



Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 16 September 2021

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Ms Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Aíne Murphy MLA
Mr Andy Allen MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Alex Easton MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA

Apologies: Ms Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Fra McCann MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)



The meeting commenced at 09.05 am in open session.

1. Apologies

Apologies as above.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Karen Mullan and Sinéad Ennis for all their work on the Committee.

The Chairperson also welcomed new Member Aíne Murphy to the Committee as the replacement for Sinéad Ennis.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write a letter of thanks to Sinéad Ennis and Karen Mullan.

The Chairperson reminded Members about the Pensioners' Parliament happening on Friday 17th September.

Members noted that the Minister for Communities was taking part and that questions would be based on the Lived Experience Survey, which AGE NI conducted over the summer.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 9 September 2021.



4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been provided with Departmental correspondence in relation to the Transfer of Functions Order regarding the statutory Transfer of the Appeals Service from Department for Communities (DfC) to Department of Justice (DoJ).

The Committee noted that a service level agreement has been in place under which administrative responsibility for the Appeals Service is managed by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.

The Committee also noted that both Departments are now in the position to facilitate the statutory transfer on 1st April 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the Department to advise that the Committee is content for the Department to make the consequential amendments to consolidate the relevant subordinate legislation.

Members also noted that the Appeals Service provides administrative support for a number of tribunals that fall within the remit of DfC, mainly appeals against decisions in relation to benefit entitlement.

The Committee discussed concerns regarding the accessibility and suitability of venues used to conduct appeals and highlighted that courts were not suitable.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the Department of Justice to ask that when considering the Appeals Service that they consider the use of venues other than court houses for appeals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the Committee for Justice providing relevant correspondence received by the Committee in relation to DfC appeals and to highlight the recommendations within the Independent Review of PIP Reports.



The Chairperson reminded Members that at the meeting on 9th September, the Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy to raise concerns over the application process for the High Street Voucher Scheme.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Clerk had held back the letter when it became clear that an announcement on the process was imminent.

The Chairperson also advised Members that in addition to an online portal, there is a telephone service for those who are unable to use the online system.

Members raised concerns regarding the short two-week window for telephone applications and potential issues that may arise from an overwhelming influx of applicants.

Members also discussed the number of applications a nominated individual can make on behalf of others.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy to seek clarification on the number of applications a nominated individual can make on behalf of others.

The Committee also agreed to request that consideration is given to the opening of the telephone application process earlier and for a longer period and, to ask how many phone lines will be available and if there will be adequate staffing resources available.

5. Charity Commission NI briefing on the Charities Bill

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been provided with requests from a number of individuals to brief the Committee on the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss further during the closed session at the end of the meeting.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a Charity Trustee.

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Ms Frances McCandless, Chief Executive



Ms Nicole Lapin, Chief Commissioner

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

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

6. Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR) briefing on the Charities Bill

The following representative joined the meeting:

Mr Martin Tyson, Head of Regulation and Improvement

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

The representative agreed to forward further information regarding OSCR's reporting requirements for charities.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for his attendance.

The meeting was suspended at 10.03 am.

The meeting restarted at 10.11 am.

The Committee agreed to suspend briefings and moved to Secondary Legislation at 10.11 am.

Alex Easton left the meeting at 10.11 am.

7. SL1 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit (Sanctuary Schemes) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed regulations will amend the Housing Benefit Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 and The Universal Credit Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 to include an exception from under-occupancy



deductions for any Housing Benefit or Universal Credit claimant who is living in a social sector rented property that is adapted under a sanctuary scheme, as a result of a member of that household having had domestic violence threatened or inflicted upon them.

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

8. Correspondence

- i. Correspondence from Carnegie UK regarding its report on the Embedding Wellbeing Project.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the proposal during the closed session.

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been emailed correspondence from the Private Office alerting the Committee that Minister Harghey intends to launch a Minor Capital Works Programme for Sport on Friday 17th September.

The Committee raised concerns in relation to the short two-week window for the submission of applications to the Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that they consider an extension to the two-week window.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- i. Pivotal Report - Pivotal Tracker Policy Priorities for Northern Ireland.
- ii. Northern Ireland Local Government Officers Superannuation Committee 2020 21 Annual Report and Accounts.
- iii. Correspondence from Finance Committee re EU Regulations and Executive and Assembly Processes.



9. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the draft forward work programme during the closed session.

10. Any Other Business

A Member discussed the outstanding 5 million Budget allocated for the support of Charities and Social Enterprises.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask when will any planned scheme be initiated and when will an update on Social Strategies be available.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department to request a written update on the Housing Executive Revitalisation Programme.

A Member raised a further issue in relation to the High Street Voucher Scheme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Communities to seek assurance that the Scheme will be disregarded from benefit calculations.

11. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 23 September 2021 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings, at 9.00 am.



12. Departmental briefing on its Business Plan

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Michael Kane

Ms Linda Williams

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 to request a written update on legislation that is currently delayed and its impact on the Business Plan Actions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) to ask if there are any plans for the future introduction of a single cross Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Business Planning Framework System similar to that developed by DfC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request an updated timeline for the Sub Regional Stadia Programme.

13. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) briefing on Post Covid Recovery

The following representative joined the meeting:

Mr Chris Birt, Deputy Director for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

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

The representative agreed to forward further information on JRF Anti- Poverty Strategy when available.



The Chairperson thanked the representative for their attendance.

14. Briefing by Training for Women Network on Women in Community Transition (WICT)

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Ms Norma Shearer, Chief Executive Officer

Ms Elizabeth Thompson, WICT Manager

Ms Amanda Leighton, Foyle Women's Information Network (FWIN)

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 write to the Department to request an urgent briefing on the WICT Programme and to ask that Officials review the meeting, and provide a written response to the questions raised, in advance of their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) to request details on the contract with TWN for the delivery of the WICT Programme.

The meeting moved into closed session at 12.41 pm.

Private Tenancies Bill

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Private Tenancies Bill had officially reached Committee Stage.

The Chairperson also reminded Members that they had raised a range of issues and questions in respect of the Bill during the second stage of the Bill, on Tuesday 14th of September 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that Officials review the Hansard and provide a written response to the questions raised.



Charities Bill

The Chairperson provided Members with an overview of responses received to the Call for Evidence.

The Chairperson advised Members that they had been provided with correspondence from individuals who wished to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the individuals to brief and that the Committee Clerk liaises with them in advance of their briefings.

Forward Work Programme

Members noted a copy of the Committees forward work programme up to 7th October 2021.

Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from Carnegie UK regarding its report on the Embedding Wellbeing Project.

The Chairperson advised Members that Carnegie UK have requested that the Committee consider a motion in support of Carnegie UK's recommendations on Embedding Wellbeing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Carnegie UK to advise that due to the lack of Committee work and evidence gathering on this issue they could not support the motion but to request that Carnegie UK forward issues on which it would like to Committee to follow up.

The meeting was adjourned at 13.05 pm

Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities