



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 5 December 2024

**Meeting Location:** Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA  
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA  
Ms Ciara Ferguson (Deputy Chairperson) MLA  
Mr Brian Kingston MLA  
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

**Apologies:** Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA  
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA  
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA  
Mr Maurice Bradley 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 10.03 a.m.

Andy Allen declared an interest as a Charity Trustee.

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a Charity Trustee

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

### 1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

### 2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson acknowledged, during Homelessness Awareness week, the debate that many Committee Members had taken part in on plenary on Monday. The Chairperson stated that it was good to see the motion gain so much cross-party support and it was also good to hear the Minister's announcement of an additional £6.7 million – split between the Housing Executive (£3M) to help prevent the risk of homelessness service closures and the voluntary and community support services (£3.7M), working on the ground.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how the Housing Executive intends to use this additional money and to ask for an update on the preventative work on homelessness that the Department is currently carrying out.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee will receive 2 briefings on homelessness at the meeting on 12 December in Derry / Londonderry (in Clooney Hall) and encouraged all Members to attend if possible.



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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 28 November 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes as drafted.

### 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.

Charity Commission - Scheme of Delegation

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what the barriers are to expediting the Scheme of Delegation.

DfC - Draft Equality Impact Assessment – The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2024

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the status of the Fuel Poverty Strategy and to ask for a Departmental briefing on the strategy.

Sport NI - Support and funding for Paralympian Sport

**Agreed:** That a briefing from Sport NI is arranged for a future Committee meeting.

DfC - Disability Strategy Update

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a timeline for the publication of the strategy.



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DfC - Welfare mitigations and Universal Credit

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for clarity on whether the Department or the Minister will be responsible for deciding whether any new legislation would be deemed appropriate.

DfC - Affordable Warmth Scheme

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if there is going to be a budget deficit for this scheme at the end of this financial year

Members noted the following items:

DfC	Additional information on housing issues
DfC	Sports funding announcement following Olympic and Paralympic success
DfC	Access and Inclusion Programme
DfC	Expansion of the Participatory Budgeting Programme
DfC	JobStart (16-24) Scheme
DfC	Right to Buy Scheme
DfC	Historic Buildings Council Report

## 5. Correspondence



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Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISSP)  
- Letter to Minister for Communities re Independent Supporting People  
Providers Survey Results Presentation November 2024

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Minister to encourage him to ask the Treasury for an exemption for charities and to ask if the Department has carried out an analysis on the impacts of the rise in National Insurance contributions on the voluntary and community sector and if any additional money has been sought from the Department of Finance or the Executive for the sector.

Co-Design Group on an Irish Language Strategy - Letter to DfC Minister

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on work on the Irish Language Strategy, a timeline for the publication of the strategy and to encourage the Minister to meet the group.

Danny Donnelly MLA - UNCRPD Initial Proposal - Members Bill

**Agreed:** That an oral briefing on the results of the consultation on the proposed Bill is requested for a future meeting.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Child Maintenance Service	CMS Annual Report Decision Making 23-24
National Museums NI	National Museums NI Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Public Sector Transformation Board
Department for Communities	Social Housing, DfC and Legal Issues



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Centre for Children's Rights	Invitation - Centre for Children's Rights, Child Poverty Event 11 Dec 2024
Individual	Letter from Individual to BBC re Winter Fuel Payment
Construction Employers Federation	Press Release - Construction Employers Federation

**6. SR 2024/198 - The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (NI) 2024**

**Agreed:** That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/198 - The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.

**7. SR 2024/199 - The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (NI) 2024**

**Agreed:** That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/199 - The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.



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**8. SR 2024/200 - The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (NI) 2024**

**Agreed:** That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2024/200 - The Occupational Pensions (Revaluation) Order (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the rule.

**9. Departmental briefing on budget 2024 – 25 and 2025 – 28 budget process**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Cherrie Arnold - Director, Financial Planning

Kathy Sands - Director of Finance (WHG & ODG)

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

- Delays in the October Monitoring round papers
- A bid for increased Rates Support Grant
- The cost of welfare reform mitigations
- Budget for social housing
- The impact of staff vacancies on the services the Department delivers
- The impact of the budget on the voluntary and community sector
- The cost of moving to full staff complement
- Cost of agency staff
- Contingency Fund budget
- Northern Ireland Football Fund
- Redevelopment of Casement Park
- The Social Housing Programme



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- Discretionary Support
- Co-ownership funding
- Fuel poverty initiatives
- Intermediate rent

**Agreed:** That the Department will reply to the Committee on the cost of agency staff and estimated costs of moving to a full staff complement. The Department will also provide figures on the Northern Ireland Football Fund and redevelopment of Casement Park spend to date and information on any fuel poverty initiatives that it intends to launch.

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

- For an analysis of the impact of staff vacancies on the services the Department delivers
- For a breakdown of the grades of staff vacancies from December 2023
- If the Department has a staff retention strategy
- Information on workplace planning work
- Whether the Department conducts exit interviews with staff leaving
- An update on current recruitment
- Clarity on the Disability Strategy versus the Disability and Work Strategy and whether they are one strategy or two separate strategies
- Clarification on why no request was made for an increase in the Rates Support Grant
- Updated information on capital requirements for Neighbourhood Renewal

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.39a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.50a.m.





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### 10. Briefing by Cliff Edge Coalition

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Holly Knox, Policy and Community Engagement Officer at Law Centre NI

Louise Heatherley, Welfare Rights Adviser at Law Centre NI

Fiona Cole, Policy & Public Affairs Manager Northern Ireland at Trussell

Stephen Morrison, Policy Co-ordinator at Housing Rights

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

- The deadline for extension of the mitigations
- 5 week wait for Universal Credit and the cost of the removal of the 5 week wait for payment
- Discussions with the Department on the payment of Universal Credit Contingency Fund
- Universal Credit claim errors
- The private rented sector

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that it raises awareness of the Contingency Fund grant, to ask for the numbers applying for Contingency Fund grants as opposed to advance payments and for information on the range of amounts applied for under the Contingency Fund grants.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.49 p.m. Committee quorum was lost. The Chairperson informed Members that no further decisions on remaining items could be taken



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### **11. Forward Work Programme**

Members noted a copy of the forward work programme.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee meeting on 12 December will take place in the Clooney Hall in Derry city (North West Methodist Mission) where the Committee will undertake its normal essential business and then hear directly from both First Housing and the Methodist Mission in relation to their support projects and work on the ground locally.

### **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 12 December 2024, in Clooney Hall in Derry City, North West Methodist Mission.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.53p.m.

**Ciara Ferguson MLA**  
**Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Communities**