



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 3 July 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
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

In Attendance:

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



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The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02a.m.

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew	Member of Public Accounts Committee Private Sector Landlord Secretary, Brantry Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann. Committee Member, Achadh Lú Gaelic Football Club Director, Willowbank Organic Producers Limited. Director, Willowbank Limited
Brian Kingston	Member of Committee for the Executive Office Director and Company Secretary, Argyll Business Centre
Maurice Bradley	Irish Football Association board member
Andy Allen	Trade Union member Paralympic Pathway sport Charity trustee Private Sector Landlord
Daniel McCrossan	Member, St Colmcilles GAA Chairperson, Public Accounts Committee
Kellie Armstrong	Member of Deaf Community

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.05a.m.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.



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3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson raised the issue of tabled correspondence from the Department and put on record the importance of the Department following agreed protocols regarding the timing of papers arriving with the Committee for it to carry out its scrutiny and support function effectively.

The Chairperson noted the following in anticipation of summer recess:

Freedom of Information requests

Agreed: That Members agree to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson on submitting views on the releasing or withholding of information relating to non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee.

Correspondence

Agreed: That Members are content that any urgent matters are dealt with via correspondence during the recess period.

Agreed: That Members are also content to consider papers twice over the summer in order to better facilitate the first meeting in September.

End of Session Reports

Members will consider the 2024/25 End of Session Report in September 2025. Once agreed, the report will be published providing a record of the activities of the committee.

The Chairperson noted that the Second Stage vote on the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill took place on Tuesday in the House of Commons and drew attention to the key 'concession' offered by the British Government to lessen the risk of a Second Stage rejection of the bill. This involved potential changes to the implementation of the PIP eligibility criteria pending the findings of the ongoing review.



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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 26 June 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

The Chairperson informed members that the minutes of this meeting will be signed off, as usual, at the next formal meeting of the Committee in September.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 10.10a.m.

5. Matters Arising

Committee Arts Report – suggested clarifications from Department for Communities

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the suggested revised wording. This report will be published and distributed to stakeholders who gave evidence.

Joint briefing request for DfC and the DoF on the Children's Services Co-Operation Act

Agreed: That a letter is sent to DoF seeking their attendance at the proposed joint meeting.

Department for Communities - Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy Briefing

Agreed: That Committee staff contact the Department to arrange a date for a future briefing session.

Housing Executive - Financial Provisions Bill and Tenancy Fraud Policy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask if it can provide more information on the type and level of penalties for tenancy fraud imposed to date and for the range of fines available for tenancy fraud.



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Proposal to Disregard Compensation Payments made by the Mother and Baby Rof Institutions
Head of the Civil Service on behalf of The Executive Office	Housing Strategy, Wastewater Infrastructure and Anti-Poverty Strategy

The Committee noted the following tabled items:

Source	Subject Matter
National Museums NI	Collections Development Policy
Department for Communities	Green Paper Pathways to Work
Department for Communities	Fresh Start Programmes and Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime
Department for Communities	Intermediate Rent - Departmental Briefing
Department for Communities	Social Inclusion Strategies
Department for Work and Pensions	Joint Committee Letter - Pathways to Work

6. Correspondence

Individual - Benefit Fraud

Agreed: That the Committee seeks comment from the Department before considering this issue further.

Individual - Riverside Theatre, Coleraine

Agreed: That a copy of the correspondence is forwarded to the Department for comment.



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Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry Construction Employers Federation Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations - position paper on Wastewater infrastructure and correspondence to Minister for Infrastructure

Agreed: That a copy of the correspondence is forwarded to the Committee for Infrastructure for comment.

Housing Executive - Review of (NIHE Administered) private sector grants update

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask if a standardised approach will be taken on awarding and managing private sector grants.

Child maintenance: improving the collection and transfer of payments – UK government response to public consultation

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for an update on its role in this issue and to ask when the changes will come into effect.

The Committee agreed a change to the agenda order to facilitate both the Ministerial briefing and the Department briefing on June Monitoring.

Daniel McCrossan returned to the meeting at 10.21a.m.

7. Ministerial Briefing

The Chairperson welcomed the Minister, Gordon Lyons MLA, to the meeting along with the following officials:

Colum Boyle, Permanent Secretary

Emer Morelli, Deputy Secretary, Engaged Communities Group

Mark O'Donnell, Deputy Secretary, Housing Sustainability Group

John Greer, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services Group



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

- Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Benefit fraud and error
- Benefit changes and the potential impact on Northern Ireland
- Irish Language Strategy
- Housing
- Casement Park redevelopment
- Northern Ireland Football Fund
- Upcoming legislation

Agreed: That the Department will provide the Committee with further information on the following:

- Plans for the reinstatement of the winter fuel payment
- Rehousing arrangements for those affected by recent civil unrest
- Legislation timetable
- Funding for instruments

Agreed: That the organisers of Orangefest are invited to brief on their work at a future meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a copy of the criteria for applications to the Community Infrastructure Fund and for clarification on whether local sports clubs can apply for funding.

Agreed: That the Department provides the Committee with a copy of the Disability Strategy as soon as it is available.

The Committee agreed a brief suspension at 11.40am.

The meeting resumed in public session at 11.49a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Nicola Brogan, Brian Kingston, Daniel McCrossan, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Maurice Bradley, Maolíosa McHugh



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8. Departmental Briefing by on the June Monitoring Round

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

John Greer, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services Group

Cherrie Arnold, Finance Director

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

- The bid for additional funds for housing
- Bid to combat fraud and error
- Disability facilities grant
- Availability of public land for housing
- Increased National Insurance contributions
- Financial consequence of staff vacancies
- Funding for Arm's Length Bodies

Agreed: That the Department will report back to the Committee with further information on asset transfers.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to DWP to ask if it has considered the ramifications of the Universal Credit and Personal Independence Payment Bill leading to a break in parity between Northern Ireland and GB on PIP assessment and, if so, to ask what mitigations it plans to introduce.

9. Correspondence

The Committee returned to the consideration of correspondence.



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Pivotal	Policy delivery in Northern Ireland - research report
Committee for Finance	Northern Ireland Fiscal Council Bill - request for views
Committee for Finance	Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill - committee scrutiny of Clauses 12 and 13
Committee for the Executive Office	Survivors of historical institutional abuse and social housing applications
Department for Communities	Proposal to disregard Republic of Ireland Mother and Baby Institutions compensation payments when calculating benefit entitlement
Clerk to Committee for Finance	All Statutory Committees: 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn information
Department for Communities	Laying of the NSLB 2022 Annual Report + Accounts
Clerk to Committee for The Executive Office	Clerk to all Committees: Inquiry Mother + Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries & Workhouses Redress Scheme Bill
Equality Commission	Paper on Supreme Court Ruling - Gender Recognition Certificates
Examiner of Statutory Rules	42nd Report Of the Examiner of Statutory Rules



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Source	Summary of content
Individual	Correspondence with Clerk to Committee for Justice
Tourism Northern Ireland	Corporate Hospitality invite - Friday 18th July - The 153rd Open
Strategic Investment Board	Assembly Committee Report

The Committee noted the following tabled item:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	The Executive Office Truth Recovery Redress Scheme - Disregard of Payments for Social Security Benefits

10. SL1 - Social security - Claims and payments and electronic communications

The Chairperson noted concerns regarding the late arrival and general sense of rush that seems to precede notices of upcoming Statutory Rules.

Agreed: Members agreed to consider the four SL1s / notices of upcoming Statutory Rules.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to both the Department and DWP to reiterate the need for due process and transparency to allow the Committee to fulfil its scrutiny function.

The Chairperson informed members that these proposed regulations amend the Social Security (Claims and Payments) Regulations (NI) 1987 ("the 1987 Regulations"), to allow for a claim to Industrial Injuries Benefit to be made via telephone.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule but seeks confirmation that the move to electronic communication will not stop those who need in person communication from being able to get it. The



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Committee feels that, given the nature of these benefits, the widest possible access is vital. The Committee considers that a move to electronic communications should also include provision for the use of text phone.

11. SL1 - The Social Security (Habitual Residency Past Presence and Temporary Absence) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed members that these proposed regulations amend the 1987 Regulations to provide for claims to Industrial Injuries Benefit and Employment and Support Allowance to be made electronically and for communications connected with awards of both benefits to be made electronically.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule but seeks clarity on the Department's comments that the DWP regulations are being made by 'urgent procedure'.

12. SL1 - Social Security (Habitual Residence and Past Presence, and Temporary Absence) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed members that these proposed regulations are required to social security legislation to facilitate access to benefits for people coming here as a result of a crisis situation abroad. The proposed Regulations also provide for continued benefit payments for existing claimants who are stranded overseas due to such a crisis.

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



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13. SL1 – Reinstatement of Winter Fuel Payments

The Chairperson informed members that the return of Winter Fuel Payments to many, though not all, pensioners: individuals with an income of £35,000 or above will have their payment automatically recovered by HMRC.

The truncated timeline means that it is unlikely that the department will be able to afford the Communities Committee the opportunity to scrutinise the draft Statutory Rule before it comes into operation.

The Chairperson reminded members, however, that the Committee will still have 30 days or 10 sitting days (whichever is longer) to consider the SR following it being laid with the Assembly. Furthermore, if time is available, the Committee will expect to have the time and space to scrutinise the draft Winter Fuel Payment SR in detail.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule but requests further information on whether the money recovered by HMRC from individuals with an income of £35,000 or above will be retained by Treasury or returned to the Northern Ireland block grant.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 12.25p.m.

14. Briefing by Irish Men's Sheds Association

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Enda Egan: CEO, Irish Men's Shed Association

Ben Nolan: Communications Manager, Irish Men's Shed Association

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

- Funding arrangements in Northern Ireland
- Capacity building
- The impact of the loss of EU funding
- Advice and support for those interested in starting a Men's Shed



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Agreed: That the Irish Men's Sheds Association provides the Committee with information on social return on investment

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Health, copied to SOLACE and the Department for Communities to support the Men's Shed Association calls for the following:

- £3,000 annual sustainability grant per shed
- Funding for Sheds for Life and local staff positions
- Policy recognition of Men's Sheds as a proven community health and wellbeing model
- Advice and guidance to help further embed sheds into community planning and development
- To provide advice for all Men's Shed Groups to apply for potential funding opportunities

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Health to state that, when it comes to social prescription, the Committee feels that this needs to be aligned with proper funding and support.

15. Forward Work Programme

The committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

The Chairperson informed members that the Forward Work Programme will be revisited after summer recess and the Clerk will provide an outline strategic plan and draft priorities for review and agreement based on the exercise which Committee undertook during its last planning session.

16. Any other business

The Chairperson thanked the Committee team for their hard work over the session.



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The Chairperson stated that he believed the Committee had undertaken some very important work and involved itself in important conversations, for example on the subjects of benefit reform and the pressures facing the arts sector.

17. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 11 September 2025, in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings when the Committee will have an evidence session on the Sign Language Bill from Deaf Interpreters NI.

The Chairperson wished members a good summer break.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.04p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities