



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 11 February 2021
Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Andy Allen MBE MLA
Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present: Starleaf Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mark Durkan MLA
Sinéad Ennis MLA
Karen Mullan MLA
Alex Easton MLA

In Attendance: Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)
Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

The meeting commenced in open session at 9.10a.m.

1. Ministerial briefing on the Regional and Sub-Regional Stadia Programme

The Chairperson welcomed the Minister, Deirdre Hargey MLA and Departmental Officials Kathryn Hill and Jacqueline Fearon, to the meeting.

The Minister made some introductory comments and then took part in a question and answer session with Members.

At the end of the briefing session, the Chairperson thanked the Minister and Officials for their attendance.

2. Apologies

Fra McCann MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson reminded Members that she had recently met with UNISON and had requested UNISON to write to the Committee with their concerns around the Supporting People Budget.

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been provided with a paper from UNISON.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a member of UNISON.

Kelly Armstrong declared an interest as a former employee in the Community and Voluntary Sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Department for comment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking for a written update on the Supporting People Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to UNISON to ask if they have engaged with the Department for Finance regarding their concerns.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a note of the recent informal stakeholder meeting on Social Security and Welfare Mitigations and asked Members for any comments.

A Member discussed concerns regarding the current legal definition of terminal illness raised during the stakeholder event.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request an update on its ongoing work in relation to amending the Special Rules for Terminal Illness for welfare claimants and to ask if any alternative options are being considered if funding is not available to take this forward under the new budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what discussions, if any, have taken place with the Department for Work and Pensions in relation to a UK wide legal definition of a terminal illness with regard to welfare claimants.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact the relative Charities to advise of the Committees agreed actions.

The Chairperson advised Members about the new Food Pallet Scheme and a range of issues emerging with the scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written briefing.

The Chairperson advised Members that she had received correspondence from Department for Communities staff expressing concern round working practices within the Department during the Covid-19 period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the correspondence fully at its next scheduled Committee meeting.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 4 February 2021.

5. Matters Arising

Members noted a copy of the Twenty Second Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules 2020/2021.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply to Committee queries on the delays in payments of the winter fuel allowance.

A Member raised concerns that a number of people in need of the payments are still unaware of when they will receive them.

Members also raised concerns as to why these payments are being issued by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and not by the Department for Communities (DfC).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking that the information on payments and contact details for queries is disseminated as widely as possible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to determine DWP has the responsibility for issuing payments and if there was scope for DfC to take responsibility in the future as that may result in faster payments to those in need.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft Committee response to the Draft Budget 2021/2022.

A Member raised two minor amendments to the draft response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to amend the response and to forward a copy of the amended response to the Committee for Finance.

A Member discussed the Labour Market Interventions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written update on their ongoing work in relation to all the interventions.

Members noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Review of Charity Regulation in NI and Legislation to amend the Charities Act (NI) 2008.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a Charity Trustee.

Members noted a Departmental update on sign language Covid-19 support fund.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Covid-19 heating payment scheme.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a Veteran.

The Committee welcomed the Departments commitment to ensure that those in receipt of a War Pension would receive payment under the Scheme.

A Member raised concerns regarding individuals with a pending PIP application or appeal which may subsequently be successful making them eligible for payment, but could fall outside the current financial year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a timeline of engagement with the Ministry of Defence for the issuing of payments to those eligible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if funding to award retrospective payments will roll forward into the next financial year for those awaiting the outcome of appeals.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on sports organisations lost income during the Covid period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the Department to request an urgent oral briefing on this matter

Members noted a Departmental letter in relation to the Social Inclusion Strategies Ministerial Steering Group.

The meeting was suspended at 10.26a.m. and restarted at 10.31a.m.

6. Federation of Small Businesses briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Roger Pollen, Head of FSB NI
Neil Hutchenson, Head of Policy

The representatives briefed the Committee and took part in a question and answer session with Members.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

7. Food NI briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

Mark Durkan declared a family interest in licensed premises.

The following representative joined the meeting:

Michele Shirlow, Chief Executive

The representative briefed the Committee and took part in a question and answer session with Members.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for her attendance.

8. Law Society NI briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Maeve Fisher, Law Society NI

Colin Mitchell, Law Society NI

The representatives briefed the Committee and took part in a question and answer session with Members.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Chairperson outlined the planned timetable for the remaining Committee Stage of the Bill and asked for Members initial views on the main issues that have arisen from the briefing sessions to date, noting that nothing that was discussed was in anyway final as there were still more evidence sessions to take

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Committee Clerk to continue to liaise with the Departmental Bill team regarding key issues raised by Members.

9. SL1s – Annual Up-Rating Benefits, Pensions and Lump Sum Payments

Agreed: The Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the rules.

10. Forward Work Programme

Members noted that, at the meeting on 18 February 2021, the Committee will be briefed by Tourism NI, the Wine and Spirit Trade Association and the Institute of Licensing NI on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

11. Correspondence

The Committee considered a letter from an individual in relation to the Licensing Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the individual to advise that the Committee is aware of the issues and has taken evidence from a number of small brewers in relation to them.

The Committee considered a letter from Belfast Metropolitan Residents Group (BMRG) in relation to reviving town and city centres.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to BMRG to request a written briefing.

The Committee considered a memo from the Public Accounts Committee regarding the Blue Light Regulations around Casement Park.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a timeline of events and decisions made in relation to the redevelopment of Casement Park from 2011. Also, for this timeline to include future projections of costs and completion dates. Members also agreed to request the same information in relation to the Sub-Regional Stadia.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Infrastructure to request an update on the Casement Park planning application.

Robin Newton left the meeting at 12.27 p.m.

The Committee considered a copy of a letter to the Minister for Finance from ShieldUsNI and ShieldUs re requesting urgent financial help for working age shielding community.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Finance to request written clarification.

The Committee noted the following:

- i. UC: Us Invitation to follow-up roundtable event, via Zoom, at 2pm on 23rd February 2021.
- ii. Invitation to Chair and Deputy Chair to address the Policy Forum for Northern Ireland policy conference: Housing in Northern Ireland.
- iii. APG on Sport & Physical Recreation - briefing paper from Sport NI.
- iv. Correspondence from the Committee for Justice re Damages (Return on Investment) Bill.

12. Any Other Business

A Member discussed concerns regarding future Advice Sector funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting a written update.

13. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 18 February 2021 at 9:15 a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 12.29 p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities