



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 25 April 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 Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

**Apologies:**

- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

**In Attendance:**

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

The meeting commenced in open session at 10.00am



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## 1. Apologies

Maurice Bradley MLA.

## 2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that a Bill on Defective Premises would be forthcoming from the Department.

**Agreed:** That RalSe is asked for a paper and briefing on examples and experience of equivalent or similar legislation being passed through other legislatures.

**Agreed:** That the Committee seeks an advance briefing from Departmental officials, prior to the introduction of the Bill to the House.

**Agreed:** That Bill office officials are asked to attend a future meeting to set out for Members the timescales, risks and potential implications for the legislation-making process when accelerated passage is sought.

## 3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 18 April 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

### 4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on vacancies and Temporary Promotions and vacancies within the Department. The Chairperson further informed Members that they had also been provided with tabled papers on the impact of vacancies.

**Agreed:** That Sian Mulholland forward the communication she had received in relation to homeworking arrangements in the Department, to the Clerk, for inclusion in correspondence at a future meeting.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a response from the Housing Executive following their briefing session at the meeting on 21 March.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive seeking clarification on whether the Housing Transfer Application form is asking equality questions or housing needs questions and to ask that the guidance for applicants, contractors and architects to support the contractor appointment stage as part of the Warranted Builder change process is sent to all MLA offices.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on questions from the Briefing by the Deputy Secretary of the Work and Health Group.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for more information on the ongoing review of the recovery of overpayments of Welfare Supplementary Payments (WSP) in respect of Social Sector Size Criteria (SSSC), specifically if there is a workaround on recovery programmes and a timescale for completion of this review. The Committee would also like to know how the Department will ensure this process is fair.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for more information on labour market partnerships and how different sectors are working together to improve employability and job opportunities.

Members noted a reply from DoF to Committee queries on vacancies and Temporary Promotions within the DfC and NICS.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

Members noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Briefing by the Deputy Secretary of the Operational Delivery Group.

Members noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a paper from the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) in relation to the revitalisation of the Housing Executive.

*Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.23 a.m.*

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department seeking an updated briefing in relation to the work to date by officials on the Housing Supply Strategy, in particular whether this includes information on social rents and affordability.

**Agreed:** That a copy of the CIH paper is forwarded to the Department of Finance seeking clarification on which options within the paper are within and outwith scope and remit of the HEX and for an update on discussions with the Treasury in relation to Housing Executive borrowing.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a memo from the Clerk in relation to the briefings the Committee had received recently on housing issues.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a briefing in relation to Neighbourhood Renewal policy/programme delivery and to ask for an update on the review into the People and Place Strategy.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department seeking;

- An update in relation the 2024-25 capital budget and the allocation for social homes
- Further detail in relation to the social housing building targets, in both rural and urban areas, for the past 5 years with delivery status by year
- A list of all of the reasons for targets not being met
- The criteria being used by the HEX in relation to building of social homes, and
- What data the Department is using to set the targets as evidence of what is required in relation to house building



## Northern Ireland Assembly

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for further information in relation to retro-fitting, specifically to ask if there should be a retro-fitting strategy for Northern Ireland, if there is an agreed definition of retro-fitting and an established standard and what is being done to incentivise and support retro-fitting across tenures.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to Bayview Contracts to ask for a written briefing on the retro-fitting work it is carrying out in the Republic of Ireland.

**Agreed:** That RalSe is asked for the housing overview briefing to include information on other jurisdictions where legislative reform has introduced a duty to prevent homelessness and require government departments to work together.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether it is able to access information in relation to mortgage vulnerability.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department and the Housing Executive to ask whether there are any plans to secure in-house Occupational Therapists in order to be able to undertake adaptation assessments.

Members noted a tabled Departmental reply to Committee queries on welfare reform mitigations.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a tabled Departmental reply to Committee queries following the briefing session by the Deputy Secretary of the Departmental Corporate Services Group.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it will consider making automatic discretionary support grant payments to any applicants waiting longer than 5 weeks for a Universal Credit payment.

### 5. Briefing from Carers NI

The following representatives joined the meeting:



## Northern Ireland Assembly

Craig Harrison – Public Affairs Manager, Carers NI

Angela Phillips – Senior Policy and Engagement Officer, Carers NI

A question and answer session followed and the main topics of the discussion were the low level of the Carers' Allowance payment, engagement with the Department, a recognition payment for Carers, a register of carers and how the system works in other jurisdictions.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

**Agreed:** That Carers NI provides further information to the Committee in relation to the level of Carers Allowance payments in the Republic of Ireland.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Scottish Government seeking information on the cost of receiving data from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on a biannual basis for the Carers Support Programme and for the annual cost to the Government of the Carers Recognition Payment.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department for Work and Pensions to ask if there is any ongoing work in relation to disregarding Carers Allowance as part of means tested benefits.

### **6. Briefing on the Independent review of welfare mitigations and impact on carers**

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Liam Devine, CEO, Clanrye Group

Les Allamby, Chairperson of the Welfare Mitigations Review Independent Advisory Panel



## Northern Ireland Assembly

A question and answer session followed and the main topics of the discussion were budgetary challenges and immediate priorities, the costs of not having welfare reform mitigations, the need for an anti-poverty strategy and issues experienced in rural areas.

*Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 11.37a.m.*

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask for clarification on the calculation of the £700m figure quoted in the plenary session on 23 April 2024 as an estimate for the total cost of the potential additional mitigations; and to ask for an update on ongoing work in relation to costing the welfare mitigation measures.

*Daniel McCrossan re-joined the meeting at 11.49a.m.*

### **7. Briefing by Professor Gráinne McKeever on the Independent Review of Discretionary Support**

The following representative joined the meeting:

Professor Gráinne McKeever, Chairperson of the Independent Review of Discretionary Support

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were the impact of budget cuts on the discretionary support grant, potential for the review of the eligibility criteria, the level of debt in Northern Ireland, the cost of living crisis, the Household Support Fund and engagement with the Department.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for briefing the Committee.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

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

- if the Barnett Consequential allocation stemming from the Household Support Fund allocation for Northern Ireland is specifically directed to the Discretionary Support budget or if it is included as part of the Department's overall budget
- for details of expenditure against allocated budget for Discretionary Support since it has been in place
- for an update on the status of the move to 24-months for repeat applications, outlined in updated guidance
- for an update on the progress on the implementation of the recommendations from the independent review report
- if there has been any review or plan to look at "staggered income" levels

*The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 12.17p.m.*

*The meeting restarted at 12.23 with the following Members present: Brian Kingston, Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Maolíosa McHugh, Ciara Ferguson and Colm Gildernew.*

### **8. Briefing by Equality Coalition on an Anti-Poverty Strategy**

The following representatives joined the meeting:  
Daniel Holder, CAJ

John Patrick Clayton, UNISON

Becca Bor, Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network

Trása Canavan, Barnardos





## Northern Ireland Assembly

A question and answer session followed and the main topics of the discussion were the cost of inaction on child poverty, work on the failure to publish and implement an anti-poverty strategy, potential legal action associated with the ongoing absence of an anti-poverty strategy, the work of the Expert Advisory Panel, the obstacles to producing an anti-poverty strategy and the need for the anti-poverty strategy to have an action plan.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department and to the Executive expressing Committee concerns around the delay in bringing forward an anti-poverty strategy, to ask what the reasons are for the delay and to ask for the Department's view on the risk of potential legal action in relation to the continued failure to bring forward a strategy in line with its statutory obligation.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to all Departments to ask if they have taken poverty into account when considering their budgets and to ask if they have liaised with the Minister for Communities on the need to introduce an anti-poverty strategy as soon as possible.

### **9. The Social Security (State Pension Age Claimants – Closure of Tax Credits) Regulations (NI) 2024 and The Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015 Commencement No. 13 and Savings and Transitional Provisions (Amendment)**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule will make a range of amendments to social security legislation to support people over State Pension age who are currently in receipt of Tax Credits (Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit) to move to either Universal Credit or Pension Credit before HMRC closes the Tax Credit system from April 2025.



## Northern Ireland Assembly

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how this proposed rule will affect couples in a household where one person is of pension age and the other is not.

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

### 10. SL1 - The Local Government (Remote Meetings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a tabled copy of the proposed Rule.

The proposed Rule will make provision to enable district councils to hold meetings remotely (or by hybrid means) including by (but not limited to) telephone conferencing, video conferencing, live webcast and live interactive streaming.

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

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for clarification on whether the Department or local councils will be subject to equality legislation should they decide to not make provision for hybrid arrangements.

### 11. Correspondence

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



## Northern Ireland Assembly

**Agreed:** That the requests in correspondence to brief the Committee are considered at the Committee's planning session on 9 May.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on work it is carrying out in relation to thatched roofs as concern was expressed in relation to the current grant limit for work on thatched roofs as well as the associated technical specification.

### 12. Forward work programme

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.

### 13. Any other business

Sian Mulholland raised the issue of the redevelopment of Casement Park and the risks associated with continued delay.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Secretary of State to ask for an update on the process in relation to the redevelopment of Casement Park as there is a concern that Euro 2028 will not take place in Northern Ireland if the UK Government does not commit funding to the project to ensure that the stadium is built in time. The Committee would also like to know that, if Euro 2028 does not go ahead in Northern Ireland, will the current financial commitment from funding partners for the redevelopment of the stadium be lost, putting the redevelopment out of reach.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Central Procurement Directorate to ask for clarification on the tendering process, specifically what stage the tendering process for the redevelopment of Casement Park is at, if it is a design and build process and whether break clauses are / could be included in the tendering process.



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**14. Date, time and location of the next meeting**

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 2 May 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.11pm.

**Colm Gildernew MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**