



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 18 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 9.17a.m.

1. Apologies

Fra McCann MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

Members noted that the AERA Committee is to undertake scrutiny of a decision by Mid and East Antrim Borough Council and DAERA to withdraw staff from Larne and Belfast Ports.

The Chairperson highlighted the Minister's comments during question time on 17 February 2021 that she was unaware of, and had not been lobbied on, the issues

affecting some social and sports clubs who are not eligible for the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The Chairperson expressed great disappointment as the Committee and Members have been lobbied continually by sporting groups on this issue and noted that the Committee has actively worked on behalf of sporting groups and other clubs and has written to the Department and Minister on a number of occasions to highlight the issues and to secure financial assistance.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 11 February 2021.

4. Matters Arising

Members noted a response from UNISON in relation to Supporting People.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a response from NICVA in relation to the concordat agreement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NICVA expressing their thanks and to request a written briefing on what better practical working relationships will entail and how future procurement will work.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply in relation to welfare reform mitigation measures.

Members expressed disappointment at the lateness of the final element of the work regarding the review as the issue has been under discussion from early 2020 and the Department is only now finalising proposals for the review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask when the review will take place and to seek assurances that the Committee will be included in the review and the co-design of any future mitigation measures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office asking that mitigations are extended, all 'loopholes' are closed and that the package agreed last February is put in place urgently.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to tenders for Work Ready Employability Services (WRES).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office, in support of the Minister for Communities, expressing their disappointment that the Department for Communities had not received an allocation in the draft budget for the WRES.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the draft Programme for Government.

Members discussed the commitment in New Decade New Approach to a standalone 'housing outcome' as one of the key priorities in the New Programme for Government.

A Member raised concerns that there has been no further mention of the agreed 'housing outcome' commitment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if the 'housing outcome' will be included by the Department as part of its input into the new Programme for Government and to ask what actions, if any, are being taken to move this commitment forward.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the PIP assessment contract.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking that they take into account recommendations from the 2nd Independent Review of PIP Report by Marie Kavanagh when deciding on whether to extend the Capita contract by a further 24 months.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask whether Northern Ireland is in the same position as the rest of the UK when it comes to a possible 24-month extension of the Capita contract.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply in relation to a timeline around the Jobstart Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for the exact date that the Department became aware that it would not have funding to launch the scheme.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the Covid-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask when payments will be made to successful applicants of the second phase of the Individual Emergency Resilience Programme that closed on 7 January 2021.

Members noted a Departmental response in relation to Community Transport.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the Discretionary Support Fund.

A Member discussed the need for the reduction or abolishment of the lower earnings limit as raised by stakeholders at the recent Committee informal stakeholder meeting on Social Security and Welfare Mitigations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if, as part of the review of the Discretionary Support Scheme, the Department has any plans to lower or abolish the lower earnings limit.

Members noted that the figures for those availing of Contingency Fund grant payments are much lower than those availing of the advance payment and feel that more needs to

be done to ensure that people are aware of this option and to ensure that this becomes the default option rather than being offered an advance payment which pushes people into debt.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to again request a breakdown of the criteria that is provided to staff to allow them to make their decisions on discretionary support.

The Committee also raised concerns regarding the Northern Ireland computer system. Members agreed that it needs to be amended to ensure that Contingency Fund grant payments are the first option considered for claimants before an advance payment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what actions the Department intends to take to address Committee concerns on this issue.

A Member raised concerns in relation to the HC1 form that provides help for health costs and that people are not being made aware that they need to complete this form when they are making an application for Universal Credit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what actions it intends to take to address this and to provide figures for the number of people that had not applied for the HC1 when applying for Universal Credit.

Members noted a letter from the Charity Commission in relation to the review of complaints by Independent Counsel.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a Charity Trustee.

5. Departmental response on Mapping Exercise and response to RaISe paper on the Licensing Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response on questions from the Research and Information Service (RaISe) of the NI Assembly paper on the Bill.

The Chairperson advised Members that the response indicates that the Department is working with its Professional Service Unit to develop an evaluation plan for the new licensing laws.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking for more information on the evaluation plan and on any guidance documents in development.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with the results of a Departmental mapping exercise of licensed premises carried out in 2017.

The Chairperson advised Members that RaISe had investigated the possibility of preparing similar maps further back in time for comparison. However, after contacting the NI Courts and Tribunal Service (NICTS), this was not possible as older records are paper-based and it would require extensive work to compile the material manually.

The Chairperson advised Members that RaISe had received pdf data from NICTS for 2018/10 but that also would require substantial work and that little would have changed from the work done in 2017.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to use the 2017 mapping exercise as a recent picture of the distribution of licensed premises.

Members thanked RaISe for highlighting the departmental mapping exercise and investigating further and commented that the exercise confirmed the Committee's concerns regarding the lack of a comprehensive central database of licence holders in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SOLACE to ask if individual councils retain a database of information on local licences in their areas.

The Chairperson asked Members if they were content to publish all written submissions on the Assembly website that had been received from the call for evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish all submissions on the Assembly website.

The Chairperson advised Members that there are a number of Clauses in the Bill that have an impact on young people and that the Committee Clerk has conducted an initial investigation with Assembly Engagement into holding a virtual zoom stakeholder event to capture the views of young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Committee Clerk to continue to develop the event with the Engagement team.

6. Wine and Spirit Trade Association briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representative joined the meeting:

Miles Beale, Chief Executive Officer

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

The Chairperson thanked the representative for his attendance.

A Member discussed the Home Office age verification process and the potential impact of this work on Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Home Office asking for an update on its ongoing work on the future proofing of age verification process using QR codes.

The meeting was suspended at 10.28a.m. and restarted at 10.33a.m

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

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Rosemary McHugh, Director of Product Development
Gary Quate, Tourism 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.

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

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Stephen McGowan, Head of Licensing Scotland
Eoin Devlin, Legal Director for TLT 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.

9. Safeguarding Board briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Bernie McNally, Independent Chair
Andrew Thomson, Chair of Case Management Review Committee

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. SL1 – The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Regulations (NI) 2021

Andy Allen declared an interest as a private rented sector landlord.

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

11. SR 2021/28 – The Loans for Mortgage Interest (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/28, which makes minor drafting amendments to the Loans for Mortgage Interest Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 (S.R. 2017 No.

176) with respect to Domestic Violence, and to the Social Fund (Cold Weather Payments) (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1988 (S.R. 1988 No. 368) with respect to Cold Weather Payments, to ensure these regulations meet the policy intent.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/28 - The Loans for Mortgage Interest (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a press release welcoming the protections put in place in respect of domestic violence.

12. SR 2021/31 – The Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/31, which amends The Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 by extending the deadline for councils to set their budget for 2021/22. This will allow the councils more time to address financial planning considerations arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/31 - The Local Government (Capital Finance and Accounting) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

13. Forward Work Programme

Members noted that, at the meeting on 25 February 2021, the Committee will be briefed by NILGA, PSNI, NI Alcohol and Drug Alliance and Stirling University on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

14. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence in relation to the review of the Charity Commission.

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

The Committee considered correspondence regarding concerns with the current Discretionary Support Isolation grant.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Department for comment on the proposals put forward by the group.

The Committee noted the following:

- i. Press Recognition Panel - Annual Report On the State of the Recognition System.
- ii. Invitation from Ofcom to contribute to their review of Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) consultation.

- iii. NI Central Investment Fund for Charities Annual Report & Accounts Sept 2019.
- iv. Response to IFA letter in relation to fines imposed for the accumulation of red and yellow cards.

15. Any Other Business

A Member raised an issue in relation to the Licensing Bill evidence sessions and Forward Work Programme in relation to the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Secretariat forwarded a timeline on the remainder of the Committee Stage of the Bill to Members for information.

16. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 25 February 2021 at 9:15 a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 12.45p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities