



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 13 March 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Building

Present:

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

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 10.00 a.m.

The following interests were declared:

Andy Allen – Trade Union member

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he was pleased to see the motion to extend Committee Stage of the Sign Language Bill gain the support of the House on Tuesday 11 March. The Chairperson stated that he would take on board the comments that were raised during the debate and will be mindful of them as the Committee Stage progresses.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee was due to receive a Departmental briefing at the meeting today on Heritage, Culture and Creativity Policies. The Committee team was advised on Tuesday afternoon that the Department would like to defer this briefing session for 2 weeks.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to state that, whilst the Committee is content that the briefing session is deferred, Members are unhappy that the session was cancelled with very little notice meaning that the Committee could not offer an opportunity to brief to another organisation. The Committee would like to know the rationale behind the request to defer as Members feel that a briefing session could go ahead in the event that one official is not available as another official could step in. The Committee's work programme is becoming very busy and Members would request no further delay in relation to this particular briefing session.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had held an informal meeting on Tuesday 11 March with the Permanent Secretary where he asked again for a copy of the legislative timetable and continued the conversation around the need for the Committee to be given its place and for good two-way communication.



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The Chairperson referenced recent media reporting on the UK Government's plans to make cuts to disability benefits.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what engagement it has had with DWP on this issue, to ask when the Committee will see the detail of the proposals and to ask the Department to provide Committee with the numbers of people in Northern Ireland currently in receipt of the benefits that may potentially be affected by these proposed cuts.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Secretary of State to ask, in the light of recent media discourse on the potential of cuts to disability benefits that, before any decision is made on proposed cuts, he takes into account the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland which has a higher amount of disabled people than other UK jurisdictions and that he takes into account local levels of child poverty and the ongoing impact of the cost of living crisis.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the equivalent Committees in the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament to ask if they have had discussions on this issue; to ask what action they are considering and to seek their opinions on the potential cuts, with a view to garnering these opinions and sending a letter from all three devolved Committees to the UK Government.

The Chairperson informed Members that he was aware that the Minister had travelled to the US this week and he made a proposal that the Committee writes to the Department to ask for a copy of the Minister's itinerary in the US and to ask what business he is conducting that is related to his Communities brief.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a copy of the Minister's itinerary and to ask what business he is conducting that is related to his Communities brief.

The Chairperson commended a Sport NI community walks initiative which is being trialled across several council areas. He had attended one such walk in his own constituency and found it to be a very worthwhile initiative which encourages exercise and social interaction and Sport NI should be applauded for this.



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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 6 March 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed 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 Members wished to discuss further.

Derry City and Strabane District Council/ Causeway Coast and Glens Council - Youth Homelessness

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask to what extent it is directing councils in relation to prioritisation of work which would align to the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Committee would also request reconsideration of rates relief across councils which could help them take more action on issues such as youth homelessness.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Causeway Coast and Glens Council to ask what the (desired) outcomes are from their youth homelessness plans.

DWP - Local Housing Allowance Rates

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what the equivalent to the Fair Payment Rate for Universal Credit is in Northern Ireland and what work the Department is carrying out in relation to this issue.

Members noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
NICVA	All Party Group on Voluntary and Community Sector

Members noted the following tabled items:



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Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Publication - Outcome on Consultation re proposals to amend existing housing related anti-social behaviour legislation
Clerk to the Committee for Communities	Memo - Sign Language Bill: Proposed Engagement events

5. Correspondence

Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) – request to brief

Agreed: That an informal meeting with NIFHA is arranged for a future date.

Department for Communities - Welfare Supplementary Payment Schemes Independent Advisory Panel Report.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it is actively considering the proposals from the Independent Advisory Panel Report and, in relation to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund, whether the original estimates were too low or are there other factors which have led to the significant jump in the costs of the Fund and Members would like to understand the reasons for this. The Committee would also like to know whether the Department has sufficient budget cover for the Contingency Fund for the upcoming financial year.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Commencement Order SR 2025/39 - Private Tenancies
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Memo to Clerk to Committee for Communities: Quarterly NICS Sickness Absence



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Source	Summary of content
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Memo to Clerk to Committee for Communities: Employee National Insurance Contributions + Joint Budget Event
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Memo to Clerks to Committees for Economy and Committee for Communities: Cost of doing business in Northern Ireland
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Memo to Clerk to Committee for Communities: Capital Easements
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Memo to Clerk to Committee for Communities: Budget Sustainability Plan
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Thirty fourth Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

The Committee noted the following tabled items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Press Release: Celebrate World Book Day with Libraries NI
Department for Communities	Press Release: Maple + May to deliver Intermediate Rent
Department for Communities	Press Release: The Northern Ireland Football Fund Information Sessions
Department for Communities	Press Release: The return of DfC face to face Corporate Induction sessions
Agenda NI	Northern Ireland Housing Conference 2025
Department for Communities	Pension Age Fuel Support Payment Announcement 21 March 2025



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Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.22a.m.

As the meeting was running ahead of time and the witnesses for the first briefing session had not yet arrived, the Chairperson decided to move ahead to other items on the agenda.

6. SL1 - The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that this proposed Rule would allow for an increase of 2.7 percent to rents of protected and statutory tenancies for those properties that meet the housing fitness standard. This would represent an average weekly increase of £2.26.

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

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a list of the protected and statutory tenancies.

7. SL1 - The Emergency Fuel Payment (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that, after the Emergency Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2025 were made, a discrepancy in the regulations was identified.

It is considered that it would be extremely unlikely that an eligible pensioner living in Europe would be paid both the Winter Fuel Payment and the Pension Age Fuel Support Payment. However, the regulations in their current form do technically allow for that possibility.

To correct this minor technical error and to robustly protect public finances, the Department is taking the steps to eliminate the possibility of double payment altogether.

An amending set of regulations, the Emergency Fuel Payment (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025, now needs to be made to correct this minor error.

To ensure the smooth roll out of payments, which are to be made before the end of March, these Regulations should be made as soon as possible. These Regulations will therefore become operational from 18 March 2025.



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Unfortunately, this will mean breaching the 21-day rule in this instance. This is considered necessary to ensure there is no delay with issuing the Pension Age Fuel Support Payment.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed make the Rule but raised concerns about a potential anomaly of an eligible pensioner living in Europe not being subject to the same criteria of the qualifying week that the existing Rule sets out for care home residents.

8. Employment Rights Bill Legislative Consent Motion - agreement of Committee report

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft report and advised them that this was the formal consideration before the report is ordered to be printed.

Powers and Membership

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

Background

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

Evidence Submitted to the Committee

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

Committee consideration of the LCM

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

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities orders the Report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Employment Rights Bill to be printed.

9. SR 2025/45 - The Emergency Fuel Payment (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025



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Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/45 - The Emergency Fuel Payment (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

10. SR 2025/38 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (NI) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/38 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

11. Briefing by Women's Policy Group NI on Gender Equality Strategy

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Elaine Crory - Women's Resource & Development Agency

Alex Brennan – NI Women's Budget Group

Clare Moore – Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Alexa Moore – Rainbow Project

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

- Engagement with the Department
- Timelines for the strategy and plans to deliver it
- Loss of time and the associated costs
- Co-design of the strategy and essential links with other social strategies
- Gender based violence and domestic violence
- The potential harmful impacts of the failure to implement the strategy and public confidence

Agreed: That the Women's Policy Group NI provides the Committee with details on the amount of people and hours that have been involved in work on



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the Gender Equality Strategy as well as the dates of the requests that the group has sent to the Minister requesting a meeting to discuss the strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office to ask that consideration be given to producing Terms of Reference for civil servants who are entering into co-design with subject matter and lived experience experts, to ensure consistency of approach and experience (for those groups). and to ask

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

- For a copy of the letter sent by the Department to the co-design groups
- For the rationale for disaggregating the social inclusion strategies as they are cross cutting strategies.
- What work is currently ongoing on the social inclusion strategies and what are the timelines for publication
- How many civil servants are working on each of the social strategies
- A briefing on / sight of the gender equality strategy prior to publication
- What data is being collected in relation to cross cutting issues such as homelessness, gender and sexual orientation in order to be able to establish objective need (to underpin the strategy)

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Head of Civil Service to ask if there is guidance on co-production and co-design and, if so, can the Committee be provided with a copy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to remind him of his responsibilities to *all communities* in Northern Ireland and to reflect to him that organisations such as the Women's Policy Group and Conradh na Gaeilge



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have reflected to Committee a lack of inclusion and a sense that “they don’t matter”.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.35a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.42a.m.

Nicola Brogan joined the meeting at 11.42a.m.

12. Briefing by Conradh na Gaeilge on the Irish language

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Cuisle Nic Liam - Comhordaitheoir Chearta Teanga | Language Rights Co-ordinator, Conradh na Gaeilge

Conchúr Ó Muadaigh - Bainisteoir Abhcóideachta | Advocacy Manager, Conradh na Gaeilge

Dr Pádraig Ó Tiarnaigh - Bainisteoir Cumarsáide | Communications Manager, Conradh na Gaeilge

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

- Mechanisms needed to ensure to ensure greater accountability and compliance with international commitments
- The specific barriers that are preventing progress and what steps should be taken to resolve them
- The effect on the lack of progress on the group’s ability to develop the Irish language
- Engagement with the Minister
- The impact of reinstating census-based targets on language development
- The impact of the denial of meetings with the Minister on the Irish language community



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- The resources the group has provided to the co-design process
- Irish language street signs
- Funding issues

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how many individual civil servants are working on the Irish Language Strategy and to state that the Committee endorses the recommendations in the Conradh na Gaeilge briefing paper.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office in relation to the ongoing funding issues for Foras na Gaeilge. The Committee discussed whether the constrained budget problems that this organisation is facing would be the case if the priority being discussed was economy or tourism and there was money available and on offer from alternative sources. The Committee would like to know what the obstacle is to the Foras na Gaeilge funding model being placed on the Executive agenda for discussion.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

14. Any other business

There was no other business.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 20 March 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson wished everyone a very Happy St Patrick's Day.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.48 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA



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Chairperson, Committee for Communities