



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 10 October 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

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

Apologies:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

In Attendance:

- Ms Emer Boyle (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 open session at 10.01a.m.

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson conveyed the success of the recent engagement with the Youth Assembly and informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of a report from Tuesday evening's online event on the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairperson thanked the following young people for attending:

Erin; Thomas; Daniel; Isaac; Weronika; Rory; James; Mia; Fionn; Paige; Vicki; Shea; Donal; Darragh; Harrison; Matthew.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Youth Assembly to thank the participants for taking the time to meet with Committee and give their views on the Bill at what the Committee thought was a very worthwhile event.

The Chairperson welcomed the recent Ministerial announcement on 1000 jobs being created as part of an arrangement with the Department for Work and Pensions but expressed disappointment that there was a regional imbalance in relation to where the jobs would be located.



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

- the criteria used for decision-making in relation to where these jobs would be located
- to ask if multiple deprivation indicators were used to determine the geographical location of the jobs and to ask if any locations were considered and rejected
- what proactive actions have been taken by the Department to ensure that a percentage of the 1000 jobs are available to disabled people, economically inactive people and over 55s
- a detailed breakdown of the impact of the current job vacancies in the Department
- to ask if the Department has plans in place to monitor numbers of the new jobs being taken by existing members of DfC staff

The Chairperson raised the issue of the recent Spotlight programme: *A Place to Call Home* and stated that it was a harrowing watch which had highlighted the impact of homelessness.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Trussell Trust had also recently published a report on poverty, which includes recent information on NI.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a list of the link officers for the Anti-Poverty Strategy and to ask what their plan of action is to re-engage organisations previously involved in drafting the strategy. The Committee would also like to know if the work of the link officers will help with the budget planning process to ensure that the associated budget requirements are ready for the planned 2 years budget cycle.

The Chairperson commended First Steps Women's Centre for their recent event entitled The Human Library.



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The Chairperson raised the issue of recent media reports that the Minister for Communities had held a meeting with the Loyalist Communities Council (LCC).

Members expressed concern that the Minister had met with the LCC ahead of meeting with other organisations such as the Equality Coalition and the Women's Policy Group who had asked for a meeting and been declined.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask for the following:

- a copy of the unredacted minutes of the meeting with the LCC, including names of attendees
- a list of all organisations/individuals the Minister has met (excluding meetings where officials have acted as your delegate)
- a list of all organisations/individuals which have requested a meeting with the Minister to discuss areas of policy responsibility
- a list of the organisations/individuals who have been declined a meeting with the Minister
- to ask why the Ministerial email inbox is closed until 21 October
- to ask if the Minister could prioritise attending the Committee meeting on 24 October rather than the meeting currently scheduled for 7 November as the Committee considers this to be an urgent issue for discussion.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 3 October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.



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4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from National Museums NI in relation to partnership work.

Agreed: That a future meeting is held in an NMNI museum.

The Committee noted a reply from Gracehill Trust inviting Members to conduct a visit.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on gambling regulation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how it intends to promote the right of the general public to make a complaint in relation to gambling activities.

The Committee noted a reply from Belfast Works Connect on the number of people its programme has supported.

The Committee noted a NILGOSC reply to the Committee's request for more information on its work.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to the anonymous letter received in relation to the impact on benefits eligibility of the mother and baby payment scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) and the DWP to ask if they have any involvement in the payment scheme and, if so, whether any consideration been given to a social security benefit disregard. If there is currently no consideration being given to this issue, Members would like to know if it is an issue that the NIO could actively consider.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the DWP to seek clarity on whether benefits can be disregarded as part of this payment scheme and for a timeline for deliberations on this issue to complete.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with an update on Jobstart.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to state that the Committee felt it was regrettable that the 16-24-year-old Jobstart could not be funded and to ask for information on the number of people who retained jobs after the scheme ended and for how long they retained the jobs. The Committee would also like to know if the Department could share any feedback on the scheme from participants, if available.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Chamber of Commerce NI and the Federation of Small Businesses to ask for their thoughts on the value of the Jobstart scheme to its members.

The Committee noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on biodiversity heritage.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply on the Historic Buildings Council report.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for information on the work the Department is carrying out at each of the sites referred to in the report, to ask what work is being carried out in relation to the sites identified as red, amber or green and to ask for a copy of the forward work programme for the Historic Buildings Council.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Department reply to Committee queries on Carer's Allowance overpayments.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a breakdown on the reasons for overpayments and whether they were Departmental errors or computer errors.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Welfare Supplementary Payment waiver and the Universal Credit Contingency Fund.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask if money will be held back in the budget for welfare mitigations measures and if the measures will continue to be funded until legislation is introduced; and to ask that, in relation to Universal Credit, the Committee is updated on a quarterly basis on claims from people experiencing fluctuating incomes.



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5. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Imtac	Work Programme for 2024 / 2025
Committee for Finance	Copy of Written Statement from the Finance Minister and the Budget Sustainability Plan provided by Committee Clerk
Committee for Finance	Unfilled vacancies across the NICS
Committee for Finance	UK Shared Prosperity Fund
Examiner of Statutory Rules	23rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Individual	Social housing DfC and legal issues - further information
Dept for Communities	Consultation on Social Security Fraud Act (Northern Ireland)
Dept for Communities	Letter re Northern Ireland Football Fund

Request from RCIS to brief the Committee.

Agreed: That RCIS is added to the list to brief the Committee at a future meeting.



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6. Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill - briefing by Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)

The Chairperson welcomed Charles Cotton, Senior Policy and Practice Advisor – Pay and Reward, to the meeting.

A question and answer session followed the briefing session and the main areas of discussion were savings sidecars, sliding scales for payments, communications strategy and views on lowering the age of auto-enrolment to 16.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for briefing the Committee.

7. Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill - briefing by Institute for Fiscal Studies

The Chairperson welcomed Dr Jonathan Cribb, Associate Director at IFS and Head of the Retirement, Savings, and Ageing sector, to the meeting.

A question and answer session followed the briefing session and the main areas of discussion were views on lowering the age of auto-enrolment to 16, communications strategy, sliding scales for payments and engagement with trade unions.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for briefing the Committee.

8. Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill - briefing by University of Stirling



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The Chairperson welcomed Dr Rachel Scarfe, University of Stirling, to the meeting.

A question and answer session followed the briefing session and the main areas of discussion were how claw back from businesses could be prevented, communications strategy and possible unintended consequences.

The Chairperson thanked the representative for briefing the Committee.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.47a.m. for a comfort break.

The meeting restarted at 12.03p.m.

9. Committee deliberations on the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that they would now commence deliberations on the Bill.

The Chairperson reminded Members that this was not the formal clause by clause stage but an opportunity to go through the Clauses and comprehensively review with the Department any issues raised by stakeholders or Committee Members and to ask for clarification on how the Bill addresses these concerns and any *additional* action that the Department intends to take on the back of the evidence the Committee has received.

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental Officials to the meeting:

Hayley Ward
Richard Jordan



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The Chairperson invited the Officials to brief the Committee on each clause.

Brian Kingston left the meeting at 12.31p.m.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials and informed Members that deliberations would continue at the meeting on 17 October.

10.SR 2024/160 - The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson reminded Members that Committee had deferred a decision on this Rule until today's meeting; that they have sent a letter to the Minister to ask that the Committee was provided with a copy of the EQIA to enable full scrutiny. Unfortunately, the Department has stated that the EQIA report is not available.

The Chairperson informed Members that, with the end of the statutory period for the Rule being 14 October, the Committee now needed to take a decision on the Rule.

The Committee wanted to place on record its disappointment with the Department at not being provided with the EQIA to ensure that it had the full range of information available to it to carry out its proper scrutiny of the Rule. Members felt that this was not the appropriate way to treat a request from a statutory committee.

Members also felt that this was not the appropriate way to make changes to social security legislation as it had been rushed through without consultation and had left the Committee in an untenable position with no other choice than to agree to the Rule as failure to do so would result in a situation where no one in Northern Ireland would receive the winter fuel payment.

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



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- if it has asked DWP for a list of people in Northern Ireland that are entitled to the payment
- what the Department is doing to encourage people in receipt of Pension Credit to apply for the payment as the Committee feels that the Department needs to do more to ensure that all those entitled to the payment are claiming it
- how the Department is communicating the eligibility criteria for pension credit payments as the Committee feels that the use of social media is an inappropriate way to communicate with older people in relation to their social security entitlements as it is not a medium that older people, generally, are engaged in
- the number of people that have applied for the payment here recently that now fall within the backdating rules
- what level of support there currently is for households in relation to fuel poverty and if the Department is currently considering new support schemes

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to outline the Committee's concerns on this Rule as outlined above and to ask what level of discussions he has had with the relevant Minister in DWP on the winter fuel payment.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Prime Minister to outline the Committee's concerns and opposition to the Rule, to outline the difficulties the introduction of the legislation to remove the winter fuel payment for many people has created in the NI legislative process as it has led to a situation where subordinate legislation has been rushed and therefore not been subject to the normal scrutiny process.

The Committee would like to know what the Prime Minister's compelling reasons are for removing the payment as it will lead to hardship for many people and inevitably a situation where people have to choose between heat or eat.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/160 The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.



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11. Forward Work Programme

Members noted a copy of the forward work programme.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a memo from the Clerk in relation to a Committee response to the draft Programme for Government. This item was deferred for consideration at the meeting on 3 October due to a lack of quorum. Members decided that it would be best for their individual parties to respond to this.

12. Any other business

There was no other business.

13. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 17 October 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.54p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities