



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 1 May 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Mr Maolfosa McHugh MLA (via Zoom)
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies: Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

In Attendance: Mr James Gilsenan (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)



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

The following interests were declared:

Andy Allen – Charity Trustee

Colm Gildernew – Charity Trustee

Brian Kingston – Member of Committee for the Executive Office

Kellie Armstrong – Member of Deaf Community

Maolíosa McHugh – Member of Conradh na Gaeilge and Chairman of pre-school Naíscóil na Deírge

Sian Mulholland – Sponsor of prospective Member's Bill on Society Lotteries

1. Apologies

Daniel McCrossan

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed members that he had attended a reception for the Belfast Giants on Tuesday to mark their success in winning the Elite Ice Hockey League this season. He further informed members that the event was well attended and that it was always good to celebrate the sporting achievements of local teams.

The Chairperson informed members that he had accepted an invitation to speak as Chairperson of the Committee at Equity Trade Union's Annual Conference evening event, to be held in Derry's St Columb's Hall on 10 May.

The Committee noted the recent return of iwi kūpuna (ancestral remains) to Hawaii by National Museums NI. Following a similar return in 2022, National Museums NI undertook to continue the search for further remains and the Chairperson stated that it is gratifying to learn that this has now been resolved.

The Chairperson wished Dungannon Swifts, Dungannon Rugby Club and Dungannon Hockey Club well in their upcoming cup finals.



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3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 10 April 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

Maurice Bradley MLA joined the meeting at 10.04a.m.

4. Matters Arising

Letter from Chairpersons' Liaison Group - Effective Scrutiny of Cross-Departmental Strategies

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee to ask for its views on this correspondence.

Department for Communities - Update on the Irish Language Strategy and the Ulster Scots Language and Culture Strategy

Agreed: That the Department is asked to brief on these strategies at a future meeting to focus on timelines for publication and when these will be sent to the Executive for agreement.

Arts Council - Funding for Financial Year 25-26

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Arts Council to ask when it expects to have its final budget confirmed for 2025-26.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Charity Commission to ask for its views on whether charities using their reserves to carry out their normal work is appropriate as they await notification of funding allocations.

Department for Communities - Recent Media report on the UK Government's plans regarding disability benefits

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask why it does not hold information in relation to the number of people in Northern Ireland currently in receipt of the benefits that may potentially be affected by the proposed cuts,



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particularly in relation to the four-point PIP assessment. The Committee would like to know what the Department is planning to do in relation to having this information readily available in the future.

Department for Communities - Briefing by Conradh na Gaelige

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it considers that a staff of four people working in the Language Strategies Team is sufficient and whether it feels that more resources may be needed.

Department for Communities - Housing related Queries and Departmental Climate Change Action Plan

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on progress of the Climate Change Action Plan.

Department for Communities - Complex Lives and Supporting People

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to seek information regarding the oversight balance between councils and the Department in relation to homelessness particularly in relation to consistency of approach.

Department for Communities - Fuel Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how information is being used to inform the Warm Healthy Homes Scheme, to ask if there is more recent mapping details available and to seek details regarding the statistics used to inform the map.

Department for Communities – Northern Ireland Football Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking the number and type of applications received, including those received in partnership with local councils.

Department for Communities – Financial Provisions Bill Social Housing Tenancy Fraud

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for clarification on the investigation process as members have concerns should investigations be left to private landlords and would like to better understand the oversight process from a public sector perspective and details of the extent of co-operation



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between the Department and the Department of Finance in relation to recouping funds.

Department for Communities – Independent Advisory Panel Report and Universal Credit Contingency Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask: what protections are currently in place for existing Universal Credit claimants; what plans there are for protections and awareness information campaigns for the next group of people migrating to Universal Credit; and what safeguards are in place to protect the £6.2million allocated to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund in the event that demand increases, and the Department’s capacity to meet any such increase.

Department for Communities – Local councils and the Anti-Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to all local councils to ask if they have an anti-poverty strategy in place.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what collaboration or process it has had working with councils in developing anti-poverty strategies.

Department for Communities – Council Local Development Plans

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how many councils have published their Local Development Plans, what the reasons are for any delays in publication and when all plans are expected to be published.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon Council	Planning Applications Processing Times
Causeway Coast and Glens	Planning Application Processing Times
Ards and North Down Borough Council	Planning applications processing times
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	Planning applications processing times



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The Executive Office	Redress Schemes Subject to a Disregard For Means-tested Benefits - Historical Institutional Abuse
Department for Communities	CRISPP Submission to the Draft Budget Consultation 2025 2026
Department for Communities	Cuts to Disability Benefits
Department for Communities	Closure of SSE's Energy Services Division in Northern Ireland - withdrawal from the home energy retrofit market
Department for Communities	Final Budget 2025-26 Proposals and bids for additional Financial Transaction Capital
Department for Communities	Minister's visit to America
Department for Communities	Registered Rents Increase - protected and statutory tenancies
Department for Communities	Review of Role of Councillors
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy
Department for Communities	Anti - Poverty Strategy Briefing
Department for Communities	NUS-USI Briefing on Student Housing and Affordability Survey
Foyle Deaf Association	Sign Language Course Criteria
Queens University Belfast	Sign Language Course Criteria
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	House Sales Scheme and Disabled Facilities Grant

The Committee noted the following tabled items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for the Economy	Construction Sector Skills Gaps and Energy Strategy Skills Requirements
Minister of Finance	NI Fiscal Council Report- Income Fees and Charges



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5. Correspondence

Work and Pensions Committee - Inquiry into Government's welfare reform proposals, Pathways to Work.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to DWP to ask why the consultation is only focused on only some of UKG's proposals.

Women's Policy Group - Social Inclusion Policies Letter from Gender Co-Design Panel Membership

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask why the Minister is not meeting with all co-design groups; which groups the Minister has and will meet; and to ask which groups have had sight of the draft Disability Strategy Paper.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
RaISe	Work and Pensions Committee Inquiry into the UK Government's proposals to reform PIP and UC
Ulster University & Joseph Rowntree Foundation	Poverty and Disability Pathways to Work Green Paper Seminar Invite
Department for Communities	Update on Transfer of Functions Order - Government Indemnity Scheme
Examiner of Statutory Rules	37th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Committee for The Executive Office	Historical Institutional Abuse -Application of Trauma Informed Practice re Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessments
Open University	Invitation to Launch of Why Riot research report on 28 May 2025



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Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Financial Transaction Capital – (FTC) Expenditure
Strategic Investment Board	Investing Activity Report for Department for Communities - Assembly Committee Report

The Committee noted the following tabled items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Social Security Fraud Act Northern Ireland 2001 Revised Code of Practice
Department for Communities	Press Release - A Royal Day to remember in Banbridge Library
Department for Communities	Press Release - DfC launch public consultation on draft Disability Action Plan for 2025
Department for Communities	Press Release - Easter Events at State Care Sites
Department for Communities	Press Release - Minister delivers keynote speech at the Northern Ireland Housing Conference
Department for Communities	Press Release - Ministers visit sports grounds in Belfast
Department for Communities	Financial Provisions Bill — Confirmation of wording of tenancy fraud clause

Agreed: The Chairperson sought members' agreement to consider the following two items ahead of the British Deaf Association's evidence session.



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6. Disposal of Documents Order 1925 - Addendums to existing Retention and Disposal Schedules for six Councils

The Chairperson informed members that addendums to Retention and Disposal schedules that are sent to the Committee are required to be treated in much the same way as a Statutory Rule.

The addendums are subject to the negative resolution.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the addendums.

The Chairperson advised members that, at the Committee meeting at PRONI on 22 May, RaSe staff will brief on their comparative analysis of the scrutiny processes for retention and disposal schedules across various legislatures including in the UK and Ireland.

7. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the Forward Work Programme.

The meeting was suspended at 10.37a.m.

The meeting resumed in public session at 10.42a.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew (Chairperson), Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson), Kellie Armstrong, Andy Allen, Sian Mulholland, Brian Kingston, Maolíosa McHugh (via Zoom), Maurice Bradley.

8. Evidence session by British Deaf Association (BDA) on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Dr. Robert Adam – BDA Chair

Majella McAteer – BDA NI Manager

Tom Lichy – BDA Head of Policy and Research



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A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were:

- Building leadership capacity within the deaf community
- The definition in clause 5 of ‘at least one person or group appearing to the Department to be acting on behalf of the community’
- The use of technology and AI
- Clause 3 and the inclusion of ‘affordability’
- The promotion of sign language
- Disadvantages for the deaf community and language deficit
- Sign language being taught as part of the school curriculum
- Engagement with the Department on the Bill
- The budget for the implementation of the Bill
- Possible gaps in equality legislation
- The use of Henry VIII powers in the Bill
- The possibility for amendments to the Bill

Agreed: That a copy of the Hansard transcript from this session is forwarded the Committee for the Executive Office to inform its Inquiry into Gaps in Equality Legislation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to BDA thanking them for their evidence and to ask for a copy of its AI and sign language policy paper.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Cregagh Primary School to encourage it to make a submission to the Committee’s call for evidence on the Sign Language Bill.

The meeting was suspended at 11.55a.m.

The meeting resumed in public session at 12.06p.m. with the following members present:

Colm Gildernew, Kellie Armstrong, Andy Allen, Sian Mulholland, Brian Kingston, Maolíosa McHugh (via Zoom), Maurice Bradley.



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9. Briefing by the National Lottery (Allwyn)

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Tiffany Jirbandey, Senior Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Allwyn UK

Gillian Taylor, Director of Communications, Allwyn UK

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were:

- The allocation of resources in Northern Ireland
- Player levels in Northern Ireland
- Prevalence of spend in gambling
- Society lotteries and GB-wide lotteries
- The size of prizes
- The National Lottery's marketing costs
- Expenditure controls
- Controls on instant win games and scratch cards
- Level of engagement with young people on instant win games

Agreed: That Allwyn will forward a summary of the research referenced in its briefing paper to the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking a breakdown of online gambling from the Prevalence of Gambling Report 2024.

10. Any other business

There was no other business.

11. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 8 May 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.57p.m.



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Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities