



Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 8 July 2021

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Ms Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA
Mr Fra McCann MLA
Ms Sinéad Ennis MLA
Mr Andy Allen MLA
Mr Alex Easton MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA

Apologies: Ms Pam Cameron MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Supervisor)



In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 10.05 am in open session, chaired by the Deputy Chairperson.

1. Apologies

Apologies as above.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that it was normal practice for committees to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson during periods of recess to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine/contentious Freedom of Information (FoI) requests received.

Members noted that they would be informed of any such requests, the views expressed by the Chairperson and/or Deputy Chairperson and the response issued by the FoI Unit, at the first available meeting following the recess period.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the Committee will continue to receive correspondence during summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that correspondence is forwarded to Members on a weekly/fortnightly basis and that Members should highlight any items that they might want to discuss further at the first meeting post recess.

The Deputy Chairperson provided an update to Members on Labour Market interventions.



The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that there were no longer 14 young people with disabilities starting work with DfC as, unfortunately, three had dropped out at short notice due to personal circumstances.

Members noted that officials are working with the work coaches to fill the three vacant posts as quickly as possible and that they intend to bring the number back up to 14 as soon as they can.

Fra McCann joined the meeting at 10.09 am.

A Member raised the possibility of the introduction of Welfare Reform Mitigations Legislation during summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss options in greater detail if the Minister brings forward her proposals.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with correspondence from the Department on the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Amendment) Bill.

Members noted that the Department had offered to brief at today's meeting but, as the Speaker is unlikely to receive advice from Legal Services on the competence of this Bill until the end of July, it had been agreed that the briefing will take place at the meeting on 9 September.

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members of the training they had received on questioning techniques earlier in the year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule refresher training in the autumn.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the Committee Chairperson had been contacted by Co-operation Ireland with regard to concerns they have over the funding for the National Citizen Service Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for an update on the current status of this funding.



3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 1 July 2021.

4. Matters Arising

Response from the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in relation to Neighbourhood Renewal.

The Committee noted that DAERA Officials are continuing to work closely with the Department for Communities (DfC) and the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) to develop a funding package for rural regeneration.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DAERA to ask for a copy of the final outcomes report when it has been published.

Departmental response in relation to Funding Allocations to Advice NI

Members noted that almost £1m of funding had been awarded for 2021-22 and a formal letter of offer and grant funding agreement had been sent to Advice NI.

Members also noted that this included a six-month advance payment released in April prior to sign-off of the budget of almost £140,000 to ensure continuity of service.

The Chairperson Informed Members that they had also been provided with a response from Advice NI in relation to funding.

Members noted that Advice NI's current focus was to engage with the Department to ensure welfare reform funding and all other funding from the Department is sustained on a 3-year basis from next year as opposed to the current 1-year funding approach.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to express their support for her and Advice NI's call for multi-year budgeting which will offer greater certainty for organisations that are providing such vital services.



Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the Advice NI paper to the Minister for Finance and to express its support for the Minister for Communities and Advice NI's call for multi-year budgeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the Advice NI paper to The Executive Office (TEO) and to express its support for the Minister for Communities and Advice NI's call for multi-year budgeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Advice NI to thank its staff for all their work, in particular the work they continued to provide while on protective notice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NICVA to ask that it provides any correspondence/evidence from its members in relation to the need for multi-year budgets.

Departmental response in relation to the use of Joint Bank Accounts for the Future Method of Payment Project

The Committee noted that customers without access to a bank account can opt to be paid into the account of a partner, family member or close friend if permission from the account holder has been given and an agreement has been made on how the money deposited is used.

Members also noted that the Department follows existing guidance from the Health & Social Care Trusts and will investigate any suspicion or evidence of financial abuse or where neglect is suspected.

Departmental response in relation to the Draft Programme for Government

The Committee noted that a Programme for Government (PfG) draft Outcomes Framework based on nine outcomes of societal wellbeing was recently consulted on and responses are now being analysed.

The Committee also noted that work on action plans is scheduled to commence in Autumn 2021, initially linking to Covid recovery plans.

Members noted that the Department will be in a position to brief the Committee on proposed PfG actions once it reaches this stage of the process.



Departmental response in relation to Women's Aid Refuges

The Committee noted that the distribution of Women's Aid refuges is based on need and that a refuge service is now provided in Newry.

The Committee also noted that, in addition to Supporting People funding, the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund had provided an allocation of £400k capital funding to Foyle Women's Aid.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the response to the original correspondent on these issues, Dolores Kelly MLA.

Departmental response in relation to the High Street Taskforce

The Committee noted that the Department is aiming to have the High Street Task Force report completed by March 2022.

Departmental response in relation to Gender Budgeting

The Committee expressed disappointment that the Department's budget process is informed only by the Section 75 considerations, which includes a gender perspective.

A Member discussed the work of the Women's Budget Group (WBG) in relation to gender budgeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the WBG to ask if it could provide a full definition of gender budgeting, for an outline of the work the organisation carries out and to ask whether they have had any contact with the Northern Ireland Department for Communities or Department for Finance in relation to the need for gender budgeting.

Departmental letter in relation to Social Security Health Assessments

The Committee again expressed disappointment that the Capita contract for services in relation to PIP had been extended, particularly given the generally acknowledged poor performance of Capita.

Sinéad Ennis joined the meeting at 10.46 a.m.



Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for a timeline of all decisions taken in relation to the extension of the contract, who was responsible for making the decisions and the rationale behind the decisions.

Paula Bradley joined the meeting at 10.50 am and assumed the Chair.

Fra McCann left the meeting at 10.50 am.

Video Relay Service (VRS) Provision by Councils

The Chairperson reminded Members that they had previously agreed to write to all local councils regarding VRS provision and to ask if they are aware of the number of deaf people living within their council area, if so, how do they gather this information, and if it is gathered under Community Planning.

The Committee discussed its concerns regarding the lack of a standardised approach to VRS across all council areas and agreed to discuss further at its meeting on 9 September.

Burial Ground Regulations

The Chairperson reminded Members that they had previously agreed to write to all local councils asking for details on burial ground regulations, how they have been dealing with the regulations and for details of their policies on burials.

A Member informed the Committee that she was aware of a forthcoming Departmental review into councils, following on from the establishment of the new councils in 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to ask for further information on the review and to ask that she considers council burial ground regulations as part of the review process.

Responses from Further Education Providers in relation to a Housing Degree

The Chairperson reminded Members that they previously agreed to write to all Northern Ireland universities and further education colleges to ask if they offer a



housing degree and, if not, why the option was dropped and if there are plans to reintroduce it. The Committee noted the responses.

Departmental reply in relation to Changing Places

The Committee noted that the 2021/22 Access and Inclusion Programme closed on 23 June and 69 applications had been received.

The Committee expressed disappointment that only six councils had sought funding towards the installation of Changing Places facilities.

The Committee welcomed confirmation that if there is an underspend the Department will seek further applications from councils and the NI Museums Council to ensure that the programme budget is allocated in full.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek assurances that it has been in contact with all councils to ensure they are aware of the funding available.

The Committee discussed the need for new building regulations to cover Changing Places to ensure that all new public buildings have such facilities available for public use.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Finance to outline its desire to see new building regulations being brought forward to cover Changing Places needs.

Letter from the Chair of the Panel for the Independent Review of Discretionary Support

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a request to brief from the Chair of the panel for the Independent Review of Discretionary Support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite representatives to brief at its meeting on 16 September 2021.



4. Charities Bill

Andy Allen declared an interest as a Charity Trustee.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft motion to extend the Committee stage of this Bill until 10 December 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the motion and that a copy is lodged with the Business Office.

The Chairperson informed Members that the advert for the Public Call for Evidence will be in the three main local newspapers on Wednesday 14 July.

The Chairperson also informed Members that they had received requests from two individuals to be sent the Departmental papers that the Committee considered at its meeting on 1 July 2021 and that these papers would be published in due course as part of the evidence in the Committee Report on the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek permission from the Department before releasing the papers.

The Chairperson raised the issue of individuals who wish to brief the Committee on the Charities Bill and reminded Members that the Committee is not investigating the actions of the Charities Commission.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask that individuals submit to the Public Call for Evidence and that, once the call for evidence is closed, the Committee will review responses and consider options for further evidence from individuals.

5. Secondary Legislation

The Chairperson placed on record her disappointment for the late receipt of six SL1s from the Department. The Committee agreed that this was highly unsatisfactory and did not allow Members sufficient time to scrutinise the proposals.



SL1 - The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Conditions for Transfers) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations set out the conditions that must be satisfied for the different ways that trustees or managers of occupational and personal pension schemes may permit a member of their scheme to use the cash equivalent value of, respectively, the member's accrued rights to benefits or pension credit rights so as to make a transfer of that value into another occupational or personal pension scheme.

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

SL1 - Occupational Pension Schemes (Admin Investment Charges and Governance) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations places administration and governance requirements on trustees of occupational defined contribution (DC) pension schemes, in particular to require trustees of certain DC pension schemes to disclose their investment returns and demonstrate that they are providing value for their members. It also increases flexibility for DC schemes to take account of performance fees payable to fund managers when calculating the cap on charges that applies to default investment arrangements.

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

SL1 - Occupational Pensions Schemes (Climate Change Governance and Reporting) (Miscellaneous Provisions and Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations will introduce requirements for trustees of certain occupational pension schemes to ensure that there is effective governance of those schemes with respect to the effects of climate change. It also introduces related reporting and publication requirements for such trustees and confers new compliance powers on the Pensions Regulator.

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



SL1 - Occupational Pensions Schemes (Climate Change Governance and Reporting) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations will introduce requirements about trustee knowledge and understanding of matters relating to the effects of climate change on occupational pension schemes, for trustees who are subject to the climate change governance and reporting requirements. It also makes consequential amendments to existing regulations in relation to disclosure and notification requirements.

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

SL1 - Pensions Regulator (Information Gathering Powers and Modification) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations sets out the minimum information which the Pensions Regulator must include in a notice which requires a person to attend an interview under extended provisions introduced by the Pension Schemes Act 2021. It also modifies the Regulator's extended inspection powers so they apply to multi-employer schemes and sets the level of the fixed and escalating civil penalties.

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

SL1 The Pensions Regulator (Employer Resources Test) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations set out what constitutes the resources of the employer for the purposes of the "employer resources test" and sets out the basis for how the value of the resources of the employer is to be calculated, determined and verified.

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



6. SR 2021/188 - The Child Support Maintenance Calculation (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/188: The Child Support Maintenance Calculation (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021, which will amend the Child Support Maintenance Calculation Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 (“the 2012 Regulations”) (S.R. 2012 No. 427) by aligning child maintenance qualifying rules with Child Benefit payment criteria in certain circumstances.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/188: The Child Support Maintenance Calculation (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021 and, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, had no objection to the Rule.

7. SR 2021/190 The Housing (Notifications of Disposals and Mortgages) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/190: The Housing (Notifications of Disposals and Mortgages) Regulations (NI) 2021, which details the information the Registered Housing Associations (RHAs) must provide in completing the notifications process.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/190: The Housing (Notifications of Disposals and Mortgages) Regulations (NI) 2021 and, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, had no objection to the Rule.

The meeting was suspended at 11.16 am.

The meeting moved into open session at 11.29 pm



8. Correspondence

- i. Letter asking to brief the Committee regarding extending public entertainment to Bingo Clubs via regulations in tandem with the new liquor license legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Department for comment as the Bill was no longer in Committee Stage.

- ii. Letter regarding Sports Sustainability Fund.

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

- iii. Correspondence from the Social Justice and Social Security Committee regarding a Joint letter with other UK legislatures on Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit uplift.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to co-sign the letter.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- i. Copy of papers from recent High Street Taskforce concurrent meeting.
- ii. Correspondence from the Committee for Education regarding Committee queries on physical literacy.
- iii. Departmental reply re social value in council procurements.
- iv. Departmental letter re policy directions for the National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- v. Joint letter from frontline advice organisations regarding the rights of EU citizens and their family members.



- vi. Memo from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) regarding NIAO reports.
- vii. Press Recognition Panel Annual Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2021.
- viii. Copy of report on Evaluation of the Covid grant making response of the Community Foundation NI.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson informed Members that, unless a very urgent matter arises, the next meeting would be 9 September 2021.

The Committee agreed to consider its forward work programme after summer recess.

The Committee noted that the Committee Stage of the Charities Bill will begin post summer recess and it is likely that the Committee stages of the Private Tenancies Bill and a Bill on the reform of gambling legislation will also commence.

10. Any Other Business

A Member raised the issue of the Department's Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written update on the strategy.

11. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 9 September 2021 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings, time to be confirmed.



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The meeting was adjourned at 11.34 am.

Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities