



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY 3 October 2013

Café Room, Foyle Arts Centre, University of Ulster Magee Campus

- Present: Mr Alex Maskey MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Gregory Campbell MLA
Mr Trevor Clarke MLA
Mr Michael Copeland MLA
Mr Stewart Dickson MLA
Mr Fra McCann MLA
Mr Sammy Wilson MLA
- In Attendance: Dr Kevin Pelan (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Angela McParland (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stephen Todd (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stewart Kennedy (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Allison Ferguson (Clerical Officer)
- Apologies: Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Ms Dolores Kelly MLA

The meeting commenced in closed session at 10.30am.

The Chairperson declared the meeting open to the public at 11.56am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Draft Minutes of the meeting held 26 September 2013

Agreed: The minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2013 were agreed.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson noted that Dolores Kelly has replaced Mark H Durkan on the Committee but was unable to attend this week's meeting due to other commitments.

The Chairperson noted that Stewart Dickson has replaced Judith Cochrane on the Committee and welcomed Mr Dickson to the Committee.

4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson asked the Committee if it was content to agree the Terms of Reference for the Committee Inquiry as drafted.

A consensus could not be reached on the Terms of Reference and the Committee divided on the following proposals:

- The motion was proposed: "That, in the first bullet point in the Terms of Reference, the term Ministers be changed to DSD Ministers"

The Committee divided: Ayes 3; Noes 6; Abstentions 0

AYES

Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Sammy Wilson

NOES

Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Fra McCann

The motion was not carried.

- The motion was proposed: “That the Terms of Reference are agreed as drafted”

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 3; Abstentions 0

AYES

Mr Alex Maskey
Mr Mickey Brady
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Michael Copeland
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Fra McCann

NOES

Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Sammy Wilson

The motion was carried.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to accept the Terms of Reference as drafted.

The Chairperson noted that a scoping paper relating to the methodology and timeframe for the Inquiry would be discussed in closed session at next week’s meeting.

This discussion and vote was recorded by Hansard.

5. Departmental Briefing on Fuel Poverty: progress of thematic action sub-groups

The following officials joined the meeting at 12.04pm:

- Ms Deirdre Ward, Deputy Director Housing Division, DSD
- Mr Pat Austin, Director, National Energy Action
- Mr Oliver McHugh, DSD

The officials briefed the Committee on the progress of the thematic sub-groups on Fuel Poverty. The representative from National Energy Action, who chairs one of the sub-groups, commended the good work of the Department, but expressed concern over the lack of progress regarding recommendations made by the sub-groups – a concern which she said others in the groups hold.

The officials noted that while they held a different view on this from Ms Austin they were going to review the work and role of the thematic action sub groups.

Officials also stated the importance of evaluating the Achieving Affordable Warmth pilot scheme which it will brief the Committee on in December.

The officials noted, and members acknowledged, that it was difficult to monitor the success of the scheme in real terms because although money could be spent on improving the efficiency of homes, the level of fuel poverty was strongly influenced by external factors such as the price of oil.

Michael Copeland MLA left the meeting at 12.37pm

The officials noted that they were on target to spend their budget in relation to the Warm Homes schemes.

Members expressed concern that current policy in relation to boiler replacement was inflexible. The officials stated that they would be reviewing this policy and qualifying criteria for the scheme.

The officials left the meeting at 1.00pm.

The Committee suspended for lunch at 1.01pm

Jim Allister MLA left the meeting at 1.01pm

Stewart Dickson MLA left the meeting at 1.01pm

The Committee reconvened in public session at 1.45pm

6. Pavement Cafés Bill – Departmental Briefing

The following officials joined the meeting at 1.45pm:

- Mr Liam Quinn, DSD
- Mr Gary McAlorum, DSD
- Mr David Irvine, Social Policy Unit, DSD

The officials briefed the Committee on the Pavement Cafés Bill.

Members had some queries about provisions for exemptions from alcohol by-laws within the curtilage of Pavement Café areas for licensed premises. The officials noted that

individual councils would have discretion as to whether these exemptions were allowed and that consultation with the PSNI is mandatory.

The Committee noted that references to street furniture in Clause 4 of the Bill were framed in broad terms and officials noted that this was to allow individual councils to have grounds for restricting the placement of furniture if they felt this was appropriate.

Members queried whether it would be helpful for a time limit to be applied to consultations on the granting of pavement café licenses to ensure the granting of licenses is not delayed and if this should be included on the face of the Bill. The officials noted that the timeframe was at the discretion of individual councils but amending the legislation to standardize this was an option.

The chairperson noted that the Committee will be receiving oral briefings from respondents to the call for evidence at next week's meeting.

The officials left the meeting at 1.05pm.

7. NIHE Response Maintenance Contracts – Briefing by UNITE the Union

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.06pm:

- Mr Jim Kelly, Regional Secretary, UNITE the Union
- Ms Susan Fitzgerald, Regional Organiser, UNITE the Union
- Mr Stevie Fitzpatrick, Shop Steward, UNITE the Union
- Mr Donal Ó Cofaigh, Economic Adviser, UNITE the Union

The officials briefed the Committee, expressing concern over the Housing Executive's use of private contractors for response maintenance. They noted the effects of sub-economic tenders on their members in terms of poor health and safety standards, job security and pay.

Officials also noted the possibility of 'blacklisting' for union activity and raised concerns about the provision for apprenticeships.

Members commented that sub-economic tenders were now often refused by the Housing Executive but that it would be useful for the Committee to follow up on this and related issues.

The chairperson noted that the Committee would carry out further discussions with the Department on these issues.

The officials left the meeting at 2.57pm

8. Empty Homes Strategy – Departmental Briefing

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.58pm:

- Mr Michael Sands, Deputy Director of Housing, DSD
- Mr Stephen Johnston, Housing Affordability, DSD

The officials briefed the Committee on the Empty Homes Strategy.

Members asked why it was considered that there had been ‘limited success’ in the pilot areas for the scheme. The officials noted a number of factors: some homes that initially appeared empty were, in fact, occupied; some owners of empty properties did not want the properties brought back into use; some property owners simply could not be contacted.

Members expressed frustration that information is not easily available through Land and Property Services (LPS) as a result of data protection restrictions and officials commented that the Minister has written to the new Finance Minister to try to move this issue forward.

Members discussed possible powers to bring empty homes back into use such as empty home management orders and abandonment powers. Officials noted the limited success of these approaches in other jurisdictions.

The chairperson noted that the committee would be returning to this issue as part of its ongoing consideration of the Department’s Housing Strategy.

The officials left the meeting at 3.23pm

9. Subordinate Legislation

9.1. Statutory Rule: SR 221/2013 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013

The Committee considered the above mentioned Statutory Rule.

Question put and agreed:

That the Committee for Social Development has considered Statutory Rule 221/2013 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Automatic Enrolment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013 and recommends that it be confirmed by the Assembly.

9.2. The Pensions (2005 Order) (Codes of Practice) (Reporting Late Payment of Contributions) (Appointed Day) Order (Northern Ireland) 2013

The Committee agreed that it was happy to note the above mentioned Order.

10. Alcohol Licensing

The Chairperson advised that the Department has sought the Committee's comments on Alcohol Licensing, but that this discussion would be postponed to next week's meeting. He encouraged members to submit any comments they may have individually.

The Chairperson also noted that members have been invited to a roundtable discussion with Shadow Minister for Pubs, Toby Perkins, on Monday 7 October where the Minister would seek to learn about Northern Ireland's liquor licensing laws and the Responsible Retailing Code, and encouraged attendance at this meeting.

11. Correspondence

- 11.1 The Department wrote to inform the Committee that the fact-finding exercise regarding allegations made against the DSD Special Advisor in the Spotlight Programme of 3 July 2013 is now complete and that the Department will brief the Committee once it has fully considered the report.
- 11.2 Members of the Committee are invited to attend a briefing on access to Finance for Local Businesses on Tuesday 8 October, hosted by the NIABT and with a speaker from Invest NI.
- 11.3 The Committee noted the remainder of correspondence as outlined on the correspondence memo.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee was content with the proposed Forward Work Programme.

13. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date, time and place of next meeting

The next meeting will take place at 10.00am on Thursday 10 October 2013 in Room 29 Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 3.27pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

**Chairperson, Committee for Social Development
10 October 2013**