Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 5 November 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

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

In Attendance:
Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
Ms Kathryn Black (Senior Assistant Clerk)

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

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1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – Member of the Public Accounts Committee, Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness, Charity Director, Private Sector Landlord.

Kellie Armstrong – Associate Member of the Chartered Institute of Housing.

Andy Allen – Private Sector Landlord, Charity Trustee.

Maurice Bradley - Member of Harry Gregg Foundation, member of Coleraine and District League Management, member of North West Football Association, member of Irish Football Association Council.

Pam Cameron – Former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and cross-departmental policy, strategy and legislation.

2. Apologies

Mr Paul Boggs MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed Members back following the Halloween recess and noted that this was the 100th meeting of the Committee. The Chairperson thanked Members and the Committee team for the volume of work and commitment this represented.

The Chairperson advised Members that he had sponsored the CILIP Ireland event "Libraries Deliver: Impact, Outcomes and Value for Communities" in Parliament Buildings on Tuesday 3 November 2026, and had attended an event with the Musicians' Union in Parliament Buildings that evening, at which the role of musicians and the arts in supporting and strengthening the economy, tourism, health and wellbeing, educational achievement and social inclusion was discussed.

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4. Draft Minutes

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the Committee meeting on 22 October 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

The Chairperson then proposed that the meeting move into closed session for agenda item 5, to allow a briefing from Assembly Legal Services on the Charities (Amendment) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session for agenda item 5.

The meeting moved into closed session at 10.06 a.m.

5. Charities (Amendment) Bill: Legal advice

The Legal Advisor briefed the Committee on legal advice in relation to Clauses 3, 4 and 6 of the Bill, and a question-and-answer session followed the briefing.

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 10.17 a.m.

The meeting resumed in open session at 10.34 a.m. with all Members present.

6. Charities (Amendment) Bill: Oral evidence from the Department for Communities

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Raymond Caldwell, Director, Voluntary and Community Division, Department for Communities
Colleen Bell, Head of Charities Policy and Legislation Team, Department for Communities
Martin Ireland, Deputy Principal, Charities Policy and Legislation Team, Department for Communities
Gerard Reilly, Deputy Principal, Charities Policy and Legislation Team, Department for Communities

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

- Charity Commission's duty to consult on regulations made following Clause 7
- Timetable for commencement of Clauses 7, 8 and 10
- Safeguards for the information of beneficiaries and donors under Clause 5
- Registration threshold and the option for small charities to remain registered
- Commencement of Clause 3 in advance of Charity Commission guidance on official warnings
- Resourcing of the Charity Commission to implement the Bill
- Charity Commission power to remove a person from employment under Clause 4 and section 33 of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008
- Department's intention to bring forward a further charities Bill in the next mandate
- Post-implementation monitoring and review

Maurice Bradley declared an interest as a member of the Harry Gregg Foundation.

Agreed: That the Committee requests that the Bill Clerk drafts a potential amendment to Clause 3 to provide for an appeal mechanism in advance of the Charity Commission issuing an official warning, for the Committee's consideration.

Agreed: That the Committee's Legacy Report notes the Department's intention to consider, as part of a further Bill in the next mandate, the Charity Commission's power to remove a person from employment under section 33 of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008.

Agreed: That the Committee undertakes informal clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill at its next meeting, with the Bill Clerk in attendance.

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7. Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill: Overview of evidence received

The Assembly Clerk and Senior Assistant Clerk provided Members with an overview of the evidence received on the Bill to date, including responses to the Committee's call for evidence, written evidence and planned oral evidence sessions, and a discussion followed on the approach to oral evidence panels.

Agreed: That the Committee team considers splitting the oral evidence panel of faith organisations scheduled for 26 November 2026 into two panels, and brings back to the Committee details of the additional meeting that would be required, including the date and time.

Agreed: That correspondence from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, forwarded by a Member, is included in the next meeting pack.

Agreed: That the Committee team prepares a table of all individuals and organisations that have formally requested to give oral evidence on the Bill.

Agreed: That the evidence session with the Bayswater Support Group on 19 November 2026 is held in closed session, with the names of witnesses redacted.

Agreed: That the Committee accepts a written submission from Rev Mike Darbandi of Six Eight Church, and that Rev Darbandi is added to the table of those who have requested to give oral evidence, with a decision on oral evidence to be taken when that table is considered.

The Committee also noted correspondence from the Public Prosecution Service and the Christian Institute in relation to the Bill.

The Chairperson proposed a short break.

The meeting was suspended at 11.29 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.36 a.m. with all Members present.

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8. Housing (Amendment) Bill: Oral evidence from the Chartered Institute of Housing

As the Chairperson is the sponsor of the Housing (Amendment) Bill, the Deputy Chairperson, Nicola Brogan MLA, assumed the Chair for agenda items 8, 9 and 10.

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following witness to the meeting:

Justin Cartwright, National Director – Northern Ireland, Chartered Institute of Housing

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

- Benefits of extending the period for being threatened with homelessness from 28 to 60 days
- Proposed extension of the commencement period in Clause 2 from six to twelve months, and alignment with budget settlements
- Preparation by the Housing Executive for the extended period
- Financial and staffing resources, and impact in rural and coastal areas
- Early intervention, relationships with landlords and inter-agency working
- Wider statutory prevention duties, including a duty to refer and an 'ask and act' duty
- Role of the Homelessness Commission and the need for it to act at pace

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, should the Bill pass, when the Northern Ireland Housing Executive would be able to bid for additional resources to implement it, at what point in the year such bids would need to be made, and when those resources would be expected to be in place, to inform the Committee's consideration of the commencement period in Clause 2.

The Deputy Chairperson proposed that the meeting move into closed session for agenda items 9 and 10.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session for agenda items 9 and 10.

The meeting moved into closed session at 12.04 p.m.

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9. Housing (Amendment) Bill: Lived experience panel – Renters' Voice

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed members of the Renters' Voice lived experience panel to the meeting.

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

- Experience of the current 28-day period for being threatened with homelessness
- Practical benefits of extending the period to 60 days
- Engagement with the Housing Executive and explanation of the homelessness process
- Barriers to securing private rented accommodation
- Housing Executive staffing and resources needed to support the extended period
- Housing supply, temporary accommodation and affordability in the private rented sector

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to request an update on when the Private Tenancies (Notice to Quit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, which will give effect to the longer notice to quit periods provided for in the Private Tenancies Act (Northern Ireland) 2022, will be brought forward.

10. Housing (Amendment) Bill: Lived experience panel – Echoes of Home

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed members of the Echoes of Home lived experience panel to the meeting.

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

- Practical benefits of an additional 32 days for people threatened with homelessness
- Clarity and consistency of the Housing Executive's process and communication with applicants

- Suitability and location of temporary accommodation, including for domestic abuse survivors
- Support for people with addiction and mental health needs
- Need for a cross-departmental approach to homelessness prevention
- Involvement of people with lived experience in the work of the Homelessness Commission

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to highlight evidence heard by the Committee that individuals engaging with the Housing Executive are not having the process explained to them, or being equipped with all of the information they need, and to ask the Housing Executive to review its processes.

Agreed: That the Committee follows up its previous correspondence to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Department for Infrastructure in relation to an interactive map of housing stress and infrastructure capacity.

The meeting resumed in open session at 1.02 p.m. with all Members present.

The Chairperson resumed the Chair at 1.02 p.m.

The Chairperson requested that the Clerk read into the formal record the agreed actions from agenda items 9 and 10.

Agreed: That the Committee follows up with the Northern Ireland Housing Executive seeking the details of all of the steps, support and information that can be provided during the current 28-day window, which officials had undertaken to provide in writing at a previous evidence session.

11. SL1 – The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had noted the SL1 on 15 October 2026, and that the proposed rule is subject to negative resolution procedure with an operational date of 30 November 2026.

The Chairperson advised Members that, as the Department must lay the SR by 9 November 2026, the Committee was asked to reach a view at this meeting rather than on 12 November 2026 as originally planned.

The Chairperson informed Members that no responses were received to the Committee's call for views, which closed on 4 November 2026.

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

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether it plans to introduce a funded employment scheme in Northern Ireland, and whether any current employability programmes would fall within the definition of a funded employment scheme.

12. SL1 – The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (Fuel as a Grant) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

Agenda items 12 and 13 were taken together.

13. Draft SR 2026/XXXX The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (Fuel as a Grant) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the proposed rule is subject to draft affirmative resolution procedure with an operational date of 4 January 2027, that the draft SR was laid on 14 October 2026, and that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not drawn it to the special attention of the Assembly in her Seventy-sixth Report.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Department had responded in writing to a Committee letter in relation to the SL1, and that no responses were received to the Committee's call for views, which closed on 4 November 2026.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Hayley Ward, Policy Lead, Department for Communities
Annette McCormick, Deputy Policy Lead, Department for Communities
Julie Kirkwood, Operational Manager, Department for Communities

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

- Basis on which a loan or a grant is offered
- Eligibility where electricity is billed through a landlord, including park homes, houses in multiple occupation and residential care homes
- Whether a threat of eviction would constitute a crisis for the purposes of the scheme
- Change to the financial implications set out in the Explanatory Memorandum between the SL1 and the laid draft SR
- Management of the scheme within budget pressures
- Support for applicants who have already received a living expenses grant
- Level of fuel awards

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (Fuel as a Grant) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and recommends that they be affirmed by the Assembly.

14. Matters Arising

Department for Communities - Homeless Commission

Agreed: That the Committee follows up with the Department to request the terms of reference for the Homeless Commission.

Department for Communities - Briefing for Committee for Communities: The Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations (tabled)

Agreed: That an oral briefing from the Department on the Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations is scheduled in February or March 2027, as soon as the Committee's legislative workload allows.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Fundamental Review of Allocations – written update
Department for Communities	Child Maintenance Service Compliance and Enforcement Review – written update

Source	Subject Matter
Department of Justice	Anti-Poverty Strategy – Planned Actions and Financial Bids
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Anti-Poverty Strategy – Planned Actions and Financial Bids
Department for Communities	Local Growth Fund – Addressing Economic Inactivity
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council	Local Development Plans – Social and Affordable Housing
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	Local Development Plans – Social and Affordable Housing
Department for Communities	Home Heating Oil Support Scheme – Park Homes

15. Correspondence

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs - Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill – Call for Evidence

Agreed: That the Committee team submits a nil return, unless a clear link to the Department for Communities' remit is identified, in which case a substantive response will be drafted for the Committee's approval.

Visual Artists Ireland - The Arts - our role in the future of Northern Ireland; and
Visual Artists Ireland - The Visual Artist in Northern Ireland Report

Agreed: That both reports are forwarded to the Department for its response to the proposals, and that a letter is sent to Visual Artists Ireland to confirm that the reports have been received.

Committee for the Economy - Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill – Call for Evidence

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee for the Economy to seek clarification on whether the Bill will enable charitable groups to hold accounts

with credit unions, and whether it would allow credit unions to come together to provide funding for social housing developments.

Agreed: That the Committee team reviews the Bill for any link with the Department for Communities' remit and, if there is none, submits a nil return.

Executive Information Service - Press release - Lyons underlines importance of partnership working with voluntary and community sector

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask how the fair funding principles will be applied within the Department.

Committee for the Executive Office - Individual – Perceived Complaint

Agreed: That the Committee team seeks the individual's permission to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.

IMTAC - Executive Disability Strategy – request to brief Committee

Agreed: That a briefing from IMTAC is scheduled for February or March 2027.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation - Poverty in Northern Ireland 2026

Agreed: That a briefing from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation is scheduled as soon as practicable in 2027, subject to the Forward Work Programme.

Simon Community - Invite to Committee to hold external meeting on Homelessness Week

Agreed: That the Committee regretfully declines the invitation to hold an off-site meeting during Homelessness Awareness Week, with a view to arranging an alternative opportunity to engage with Champions for Change as soon as the Forward Work Programme allows, and further, that the invitation is referenced in the Committee's Legacy Report for consideration by the Committee in the next mandate.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Protocol for the Care of the Government Historic Estate – 6th Report
Ulster Rugby	Meeting at Ulster Rugby on 1 October 2026

Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Press release - Lyons hails success of Northern Ireland Open snooker championship
Committee for the Economy	Waste Water Infrastructure Issues – copy of correspondence issued to DfE, DfI, DoF, DfC and DAERA
Executive Information Service	Press release - Lyons announces £900,000 funding for Public Realm Refresh Enhancement Scheme in North Down
Committee for Finance	2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – September (R6) Position
Forum on EU-UK Cultural and Media Relations	UK participation in Creative Europe from 2027 - petition delivered to the UK Government
Strategic Investment Board	Investing Activity Report October 2026
Children in Northern Ireland	Response to invitation to give evidence on Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill - apologies
Kathleen Stock	Response to invitation to give evidence on Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill - apologies
Women's Support Network	Response to invitation to give evidence on Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill - apologies
NI Youth Forum	Your Voice, Our Future research report
Angel Eyes NI	Charity audit thresholds
Assembly Business Office	Armagh Observatory and Planetarium 2025-26 Annual Report and Accounts
Assembly Business Office	Libraries NI 2025/26 Annual Report and Accounts
Department for Communities	Disability Strategy Public Consultation – Written summary of findings

Source	Summary of content
Youth Assembly	October 2026 update
Department for Communities	Neighbourhood Renewal Outcomes Based Report Card

The Committee noted the following item of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Funding announcement - Markethill Environmental Improvement Scheme

16. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson advised Members that, given the volume of business scheduled for the meeting on 12 November 2026, it was proposed that an additional two-hour meeting be held in closed session on Wednesday 11 November 2026 at 2.00p.m. in Room 21 for deliberations and informal clause by Clause on the Charities (Amendment) Bill and deliberations on the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 1.29 p.m.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the meeting on 12 November 2026 would include the Minister's quarterly update, with Department Finance officials in attendance, and that any topics which Members wanted an update on during that session, should be forwarded to the Clerk in advance.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 1.31 p.m.

The Chairperson also highlighted the additional meetings in the Senate Chamber from 12 noon to 2.00 p.m. on Tuesday 1 December and Tuesday 8 December 2026 for oral evidence on the Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill.

Agreed: That the Forward Work Programme is agreed, including the additional meeting on Wednesday 11 November 2026.

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17. Any other business

There was no other business.

18. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 2.00 p.m. on Wednesday 11 November 2026, in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.34 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities