



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 7 March 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Ms Ciara Ferguson (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance:

- Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Mrs Tracey McCaughey (Clerical Officer)



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The meeting commenced in open session at 10.01 a.m.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he had attended the Cliff Edge Coalition round table event on 6 March where the group outlined their priorities. The Chairperson also spoke at the event on behalf of the Committee and provided a short update on the work of the Committee so far. The Chairperson stated that it was a very worthwhile event and confirmed that welfare mitigations remain an issue that the Committee will need to keep under a watchful brief.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Speaker was hosting an event in the Long Gallery as part of Irish Language week at 1.15 in the Senate Chamber and encouraged Members to attend.

The Chairperson welcomed the visit by Education Minister Paul Givan to Irish medium primary school Gaelscoil Aodha Rua, in Dungannon and described the coverage he had seen and heard about it as uplifting and positive.

The Chairperson also informed Members that it is International Women's Day on 8 March. The campaign theme for 2024 is 'Inspire Inclusion', which means to celebrate diversity and empowerment on International Women's Day 2024 and beyond.



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3. Matters Arising

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.05a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with Departmental letters in relation to Statutory Rules on the extension of the expiry date of section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020.

The Committee considered 3 Rules on this issue at its meeting on 22 February and agreed to recommend that the Assembly approve them.

However, the Minister has since decided that there is no justification for the continued extension of provisions of the Coronavirus Act and Assembly approval for the above Orders will therefore not be sought.

The current extension Order will therefore cease to have effect after 6 March 2024.

The letters outline that the Local Government (Meetings and Performance) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 provides a power for the Department to make regulations for the purpose of or in connection with ensuring district council meetings may be held remotely. The Minister has asked that the Department proceed with making regulations under the 2021 Act instead.

The question was put to the Committee that a letter is sent to the Minister highlighting the Committee's disappointment in this decision and;

- Seeking an urgent Departmental briefing on this issue for the Committee
- Asking for the forecast timescale for the alternative subordinate legislation to be brought forward to ensure that district council meetings may be held remotely
- Asking whether consultation is required on any new subordinate legislation
- Asking for an explanation of the calculation of the 40 days applied to the most recent Rule
- Asking the Minister for clarification on whether the proposed new regulations will propose to differentiate between remote meeting facilities



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being available for full council meetings and for meetings of council committees.

The Committee divided: Ayes 7; Noes 0; Abstain 2

AYES: Colm Gildernew, Ciara Ferguson, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Maolíosa McHugh, Daniel McCrossan, Andy Allen

NOES: None

ABSTAIN: Brian Kingston, Maurice Bradley

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the letter should be sent to the Minister.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 29 February 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes subject to minor corrections.

5. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a correspondence memo with proposed actions detailed.

Agreed: That clarification is sought from the correspondent as to whether Imtac is a member of the expert panel on a disability strategy or whether the correspondent is writing as a member of the panel in their individual capacity?

Agreed: The Committee agreed the correspondence memo as drafted.



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The Chairperson drew Members' attention to correspondence and associated papers relating to notification of a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) on Pensions (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill 2024 in tabled papers.

The Chairperson stated that, as with any LCM, the Committee was under pressure to report in very tight timescales (15 working days) and, given that had been sent to the Committee on Tuesday 5 March, the time to report is even more limited as it was not possible to arrange a briefing session for today's meeting.

The Chairperson further stated that, whilst the intention behind this legislation was to be welcomed, he didn't believe the Committee had been given its place in the process to allow Members to carry out proper scrutiny. The Chairperson stated that he would want to know whether the Department was aware of this legislation being introduced in the House of Commons in December 2023, and if so, why this was not brought to the attention of the Committee at its first meeting on 15 February and, if this wasn't possible, then at the very least he felt the Committee should have received it before Tuesday 5 March.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask when exactly the Department and the Minister became aware that an LCM would be required and why the Committee only received this LCM for consideration at such a late stage.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that the relevant officials brief the Committee on this LCM at the meeting on 14 March.

Agreed: That letters are sent to relevant stakeholders to seek their written views in relation to the LCM.

6. Briefing by Deputy Secretary of Departmental Corporate Services Group

The following officials joined the meeting:



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Gillian Morton, Deputy Secretary

Gavin Patrick, Director

George Sampson, Director

The Deputy Secretary outlined the main priorities of the Corporate Services Group.

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were Departmental budgets, the timescale for a legislative programme, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, staff vacancies within the Department and the reasons for those vacancies, funding for social housing, the impact on staff vacancies on services that the Department delivers and disability legislation.

The Chairperson informed officials that he would pass further questions to Committee staff to be forwarded to the Department for answer.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask:

- The Department to provide an analysis of the impact of staff vacancies on the services it provides
- Whether the staff vacancies have had an impact on the development of any of the social inclusion strategies
- The Department for more information on the length of time that posts have been vacant within the Department
- For a breakdown of the additional £13.2m allocated to social housing; and
- For a timescale for the publication of each of the social inclusion strategies

7. Briefing by Deputy Secretary of Engaged Communities Group

The following officials joined the meeting:



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Emer Morelli, Deputy Secretary

David Huddleston, Director

Paul Price, Director

Kathryn Hill, Director

The Deputy Secretary outlined the main priorities of the Engaged Communities Group.

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were the Irish Language strategy, Casement Park, Sport NI, funding for thatch roof owners, the Sub Regional Stadia Funding Programme, the Culture, Arts and Heritage strategy, the criteria for grassroots football funding and staff vacancy rates.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department asking whether Japanese knotweed has been found at any of the local football club grounds and also seeking further information on the standard for thatched roofs and if there can be any flexibility in relation to the 1-year period for funding, given that thatching can only be undertaken during summer months.

The Chairperson informed Members that there would be a short comfort break and reminded members to use the simultaneous interpretation headphones provided for the next agenda item, as needed. The meeting was suspended at 11.47a.m.

The meeting resumed in public session at 11.52 with all Members present.



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8. Briefing by Chonradh na Gaeilge on the Irish Language

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Dr Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh - Communications Manager, Conradh na Gaeilge

Conchúr Ó Muadaigh - Advocacy Manager, Conradh na Gaeilge

Cuisle Nic Liam - Language Rights Co-ordinator, Conradh na Gaeilge

The representatives briefed the Committee on their work in relation to promoting the Irish Language.

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were engagement with the Department on an Irish Language strategy, ongoing work in relation to a strategy, the funding needed to develop a strategy and whether Chonradh na Gaeilge had access to the minutes of the Cross Departmental Working Group on an Irish Language Strategy.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if the Committee can have a copy of the minutes from the meeting(s) of the Cross Departmental Working Group on an Irish Language Strategy.

9. Briefing by Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL) on the Sub Regional Stadia Funding Programme

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Gerard Lawlor - Chairman, NIFL

Steven Mills - Chief Operating Officer, NIFL

Sophie Glendinning – Competitions and Operations Lead, NIFL

The representatives briefed the Committee on the work of NIFL and their strategic priorities and challenges linked to the delays in distribution of the Sub Regional Stadia Funding Programme.



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A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were whether NIFL had held discussions with officials in charge of the Shared Island Fund and Levelling Up Fund, if clubs are facing restrictions in attendances due to lack of facilities and the forecast for the current financial need for clubs.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to NIFL asking for more information on social return on investment per pound spent.

10. SR 2024/20 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/20 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the Rule.

11. SL1 - The Social Security and Universal Credit (Migration of Tax Credit Claimants and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulation (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule will make a range of miscellaneous amendments to social security legislation to align with legislation being progressed by the Department for Work and Pensions. The proposed amendments are largely technical in nature and are not anticipated to have any significant practical or financial impact.



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

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it has the resources to take all the actions required by the legislation given the concerns expressed in relation to the level of staff vacancies within the Department.

12. Forward work programme

The Chairperson informed Members that, at the meeting on 14 March, the Committee will receive briefings from the Deputy Secretary of the Work & Health Group and the Deputy Secretary of the Operational Delivery Group.

The Committee will then receive briefings from the remaining Deputy Secretaries at the meeting on 21 March.

The Chairperson suggested to Members that a short meeting, followed by a closed planning session, is held on Thursday 9 May in First Steps Women's Centre, Dungannon.

Agreed: That a meeting and planning session are held on 9 May.

13. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong raised an issue in relation to the process followed by the Department to correct errors in information being provided in responses to Assembly questions.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking additional information in relation to the process for correcting errors in written responses to Assembly questions.



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14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 14 March 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.03p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities