



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 18 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 Maurice Bradley MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

Apologies: None

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 10.00am

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that RalSe would brief the Committee in closed session at the end the meeting covering the next module on public finance scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take Agenda Item 5: Briefing from the Minister for Communities as the next item of business, to avoid detaining the Minister.

3. Briefing from the Minister for Communities

The Minister for Communities, Gordon Lyons MLA and Colum Boyle, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities joined the meeting.

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.06am.

A question and answer session with Members followed the briefing from the Minister. The main topics of the discussion were:

- Social Inclusion Strategies
- Irish Language Strategy
- Preparations for hosting Euro 2028 and an update on the procurement process for the development for Casement Park
- Funding for the arts sector



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- Meeting demand for quality and affordable housing
- Waste water infrastructure in Northern Ireland
- Home energy efficiency schemes
- The Department's legislative programme for this mandate
- Gambling legislation
- Housing as a standalone outcome in the Programme for Government
- Sub Regional Stadia funding
- Addressing homelessness and the Supporting People programme
- Private rented sector reforms
- Advisory panel on Community Wealth Building
- Welfare Mitigations
- Access to disability sport in Northern Ireland
- NIHE right to buy scheme and enabling the NIHE to borrow funds for house building
- Retention and recruitment of staff in the Department
- The Rates Support Grant

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to request a written update on the work of the Independent Advisory Panel on Community Wealth Building.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to request a written update in relation to ongoing work to enhance council regeneration powers.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to ask for the rationale for retaining the Right to Buy Policy/Scheme in relation to Housing Executive stock, which differs from the policy in place for Housing Association stock and appears, from evidence recently received by the Committee, to be at odds with the needs expressed by Housing Executive officials.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to ask for an analysis of how the aforementioned policy position will affect the Revitalisation Programme, should the Right to Buy Scheme continue to exist in its current form.



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Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to ask for an update in relation to discussions ongoing with the Treasury regarding potential changes in public debt models or policy which could allow the Housing Executive to borrow.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to request a clear list of proposed legislation, to include likely timeframes, submitted by the Department for consideration in the Executive's Legislative Programme discussions.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to ask for an explanation as to why the tender for the redevelopment of Casement Park cannot be advertised on a "subject to funding" basis as Committee is extremely concerned about the significant reputational risk if the stadium is not built in time for Euro 2028.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to ask whether a design specification for the redevelopment Casement Park stadium has been finalised.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister seeking a timeline to bring forward legislation to enable hybrid council meetings and to introduce Irish Language Bill.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Executive Office noting that the issue of waste water capacity has been raised at a number of briefings and highlight that this should be a cross departmental priority.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take Agenda Item 6: Construction Employers Federation next.



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4. Briefing from Construction Employers Federation

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Mark Spence, Chief Executive

David Fry, Head of Public Affairs

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were the possible use of RRI borrowing facility to improve house standards, the Residential Decarbonisation Coordination Group, views on higher rise developments, availability of skilled workforce and involvement with Further Education institutions, status of council local development plans and land banking, waste water capacity pinch points and cost of connecting to water infrastructure and partnerships between housing associations and house builders.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee to write to the Minister to ask that Construction Employers Federation be included in the Residential Decarbonisation Coordination Group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take Agenda Item 7: Briefing from Co-Ownership next.

5. Briefing from Co-Ownership

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Mark Graham, Chief Executive

Charles O'Neill, Director of Product Development

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were the uptake of the co-ownership model in rural and urban areas, the rate at which customers moving to full mortgage payments, the impact of energy efficiency improvements to mortgage affordability and running costs, infrastructure challenges to house building, reliance on government funding for co-ownership model and impact on changing interest rates on attractiveness of co-ownership.



The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

6. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 11 April 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.

7. Matters Arising

The Chairperson noted substantive responses from the Department on:

Committee queries on vacancies and Temporary Promotions within the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Committee queries following the Briefing by Deputy Secretary of the Operational Delivery Group.

Committee queries following the Briefing by the Deputy Secretary of the Work and Health Group.

The Chairperson asked Members if consideration of the above responses could be put on the agenda for the next meeting to allow for an adequate amount of discussion on each.

Agreed: That the above three agenda items are put on the agenda for the next Committee meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting details of the number of staff currently working in the Universal Credit Migration Team and the number of applications for Universal Credit that are in the system for longer than five weeks.



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Members noted Departmental replies to Committee queries regarding the Anti-Poverty Strategy, Liquor Licensing and breakdown of local producers' licences and a request for copies of the minutes of the cross-departmental working group on Irish Language Strategy development.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be able form part of the Programme for Government and expressing Committees concerns that the strategy will not be agreed in time to be included in the 2024-25 budget.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if the Department can provide (in confidence) copies of all the draft Social Inclusion Strategies (Anti-Poverty Strategy, Disability Strategy, Gender Strategy and Sexual Orientation Strategy) and / or whether Members could receive a (confidential) briefing on these at a future Committee meeting, noting that Members are aware that draft actions for potential inclusion in the Anti-Poverty Strategy have been sent to all Departments for consideration.

Members noted Departmental replies to Committee queries on gambling harm education policy and progressing sign language legislation.

Agreed: Committee secretariat to identify a suitable date in the forward work programme to invite OFCOM to brief on their role in relation to regulation of gambling.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting an outline of the Sign Language Bill proposals and the timeframe for the introduction of the Bill.

Members noted a copy of the survey on the impact of the increase in the minimum wage on Supporting People funded providers provided by Homeless Connect following last week's meeting.



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SL1 The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule will allow for an increase of 7.7 percent to rents of protected and statutory tenancies for those properties that meet the housing fitness standard. This would represent an average weekly increase of £6.03.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how many people are affected by the increase and how many of those are in receipt of Housing Benefit.

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

8. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a correspondence memo with proposed actions. The Chairperson suggested that, due to time constraints, Members could defer consideration of all correspondence items to next week or could highlight particular items they wish to be brought back.

Agreed: Members to indicate to Clerk by 5pm on Friday 19 April if they wish for any items of correspondence to be brought back to the next meeting agenda and any items not requested to be brought back would be disposed of as per the correspondence memo.

9. Forward work programme

Members noted the Forward Work Programme.



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10. Any other business

The Chairperson asked if Members wished to seek a further updated Budget briefing from the Deputy Secretary with responsibility for finance, to outline the Department's realistic actual 2024-25 position, as soon as possible.

Agreed: That a further updated Budget briefing from the relevant Deputy Secretary is requested.

11. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 25 April 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.28pm.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 12.30pm.

The meeting went into closed session at 12.35pm.

12. Spending Plans and Supply Estimates Process: supporting Assembly scrutiny during Formulation and Approvals stage of Budget cycle - briefing from Public Finance Scrutiny Unit, RalSe

The following members were present for the closed session: Colm Gildernew, Ciara Ferguson, Kellie Armstrong, Andy Allen, Maurice Bradley, Maolíosa McHugh, Sian Mulholland, Brian Kingston.

Christopher Rothwell from RalSe briefed the Committee and answered Members' questions on the formulation and approvals stage of a budget cycle.

The Chairperson thanked Christopher for a comprehensive briefing.



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The meeting ended at 1.16pm.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities