



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 4 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)
Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 9.17a.m.

1. Apologies

Fra McCann MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed Karen Mullan to the Committee and wished her well in her new role.

The Chairperson put on record the Committee's appreciation to Carál Ní Chuilín for the contribution she made both as a Committee Member and during her time as Minister.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee had been provided with two research papers from RaISe on Sport and Disability in Northern Ireland and on Female Participation in Sport and Physical Activity in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the research papers and to schedule briefings from RaISe on these important issues when normal business resumes.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee had agreed to contact all other Committees to see if a co-ordinated response to concerns and issues around the Shared Prosperity Fund would be possible.

The Chairperson proposed to Members that, given the worsening Covid situation whereby Committees are now focusing on their immediate essential business only, that the Committee writes initially to the Department of Finance who have responsibility for the fund for an update on the status of the fund, and re-evaluate the way forward once a response has been received.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the revised approach.

Members noted that the new draft Programme for Government (PfG) is out to consultation and that a briefing from Departmental Officials has been requested on the PfG in relation to the Department for Communities.

The Chairperson informed Members that she had attended a meeting with UNISON and discussed issues around the Supporting People Budget.

The Chairperson advised Members that she had requested UNISON to write to the Committee with their concerns around the lack of pay parity with the Statutory Sector (Trusts) for those working in similar posts providing similar services in the community and voluntary sector and also around the £10million Workforce Costs Covid funding awarded to the Housing Executive to pay staff, which was available to Supporting People providers.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a member of UNISON.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to wait for receipt of correspondence from UNISON.

Members noted that Chairperson had met with Advice NI to discuss their on-going issues with the draft budget.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 28 January 2021.

4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a response from SOLACE to Committee queries on what Councils are doing to ensure vulnerable people are aware of Covid-19 funding support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SOLACE for a more detailed breakdown of the Covid funding schemes provided by each Council and how they are being progressed.

Members noted a Ministerial reply to Committee queries on community transport.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the concordat agreement with the voluntary and community sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for an update on meetings held with the voluntary and community sector on the concordat agreement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Voluntary and Community Sector to ask for an update on meetings held with the Department regarding the concordat agreement.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on sports organisations that have lost income during the Covid period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Finance to ask that his Department makes funds available to any sports clubs that have not met the criteria for the Sports Sustainability Fund.

5. Departmental briefing on Budget 2021-22

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

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

The Officials 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 Minister for Communities to state its support for her bids for more funding for services and also to the Minister for Finance asking that he supports the Minister for Communities' funding bids.

The meeting was suspended at 10.10a.m. and restarted at 10.13a.m.

6. The Presbyterian and Methodist Churches briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Lindsay Conway, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Council for Social Witness
Rev. David Clements, Methodist Church in Ireland, Council for Social Responsibility
Karen Jardine, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Public Affairs Officer

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Health to request an update on the progress of his planned public consultation on minimum unit alcohol pricing, announced in July 2020. Also, to ask the Minister to consider the Committee's recommendation for increased funding for advice and addiction services.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy requesting clarification on what protections are in place for staff of faith in relation to the proposed extended Easter opening hours and generally by employers.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

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

The following representative joined the meeting:

Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive, Retail NI

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

The Chairperson thanked the representative for his attendance.

8. NI Drinks Industry Group briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representative joined the meeting:

Nicola Carruthers, NI Drinks Industry Group

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

The Chairperson thanked the representative for her attendance.

9. Copeland Distillery briefing on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The following representative joined the meeting:

Gareth Irvine, Director Copeland Distillery

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

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.30p.m.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for his attendance.

10. SL1 – Drumbo Park Stadium designation as an Outdoor Stadium for the Purposes of Liquor Licensing Legislation

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

11. SL1 – The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

12. SL1 – The Automatic Enrolment (Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

13. SL1 – The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (NI) 2021

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

14. SL1 – The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

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

15. SR 2021/14 – The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/14, which makes changes to how the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) will determine Local Housing Allowance (LHA)

rates which will apply for 2021/22. It provides for LHA rates in 2021/22 to be retained at the same cash levels as applied from April 2020.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/14 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

16. SR 2021/15 – The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/15, which addresses deficiencies in retained EU law relating to social fund funeral expenses payments arising from the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. It will maintain the status quo for eligible EEA nationals and their family members, who will continue to be able to be awarded a social fund funeral expenses payment for a funeral taking place in the United Kingdom, the EEA or Switzerland.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/15 - The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

17. Forward Work Programme

Members noted that, at the meeting on 11 February 2021, the Committee will be briefed first by the Minister on the Regional and Sub Regional Stadia Programme. The Committee will then be briefed by the Law Society NI, Federation of Small Businesses and Food NI on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill.

18. Correspondence

The Committee considered a Departmental letter on the Consultation on the Definition of Affordable Housing in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting clarification on the term small mortgage within the definition of intermediate housing.

The Committee noted the following:

- i. Departmental letter re Data Sharing Legislation between NI and Scotland.
- ii. RaISe briefing paper on Housing Rights Private Rented Sector Conference 2020.
- iii. Departmental Welfare Supplementary Payments Report 2010/2020.
- iv. Copy of arc21 letter to Ministers re Green Growth.
- v. Copy of Department for Communities draft budget 2021/2022 Equality Impact Assessment.
- vi. Correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office re Dealing with EU Exit Matters - Terms of Reference.

- vii. Copy of UK Sport UK Anti-Doping Annual Report and Accounts for the year ending 31 March 2020.
- viii. Department for Communities Investing Activity Report 31 January 2021.

19. Any Other Business

A Member raised an issue regarding the Department's recent announcement regarding funding for their Labour Market Partnership Plan prior to the closing date of 5 February.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking why Councils were asked to respond only for the Department to announce there is no funding available.

A Member expressed concerns raised in the Education Committee regarding the mental health of pupils during periods of lockdown, and the need to address the re-opening of schools.

The Member discussed various physical and mental health impacts of lockdown and stressed the need for a cross cutting approach with the Department of Education taking the lead.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister asking her to look at a cross-departmental approach to tackle the return of pupils to school.

A Member welcomed the recent announcement by the Minister for Health of the £500 special recognition payment to Health Workers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to ask that every step is taken to ensure that there is no negative impact on any benefits received by those Health Workers receiving the recognition payment.

20. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 11 February 2021 at 9:00 a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 12.51p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities