



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 26 February 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

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

In Attendance: Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly 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)



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

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.

Andy Allen – Former Member of the Military.

Pam Cameron – Former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and Cross Departmental policy, strategy and legislation.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson’s Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he understood that an application for leave to apply for a Judicial Review against the Minister for Communities had been lodged with the court by DJ Holly Lester & Free the Night in respect of Licensing Law Review and the Surrender Principle.

The Chairperson also reminded Members that the Public Accounts Committee was launching its report into Homelessness in Northern Ireland, after the Committee for Communities meeting, in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 19 February 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

5. Matters Arising

Mark Simpson – Ulster University - Independent Review of discretionary Support

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a timeline in relation to the report on Welfare Mitigations, asking when it will be completed and received by the Committee.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Minister for Communities	Supporting People Programme
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Acquisition of 600 homes
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Shared Housing EQIAs and Locations
First Minister and deputy First Minister	Cross-Departmental Strategy for the Supporting People Programme
Committee for Communities	Clerk's Memo – Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

6. Correspondence

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.06 a.m.

Advice NI / Feeding Britain – Free School Meals

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for response in advance of its joint briefing with the Committee for Finance on 12 March 2026, to ask whether the Children's Services Co-Operation Act is being engaged in relation to Free School Meals provision and to ask what preparatory work is ongoing in relation to this.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

RaISe – Members scrutiny of the 2026-27 BBC Charter Renewal

Agreed: That an update is requested from BBC NI, with particular focus on any changes stemming from the Charter Renewal for NI and to also enquire about the commitment to local content, sign language visibility and indigenous language promotion.

Department for Communities – Update on the Timms Review - Personal Independence Payment

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Westminster Social Security Advisory Committee reflecting the Committee’s concerns in relation to the lack of Northern Ireland representation contributing to the Review, to ask the Committee how the voices of disabled people here will be heard and to ask the Committee whether it is content with the existing arrangements.

Minister for Communities - Minister for Communities - Three-year Social Housing Development Programme

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether a rural proofing exercise is undertaken as part of Housing Schemes Development planning and to highlight Members concerns in relation to the number of rural schemes planned.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Press Release DfC - Líofo Bursary Scheme 2026 Open for Applications
Finance Committee	Impact on the Block Grant of the Abolition of the 2 Child Limit
Finance Committee	Department for Education 5-Year Budget Strategy
Individual	NIHE Housing Issue
Executive Information Service	Press Release - DfC Lyons welcomes launch of Shankill A Plan to Grow



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Press Release - DfC Minister announces dedicated advice service for Armed Forces community
Department for Communities	SSAC visit including the meeting with Committee for Communities Members
Finance Committee	Spring Supplementary Estimates
Individual	Quarterly Briefing with the Minister for Communities
Strategic Investment Board	Assembly Committee Report – Social Value Monitoring
Executive Information Service	Appointments to the Board of the Northern Ireland Museums Council
Department for Communities	Local Government Auditor Code of Audit Practice 2026
IMTAC	Disability Strategy Open Letter
Department for Communities	Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations Consultation Paper

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Clerk to the Finance Committee	Finance Committee - Digital Infrastructure and Cybersecurity Risks across the Community and Voluntary Sector
NI Fiscal Council	Assessment of The Finance Minister's Proposed 2026-27 to 28-29- 29-30 Budget

The Chairperson suspended the meeting.



Northern Ireland Assembly

The meeting was suspended at 10.14 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.17 a.m. with all Members present.

7. Oral evidence from the Department for Communities – Financial Position Update

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr John Greer, Deputy Secretary Corporate Services Group, Department for Communities

Ms Kathy Sands, Director of Finance, Department for Communities

Ms Olga Beagon, Director of Finance, Department for Communities

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

- Department Prioritisation of Funds
- Investment in Social Housing
- Inescapable Pressures and Statutory Obligations
- Ringfencing of Funds for the Social Housing Development Programme
- Fraud and Error Bill and potential revenue stemming from the Bill
- Overspend Impact
- Staffing Costs, Recruitment and Regional Balance
- Northern Ireland Housing Executive Revitalisation Project
- Support for Veterans and Affordable Warmth Scheme
- Welfare Mitigations and 2028 Cliff-Edge
- Discretionary Support
- Project Funding (Sports, Casement Park and The Northern Ireland Football Fund)
- Local Growth Fund and Implications of less funding for the Community and Voluntary Sector
- Arm's Length Bodies Expenditure
- Rates Support Grant
- Monitoring and Reporting to Committee



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department in relation to the “Open Book” exercise and to ask for the detail of the impact of the exercise on the Department for Communities when it is available.

8. Draft Multi-Year Budget for 2026-29/30: Consideration of response to Committee for Finance

The Chairperson invited Members’ views in relation to the previous Financial Briefing (Agenda Item 7) and sought points of feedback for inclusion in the Committee’s response to the Committee for Finance request.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for its response to summarise both the content and the strength of the Minister for Communities position on the Multi-Year Budget.

Agreed: That the Committee Team draft a response and return the draft to the Committee for review and consideration at next week’s meeting.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 11.35 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.41 a.m. with all Members present.

The Chairperson informed Members that the same Departmental Officials would brief the Committee on Agenda items 9-11 and a different panel of officials will brief the Committee on Agenda item 12, and that Members would have the opportunity to ask questions after the briefing on each SL1 and that he would seek agreement for the required actions after all briefings had taken place.

The Chairperson further advised Members that the 4 SL1s were subject to the new process that was introduced on 5 January 2026 and that Members would *not* be asked to make a decision about the policy merits of these proposed statutory rules at this point, that a reduced timeframe had been requested for these SL1s on the basis of Parity, and that letters from the Minister outlining these exceptional circumstances were included in Members’ packs.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

9. SL1 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Ms Michelle Grills, Pension Policy Lead, Department for Communities

Ms Keira McKeown, Deputy Pension Policy Lead, Department for Communities

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

- Timeline of receipt of papers by the Committee
- Regulatory Impact
- Equality Screening

10. SL1 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pension Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

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

- Timeline of receipt of papers by the Committee
- Engagement and Communication with individuals to be affected

11. SL1 - The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson informed the Committee that a Draft Statutory Rule and Explanatory Memorandum *had yet to be* received for the SL1.

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

- Receipt of Draft SR and EM Timeframe



Northern Ireland
Assembly

12. SL1 - The Social Security and Statutory Maternity Pay (Evidence of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson informed the Committee that a Draft Statutory Rule and Explanatory Memorandum had *yet to be* received for the SL1.

The Chairperson then welcomed the following Departmental Officials to the meeting:

Ms Jennifer Gibb, Principal for Work and Health, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision-Making Services, Department for Communities

Ms Karen McCann, Principal for Work and Health, Maternity Allowance operations, Department for Communities

Ms Mary Gately, Deputy Principal for Work and Health, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision-Making Services, Department for Communities

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

- Timeframe for Statutory Instrument in Westminster
- Digital and Hard copy Certificates
- Cost of online system

The Chairperson informed Members that, the absence of a draft copy of the rule does not prevent the Committee from proceeding, however, this should be exceptional.

The Chairperson further advised the Committee that the Minister for Communities had requested that the Committee considered the four proposed statutory rules within a shortened timeframe.

Agreed: That the Committee consider the proposed statutory rules within the shortened timeframe, and that:

- The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and The Social Security and Statutory



Northern Ireland Assembly

- Maternity Pay (Evidence of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 will be considered again at the meeting on 5 March 2026, and
- The Guaranteed Minimum Pension Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 will be considered at the meeting on 12 March 2026.

The Chairperson then advised Members that a shortened timeframe did not preclude the committee from issuing a call for views and that this could result in the Committee making a decision on an SL1 before responses were received, and that any responses would contribute to Committee scrutiny at the Statutory Rule stage, rather than at the SL1 stage.

The Chairperson finally informed Members that:

- The Committee would next consider the SL1s as agreed on 5 and 12 March 2026 alongside a summary of any comments and feedback received via Citizen Space (up to that date).
- The Committee team would issue a call for views on the 4 SL1's using the standard survey on Citizen Space from 26 February 2026 and that the call for views for each will close at midnight on 11 March 2026.
- The SL1, and any relevant papers from the Department would be published on the Committee website and notified to relevant stakeholders, alongside the relevant deadline, where appropriate.

13. SR 2026/24 The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meeting on 8 January 2026 when the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, which was managed via the previous delegated legislation process.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/24: The Pneumoconiosis, Etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims)



Northern Ireland Assembly

(Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

14. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

15. Any other business

There was no other business.

16. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 5 March 2026, in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson informed Members that the final agenda item would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to be briefed by the Clerk on a review of Committee Strategic Planning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to undertake consideration of the Committees' Strategic Planning.

The meeting moved into closed session at 12.05 p.m.

17. Strategic Planning update

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.08 p.m.

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo on the Committee's Strategic Planning.

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.28 p.m.

Mark Durkan left the meeting at 12.30 p.m.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a Communities focused briefing from the Administrative Data Research Centre NI (ADRC).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a future Post-Budget (2026) briefing session from the Department.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule the order of agenda items for future meetings, as appropriate, to prioritise briefings, moving MA and Correspondence items to later on the agenda.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.35 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities