



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 17 December 2020
Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Andy Allen MBE MLA
Alex Easton MLA
Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present: Starleaf Mark Durkan MLA
Sinéad Ennis MLA

In Attendance: Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)
Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 9.03a.m.

NB. The items on the Agenda were not taken in the advertised order due to technical difficulties.

1. Apologies

Fra McCann MLA
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised Members that they had previously agreed to change the start time of meetings in the New Year to accommodate extra briefings. The Chairperson proposed that meetings start at 9.15am to accommodate as many Members as possible being present for the start of the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to change the start time to 9.15a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that she had recently met with representatives from Movie House Cinemas and had received a letter from them highlighting a number of important issues on which they would like to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite representatives from the Movie House to brief the Committee in the New Year.

The Chairperson informed Members that she had a meeting with Advice NI and the issue of the safeguarding of vulnerable welfare claimants was discussed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider a briefing from Advice NI when Safeguarding legislation comes before the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what safeguarding measures are in place for those people moving into care homes.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 10 December 2020.

4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with replies from the Minister for Finance and the Minister for the Economy on the High Street Voucher Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy to recommend that protections be put in place to safeguard against the misuse of the High Street Voucher Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a press release welcoming the inclusion of Charity Shops in High Street Voucher Fund.

Mark Durkan MLA joined the meeting at 9:11a.m.

Members considered a memo from the Justice Committee seeking views on the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to a number of key stakeholders seeking their views before drafting a response.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a letter from the Minister in relation to Phase 2 of the Covid-19 Charities Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking clarity on the timescale that charities have to utilise the funding and whether the money has to be spent by 31 March 2021 or if it can be spent beyond this date.

Members considered a Departmental reply to Committee queries on funding for the Community Transport Sector.

Kellie Armstrong declared an interest as the former NI Director of the Community Transport Association.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure for an update on transport charities.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft letter to National Museums NI (NMNI) asking for more information on its rationale to remove the Model Engineers' Society from the Cultra site.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue the letter to NMNI.

5. Assembly Research paper on a High Street Taskforce for Northern Ireland

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been provided with a copy of a research paper from RaISe.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to be briefed on the paper at a meeting in the New Year.

6. SL1 - The Credit (Transitional Provisions) (Claimants Previously Entitled to a Severe Disability Premium) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to make the rule.

7. Ministerial Briefing

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

The Minister and Officials took part in a question and answer session with Members.

The Minister left the meeting at 9.30a.m. and the officials continued with the question and answer session.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to request a written briefing on the Sub Regional Stadia Programme and to request a fuller briefing from the Minister in the New Year.

8. Assembly Research briefing on the Impact of Covid-19 on the Arts Sector

The meeting moved into closed session at 9.44a.m.

An official from Assembly Research briefed the Committee on the impact of Covid-19 on the Arts Sector.

The Chairperson resumed the meeting in public session at 10:02a.m.

The meeting was suspended at 10.02a.m. and restarted at 10.09a.m.

9. Briefing by the Arts Council on the impact of Covid-19 on the Arts Sector

The meeting was suspended at 10.10a.m. and restarted at 10.12a.m.

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Roisin McDonough, Chief Executive

Paul Harron, Director of Operations

Nóirín McKinney, Director of Arts Development

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

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

10. Departmental briefing on January Monitoring Round

The following officials joined the meeting:

Cherrie Arnold

Gavin Patrick

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

Robin Newton MLA left the meeting at 11.57a.m.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the following information on the Covid-19 Discretionary Support Fund:

- A breakdown of the number of people awarded grant funding and the number that were refused.
- A breakdown of the number of people awarded a loan and the number that were refused.
- The number of people that were offered an advance payment as the default option.

Members raised concerns regarding difficulties in getting through to speak to someone in the Department by phone. The Committee believe this is disadvantaging those that do not have access to online services.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if they have any plans to review their telephony services.

The meeting was suspended at 12.29p.m. and restarted at 12.34p.m.

11. SL1 - The Covid-19 Heating Payment Scheme Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson advised Members that the Scheme is being introduced to provide financial support to ensure that additional heating costs incurred as a result of the pandemic will not create any added burden or anxiety.

The Chairperson informed Members that through the scheme, the Department will make a one-off payment of £200 to people in receipt of Pension Credit, as well as those receiving the highest rates of Attendance Allowance, Personal Independence Payment and Disability Living Allowance, including children.

The Chairperson advised Members that a number of concerns had been raised about aspects of the proposal and, for that reason, officials had been asked to brief the Committee.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a war veteran.

The following Officials joined the meeting:

Anne McCleary
Mickey Kelly
Brenda Henderson

The Committee raised concerns around the lack of an Equality Impact Assessment in respect of the SL1. Members believe there are equality issues and that it falls short of accommodating all potential recipients.

Members are concerned that it will not be available to those in receipt of War Pensioners 'Mobility Supplement' (WPMS). WPMS is equivalent to the mobility component of DLA (high rate) and PIP (enhanced rate) and applicants to these schemes must meet similar criteria.

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to make the Rule in its current form but agreed to write to the Department seeking urgent action to be taken to accommodate those in receipt of WPMS and to allow retrospective payments to be made to those individuals.

12. SR 2020/318 – The Pension Protection Fund (State Aid) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (NI) 2020

The Committee considered SR 2020/318 which makes amendments to legislation related to the Pension Protection Fund consequential to EU Exit.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2020/318 - The Pension Protection Fund (State Aid) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

13. Correspondence

The Committee considered a letter of concern regarding the Heritage Fund run and distributed on behalf of the Department by the National Lottery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to send a copy of the email to the Department for Communities for comment.

The Committee considered a statement from the Belfast School of Performing Arts on the impact of Covid-19.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking if it is considering the re-categorisation of dance so that it can be practised when the school is allowed to reopen.

The Committee considered a copy of the NI Human Rights Commission Annual Statement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask how it intends to implement the recommendations applicable to it in the report.

The Committee noted the following:

- i. Copy of letter forwarded to the Minister re Charity Commission.
- ii. Response from the Committee for the Economy regarding the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.
- iii. Note of a meeting between individual correspondent and Departmental official regarding the Charity Commission.
- iv. Copy of Child Maintenance Service Annual Report on Decision Making 2019-2020.
- v. Departmental letter regarding additional £1.7m Covid-19 funding allocation for local councils.
- vi. Executive response to recent correspondence forwarded by the Committee for comment.
- vii. Pivotal's Report on Education, Training and Skills for Young People aged 14-19 years' old.
- viii. Memo and letter from the Committee for Justice regarding Health Protection Regulations.
- ix. Departmental letter regarding Amendments to NI Housing Legislation.
- x. Departmental letter regarding The Social Security Co-ordination (Revocation of Retained Direct EU Legislation and Related Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.

- xi. Departmental Report on the Second Independent Review of PIP Assessment Process.
- xii. Update from the Department of Finance on Dormant Accounts Fund.
- xiii. Departmental letter regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
- xiv. Departmental response to queries from an individual correspondent seeking clarification on Covid-19 funding for Sports Clubs.

14. Forward Work Programme

Members noted that, at the meeting on 14 January 2021, the Committee will be briefed by Hospitality Ulster, the Public Health Agency and the NI Hotels Federation on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

The Committee is also scheduled to be briefed by members of the deaf community on the Video Relay System but this briefing may have to be postponed due to a mix of procurement and technical matters that the Committee team is dealing with.

15. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

16. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 14 January 2021 at 9:15 a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 13.08p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities