



Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR COMMUNITIES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

Wednesday 22 April 2020
Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Present, Senate: Paula Bradley MLA (Chairperson)
Kellie Armstrong MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Andy Allen MBE MLA

Present, Teleconferencing: Mark Durkan MLA
Sinéad Ennis MLA
Fra McCann MLA
Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
Jonathan Buckley MLA

Apologies: Robin Newton MBE MLA

In Attendance: Kevin Pelan (Assembly Clerk)
Sean McCann (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Oliver Bellew (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 11:36 a.m.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 6 April 2020.

3. Matters Arising

Members noted a Ministerial response to a Committee request for information on Social Sector Size Criteria and Covid-19 related issues.

Members noted a Departmental update on the latest actions the Minister has taken in relation to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The Chairperson informed members they had been provided with a copy of the sixth report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Examiner had drawn the Committee's attention to The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020 and stated that the Department had breached the 21-day rule. However, the Examiner was content with the Department's reason for doing this which was as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. Members agreed to note the Report.

Members noted a copy of the guidance for private rented tenants and landlords as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries on plans to automate the current process of paying Universal Credit housing costs to landlords in the private rented sector.

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a departmental response to Committee queries on the review of the advice sector and the social supermarket pilot.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister asking whether there are any plans to extend the Supermarket Pilot Scheme given that the end date of 30 March 2020 for the pilot has now passed.

The Chairperson advised members that they had been provided with a copy of the survey report on the consultation on liquor licensing laws.

Agreed: Members agreed to request a Departmental briefing on the report at a future meeting.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries on Social Security measures taken to date in response to Covid-19.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries on Discretionary Support Emergency Financial Support.

Members noted a Departmental response on the classification of housing associations.

Fra McCann MLA joined the meeting via teleconference at 11.43 a.m.

4. Departmental briefing – Budget 2020/21

The following departmental officials joined the meeting via teleconference at 11.44 a.m.

Gavin Patrick, Director of Financial Management
Cherrie Arnold, Assistant Director of Financial Planning

The following interests were declared:

Carál Ní Chuilín MLA declared an interest as a former Minister of DCAL.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting the following information:

- A response to Committee queries as to whether there was a 2nd tranche of the Covid-19 Sports Hardship Fund and details of any future funding bids and whether these had been successful.
- A further breakdown on the Supporting People Fund and the funding for the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) through this fund as well as details on what these funds are being used for.
- More information on the figures presented for the NIHE as there was confusion around the figures presented in Part A and the figures presented in Part B of the response.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider today's briefing and to forward any comments to the Committee Clerk for inclusion in a paper detailing the Committee's views on the department's budget for consideration at the next meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk drafts a letter to the Minister for Infrastructure asking to clarify the position on planning permission for a range of capital projects and what plans the Minister has to ensure these capital projects are ready to be initiated after the Covid-19 crisis.

5. Westminster Pension Schemes Bill Legislative Consent Motion

The Chairperson advised members that the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) had now been formally referred to the committee and that the committee may now consider those issues in the Bill which are devolved and report on them to the Assembly.

The following departmental officials joined the meeting via teleconference at 12.34 a.m.

Anne McCleary, Director of Social Security, Policy and Legislation
Gerry McCann, State and Private Pensions & EU
Doreen Roy, State and Private Pensions

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The Chairperson advised members that the committee may report to the Assembly on the provisions of the Bill relating to Northern Ireland within 15 days of the LCM being laid which would be Wednesday 29 April 2020.

Agreed: Members agreed that the Committee Clerk incorporates comments from today's briefing into a paper for consideration at the meeting on 29 April 2020.

6. SR 2020/62 – The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020

The Committee considered SR 2020/62 - The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020 which amend the provisions relating to funeral expenses payments from the Social Fund and increase the limit allowed for other costs from £700 to £1000 for deaths which occur on or after 8th April 2020.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2020/62 - The Social Fund Funeral Expenses Payment (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Department asking how the increase in the discretionary award payment will be communicated to the public, funeral directors, advice sector etc. Members also agreed to ask if there had been an increase in applications for the payment.

7. SR 2020/66 – The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations (NI) 2020

The Committee considered SR 2020/66 - The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2020. This rule amends the Statutory Sick (General) Regulations (NI) 1982 to extend to a person who is deemed incapable of work because the person is advised to stay at home to shield themselves as they are extremely vulnerable and have a very high risk of severe illness from Covid-19 because of an underlying health condition.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2020/66 - The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2020 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, had no objection to the rule.

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Department for Communities to ask if they would advise the Department of Economy of these regulations to enable them to be published on their website to ensure public awareness.

8. Correspondence

Members considered correspondence from Mr Gregory Burke.

Agreed: Members agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Department for comment.

Members considered a copy of correspondence to the Minister from the NI Human Rights Commission on Covid-19. Members expressed concern that certain groups such as refugees and asylum seekers are unable to access Covid-19 funds, presumably due to them not having a bank account.

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Department to request more information on the number of people this is affecting and how the Department intends to address the problem.

The Committee noted the following:

- I. Letter of thanks to the Committee from the National Union for Students NI
- II. A copy of the NI Human Rights Commission paper on the Coronavirus Act 2020
- III. A copy of NI Human Rights Commission Citizen and Birthright publications March 2020.
- IV. Recommendations from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for recovery throughout Covid-19 and beyond.
- V. A copy of NI Human Rights Commission correspondence to the Speaker on Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill.

9. Any Other Business

A member of the Committee raised concerns in relation to the closing date for the second review of PIP and the capacity of the voluntary and community sector to make a submission due to restrictions in place during the Covid-19 crisis.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking that they consider an extension to the closing date for submissions to the review.

A member of the Committee raised concerns in relation to the problems facing students as a result of the Covid-19 crisis.

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Department asking if officials had engaged with the Department for the Economy on enhancing the Student Hardship Fund. If so, what was the outcome and, if not, when do they expect to have these discussions.

A Member raised concerns in relation to social distancing practices in the Department for Communities' offices and the provision of PPE where necessary.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department asking if they were adhering to social distancing in their own offices and providing PPE where necessary.

10. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on 29 April at 11.30 a.m. Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 12.56 p.m.

Ms Paula Bradley MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities