



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 22 February 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 Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
- Mr Maolísa McHugh MLA

**Apologies:**

- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

**In Attendance:**

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

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



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### **1. Apologies**

Apologies are listed above.

### **2. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson informed Members that the Minister had been scheduled to brief the Committee at next week's meeting. However, due to the Executive meeting time being changed, he will no longer be able to attend.

The Department has confirmed that Colum Boyle, Permanent Secretary, will still attend to give an overview of DfC at the meeting, this will be followed over the subsequent 3 weeks with briefings by senior officials. The Minister will attend the Committee as soon as possible after these briefings have taken place (subject to Executive meeting schedule). The Chairperson also informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the Department's First Day Brief. This was intended for information only at this stage and would be considered in more detail at the meeting on 29 February.

The Chairperson informed Members that, immediately following last week's meeting, a request was lodged with the Department for officials to attend a meeting to brief on the Department's budget. The Department has confirmed that the Deputy Secretary of Corporate Services Group will be attending the Committee meeting on March 7 and the DfC Budget will be a core part of her briefing.

The Chair further informed Members that they had been provided with documents on the Budget Bill 2024. These documents were for information only at this stage and it was proposed that they would be considered again at the Departmental budget briefing on 7 March.

Due to the urgent need for the Bill to be progressed through accelerated passage earlier this week, The Chairperson spoke briefly in the second stage of the debate, making the point that Committee had not had any engagement



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or information relating to the Bill and expressing the need for clarity on the budget settlement, its impact on the Department for Communities, and an assurance of more timely processes in the future.

The Chairperson informed Members that they would receive a briefing from the Assembly Research Public Financial Scrutiny Unit in closed session at the end of the meeting and that this would be useful in advance of being briefed by Departmental officials on the budget in the coming weeks.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had been invited to attend an event, as Chairperson, in the Ardhoven Theatre Enniskillen as part of the Enniskillen Drama Festival.

### **3. Draft Minutes**

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 15 February 2024. The Chairperson asked the Clerk to clarify for Members where a correction was needed in the minutes in regards to the date and day of the meeting.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes subject to a minor amendment.

### **4. Correspondence**

Daniel McCrossan declared an interest as a Partner in White Strand Investments Limited, which owns premises for which a license is required.

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

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the status of ongoing work in relation to the different social strategies.



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*Agreed:* That NIFHA and NIHF are invited to brief the Committee at a future meeting.

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Department welcoming the commitment to bring forward the Sign Language Bill and to asking whether it is involved in any cross departmental work with the Department for Education in relation to the introduction of sign language on to the curriculum as a GCSE subject. The update should also include information on how the Department is proposing to engage with those members of the deaf community based in rural areas who may be harder to reach.

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Department seeking an update on the work it is carrying out in relation to welfare reform mitigations.

### **5. Examiner of Statutory Rules First Report**

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the Examiner of Statutory Rules First Report.

The Examiner drew the Committee's attention to the following rules for a breach of the 21-day rule:

- S.R. 2022/172: The Income-Related Benefits (Local Welfare Provision Disregard) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022
- S.R. 2022/177: The Child Support (Amendments Relating to Information) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022
- S.R. 2022/178: The Child Support (Amendments Relating to Electronic Communications) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022
- S.R. 2022/215: The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment (Temporary Increase) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022
- S.R. 2022/223: The Universal Credit (Administrative Earnings Threshold) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022



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- S.R 2023/086: The Social Fund Maternity and Funeral Expenses (General) and Social Security (Claims and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023

The Examiner was content that the Department had, on this occasion, provided a satisfactory explanation for the breaches.

The Examiner also drew attention to the following Rules which contained drafting errors:

- S.R. 2023/007: The Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 (revoked)
- S.R. 2023/117: The Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023

The Examiner reported that the Department had acknowledged the errors and made the appropriate corrections to S.R. 2023/117.

The Committee was content to note the report.

## 6. Statutory Rules

Andy Allen declared an interest as a private landlord and charity trustee.

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a private landlord.

Maolísa McHugh declared an interest as a member of Conradh na Gaeilge, Chairman of Naíscoil na Deirge Pre School.

Daniel McCrossan declared an interest as a company director.

Kellie Armstrong declared an interest as a member of the NILGOSC pension scheme.

The Chairperson informed members that the Committee needed to continue to work through a backlog of Statutory Rules (SRs) and that officials were in attendance to provide the Committee with a brief overview of each Rule before Members made their decision on the Rule.



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The Chairperson welcomed Colleen Bell and Gerard Flynn to the meeting to brief the Committee on **SR 2022/294 - The Charities (Edgehill Theological College Scheme) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022.**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2022/294 - The Charities (Edgehill Theological College Scheme) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 and has no objection to the rule.

**7. SR 2022/230 - The Social Security (Habitual Residence and Past Presence) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022**

The Chairperson welcomed Carol Reid to the meeting to brief the Committee on this SR.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/72 - The Licensing (Form of Licence) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**8. SR 2023/2 - The Housing Renovation etc. Grants (Grant Limit) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

The Chairperson welcomed Heloise Brown to the meeting to brief the Committee on this SR.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/2 - The Housing Renovation etc. Grants (Grant Limit) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Department seeking; -  
(i) clarification, in guidance, in relation to the application process for housing renovation grants (being per person or per application rather than per house) and,  
(ii) the terms of reference for the review of the legislation and



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(iii) clarification on whether the legislation can provide for the basic cost of fitting out a house after repairs have taken place as this can be a substantial sum.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 10.39a.m.

**9. SR 2023/48 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension to Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

The Chairperson welcomed Julie Broadway to the meeting to brief the Committee on the next set of SRs.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/48 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension to Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

**10. SR 2023/51 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension to Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/51 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension to Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) (No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

**11. SR 2023/140 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension to Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) (No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/140 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension to Provisions Relating to Local Authority Meetings) (No. 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.



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**12. SR 2023/78 - The Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/78 - The Local Government (Performance Indicators and Standards) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**13. SR 2023/81 - The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2023**

The Chairperson welcomed William Dobbin to the meeting who joined Julie Broadway to brief on the next 2 SRs.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/81 - The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**14. SR 2023/149 - The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

Brian Kingston declared an interest as a member of the NILGOSC pension scheme.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.





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**15. SR 2023/18 - The Tenancy Deposit Schemes (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

The Chairperson welcomed David Polley to the meeting to brief on the next set of SRs.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/18 - The Tenancy Deposit Schemes (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**16. SR 2023/19 - The Tenancy Information Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/19 - The Tenancy Information Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**17. SR 2023/104 - The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/104 - The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**18. SR 2023/189 - The Child Support (Management of Payments and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

The Chairperson welcomed David Tarr and Nicola Boyle to the meeting to brief on this SR.



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*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/189 - The Child Support (Management of Payments and Arrears) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

### **19. SR 2023/209 - The Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

The Chairperson welcomed Hayley Ward to the meeting who joined David Tarr to brief on the next set of SRs.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/209 - The Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and recommends that it is approved by the Assembly.

*Agreed:* The Departmental officials agreed to write back to the Committee to confirm whether or not all government pensions will be available on the dashboard well in advance of the connection deadline of 31 October 2026. The officials also agreed to confirm if work can be done in relation to people who may work in the EU but reside in Northern Ireland to ensure that their pension schemes will be accessible on the dashboards. The Committee also agreed to emphasise to the Department the need to publicise the availability and location of the dashboards to ensure that anyone who is a member of an occupational pension scheme is aware of this service.

### **20. SR 2023/158 - The Occupational Pension Schemes (Administration, Investment, Charges and Governance) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

The Departmental officials informed Members that they intended to revoke this Rule and relay it, therefore no decision was required on the Rule. The Committee would receive a proposal for secondary legislation in the coming weeks on this issue.



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The Committee agreed with this approach.

**21. SR 2022/300 - The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2022/300 - The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 and has no objection to the rule.

**22. SR 2023/22 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/22 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule."

**23. SR 2023/29 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/29 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**24. SR 2023/41 - The Pension Protection Fund (Compensation) and Occupational Pension Schemes (Fraud Compensation Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**



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*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/41 - The Pension Protection Fund (Compensation) and Occupational Pension Schemes (Fraud Compensation Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, has no objection to the rule.

**25. SR 2023/193 - The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/193 - The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**26. SR 2022/297 - The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2022/297 - The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 and has no objection to the rule.

**27. SR 2022/298 - The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (Northern Ireland) 2022**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2022/298 - The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 and has no objection to the rule.



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**28. SR 2023/194 - The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/194 - The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**29. SR 2023/195 - The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/195 - The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

**30. SR 2022/301 - The Pensions (2005 Order) (Disclosure of Restricted Information by the Pensions Regulator) (Amendment of Specified Persons) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2022/301 - The Pensions (2005 Order) (Disclosure of Restricted Information by the Pensions Regulator) (Amendment of Specified Persons) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022 and has no objection to the rule.

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Department asking;-

(i) if anyone who is a member of an EU pension scheme will be able to access that information on the dashboards without a reciprocal agreement in place, and

(ii) whether individuals have been made aware of the need for them to expressly disclose information in order to facilitate the pensions dashboard functions, and

(ii) whether there are any GDPR implications in relation to this.



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**31. SR 2023/4 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2023/4 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and has no objection to the rule.

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Minister asking him to make representations to the Chancellor to ensure that housing benefit rates remain under active consideration on an annual basis as this hasn't always been the case.

*Agreed:* That a letter is sent to the Work and Pensions Committee in Westminster asking whether it has ongoing communication with the Department for Work and Pensions in relation to housing benefit annual increases and whether that committee has been calling for increases and is supportive of the call for annual increases.

**32. SR 2024/3 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024**

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/3 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.

*Agreed:* That the Department writes to the Committee to confirm the Local Housing Allowance rate for 2024.



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The Chairperson thanked the officials for attending the meeting to assist with the consideration of the SRs.

The Chairperson informed members that the same process will be followed at next week's meeting when it was hoped that the backlog of SRs would be cleared.

### **33.SL1 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2024**

*Agreed:* The Committee was content for the Department to make the Rule.

### **34.SL1 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024**

*Agreed:* The Committee was content for the Department to make the Rule.

### **35.SL1 - The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2024**

*Agreed:* The Committee was content for the Department to make the Rule.

### **36.Forward work programme**

The Chairperson informed Members that, at the meeting on 29 February 2024, the Committee will be briefed by the Departmental Permanent Secretary and by RalSe in relation to the departmental portfolio as part of horizon scanning for the development of its Forward Work Programme.



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### **37. Any other business**

Brian Kingston informed the Chairperson that he would not be present at the meeting on 29 February 2024.

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

The next meeting will take place on Thursday 29 February 2024 at 10.00a.m. in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 11.48a.m.

The meeting went into closed session at 12.01p.m.

### **39. Briefing by RalSe Public Financial Scrutiny Unit on NI Public Finance Framework and NI Executive Budget policy and practice**

*The following members were present for the closed session: Colm Gildernew, Ciara Ferguson, Andy Allen, Maurice Bradley, Brian Kingston, Maolísa McHugh, Kellie Armstrong*

Eileen Regan and Rachel Keyes from RalSe briefed the Committee and answered Members' questions on the NI Public Finance Framework and NI Executive Budget policy and practice.

The Chairperson thanked the RalSe officials for their comprehensive briefing.

The meeting ended at 1.00p.m.

**Colm Gildernew MLA**

**Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Communities**