



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 15 May 2025

**Meeting Location:** Room 29, Parliament Buildings

**Present:**

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA

**In Attendance:**

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

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



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### **1. Declarations of Interest**

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – Consulting on a Member's Bill on Homelessness

Member of Public Accounts Committee

Brian Kingston – Member of the Committee for the Executive Office

Kellie Armstrong – Member of Deaf Community

### **2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

### **3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson congratulated the team behind Blue Lights on winning a BAFTA for best drama.

The Chairperson informed members that he attended the Equity trade union conference in Derry on Saturday 10 May. It was a very well attended and positive event despite the current financial circumstances facing the creative industries.

The Chairperson informed members that he felt that the informal meeting with the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations on Tuesday 13 May was very informative and that it was important to learn that the current funding model here is deemed to be a strong one.

The Chairperson informed members that, following the committee meeting last week, the Public Accounts Committee announced an inquiry into homelessness in Northern Ireland. In keeping with the convention of primacy, the committee will, at this stage, simply note any response from the Department regarding the Simon Community's consideration of the Audit Office Report on homelessness.

Nicola Brogan joined the meeting at 10.03a.m.



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The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a letter to the Minister from Echo Echo Dance Company following a decision by the Arts Council to cut all of its funding.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Arts Council seeking further information regarding this decision.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department seeking information on alternative funding options and available support for organisations that are experiencing funding cuts.

### 4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of amended draft minutes from the meeting on 8 May 2025.

**Agreed:** That the amended minutes are agreed.

### 5. Matters Arising

British Deaf Association - Artificial Intelligence, BSL and the BDA

**Agreed:** That a copy the BDA paper on AI is included as evidence in the Committee report on the Sign Language Bill and that a copy of the paper is forwarded to both the Committee for Economy and the Department for Economy.

Department for Communities - Council Local Development Plans

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Committee for Infrastructure seeking information in relation to the publishing of Local Development Plans.



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Derry City and Strabane District Council	Planning Application Processing Times
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	Planning Application Processing Times
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	Planning Application Processing Times
Causeway Coast and Glens Council	Anti-poverty strategy
Department for Communities	Public Accounts Committee Report into Child Poverty - Children's Services Co-operation Act Northern Ireland
Department for Communities	Use of Artificial Intelligence in relation to the benefits system

### 6. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Committee for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs	Copy of correspondence to SOLACE regarding Northern Ireland Shows Association (NISA) on its 2022 Report Independent Resilience Review of Agriculture Shows in Northern Ireland.
Committee for Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs	Copy of correspondence to Department for Communities regarding Northern Ireland Shows Association (NISA) on its 2022 Report



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Source	Summary of content
	Independent Resilience Review of Agriculture Shows in Northern Ireland.
Committee for Infrastructure	Copy of the response from the Minister of Finance to the Committee's request for a disaggregation of the funding under each Programme for Government priority.
Department for Communities	Budget 2025-26 Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) And Rural Needs Impact Assessment
Committee for the Executive Office	Copy of correspondence to all councils regarding Local Change Fund requesting a breakdown of the monies allocated.

The Committee agreed to suspend the meeting at 10.10a.m.

The meeting restarted at 10.12a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Andy Allen, Brian Kingston, Maurice Bradley, Nicola Bradley, Maolíosa McHugh, Kellie Armstrong, Sian Mulholland.

## 7. Sign Language Bill: Update on the Committee's Call for Evidence

The Chairperson referred members to a memo from the Clerk in relation to the call for evidence on the Sign Language Bill which closed on Friday 9 May 2025.

There were 42 submissions and the Committee was provided with a list of potential stakeholder organisations to invite to provide oral evidence on the provisions in the Bill.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content that the suggested organisations are invited to provide oral evidence.



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The Chairperson informed members that the Committee team is considering how best to add an additional session or sessions, perhaps in a focus group format, to allow for the participation of additional stakeholders ideally to take place in early June.

**Agreed:** That committee staff draft a proposal for this event to bring back to the committee for agreement.

The Committee agreed to suspend the meeting at 10.18a.m.

The meeting restarted at 10.25a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Andy Allen, Brian Kingston, Maurice Bradley, Nicola Bradley, Maolíosa McHugh, Kellie Armstrong, Sian Mulholland.

### **8. Briefing from NI Commissioner for Children & Young People (NICCY) on Children's and Young People's voices, rights and needs**

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Chris Quinn – Commissioner for Children and Young People

Alex Tennant – Interim CEO, NICCY

Joanne McGurk – Head of Legal and Investigations, NICCY

Rachel Woods – Senior Policy and Research Officer, NICCY

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

- Relationship with the Department for Communities
- Incorporation of UN Convention on Rights of a Child into legislation
- Interventions needed to tackle child poverty and homelessness
- The impact of benefit cuts on children and young people
- The independence of NICCY and how child commissioners operate in other jurisdictions
- The impact of budget cuts
- Current caseload



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- The number of interventions NICCY has carried out
- Views on the Sign Language Bill

**Agreed:** That NICCY will forward the following additional information:

- the UK Anti-Poverty Strategy once published
- a copy of its annual report and more information on the types of cases dealt with and case closure statistics
- a copy of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on poverty
- evidence relating to the impact of 'the bedroom tax' on children and young people
- examples of good practice of pooling of resources and budgets
- NICCY's views on the Sign Language Bill
- research on the impact of early intervention and prevention policies on homelessness

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Audit Office to ask if it has carried out any research on the impact of funding to organisations being provided very late in the financial year and/or via monitoring rounds and the implications for the most effective use of public money.

**Agreed:** That a copy of the All Party Group on Youth Participation report on youth housing and homelessness is provided to the Committee.

**Agreed:** That existing research is shared with the Committee, or if required, research is sought on the governance of Commissioner - type bodies by parliaments or departments in other jurisdictions in the UK .

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to request briefings on the Department's Anti-Poverty Strategy; the Irish Language Strategy; and Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy.



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**9. Briefing by the Assembly Research and Information Service (RalSe) on Homelessness legislative frameworks in NI, England, Scotland and Wales**

The Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:  
Eleanor Murphy - RalSe

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

- 'Ask and Act' duties
- money spent on temporary accommodation
- liaison with other jurisdictions on their legislative proposals for homelessness
- causes of homelessness in other jurisdictions
- a statutory shift in other jurisdictions towards prevention and collaboration
- NI Housing Executive's statutory obligations

**Agreed:** That RalSe provide additional information relating to Ask and Act, or comparable, duties in other jurisdictions.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to Professor Suzanne Fitzpatrick seeking reflections on her work on homelessness in Scotland and Wales.

**Agreed:** That a copy of the research paper is forwarded to the Public Accounts Committee in anticipation of its homelessness inquiry.

**10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

**11. Any other business**





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Kellie Armstrong and Maolíosa McHugh gave apologies for the meeting on 22 May.

### **12. Date, time and location of the next meeting**

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 22 May 2025, in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Titanic Boulevard, Belfast.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.12p.m.

**Colm Gildernew MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**