



# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 17 June 2021

**Meeting Location:** Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Ms Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Mark Durkan MLA

Ms Karen Mullan MLA

Mr Fra McCann MLA

Ms Sinéad Ennis MLA

Mr Robin Newton MLA

Mr Alex Easton MLA

Mr Andy Allen MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)

Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Mr Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)



**In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:**

Ms Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 09.05 am in open session, chaired by the Deputy Chairperson.

**1. Ministerial briefing on Welfare Reform Mitigations**

The Minister for Communities, Ms Deirdre Hargey, joined the meeting.

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

The Minister agreed to forward information on the number of families that have fallen into rent arrears and the support that the Department is offering these families.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the Minister for her attendance.

Paula Bradley joined the meeting at 9.33 am and assumed the Chair.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to The Executive Office (TEO) to express its support for the Minister on this issue and to ask that it is progressed as quickly as possible. The Committee also agreed to ask TEO for an indication of how quickly legislation could be progressed if Executive clearance is given.

**2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.



### 3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental paper listing the Minister's amendments for Further Consideration Stage of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

Members noted that the amendments were all technical in nature and did not make any changes to the policy direction or the decisions agreed in the House at Consideration Stage.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to support the Minister's amendments.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a note of the most recent informal stakeholder meeting held on 1<sup>st</sup> June.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Assembly Clerk for the Committee for the Executive Office (TEO) had advised that a joint meeting of the Committees for TEO, Economy and Finance was held on Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> June to discuss a number of cross-cutting issues, including the High Street Taskforce.

The Chairperson informed Members that Officials from the Department for Communities (DfC) had accompanied TEO Officials to support discussions on this matter.

Members expressed disappointment at not being invited to take part in the meeting.

**Agreed:** Members agreed to write to TEO Committee to express disappointment at not being invited to take part in the meeting and to request a copy of the minutes from the meeting.

### 4. Draft Minutes

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 10 June 2021.



#### **4. Matters Arising**

##### **Forty-first Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules 2020 – 2021**

The Committee noted the Forty-first Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules 2020 – 2021, which drew special attention to the Housing Benefit and Universal Credit (Care Leavers and Homeless) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 in respect of the Department's drafting.

The Chairperson informed the Committee that the Department had confirmed that it will insert 'Amendment' into the title by way of a correction slip at the earliest opportunity.

##### **Departmental response in relation to a Housing Degree**

The Committee expressed disappointment that the Department is unaware if the lack of a housing degree in Northern Ireland is impacting on the recruitment of staff.

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that they had previously written to universities and all further education colleges regarding the lack of a degree in housing.

##### **Departmental response in relation to the Flexibility of Council Meetings**

The Committee welcomed the introduction of the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Bill on 14 June.

The Committee welcomed confirmation that this Bill will ensure that the gap in legislative cover for councils to hold remote meetings will be as short as possible.

Members discussed the potential for future flexible working for councillors and council staff in the future.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to ask that her Department consults with councils on the possibility of a hybrid model for future meetings.



### **Departmental response in relation to the Discretionary Support Review**

The Committee noted that the review of the Discretionary Support policy and operational delivery had now identified membership of the Independent Panel and had secured their participation.

### **Departmental response in relation to the Covid-19 Charities Fund**

The Committee noted the breakdown of the successful and unsuccessful applications to the fund, including reasons why applications were unsuccessful.

### **Departmental response in relation to Community and Voluntary Sector Gender Budgeting**

The Committee expressed concern that although the Department provides funding to support capacity building within the Voluntary and Community sector, there is currently no specific focus on gender budgeting in terms of targets or outcomes.

Members discussed the need for a Gender Equality Strategy that included actions on a cross departmental basis. In particular, the Committee agreed that the Department of Finance needs to have actions allocated to it in relation to procurement contracts, which would measure effectiveness through the use of a scoring mechanism.

**Agreed:** Members agreed to write to the Department to ask that it takes the Committee's views into consideration.

### **Departmental response in relation to the Contract for Personal Independence Payment**

The Committee welcomed news that a range of improvements had been introduced to the assessment process from March 2021. In particular, the Committee welcomed news that several elements of the process have been brought in-house.

However, the Committee expressed disappointment that a new tender for services had not been launched, particularly given concerns regarding the poor performance of Capita.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for more detail on why there was no new tender issued for these services.



### **Departmental response in relation to Covid-19 funding for the Community and Voluntary Sector**

The Committee noted that a Disability Strategy is currently under development and that the issue of cross-departmental spend on disability will be considered as work on the strategy progresses.

### **Committee Report on the Westminster Compensation (London Capital Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Bill - Legislative Consent Memorandum**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for its report on the Westminster Compensation (London Capital Finance plc and Fraud Compensation Fund) Bill - Legislative Consent Memorandum to be published.

*The meeting was suspended at 10.01 am.*

*The meeting moved into open session at 10.08 am.*

The Chairperson informed the Committee that, due to a scheduled Plenary session, the meeting would need to end by 10.30 am to allow Members to attend party meetings in advance of the session.

The Committee agreed to reschedule the Departmental briefing on Neighbourhood Renewal to its meeting on 24 June 2021, subject to the availability of Officials.

The Committee further agreed to reschedule briefings by the National Insulation Association of Ireland, Co-Ownership and the Council for Homelessness until after summer recess.

The Committee agreed to move to agenda item 9.

### **5. Departmental briefing on Neighbourhood Renewal**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reschedule the briefing to 24 June 2021.



## **6. Briefing by the National Insulation Association of Ireland**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reschedule the briefing.

## **7. Briefing by Co-Ownership**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reschedule the briefing.

## **8. Briefing by the Council for Homelessness**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reschedule the briefing.

## **9. SL1 The Housing (Notification of Disposals and Mortgages) Regulations (NI) 2021**

The Chairperson informed Members that the purpose of the regulations is to detail the information the Registered Housing Associations (RHAs) must provide in completing the notifications process.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department for Communities to proceed to make the Statutory Rule.

The Committee expressed concern of reports that there were large scale social housing purchases by developers and not by owner occupiers.

The Committee was alarmed by the alleged practice as it runs contrary to the policy of the House Sales Scheme. In particular, the Committee was concerned at the potential loss of homes to the social housing sector.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if it has any evidence of this taking place and, if so, how it intends to stop this practice.



#### **10.SL1 - The Social Security (Reciprocal Agreements) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2021**

The Chairperson informed Members that as a result of EU Exit, a number of amendments are required to NI legislation to tidy up references in legislation and ensure legal clarity to align it with the position under these agreements.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department for Communities to proceed to make the Statutory Rule.

#### **11.SR 2021/147 - The Domestic Energy Efficiency Grants (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

The Committee considered SR 2021/147: The Domestic Energy Efficiency Grants (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021, which responds to the need to reduce the number of households living in fuel poverty by increasing the income threshold for eligibility for support from the Scheme to £23,000.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered SR 2021/147: The Domestic Energy Efficiency Grants (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021 and had no objection to the Rule.

#### **12. Correspondence**

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from the Belfast Metropolitan Residents' Group in relation to the Living Over The Shops (LOTS) scheme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the correspondence further at its meeting on 24 June 2021.

- ii. Invitation to attend a webinar on Gambling Policy and Regulation in Ireland: Catching up with the Digital Age.





**Agreed:** Members agreed to request that a member of RalSe attends on behalf of the Committee and provides a written note of the session.

- iii. Correspondence from the Committee for Finance to the Department regarding the Tower Block Action Plan.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Communities to request a copy of its response to the Tower Block Action Plan.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- i. RalSe Paper on 'Gender Budgeting in Northern Irish Education Policy'.
- ii. Departmental Report on the Northern Ireland Executive's Child Poverty Strategy.
- iii. Copy of Home Start Report - 'Home is Where We Start From'.
- iv. Departmental letter re Affordable Warmth Scheme.
- v. Copy of letter forwarded to the Minister by Model Engineers' Society NI Ltd seeking financial support.

### **13. Forward Work Programme**

Members noted that, at the meeting on 24 June 2021, the Committee will be briefed by Departmental Officials on Supporting People, Labour Market Interventions, Post Office Card Accounts and will also be briefed by UNISON on Supporting People.



#### **14. Any Other Business**

The Committee discussed further its concerns regarding families that have fallen into rent arrears as Welfare Reform payments in respect of rent cannot be made retrospectively.

The Committee discussed a possible workaround on this issue to prevent any money being lost from the Welfare Reform mitigations budget.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if there was an opportunity to utilise underspend from the Welfare Reform mitigations budget to provide grants to the NI Housing Executive (NIHE) and housing associations to alleviate rent arrears.

#### **15. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 24 June 2021 at 09.30 am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 10.23 am.

**Paula Bradley MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**