



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 28 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 Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA

Apologies: Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

In Attendance: Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)

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



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

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a landlord and a Charity Trustee

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.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed the Minister's announcement on Tuesday that he hopes to legislate to extend the benefit cap mitigations, post March 2025, in a matter of weeks and that he hoped that the information will be with the Executive imminently. The Chairperson stated that he hoped the Committee will see the review report imminently too, in order to be able to get the full picture before legislative proposals come before the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that the statutory review of mitigations is brought to the Committee as soon as possible.

The Chairperson noted news that the Labour government plans to introduce a statutory levy on gambling companies, mandating an annual contribution of £100 million. The levy would be to fund research, education, with the largest percentage to go to the treatment related to gambling harms. The announcement set out potential for implementation in April 2025.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether it will be possible to bring forward similar regulations in Northern Ireland in line with the timeframe of April 2025.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 21 November 2024.



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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.

Departmental reply on Welfare Supplementary Payments and Carer's Allowance.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask again for the numbers affected by the recovery of a Welfare Supplementary Payment.

Departmental reply on decarbonisation of NIHE homes.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it intends to bring forward a decarbonisation strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask when its House and Survey report will be published.

Departmental reply on Housing Issues.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what it considers to be an appropriate baseline for Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) ratings across Housing Executive stock.

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

- whether it tracks the reasons for ineligible applications
- information on reasons why they do not meet the eligibility threshold
- the budget for the Affordable Warmth Scheme post October 2024
- whether this will meet the demand for those that are eligible for the grant
- whether the Department has considered other investment to alleviate fuel poverty by retrofitting homes, for example under the ERDF funding programme.

Departmental reply re Landlord Registration Scheme.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council to ask who it is consulting with in relation to the development of the scheme, whether private renters will be consulted with as well as landlords and if the council can share the data headings of the IT system with the Committee.

NIHE reply on the use of emergency accommodation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask if it was able to provide offers to all that presented for emergency accommodation over the previous weekend (as a consequence of cold weather and flooding). The Committee would also like to know how the Housing Executive defines “saturation point” in terms of demand for emergency accommodation.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what steps it is taking to ensure that emergency accommodation is of an acceptable standard.

Departmental reply on The Social Fund Winter Fuel Payment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 (SR 2024 No.160).

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, based on their most recent numbers of applicants (via Make The Call), how many people were successful in their applications for Pension Credit and, of these, the amount of applications which were successful and which will be backdated for 3 months and how many of the recent applications will therefore be entitled to the winter fuel payment.

Departmental reply re UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Housing, Levelling Up and Communities to state that the Committee believes the Department for Communities should be the lead in delivering the UK Shared Prosperity Fund in Northern Ireland as it has the local knowledge and expertise to administer the funding.

Members noted the following items:

Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	Planning applications on hold
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NI Assembly	Timescales for Interaction between Assembly Committees and Departments
DfC	Welfare Supplementary Payments, Discretionary Support, Standards of Advice and Assistance, Sanctions Report 2023
DfC	Potential changes to TCI/HAG for 2024/25
DfC	Planning Applications and Waste Water

5. Correspondence

Departmental letter re publication of Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) on Employment Support Scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for the rationale for the Employment Support Scheme, for clarity on why the scheme doesn't deliver value for money, whether an EQIA was undertaken and to ask for a briefing at a future meeting.

National Students' Union Northern Ireland - Student Housing and Affordability Survey

Agreed: That the National Students' Union Northern Ireland is invited to brief at a future meeting.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.24a.m.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

NI Assembly Business Office	Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Annual Report and Account 2023-24
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Belfast Harbour Commissioner	Stakeholder Festive Reception
NI Opera	Upcoming Committee for Communities Arts Event in 2025
Committee for Finance	Terms of Reference for Inquiry into NI Banking and Financial Services
Safeguarding Board NI	SBNI Conference Invite
Committee for Finance	Stat Budget 25-26 Future Years Information
Libraries NI	Libraries NI Annual Report and Accounts 23-24
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Twenty-seventh Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Assembly NI Engagement Team	Report on Older Peoples Parliament to TEO re Draft PfG
Investment Strategy Northern Ireland Investing Activity Report	Assembly Committee Report: Investing Activity Report
DFC	Update to the Committee on DFC input to the DoF Budget 2025-28 Information Gathering Exercise.

6. Consideration of the draft Committee report on the Child Support Enforcement Bill



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The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee now needed to consider the draft report on the Bill.

Powers and Membership

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Executive Summary

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Introduction

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Context and Overview of the Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Committee Recommendations and Consideration of Wider Issues

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Committee Consideration of the Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Committee Deliberations on the Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Clause by Clause Consideration of the Bill

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Appendices

Agreed: That the Committee is content with this section as drafted.

Agreed: That a copy of the minutes from today's meeting are included in the report.

Agreed: That the report is printed.

The Chairperson informed Members that this concluded Committee Stage of the Bill and thanked Members for their in-depth scrutiny of the Bill and put on record his thanks to all those that made submissions and gave oral evidence.



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He also thanked the Departmental Officials and the Assembly Bill Office Officials for their hard work and help in working the Committee's way through the Bill.

7. Departmental Briefing on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Emer Morelli: Deputy Secretary, Engaged Communities Group

Paul Gamble: Head of Poverty Policy Team

Carl Savage: Deputy Director, Central Policy Division

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

- The publication date for the strategy
- The main changes to the strategy
- Monitoring of actions that are cross departmental
- The need for time-bound targets
- The Department's role in holding other departments to account
- The possibility of a joint budget application across departments
- Implementation of the strategy and monitoring of its effectiveness
- Employability support
- Multiple deprivation measures and objective need
- The need for statistical baselines
- Lessons learnt from previous strategies
- The timeline for the strategy
- Work with the Equality Commission
- The need to improve Equality Impact Assessments

Agreed: That the Departmental officials will seek approval from the Minister to share a copy of the draft strategy with the Committee.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a copy of the form / template that is used to complete Equality Impact Assessments.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to all departments to ask that any work attributed to each Department in the Anti-Poverty Strategy be expedited to ensure there are no delays in the publication of the strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the strategy at the end of January 2025.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 11.13a.m.

8. Briefing by the Commissioner for Older People NI

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Eddie Lynch, Commissioner for Older People

Ángel Leira Pernas, Policy & Research Officer

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

- End of life care
- The need to prioritise an ageing population
- Issues experienced by older people living in rural areas
- The status of the Active Ageing Strategy
- Care home residents and lack of security of tenure
- The omission of an ageing population from the Programme for Government
- Housing
- Adult Protection Bill

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if care home residents can be included in the definition of a private tenancy and to ask about ongoing work in updating / replacing the Active Ageing Strategy.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Health to seek an update on the status of the Adult Protection Bill and the timescale for introducing it.

9. Forward Work Programme

Members noted a copy of the forward work programme.

The Chairperson drew Members' attention to the scheduling of the Committee's Motion on Welfare Supplementary Payments for Monday 9 December.

The Chairperson also highlighted the motion on Homelessness Awareness Week 2024 which will take place on Monday 2 December in plenary and encouraged Members to support the motion and to get involved in the debate.

Finally, the Chairperson informed 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.

10. Any other business

There was no other business.

11. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 5 December 2024, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.27p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities