



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 9 October 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, 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
- Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)

In Attendance:

- Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
- Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)

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



1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Andy Allen – charity trustee, private sector landlord, trade union member

Pam Cameron – former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and Cross Departmental policy, strategy and legislation, family member is a member of the Arts Council

Colm Gildernew – Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness, charity trustee

Maolíosa McHugh – charity trustee

2. Apologies

Maurice Bradley MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson noted with concern the development announced the previous evening by Derry City FC to join with Crusaders FC to commence legal proceedings to challenge the exclusion of both clubs from Stage 2 of the Northern Ireland Football Fund process. The Chairperson stated that this a concerning, whilst not unexpected development. The Chairperson reminded Members of the Standing Order in relation to Sub Judice, whilst noting that the matter was not yet active.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if all clubs have received feedback on their applications.

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.06a.m.

The Chairperson welcomed the statements made by the Minister this week on the Disability and Work Strategy and JobStart. This Committee has been



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pushing for the publication of the work strategy and always thought that Jobstart was a good initiative and welcome this new funding.

However, the Chairperson stated that he remained concerned that the £12.4m funding for Jobstart has, like the other recent funding announcements, been announced to the wider community and media without any scrutiny by the Committee and he proposed that, following the Committee's letter last week to ask about budget lines for previous funding announcements, another letter is sent to ask for specific detail in relation to where this money will come from within the existing budget lines.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for specific detail in relation to where the funding for Jobstart is coming from in terms of the existing budget lines.

The Chairperson asked Members whether they were content that the scheduled update on the departmental financial position, currently planned for 27 November, remained timely enough or if Members might prefer to request that this takes place at the earliest possible opportunity.

Agreed: That the briefing is requested at the earliest opportunity.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a report from the Simon Community on Childhood Adversity and Homelessness.

The Chairperson stated that, whilst the information and statistics in the report make for difficult reading, it is a stark reminder of the impact of homelessness and lack of stability from childhood into adulthood. The Chairperson asked, given the issues raised within the report, if Members were content to ask the Simon Community for a briefing at a future meeting.

Agreed: That the Simon Community is asked to brief on the report at a future meeting.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 2 October 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.



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5. Matters Arising

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
DfC	Northern Ireland Community Infrastructure Fund (NICIF) Launch Event
ICO	Data breach reporting guidance
Minister of Finance	Invest to Save Initiative
Minister of State for Social Security and Disability	Review of PIP Assessment

6. Correspondence

Women's Support Network - response to Draft Anti- Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That a briefing is arranged for a future meeting from the Women's Support Network.

Department for Communities – Statutory Instrument - amendments to Social Security Legislation regarding the introduction of new Social Security Benefits in Scotland to replace Carer's Allowance, attendance Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payment

Agreed: That a briefing from the Department on the Statutory Instrument is arranged for a future meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee and the Committee on Procedures asking if the Committee(s) have any plans to look at the procedural gap in scrutiny opportunities for Statutory Committees in the event that UK Government departments continue to amend legislation on



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transferred matters via Statutory Instrument and to ask whether it would be feasible for the Committee on Procedures to extend its ongoing work on the LCM procedures into the use of Statutory Instruments.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Annual Report on Decision Making and Financial Accuracy 2024
Marie Curie	Update on Meeting with Tell Us Once Officials - Bereavement Services
Department for Communities	EQIA Final Report Following Consultation - Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Changes
Individual	2025 10 01 Individual REAI Appeal
Assembly Business Office	Laying of the North South Language Body 2023 Annual Report Accounts
Joseph Rowntree Foundation	Invitation International Day for the Eradication of Poverty 17 October 2025
Assembly Business Office	NI Community Relations Council - Presenting of Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25

Finance Committee - Memo re October Monitoring Round

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if a further request for cuts in expenditure across Departments is made (in order to mitigate the extent of HSC related o/ spends) that no further cuts be made to the discretionary expenditure lines in the Departmental budget, focussing instead on internal efficiencies.



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Clerk to Committee for Communities - Response to the memo from TEO to Communities Clerk re PRONI Mother and Baby Institutions Redress Scheme Bill

Agreed: That a copy of the response is sent to the Committee for the Executive Office.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking an assurance that there is a dedicated resource in the Department liaising with TEO in relation to the relevant sections of the Bill which intersect with its responsibilities.

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Written Ministerial Statement from FM and dFM on the Executive Legislation Programme
Clerk to Committee for The Executive Office	Memo from TEO to Communities Clerk re PRONI Mother and Baby Institutions Redress Scheme Bill
Department for Communities	Press release - NI Community Infrastructure Fund launch
Assembly Communications Office	Media clippings - Homeless hostel residents research
Assembly Communications Office	Media clippings - Intimidation points for social housing

The Chairperson proposed a short break to allow for interpreters to set up for the next agenda item.

The meeting was suspended at 10.17a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.21a.m. with all Members present.



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7. Briefing by Deaf OAP NI on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Rita Abernethy, Deaf OAP NI

Claire McIlwraith, Deaf OAP NI

Bobby Bailey, Deaf OAP NI

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

- The need for sign language provision in care homes
- Changing communication as people grow older
- The need for sign language provision for social workers in all health trusts
- The key challenges that the Bill needs to address
- The need for sign language classes for older deaf people or people losing their hearing
- The need for sign language provision to be included in private businesses, not just public bodies
- Deaf culture and the need to include more protection in the Bill for deaf culture
- The definition of 'reasonable steps' in the Bill
- Access to interpreters and how this can be improved

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Health to express the Committee's concerns in relations to points made by the witnesses during this briefing session in relation to the lack of sign language provision within the health service and to ask the following:

- If the Department of Health conducts risk assessments on its services for deaf and hard of hearing people



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- What actions is the Department taking to improve services for deaf and hard of hearing people, particularly in relation to isolation and end of life care
- Has the Department considered the introduction of peripatetic workers in hospitals, wards, care homes, Emergency Departments and social work as concerns were expressed that using staff with only a basic level of sign language in the health service represents a risk when communicating sensitive medical and personal information to deaf and hard of hearing people.

Agreed: That information is sought on whether there is legislation in place for the provision of fire alarms/flashing alarms for deaf and hard of hearing people in dwellings.

Agreed: That further information is sought on the personal assistant system for deaf people in England as there seems to be a difference in provision between England and Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson proposed a short break to allow for interpreters to set up for the next agenda item.

The meeting was suspended at 11.15a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.17a.m. with all Members present.

8. Briefing by Christian Fellowship Church Sign Language Centre on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representative to the meeting:

Daniel Voss, Sign Language Pastor, Christian Fellowship Church Sign Language Centre

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

- The quality of interpreters
- Practical challenges for the deaf community and how the Bill might address those challenges
- The language used in the Bill and whether it was strong enough
- Deaf culture and the opportunity to enhance that term in the Bill



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how it intends to manage the lead-in period for the introduction of all measures in the Bill as there have been concerns expressed that there is a lack of sign language provision, particularly in areas such as interpretation. The Committee would also like to know if the current video interpretation service offers ISL interpretation and if interpreters from Northern Ireland are employed on this service as concerns were expressed by the deaf community that differences with regional dialects in sign language have led to situations where the service has been of little benefit to users in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson informed Members that there was to be a third briefing to the Committee today from Hands That Talk but the witnesses were unavailable to attend. A briefing paper for this agenda item had been provided in the pack in the form of the organisation's response to the Committee's citizen space survey.

This evidence will inform Committee deliberations in the forthcoming weeks and if possible, an alternative date to hear from Hands That Talk will be identified.

The Chairperson proposed a short break to allow for interpreters to leave the room.

The meeting was suspended at 11.51a.m.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 11.51a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.58a.m. with the following Members present: Colm Gildernew, Mark Durkan, Pam Cameron, Andy Allen, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Maolíosa McHugh

9. Departmental briefing on Pension Schemes Bill Legislative Consent Motion

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Hayley Ward – Policy Lead

Michelle Grills – Policy Lead

Tommy Boyle – Deputy Policy Lead



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

- Parity
- The impact this LCM might have on those living in border areas
- Access to the Ombudsman
- Timeline for a further Executive Bill on Pensions
- Ongoing engagement with DWP
- The implications of not consenting to the motion
- Any measures in the LCM that may not be beneficial

10. Consideration of End of Session Report 2024/25

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft copy of the report for consideration.

Members suggested several changes to the report.

Agreed: That the report is considered again at the meeting on 16 October with the proposed changes made.

11. Addendums To Retention and Disposal Schedules of Councils

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

12. Prisoner Ombudsman Retention and Disposal schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a memo from the Committee for Justice. That Committee had sought further information on how this schedule differs from the previous version.

The response from the Ombudsman advised that the Schedule was updated to bring their record keeping and GDPR compliance up to date with changes in GDPR and DPA in 2018, as well as to comply with PRONI's legislation. The Justic Committee was therefore content with the schedule.

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



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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 16 October 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.29p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities