



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 28 January 2021
Room 29, Parliament Buildings

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

Present: Starleaf Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
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 9.18a.m.

1. Apologies

Fra McCann MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had discussed the updated Covid guidance for Committees at the previous week's meeting.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee had been asked to consider reverting back to essential business only for the immediate future and proposed that it reconsiders a number of Departmental briefings that are in the diary and request written briefings instead.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to cancel the oral briefings and to request written briefings.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Department has advised that the Audit Office draft 'Code of Audit Practice' and summary documents are ready and that these documents will be laid by the Minister before 31 March 2021.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Department has offered to provide the Committee with an oral or written briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a written briefing.

The Chairperson informed Members that RaISe was scheduled to brief the Committee on their paper on a High Street Taskforce for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to postpone the briefing until the Committee moves back to normal business.

Members noted a copy of advice to Committees about meetings in the current Covid situation.

The Chairperson advised Members that on Tuesday the Committee had held its second informal stakeholder briefing event on Universal Credit and Welfare Reform Mitigations.

The Chairperson thanked the Assembly Engagement team who facilitated the zoom meeting, and advised that the audio recording will be made available to all Members.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee secretariat will provide a note of the meeting to Members in order to assist consideration as to how they wish to proceed on the issues raised.

The Committee discussed the Reform of Welfare Mitigations and remain concerned that no proposals have been brought forward. Members expressed concern that accelerated passage may be used to push through measures, thus removing the Committee's scrutiny role.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request details on the Department's proposals for extending and strengthening the mitigation measures and to seek assurance that accelerated passage will not be used.

Members raised concerns arising from the recent Committee stakeholder event at the lack of engagement between the Department and key stakeholders in relation to the co-design of the measures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking if they have engaged with stakeholders in relation to co-design measures.

The Chairperson informed Members that she had attended a meeting with TWN. The Chairperson advised that WICT was discussed and that the funding of this women's programme is due to finish at the end of March.

The Committee discussed the expiration of contracts for services such as those provided by the advice sector and work ready employment services. Members expressed concern that contracts for these services are due to end on 31 March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking when will tenders be issued for all services as there is now limited time for tenders to be issued and awarded.

The Chairperson advised Members that she had attended the APG on Sport and Physical Recreation and had raised the issue of Covid funding for sports clubs for loss of income from bars etc.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking what funding is available for those clubs that will be excluded from Covid funding because they do not meet the exact criteria.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 21 January 2021.

4. Matters Arising

Members noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on Phase 2 of the Covid-19 Charities Fund.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on a database of liquor licence holders.

The Chairperson advised Members that Assembly Research had brought to the Committee Clerk's attention that, through contacts at the Institute of Public Health, they had been made aware that the Department for Communities undertook a mapping exercise in 2017 where they plotted the location of all off-and on-licensed premises in Northern Ireland by towns and cities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Departmental response and also requested the results of this mapping exercise and any updates done since 2017 or any similar work.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Covid-19 Discretionary Support Fund.

Members expressed disappointment with the response and that there were no breakdowns provided on individuals that had requested the advance payment rather than the Contingency Fund.

The Committee raised concerns that the Department does not seem to have data on individuals that are availing of the advance payment.

A Member raised the issue of eligibility criteria for the fund as information provided in a written answer to the Member showed only 2% of those applying received an award of £500 or more.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking that it undertakes a review of the eligibility criteria to make it more accessible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking for a breakdown of the wider Discretionary Support Fund budget and a comparison of the distribution of funds on an annual basis to include any amounts of money that were returned.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on Community Transport.

A Member raised concerns that providers of community transport are being treated differently across departments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking that they do more on a cross departmental basis to ensure equitable treatment for providers of community transport.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the 2nd Independent Review of PIP.

Members discussed responses to Assembly questions which seemed to offer differing timescales for the extension of Capita's contract.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking if the contract has been extended and, if so, for how long.

Members noted a reply from the Arts Council to Committee queries on IERP.

Due to a technical issue the Committee agreed to move the consideration of Secondary Legislation at 09.45a.m.

5. SL1 – The Loans for Mortgage Interest (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

6. SL1 – The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

7. SL1 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Chairperson advised Members that the purpose of the Rule is to freeze Local Housing Allowance Rates in cash terms from 1 April 2021, following the increase in Local Housing Allowance Rates in April 2020.

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

A Member raised concerns regarding the potential differentials for those in the private rental sector compared to those in social housing on Housing Benefit. In particular, if private landlords increase their rents from 1 April 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting a written update on any detrimental impact on private renters.

8. Armagh Cider Company briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representative joined the meeting:

Helen Troughton, Armagh Cider Company.

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

The Chairperson thanked the representative for their attendance.

The meeting was suspended at 10.06a.m. and restarted at 10.10a.m.

9. Public Health Agency briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Michael Owen, Senior Drugs and Alcohol Co-ordinator

Maurice Meehan, Head of Health Improvement

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 request that the Departmental Bill Team consider the Public Health Agency's concerns in relation to the wider public health messaging being built in to the legislation.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee Clerk would be updating the Bill Team within the Department of any potential issues identified by the Committee and that the Department would provide written briefings on any Bill related matters that required clarification as the Committee moves through the remainder of its evidence sessions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk forward any issues raised to the Departmental Bill Team.

10. Omniplex Cinemas briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Carole King, Omniplex Cinemas

Paul Anderson, Director of Omniplex Cinemas

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

During discussions concerns were raised in regard to the lack of direct Covid-19 funding for large leisure and entertainment businesses. The Committee understands that the sector has received assistance in the form of furlough for staff and rates relief. However, Members are concerned that there is no apparent support to ensure the future of this sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what Covid-19 funding is, or will be, made available for large leisure and entertainment businesses.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The meeting was suspended at 12.08p.m. and restarted at 12.13p.m.

11. Departmental briefing on the Jobstart Scheme

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been provided with a letter from the Minister and an additional briefing paper in their tabled papers.

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Deirdre Ward, Director of Work and Wellbeing Division

Chris Smart, Assistant Director of Work and Wellbeing Division

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 seeking further information regarding costs incurred to date in relation to the scheme and also, to confirm the actual Barnett Consequential figure received for labour market interventions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting a timeline for decisions taken in relation to the delay of the Jobstart Scheme. The Committee also

agreed to request that is kept fully informed of any decisions in relation to the Jobstart Scheme.

12. Departmental briefing on Budget 2021-22

The Chairperson advised Members that in addition to the budget briefing paper in the pack from the Department they had also been provided with a Departmental letter regarding the January Monitoring Round, New Bids and additional Reduced Requirements in their tabled papers.

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Gavin Patrick, Director of Financial Management
Cherrie Arnold, Director of Financial Planning

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 invite the Departmental Officials to the Committee meeting on 4 February to continue their briefing as not all Members were able to ask their questions in the remaining time.

13. Correspondence

The Committee considered a request from the Arts Collaboration Network to brief the Committee on their Report – Culture Beyond Covid.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward an invitation to the next Committee Stakeholder Event.

The Committee considered a request from National Association of Councillors to brief the Committee regarding Councillors' issues, concerns, and wellbeing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a written briefing.

The Committee considered a response to Committee queries regarding IFA fines.

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

The Committee considered a letter requesting that the Committee consider a review/reconsideration of the Caravan Act 2011.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the correspondent to advise that the Committee has recently written to the Department asking that they review the aspects of the Caravan Act for which it has responsibility for.

The Committee consider a request for information regarding the Kickstart NI Funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward correspondence to the Department for a response.

The Committee considered a letter from the Committee for Finance seeking the Committee to review the impact of the draft Budget 2021-22 in respect of their Departments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a response to the Committee for Finance by 12 February.

The Committee noted the following:

- i. Copy of Committee for Finance correspondence to the Minister of Infrastructure re Scrutiny of January Monitoring.
- ii. Copy of Ulster Orchestra letter to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury regarding Orchestra Tax Relief.
- iii. Copy of the Welfare Supplementary Payments Annual Report for 2019/20.
- iv. Copy of Construction Employers Federation submission to the Committee for Finance on the draft Budget.
- v. Departmental response to Committees request re Advice NI paper on Safeguarding Vulnerable Social Security Benefits Claimants.

14. Forward Work Programme

Members noted that, at the meeting on 4 February 2021, the Committee will be briefed by the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches (joint briefing), Retail NI, NI Drinks Industry and Copeland Distillery on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

15. Any Other Business

A Member raised an issue with Starleaf teleconferencing system.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Committee Secretariat to investigate the issue further and to report back to the Member.

16. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 4 February 2021 at 9:15 a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 13.20p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities

