



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 13 June 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)
- Ms Ciara Ferguson (Deputy Chairperson) MLA (via Zoom)
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA

Apologies:

- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA

In Attendance:

- Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Mrs Tracey McCaughey (Clerical Officer)



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

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a former social worker and a private sector landlord.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a private sector landlord.

Brian Kingston declared an interest as a member of the board of governors of Boys' Model School and Malvern Primary School.

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business to report.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meetings on 30 May and 6 June 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.



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4. Matters Arising

Members noted a reply from the Department of Education to Committee queries on an anti-poverty strategy.

Members noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on recommendations from the Equality Commission on ensuring compliance with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with the delegated powers memorandum for the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill.

Agreed: That a copy of the memorandum is sent to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for comment.

Members noted a reply from the Committee on Procedures to Committee queries on closed sessions at committee meetings.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from DWP in relation to Committee queries on Carers' Allowance.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to DWP to ask whether it would be possible and what it would take for Carers' Allowance to be considered as a tapered benefit rather than as a cliff edge benefit.

Members noted a reply from Ards and North Down Borough Council to Committee queries on how councils intend to comply with equality legislation for remote meetings regulations.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the Scottish Government to Committee queries in relation to carers benefits.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the relevant departments of the Welsh and Republic of Ireland Governments to ask how Carers Allowance operates in these jurisdictions.



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply to Committee queries following the Ministerial briefing to Committee on 18 April.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask the following:

- If he intends to give further consideration to the Right to Buy Scheme given the decline in both social housing availability and new builds
- For more detail on how much income is being generated from the house sales through the Right to Buy Scheme and if there are plans to review the policy and if there is an alternative means of tightening up loopholes in the scheme
- If all avenues have been exhausted in relation to sourcing funds for Casement Park to ensure that Euro 2028 can be hosted

Members noted a reply from the Equality Commission to Committee queries on whether there had been an update to its 2012 report on Disability Law Reform.

Members noted a reply from the Department of Justice on its involvement in the work to develop an anti-poverty strategy.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply on Welfare Supplementary Payments, Labour Market Partnerships and Discretionary Support grant payments.

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

- For information on the amount of people who have had to wait more than 5 weeks for payment from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund (UCCF) and whether there is adequate funds allocated to the budget to ensure payments will continue from the UCCF for the remainder of the year given the budget pressures for 2024/25?
- For an update on the work the Department is completing for the introduction of a discretionary waiver facility for people in receipt of a



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Welfare Supplementary Payment (WSP) including those where a Social Sector Size Criteria payment has been paid to a landlord

Members noted a Departmental reply on welfare reform.

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.19a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply on housing issues.

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

- A specific timeline for when the Housing Supply Strategy will be brought forward for consideration, including details in relation to supply across rural areas.
- Information on the range and types of data used to agree criteria for housebuilding.
- If there are plans to review or change the Total Cost Indicators (TCI) method of calculating the level of funding provided to Housing Associations Members

Members noted a Departmental reply in relation to gambling legislation.

Members noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Discretionary Support Scheme.

Members noted a reply from Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council to Committee queries on how councils intend to comply with equality legislation for remote meetings regulations.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply to Committee queries following the briefing by the disabled people's organisations on the disability strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to specifically ask if he will commit to sharing the draft disability strategy with the Disabled People's Organisations involved in the co-design work.



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from Mid-East and Antrim Borough Council to Committee queries on hybrid working regulations.

Members noted a reply from Mid Ulster District Council to Committee queries on hybrid working regulations.

Members noted a Departmental reply to a Committee request for minutes of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Cross-Departmental Working Group.

Members noted a reply from Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council to Committee queries on hybrid working regulations.

Members noted a reply from the Housing Executive to Committee queries in relation to Housing First.

Members noted a reply from the Department for Economy to Committee queries on an anti-poverty strategy.

The Chairperson informed the Committee that, at the meeting on 6 June, the Committee was briefed on the Departmental Budget 2024/5.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a copy of the officials' speaking notes from that meeting and for a copy of the Department's Annual Business Plan setting out the activities against the 2024-25 budget.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 10.30a.m. to allow time for the witnesses to join the meeting.

The meeting restarted at 10.33am.

5. Briefing by British Association of Social Workers (BASW) NI

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Carolyn Ewart, National Director, BASW NI

Andy McClenaghan, Public Affairs, Policy and Communications Lead, BASW NI



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A question and answer session followed the representatives' briefing and the main areas of discussion were the 2-child benefit cap, the impact of the cost of living crisis, promotion of the benefits of foster care, the costs of child poverty and the utilisation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

6. Briefing by RalSe on the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill

The following Assembly official joined the meeting:

Eleanor Murphy, Assembly Researcher

A question and answer session followed the official's briefing and the main areas of discussion were the need for an appropriate communications strategy, the disparity in uptake in pensions enrolment between the private and public sector, employers' contributions and cross border pensions protocols.

The Chairperson thanked the official for briefing the Committee.

7. Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft motion to extend Committee Stage.

Agreed: That a copy of the motion is lodged with the Business Office.

Members noted the following papers:

- a draft Bill timetable (for Committee stage)



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- questions for the Citizen Space call for evidence which will be published on the Committee pages of the website
- the delegated powers memorandum
- a copy of a signposting advert to be placed in the 3 main newspapers

8. SR 2024/119 - The Social Security State Pension Age Claimants Closure of Tax Credits Amendment Regulations NI 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/119 - The Social Security State Pension Age Claimants Closure of Tax Credits Amendment Regulations NI 2024 and has no objection to the rule, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules report.

9. SR 2024/123 - The Smoke Heat and Carbon Monoxide Alarms for Private Tenancies Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided, in tabled papers, with a Departmental reply to Committee queries raised at the briefing session on 23 May. The officials had agreed to provide additional information in relation to the equivalent standards in relation to smoke, heat and carbon monoxide alarms for Registered Housing Associations which were outlined in the reply. Members noted the reply.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had also been provided in their tabled papers with a copy of the latest report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules. This Rule has been considered by the ESR but she had no comment to make on it. Members noted the report.



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Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/123 - The Smoke Heat and Carbon Monoxide Alarms for Private Tenancies Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.

10. SR - The Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR - The Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (NI) 2024 and recommends that it is approved by the Assembly.

11. SL1 – The Pensions (2005) (Codes of Practice) (Revocation) Order (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the order will revoke ten of The Pensions Regulator's existing codes of practice.

The ten codes which are being revoked are being replaced by a new code of practice which provides more accessible guidance for pension schemes and incorporates changes introduced by the Occupational pension schemes (Governance) (Amendment) Regulations 2018.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.



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12. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that they had received 2 requests to brief the Committee, one from NICCY and the other from the Association of British Insurers who wanted to brief on the Pensions Extension of Auto Enrolment Bill.

Agreed: That briefings are arranged for future meetings following the summer recess.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had also received a request from National Museums NI to host a future Committee meeting in one of its venues.

Agreed: That a Committee meeting is held in a National Museums NI venue following summer recess.

13. Forward work programme

Members noted the forward work programme.

14. Any other business

There was no other business.



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15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00a.m. on Thursday 20 June, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.54a.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities