



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 27 November 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
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)
Ms Kathryn Black (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, trade union member, Assembly Commission Member.

Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community.

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.

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

Mark Durkan – Licensed Premise owned by family.

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

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed Cathy Mason to the Committee and wished her well in her new role. The Chairperson also placed on record the Committee's thanks to Nicola Brogan for her hard work on the Committee and sought Committee agreement to write to her accordingly, passing best wishes for the incoming months.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to Nicola Brogan thanking her for her work on the Committee and passing best wishes for the incoming months.

The Chairperson reminded Members that an informal meeting with Members of the Westminster Social Security Advisory Committee was held on 20 November in Parliament Buildings and thanked Members for their attendance and feedback.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had noted with concern the extent of the recent media coverage and reaction from the sector in relation to the Minister's decision to not take forward a review of the Surrender principle following the University of Stirling report. He reminded Members of the content of Committee's request to the Department for information after its meeting on 20 November.

Agreed: That a further letter is sent to the Department following on from previous correspondence to ask how the economic impact on non-Hospitality Ulster members was being assessed, with particular focus on the those rural communities which are losing local licensed premises to multinational companies.

The Chairperson then reminded Members that next week is Homelessness Awareness Week, and the Committee meeting will be held in The Skainos Centre, followed by a tour of Hosford Community Homes.

Finally, the Chairperson reminded Members of an invitation extended by the Minister for Communities, to all Members of the Committee, to the launch of the New Foundations pilot programme which aims to prevent Young People Leaving Care entering homelessness on 1 December in Parliament Buildings. The Chairperson reminded Members that the invitation was sent in October for Members to RSVP individually, and advised that he would be an apology.

Agreed: That an apology is sent on behalf of the Chairperson.

4. Draft Minutes



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 20 November 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters Arising

Fermanagh and Omagh District Council - Anti-Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That the Committee team will consider options for the most effective way to facilitate a meeting where representatives from all Councils can meet with the Committee.

Agreed: That the Committee team will also schedule an event in 2026 where the Committee can engage with representatives from each of the Councils to in relation to a number of areas of interest.

Department for Communities - Business Plan - Good Relations

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

- thank it for the update provided
- advise that Committee raised concerns about the absence of a forward plan and the continued provision of single identity funding to individuals and groups
- ask the Department to set out what its Good Relations objectives are
- how the Department will measure the associated outcomes to ensure effectiveness

Department for Communities - Irish language Strategy Briefing

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request quarterly updates in relation to the work of the Cross-Departmental Working Group.

Agreed: That the Irish Language Commissioner and Commissioner for the Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition are invited to brief the Committee at a future meeting.

Department for Communities - JobStart Scheme

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department, noting the information provided and to request a detailed breakdown in relation to:

- the number of people employed through Jobstart
- the number of those placements which convert into sustained employment
- that the information is provided by geography of NI, and
- to cover the last 5 years



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- In addition Committee agreed to ask if the Department provided any similar opportunity to people with a disability who are excluded from Jobstart as a consequence of savings or being ineligible for Universal Credit.

Department for Communities - Reply re Briefing by Forum for Better Homes NI on Housing Decarbonisation

Agreed: That a briefing is requested in relation to the work of Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) on any retrofit housing processes in the Republic of Ireland (potentially as part of informal meeting in Leinster House).

Department for Communities - Review of the Rates Support Grant

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department thanking them for the correspondence and to request:

- The extent to which the Department has consulted with councils in relation to the recommendations, in particular those councils with more rural communities
- To ask if there are any future plans for an independent review into the impact on the effectiveness of the review of Public Administration

Agreed: That a letter is sent to The Executive and to Finance Minister, to request that consideration be given to ringfencing the Rates Support Grant and highlighting the level of reliance on the grant by rural Councils in particular

Agreed: That a letter is also sent to the Minister for Communities requesting he highlight the need to ringfence or protect the Rates Support Grant to the Executive.

Department for Communities - Social Inclusion Strategies Timetables

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what are the particular considerations that are “under review” in relation to the sexual orientation strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to The Executive Office seeking an Executive view on the letter from the Minister and the absence of timescales for progressing the Strategies, seeking confirmation in relation to who is responsible for progressing the Strategies and emphasising the need for approval at Executive level.

Department for Communities - The Northern Ireland Football Fund Briefing

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department welcoming the apology and emphasising the importance of supplying any outstanding information previously



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requested. In addition the Committee sought clarification of the last time the Departmental officials had received briefing and information covering the sub judice rule and the Committee's right to request information and call for persons and papers.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking the following information in relation to Freedom of Information requests:

- The number of FOI requests received
- The number / percentage of requests refused or declined
- The justification or exemptions being cited for refusal
- That the information covers the last 5 years of FOI requests

Translink - Sign Language Bill and associated public transport accessibility

Agreed: That a response is sent to Translink advising that the Committee is content that Translink share the correspondence with the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC).

Department for Communities - UK Shared Prosperity Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department asking if it has data on the number of staff currently in the Community & Voluntary Sector who may be placed on redundancy notice within the January to March 2026 window. Committee further agreed to ask the Department again about whether bridging funding will be made available to the sector given the continued absence of details on the replacement (Local Growth) fund and its weighting to capital projects, given that many of these organisations are currently providing statutory services.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Reduced Earnings Allowance Complaint
Department for Communities	Request for a list of the Department's Primary Legislation
Department for Communities	Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill – Social Housing Tenancy Fraud



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Department for Communities	Query following briefing by the Association of British Insurers on the Pension Schemes
Department for Communities	Sign Language Bill Deliberations

6. Correspondence

Department for Communities - Public Consultation on the Review of the Decent Homes Standard

Agreed: That a briefing is scheduled for a future meeting, following the consultation.

Committee for the Economy - Notification to all Statutory Committees - RHI Closure Bill; &

Committee for Communities - Draft Response to Committee for Economy on the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the draft response to be forwarded to the Committee for the Economy.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation - Information regarding Poverty NI Report and offer to brief the Committee

Agreed: That a briefing is scheduled for a future meeting.

BBC - Titanic Sinks Tonight - Invitation 08 Dec 2025

Agreed: That the Chairperson attends the event on behalf of the Committee and that the team RSVP to BBC on behalf of the Chairperson accordingly.

The Guardian - Ministers urged to apologise after review finds systemic failures led to carer's allowance crisis

Agreed: That, following the budget and associated announcement, a follow-up letter is sent to the DWP seeking an update in relation to whether a tapered approach could be considered in relation to the ongoing Review of Carer's Allowance.

The Committee noted the following items:



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Source	Summary of content
Ofcom	Invitation to Plan of Work - Belfast 2026 in Parliament Building 29 Jan 2026 - Registration Open
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission	Annual Human Rights Statement Invitation 08 Dec 2025
Individual	Housing Issue / Removal from Northern Ireland
Committee for Finance Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill	Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill
The Katie Trust	Invitation - The 03 Dec 2025. The event will set out the Trust's mission to support families seeking truth and justice where the circumstances of a loved one's death remain in question.
Minister for Communities	Intention to make Oral Statement - Disability Strategy on 24 Nov 2025
Executive Information Service	News Release - Housing Minister highlights 'Every House Matters' at Social Housing Tenancy Fraud Conference
Individuals	Proposed Belfast Busking Byelaws
Department for Communities	Joint Briefing re Sustainable Places Programme

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Belfast Telegraph	Department's response to Liquor Licensing Review will do 'almost nothing to address fundamental problems' with system
BBC News	Alcohol licensing rule recommendations rejected by Lyons
Executive Information Service	Appointment of Housing Executive Board Member
Executive Information Service	News Release - Communities Minister launches consultation on Decent Homes Standard for social homes

7. SR 2025/183 - The Social Security (Residence in an EEA State or Switzerland) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/183 - The Social Security (Residence in an EEA State or Switzerland) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

8. Police Ombudsman – Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for Justice which had corresponded to confirm it was content with the schedule.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to approve the schedule.

9. Briefing from Department of Communities – Update on Budget 2025-26 position and future years

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Mr John Greer, Deputy Secretary Corporate Services Group, Department for Communities

Ms Kathy Sands, Director of Finance, Department for Communities



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Ms Cherrie Arnold, Director of Finance, Department for Communities

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

- Allocation Update
- Capital Budget and new build plans
- Welfare Reform and Parity Penalties
- Strategic Prevention of Homelessness
- Housing Supply Strategy
- Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Budget Prioritisation and Statutory Commitments
- Sign Language Bill Resources
- Discretionary Spend and Support
- Housing Grants, New Units and engagement
- Fraud and Error
- Rates Support Grant

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request specific figures in relation to funds that will be returned to Northern Ireland as a consequence of the Fraud and Error work and how this figure will be arrived at, including any ongoing discussions with DWP and Treasury on whether the money will be ringfenced for further fraud and error work here and the likely quantum of any penalties which could be levied should the work not be progressed.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive regarding the 600 homes Buy Back Scheme seeking clarification in relation to whether areas of high need will be prioritised, how they will be selected and if the homes will be purchased via the open market.

10. Oral evidence on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy consultation – Women’s Support Network, NI Anti-Poverty Network, Save the Children NI and Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Siobhán Harding, Women’s Support Network

Ms Becca Bor, NI Anti-Poverty Network



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Ms Rachel Benson (lived experience)

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

- Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Ministerial engagement and Lived Experience Panel
- Two Child Limit Benefit Cap
- Child Benefit
- Childcare, Free School meals, School Uniform Grants, Holiday Hunger
- Media narrative
- Plan for tackling Child Poverty

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.07p.m

Andy Allen rejoined the meeting at 12.09p.m

Agreed: That a briefing is requested from the Department on the Anti-Poverty Strategy in open session.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how DfC in lead role, will be assured from the other contributing Departments that their actions to be delivered under the strategy, are in fact alleviating poverty.

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

- What steps will be taken between now and April 2026 in relation to the end of the 2 Child Limit
- What communications activities is the DfC planning to prevent public misinformation and conflation (for the general public) of the Benefit Cap, the 2 Child Limit and Child Benefit entitlements
- Based on the work of the CDWG, for confirmation of whether the updated Anti-Poverty Strategy will include reference to Free School Meals, a Holiday Hunger Scheme, Provision of Childcare, the UC Five Week Wait and cost of school uniforms and the uniform grant.

11. Department Briefing - Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:



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Mr Iain Greenway, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for Communities

Mr Tommy McAuley, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for Communities

Mr Gerard Flynn, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for Communities

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.14p.m

Pam Cameron rejoined the meeting at 12.20p.m

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

- Amendments to Clauses in Bill and Proposed Text
- Financial Impact of Proposed Amendments
- Statutory Guidance and Best Practice
- Ministerial Approval
- Definition of Promotion in the Bill
- Age Discrimination
- Affordability

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.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to undertake informal deliberations on the Bill.

The meeting moved into closed session at 1.04p.m.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 1.05p.m.

Liz Marsh, Bill Clerk joined the meeting to address any queries during the informal deliberations.

12. Sign Language Bill – Committee deliberations on the clauses of the Bill

The Committee considered the Clause by Clause table which detailed all the comments and evidence received as part of Clause 5 of its Sign Language Bill.



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Members discussed Clause 5 of the Bill, and the range of stakeholder views and comments received.

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 1.21p.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 1.35p.m.

The meeting resumed in open session at 1.40p.m. with the following Members present: Mr Colm Gildernew, Ms Cathy Mason, Mrs Kellie Armstrong, Mr Mark Durkan, Mr Maolíosa McHugh and Mrs Sian Mulholland.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting clarification and consideration of a number of amendments to Clause 5 of the Bill.

Agreed: That an additional Committee meeting is scheduled for 2 December 2025, to facilitate Committee deliberations on the Clauses of the Sign Language Bill.

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 4 December 2025, in The Skainos Centre, with the provision for an additional Committee meeting on 2 December.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.45 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities