



# Northern Ireland Assembly

## COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

### MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**Thursday 11 June 2020**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings**

Present, Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)  
Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Andy Allen MBE MLA

Present, Teleconferencing: Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present, Starleaf Mark Durkan MLA  
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA  
Fra McCann MLA  
Jonathan Buckley MLA

Apologies: Sinéad Ennis MLA

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

*The meeting commenced in open session at 13:08 p.m.*

#### **1. Apologies**

As above.

#### **2. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's Business.

### **3. Draft Minutes**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 3 June 2020.

### **4. Departmental briefing on current and future support for councils**

The following departmental officials joined the meeting via Starleaf videoconference at 13:12 p.m.:

Mark O'Donnell, Deputy Secretary, Belfast Regeneration  
Anthony Carleton, Director of Local Government Policy

The departmental officials provided the Committee with an overview of the current and future support for councils.

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

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking for the following:

- Clarification on the date that Covid-19 emergency funding came into effect and whether any claims from councils were made prior to this date.
- If the department has plans any to measure the outcomes of its Covid-19 emergency funding to councils.

The Chairperson thanked the departmental officials for their attendance.

### **5. Departmental briefing on June Monitoring/reprioritisation**

The following departmental officials joined the meeting via Starleaf videoconference at 13:59 p.m.:

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

The departmental officials provided the Committee with an overview of the June Monitoring Round and reprioritisation exercise.

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

The following interest was declared:

Fra McCann MLA declared an interest as Vice Chair of the All Party Group on Visual Impairment

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the department to request a copy of the criteria for applications to future sports club emergency funding.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to all departments to ensure that all social distancing measures and cross-departmental engagement on town centre resilience take into consideration the difficulties faced by people with visual impairments.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the June Monitoring papers to the Committee for Finance for information.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to write to the Department for Communities to advise that the Committee was supportive of their proposed bids and reprioritisation in the June Monitoring Round.

The Chairperson thanked the departmental officials for their attendance.

## **6. Matters Arising**

The Committee Chairperson expressed her disappointment that a number of the departmental responses had again fallen outside of the agreed protocol of 10 working days for replies.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to write again to the Minister to remind her of the agreed protocol and the need to reply to the Committee on a timely basis.

Members noted a departmental reply to Committee queries on Universal Credit.

Members noted a departmental reply to Committee queries on Post Offices and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Independent Review of Personal Independence Payment (PIP).

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries on Make the Call helpline.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries on the provision of meals for school children during the Covid-19 crisis.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries in relation to the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries on the Student Hardship Fund and the Charity Commission NI.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries following the departmental Budget briefing on 22 April.

Members considered a departmental response to Committee queries on the Covid-19 Food Parcel Service.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to write to the department seeking clarity and further information on how the Food Parcel service was administered and to ask whether the department has plans to carry out a review of the service to measure its effectiveness.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to write to the Department of Health to recognise the success of the service and to ask that it works closer with the Department for Communities in the future to ensure the service is better targeted to reach those in greatest need.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to write to the Department of Health seeking an explanation for the delay in the issuing of shielding letters, and to ask what other departments/agencies were consulted on the distribution of food parcels.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to write to the British Medical Association (BMA) seeking an explanation for the delay in the issuing of shielding letters.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries on the Supporting People Programme.

Members noted a departmental reply to Committee queries regarding correspondence from IMTAC.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries on Covid-19 funding for councils.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries on the Housing (Amendment) Bill and the potential impact of Covid-19 on the financial standing of councils.

Members noted a departmental response to the Committee's request for further information on the department's expenditure during Covid-19.

Members noted a departmental response to the Committee's request for further information regarding financial support to charities.

Members noted a departmental response to the Committee's request for further information on the Sports Hardship Fund.

Members noted a departmental response to the Committee's request for further information on the Dormant Accounts Fund.

Members noted a departmental response to Committee queries regarding the 2014/2015 Savills Stock Condition Survey.

Members noted a departmental response to the Committee's request for a further breakdown of Sport NI Funding.

Members noted a departmental response to the Committee's request for an update on the projects under the auspices of the Regional Development Office.

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of the Twelfth report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Examiner had drawn the Committee's attention to the following rules:

SR 2020/66 - The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations (NI) 2020

SR 2020/69 - The Maternity Allowance and Statutory Maternity Pay (Normal Weekly Earnings etc.) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020; and

SR 2020/74 The Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2020.

The report stated that the Department had breached the 21-day rule on each of these rules. However, the Examiner was content with the Department's explanation for this, which was the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak. Members agreed to note the Report.

## **7. Correspondence**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Trussell Trust regarding the impact of Covid-19 on local food banks.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence outlining the Committee's support to those organisations highlighted in the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Music Venue Trust on support in Northern Ireland for grassroots music venues facing closure as a result of Covid-19.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the department for comment.

The Committee considered correspondence from Home NI regarding the provision of homes for the homeless post Covid-19.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the department for comment.

Members considered the following three requests to the brief the Committee:

- Arts Collaboration Network on the impact of Covid-19.
- Ulster Orchestra on the impact of Covid-19.
- Pivotal report 'Moving out of Lockdown'.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to give further consideration to the briefing requests and to forward their views directly to the Committee Clerk.

The Committee noted the following:

- I. Correspondence regarding the underpayment of state pension.
- II. Department for Communities Investment Activity Report May 2020.
- III. Correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding financial support for businesses adversely affected by Covid-19.
- IV. Departmental response to the Committee for Health regarding Hourglass Charity correspondence.

## **8. Forward Work Programme**

Members noted that the Committee will be briefed by the department on June 17 on an LCM on Immigration and Social Security and on Covid-19 funding to Supporting People.

The Chairperson advised members that the department intends to introduce a Pensions Bill before summer which will require a pre-introductory briefing on June 17.

*Agreed:* Members agreed to receive a departmental briefing on the Pensions Bill on 17 June.

Members also noted that the Committee will be briefed by the department on June 24 on the reform of liquor licensing and will also receive a briefing update from Solace on Covid-19 funding to local councils.

## **9. Any Other Business**

A member discussed concerns regarding a recent letter issued by the Irish Football Association (IFA) to football clubs.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the IFA requesting the following information:

- The clarification and rationale behind the letter which was issued to clubs.
- Information on the implications for furloughed staff.
- An update on the current position of the women's league.
- A written briefing focusing on the sustainability of clubs post Covid-19.

## **10. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 17 June at 14:00 p.m. Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

*The meeting adjourned at 14:50 p.m.*

**Ms Paula Bradley MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**