



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 8 May 2025

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

**Present:**

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

**In Attendance:**

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



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

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

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – bringing forward a Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness

Kellie Armstrong – family member has availed of the NI Civil Service early retirement scheme

### **2. Apologies**

None.

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

The Chairperson reminded members that the call for evidence on the Sign Language Bill closes on Friday 9 May and encouraged as many people as possible to respond. The evidence session on 1 May was very well received.

The Chairperson also informed members that it was Deaf Awareness week and that there was a well-attended drop-in session on beginners' British and Irish Sign Language in the Blue Flax that some members attended on 7 May.

The Chairperson passed on congratulations to Brian Kingston on completing the Belfast Marathon. The committee passed on its thanks to the organisers of the marathon in making this year's event a record-breaking success. The committee also passed on its condolences to the family of John Allen, Chairperson of the Belfast Marathon, who recently passed away.

The Chairperson also passed on congratulations to Dungannon Swifts on winning the Irish Cup.

Maolíosa McHugh passed on congratulations to the Tyrone under 20 team on winning the Ulster title.



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### 4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 1 May 2025.

**Agreed:** That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

### 5. Matters Arising

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Infrastructure	Targeted Investment in Water Infrastructure to Support
Chairpersons' Liaison Group	Terms of Reference for Co-Design Programmes

Chairpersons' Liaison Group -

Kellie Armstrong raised the report on the Review of the Social Inclusion Strategies Co-design and co-production process which had recently been laid in the Assembly Library by the Minister for Communities.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the department to ask for further detail on co-production as there was concern that this element had been dropped.

The Chairperson informed members that, following the meeting on 13 March, it was agreed that the committee would write to the equivalent committees in Scotland and Wales on the potential for a joint devolved committee response on proposed UK welfare reforms. Responses had now been received from Scotland and Wales: Scotland is proposing to consider the matter further following a roundtable session with stakeholders on 15 May and will contact the committee following that meeting.

**Agreed:** That the committee is content to note the responses and await further correspondence from Scotland.



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The Committee noted the following tabled item:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Tackling Fraud and Error in the Welfare System

### 6. Correspondence

Simon Community - Northern Ireland Audit Office report - comments on homelessness prevention

**Agreed:** That a copy of the report is forwarded to the department for comment and to ask if there are plans to act on the recommendations in this report.

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2024

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the department to ask if it carrying out an impact assessment and /or EQIA on the impact of its budget and lack of an Anti-Poverty Strategy on children and young people.

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.10a.m.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Aberystwyth University	UKRI/AHRC Curiosity Grant application
Assembly Business Office	Social Security Fraud Act NI 2001 Revised Code of Practice on Obtaining Information
Clerk to Committee for Finance	24-25 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn information MM

The Committee noted the following tabled items of correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Press Release - Foundry Lane Environmental Improvement Scheme launched
Department for Communities	Press Release - JobStart 50
Department for Communities	Press Release - Minister Lyons celebrates title success for Belfast Giants
Department for Communities	Press Release - North West Jobs and Benefits Offices
Scottish Commission on Social Security	Webinar Invite - People with communication needs and the Scottish Social Security System

The Committee agreed to suspend the meeting at 10.12a.m.

The meeting restarted at 10.13a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Andy Allen, Brian Kingston, Daniel McCrossan, Kellie Armstrong, Maolíosa McHugh, Nicola Brogan, Sian Mulholland

## **7. Departmental Briefing on Budget 2025-26:Initial Decisions**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

John Greer – Deputy Secretary Corporate Services Group

Kathy Sands – Finance Director

Cherrie Arnold – Finance Director

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



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- The costs of repairs following Storm Eowyn building resilience in the face of climate change
- Culture and heritage budgets
- Homelessness and the Supporting People Programme
- Budget for the voluntary and community sector
- Barnett Consequentials
- The Pathways to Work Green Paper
- The budget for the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Arts sector funding and the delay in allocations to the sector
- Fees and charges
- Benefits recovery from tackling fraud and error
- In year monitoring rounds
- Recruitment
- Capital allocation bids
- Fuel poverty initiatives
- Transformation funding
- Welfare reform mitigations
- Employment Support Scheme
- Budget allocation for built heritage

**Agreed:** That the Climate Change Division will reply to the committee query on building resilience in the face of climate change.

**Agreed:** That the Housing Division will reply to queries in relation to homelessness.

**Agreed:** That the department will reply to the committee in relation to the following:

- Budgets for local councils to carry out work in regards to the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Bids for capital projects
- Budget for built heritage



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- Employment Support proposals in the Pathways to Work Green Paper and the impact on Northern Ireland
- Pooling of resources between departments for homelessness prevention
- An explanation of the difference between earmarked and ring fenced funding
- A definition of cultural institutions in relation to Libraries NI and Museums NI service delivery support

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the department seeking a briefing on Heritage, Culture and Creativity Policies and the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 11.27a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.34a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Andy Allen, Brian Kingston, Daniel McCrossan, Kellie Armstrong, Maolíosa McHugh, Nicola Brogan, Sian Mulholland

### **8. Departmental Briefing on Staff Pressures and Workforce Planning**

The Chairperson welcomed back the following officials to the meeting:

John Greer – Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services Group

Cherrie Arnold – Finance Director

And welcomed:

Eamon O’Kane – People & Property Director

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

- Transition planning and knowledge transfer
- Vacancy management
- Career opportunities within the department



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- Sickness absence and initiatives to reduce absence levels
- The levels and cost of employing agency workers
- Temporary promotions
- Backfilling of vacancies
- Apprenticeships within the department
- Vacancy control process
- Hybrid working
- Impact of vacancies on the Disability and Carers Service

**Agreed:** That the department provides the committee with further information on the impact of funding cuts on the Disability and Carers Service and the rationale for the budget reduction.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Committee for Finance to seek the following:

- Information on NICS recruitment models and how these can be streamlined
- Whether NICS contracts are fit for purpose as the committee is concerned that they are not flexible
- Whether there are plans to review and monitor the NICS hybrid working policy
- What assistance the NICS can provide to agency workers to gain permanent employment with the NICS

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the department to ask the following:

- How the department plans to recruit 400 additional Benefit Delivery staff without recurrent funding
- Whether the department has considered amending its employment contracts to allow greater flexibility.
- How the department reviews staff complement





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Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.05pm.

### **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

### **10. Any other business**

There was no other business.

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

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 15 May 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.40p.m.

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