



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 16 May 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

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

Apologies: None

In Attendance:

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



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The meeting commenced in open session at 10.00a.m.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson discussed the informal meeting with the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing that was held on Tuesday 14 May and told Members that he felt it was a very worthwhile meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Special Rapporteur seeking his views on effective reforms or interventions which the Committee for Communities could refer to, based on what he has seen and heard when visiting Northern Ireland recently and hearing directly from people experiencing housing distress here.

The Chairperson informed Members that he wished to put on record the Committee's thanks to First Steps Women's Centre for hosting the meeting on 9 May. It was a very informative, and at times emotional, briefing session and it was good to get out into the community to see some of the great work that local groups are carrying out and the difference this is making to peoples' lives.

Agreed: That a letter of thanks is sent to the First Steps Women's Centre.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 9 May 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.

4. Matters Arising



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with the Equality Commission's recommendations for Disability Law Reform, further to the discussion on the Disability Strategy at the meeting on 2 May 2024.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Equality Commission to ask if there has been an update to the 2012 report it sent and to request that it briefs the Committee at a future meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the work it has carried out to implement the recommendations from the Equality Commission report.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the Minister in relation to the review of Local Housing Allowance rates.

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

- a comparison of Discretionary Support between Northern Ireland and GB;
- the policy and criteria for Discretionary Housing Payments and their plans for moving this forward; and
- for views on how widespread the practice is of landlords raising rents to when the Local Housing Allowance rates are increased.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the Department of Finance in relation to the redevelopment of Casement Park.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to express the Committee's frustration that the tender process has not moved forward and is therefore putting the hosting of Euro 2028 in significant doubt. The Committee sees no reason as to why the tendering process cannot proceed and would like an urgent response which sets out:

- when the tender exercise will commence, and
- whether there has been any further discussion or correspondence between the Minister and the Secretary of State in relation to progressing the redevelopment.



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply in relation to Local Government Remote Meetings Regulations.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to all local councils to ask how they intend to ensure compliance with equality legislation in relation to the implementation of these regulations.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the Department of Health in relation to an anti-poverty strategy.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from Daera in relation to an anti-poverty strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for copies of previous and future minutes of the Cross-Departmental Working Group on an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from Co-Ownership on the difference in the number of homes purchased in the past year in certain geographical areas.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Co-Ownership to ask whether it can take a targeted approach in those geographical areas where there is a low uptake.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if Co-Ownership, with their rent to buy model, will be able to rent an intermediate rent product as per the recently announced Financial Transactions Capital loan scheme to fund a new supply of intermediate housing for rent.

Members noted a Departmental reply in relation to the social inclusion strategies and a sign language bill.

The Chairperson informed Members that the meeting would go into closed session to receive a briefing from the Assembly Bill Office.

The meeting went into closed session at 10.21a.m.

5. Bill Office briefing on accelerated passage for the Defective Premises Bill

The following Assembly officials joined the meeting:



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Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant

Liz Marsh, Bill Clerk

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee on Procedures to ask if consideration could be given to establishing clear guidance/criteria in Standing Orders which could provide clarity on the use of open/closed sessions in Committee meetings when considering a Bill, including for occasions when the use of Accelerated Passage has been requested.

The Chairperson went back into open session at 11.19a.m.

6. Departmental briefing on the Defective Premises Bill

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting:

Frances Donnelly, Deputy Director of Residential Building Safety

Gerry McKibbin, Residential Building Safety

A question and answer session followed the officials' briefing and the main areas of discussion were how building defects are currently handled, how defects will be addressed by this Bill, the need for accelerated passage for the Bill, whether a short Committee Stage to scrutinise the Bill was a possibility, the possibility of legal challenges to the Bill and legal advice received by the Department on the competency of the Bill, specifically in relation to the ECHR.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That the Departmental officials would reply to the Committee on whether the legal advice received by the Department could be shared with the Committee.

7. Royal Society of Ulster Architects briefing on the Defective Premises Bill

The following representatives joined the meeting:



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Ciaran Fox, Director

George Dorrian, Policy and Public Affairs

Joan McCoy, Director, Whitelink Architects

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were the need for full scrutiny of the Bill and concerns around the possibility of “unintended consequences” of speedy legislation, one of which could be that architects being held responsible for defects for an extended period.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

The Chairperson proposed that a letter be sent to the Minister to ask if he would reconsider requesting that the Bill receive accelerated passage, in order to allow the Committee to hold a 30-day Committee Stage.

The Committee divided:

AYES

Colm Gildernew

Ciara Ferguson

Andy Allen

Daniel McCrossan

Maolíosa McHugh

NOES

Kellie Armstrong

Brian Kingston

Sian Mulholland

Maurice Bradley

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to state that, having heard concerns and received a briefing on the Defective Premises Bill, the Committee would like to know if the Minister would consider whether the best possible legislation would be facilitated through the normal Bill passage process in which the Committee would undertake a 30-day Committee Stage as per its statutory role.

Agreed: That advice is sought from Assembly Legal Services for the Committee in relation to the Bill, to include the potential delay which a 30-day



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Committee Stage could have on the progression of the Bill and medium-term implications in relation to the existing civil case.

8. SR 2024/107 Social Security - The Universal Credit (Administrative Earnings Threshold) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/107 Social Security - The Universal Credit (Administrative Earnings Threshold) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules report.

9. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a correspondence memo with proposed actions.

Agreed: That a copy of the Carers' NI letter on overpayments is sent to the Department for response in relation to the issues raised.

10. Forward work programme

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a forward work programme which would be updated following the Committee's strategic planning day and brought back for consideration at the meeting on 23 May.

11. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong raised the possibility of receiving a Departmental briefing on Budget 2024-25. The Clerk informed the Member that a briefing had been requested and that an update on the request would be expedited.

12. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00a.m. on Thursday 23 May, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.08p.m.



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Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities