



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 19 February 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Cathy Mason 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)
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)

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 - Charity trustee

Andy Allen – Charity trustee, private sector landlord, trade union member.

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, Friends of Coleraine.

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

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

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that debates on the SSE and VoA motions were scheduled in Plenary for week commencing 23 February and that the Committee is scheduled to receive an update on from Departmental Finance officials, at its meeting on 26 February 2026.

The Chairperson then advised that as the Committee won't have an opportunity to reach a position in advance of the debates, that he intended to reflect what Committee understands to be the the Departmental concerns and areas of pressure.

Agreed: That the Chairperson reflect the known areas of concern and financial pressures being experienced by the Department when speaking as Chairperson during the forthcoming SSE, VoA and Budget debates in Plenary.



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4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 12 February 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed subject to two amendments advised by Members.

5. Matters Arising

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 10.09 am via Zoom.

Committee for Communities - Memo - Social Housing Development Programme – Ringfenced Funding Proposal, and; Department for Communities - Ringfencing of funding for Social Housing Development Programme

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee agreed following a division at its meeting on 12 February 2026, to defer the decision to write to The Executive Office endorsing the Ministers request to ring-fence funds, by one week to allow for more information to be obtained.

The Chairperson then informed Members that more information had been received and that the Committee had been consistent and persistent in its support of the need for Social Homes and the prioritisation of home-building within the Programme for Government.

The Chairperson then proposed that the Committee *“write to the Executive and the Minister for Communities to reiterate our support for Programme for Government targets, including housing targets, and any meaningful efforts from the minister to achieve them; acknowledges the reality of the budget which the Executive and all Departments are facing, and calls on the Minister for Communities to work constructively with the Minister for Finance to deliver a multi-year Budget which would allow us to plan investment in public services including social housing for years to come”*.



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The Committee failed to reach consensus on the way forward and Pam Cameron subsequently counter-proposed that *“This Committee write to the Executive to support the ear-marking of the full funding requirements of the Social Housing Development Programme which reflect the Executive’s own housing commitments as expressed both in its Programme for Government and its Housing Supply Strategy.”*

Mark Durkan left the meeting at 10.13 am.

Mark Durkan rejoined the meeting at 10.14 am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would write to The Executive Office to support the ear-marking of the full funding requirements of the Social Housing Development Programme which reflect the Executive’s own housing commitments as expressed both in its Programme for Government and its Housing Supply Strategy.

Housing Rights - Local Housing Allowance and average rents

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether it would consider undertaking research at an appropriate time in relation to the differential between Local Housing Allowance and Average Rents across NI.

Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland - Local Growth Fund

Agreed: That a response is sent to the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to accept his offer to meet with the Chairperson at a future date.

Department for Communities - Local Growth Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Communities, requesting clarity in relation to current allocation of what was previously termed “match funding” from the Department since the end of the European Social Fund (ESF).

Andy Allen left the meeting at 10.31 am.

Andy Allen rejoined the meeting at 10.34 am.

Department for Communities - Proposed Draft Budget 2026-29-30



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to advise that Members would welcome clarity on the difference between *inescapable* and *high priority* bids, when the officials are providing an update on the financial position at Committee on 26 February 2026.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Work and Pensions	Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill Legislative Consent Memorandum
Cavendish Consultancy on behalf of Belfast Works Connect	Local Growth Fund – briefing paper

6. Correspondence

Department for Communities – Briefing Deferral - Housing Supply Strategy

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

Department for Communities – Briefing Deferral - The Northern Ireland Football Fund

Agreed: That a briefing in closed session is rescheduled for a future meeting.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
The British Polio Fellowship	Polio Survivor Event
Individual	Housing Repairs Issue
Department for Communities	Section 167 Charities Act NI 2008 - Consultation Response
Committee for Finance	Review of Arms Length Bodies
Sign Solutions / Interpreters Live	Request to meet with CfC re SLB



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Source	Summary of content
Public Accounts Committee	12 Month Review – Child Poverty in Northern Ireland
Individual	Housing Issue
IMTAC	Applications for new members of IMTAC

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 10.38 am.

7. Oral evidence from Joseph Rowntree Foundation - Poverty in Northern Ireland 2025 Report

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Ursula O’Hare, Head of NI, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Ms Sheena McMullen, Senior Policy Adviser, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Ms Christine Ellison, Senior Analyst, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Sian Mulholland rejoined the meeting at 10.41 am

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

- In Work Poverty and the Good Jobs Bill
- Childcare Strategy
- Employment insecurity
- Anti-Poverty Strategy and its targets
- Educational Under achievement and its link to Poverty
- Poverty and employment by Demographic area
- Cross Department Working
- Strengthening the Social Security System and mitigations
- Child Poverty in Britain compared to Northern Ireland
- Impact of Domestic Rates on Poverty and the Rates Support Grant



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Agreed: That a Pre-Legislative briefing on the proposed content of the Good Jobs Bill in relation to its impact on the “working poor”, is scheduled for a future meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what preparations are ongoing in this mandate in relation to welfare mitigations and the 2028 cliff-edge / end-point.

8. Oral evidence from Child Poverty Action Group - Safety nets Social security for families in a devolved UK report

The Chairperson informed Members that the Child Poverty Action Group is working jointly with academics across the UK on the Safety Nets project and that Mark Simpson is one of the Northern Ireland country leads for the project.

The Chairperson then welcomed the following official to the meeting:

Mr Mark Simpson, Senior lecturer, School of Law, University of Ulster

Cathy Mason left the meeting at 11.41 am.

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

- Anti Poverty Strategy and its measurable targets
- Discretionary Support
- Other jurisdictions and comparable targets
- Social Security Parity Legislation in NI and Scotland
- Joint Research Labs and timeline

Cathy Mason rejoined the meeting at 11.46 am.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

Kellie Armstong requested that a written update is sought from the Department in relation to forthcoming Delegated Legislation and that Committee allocate some time to a Strategic Planning session as soon as practicable.

Agreed: That a strategic planning review session is scheduled for a future meeting.



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10. Any other business

Pam Cameron requested that an update is sought from the Department in relation to the Active Aging Strategy and whether it is currently being refreshed.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update in regards to the Active Aging Strategy and whether it is currently being refreshed.

11. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 26 February 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.51 a.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities