



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 10 April 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA (via Zoom)
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Mr Maolíosá McHugh MLA (via Zoom)
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

Apologies:

In Attendance:

Ms Barbara Love (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 public session at 10.00a.m.

The following interests were declared:

Andy Allen – Charity trustee and private landlord

Colm Gildernew – Private landlord and Director, Willowbank Limited

Brian Kingston – Member of TEO Committee

Kellie Armstrong - Member of the Deaf Community

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.02a.m.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he had been invited to attend an event, as Committee Chair, in Queen's University on Wednesday 16 April. The event is entitled 'Passing the Torch' and is being hosted by Senator George Mitchell. The event is about exploring the power of community-driven activism as a positive force for change.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had recently visited the Ó Fiaich Library & Archive in Armagh.

Agreed: That a visit and meeting is arranged in the Ó Fiaich Library & Archive at a future date.

Maolíosa McHugh joined the meeting at 10.05a.m.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 3 April 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

4. Matters Arising



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The Committee noted the following items:

Northern Ireland Fiscal Council - Further detail regarding fees generated by the Department for Communities.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Finance to ask what work his department is conducting to ensure transparency in light of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council's comments.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if fees generated by the Department are ring fenced or if they are part of wider departmental spending.

Agreed: That a copy of Making a Difference is sent to Members.

Equality and Social Justice Committee Wales Senedd Committee - Disability Benefit Payments.

Agreed: That a reply is sent to the Equality and Social Justice Committee Wales Senedd Committee to say that the Committee will await their comments before deciding on its next steps on this issue.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network	Advisory Panel quotes for Communities Committee
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	600 Houses Purchase Announcement
Northern Ireland Civil Service Policy Profession on behalf of the Executive Office	Terms of Reference for Civil Servants undertaking Co-Design work

The Committee noted the following tabled items:

Source	Subject Matter
Committee for Economy – Chair Phillip Brett MLA	UK Government Green Paper on Disability Benefit Reform



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Source	Subject Matter
The Scottish Parliament Social Justice and Social Security Committee	UK Government's Recently Announced Welfare Reforms
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	Student Accommodation and the Landlord Registration Scheme

5. Correspondence

Committee for The Executive Office - Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy – Funding from Departments.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the NI Housing Executive to ask what positive actions it is taking in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

Agreed: That a copy of the correspondence is forwarded to the Department for comment.

Department for Communities - Department for Communities Disability Action Plan 2025-2030 – Consultation

Agreed: That a briefing session is requested on the consultation for a future Committee meeting.

Department for Communities - Revised Legislative Consent Memorandum - Employment Rights Bill

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for clarification on the impact on the devolved legislature and whether changes brought about by the LCM in relation to employment rights will be brought forward via the draft affirmative process to ensure proper scrutiny by the Assembly.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Housing Communities and Local Government Committee	Accommodation for Homeless children
Examiner of Statutory Rules	36th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

Assembly Research and Information Service - RaISe Paper - Homelessness Legislation in Other Jurisdictions

Agreed: That a briefing session on the paper is arranged for a future Committee meeting.

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Northern Ireland Central Investment Fund for Charities Annual Report and Accounts to 30 September 2024
Minister for Communities	3 Year Social Housing Development Programme 2025/26 – 2027/28
Department for Communities	Press Release Developing Women in the Community: Phase Two Collaborative Celebration Event
Department for Communities	Press Release - The Arts Council NI: Public Appointment Opportunity
Assembly Business Office	Commissioner for Older People Northern Ireland Annual report and financial statements for the year ended 31 March 2024
Advice NI	Press Release and Green Paper - Impact of Government Proposals in NI

The Committee agreed to go into closed session for the next agenda item.



The meeting moved into closed session at 10.18a.m.

6. Briefing by Examiner of Statutory Rules Office on the Delegated Powers for the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly officials to the meeting:

Angela Kelly, Examiner of Statutory Rules

Catriona Doherty, Legal Adviser, Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

The officials provided legal advice on the Delegated Powers Memorandum.

The meeting resumed in open session at 11.10a.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 11.10a.m.

7. Departmental Briefing on the Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Tommy McAuley – Acting Head of Sign Language Policy and Legislation,
Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch

Gerard Flynn – Deputy Principal, Sign Language Policy and Legislation
Branch

Patricia Leeper, Deputy Principal, Sign Language Policy and Legislation
Branch

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

- Henry VIII powers
- The scope of the Bill and what it hopes to achieve



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- Prescribed organisations
- Affordability
- Subordinate legislation process
- Duties for public bodies
- Numbers studying BSL and ISL
- The need for consultation as outlined in the Bill
- The rationale for the 5-year reporting period on the operation of the legislation
- Enforceable rights
- The functions to be conferred to prescribed organisations
- Criteria for prescribed organisations

Agreed: That the Department provides the Committee with the Terms of Reference for the Sign Language Partnership Group and will consider the Committee request for a copy of the consultation report on the Sign Language Framework. The Department also agreed to provide a breakdown on the numbers studying ISL and BSL.

Agreed: That queries from the RaISe paper on the Bill and from the ESR paper on the Delegated Powers Memorandum are forwarded to the Department for comment.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Queen's University and the Foyle Deaf Association to ask for details of the criteria for their sign language courses.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Equality Commission to ask for its views on the Bill.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 12.09p.m.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 12.09p.m.



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Maolíosa McHugh left the meeting at 12.09p.m. The meeting restarted at 12.16p.m.

8. SR 2025/73 - The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Committee considered the Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (NI) 2025 which would move fines higher up the list of priority debts; and give child support maintenance deductions top priority in that list for a temporary period.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/73 - The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report.

9. Briefing by Housing Policy Panel

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Siobhan O'Neill - Tenant Participation and Community Development Officer, Supporting Communities

Patricia McQuillan MBE, Housing Policy Panel, Tenant advocate and Chair of the HPP

Bobby McConnell, Housing Policy Panel, Panel Member

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

- The need to start work on a new Tenant Participation Strategy
- Homelessness initiatives
- Social housing



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- Interaction with the Department on a new strategy
- Removal of intimidation points
- Derelict properties and older housing stock

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Infrastructure to ask if it has explored the idea of allocating relatively small amounts of money to improve water infrastructure in areas to facilitate as much new social housing as possible.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it is anticipated that housing targets will be affected by Housing Association Grants not being increased to meet connection, on-site facilities and/or the proposed developer contribution costs which are currently subject to consultation.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

11. Any other business

There was no other business.

12. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 1 May 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.57p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities