



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 14 November 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 Daniel McCrossan MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies:

- Mr Maolíosa McHugh 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 10.02 a.m.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a landlord.

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a landlord.

Brian Kingston left the meeting at 10.03 a.m.

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business to report.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 7 November 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.



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4. Matters Arising

Members noted a reply from the Housing Executive in relation to a Committee request to provide guidance for applicants, contractors and architects to support the contractor appointment stage as part of the Warranted Builder change process to all MLA offices.

Brian Kingston re-joined the meeting at 10.07 a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply on the sports funding announcement following Olympic and Paralympic success.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to welcome that the athletes will be supported in allocating the funding available to each of them. Members expressed concern that this is an unusual way to allocate public money and asked for the following information:

- The criteria to be used for the allocation of funds
- How the impact of the funds will be measured
- Whether a risk assessment of this model of funding allocation has been undertaken
- For more information on where the 5 sports hubs under the Multi Facility Fund will be located and for a timeline for completion of the hubs

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Sport NI to ask if it has plans to invest in paralympian sport and to ask what Sport NI is doing to support paralympians and their families. The Committee also requested a briefing at a future meeting.

Members noted a Departmental reply on gambling regulation.

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 if a traffic light system can be applied to monitor the recommendations ("essays") referred to in the report and to ask for confirmation of whether there would be budget in place



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should the Department be subject to any associated legal challenges in the context of not progressing works needed. The Committee would also like the Department to ensure that funding is released within more appropriate timeframes for work to be undertaken, as funding for thatched roofs had previously been released too late in the season and when materials for thatching were not available.

Members would also like a briefing at a future meeting to learn more about the different strands of the Historic Environment, Culture and Creativity strategy as they feel that each strand will require individual attention.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply to Committee's queries on the retention of employees entering employment through the JobStart (16-24) Scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to commend it on the success of the Jobstart Scheme and to ask the following:

- if there is any follow up on the retention of employees recruited via the Scheme after 9 or 12 months
- if the Department has any further information on the reasons why 32% of those who participated in the scheme are not in employment
- if there could be a further review after 1 year to monitor success and ascertain whether the scheme represents value for money

Members noted a Departmental reply on the NI Resettlement Team.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Departmental reply on the Disabled Facilities Grant and Home Improvement Grants.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to welcome the support that people are receiving to remain in their own homes but to highlight continued concerns about the situation facing tenants in need of repairs to their homes.

The Committee asked for the following information (if possible in a table):

- the number of applications in relation to each support scheme
- the type of assistance being requested (what works are required)



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- the level of deficit in terms of demand against the funding available
- the number of people withdrawing from the process after they have been awarded a grant
- the average length of time from award of grant to completion of repairs
- if the Department has been in contact with Shelter and Radius about their work with people who have received grants under the scheme, in order to seek feedback on the scheme
- the number of people in receipt of the grant that have raised issues with the complexity the grant or difficulties they have with managing the process

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with Departmental replies on the progress of an Irish Language Strategy, the appointment of an Irish Language Commissioner and the membership of the Cross-Departmental Working Group for the Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy and the Irish Language Strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department outlining the Committee's disappointment with the tone and attitude of the responses received on these issues. The Committee would like to be able to assist the Department by carrying out its statutory role but the Department needs to be mindful of the Committee's statutory role under the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in terms of scrutiny of policy and legislation and its ongoing role in consultation. The Committee emphasised the need for the Department to provide up to date and fulsome responses to the Committee's requests for information.

The Committee feels that these types of responses are inappropriate and not in keeping with the role of the Committee. The Committee would like a full response to its original request for the names of the officials in the Cross-Departmental Working Group and an update on the work undertaken since February 2024 to progress the Ulster-Scots Language, Heritage and Culture Strategy and the Irish Language Strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office for an update on the progress of the appointment of Language Commissioners.

Members noted a reply from the Arts Council on the review of its grants system.



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The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with replies from DWP and the NIO in relation to Committees query on the potential for a benefit disregard in the context of awards to be made via the Mother and Baby payment scheme.

Agreed: That a follow-up letter is sent to the DWP to ask for a further reply on progress on this issue in 12 weeks' time.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a paper from Gable on its project with Shelter.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to recognise the work it does in relation to supporting tenants to live in their own homes and to ask the following;

- Does the Housing Executive have any plans for a review of home improvement agencies
- For more details on the specific roles that Shelter and Radius have in Housing Executive home improvement schemes
- Whether there are any plans to undertake an independent review of the Trusted Trader Scheme

Agreed: That a letter is also sent to the Department of Health to ask what models of home improvement support agencies it works with and whether there are any plans to extend these home improvement services across all HSC Trusts.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with several replies from councils in relation to the Private Landlord Registration Scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department and SOLACE to ask that they monitor this scheme.

Members noted a reply from the Department for Culture Media and Sport in relation to the provision of sign language on BBC NI Lunchtime News.

Members noted a letter from the Commissioner for Older People confirming his attendance at a future meeting.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with the PAC Report on Child Poverty as requested at the meeting on 7 November.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Public Accounts Committee to ask that it keeps the Committee informed of progress on the implementation of the recommendations set out in the report.

Members noted a Departmental reply on Carer's Allowance overpayments.

Members noted a reply from TEO on Disability Rights and Representation.

5. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Letter from Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to SOLACE re Enforcement around Single Use Vapes.
Committee for Finance	Copy of Minister of Finance Oral Statement - Public Expenditure 2024-25 October Monitoring.
Dept for Communities	SR 2024 192 The Pensions (2005 Order) (Code of Practice) (Defined Benefit Funding) (Appointed Day) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024
BBC NI	Invitation to 100 years of the BBC in Northern Ireland – Assembly Reception
Dept for Communities	Press release - Launch of the DfC Giving Tree Appeal 2024
Dept for Communities	Press release - New Get Help Arranging Child Maintenance online service goes live
Dept for Communities	Press release - Fresh Start through Sport 2023-2024



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Dept for Communities	Press release - Good Relations 'Housing for All' Award now open
Dept for Communities	Press release - Make the Call attend Winter Warmer Roadshow

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.57 a.m.

Request from Cliff Edge Coalition to brief Committee and copy of Coalition's response to NI Executive draft Programme for Government.

Agreed: That the Cliff Edge Coalition is invited to brief the Committee at the meeting on 5 December.

Minister of Finance Oral Statement - Public Expenditure 2024-25 October Monitoring.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, in relation to the General Fund, that the Committee receives a written briefing on the allocation of this funding in advance of any public statement being made outlining specific allocations. The Committee welcomes the additional funding allocation for the building of social homes but would like to know if, in the event that the money cannot be spent in this financial year, the Department will be permitted to carry over the money into the next financial year. Finally, the Committee welcomed the additional money for Winter Fuel allowances and would like to be kept informed as to the criteria for the allocation of this funding.

The Chairperson asked Members if they were content for the meeting to go into closed session for the next agenda item.

Agreed: That the meeting goes into closed session

The meeting went into closed session at 10.58 a.m.



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6. Committee Deliberations on the Child Support Enforcement Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee now needed to commence its deliberations on the Bill and reminded Members that this was not the formal clause by clause stage.

The Chairperson welcomed Aoibheann Baker from the Bill Office who was available to answer any Committee queries.

The Chairperson informed Members that Departmental Officials will attend the meeting on 21 November when the Committee will formally consider the clauses and asked that any other issues or queries are highlighted now to ensure that the Officials could be informed of them in advance of that session.

The meeting went back into public session at 11.03 a.m.

7. Briefing by Equality Commission

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Geraldine McGahey (Chief Commissioner)

Darren McKinstry (Director, Public Policy and Strategic Engagement)

Kathryn Barr (Senior Policy Officer)

A question and answer session followed the briefing session and the main areas of discussion were disability legislative reform, examples of best practice in relation to disability legislation, the needs for a Disability Strategy, the Northern Ireland Regional Disability Forum and equality impact assessments.

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



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- For confirmation in relation to what plans are in place for legislative reform of disability law, and to ask if this will include best practice internationally as the Committee feels that it is important that this is happening now to inform the disability strategy
- For confirmation of the steps the Department is taking to establish the Regional Disability Forum as the Committee feels this should be a priority as it would be an asset to both the Department for Communities and all Executive departments
- If the Department plans reconvene/re-engage communication those involved in the co-design of the disability strategy
- If the Department still plans to share the draft strategy with those involved in the co-design process *prior* to it being published
- For clarification on whether the strategy will contain an oversight mechanism and that the Terms of Reference should ensure that the oversight mechanism will involve oversight of all Executive departments, not just DfC.

Agreed: That a research paper is requested from RalSe on disability law in other jurisdictions in the UK, Europe and internationally.

8. SR 189/2024 - The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 189/2024 - The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.

9. Welfare Reform Mitigations – consideration of Committee motion



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The Chairperson informed Members they had been provided with the wording of a proposed Committee motion.

10. The Committee discussed amendments to the motion.

Agreed: That the motion is amended to read as follows:

That this Assembly expresses its concern at the impending March 2025 deadline for the review of Welfare Supplementary Payments under the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022; recognises the vital role that these mitigation payments play in supporting vulnerable individuals and families affected by welfare reforms; and calls on the Minister for Communities to commit to preserving these payments at no less than their current levels beyond March 2025 and to initiate clear, proactive communication with all current recipients about their entitlement; and further urges the Minister to prioritise legislative planning and coordination with the Executive to secure robust, long-term mitigation protections for those most adversely impacted by welfare reform, with a clear timeline for implementation.

Agreed: That a copy of the motion is lodged with the Business Office to be scheduled for a future plenary debate.

11. Forward Work Programme

Members noted a copy of the forward work programme.



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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 21 November 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.10.p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities