



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 19 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 (via Zoom)
Mr Brian Kingston MLA

Apologies: Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
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 10.02a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they needed to declare any interests under discussion at the meeting and the following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – Charity Trustee

Kellie Armstrong – member of NILGOSC pension scheme

Brian Kingston – Charity Trustee and member of NILGOSC pension scheme

Andy Allen - Charity Trustee

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he noted the recent Ministerial statement on the North South Ministerial Council on Languages and the recent receipt of a report from the Council of Europe on the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages.

Agreed: That an update is sought from the Department on progress on an Irish Language Strategy and the appointment of an Irish Language Commissioner.

The Chairperson recorded his disappointment with the recent decision by the British Government in relation to funding for the redevelopment of Casement Park.



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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 12 September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes subject to a minor amendment.

4. Correspondence

The Chairperson informed Members that, at the meeting on 19 September, the Committee deferred consideration of the correspondence until today.

Members were asked if they had any comments on the items of correspondence from the meeting on 12 September.

Members noted the following items of correspondence:

Defective Premises Bill – correspondence from individual
Committee for Finance Written briefing on monthly outturn
Link to the Responsible Business report 2023 – Phoenix Energy
Local Government Cremation Regulations
Culture and Creative Industries Inter-Ministerial Group Terms of reference of group and communiqué issued following first meeting provided.
Twentieth Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Investing Activity Report – 30 June 2024
Funding for the Scoil Spreagtha O cáidí Cheiliúrtha Scheme



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Social Fund Report and Accounts 2022-23
DfC Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24
Committee for Finance - Proposed legislative provisions of the Financial Provisions Bill.
NIHE Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24
NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NI) Order 2003 Article 24 review reporting
Invitation to Homelessness Conference on 10 October 2024
Charity Commission for NI Annual Report and Accounts 23/24
Press Release Appointment of Chair and Independent Members To NILGOSC
Press Release Appointment of Members to the Management Committee of the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium
Press Release Communities Minister Lyons establishes US/NI Cultural Working Group
Press Release Appointments to the Board of National Museums Northern Ireland
Press Release Reappointments to the Board of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland
Press Release Appointments to the Board of Sport Northern Ireland
Press Release £1.9 million boost for over 50's employability



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Press Release Consultation launched on changes to Child Maintenance enforcement and collection
Press Release Tax credit only recipients urged to take action on 'Move to UC' migration notices
Copy of letter to Minister regarding concerns about Defective Premises Bill
Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24
Annual Report 2023/24
Annual Report and Accounts
Impact Report 2023-24
Request to brief committee on the Creative Communities research programme
Investing Activity Report – 28 July 2024
DfC and Libraries NI partnership agreement
Annual Report and accounts 2023/24
Annual Report and accounts 2023/24
Draft Defined Benefit Funding Code of Practice
Annual Report and accounts 2023/24
COPNI commissioner recruitment competition
Press Release Mitigations schemes survey available on Communities website
Press Release



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Minister cheers on best ever Olympics
Press Release
Statement on Winter Fuel Payment
NI Executive's Budget 24-25 Supplementary Note
Terms of reference for the statutory report on Welfare Supplementary Payments
Partnership Agreement between DfC and Armagh Observatory
DWP extension of consultation on “Child Maintenance: Improving the collection and transfer of payments”
Pensions Regulator’s Defined Benefit Funding Code of Practice 2024
Gambling Code of Practice Consultation
New Decade New Approach Review reports on NICCY and COPNI
NICCY Article 24 Reports for 2019 And 2023
Charities Annual Report 2023
Victoria Square Apartments
Investing Activity Report – 25 August 2024
Invitation to event on Thursday, 26 September 2024 “Reducing Alcohol Harms in NI: The potential of Minimum Unit Pricing”
Written Ministerial Statement - Proposed Policy Changes to the Winter Fuel Payment Scheme in Northern Ireland
Invitation to Raising Awareness of Developmental Language (DLD) Day 18 October 2024
Twenty First Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Briefing – 2024-25 Urgent In-Year Information Gathering Exercise (August 2024)



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- Department for Communities 21st Historic Buildings Council Report.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how and when it will implement the recommendations in the report.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a memo outlining the correspondence received in the week up to today's meeting, including:

- Ministerial Statement on Heritage, Culture and Creativity programme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on ongoing work to improve the lives of artists.

- Public consultation on child maintenance enforcement measures - the use of administrative liability orders.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for further information on how this would impact on parents that are not living in the same jurisdiction, north or south of the border.

- Partnership Agreement between DfC and National Museums.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on any ongoing work on a north south and east west basis in relation to these programmes.

- Departmental paper on Financial Provisions Bill

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a synopsis of responses to the consultation on housing tenancy fraud.

- Press releases on appointments to Boards.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the various organisations outlined in the press releases to ask for information on their workloads and responsibilities and to ask if they have any issues they wish to raise with the Committee.

- Equality Coalition letter to Communities Minister requesting urgent update on social inclusion strategies.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department seeking update and emphasising the following points:

- An update on all of the consultation that has taken place in relation to the social strategies
 - Detail in relation to how relevant groups have been included in the process
 - Whether a deadline is in place for publication of the strategies
 - That the Committee feels that a deadline is needed as it will help the Department have a strategy in place in advance of moving towards 2-year budgeting.
- Departmental letter re Moravian church villages world heritage site status.

Agreed: That a letter offering the Committee's congratulations is sent to Dr David Johnstone, Gracehill Trust.

- Gambling Code of Practice Consultation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to asked for a copy of the synopsis of responses to the consultation and to clarify where responsibility for the regulation of online gambling sits in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: That the Committee is provided at a future meeting with the Westminster research briefing paper on the Online Safety Bill.

The Chairperson informed Members that they now needed to consider the most recent correspondence memo.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:



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Letter from Gerry Carroll MLA re People's Housing Bill
Press Recognition Panel - Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024
NILGOSC Annual Report 2023-24
Twenty Second Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Housing Rights Event Invite - Home - A Place for Everyone
<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ Budget 2025/26 Timeline➤ Budget Commissioning Templates➤ Scrutiny of Budgeting for the PfG
NIAO Departmental Guide
<p>The guide provides:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ A short overview of DfC priorities and funding.➤ An overview of the NIAO programme of audit work.

- Broadcasting Policy in a Devolved UK – request for a letter of support from the University of Ulster for a research funding application.

Agreed: That a letter of support is sent to University of Ulster.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to ask, under the BBC's licence, what requirements it has to provide accessible content on broadcast TV, not just online as the Committee is disappointed by the change to provision of sign language on BBC NI's lunchtime news which only happens online now.

- Committee for the Executive Office - Draft Programme for Government Consultation

Agreed: That this is considered further at a future meeting with a view to submitting a Committee response.

- Action for Children - A Place to Call Home research report



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to Paddy (via Action for Children), the young person referenced in the report, to highlight that the Committee read and noted his experiences in care with great concern and wanted to wish him well in the future.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to express the Committee's concerns in relation to its focus on one-bedroom housing. The Committee requested the following information:

- How are care leavers aged 16 and 17 supported when seeking housing
- An update on the process to determine an individual's bedroom indicator
- Whether the NIHE has any work ongoing in relation to future proofing changes in circumstance such as the need for a live-in carer
- An update on the NIHE youth homelessness strategy
- A written briefing on the housing selection scheme and, in particular, the impact in relation to 16/17 year olds and the demand for single bed units.

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

- an update on its ongoing work in relation to a housing strategy in relation to 16/17 year olds and their ability to sustain a tenancy and how the NIHE intends to meet the specific needs of this cohort.
- Whether there is any plan to review the policy in relation to the allocation of Housing Benefit when a tenancy is granted as Committee has heard examples of situations where a homeless person may be offered housing but cannot move in immediately and the benefit is no longer paid to the homeless organisation but directly to the housing association.

Agreed: That a research paper is requested from RalSe on how the housing selection scheme impacts on single bed unit and waiting lists and to ask for the number of people in the private rented sector as they are not being included in statistics, especially in rural areas.



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5. Matters Arising

The Committee noted a reply from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to Committee queries on complaints to environmental health in the past 5 years about the private rental sector.

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

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department expressing the Committee's concerns about the level of debt for some carers and to ask whether, if VEP access is granted by DWP, it will be possible to put a flag in the system to identify concerns around debt issues in order that repayment remains possible? The Committee would also like to know how many cases of debt have been waived by the Department.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a reply from the Housing Executive to a Committee request that guidance for applicants, contractors and architects to support the contractor appointment stage as part of the Warranted Builder change process be sent to all MLA offices (when updated).

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask for the following information:

- A list of the changes in the Housing Improvement Grant and Disabled Facilities Grant and when these changes were made
- How the Housing Executive intends to protect public money and applicants for these grants as there is a concern in relation to the oversight of the schemes
- Any research/information on barriers for people who need the grant but are fearful of applying for it due to the demands of the role they would have in hiring builders and overseeing the work
- Information on the success rate of the Shelter NI model



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- Information on how applicants are updated on the progress of their grant applications and whether they are given a timeline for their grant application

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Shelter NI/Gable to ask for an update on their ongoing work.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a Ministerial reply to Committee queries on a disability strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if there is a timeline for completion of work on all of the social inclusion strategies, if the Committee will be included as a consultee prior to the publication of the strategies and for an update on the progress of work on each strategy along with contact information for the officials leading on each strategy.

The Chairperson informed Members that the meeting needed to move into closed session to receive briefings from Assembly Bill Office officials on the two Bills that the Committee has in its workload - the Pensions Automatic Enrolment Bill and the Child Support Enforcement Bill.

The meeting went into closed session at 11.02a.m.

6. Child Support Enforcement Bill – briefing by Assembly Bill Office

The Chairperson welcomed the following Bill Office official to the meeting:

Aoibheann Baker

Ms Baker briefed the Committee on the Child Support Enforcement Bill.

The Chairperson thanked Ms Baker for briefing the Committee.



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7. Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill – Briefing by Assembly Bill Office

The Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly Bill Office official to the meeting:

Stephen Orme

The Chairperson thanked Mr Orme for briefing the Committee.

The meeting went back into open session at 12.20p.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that any subordinate legislation in relation to these two Bills are subject to the draft affirmative procedure (as a minimum) and, in the event that this is not achievable, that the Department includes an explanation for this decision in the explanatory notes.

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

The Chairperson informed Members that, as the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not yet reported on this rule, he would propose to defer consideration of the Rule until after the publication of the Examiner's next report.

Agreed: That Committee defer consideration of the draft Rule until the Examiner has reported and that Committee invite the Examiner to provide her advice, when the report is available.

9. SR 2024/163 - The Social Security (Genuine and Sufficient Link to the United Kingdom) (Amendment) Regulations (NI)



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Agreed: “That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/163 - The Social Security (Genuine and Sufficient Link to the United Kingdom) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report, has no objection to the rule.”

10. SL1 The Social Security (Infected Blood Capital Disregard) (Amendment) Regs (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that the purpose of this proposed Statutory Rule was to amend various social security regulations to provide a disregard for any payments made out of the estate of a person which was derived from a payment from an approved blood scheme. This disregard was previously only available to family members of the deceased. The proposed GB regulations will extend the disregard to anyone who receives such a payment from such an estate.

Payments from an approved blood scheme will be disregarded indefinitely for the purposes of calculating entitlement to means-tested benefits.

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

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask why Carer’s Allowance is not included in the list of means tested benefits for this proposal.

11. Briefing by Belfast Works Connect

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Andrew Irvine, CEO - East Belfast Mission

Rosemary McCusker, Head of Employment and Training - Upper Springfield Development Trust

Ciaran Boylan, Belfast Works Connect Consultant - Locus Management



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A question and answer session followed the briefing and the main areas of discussion were economic inactivity, programmes for employment, funding and engagement with further education colleges.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to ask for a timeline in relation to the decision on replacement funding for the Social Prosperity Fund; for a report on the effectiveness of the fund in Northern Ireland; and to ask if they are considering multi year budgets for the replacement fund.

12. Briefing by NICVA

The Chairperson informed Members that, due to a bereavement, the briefing session by NICVA could not take place and would be rearranged for a future Committee meeting.

13. Forward work programme

Members noted the forward work programme and were informed that the meeting on 24 October would be held in the premises of First Housing, in Derry/Londonderry.

Andy Allen and Brian Kingston left the meeting at 13.06p.m.



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14. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong informed Members of a recent visit to True Harvest Seeds in relation to heritage and biodiversity.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether there are any funding streams for heritage and biodiversity and if there is a specific contact in the Department to discuss this issue further with.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00a.m. on Thursday 26 September, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.06p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities