



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday 13 May 2020
Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present, Senate: Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Andy Allen MBE MLA
Jonathan Buckley MLA

Present, Teleconferencing: Mark Durkan MLA
Sinéad Ennis MLA
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies: Fra McCann 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 29 April 2020.

4. Matters Arising

Members noted a copy of updated guidance for landlords following the making of the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

Members noted a copy of a Research and Information Service paper on Assembly Committees Co-ordinated Budget Scrutiny.

Members considered an explanation for the use of a phrase in the budget template developed by Research and Information Service (RaISe).

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Committee for Finance to ask if it has any comments on the use of the phrase in the RaISe budget monitoring template.

Agreed: Members agreed to forward a copy of the explanation to the department for information.

Agreed: Members agreed to request a departmental briefing on the June Monitoring Round at the meeting on 3 June 2020.

Members noted a Departmental update on its response to Covid-19.

5. Ministerial briefing on the Housing (Amendment) Bill (NI) 2020

The following departmental officials joined the meeting via teleconference at 13:13 p.m.:

Ms Deirdre Hargey MLA, Minister for Communities
Mr Paul Price, Social Housing Reform, Programme Manager
Mr Shane Clements, Social Housing Reform, Policy Project Manager

The Minister provided the Committee with an overview of the Housing (Amendment) Bill (NI) 2020

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session on the Bill

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the department requesting the following information:

- A breakdown of the number of houses bought by tenants in the housing association sector and houses bought by Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) tenants for each of the last 5 years.

- The reason(s) for the sale of NIHE houses being roughly ten times greater than the sale of housing association homes.
- Details of the financial cost of not reversing the decision of the ONS due to the Assembly not functioning and the annual figures of capital funding over this period that was directed to co-ownership that might otherwise have been covered by Financial Transactions Capital
- Information on the regulatory impact of reclassification.
- More information on the grant-making facility referred to in Clause 8.

Agreed: The Committee recommended that the Bill is granted accelerated passage by the Assembly.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and her officials for their attendance.

6. Briefing by Solace NI on the impact of Covid-19 on local councils

The following interest was declared:

Mark Durkan MLA declared an interest as his wife a local council employee.

The following Solace NI representatives joined the meeting via teleconference at 14:16 p.m.

David Jackson, Solace NI Chair & Chief Executive of Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Suzanne Wylie, Chief Executive, Belfast City Council

Alfie Dallas, Lead Finance Officer of Derry City and Strabane District Council

Ronan Cregan, Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Finance and Resources of Belfast City Council

Solace NI provided the Committee with an overview of the impact of Covid-19 on local councils.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Solace requesting the following:

- A breakdown of the ‘savings’ being made by councils as a result of Covid-19 e.g. reduction in expenditure on fuel etc.
- A breakdown, by council area, of the number of staff to be furloughed.
- Information on the level of reserves held by each council.
- The Committee is aware that councils have upfront expenditure which they could claim back from the Department for Communities / Department of Finance and would like to know what this has been for each council.

Agreed: Members agreed to forward a copy of the Solace briefing paper to the department for comment and to request a further briefing from Solace at a Committee meeting before summer recess.

Agreed: Members agreed to request a Ministerial briefing on support packages the department has introduced, or will introduce, for councils.

Agreed: Members agreed to forward a copy of the Solace briefing paper to all departments asking what support packages they have introduced, or will introduce, for councils.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives of Solace NI for their attendance.

7. SL1 – The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Electronic Communications) (Amendment) Order (NI) 2020

The proposed Rule allows those affected by the pandemic to claim State Pension Credit at a time of their choosing and without having to leave their homes. It will assist those older members of the community who are self-isolating and those who are shielding.

Agreed: The Committee considered The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Electronic Communications) (Amendment) Order (NI) 2020 and was content that the Rule is made.

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

The Committee considered SR 2020/74 - The Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2020, which makes provision to enable councils in NI to hold meetings remotely including telephone, video conferencing, live webcast and live interactive screening. The regulations also modify existing legislative provisions to allow councils to postpone annual general meetings until 30 September at the latest.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2020/74 - The Local Government (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of District Council Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2020, and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

9. SR 2020/77 - The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020

The Committee considered SR 2020/77 - The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020, which amend Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) (NI) Regulations to correct drafting errors contained in LGPS (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2019 (SR 2019/206).

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2020/77 - The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

10. Correspondence

The Committee considered additional correspondence from an individual regarding a Charity Commission complaint. The Chairperson reminded members that previous correspondence had been forwarded to the Department on 27 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the individual advising that members have agreed to take a briefing from the department and CCNI on its role, governance and the implications of the recent court decision involving CCNI.

The Committee considered a letter of concern in relation to easing of restrictions on apartment blocks with communal areas without putting vulnerable people at greater risk of infection.

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

The Committee considered a memo from the Committee for Infrastructure asking the department to consider initiating a scheme to offer financial assistance to the taxi industry during the Covid-19 crisis.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward correspondence to department for comment.

The Committee noted the following:

- I. Copy of Department for Communities Investing Activity Report April 2020.
- II. Copy of Mid & East Antrim Borough Council's response to Covid-19.
- III. Copy of correspondence from Mears Ltd NI thanking the Committee for highlighting the impact of Covid-19 on asylum seekers.
- IV. Details of the Committee for the Economy Energy Strategy micro inquiry.

11. Any Other Business

A member of the Committee raised an issue in relation to Sport NI and the impact of Covid-19 on sport.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a briefing from Sport NI at a future meeting on the impact of Covid-19 on sport.

The Committee Chairperson raised the impact of Covid-19 on the Arts sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a briefing from the Arts Council on the impact of Covid-19 on the Arts sector.

The Chairperson advised members that the Committee had been contacted by representatives from the charity, voluntary and community sectors regarding the impact of Covid-19.

Agreed: Members agreed to invite representatives from CO3 and NICVA to jointly brief the Committee at the meeting on 20 May 2020.

A member raised concerns regarding the poor quality of the teleconference facility.

Agreed: That the Committee writes to senior management expressing its dissatisfaction with the teleconference facility and its impact on Committee meetings.

A member raised an issue around the cost of planning applications imposed by local councils and whether the Department for Infrastructure had plans to introduce emergency legislation to address this.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Infrastructure for comment.

A member raised the issue of the departmental spend to date on Covid-19 emergency measures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking for a breakdown of the full expenditure on Covid-19 to date.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 20 May at 13:00 p.m. Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 15:48p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities