



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 14 March 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 Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance:

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



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The meeting commenced in open session at 10.05 a.m.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he had attended the Enniskillen Drama Festival last week and would like to thank all those involved in organising a great event.

He further stated that the value that the arts brings to our communities cannot be underestimated, in a broad range of ways, from promoting social connections to supporting and developing local talent and that it's important that we try to support the arts in all its forms when we possibly can.

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.07a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Child Poverty and that this was an issue of concern that the Committee needed to keep on its agenda.

The Chairperson informed Members that it was also Young Carers' Action Day on 13 March and he wanted to acknowledge the work that they carry out and the pressure and extra barriers that they face.



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3. Matters Arising

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to welfare reform mitigations. The Chairperson expressed his disappointment with the extent of the detail in the response which did not include any costs or timescales.

Agreed: That a further letter is sent to the Department;

- i. seeking more specific information in relation to timeframes for the updating work;
- ii. seeking a plan which sets out the next steps relating to the Independent Panel's recommendations;
- iii. to ask the Department how many staff are working on the welfare mitigation review work; and
- iv. to ask if work is also being undertaken to identify the costs of **not** extending the mitigations.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to progressing sign language legislation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department;

- i. seeking clarification on whether the Minister is liaising with the Minister for Education in relation to plans to bring forward appropriate numbers of teachers of sign language; and
- ii. asking whether consideration has been given to the qualification that would be required in order to teach; specifically, whether it would be a qualified teacher who had signing experience; or
- iii. whether existing qualified signers would be required to acquire a teaching qualification.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply to Committee queries on Local Housing Allowance rates.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a private landlord.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department asking that the Committee is provided with any updates on this matter that the Department receives from the Department for Work and Pensions.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to gambling legislation. The Chairperson expressed disappointment with the reply which did not give any indication of the extent of work ongoing or any timescales.

Agreed: That a further letter is sent to the Department to ask what stage the next steps of reform have reached and an indication of whether this Committee should plan to receive the 300+ clause Bill in the next 2-3 years.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 7 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.

5. Correspondence

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed the correspondence memo as drafted.



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6. Briefing by Deputy Secretary of Operational Delivery Group

The following officials joined the meeting:

Brenda Henderson – Deputy Secretary

Leonora McLaughlin - Director - Pensions, Disability, Benefit Security & Debt

Gareth Kelly - Director - Child Maintenance Service, DWP Services, Make the Call

The Deputy Secretary outlined the main priorities of the Operational Delivery Group.

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were staff vacancies, benefit fraud rates, child maintenance compliance, Make the Call, the Universal Credit Contingency Fund, Personal Independence Payment, cyber security and the Northern Ireland Public Services Report (NIPSO) – PIP and the value of further evidence.

Agreed: The officials agreed to provide the Committee with further information in writing in relation to a number of queries which Members raised; specifically

- i. An update on the level of benefit fraud;
- ii. A list of the disability consultative fora / organisations;
- iii. a breakdown of the number of people with a debt to be paid back as a result of official errors in relation to benefits;
- iv. an update on the progress of ongoing work to implement the recommendations of the NIPSO report on PIP;
- v. the individual numbers affected by mitigation payments being made straight to a housing body or landlord rather than to the individual; and
- vi. a timeframe for when the review of welfare reform mitigations will be undertaken.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.



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7. Briefing by Deputy Secretary of Work and Health Group

The following officials joined the meeting:

Paddy Rooney – Deputy Secretary

Deirdre Ward - Director - Work & Wellbeing Division

Jacqui Montgomery - Director – Universal Credit Operations

Conrad McConnell - Director – Universal Credit Programme and working Age Services

The Deputy Secretary outlined the main priorities of the Engaged Communities Group.

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were the migration to Universal Credit, staff vacancies, Discretionary Support, benefit fraud reduction and Jobstart.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for the following:

- i. a copy of the annual report on benefit fraud
- ii. how information is shared between the Department for Communities and the Department for Work and Pensions in relation to benefit error and fraud
- iii. information on the barriers to uptake for all the support programmes the Department is responsible for
- iv. whether there has been any economic analysis of the benefit of the range of employment support programmes

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.



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8. Briefing by Advice NI on Social Policy

The following representative joined the meeting:

Kevin Higgins, Head of Policy, Advice NI

The representative briefed the Committee on Social Policy.

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were the migration to Universal Credit, benefit sanctions, Make the Call, healthcare costs and welfare reform mitigations.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for briefing the Committee.

9. Departmental briefing on Legislative Consent Motion – The Pensions (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill 2024

The following officials joined the meeting:

David Tarr (Director, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making)

Hayley Ward (Policy lead)

The officials briefed the Committee on the Legislative Consent Motion.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

10. Departmental briefing on Coronavirus Act 2020 Section 78 (local authority meetings) Statutory Rules

The following officials joined the meeting:



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Anthony Carleton (Director, Local Government Policy)

Julie Broadway (Policy lead)

The officials briefed the Committee on the Coronavirus Act 2020 Section 78 (local authority meetings) Statutory Rules.

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were when the new subordinate legislation will be brought forward, an explanation of the calculation of the 40 days applied to the most recent Rule and liaison with Council Chief Executives in relation to new subordinate legislation required to support hybrid meetings going forward.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a written explanation of its 40-day calculation for the most recent Rule.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 12.43p.m.

11. S.R. 2024/39 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (General Levy) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered S.R. 2024/39 The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (General Levy) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 and, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the Rule.



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12. SR 2024/46 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Specified Diseases and Prescribed Occupations) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided in their tabled papers with a copy of the latest report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Examiner had drawn attention to a minor drafting error in regulation 2(1) of the Regulations "1998" should read "1988".

The Department has acknowledged this minor error and confirmed that it will issue a correction slip at the earliest opportunity. The Examiner has therefore confirmed that she is content with this approach.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/46 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Specified Diseases and Prescribed Occupations) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and recommends that it is approved by the Assembly.

13. SR 2024/47 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/47 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 and recommends that it is approved by the Assembly.



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14. SR 2024/48 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/48 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2024 and, has no objection to the Rule.

15. SL1 - The Occupational Pension Schemes (Administration, Investment, Charges and Governance) (Amendment) (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule will amend existing Regulations to require trustees or managers of most defined contribution occupational pension schemes to publish their policies on investment in assets that cannot easily or quickly be sold or exchanged for cash and information about the types of assets in which the scheme has investments.

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

16. SL1 - The Occupational Pension Schemes (Governance and Registration) (Amendment) (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule enables the Pensions Regulator to oversee compliance by trustees of relevant pension schemes to allow for effective monitoring and enforcement.

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



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17.SL1 - The Occupational Pension Schemes (Master Trusts) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule aims to address the potential impact of the risks for Master Trust scheme members by providing an authorisation and supervision regime administered by the Pensions Regulator. They will enable the Regulator to provide more practical details of what will be required in its Code of Practice.

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

18.SL1 - The Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule will revoke and replace the Benefit Cap (Annual Limit) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (NI) 2023.

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

19.Forward work programme

The Chairperson informed Members that, at the meeting on 21 March, the Committee will receive briefings from the Deputy Secretary of Housing & Sustainability Group and the Deputy Secretary of Communities, Place & Local Government Group. As well as this, the Committee will receive a briefing from the Housing Executive.



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20. Any other business

There was a discussion around the briefings which had taken place and in relation to the need for follow-up correspondence to be issued in relation to a number of Committee queries.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a breakdown, by directorate, of permanent staff and agency staff, to include information on what projects / programmes of work the agency staff are assigned to.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask for an update in relation to what work the department is undertaking in relation to the retrofitting of social housing.

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 12.57p.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if there is a legislative anomaly in relation to the bedroom tax and, if so, can this be addressed quickly as the review of welfare reform mitigations does not currently have a timeline and it would take too long to address this issue through the review.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask it to confirm the extent of its remit in relation to defective buildings and the recent legal ruling on apartments at Victoria Square and any plan to progress policy or legislative work moving forward.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask if he has had any engagement with the Minister for Infrastructure in relation to NI Water's wastewater treatment works programme and capacity constraints which are hindering residential developments. The Committee also agreed to request specific information on the number and locations of developments that are being impacted by wastewater infrastructure limitations.



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21. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 21 March 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.03p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities