



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 24 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 Alex Easton MLA

Mr Andy Allen MLA

Ms Pam Cameron MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)

Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Mr Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)



Northern Ireland
Assembly

In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 09.06 am in open session, chaired by the Deputy Chairperson.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed new Member Pam Cameron to the Committee as a replacement for Robin Newton.

The Deputy Chairperson extended her thanks to Robin Newton for all his work on the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write a letter of thanks to Robin Newton.

Departmental briefing on the Local Government Meetings and Performance Bill

The Deputy Chairperson informed the Committee that the Department had requested an urgent briefing session to advise of changes to the Bill.

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Ms Julie Broadway

Mr Anthony Carleton

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

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



Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Chairperson informed the Committee that they had been provided with a memo from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in relation to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report on the Sports Sustainability Fund.

The Committee noted that the PAC is due to commence an inquiry and has primacy over this issue. Members were content at this stage for the PAC to keep the Committee apprised of progress and the publication of its report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss further at its meeting on 1 July 2021.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 17 June 2021.

SL1 - Child Support Maintenance Calculation (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the Department had asked the Committee to urgently consider the SL1 to ensure that the timescale for the Statutory Rule is met.

The Chairperson informed Members that the purpose of the regulations is to ensure that the rules, used to decide when child maintenance liabilities end (once children have left education), are aligned with Child Benefit payability provisions.

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



Northern Ireland Assembly

4. Matters Arising

Departmental response in relation to the timeline of requests for Welfare Reform Mitigations to be included on the Executive's meeting agenda

The Committee expressed disappointment that, despite the Minister having written to The Executive Office (TEO) and the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) on numerous occasions requesting that her paper be discussed at an Executive meeting, this issue had still not made the agenda.

Members noted that the Committee agreed, at its meeting on 17 June 2021, to write to TEO to express its support for the Minister and to query the reasons for the delay in this issue being included on the Executive agenda.

Response from the Health Minister in relation to the Promotion of Physical Activity Amongst Young People

The Committee welcomed that the Department of Health (DoH) has worked closely with DfC on the development of the new Sport and Physical Activity Strategy for 2020-2030.

The Committee also welcomed news that DoH has started to develop a refreshed 10-year obesity prevention strategy, which will align with the DfC Sport and Physical Activity Strategy.

Ministerial response in relation to Changing Places

The Committee discussed the Department's 'Access and Inclusion Programme' that provides capital grants towards the installation of Changing Places in those venues for which DfC has policy responsibility.

Members expressed concern that there may be an underspend depending on the number of applications received by the closing date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that it considers an extension to the closing date for application and to ask that it proactively works with councils to remind them that money is available to ensure that the money is fully spent.



Northern Ireland Assembly

The Committee also discussed the prevalence of Changing Places facilities across hospitals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Health for information on the provision of Changing Places facilities across hospitals.

Departmental response in relation to Assembly Research Papers on Sport

The Committee noted that the Department is currently drafting a new 10-year strategy for sport and physical activity which will seek to promote greater participation and inclusion in sport, particularly for women and girls and those with a disability.

Departmental response in relation to SL1 - The Social Security (Claims and Payments) Telephone and Video Assessment Regulations

The Committee noted that appeals are heard in both public and privately owned venues throughout Northern Ireland based on the facilities available in each area.

Members welcomed confirmation that the Appeals Service completes a health and safety risk assessment of the location and facilities and that these assessments are revised on a regular basis to ensure that the venues remain suitable.

The Committee was of the view that accessibility should go beyond the basic requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a copy of the template used by the Appeals Service to determine accessibility of a venue.

The Committee expressed disappointment with the use of the term 'off-flows' as Members feel that this is a derogatory term to use to refer to people whose benefits had been stopped.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that it considers the Committee's call for an extension for people to continue to claim benefits where appeals are taking longer than 12 months.

The Committee also expressed its frustration with the time it is taking for appeals to be heard with many appeals taking longer than 12 months.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request the number of people that are currently waiting more than 12 months for an appeal to be heard.

Departmental response in relation to the Relocation of the Model Engineers' Society Northern Ireland (MESNI)

The Committee welcomed confirmation that it remains the National Museums NI's (NMNI) intention to support MESNI with its relocation, including the removal of its train apparatus, in the budget for the Walled Garden redevelopment subject to the appropriate approvals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that it is kept up to date on this issue.

Departmental response in relation to Gender Budgeting

The Committee noted that gender budgeting by the NI Executive was raised in the report by the Expert Advisory Panel on the Gender Equality Strategy which is due to be published, pending Executive approval, in December 2021.

The Committee expressed disappointment that, although the Department provides funding to support capacity building within the Voluntary and Community sector, it is unlikely, due to the timing of the proposed publication of the Gender Equality Strategy, that gender budgeting will be included in multi-year budgeting planning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that it takes gender budgeting into account when considering its own budget.

Departmental response in relation to Budget 2021/22

The Committee noted that the Department presently has over 1,300 staff vacancies. Over 55% of the Department's vacancies are at the key management grades EO2 and EO1.

Members welcomed news that a NICS wide recruitment competition for EO2 and EO1 staff was launched in May 2021.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

5. Briefing by UNISON on Supporting People

Paula Bradley declared an interest as a former member of UNISON.

Karen Mullan declared an interest as a member of SIPTU.

Fra McCann declared an interest as a member of SIPTU.

Kellie Armstrong declared an interest as a former union representative for BECTU.

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Mr Joe McCusker, Regional Organiser

Mr Niall McCarroll, Community and Voluntary Branch Chair

Ms Saoirse Fanning, Support Worker

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

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Department to ask, in relation to the Disability Strategy, if it had given any consideration for people employed through grants and services to attain appropriate skill sets and training to deliver services for people with disabilities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for details on employers that applied to the Covid Fund to cover Covid related absences but then only paid employees Statutory Sick Pay.

The meeting was suspended at 10.41 am.

The meeting restarted at 10.46 am.



Northern Ireland Assembly

6. Departmental Briefing on Supporting People

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Ms Heloise Brown

Mr Martin McDermott

Mr Alistair Mawhinney

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

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to request information on its feasibility study, whether the study is considering the potential to procure staff on improved terms and conditions, for details on when the study will be ready and to ask if the Committee can have a copy. The Committee would also like to know if the study will give consideration to workforce costs in providing the services and if those costs will be based on Agenda for Change.

As there was a technical problem before the next scheduled briefing session, the Committee agreed to move to Correspondence at 11.06 am.

7. Correspondence

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Minister and request that the Department consider the findings of the PACEC report and the correspondence from the BMRG when considering the way forward for housing planning and



Northern Ireland
Assembly

schemes for NI and to also consider this from a rural perspective.

- ii. The Committee considered a Departmental response regarding Covid-19 Arts Funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the response to the original correspondent.

- iii. The Committee considered a request to brief on the current situation faced by Arts, Culture and Creative industries across Northern Ireland

Pam Cameron declared an interest as Secretary of Little Willow Productions Limited.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a future briefing after summer recess.

- iv. The Committee considered a Departmental letter regarding policy directions for the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to be involved in the engagement process.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- i. Copy of Social Fund Account for the year ended 31 March 2020.
- ii. Further information from St Vincent de Paul following the Committee's informal Stakeholder Event on 'Covid-19 – The way Forward.
- iii. Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Memo regarding a High Street Task Force.
- iv. Copy of Livestock and Meat Commission (LMC) Retention and Disposal Schedule.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

- v. Copy of Libraries NI Retention and Disposal Schedule.
- vi. Departmental letter regarding European Social Fund Programme closure.
- vii. Departmental letter regarding Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Bill.

The Committee agreed to return to the Departmental briefing on Neighbourhood Renewal.

8. Departmental briefing on Neighbourhood Renewal

Karen Mullan declared an interest as a former employee in the Neighbourhood Renewal Sector, also that her spouse is currently employed in the sector.

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Mr David Sales

Ms Colette Toman

Ms Jean McAnulty

Mr Gerard Murray

Mr John Burns

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

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for a copy of the review of Neighbourhood Renewal when published and to schedule a future follow-up briefing.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

9. Departmental briefing on Labour Market Interventions

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Ms Deirdre Ward

Ms Roisin Sloan

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

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a future follow-up briefing.

10. Departmental briefing on Post Office Card Accounts

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Ms Linda Williams

Mr Roy McGivern

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

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for further information in relation to a potential issue with joint bank accounts and to ask for a future briefing on progress.



Northern Ireland Assembly

11. Forward Work Programme

Members noted that, at the meeting on 1 July 2021, the Committee will be briefed on post Covid recovery by Hospitality Ulster, Sport NI and the Arts Council and will also be briefed by the Department on the Private Tenancies Bill.

12. Any Other Business

A Member informed the Committee that the Ards Community Network had requested the opportunity to brief the Committee regarding the impact of Covid-19 and other issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a future briefing after summer recess.

A Member raised the issue of the 'Caring Society and Support for People throughout their lives' outcome of the Draft Programme for Government (PfG).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written update on draft PfG Outcomes.

13. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 1 July 2021 at 09.15 am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 13.04 pm.

Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities