



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 12 September 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
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA

Apologies:

- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

In Attendance:

- Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Mrs Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)



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

The Chairperson informed Members that they needed to declare any interests under discussion at the meeting.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a private sector landlord and a charity trustee.

Sian Mulholland, Brian Kingston, Maolíosa McHugh and Kellie Armstrong declared an interest as members of the NILGOSC pension scheme.

Sian Mulholland declared an interest as Chairperson of the All-Party Group on the Arts.

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a private sector landlord and a charity trustee.

The Chairperson extended his, and the Committee's, condolences to Daniel McCrossan following the recent death of his mother.

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that there were a number of issues he would like to draw Committee attention to, including;

- Winter Fuel Payments – the Chairperson informed Members that there had been much reporting and discussion on this in recent days but the Committee still needed to undertake its scrutiny role and confirmed that



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- Committee was scheduled to consider the associated SL1 and hear from Departmental officials later in the meeting;
- Grenfell Inquiry report – the Chairperson noted the inquiry report publication, the associate significance and need for scrutiny by the Committee of all follow-up actions;
 - Electrical Safety event on Monday – the Chairperson highlighted the importance of proper regulation and the key role for the Committee in looking out for forthcoming changes and improvements;
 - The Chairperson acknowledged and welcomed the news that Air Ambulance NI had been chosen as the Assembly nominated Charity;
 - The Chairperson informed Members that, whilst he had a number of commitments on Monday past, he did get an opportunity to see Michael on the margins of the Monday event and acknowledge his significant TT achievement records;
 - The Chairperson put on record on behalf of the entire Committee huge congratulations to all of our Olympians and Paralympians and hoped there would be opportunities for the Committee to engage with them further and in person in the forthcoming months.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 27 June 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.



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4. Matters Arising

The Chairperson informed Members that there were a substantial number of Matter arising items which had been received over the summer recess. As there were so many items, Members had been provided with a Matters Arising memo which set out a brief summary of each item organised by topic or theme.

The Committee noted a range of replies in relation to its queries on Carers' Allowance.

The Committee noted a Ministerial reply and a reply from the Secretary of State in relation to Casement Park.

The Committee noted replies from the Departments in relation to the COPNI report on preparations for an ageing population.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with replies from Councils on reports made to Environmental Health in relation to private rented sector housing over the last five years.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking an update on ongoing work to ensure the private landlord registry is being updated and assurance that there is work ongoing with landlords to encourage them towards formal registration.

The Committee noted replies to queries following the briefing by Electrical Safety First before summer recess.

The Committee noted a reply from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in relation to Committee queries on local government remote meetings regulations.

The Committee noted a reply from the Department in relation to the Scottish model for a mortgage rescue scheme.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply in relation to the Committee's request to be provided with regular updates on the introduction of a discretionary waiver facility for individuals in receipt of a Welfare Supplementary Payment.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for further information on the eligibility criteria for the waiver facility and to ask how tenants will be adequately informed about the waiver.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply in relation to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the progress of renaming this (UCCF) fund and the Department's engagement with the sector on this piece of work. The Committee would also like to know of any contingency plans that the Department has in place as Members were concerned that the budget may not be sufficient to meet increased demand. Members also requested more detail on how the Department intends to deal with seasonal workers or those working in gig economy or on zero hours contracts, who may not have a set amount of earnings each week.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply in relation to gambling legislation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Gambling Commission to ask for an update on changes in relation to online gambling and the associated regulatory activities across all parts of the UK.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for baseline information on how the land-based gambling industry is adhering to rules, what level of compliance is being achieved currently and updated information in relation to regulatory gaps.

The Committee noted a Departmental reply in relation to the intermediate rent scheme.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply in relation to the NIHE Right to Buy Scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if the policy in relation to Capital receipts from the NIHE's house sales is applied annually.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to ask for an update on ongoing work in relation to the reform of the NIHE.



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The Committee noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on housing issues.

The Committee noted a reply from Sport NI following their briefing session at the meeting on 2 May and the follow-up information requested.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries following the briefing session by the Fuel Poverty Coalition.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the Affordable Warmth Scheme in light of the Winter Fuel Payment cut. The Committee would like the following information:

- The number of people awaiting an outcome on their applications and a breakdown of the work they require
- the length of time people have been waiting for a decision
- the current status of the budget as Committee expressed concern about whether it would be able to continue to meet demand.

The Committee noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries following the briefing session by Renters' Voice.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Jobstart Scheme 50+.

Agreed: That the Department is asked, as part of their regular updates on this issue, to provide a breakdown of the companies participating in the scheme and the numbers of placements that each company is offering. The Committee would also like to know the Department's plans to finance the original Jobstart scheme for people aged 18+.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the ongoing review of grant funding.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Arts Council requesting an update on its most recent commissioned research on the working and living conditions of artists reported in April 2024, particularly in relation to freelancers.



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The Committee noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the framework for interpretation, translation and transcription services.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to a Committee request for further information on the budget.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister requesting an in-person briefing on the Department's updated financial situation, to include information on October monitoring and any impact this may have on the delivery of the actions set out in the Departmental business plan 2024/25.

The Committee noted a Departmental reply to Committee queries on the Meenan Square project.

The Committee noted a reply from the Energy Savings Trust to Committee queries on the Sustainable Energy Programme.

The Committee noted a Ministerial reply to Committee queries on the Local Housing Allowance.

The Committee noted a Ministerial reply to Committee queries on funding for the Scoil Spreagtha O cáidí Cheiliúrtha scheme.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to the Committee's request for a copy of the Departmental Business Plan 2024-25.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on its strategic planning priorities in light of the budget available.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from TEO to a Committee query on the development of an anti-poverty strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office Committee to ask if it has received any updates from the Executive Office on the development of an anti-poverty strategy and whether they are carrying out any work in relation to this.



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5. Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill – Briefing by Association of British Insurers

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Alastair Ross, Assistant Director, Head of Public Policy (Scotland, Wales & NI)

Ben Infield, Policy Adviser, Long Term Savings Policy

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were the views of smaller business on the changes proposed by the Bill, whether 16-year olds in apprenticeships could be auto-enrolled in a pension scheme, the potential for any unintended consequences from the Bill and protection for workers on zero hours contracts or working in the gig economy.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

6. Briefing by Pivotal

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Ann Watt, Director

Dr James Greer, Senior Researcher

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were the definition of economic inactivity, the key barriers for people in being economically active, geographic variations and the need for further research in this area.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.04p.m.



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The meeting restarted at 12.11p.m. with all Members present.

7. SL1 - The Electrical Safety Standards for Private Tenancies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the purpose of the proposed Order is to introduce the requirement for private rented landlords to have the hardwired electrical installation of a rental property inspected and tested by a qualified electrician at intervals of not less than a 5-year period.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether the guidance will include a requirement for specific qualifications for electricians to be able to carry out this work.

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

8. SL1 - The Social Security (Genuine and Sufficient Link to the UK) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the purpose of this proposed Rule is to make amendments to disability and carer benefits regulations to amend provisions relating to the Genuine and Sufficient Link (GSL) Test. The proposed amendments will update the legislation in line with the Court of Appeal decision in *Kavanagh & Anor v The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* and align it with operational guidance.

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



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9. SL1 - The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that, given the topic and the short timeframes associated with this, the Committee would receive a Departmental briefing on this proposed Rule.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

David Tarr, DfC

John Noble, DfC

A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were the costs of not maintaining parity with the rest of the UK, the need for changes in the current Pensions Credit threshold and whether the Department can carry out a piece of work in relation to this, information campaigns to reach those that are entitled to claim Pension Credit but have not done so yet, the work the Minister has been carrying out in relation to the winter fuel payments and the need for an Equality Impact Assessment to be carried out.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) to highlight the Committee's discontent with the decision to means test the winter fuel payment, to encourage the DWP towards a different course of action and to ask if there is any work ongoing in relation to reviewing the qualifying threshold for Pension Credit.

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



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10. SL1 The Draft Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that Members would receive a Departmental briefing on this proposal which was received during recess and was in relation to the Rule which had also been laid.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Julie Broadway, DfC

Willy Dobbin, DfC

The Officials apologised to the Committee for the lateness in forwarding the SL1 and SR to the Committee but explained that, despite NILGOSC's best efforts in taking forward the complex and detailed work to implement the McCloud Remedy, it has acknowledged that it is unable to include the McCloud Remedy in the Annual Benefit Statements (ABSs) this year (2023/24 statements) and there is a strong possibility that all the Remedy work may not be completed by March 2025 in time for the 2024/25 statements.

To ensure that changes to ABSs do not detract from work on other aspects of the McCloud Remedy, the requirement to include an underpin estimate in the 2023/24 statements, and possibly the 2024/25 statements, is being set aside.

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

The meeting went into closed session at 12.52p.m. Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.52p.m.

11. Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) briefing on delegated legislation.

The Chairperson informed Members that the ESR had been invited to provide procedural advice to Committee given the very tight timescales pertaining to agenda items 9 and 10.



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The Chairperson welcomed Angela Kelly to the meeting and invited her to brief the Committee.

The Chairperson thanked Angela for briefing the Committee.

The meeting resumed in open session at 13.13p.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that the Department does everything in its power to forward SL1s and SRs to the Committee in good time to allow the Committee to have the required amount of time to carry out its scrutiny role.

12. SR 2024/159 The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: “That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/159 The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule”

13. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that they have been provided with a correspondence memo.

Due to time constraints, it was agreed that all items of correspondence would be deferred for consideration at the meeting on 19 September.



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14. Forward work programme

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a paper from the Clerk in relation to the planning session the Committee held in Dungannon in May.

The Chairperson asked that Members take the memo away for review and consider it further whilst the Committee team seek updated information from the Department and relevant agencies in relation to the priorities table.

Members noted the forward work programme.

15. Any other business

Sian Mulholland noted that Tracey McCaughey had left the Committee secretariat team and asked that the minutes record the thanks and appreciation of the Committee for the work she has carried out on its behalf.

16. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00a.m. on Thursday 12 September, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.16p.m.



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Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities