



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Thursday 20 February 2020
Room 29 Parliament Buildings

Present: Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Andy Allen MLA
Jonathan Buckley MLA
Mark Durkan MLA
Sinead Ennis MLA
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
Robin Newton MBE MLA
Emma Sheerin MLA

Apologies: Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)

In Attendance: Kevin Pelan (Assembly Clerk)
Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Supervisor)
Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 10:04 a.m.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 13 February 2020.

3. Matters Arising

The deputy chairperson advised members that a Departmental response to a Committee request for information on the Budget Bill had been received and that the Department had offered to provide officials for a briefing on this issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive a Departmental briefing on budgetary matters at a future meeting in advance of the Budget (No 2) Bill.

Members noted an excerpt from the Department of Finance NI Spring Supplementary Estimates and a copy of Vote on Account.

Members noted an NIA Research and Information Service paper on Assembly Committee engagement on 2020-21 departmental budget planning.

The Deputy Chairperson advised members that the Chair of the Committee planned to speak during the debates on the Spring Supplementary Estimates and the Second Stage of the Budget Bill.

Agreed: Members were content for the Chair to speak on behalf of the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson reminded members that they had previously considered 5 March as the date for their strategic planning day but that they now needed to factor in two more briefing sessions with the Departmental Deputy Secretaries.

Agreed: Members agreed to reschedule the Committee planning day until March 19.

4. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from Ulster Rugby regarding the possibility of holding a meeting at Kingspan Stadium.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a future meeting at Kingspan Stadium.

A member sought clarification on the meeting between the chair and the Chief Executive of Ulster Rugby. The deputy chairperson advised that the chair would address this issue at the next meeting of the committee.

The Committee considered a letter of congratulations and request to meet the Deputy Chair from the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite representatives from CIH to brief at a future meeting.

The deputy chairperson also advised members that, in her capacity as deputy chairperson, she had been asked to present an award at the upcoming Chartered

Institute of Housing awards ceremony. She also advised that she would not be speaking on behalf of the committee at the ceremony.

The committee noted this.

The Committee also noted the following:

- I. Charity Commission NI briefing paper on their role and work.
- II. Correspondence from Marie Curie in response to departmental evidence on 6 February.
- III. British Association of Social Workers NI (BASW NI) briefing paper on Welfare Reform.
- IV. Invitation to attend Gradam Ceoil pre-concert reception.
- V. The Committee considered a letter of congratulations and request to meet the Chairperson from the Construction Employers Federation (CEF).

5. Departmental briefing: Welfare Reform

The following departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:11 a.m.

Anne McCleary, Director of Social Security, Policy, Legislation and Decision-making
David Tarr, Social Policy Development

Members noted a copy of the Northern Ireland Welfare Supplementary Payments Schemes and Review of Welfare Mitigation Schemes.

Departmental officials provided the Committee with an overview of Welfare Reform.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the department on the following:

- A copy of the speaking notes from the Department's briefing on welfare reform.
- An estimated breakdown of the 47,000 claimants according to the type of benefits they are in receipt of and the cost of the mitigation measures applied to each.
- A copy of the terms of reference for the further review of PIP, the name(s) of the person(s) conducting it and an indication of when the report is due.
- A copy of the SIB review of the advice sector.

- The actions the department has taken to implement the recommendations of the independent review of the PIP assessment process carried out by Walter Rader in 2018.
- Following Capita's announcement that it had secured a 2-year extension to its PIP assessment contract with the department, the Committee requested more information on what Capita has been contracted to do given all, or most claimants, have been assessed.
- An update on the investigation that the NI Public Services Ombudsman is conducting into the way the department administers Personal Independence Payments.
- More information on the department's plans for co-design of mitigation measures.
- The Committee was repeatedly informed that the 5-week wait for a Universal Credit payment impoverished claimants and their families and is extremely concerned about this. Members urged the Minister to ensure that a non-loan contingency is in place to assist claimants during this difficult period (e.g. a one-off supplementary payment) and that claimants of Universal Credit are made aware at the point of application that such a contingency exists
- Members noted that their constituents are often confused as to when a PIP assessment has begun and when it has finished. The Committee urged the department to ensure that Capita officials inform claimants as to when the formal assessment has begun and ended and that only information gathered during that timeframe is considered by the decision-maker.
- The Committee is aware that a Social Supermarket pilot took place between 1 October 2017 and 30 September 2018 and that an evaluation has shown a high demand in the five pilot areas. Members would like to know if the department has plans to extend the pilot.
- The Committee believes that it is important to understand why the option for a split payment has rarely been taken up by claimants. Members would welcome the department's insight into this issue and would encourage research to establish the reasons.
- The Committee is aware of the option for split payments between members of a couple in a household to ensure the main carer of children in the household received the majority of the payment, but that this option has not had a significant uptake. Members would like to know what the Department is doing to raise awareness of this payment option and the reasons why there has not been uptake of this option.
- The Committee is aware that the housing costs of universal credit in relation to payments to landlords in the private rented sector have to be processed manually and would like to know what plans there are to automate this process.

The deputy chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

6. Briefing by Kevin Higgins and Professor Eileen Evason: Welfare Reform

The following representatives joined the meeting at 11:02 a.m.

Kevin Higgins, Head of Policy, Advice NI

Professor Eileen Evason, Chair of NI Welfare Mitigations Working Group

Mr Higgins and Professor Evason provided the Committee with an overview of welfare reform mitigations.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The deputy chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

7. Briefing by Cliff Edge Coalition: Welfare Reform

The following representatives joined the meeting at 12:04 a.m.

Kate McCauley, Housing Rights

Ursula O'Hare, Law Centre NI

Andy McClenaghan, British Association of Social Workers NI

Siobhán Harding, Women Support Network

The representatives from Cliff Edge Coalition provided the Committee with an overview of their key concerns relating to welfare reform and proposals on the way forward.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Cliff Edge Coalition seeking the following:

- A copy of each of the group's representative's speaking notes.
- Any evidence that the Coalition might have on the cost of mitigations they support versus the cost of not implementing these measures.
- Any evidence that the Coalition might have on the number of households having to access food banks as a result of the 5-week wait for Universal Credit.
- A copy of the research report on best practice in other countries for those on low incomes living in the private rented sector that is due at the end of March.

The deputy chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

8. Any Other Business

The deputy chairperson advised members that the Minister, Deputy Secretary on Housing and a departmental briefing on liquor licensing had been scheduled for the

meeting on 27 February. However, due to accommodation issues, the Committee may wish to consider rescheduling the briefing on liquor licencing until the following week.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule the briefing from the Deputy Secretary on housing until 5 March and to reschedule the Committee planning day until 19 March.

9. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on Thursday 27 February at 10.00 a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 13.06 p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities