



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY 23 October 2014

Housing Rights Service, Middleton Building, Belfast

Present: Mr Alex Maskey MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Mickey Brady MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Gregory Campbell MLA
Mr Stewart Dickson MLA
Mr Sammy Douglas MLA
Mr Fra McCann MLA

In Attendance: Dr Kevin Pelan (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stephen Todd (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stewart Kennedy (Clerical Supervisor)

Apologies: Mr Jim Allister MLA
Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Mr Michael Copeland MLA
Mr Sammy Wilson MLA

The Chairperson declared the meeting open to the public at 10.00am.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as noted above.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Michael Copeland MLA wishing him well after recent ill health.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2014 were agreed.

3. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 *Agreed:* The Committee agreed to consider Inquiry process issues at its meeting on 6 November.

4.2 The Chairperson noted that, following today's formal business, the Committee would meet with representatives from the Private Tenants Forum.

4.3 Members noted a press release prepared by Housing Rights Service in respect of today's meeting.

4.4 The Chairperson corrected advice given last week that the BBC had not been invited to give oral evidence in respect of Phase 3 of the Inquiry. He confirmed that an invitation was issued to the BBC on 15 September and that a reply was received on 22 October advising that representatives from the BBC would not appear before the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider its next steps in relation to this reply at its meeting on 6 November.

4.5 The Chairperson noted that Brian Rowntree, former NIHE Chairperson, has advised that following legal advice he will not appear before the Committee but would submit a detailed written briefing.

Agreed: The Committee expressed its concern at Mr Rowntree's decision not to attend and agreed to write to him seeking fuller detail on the reason for this decision.

4.6 The Chairperson noted that the legal briefing originally scheduled for 16 October has been rescheduled to 6 November.

4.7 *Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to Mr Paddy McIntyre, former NIHE Chief Executive, seeking an explanation for an apparent contradiction between evidence he gave to the Committee on 2 October and information outlined in a response to an Assembly Question.

4.8 The Committee noted that the Department's intention to publish the NI Housing Statistics 2013-14 on 23 October 2014.

5. Improving Benefit Uptake – Update on Year 2 Plan – Departmental Briefing

The following officials joined the meeting at 10.18am:

- Brian Doherty, Director of Universal Credit, Social Security Agency
- Mairead Duddy, lead official of Improving Benefit Uptake Team, Social Security Agency.

The officials briefed the Committee on the progress of Year 2 of “Maximising Incomes & Outcomes – A 3 Year Plan for Improving the Uptake of Benefits”, including details of commitments and Year 2 objectives.

The officials took questions from the Committee around the approaches currently adopted and potential difficulties in promoting benefit uptake.

The officials noted the Minister’s commitment to promoting benefit uptake but also commented that there were difficulties due to budget constraints.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information from the Department on some of the issues discussed.

The officials left the meeting at 10.58am.

6. Review of Social Housing Allocations Policy – Departmental Briefing

The following officials joined the meeting at 10.58am:

- Paul Price, Deputy Director, Housing Group, DSD
- Heloise Brown, Housing Policy, Research & Legislation Branch, DSD

The officials briefed the Committee on public responses to research commissioned by the department as part of its Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations Policy.

The Department noted that these responses were published on 2 October 2014.

The officials took questions from the Committee.

Sammy Douglas MLA left the meeting at 11.29am.

The officials noted that the Department would keep the Committee informed of DSD proposals in relation to housing allocations on an ongoing basis.

The officials left the meeting at 11.35am.

7. SL1 The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to make the proposed Statutory Rule.

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Chairperson noted that Frank Cushnahan had provided clarification in respect of correspondence between him and Paddy McIntyre, as requested by the Committee.

8.2 The Committee noted a response from the Head of the Civil Service in respect of the Committee's query regarding the fact-finding exercise into the DSD Special Adviser.

8.3 The Committee noted that the Department will be holding a Housing Repossessions Taskforce Conference at Titanic Belfast on 5 November 2014.

8.4 The Committee noted that the Child Poverty Alliance would hold an event in Parliament Buildings on 3 November 2014.

8.5 The Committee noted the DFP's Terms of Reference for the independent assessment of Welfare Reform in NI, forwarded to the Committee by the Committee for Finance and Personnel.

8.6 The Committee noted two items of correspondence forwarded by the Justice Committee, raising allegations of mistreatment of charities by the Charities Commission, which were also forwarded to the Minister for Social Development.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Justice Committee provide it with a copy of the Minister's response.

8.7 The Committee noted a memo from the Committee for Finance and Personnel noting its approach to the NI Audit Office's report into Sickness Absence in the Public Sector.

8.8 The Committee noted correspondence from Rank Group regarding its proposal for development of an entertainment complex including a casino.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Rank Group advising that the timing of a briefing would be more appropriate when the proposed gambling bill was introduced.

8.9 The Committee noted that the Department had provided its submission to the Department of Finance and Personnel for the October Monitoring Round.

8.10 The Committee noted that Naomi Long MP had replied to Committee queries in respect of Phase 3 of its Inquiry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the rest of the correspondence as outlined on the correspondence memo.

9. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed the FWP as drafted.

10. AOB

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department on the progress of liquor licensing legislation.

11. Date, time and place of next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Social Development will take place on 6 November 2014 at 10.00am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.43am.

Alex Maskey
Chairperson, Committee for Social Development

6 November 2014