



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 27 January 2022

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Ms Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Mr Paul Frew MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Stephen Dunne MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA
Ms Ciara Ferguson MLA
Ms Áine Murphy MLA
Ms Aisling Reilly MLA

Apologies:

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



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In Attendance by Video or Teleconference: Ms Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Officer)

The Chairperson, Paula Bradley, assumed the Chair. The meeting began at 9.07 am in closed session. The following Members were present at the start of the public session: Paula Bradley (Chairperson), Andy Allen, Kellie Armstrong, Ciara Ferguson and Aisling Reilly.

Declaration of Interests

Kellie Armstrong declared an interest as having a close family member who may be able to receive energy support payments.

1. Apologies

No apologies were made.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 20 January 2022.

3. Chairperson's Business

Paul Frew joined the meeting at 9.12 am.

The Chairperson informed Members that it had come to her attention that although the Housing Executive pay for certain adaptations to homes, due to Covid-19, the



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adaptations have not yet been undertaken and quotes for the same work are higher than originally agreed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding a number of related issues;

- To enquire what is being done to meet the rising material and building costs, as projected costs have doubled in some instances;
- To request a copy of the schedule for reviewing pricing for adaptations;
- For clarification regarding payment up-lifts, and whether these payments were offered to those who had seen costs increase during the planned works;
- For clarification on the Disabled Facilities Grant, whether the amount is awarded per household or per individual in need; and
- To enquire when a review is planned for the Disabled Facilities Grant and the prerequisites for it to be awarded.

4. Matters Arising

Áine Murphy joined the meeting at 9.29 am.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had received a Departmental response regarding the Changing Places Facilities, including an appendix in the guidance notes listing projects eligible for funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request permission from the Department to share the guidance notes with the Co-Design Group so that it may verify whether the appendix is still up-to-date.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had received a Departmental response regarding mixed tenure properties.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to address;

- Issues raised regarding mixed tenure properties; and
- to request that NIHE include an official with responsibilities for maintenance queries as part of their briefing delegation.



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had received a response from the Department regarding the closure of Regina Coeli House.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department enquiring what measures it was taking to re-house the affected women and how the Department was employing its strategy against homelessness in addressing the issue. The Committee also agreed to send a copy of the letter to the NIHE.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had received a Departmental response regarding the Supporting People (SP) Three Year Strategic Plan and Covid-19 Recovery Plan 2021 – 24. The Committee was content to note.

The Committee moved to a later agenda item to allow witnesses time to join the meeting via Starleaf.

5. SL1 – The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

6. SL1 – The Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

7. SL1 – The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (NI) 2022

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.



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8. SL1 – The Social Security Up-rating Regulations (NI) 2022

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

9. SR 2022/000 – The Welfare Supplementary Payment (Extension) Regulations (NI) 2022

Agreed: The Committee considered SR2022/000 - The Welfare Supplementary Payment (Extension) Regulations (NI) 2022 and recommended that it was affirmed by the Assembly.

Kellie Armstrong and Andy Allen wished to put on record their concerns that another cliff-edge situation would be reached in relation to welfare reform mitigations in three years' time.

10. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that they had received correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding SL1 – The Housing Related Functions of the Department of Finance (Exercise by the NIHE) Regulations (NI) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIHE enquiring whether it has the necessary staff capacity to assume the administration of the Housing Benefit (Rates) and Low-Income Rate Relief Functions.

The Committee was content to note the following items of correspondence:

- i. A copy of the NI Fiscal Council's report on the Assessment of the Northern Ireland Executive's 2022-25 Draft Budget;
- ii. And an invitation to attend Advice NI's Annual General Meeting.



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11. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee would commence deliberations on the Support for Mortgage Interest etc. (Security for Loans) Bill at the meeting on Tuesday 1 February.

The meeting was adjourned at 9.27 am.

The meeting recommenced at 9.39 am.

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 9.39 am.

12. Departmental briefing on Energy Support Schemes

Stephen Dunne joined the meeting at 10.24 am.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 10.37 am.

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental Officials to the meeting:

David Polley

Anne McCleary

Gareth Kelly

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

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

13. Support for Security for Mortgage Interest etc. (Security for Loans) Bill Papers

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with the following documents:



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- A copy of the Security for Mortgage Interest etc. (Security for Loans) Bill;
- A copy of the research paper from the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe);
- And a copy of the research paper from Housing Rights

The Committee was content to note and to include the papers in its report on the Bill.

14. Law Society briefing on Support for Mortgage Interest etc. (Security for Loans) Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Brian Carson

Stuart Harper

Catherine Heyes

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

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

15. Departmental briefing on Support for Mortgage Interest etc. (Security for Loans) Bill

Aisling Reilly left the meeting at 11.50 am.

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental Officials to the meeting:

Anne McCleary

Una McConnell

Hayley Ward



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

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Officials agreed to respond on a number of issues raised by Members:

- To confirm the process for repaying the SMI loan and also describe the process for the removal of the charge on a property and the timelines involved;
- To clarify whether set times for adding a charge to the register or removal of a charge would be useful and potentially be included in the regulations;
- To clarify the situation regarding joint owners and what happens in situations of separation or bereavement;
- To clarify what would happen to the SMI loan in a circumstance where the property had to be sold but there was insufficient equity;
- Define what 'sufficient equity' means in practice and whether this is calculated on a case by case basis;
- To clarify whether there is potential for the Bill to render someone who lives in the property homeless, if a trigger event occurs;
- To provide a timescale for the Regulations, and clarify if they will apply to new loans only, and provide the timescale for the transfer of existing loans;
- Further explanation regarding debt management decision-making in the Department in relation to SMI loans and also regarding any appeals process;
- Confirmation of the rationale for the 39-week wait and if it is something that could be considered in a review of the SMI policy;
- Whether the Department will consider reviewing the SMI loan policy in preparation for the move to UC in Northern Ireland; and
- Whether the Department will consider reviewing the SMI loan policy regarding reduced numbers of pensioners being able to get an SMI loan due to them not being in receipt of pensions credits and for future proof the policy.



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16. SL1 – Energy Payment Support Scheme Regulations (NI) 2022

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

17. Any Other Business

A Member raised a query about the Industrial Injury Disability Benefit, noting that a constituent had not received their weekly payments since 5 January 2022 having been informed that this was due to staff shortages.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting urgent clarification on this issue and to ask what the Department is doing to address any staff shortages to ensure payment of the benefit.

18. Date, Time and Location of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 1 February 2022 at 9.00 am in room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.08 pm.

Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities