



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 23 October 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA

In Attendance:

Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
Mrs Victoria Bourquin (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)
Ms Kathryn Black (Senior Assistant Clerk)



The meeting commenced in public session at 10.00a.m.

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - charity trustee, private sector landlord, Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness

Andy Allen – charity trustee, private sector landlord, trade union member, Assembly Commission Member

Maolíosa McHugh – Chairman of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge, Treasurer Conrad na Gaeilge na Deirge

Pam Cameron – Former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and Cross Departmental policy, strategy and legislation and family members are members of The Arts Council Northern Ireland.

Nicola Brogan – Member of the Committee for Infrastructure.

2. Apologies

Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that, following the meeting, Committee would be holding an event on the Sign Language Bill with members of the deafblind community and he encouraged Members to attend if possible.

The Chairperson further informed Members that he had attended an event on Friday 17 October on how different governments have taken action to reduce poverty, which was hosted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in the MAC theatre. The Chairperson stated that it was a very useful event which focused on the approaches taken to tackling poverty in neighbouring regions. Members



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have been provided with a summary note of the event and some of the presenters slides, for information.

The Chairperson told Members that he was conscious of the recent media coverage about the threat to voluntary and community sector funding and the Minister of Finance's efforts with the Treasury in relation to the NI portion of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The Committee has consistently continued to raise concerns about the lack of progress and clear information on the future of this fund and it is an issue that will require further consideration.

Finally, the Chairperson informed Members that it was Book Week and, to mark this event, the Speaker held an event on Tuesday in collaboration with the BBC, which featured a panel of Members discussing a book of their choice. The Committee collectively acknowledged the vital work and support provided by Libraries NI in all of our communities.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 16 October 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Ministerial Briefing

The Chairperson welcomed the following people to the meeting:

Gordon Lyons, Minister for Communities

John Greer, Deputy Secretary Corporate Services Group

Emer Morelli, Deputy Secretary Engaged Communities Group

Paddy Rooney, Deputy Secretary Work and Health Group

A thematic approach was taken by Members to the question and answer session which followed and the main areas of discussion were:

Strategies, Sports, Housing and Miscellaneous questions.

Agreed: That Legal Advice is sought on whether The Northern Ireland Football Fund JR application is deemed "active" at this stage.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive requesting information on whether there have been, or will be, any amendments to the Priority Need Policy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a complete response to questions previously raised by the Committee following the Department briefing on The Northern Ireland Football Fund at the meeting on 18 September.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for the following in relation to the Irish Language Strategy:

- The reason why the meeting with the Irish Language Co-Design Group, referred to by the Minister, was cancelled and to encourage more collegiate working with the Co-Design Group
- A definitive timeline for the Irish Language Strategy being progressed, to include proposed dates when it will go for consideration by the Executive, when it will be provided to the Committee for scrutiny and when it will go out to public consultation
- Whether the 6-7 month timescale discussed by a senior official for the work of the Cross Departmental Working Group on the Irish Language Strategy to be completed also applies to the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Committee also requested clarification on why, given that the Group was formed in May 2025, the prospective date cited for the work being completed was “within the financial year” and not by the end of the current calendar year?

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, following the publication of an article in the Belfast Telegraph which referred to a number of marching bands and association with glorification of paramilitarism, for clarity on what guidance (Community and Good Relations) its Arms Length Bodies (such as the Arts Council) are expected to apply in relation to funded projects and programmes.

Agreed: That a letter is also sent to the Arts Council NI seeking clarification in relation to what guidance (Community and Good Relations) it follows and applies in relation to its funded projects and programmes.



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The Chairperson informed Members that, to allow time for interpreters to set up for the next session, he proposed a short suspension.

The meeting was suspended at 11.22.a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.29.a.m. with all Members present.

6. Departmental briefing on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Iain Greenway - Sign Language Policy & Legislation Branch

Tommy McAuley - Sign Language Policy & Legislation Branch

Gerard Flynn - Sign Language Policy & Legislation Branch

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

- Sign Language Action Plans (SLAPS),
- Access to Services
- Potential Bill Amendments being considered by the Department
- Budget
- Care Homes and Education Environments
- Translation Services and Accreditation

The Chairperson proposed, as a follow-up action based on feedback received from last week's event with young people, that the Committee write to the Assembly Commission seeking confirmation on the preparedness of Parliament Buildings to assist guests and visitors with hearing loss to evacuate in an emergency.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Assembly Commission seeking confirmation on the preparedness of Parliament Buildings to assist guests and visitors with hearing loss to evacuate in the event of an emergency.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee had previously received legal advice from the Examiner for Statutory Rules on the Delegated Powers of the Bill but the Committee had not asked for legal advice in relation to any human rights implications associated with the Bill.



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Agreed: That the Committee seeks legal advice in relation to any Human Rights or other relevant legal implications associated with the Bill.

7. Consideration of Committee Report on the Pensions Bill LCM

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft report for consideration.

Powers and Membership

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Background

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Evidence

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Committee consideration of the Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee orders the Report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum for Terminal Illness, Pension Ombudsman, Retrospective Actuarial Confirmation of Benefit Changes (Virgin Media), Pensions Dashboard and Contractual Override 2025 to be published.

8. SL1 - The Social Fund (Child Funeral Fund) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule would increase the Child Funeral Fund payment from £3,056 to £3,441. The Child funeral Fund provides a one-off lump sum to meet the cost of a basic funeral following the death of a child (up to age 18) or a stillbirth after 24 weeks.

The Regulations are anticipated to be made by 10 November to enable commencement on 1 December. For funerals on or before 30 November 2025, the lower rate applies and funerals on or after 1 December 2025, the higher rate will apply.



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Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

9. Matters Arising

Cricket Ireland – the work of Cricket Ireland

Agreed: That Cricket Ireland is invited to brief at a future meeting.

Committee for Communities - Draft response to Committee for AERA on the Dilapidation Bill

Agreed: That the response is sent to the Committee for AERA.

Department for Communities – Social Inclusion Strategies.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting a timetable for bringing forward each of social strategies and to encourage the Department to have greater collaborative engagement with Co-Design Groups.

Department for Communities – UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting that it write to Community Voluntary Sector groups to provide clarity in relation to deadlines and the status of communications in relation to any future funding.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for Finance highlighting the looming date for the UK Shared Prosperity fund to end in March 2026 - with no announcements as yet in relation to replacement funding and to seek agreement for a joint letter from all 3 committees to go to the Department and to the UK Treasury to express concerns and to ask what work is ongoing in relation to a replacement fund.

Department for Communities – Anonymous Letter regarding Visitor Experience Team at Ulster Folk and Transport Museums

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting an update on the outcome of the Partnership meeting in November where this issue will be discussed further.

Department for Communities – Climate Change Action Plan



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs requesting a briefing on the climate change action plan and the role / responsibilities of the Department of Communities associated with it.

Department for Communities – Delay in Irish Language Strategy

Agreed: That legal advice is sought for the Committee in relation to its request to be briefed by Departmental officials.

Department for Communities - Task and Finish Group Benefit Fraud and Error

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department highlighting the need for appropriate Committee scrutiny and public awareness and the need for a briefing to be in public session and for the Department to outline its reasons for the request to brief in closed session.

Department for Communities – Tri-Lingual Corporate Identity Logo

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department expressing disappointment that the Department with responsibility for promoting language and culture has made this change; requesting again the rationale for the change in policy, the minutes of any meetings where the change was discussed.

Committee for Communities - Draft response to Committee for AERA on the Dilapidation Bill

Agreed: That the response is sent to the Committee for AERA.

Department for Communities - Draft response to Committee for Finance on the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill

Agreed: That the response is sent to the Committee for Finance.

Department for Communities – The Northern Ireland Football Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a full response to previous Committee queries.

Andy Allan MLA left the meeting at 12.28.p.m.



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Antrim and Newtownabbey Council, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, Ards and North Down Council	Plans to Future Proof House Building and Retrofitting
Minister for Health	Disability Work Schemes
Department for Communities	Dilapidation Bill
Department for Communities	Invest to Save Initiative
Department for Communities	Child Risk Impact Assessments
Department for Communities	Fraud and Error Bill
Department for Communities	Fuel Poverty
Department for Communities	Social Fund - Winter Fuel Payments
Department for Communities	Heritage Contracts
Department for Communities	Migration to Universal Credit
Department for Communities	Departmental Data Breach Personal Independence Payment
Department for Communities	Scoping Paper Gambling Reform
Department for Communities	Timescales for Responses to Correspondence
Department for Communities	Newspaper Article, Arts Council Funding of Bands



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10. Correspondence

Individual – Housing issue

Agreed: That a response is sent to the individual indicating that the Committee cannot act on an individual's behalf and to suggest they contact the housing supplier directly or their local MLA.

Ulster Rugby - Offer to host Committee meeting

Agreed: That a meeting at Ulster Rugby ground is arranged for a future meeting.

Department for Communities - Consequential Amendments to Northern Ireland Social Security Legislation due to changes to Scottish Carer's Assistance (Carer Support Payment)

Agreed: That a briefing on the amendments is arranged for a future meeting.

Department for Communities - Amendments to Northern Ireland Child Maintenance And Social Security Legislation following enactment of the Education (Scotland) Act

Agreed: That a briefing on the amendments is arranged for a future meeting.

Department for Communities - Review of the Rates Support Grant

Agreed: That a briefing is arranged for a future meeting.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	National Museums NI 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts
Simon Community	Childhood Adversity and Homelessness in Northern Ireland: Breaking the Cycle research report



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Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board Retention and Disposal Schedule
Live Music Now	Invitation - Musical Connections Event, Friday 7 November, 1pm The MAC, Belfast
Department for Communities	Local Government Staff Commission- Next Steps

Committee for Infrastructure - Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill.

Agreed: That the Committee team drafts a response for Committee consideration at a future meeting.

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Minister for Communities	Letter to Chair of Committee - Oral Statement – Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO)
Assembly Business Office	NI Museums Council - Laying of 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

12. Any other business

The Chairperson thanked Sean McCann, Assistant Clerk of the Committee Secretariat Team, for his work with the Committee and wished him well as he moves to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.



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13. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 6 November 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

Pam Cameron recorded an apology for this meeting.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.46p.m.

Nicola Brogan MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Communities