



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 29 May 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maolfosa McHugh MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)

In Attendance:

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



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

1. Declarations of Interest

Kellie Armstrong – member of the Deaf Community

Maolíosa McHugh – in receipt of a pension

Daniel McCrossan – Chairperson of Public Accounts Committee

Colm Gildernew – member of Public Accounts Committee

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson noted that the Committee had agreed to a change in the agenda by correspondence to include a closed session briefing on the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Department's briefing on Benefit Security Fraud and Error will now take place on 5 June 2025.

The Chairperson condemned the attacks on houses in the Annalee and Alloa Street areas of North Belfast saying that these attacks are unacceptable, particularly in an area where many of those living in these houses have been homeless for many years. He welcomed the news that Clanmill Housing and other agencies had been in the area in recent days offering support and assistance to those affected and he hoped that the people affected can move back into their homes should they wish.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 22 May 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.



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5. Matters Arising

Scottish Parliament - Proposed UK Welfare Reforms – Potential Joint Devolved Committee Response

Agreed: That the committee seeks permission to share the earlier Senedd response with the Scottish Parliament and vice versa and that the Committee consider the wording of a possible joint letter before summer recess.

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.08a.m.

Agreed: That a copy of the response is sent to the department to ask how it intends to manage the merging of potentially mutually exclusive benefits to ensure no detriment.

Department for Communities - Social Inclusion Strategies

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the department seeking detailed timelines for the publication and advancement of proposed strategies prior to multi-year budgets being introduced and information on the extent of the work of strategy co-design groups.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	Processing Times for Planning Applications
Ards and North Down Borough Council	Anti-Poverty Strategy
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Terms and Conditions for NICS Staff – work being carried out regarding this by the Committee for Finance
Department for Communities	Simon Community correspondence - Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on Homelessness



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6. Correspondence

Individual - Comments on Sign Language Bill and issues impacting the deaf community

Agreed: That this item of correspondence is accepted as evidence in the Committee's consideration of the Sign Language Bill and that a copy is forwarded to the department to ask for comment.

Inside Housing - Article - Welsh government introduces 'landmark' homelessness Bill

Agreed: That a request is made to RaiSe for a comparative table on current legislation in Northern Ireland and what is being proposed in Wales.

Department for Communities - Partnership Agreement Between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector

Agreed: That a departmental briefing is requested focusing on the department's role as the umbrella body for the voluntary and community sector and its work with other departments that also fund the sector and how this work will be monitored and by whom.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	The Pensions Bill - legislative consent
Committee for Finance	2025-26 June Monitoring Commissioning letter
Committee for Finance	Budget Sustainability – 5 year Departmental Plans Guidance



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Source	Summary of content
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Fortieth Report of The Examiner of Statutory Rules

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee of the Welsh Parliament – health related disability benefits

The Committee agreed to suspend the meeting at 10.22a.m. to allow translators to join.

The meeting resumed at 10.27a.m with the following members present:

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

7. Briefing by the Equality Commission on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner

Paul Noonan, Senior Policy Officer

Andy Allen joined the meeting at 10.42a.m.

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

- Concerns around the requirement to consult with one person or organisation
- How the Bill meets the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)



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- Reasonableness and affordability
- The need to include all sections of society in the Bill
- Complaints process and essential services
- Safeguarding measures and the Scottish model
- Enforcement and redress
- Timeframes for regulations and the need to be included in the Bill
- Review process and associated terms of reference

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 11.08a.m.

8. Briefing by Adapt NI on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Laura Murphy-Sloan, Director

Alex Leslie, Director

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

- The need for a dedicated employment clause to be added to the Bill
- Concerns around the requirement to consult with one person or organisation
- The definition of 'reasonable'
- Raising awareness
- Recompense for organisations providing support
- Regulations

The meeting went into closed session at 11.31a.m.

9. Departmental briefing on the draft Anti – Poverty Strategy

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Emer Morelli, Deputy Secretary, Engaged Communities Group

John McCord, Director, Central Policy Division

Carl Savage, Deputy Director, Central Policy Division



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Paul Gamble, Head of Branch, Poverty Policy

The main areas of discussion were:

- Consultation process
- Absence of targets
- Evaluation review mechanisms
- Cross-departmental accountability and delivery plans
- Definition of relative and absolute poverty
- Childcare
- Multi-year budgets across departments to ensure outcomes are met
- The Anti-Poverty Strategy Board
- New initiatives in the draft strategy
- Action plan for the draft strategy

Agreed: That the department provides the committee with further information in relation to definitions of relative and absolute poverty.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 12.26p.m.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 12.32p.m.

The meeting resumed in public session at 12.33p.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Brian Kingston, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Maolíosa McHugh, Nicola Brogan

Agreed: That a further departmental briefing in public session is arranged when the strategy is published.

10. **SL1 The Social Security (Income And Capital Disregards) (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations (NI) 2025**

The Chairperson informed members that the proposed rule will ensure that lump-sum payments made under Miscarriage of Justice Compensation Schemes administered by the UK and Devolved Governments are indefinitely disregarded when calculating entitlement to means-tested benefits. It will also align provision with policy being introduced by the DWP and amend several existing regulations to allow compensation recipients who exceed the



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standard capital threshold of £16,000 to retain or gain entitlement to means-tested benefits.

Agreed: That the committee is content for the department to proceed to make the rule.

Daniel McCrossan returned to the meeting at 12.41p.m.

The Committee agreed to consider Items 11 and 12 together

11. Disposal Of Documents Order 1925: Strategic Investment Board Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Committee noted the schedule.

12. Disposal Of Documents Order 1925: PSNI Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Committee noted the schedule.

The Chairperson asked members if they were content to note the schedules at Item 11 and 12 until the relevant Committees notify the Committee that their considerations have concluded.

Agreed: That further information is sought on the guidelines for the length of time that records have to be kept.

13. Forward Work Programme

The committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

14. Any other business

There was no other business.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 5 June 2025, in the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.44p.m.



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Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities