



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 21 March 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)



Northern Ireland Assembly

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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business to report.

3. Matters Arising

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to Committee queries on the Departmental Budget 2024/5.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to SR 2022/301 - The Pensions (2005 Order) (Disclosure of Restricted Information by the Pensions Regulator) (Amendment of Specified Persons) Order (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to SR 2023/2 - The Housing Renovation etc. Grants (Grant Limit) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to SR 2023/209 - The Pensions Dashboards (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023.

Members noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in relation to the Strategic Investment Board Investing Activity Report.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 14 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.



Northern Ireland Assembly

5. Correspondence

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

The Chairperson further informed Members that they had been provided with an anonymous letter in relation to vacancies and temporary promotions within the Department and the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

The Chairperson informed Members that the meeting would need to move into closed session in order for the Clerk to provide a summary update to Members in relation to the legal advice which had been sought on the matter.

The meeting went into closed session at 10.07a.m.

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.26a.m.

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

- Clarification in relation to whether the Department has a clear Temporary Promotion policy in place which governs the practice in relation to temporary promotions.
- Clarification in relation to the extent of roles (numbers by branch / division) being undertaken by staff in a temporary promotion.
- Confirmation that the temporary promotion policy is being used appropriately at all times as the Committee feels that there should be specific timeframes placed on temporary promotion opportunities.
- A report outlining the number of temporary promotion opportunities in place over the last 5 years, to include information on the length of time staff have remained in the TP position and numbers of partially retired staff in TP roles.
- Confirmation of whether the Department has an action plan to reduce the number of temporary promotions.
- Details of when the last recruitment competitions were held for Grade 5, 6 and 7 opportunities.



Northern Ireland Assembly

- Clarification of whether there are currently vacancies in any Branch of the Department responsible for the development and implementation of policy, strategy or in any of the Bill teams.
- Detail on the cost of using agency staff as Committee is seeking reassurance that this use represents value for money when compared to the cost of hiring permanent staff, including whether permanent staff are paid more than agency staff.
- For the Committee to be kept apprised of the level of temporary promotions in place across the Department on a regular basis.

Agreed: That a copy of the anonymous letter is sent to the Department of Finance seeking a response in relation to the issues raised re recruitment, retention and the use of the temporary promotions.

Agreed: That a copy of the anonymous letter is sent to the Committee for Finance for information.

The meeting resumed in open session at 10.30a.m. with all Members present.

Kellie Armstrong referred to the letter in correspondence in relation to the defects in apartments in Victoria Square.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister asking whether it will be possible for him to fast track any new legislation in relation to defective buildings via his Department.

The Chairperson asked Members if they had any comments in relation to the remainder of the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the remainder of the correspondence memo as drafted.

6. Briefing by Deputy Secretary of Housing and Sustainability Group

The following officials joined the meeting:

Mark O'Donnell – Deputy Secretary

Heloise Brown – Director, Social Housing Policy & Oversight



Northern Ireland Assembly

David Polley – Director, Housing Supply Policy

Angus Kerr – Director, Climate Change

Derek Kennedy – Director, Residential Building Safety

The Deputy Secretary outlined the main priorities of the Housing and Sustainability Group.

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were overall housing supply, the Right to Buy Scheme, the Tenant Participation Strategy, anti-social behaviour, revitalisation, homelessness, staffing challenges and the delivery of new social housing homes.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department expressing the Committee's concerns that the Tenant Participation Strategy has been paused and asking what impact this decision is likely to have. The Committee also requested an update on the Tower Block Action Plan, information on any work it is carrying out to reduce the number of long-term derelict properties and information on the delivery of new social housing homes in North and West Belfast, Derry / Londonderry and Newry.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 11.25 a.m.

7. Briefing by Deputy Secretary of Communities, Place and Local Government Group

Brian Kingston declared an interest as a Director of the Greater Shankill Partnership.

Sian Mulholland and Kellie Armstrong declare an interest as members of NILGOSC.

The following officials joined the meeting:

John Smith - Deputy Secretary



Northern Ireland Assembly

Tony Murphy – Director, Community Empowerment

Anthony Carleton - Director, Local Government Policy

Gerard Murray – Director, Regional Development

Sharon Russell – Director, Voluntary & Community

The Deputy Secretary outlined the main priorities of the Communities, Place and Local Government Group.

A question and answer session with Members followed and the main topics of the discussion were neighbourhood renewal, public realm schemes, city deals, the rates support grant, social supermarkets, and Make the Call and advice services.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking an update on the Causeway Coast and Glens Growth Deal.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for briefing the Committee.

8. Briefing by NI Housing Executive

The following representatives joined the meeting:

Grainia Long, Chief Executive

Jennifer Hawthorne, Director of Housing Services

The representative briefed the Committee on the priorities of the NI Housing Executive.

A question and answer session followed and the main areas of discussion were the Right to Buy Scheme, the level of housing need in rural areas, land availability, the disabled facilities grant, long term derelict properties, the amount of land belonging to the Housing Executive, recruitment and housing stress.

Daniel McCrossan re-joined the meeting at 12.25 p.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive seeking:



Northern Ireland Assembly

- The detail in relation to emergency housing demand / supply in rural areas disaggregated by constituency.
- A review of the Housing Transfer Application form and why it does not ask for information on disability.
- Specific information in relation to the housing needs test in the Causeway Coast and Glens area.
- Information on the review of the disabled facilities grants and the changes and improvements that have been made.
- Information on the amount of land belonging to the Housing Executive
- An update on figures and information in relation to tenancy fraud.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

9. Consideration of draft Committee Report on Legislative Consent Memorandum on The Pensions (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill 2024

The Committee considered a draft report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum on The Pensions (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill 2024.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 1.02 p.m.

The Chairperson referred Members to a memo from the Clerk and asked if Members were content for a sentence to be added into the report referring to Marie Curie's call for an amendment to the Bill but acknowledging that, whilst the Committee was made aware of it, it did not form part of the scope of the draft memorandum in relation to which consent was being sought.

Agreed: That a sentence to this effect is added to the Committee report.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities orders the Report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum on The Pensions (Special Rules for End of Life) Bill 2024 to be printed.

10.S.R. 2024/51 - Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (NI) 2024



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered S.R. 2024/51 - Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (NI) 2024 and, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the Rule.

11. S.R. 2024/52 - Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered S.R. 2024/52 - Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (NI) 2024 and, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the Rule.

12. S.R. 2024/54 - The Social Security and Universal Credit (Migration of Tax Credit Claimants and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered S.R. 2024/54 - The Social Security and Universal Credit (Migration of Tax Credit Claimants and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2024 and, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the Rule.

13. Forward work programme

The Chairperson informed Members that, at the meeting on 11 April, the Committee will receive briefings from Neighbourhood Renewal Forum, Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations, Homeless Connect, Housing Rights and Chartered Institute of Housing Northern Ireland.

14. Any other business

Sian Mulholland asked Members to consider if any of them wished to join the All-Party Group on the Arts.

Kellie Armstrong raised a query in relation to the mapping of public land and whether work had previously been undertaken on this and if there may be a report available.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Finance and the All-Party Group on Construction to ask if there is ongoing work in relation to the mapping of public land.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 11 April 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.11p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities