



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Social Development

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

Pensions Bill

26 January 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Social Development

Pensions Bill

26 January 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Alex Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mrs Judith Cochrane
Mr Mark H Durkan
Mr Alex Easton
Ms Pamela Lewis
Mr Fra McCann

Witnesses:

Mr Seamus Cassidy	Department for Social Development
Mr Gerry McCann	Department for Social Development
Ms Anne McCleary	Department for Social Development

The Chairperson: We move on to the Pensions Bill. I advise members that the Second Stage of the Pensions Bill will be debated in the Assembly on 31 January, which is next Tuesday. That debate will be on the general principles of the Pensions Bill. If the Second Stage is agreed, the Bill will stand referred to the Committee. We will have 30 days to deal with the Committee Stage.

People are aware that we, as a Committee, will have 30 days to deliberate on the Bill's provisions. People have made their views clear. We have had quite a number of discussions with Anne and her colleagues over the past months. The Committee Stage affords the Committee an important opportunity to go through the Bill in some detail, and we will, presumably, consult on it.

I want to refer members to the process. There is a fairly tight time frame. We are also mindful that, given that we are taking the time to deal with the legislation, we may stand accused by some people of disadvantaging a certain category of women. Notwithstanding that, the Committee and the Assembly have decided that we will process the legislation. Therefore, it is important that we deal with it expeditiously.

Assuming that the vote is carried next Tuesday — it may not be, but let us assume that it is — the Bill will be back to us. We propose that we will need a short period of consultation. There is a new system for Assembly advertisements. All the Committees recently agreed to a truncated version, which can be seen in members' tabled papers. There is a draft version of the advertisement that invites people to participate in our consultation on the Pensions Bill's provisions. We had hoped to keep the notice period short, but we were advised to make it 14 days. However, we will ask key organisations to let us know whether they intend to make a submission or want to come and make a submission. If we know

that, we can at least schedule those sessions. Obviously, the time that we will need to make available will depend on the responses we get back.

We propose that, with members' agreement, the Committee gives more time to deal with the Bill over the next month or so. We suggest that we have our usual Committee meeting at 10.00 am on Thursday and work to a schedule that sees us complete our normal business around 12.00 noon or 12.15 pm. We would have a light lunch at 12.15 pm and recommence at 1.00 pm to discuss the Pensions Bill. We are going to have to devote more time to facilitate the process of the legislation, and the alternative to what I have suggested is to meet on another day. However, I suggest to the Committee that we conduct our normal Committee business from 10.00 am to 12.00 noon and then return at 1.00 pm for a session on the Pensions Bill.

Mr Campbell: Which day is that?

The Chairperson: It would be on a Thursday.

Mr Campbell: Which Thursday?

The Chairperson: It would be for the duration of the Committee Stage of the Pensions Bill, which is 30 days.

Mr Campbell: So it is each Thursday.

The Chairperson: Yes. It is possible that we could have it done within the third week. I do not know, but we have 30 days. I do not know how many consultees there will be. As you know, people have made some presentations to the Committee already. Some of them may wish to do so again.

Mr Campbell: It will probably be more clear once the advertisement goes out.

The Chairperson: Yes; that is what I am saying. We will chase up with some of the people who have already spoken to us and ask them whether they want to come back again. If so, we can at least get a schedule. We have to do that or find another day. Either way, we will have to devote extra time to the legislation.

Are members content that we proceed on that basis?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We have already discussed with the officials that we would have somebody here from the Department on those days in case we need them. I presume that we will. There are three or so key components of the Pensions Bill's provisions, but there are a lot of technical elements as well, and I believe that we will need ongoing assistance with that. Anne, as you know, we have asked your senior officials for someone to be available. You are here this morning. We do not anticipate any real debate this morning. It is up to members whether they wish to ask you questions now, but we are really dealing with the process of legislation over the next number of weeks. That presupposes that the Bill goes through its Second Stage successfully.

Are members content that that is the way in which we deal with this?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content thus far that we have heard enough from the officials to allow us to continue? Obviously, we will have a debate in the Assembly on Tuesday, and people will have their views and, perhaps, their party views. Is that fair enough? Are members content that we can move on from this item this morning?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: I have asked members whether they have any questions to ask of the officials while they are here this morning. It is not compulsory for them to have questions. Thank you, Anne, Gerry and Seamus. I appreciate you being here this morning.

Have members had a chance to have a quick look at the draft advertisement? We will proceed to having that prepared. It will be our 'Blue Peter' one for Tuesday.

Mr Brady: Will the advert be sent directly to groups, or will it just be a general advert that people respond to? It is important that it goes to groups that deal with older people, as the legislation will impact on them, and to the voluntary sector in general.

The Chairperson: All the Assembly Committees recently agreed a format for advertisements. I cannot remember all the provisions, but there is an assurance that they will be targeted at stakeholder organisations etc. I think that the answer to your question is yes, but we will double-check that.

The Committee Clerk: The notice will direct people to the Committee's website and the Pensions Bill and will give them the time frame for responding etc. In addition, we will contact stakeholders directly.

Mr F McCann: It has probably already been taken on board, but will there also be a statement going out from the Chair to say that this is coming up? That would capture a wider audience.

The Chairperson: I have no difficulty at all with doing that, Fra. There will be a debate in the Assembly on Tuesday, and I am sure that it will make the headlines — well, I am not sure about the headlines, but it will be well in the public domain, given that it will be on the Floor of the Assembly and people will have their views. There will be a full debate, as you know, on Tuesday. We will do anything that we can additionally. Our focus will be on trying to make sure that the key organisations know that it is on. If they wish to contribute, they will have the opportunity to do so. Does that answer your question, Fra?

Mr F McCann: Yes.

The Chairperson: OK. Thank you.