



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 21 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 Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies:

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 10.06 a.m.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a landlord and a Charity Trustee.

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a landlord.

Daniel McCrossan declared an interest as a landlord.

Brian Kingston declared an interest as a director of a charity.

Maolíosa McHugh declared an interest as Charity Trustee of Naomh Eoghain Caisleán na Deirge.

Ciara Ferguson declared an interest as a former voluntary and community worker and member of NICVA.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that they needed to agree the date of the first Committee meeting post-Christmas recess.

Agreed: That the first meeting post-Christmas recess is held on Thursday 16 January 2025.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.11a.m.



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The Chairperson acknowledged the final event to mark 100 years of the BBC NI event held on Tuesday 19 November in the Long Gallery. The Chairperson also put on record the important role that the BBC has played here in nurturing, developing and promoting the local creative arts, drama and languages as well as artists and media professionals.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided in tabled papers with a copy of the draft Housing Strategy as well as a paper in relation to October Monitoring out-turns, which had been omitted from papers previously provided, in error. A discussion followed during which Members discussed their concerns about established protocols for the timely provision of departmental papers and engagement with the Committee *not* being consistently adhered to by the Minister and the Department.

Agreed: That the Permanent Secretary and Deputy Secretaries are invited to a future meeting to discuss improving communication between the Department and the Committee and to ask for an explanation as to why agreed protocols are not being consistently adhered to in relation to the timescales for the provision of Departmental papers to the Committee. The Committee also requested an explanation as to why the Department refused to brief on the draft Housing Strategy in closed session.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, following the recent Ministerial announcement of £100 winter fuel payments to pensioners, what specific support is being made available to non-pensioner households.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 14 November 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 summary table of Matters Arising and asked if there were any items they wished to discuss further.

Lisburn and Castlereagh Council response in relation to the Landlord Registration Scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Lisburn and Castlereagh Council seeking an oral briefing at a future Committee meeting to focus on the approach being taken for the implementation of this scheme, in particular in relation to the management of data being collated and how will it be used; how enforcement will be undertaken; and to understand working arrangements when landlords are based in a different Council area to where their properties are located.

Charity Commission update on work priorities.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Charity Commission to ask why the recommendation relating to the scheme of delegation has not yet been implemented, who is responsible for the delays and what is being done to expedite the process.

Members noted the following items:

Committee on Procedures	Guidance on the issue of Closed Assembly Committee Meetings
Department for Communities	Landlord Registration Scheme
Housing Executive	Adaptation grant programme and capital receipts from the Right to Buy Scheme
Minister for Finance	Housing Executive Borrowing Arrangements



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Minister for Health	Disability Rights and Representation
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5. Correspondence

Committee for Finance correspondence on Building Regulations in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for clarification of its role in terms of investigation into the prevalence of defective blocks in housing in all of the border areas. Members expressed concern that householders affected by the defective block issue are fearful of reporting the problem due to the potential implications such as the inability to sell their properties. The Committee would like to know what support there is for householders, what cross border work is taking place to understand the prevalence of the issue and the number of people who have reported this to date, to the Department.

Committee for Infrastructure correspondence on bereavement services in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether other services could be added to the *Tell Us Once Service* and whether the Department has identified *how* other departments could be involved. The Committee is also concerned about differences in how sensitively a bereavement is handled by the Department, referring specifically to the Department stopping Housing Benefit almost immediately following notification of a bereavement, whereas social housing providers allow more time.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

APG Youth Participation	Request for examination of youth homelessness in future Committee agenda
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Youth Assembly	Youth Assembly Response to draft PfG
Dept for Communities	Section 19 Employment Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 – Gender Pay Gap Reporting - draft consultation
Homeless Connect	Programme Homelessness Awareness Week 2024
PRONI	PRONI - Independent Neurology Inquiry - (INI) Retention and Disposal Schedule

6. Clause by Clause Consideration of the Child Support Enforcement Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee now needed to commence clause by clause consideration of the Bill.

Clause 1: Rules relating to liability orders

Agreed: That the Committee is content with Clause 1 as drafted by the Department.

Clause 2: Commencement and short title

Agreed: That the Committee is content with Clause 1 as drafted by the Department.

Schedule: Amendment of statutory provisions

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the Schedule as drafted by the Department.

The Chairperson informed Members that this concluded the Committee's formal clause by clause consideration of the Child Support Enforcement Bill.



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The Chairperson thanked the Departmental Officials John Noble, Sinead Wylie and John McIlwaine for all their support and patience with Committee queries and Aoibheann Baker from the Assembly Bill Office for her support as well as Eleanor Murphy from RaISe.

The Chairperson informed Members that a draft Committee report had been included in meeting papers and asked Members to take the report away and read it ahead of next week's meeting when it would be formally agreed.

Agreed: That a recommendation is added to the report in respect of a victim of domestic abuse not having to pay for a Liability Order.

7. Departmental Briefing on Gambling Reform

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ciaran Mee

Carol Reid

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

- the number of Departmental staff currently working on gambling policy and legislative reform
- the need for future legislation
- preparatory work for new legislation
- enforcement
- online gambling
- responsibility for gambling licences
- codes of practice
- neighbourhood notifications
- cross border gambling
- limiting stakes
- collection of data



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- gaming machines
- work with Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Advertising Standards Authority and the Republic of Ireland
- a gambling regulator
- gambling apps
- gambling levy
- data gathering
- education and prevention; and
- timescales for review

Agreed: That the Department provides the Committee with a copy of the review of the current regulatory position on gambling.

The Chairperson informed Members that, as the officials in charge of gambling were still at the table, he proposed that the Committee consider the SL1s in relation to gambling (scheduled later in the agenda). Members were agreed.

8. SL1 - The Gaming (Variation of Monetary Limits) Order 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that this proposed Rule increases the permitted maximum amounts in gaming (other than by machine) for prizes on bingo club premises, as well as increasing the maximum permitted stakes and prizes for gaming by means of a gaming machine in permitted locations.

There was a question-and-answer session on the SL1 and the main areas of discussion were:

- Information gathering in relation to adverse impacts
- Reviews of equivalent legislation in other UK jurisdictions
- Whether the changes would bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of GB
- Aggregated winnings
- The Gambling Prevalence Survey



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- Mechanisms available to the Department to report on the prevalence of gambling

Agreed: That the Department provides the Committee with further information on mechanisms available to report on the prevalence of gambling and how the Department will gather information to evaluate any adverse impact of the Rule. The Committee requested that the information be provided in advance of the Statutory Rule coming before the Committee for consideration.

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

9. SL1 - The Gaming (Gaming Machines in Registered Clubs) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Chairperson informed Members that this proposed Rule sets the maximum prize entitlement in respect of any one game played by means of a gaming machine in a registered club at £400.

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

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.59a.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.04p.m.

The meeting restarted at 12.05p.m.

10. Departmental Briefing on Welfare Supplementary Payment and Carer's Allowance

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Leonora McLaughlin, Director of Pensions, Disability and Carers



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Ruairi O'Connell, Assistant Director of Pensions, Disability and Carers

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

- The new waiver facility and whether it applied to Carer's Allowance overpayments
- The review of Carer's Allowance
- Benefit cap mitigations
- Reporting changes online
- Variable working hours
- Access for customers to online services
- The need for a strategy review

Agreed: That the Department provides information on the ongoing work in relation to preparations for the continued operation of welfare mitigations and the most recent statutory report on operations.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 12.20p.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that he wished to discuss the forward work programme as the next agenda item.

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 on the proposed Committee Arts event.

Agreed: That the Committee agrees with the proposed format of the event.



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The Chairperson, Colm Gildernew, left the meeting at 12.38p.m. and the Deputy Chairperson, Ciara Ferguson, assumed the Chair.

12. Briefing by NICVA

The Chairperson welcomed the following representative to the meeting:

Celine McStravick, Chief Executive Officer, NICVA

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

- The anti-poverty strategy
- The impact of cuts in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- The new partnership agreement
- The Programme for Government
- The Joint Forum
- Funding gaps
- Poverty alleviations and marginalised groups
- The impact on services of the recent rise in National Insurance contributions
- NICVA's work across departments

Agreed: That a letter is sent to all departments to ask what work they are carrying out with the voluntary can community sector on public sector policy development, including transformation plans, with regard to ensuring fair pay, grant and any contract arrangements.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it had completed a risk assessment on the range of grants on offer and if it had any plans to mitigate the impact of these in terms of reductions in payments.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for the current status of the Government Funders' Database and whether it is being updated.

13. Any other business

The Chairperson and Members commended the Housing Rights Annual Conference and the work it, and Renters' Voice, carries out.

14. 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 13.18p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities