



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 21 October 2021

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Ms Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen MLA
Ms Ciara Ferguson MLA
Ms Aíne Murphy MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Stephen Dunne MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA
Mr Paul Frew MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Antoinette Bowen (Clerical Supervisor)



Northern Ireland Assembly

The meeting commenced at 09.02 am in open session.

1. Ministerial briefing on Welfare Reform Mitigations

Ciara Ferguson joined the meeting at 9.03am

Paul Frew joined the meeting at 9.06am

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 9.06am

Aine Murphy joined the meeting at 9.07am

The Chairperson informed Members that the Minister had asked to brief the Committee on Welfare Reform Mitigations at today's meeting.

The Chairperson welcomed the Minister, Deirdre Hargey. The Minister briefed the Committee and took part in a question and answer session with Members.

Agreed: The Minister agreed to provide the Committee with figures in relation to the cost per week to people who cannot receive a mitigation payment because the 'loopholes' have not been closed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office to ask that the issue of Welfare Reform Mitigations legislation and measures is included on its agenda for a decision.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed a new staff member to the team, Rachel Ashe, and wished her well in her new role.



Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson informed Members that Fra McCann had now officially resigned as an MLA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to send a letter of thanks for his work on the current Committee, on the previous Social Development Committee and in the Assembly.

4. Draft Minutes

5. **Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 14 October 2021. Matters Arising**

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to a £5 Million allocation to charities and social enterprises.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if charities and social enterprises will have the time to spend this money. Members expressed concern that, if the money is not provided by November/December 2021, there will be difficulties in spending it. Members would also like to know why the Department bid for this additional money when it seems there was no firm plan in place for how to spend it.

The Committee also expressed frustration with the use of terms such as 'shortly' in the responses it receives and feel that the Department needs to provide more definitive timelines.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to its Annual Report and Accounts for 2020 – 2021.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for more information on its audit system as there were concerns expressed that benefit underpayments are occurring due to the Department's delay in dealing with information that individuals are providing.

The Committee requested more detail on the £23.8m underpayments, specifically how many people are affected by this. Members would also like to know the areas of Northern Ireland in which underpayments are happening and if the Department needs to provide more staff resources in these areas to deal with this.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the HC1 claim for help with health costs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to state that it was dissatisfied with the response, which failed to address the initial Committee query as to what the Department is doing to proactively engage with individuals in relation to the need for applicants to complete a HC1 form.

The Committee feels that the Department needs to do a lot more to promote this and that work coaches should be making people aware of this from an early stage.

Members also requested a demonstration of the online system to see where the HC1 form is located as there was a concern expressed that it is difficult for people to locate the form.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Health to ask what the uptake has been for the HC1 claim form, whether it was necessary for annual claims to be made and to ask if a review is planned of the need for this form.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to SL1 - The Social Security (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (NI) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to send a copy of the response to Advice NI and other similar advisory bodies.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to SL1 - The Universal Credit (Childcare Costs) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021.

Members noted the response.



Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the Supporting People Feasibility Study.

Agreed: The Committee expressed dissatisfaction with the response as there was no timeframe provided for the completion of the Feasibility Study. Members requested that a timeframe of completion of the work is now provided and would like to know when the Committee will be provided with the study report to enable it to carry out its scrutiny role.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to request a briefing at a future meeting.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental response in relation to the Women Involved in Community Transformation (WICT) Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for a timeframe for the introduction of the replacement for the WICT Programme. Members also agreed to write to the Department to ask that specific end dates are included in future for programme whether contract or grant funded.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a response from the Department of Finance on the Shared Prosperity Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for a breakdown of organisations that will be affected by the loss of EU funds and the implications for these organisations if the Shared Prosperity Fund proceeds as currently outlined.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a response from the Department for the Economy in relation to the UK Government's plan to introduce a gas & oil boiler ban on new build homes from 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy to ask why it is not prioritising the insulation of houses over programmes such as the Boiler Replacement Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response with the Committee for the Economy to ask if its Members were aware of this information.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for Communities to encourage the establishment of a cross departmental taskforce, led by its Officials,



Northern Ireland
Assembly

on fuel poverty. The Committee is concerned at the lack of a joined-up approach on this issue and feels that more needs to be done to develop meaningful solutions and that strategies need to be brought forward and implemented.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations to brief on this issue at a future meeting.

6. Briefing by Research and Information Services (RaISe) on the Private Tenancies Bill

The following NI Assembly RaISe Research Officer joined the meeting:

Eleanor Murphy

The Research Officer briefed the Committee and took part in a question and answer session with Members.

The Chairperson thanked her for her attendance.

7. SL1 - Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule will make amendments which are required to correct an error made in the Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 ("2017 Regulations") where a consequential amendment was missed.

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if there was any consequence of the consequential amendment being missed and what impact, if any, this has had on individuals.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Andy Allen rejoined the meeting at 10.58am

8. SL1 - Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2021

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule will amend the expiry date in regulation 5(2) of the Employment and Support Allowance and Universal Credit (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (S.R. 2020 No. 33) so that they now expire on 24th March 2022.

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask how many people are in the special category for Employment and Support Allowance and how many have come out of this category in the past year.

9. SR 2021/281 - The Social Security (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/281 - The Social Security (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules report, had no objection to the rule.

10. Correspondence

Letter from Rural Community Network regarding social housing target being missed in rural communities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the organisation to a future stakeholder meeting.

Community Places request to brief on participatory budgeting.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the organisation to a future stakeholder meeting.

Letter of complaint from Dr Andrews in relation to Foras Na Gaeilge.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Dr Andrews to advise that he avails of the Department's complaints process.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- i. Departmental update on BBC Board Member Appointment
- ii. Department for Communities Climate Change Action Plan
- iii. Department for Communities Review of the Intermediate Housing Pilot Schemes
- iv. Invitation to APG Development of the 2022-2027 Homelessness Strategy - Wednesday 3RD November at 12.00pm

11. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson informed Members that there will be a meeting on 2 November 2021 at 9.00am to hear evidence on the Private Tenancies Bill. The Chairperson also informed Members that, at the meeting on 4 November 2021, the Committee will continue its deliberation on the Charities Bill. The Committee will also be briefed by Departmental Officials and PIP representatives on the renewal of the contract for PIP assessments.

The meeting was adjourned at 11.02am

The meeting restarted at 11.11am with all Members present.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

12. Committee deliberations on the clauses of the Charities Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with the following papers:

- A copy of the Bill;
- A response from Mr Crawford in relation to his Freedom of Information requests on the Bill;
- Departmental papers from the meeting on 14 October 2021; and
- Clause by clause evidence summary tables.

The Chairperson informed Members that the following Officials were present to answer queries on the clauses:

Sharon Russell

Martin Ireland

The Officials took part in a question and answer session with Members.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

13. Any Other Business

A Member raised the issue of the Covid 19 Heating Scheme.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask how many people have received payments under this scheme and to ask how much has been paid out under the scheme.

14. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 2 November 2021 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings, at 9.00 am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.18pm.

Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities