



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 26 June 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Present:

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA (via Zoom)
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

In Attendance:

- Mr James Gilsenan (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
- Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02a.m.



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1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew	Member of Public Accounts Committee Private Sector Landlord Charity Trustee Proposed Member's Bill addressing homelessness
Kellie Armstrong	Member of Deaf Community
Sian Mulholland	Proposed Member's Bill on Society Lotteries
Brian Kingston	Charity Trustee
Maurice Bradley	Charity Trustee
Andy Allen	Charity Trustee Private Sector Landlord

2. Apologies

Maolíosa McHugh

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson confirmed that, following sign off by both the Equality and Social Justice Committee in Cardiff and the Social Justice and Social Security Committee in Edinburgh, the agreed joint letter regarding the Pathways to Work Green Paper was sent to the Secretary of State on Wednesday 25 June.

The Chairperson informed members that it is Deafblind Awareness Week which 'aims to highlight the unique challenges faced by people who are both deaf and blind, as well as the remarkable resilience of this community'. A focus group for deafblind people and their families/carers is planned for the autumn to ensure their views inform the scrutiny of the Sign Language Bill.



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The Chairperson informed members that the Minister provided the Committee with a Written Statement to be issued today relating to the Northern Ireland Community Infrastructure Fund.

Agreed: That a Departmental briefing on the Fund following summer recess.

The Chairperson asked members if they were content that the Committee Report on the Arts Sector event and associated correspondence be forwarded to the Minister for comments.

Agreed: That a copy of the report is forwarded to the Minister for comment.

The Chairperson informed members that he was very pleased to hear that Paralympian Jason Smyth has been honoured in Eglinton with a new welcome sign to the village. Jason was unbeaten in a 17-year career and won sprint doubles in the 100m and 200m at Beijing in 2008 and London in 2012. This is another significant milestone in the recognition of para sports and well deserved.

The Chairperson informed members that, on 25 June, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) launched an investigation into the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). This investigation will end with a report being laid in the Assembly and is an issue the Committee will maintain an ongoing interest in.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 19 June 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters Arising

Clerk to the Committee for Communities - Memo to Members re Local Council Responses on Planning and Anti-Poverty Strategies

Agreed: That a copy of the memo is forwarded to the Public Accounts Committee due to its interest in Child Poverty.



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Agreed: That Belfast City Council is contacted in relation to providing a response on planning application processes.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to SOLACE to ask which Executive Minister, if any, councils are accountable to if not meeting planning application targets and to ask if there are implication for councils for not meeting these targets.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if the Councils' work on anti-poverty is aligned with the Anti-Poverty Strategy's intentions and how the Department will work in partnership with councils to deliver on targets.

Department for Communities - Budget 2024-25 - Child Risk Assessment

Agreed: That a written departmental briefing is requested on the process for the publication of Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) and to ask the Department why full EQIAs are not provided to the Committee. The Committee also feels that a Child Risk Assessment (CRA) should be considered alongside an EQIA and requested a copy of the full CRA for Budget 2024-25.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Newry Mourne and Down District Council	Anti- Poverty Strategy

6. Correspondence

Department for Communities - Shaping Sustainable Places Consultation

Agreed: That a briefing on the outcome of the consultation is requested for a meeting post summer recess.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if consideration can be given to an extension to the 8 week, summer months consultation.

Ulster University report on Private Rental Market Performance Jan-June 2024



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Agreed: That a briefing on this report is requested for a meeting post summer recess.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister regarding implementation of the Private Tenancies Act.

Committee for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs - Letter to SOLACE - SL1 The Environmental Protection Single-use Vapes Amendment Regs NI 2025

Agreed: That a letter is sent to SOLACE to ask if the fine system proposed for the illegal disposal of single-use vapes will fully cover the costs of enforcement and how fines raised are aligned with costs for enforcement.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for clarification on the proposed extent of its control over distribution of UK Shared Prosperity Fund finance and for an update on discussions with the UK Government on the fund.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Women's Support Network - Cliff Edge Coalition	Response To The Green Paper on Disability Proposals
Welsh Parliament – Equality and Social Justice Committee	Correspondence from Welsh Parliament – Equality and Social Justice Committee regarding Welfare Reform
Assembly Business Office	Laying of accounts in Assembly- USEL 2023-24
Committee for Education	Correspondence from Education Authority re Free School Meals and Uniform Physical Education Allowances for School Year 2025-26
Committee for Education	Letter to Department for Communities re Auto Enrolment Free School Meals and Uniform Allowances



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Source	Summary of content
National Deaf Children's Society	Sign Language Bill
Individual	Closure of Riverside Theatre – Department for Communities Response
Group of Individuals	Concern re lack of care for individuals with Complex Needs post 19 – Sent to all Committees
Individual	Concern re lack of care for individuals with Complex Needs post 19 – Sent to all Committees – attached original email trail starting on 05/06/2025
Construction Employers Federation	Response to the Department for Infrastructure Consultation on Developer Contributions June 2025

Members agreed to the Chairperson's proposal for a short suspension to allow interpreters to set up for the next agenda item.

The meeting was suspended at 10.25a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.33a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Maurice Bradley, Brian Kingston, Andy Allen, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Daniel McCrossan, Nicola Brogan

7. Briefing by Action Deaf Youth on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Julie Graham, Director of Services

Ellie-May O'Connell, young deaf person

Bronagh O'Connell, parent of Ellie-May



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Gemma McMullan, mother of a young deaf child

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were:

- The use of Sign Language within schools
- Challenges in broader society
- Early years provision
- Access to Sign Language
- The number of interpreters needed to implement the legislation
- Qualifications for Sign Language teachers
- Specialist schools in Northern Ireland
- Consultation process
- Definition of the Deaf Community
- The provision of Sign Language in primary schools

Members agreed to the Chairperson's proposal for a short suspension and for the next agenda item to take place in closed session.

The meeting was suspended at 11.38a.m.

The meeting resumed in closed session at 11.49.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Maurice Bradley, Brian Kingston, Andy Allen, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Daniel McCrossan, Nicola Brogan

8. Briefing by Assembly Bill Office on the Sign Language Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is provided with a copy of legislation relating to Irish medium schools.

Agreed: That the Bill Office provides the Committee with further information relating to definitions and language.

Following the briefing, the Committee considered an interim report on the scrutiny of the sign Language Bill to date.



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Agreed: That a copy of the interim progress report is forwarded to the Department for information.

Agreed: That listed correspondence in the report not yet formally accepted as evidence is included.

The meeting resumed in open session at 12.38p.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Brian Kingston, Andy Allen, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Maurice Bradley

9. Departmental briefing on a regulatory framework for gambling

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Gerard Murray - Director of Local Government and Housing Regulation

Carol Reid - Assistant Director of Local Government and Housing Regulation

Victoria Trimble – Grade 7 Social Policy Unit – Licensing and Gambling

Ciarán Mee – Deputy Principal Social Policy Unit – Licensing and Gambling

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were:

- Consultation on gambling code of practice
- Discussions on a gambling levy with GB
- Online gambling for National Lottery games and overall online gambling prevalence
- Unregulated gambling
- Ongoing work on gambling legislation

Agreed: That a copy of the report on the consultation on the gambling code of practice is provided to the Committee.

10. SL1 - The Houses in Multiple Occupation (Fees) (Amendment) (NI) Regulations 2025

The Chairperson informed members that these proposed regulations amend the maximum fee per person per annum the council may charge for an application for an HMO licence.



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Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule but would like further information on the rationale for the rise in fees to £75 and what it covers and whether the Department has considered whether the rise in fees might discourage landlords from registering properties as HMOs.

11. Police Service of Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Chairperson informed members that the Justice Committee has sought further information on the PSNI schedule. The Committee for Justice, noting that the Statutory Period for consideration will expire before that information will be received, and that the Schedule is a live document that can be updated to reflect legislative or policy changes, agreed on 19 June that it has no objection to the PSNI Retention and Disposal Schedule.

The Chairperson welcomed the ongoing level of scrutiny of retention and disposal schedules.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to approve the retention and disposal schedule.

12. Forward Work Programme

The committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

13. Any other business

The Chairperson reminded members that the Minister's Question Time is on Monday 30 June and the second stage of the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill is on 1 July, clause 12 of which addresses 'Investigation of housing association tenancy fraud'.

The Minister has invited Committee members to a reception for the Northern Ireland World Transplant Games team who are competing in the World Transplant Games in Dresden in August in the Long Gallery on Monday 30 June 2025 at 4.00pm. The Committee wished the team well at the games.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting



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The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 3 July 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.08p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities