



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 8 January 2026

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

**Present:** Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)  
Ms Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson) (via Zoom)  
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA  
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA  
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)  
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA  
Mr Mark Durkan MLA  
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA (via Zoom)  
Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

**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)



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

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

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - Charity trustee, private sector landlord, Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness.

Andy Allen – Charity trustee, private sector landlord.

Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community, Chairperson of the Committee for Procedures.

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

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

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.

Mark Durkan – Licensed Premise owned by family, Member of GAA.

### **2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

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

The Chairperson welcomed Members back following the Christmas recess period and wished them a Happy New Year.

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development meeting which took place on 17 December 2025. He further thanked the Joint Committee for the invite and hosting the Committee for Communities.



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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 11 December 2025.

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

### 5. Matters Arising

#### **Department for Communities - Change to Departmental Logo**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department welcoming the information received and to further request:

- The genesis of the review
- The economic or business case for the review and for a copy of the EQIA undertaken
- The full cost of the review – to include the costs for digital branding, digital content
- Clarity in relation to how “appropriate” will be decided and by whom
- Why the minutes of meetings provided to the Committee were so heavily redacted and for unredacted copies to be provided

#### **Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Acquisition of 600 Housing Units for Temporary Accommodation**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive requesting the number of homes purchased to date.

#### **Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service - Fraud and Error Recovery Bill**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting detail of any costs which will be associated with engaging the Police Service Northern Ireland officers in risk assessments and operations associated with implementation of actions stemming from the Bill.

**First Housing - Specific Services which may no longer be able to be provided as a consequence of the constrained budget;**



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### **MACS: Supporting Children and Young People - Specific services which may no longer be able to be provided as a consequence of the constrained budget**

**Agreed:** That the items of correspondence and detail are included in the Committee's mini-report on Homelessness and Supporting People.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to request details of any action currently being taken in relation to prospective job losses and the continued delivery of services in light of the information provided.

### **Department for Communities - Independent Review Liquor Licensing**

**Agreed:** That the Committee Team liaise with the DALO to schedule a future briefing following completion of the review.

### **Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Strategic Needs Assessment**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting further detail on the Supporting People Modernisation Project and a projected timeframe for its completion.

### **Department for Work and Pensions - Independent report into Review of Carer's Allowance Overpayments**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting detailed figures on how many individuals in Northern Ireland are likely to be impacted.

### **Lisburn and Castlereagh Council - Anti-Poverty Strategy briefing: request for all Councils briefing**

**Agreed:** That a briefing with all Councils in relation to the Anti-Poverty Strategy is scheduled for 5 March 2026.

### **Department for Communities - Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy Consultation**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to express concerns about the absence of opportunity for Committee oversight of the work of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Board and to:

- Request copies of minutes of the meetings of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Board
- Clarify whether the meetings of the Board are open to the public



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- Note that the details of membership of the Board provided include Senior Civil Servants alone and consequently to ask how the co-design element of the approach will be ensured
- Ask what communications the Department is planning in relation to the Benefit Cap, the 2 Child Limit and welfare mitigations, considering the forthcoming removal of the 2 Child Limit for Universal Credit.

### **Department for Communities - Benefit Fraud and Error – Minister for Communities interview on Good Morning Ulster 28 Nov 2025**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting the following information:

- How much is currently being spent on FER by the Department
- Has a full cost-benefit analysis been undertaken in relation to Fraud and Error work
- Whether agreement has been reached with HM Treasury re level of recovered funds and fines which would be applied to NI
- Whether funds to be directed to NI would be hypothecated
- is there a plan for where any FER savings would be allocated within the Department (e.g. social house building) and what process would be used

### **Department for Communities - Building Safety Policy**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting information on the frequency of the Building Safety checks and where this regulatory responsibility sits.

### **Department for Communities - Festive Lighting Funding - Mid and East Antrim**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting a list of the Department's Development Offices and a breakdown of funds applied for by each Council.

### **Department for Communities - Freedom of Information Requests – request for breakdown of those processed**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting a breakdown of FOI requests by year, for the previous ten years.



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**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Speaker copying this letter and highlighting concerns in relation to the timeliness of responses from the Department to individual Members.

### **Department for Communities - Funding provided to disabled sports clubs and teams**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department highlighting the Committee's concerns of timeliness of communication to organisations regarding the availability of funds.

### **Department for Communities - Guidance to Arm's Length Bodies re published materials**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting a copy of the accessible guidance issued to Arm's Length Bodies.

### **Department for Communities - UK Town of Culture 2028 and UK City of Culture 2029**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting assurance that in future, the Committee be informed of relevant events in a more timely manner.

### **Department for Communities - The Northern Ireland Football Fund briefing: when officials last received briefings or information covering the intersection between the operation of the sub judice rule and the Committee's statutory right to request information**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what experience and qualifications the individuals undertaking the assessment for the scoring matrix had. The Committee further requests information on whether or not officials receive training in relation to the provision of essential information to the Committee in the context of *potential* litigation and the statutory powers of the Committee.

### **Department for Communities - DWP Universal Credit Bill**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department seeking clarification on why the specific impact assessments specific to Northern Ireland are not being undertaken and formally advising that these be undertaken immediately and that Committee be provided with the reports for each.



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The Committee noted the following items:

| Source                     | Subject Matter                                                                                          |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Department of Finance      | Partnership Agreement between Government and Voluntary and Community Sector and Fair Funding Principles |
| Department of Finance      | Ring Fencing of Rates Support Grant                                                                     |
| Department for Communities | Rates Support Grant                                                                                     |
| Co-Ownership               | Property Value Limit                                                                                    |
| Department of Finance      | Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland)                                                 |
| Department for Communities | Budgetary overplanning process                                                                          |
| Department for Communities | Funding Announcements and Budget Planning – standardised formatted breakdown request                    |
| Department for Communities | Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, etc.,) Redress Bill                                              |
| Department for Communities | National Museums NI – Anonymous Letter                                                                  |
| Department for Communities | SL1 – The Occupational Pension Schemes (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025                      |
| Department for Communities | JobStart Scheme: Council Area Data                                                                      |
| Department for Communities | Statutory Instrument - amendments to Social Security Legislation                                        |
| Department for Communities | UK Shared Prosperity Fund                                                                               |

## 6. Correspondence

### **Executive Information Service - Deaths of Homeless People NI 2024**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department in relation to the SWEP Protocol and to ask what procedures have been put in place to ensure that the Protocol does not fail individuals again.



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**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive requesting a geographical breakdown for the 58 deaths and any additional information in relation to vulnerabilities (addiction, dual-diagnosis, geographical displacement) and whether NISRA records any wider information relevant to those individuals deaths.

### **Advice NI - Removal of 2 Child Benefit Limit**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting responses to the specific questions asked by Advice NI and to request assurance that any additional changes as a consequence of ongoing legislative drafting (relating to benefit mitigations) will not further impact individuals affected by the removal of the two child Benefit Limit.

### **Assembly Engagement - Balmoral Show 2026**

**Agreed:** That the Clerk and Committee Team consider potential agenda items and express an interest on behalf of the Committee to hold a Committee meeting at the Balmoral Show.

### **British Deaf Association - Offer by British Deaf Association of an informal session on the Sign Language Bill with Committee Members**

**Agreed:** That Members liaise individually with the British Deaf Association should they wish to discuss any further Bill amendments.

### **Assembly Business Office - Child Maintenance Service Annual Report 24-25**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting additional information to include:

- Data on number of complaints received
- How complaints are dealt with
- How complaints which involve communication and information sharing between parties with shared involvement in Child Maintenance disputes are handled

### **Assembly Communications - BBC Radio Ulster Nolan Show Transcript - Fraud and Error Recovery Bill**



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**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department outlining Committee's support for tackling fraud and to express Members' concerns in relation to:

- publishing names alongside geographical area involves reputational risk and potential harm where more common names are published, impacting on peoples' lives
- the use of language and the potential for the language used to impact negatively on working individuals in receipt of benefits and legitimate benefit claimants, and
- the impact of describing individual case examples in the media (as a consequence of a Committee Member being contacted following the radio programme) and to urge caution in relation to the level of detail shared with the media.

### **Department for Communities - Welfare Supplementary Payments Annual Report 2024-25**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department information on what monitoring is currently in place in relation to Transitional Protection to ensure claimants are not adversely affected and to reiterate the need for the Department to bring forward legislation in the current mandate to avoid a future cliff-edge for welfare mitigations.

### **David Honeyford MLA - Request for Committee Evidence on Tollymore National Outdoor Centre Closure**

**Agreed:** That a briefing from relevant stakeholders is scheduled for a future meeting.

### **Department for Communities - HM Treasury Legislative Amendments to Child Support and Pensions Regulations**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting that the Committee is afforded the opportunity of scrutiny, receiving a brief when Regulations are made and laid in Westminster and to seek clarification on why the usual approach to bring forward NI Regulations is not being followed.



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**Minister of Finance - Written Ministerial Statement - Minister of Finance -  
Proposed Draft Budget 2026-29-30**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department requesting the information provided by DoF in the draft allocation and requesting the Minister's position on the draft multi-year Budget.

The Committee noted the following items:

| Source                                   | Summary of content                                                                                      |
|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Executive Information Service            | Statistics from the Northern Ireland Substance Misuse Database 2024 - 25                                |
| Executive Information Service            | Junior Ministers use London events to reaffirm Executive's commitment to economic growth and prosperity |
| Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission | Annual Statement 2025                                                                                   |
| Executive Information Service            | Appointment to the Historic Monuments Council                                                           |
| Assembly Business Office                 | UK Sports Council - Grant-in-Aid and National Lottery Distribution Fund                                 |
| Executive Information Service            | Make the Call Wraparound Service generates over £63million in benefits                                  |
| Individual                               | Waiver of tuition fees for Students in 2020                                                             |
| Department for Communities               | Housing Supply Strategy briefing                                                                        |
| Assembly Business Office                 | British Film Institute Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25                                               |
| Assembly Business Office                 | UK Anti-Doping 2024-25 Annual Report                                                                    |
| Assembly Business Office                 | Annual Report Accounts - Arts Council of Northern Ireland                                               |



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| Source                                                    | Summary of content                                                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Executive Information Service                             | Young People's Attitudes to Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Northern Ireland 2025                           |
| Department for Communities                                | Notice to Quit EQIA report and consultation - Private Tenancies                                            |
| Executive Information Service                             | Probation order for benefit fraud at Londonderry Magistrates' Court                                        |
| Executive Information Service                             | Appointment to the Board of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland                                           |
| Assembly Business Office                                  | Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25                                      |
| Department for Communities and Department for the Economy | Changes in relation to Departmental Responsibilities: Broadcasting-Related Matters                         |
| Department for Communities                                | Update on the Timms Review of Personal Independence Payments                                               |
| Executive Information Service                             | Communities Minister launches Consultation on Notice to Quit Periods                                       |
| Construction Employers Federation                         | Press release: Agreement of NI Executive multi-year budget fundamental to construction industry confidence |
| Assembly Communications                                   | Press clippings – 03 January 2026                                                                          |

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 Clerk Assistant.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to move into closed session to receive procedural advice.



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The meeting moved into closed session at 11.03a.m.

Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant joined the meeting to provide Procedural Advice and address any queries.

### **7. Legislative Consent Motion - Universal Credit (Removal Of Two Child Limit) Bill: Procedural Advice**

Cathy Mason joined the meeting at 11.05a.m.

The Chairperson welcomed the following official to the meeting:

Paul Gill – Clerk Assistant, Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

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

- LCM Process and Procedures
- Standing Orders
- Committee Scrutiny and role of the Assembly

Mark Durkan left the meeting at 11.25a.m

The meeting resumed in open session at 11.30a.m. with the following Members present: Mr Colm Gildernew, Ms Cathy Mason, Mr Andy Allen, Mrs Kellie Armstrong, Mr Maurice Bradley, Mrs Pam Cameron, Mr Maolíosa McHugh and Mrs Sian Mulholland.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities to remind him of the requirement to act in accordance with the requirements of Standing Order 42A and highlight that it is for the Assembly as a whole to provide consent, after the Committee has reported.

**Agreed:** That the letter is copied to the Speaker and the Chairpersons' Liaison Group for information.



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### **8. SL1 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule is an annual Order under the Social Security Administration (NI) Act to implement the 2026-27 up-rating of social security benefits, pensions and specified lump sums.

It is the principal instrument in the up-rating package and sets the rates for contributory and non-contributory benefits, and the premia and additions that form part of the income-related benefits. The Rule is intended to commence on 1 April 2026.

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

### **9. SL1 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule would will form part of the 2026 up-rating package and are made in consequence of the principal Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (NI) 2026. The Regulations are replicated each year to ensure the correct, practical implementation of the increased rates set by the Up-rating Order. The Rule is intended to commence at the beginning of April 2026.

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

### **10. SL1 - The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Chairperson informed Members that the rule is proposed under the Mesothelioma, etc., Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 as part of the 2026–27 annual up-rating package. The Rule will increase by 3.8% the lump-sum amounts payable under the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments Scheme, aligning with the April 2026 up-rating of industrial injuries benefits. The Rule is intended to commence on 1 April 2026.

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



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### **11. SL1 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Chairperson informed Members that the Rule is proposed under the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Northern Ireland) Order 1979. It forms part of the 2026–27 annual up-rating package and will increase by 3.8% the lump-sum amounts payable under the 1979 Scheme, in line with the up-rating of industrial injuries benefits. The Rule is intended to commence on 1 April 2026.

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

### **12. SL1 - The Universal Credit (Transitional Provisions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

Mark Durkan rejoined the meeting at 11.38a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule would amend the Universal Credit (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (NI) 2016 under powers in the Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015 to support completion of the managed migration from legacy benefits to Universal Credit (UC) by end of March 2026.

The amendments address two issues that could otherwise leave some claimants without the transitional protection (TP) that keeps them financially whole at the point of transfer. The Rule is intended to commence on 29 January 2026.

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

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Law Centre requesting their considered views in relation to Transitional Provisions.

**Agreed:** That the Department is requested to provide a briefing on the breakdown of Transitional Provisions and the move to Universal Credit.

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.



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**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to move into closed session to undertake consideration of the Bill Clerks drafts of amendments of the Bill.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11.42 a.m.

Liz Marsh, Bill Clerk joined the meeting to address any queries during the consideration of draft amendments.

### **13. Sign Language Bill – Consideration of the Bill Clerks draft amendments**

The Committee considered the Clause by Clause table and further information received from the Department alongside the draft amendments provided by the Bill Clerk.

The meeting resumed in open session at 11.57 a.m. with all Members present.

### **14. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

### **15. Any other business**

There was no other business.

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

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 15 January 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson informed Members that the final agenda item would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to be briefed by the Clerk on Committee Strategic Planning.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to move into closed session to undertake consideration of the Committees' Strategic Priorities.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11.59a.m.



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## 17. Strategic Planning

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo on the Review and Refresh of Committee's Strategic Priorities.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.34p.m.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to revert to the Clerk with top 3 priorities for the remainder of the current mandate.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to provide a written summary of the Committee's concerns to the Speaker, Chairpersons' Liaison Group and Clerk Assistants highlighting;

- Committee time remaining in the mandate
- List of Executive Bills yet to be introduced
- Number of Potential Members' Bills which could be referred to the Committee
- Requirement for the Committee to have adequate time to be able to undertake fulsome consultation and scrutiny of forthcoming legislation
- Committee preference to adhere to a 12 week period in its Calls for Evidence, particularly if the call spans the summer / recess months.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.43p.m.

**Colm Gildernew MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**