



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 13 November 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolíosa 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)



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

1. **Declarations of Interest**

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - Charity trustee

Andy Allen – Charity trustee

Maolfosa McHugh – Charity trustee

Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community

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 reminded Members that the Minister delivered a statement in Plenary on 11 November 2025 in relation to the Equality Commission Review of the governance, practices, and procedures applicable to Ulster Boxing and commented that the report had not been easy to access.

Agreed: That a request be made to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to brief Committee in relation to the report at a future meeting.

The Chairperson advised Members that an informal meeting with the Westminster Social Security Advisory Committee, had been requested via the Minister's Private Office and is to take place on 20 November 2025 in Parliament Buildings. The Chairperson advised that he would be keen for other Members to attend alongside him.



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Agreed: That additional Members would be provided with the relevant information and should confirm availability to the Committee team.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 6 November 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters arising

Committee for the Economy - Joint Committee Letter to UK Treasury UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Agreed: That a draft of a Joint Committee letter to the UK Treasury is developed for Committee consideration at a future meeting.

Minister for Communities - Funding Announcements and Budget Planning

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request the following in advance of the scheduled briefing on 27th November:

- A detailed breakdown of discretionary spend over the last year
- That the Department provides financial information to the Committee in a more standardised way following any Departmental or Ministerial announcement where funding is included – i.e. that the full detail, including the relevant budget line is provided to the Committee for scrutiny.

Plans to Future Proof House Building and Retrofitting

Mid Ulster Council, Lisburn and Castlereagh Council and Fermanagh and Omagh Council

Agreed: That the responses are reviewed as a collective once a full set of responses has been received from Local Councils.

Committee for Communities - Draft response to Committee for Infrastructure on the Water Sustainable Drainage Bill

Agreed: That the updated response is further amended to request that Social Housing tenants be included to apply for the Flood Protection Grant and that the further updated response is sent to the Committee for Infrastructure.



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Anti-Poverty Strategy

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council and Causeway Coast and Glens Council

Agreed: That Committee will consider a suitable format for a meeting with representatives from each of the Councils once a full set of responses has been received.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Assembly Executive and Review Committee	Review into the development of a formal process and guidance on the handling of Westminster Statutory Instruments which include a role for the Assembly
Minister for Health	Support and Care for Deaf People

6. Correspondence

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.15 a.m.

Co-Ownership - Update on applications, purchases and buy-outs following Property Value Limit increase

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Co-Ownership to thank them for their update and to request a written briefing on the model and the level of uptake of the scheme, particularly for the over 55's, people in rural areas and to include information on those geographical areas where the uptake of the scheme is lower.

Assembly Business Office - Libraries NI 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts

Agreed: That a future Committee meeting be held in a Northern Ireland Library during Book Week 2026.



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Committee for Finance - Review of Arm's Length Bodies

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Finance to ask whether, as part of its review of Arm's Length Bodies, it is seeking the views and experiences of Arm's Length Bodies of the Department for Communities (and from ALBs more broadly).

Assembly Communications - Media clippings regarding trilingual logos

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a full breakdown of the cost associated with the change from the tri-lingual logo.

Individual – Housing Issue

Agreed: That a further response is sent to the individual indicating that the Committee cannot act on an individual's behalf and to suggest they contact the housing supplier directly or their local MLA / MP.

Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development – Committee Invitation

Agreed: That the Committee team make arrangements for the Committee to attend the informal meeting and lunch.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Press release - Bands and individuals to benefit from the £1.1million Musical Instruments Programme
Department for Communities	Do you know someone who may be eligible for Pension Credit?
Department for Communities	Minister Lyons visits the Marine Gardens site in Bangor
Department for Communities	Updated Disability Action Plan 2025-30 and Consultation Outcome Report
Examiner of Statutory Rules	49th Report of The Examiner of Statutory Rules
Belfast Harbour	Belfast Harbour's Annual Festival Reception



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Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Laying of Retention and Disposal Schedule - Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland retention and disposal

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	The Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 (Commencement No. 18) (Abolition of Benefits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025
Minister for Communities	Oral Statement – Equality Commission NI Review of the Ulster Boxing Council
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Homelessness - Terminologies
Department for Communities	Press Release - Boxing is a Positive Force for Community Relations
Assembly Business Office	SR 2025/176 (C.3) The Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 (Commencement No. 18) (Abolition of Benefits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

7. SL1 – The Occupational Pension Schemes (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule specifies the revaluation percentages for preserved pension rights of members who leave a salary-related occupational pension scheme before pension age. The 2025 Order will apply to members reaching their scheme's normal pension age in 2026. The Order keeps preserved rights in line with price changes and maintains parity with GB.

The Department is required to follow the GB position and cannot set a different percentage for Northern Ireland. The Rule is intended to come into operation on 1 January 2026.

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



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request information in relation to plans to communicate with all relevant stakeholders impacted by the new percentage rate and to ask what particular action will be taken in relation to Northern Ireland specific issues.

8. Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board – Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for The Executive Office which had corresponded to confirm it was content with the schedule.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to approve the schedule.

9. Departmental Pre-introduction briefing on the Fraud, Error and Recovery Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting.

Mr David Tarr, Director, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making, Department for Communities

Ms Jennifer Gibb, G7, SSPLD, Fraud, Error & Recovery Bill, Department for Communities

Ms Julie Nelson, Director of Debt Management, Benefit Security, Child Maintenance NI, Department for Communities

Mr Mark Morrison, Acting Deputy Director Debt Management & Benefit Security, Department for Communities

Ms Donna Atkinson, G7, Public Authorities Fraud, Error and Recovery Project, Department for Communities

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

- Codes of Practice
- Eligibility Verification Markers
- Enforcement and Debt Recovery Process



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- Timeline for Bill
- Health and Safety of Civil Servants
- Parity Issue
- Equality Screening and Human Rights Compliance

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to raise concerns about whether there will be a sufficient window of time for effective Committee scrutiny of the Bill in the current mandate and any likely implications of breaking parity with GB should it not be progressed.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Head of the NI Civil Service to ask what, if any, consideration has been given to the Health and Safety of Civil Servants in relation to powers of entry and seizure in relation to the Bill, and to highlight the concerns of the Committee in relation to the Bill timeline and an appropriate timeframe for effective Committee scrutiny.

Agreed: That the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) is asked to provide detail on the passage of the Bill in Westminster and the approach being taken in other Devolved Nations.

The Chairperson advised Members that Agenda items 10 and 11 were both briefings in relation to the new or revised Partnership agreement, firstly from the Department and secondly from NICVA representatives.

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 11.34 a.m.

10. Departmental briefing on the Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and community sector

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting.

Mr Raymond Caldwell, Director Voluntary and Community Division; Chair of Joint Forum Public Sector Panel, Department for Communities

Ms Lorraine Gallagher, Head of Sectoral Policy and Engagement, Voluntary and Community Division, Department for Communities



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Ms Karen Smith, Head of Inclusion; (Chair of Joint Forum VCS Panel and Co-Chair of Joint Forum), Disability Action

Sian Mulholland rejoined the meeting at 11.38 a.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 11.45 a.m.

Andy Allen rejoined the meeting at 11.49 a.m.

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

- Evaluation Framework
- Co-Design Working Group
- Accountability for Non-Compliance
- Fair Funding Principles
- Budgeting Decisions

Pam Cameron joined the meeting at 12.02 p.m.

The Chairperson advised Members that Ms Karen Smith would remain for Agenda Item 11.

11. Briefing from NICVA on the Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and community sector

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting.

Mr Jonny Currie, Director of Policy and Insight, Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Association

Ms Karen Smith, Head of Inclusion; (Chair of Joint Forum VCS Panel and Co-Chair of Joint Forum), Disability Action

Ms Kathy Maguire, NICVA Policy Development Manager, Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Association

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



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- Joint Forum
- Partnership Agreement
- Co-Design Working Group
- Fair Funding Principles
- Funding and resources
- Annual Partnership Report
- Staff redundancies

Agreed: Having received both briefings, it was agreed that a letter is sent to the Department of Finance in relation to fair funding principles and to ask if all Departments are required to consider and apply these principles when submitting bids for funding for DoF.

The Chairperson informed Members that the next agenda item would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to be briefed by the Bill clerk.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to undertake informal deliberations on the Bill.

The meeting moved into closed session at 12.19 p.m.

Liz Marsh, Bill Clerk joined the meeting to address any queries during the informal deliberations.

12. Sign Language Bill – Committee deliberations on the clauses of the Bill

The Committee considered the Clause by Clause deliberations table which detailed all the comments and evidence received as part of Clauses 3 and 4 of its Sign Language Bill.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 12.54 p.m.

Members discussed both Clauses 3 and 4 of the Bill, and the range of stakeholder views and comments received.

The meeting resumed in open session at 1.21p.m. with the following Members present:



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Mr Colm Gildernew, Mr Andy Allen, Mrs Kellie Armstrong, Mr Maurice Bradley, Mrs Pam Cameron, Mr Mark Durkan, Mr Maolíosa McHugh, Mrs Sian Mulholland

Kellie Armstrong left the meeting at 1.23 p.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting clarification in relation to detail to be included in the Guidance and consideration of potential amendments to Clauses 3 and 4 of the Bill.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting that Departmental Officials attend the Committee meetings on 27 November and 11 December to discuss the Department's feedback on queries raised to date.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

14. Any other business

Sian Mulholland proposed that the Chairperson sends a letter of congratulations on behalf of the Committee, to Louise Gallagher, producer of Blue Lights television series, on receiving the Brian Waddell Award for Outstanding Contribution to Industry.

Agreed: That a letter of congratulations is sent to Louise Gallagher.

Mark Durkan raised concerns in relation to a press release from the Minister which had issued during the Committee meeting relating to investment in festive lighting across the Mid and East Antrim Council area.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request the following:

- The budget line from which this investment will be allocated
- Whether there is an application process for Councils, and if so, what the process entails
- If other Council areas will be able to avail of similar investment.

Mark Durkan also raised a concern in relation to the Rates Support Grant Judicial Review decision taken in court earlier in the week.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a written briefing on the planned course of action following the Court's decision.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 20 November 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.26 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities