



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 20 February 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
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)
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 10.03 a.m.

The following interests were declared:

Sian Mulholland - Chair of the All Party Group on the Arts and as being formerly employed by an organisation funded by the Arts Council NI

Maolíosa McHugh - Chairman of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge

Colm Gildernew - Secretary, Brantry Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson congratulated Committee colleague Andy Allen on his outstanding achievements in the Invictus Games where he won a medal in all four events that he competed in – a bronze in the Nordic Cross-Country Sit Skiing, two silvers as part of the Wheelchair Rugby team and another in the One Minute Sprint Rowing event and a gold medal in the Four Minute Endurance Rowing.

The Chairperson thanked Members for their work at the Arts stakeholder engagement event on 13 February. The Chairperson further informed Members that work of the graphic artist was displayed in the room and will be displayed at any future meeting where Arts organisations are in attendance. The Committee team has started working on the report of the event which will be brought back to the Committee in due course for our consideration.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.09 a.m.

The Chairperson welcomed the Second Stage of the Sign Language Bill and paid tribute to the Minister for introducing the stage using sign language only



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which was welcomed by the members of the deaf community in the public gallery at the time.

The Chairperson welcomed the news that the Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, will be held in Belfast for the first time in 2026. When the event was held last year in Wexford, it attracted more than half a million people and generated an estimated €60 million for the economy and the Chairperson stated that he would hope to see a similar boost to the North's economy when it is held in Belfast next year.

The Chairperson raised the issue of the Northern Ireland Football Fund and concerns raised by Councils around funding.

Agreed: That the scheduled Departmental briefing on the Northern Ireland Football Fund is brought forward to an earlier meeting and that the Department is encouraged to liaise with councils on their concerns about the Fund. The Committee would also like details of the Fund as there is a concern that the scope has changed over time.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had attended, as had the Minister, the re-opening of Fivemiletown library which is a fantastic facility for the local community.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 6 February 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.

DfC - Bereavement Service and 1000 DWP jobs



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department outlining that the Committee remains disappointed with the location of the Jobs Noting the absence of new roles in rural areas. Members asked for a breakdown of jobs by area with the numbers of jobs in each geographical location across Northern Ireland and how many have been commenced.

DfC - Irish Language Strategy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to outline the Committee's disappointment that the Minister has not yet met with the Co-Design Group and to ask for an update on the specific work currently ongoing in the Department to progress the Irish Language Strategy.

NIHE - Disabled Facilities Grant, Home Improvement Schemes and House and land sales

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask how money is generated from the House Sales Scheme and how it can then be used for the Disabled Facilities Grant.

DfI - Wastewater infrastructure

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office in support of the Minister for Communities and the Housing Supply Strategy and to ask that the Executive takes a whole system approach to address the barriers that impact on building homes, including wastewater infrastructure.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Infrastructure to ask that it takes action to reduce leakage and pollution into local rivers and to integrate the flood management scheme.

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.23 a.m.

DfC - Storm Éowyn - £1m Funding

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a detailed breakdown of how the money was spent and if any part of the funding that went to local councils was used to support small businesses.

DoF - Impact of increased ENIC on the Voluntary and Community Sector



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee for Finance to ask for a copy of the minutes / note of its round table event on this issue.

Committee for Communities Clerk - Round Robin Response to Committee for Finance - 2025-26 Budget allocations

Agreed: That the response is sent to the Committee for Finance.

Members noted the following items:

DfC	Regulatory reform in relation to Discretionary Support
Dept of Education	Pensions Bill Report Recommendation
NIHE	Updates on Place Shaping
DoF	ENIC and the impact on Voluntary and Community Sector
NI Water	Follow up information following briefing session
Ministerial Response	Wastewater infrastructure
Gerry Carroll MLA	Rent Controls
DfC	Additional information regarding the SL1s on the Welfare Supplementary Payment schemes
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government	UK Shared Prosperity Fund
DfC	Universal Credit Contingency Fund – name change and highlighting grant fund options

5. Correspondence

Committee for Finance - PAC report on Child Poverty in NI

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a briefing at a future meeting on how, in the absence of a specific Child Poverty Strategy, the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 can be used in terms of design and implementation of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.



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Department for Communities - Ministerial Statement on Tackling Fraud and Error in the Welfare System

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask why the naming and shaming of those found guilty of benefit fraud has been prioritised for action by a Task & Finish group rather than examining errors. The Committee also requested details of the Task and Finish Group, specifically the Terms of Reference for the group, its membership, which part of the Department the staff will come from and start and end dates for this work.

Agreed: That the Department is asked for a future informal session on benefit fraud and error.

The Chairperson drew Members' attention to an invitation from the National Deaf Children's Society to attend a Sign Language Taster Event in the Long Gallery on Monday 24 February. The Sign Language Bill has now entered Committee Stage and ahead of Committee consideration of it, he encouraged as many Members to attend the event as possible.

The Chairperson informed Members that, last week in Plenary when the Minister made his urgent Oral Statement re Benefit Fraud, he made reference (in delivery) to setting up a Task and Finish Working Group, which he hadn't seen this in the statement circulated to the Committee. The Chairperson stated that this would have been an obvious point of scrutiny / opportunity for a Question and asked for the views of Members on this issue.

The Chairperson drew Members' attention to a letter from the Department seeking Committee support for an LCM on the Employment Rights Bill. The AERA Committee was due to receive a briefing on this Bill at its meeting on 20 February having received notification of the LCM in November last year. The Committee for Economy is also involved, but it would appear the Department for Communities is in a lead role on this matter. Due to time constraints once the Minister has laid the consent memorandum in the Assembly's Business Office, the Committee team has already requested an urgent briefing on the LCM and Departmental officials have confirmed attendance at next week's meeting.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee has been offered a briefing in relation to the Charity Commission Scheme of Delegation.



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Agreed: That a briefing is arranged for a future Committee meeting.

Department of Work and Pensions - Individuals compensated through the Republic of Ireland's Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme.

The Chairperson drew Members' attention to the DWP response and informed Members that the Committee was originally contacted anonymously for help on this issue so, in the hope that the original correspondent continues to listen-in, the Chairperson continued to read some of the DWP response.

DWP states that Claimants are not entitled to Universal Credit if they have capital over £16,000. Capital in excess of £6,000 is treated as yielding an income (known as "assumed yield") of £4.35 per month for each complete £250 over £6,000. Any excess which is not a complete £250 will be treated as yielding £4.35 per month. Pension Credit does not have an upper capital limit, and the lower capital limit starts at £10,000.

There are currently no specific capital disregards in GB's means-tested benefits for compensation payments made from the scheme for people living in GB. However, there is a possibility that some parts of the payment could be disregarded under existing capital personal injury provisions.

DWP officials are currently gathering the necessary information about the scheme, so that advice can be sent to Ministers to consider whether it will be appropriate to introduce any capital disregards for means-tested benefits in GB.

If Ministers decide to make a change, existing regulations would need to be amended and be subject to approval from Treasury in respect of the savings foregone. Changes to regulations would take several months to be implemented and would require consultation with the Social Security Advisory Committee and the Local Authority Associations.

Agreed: That a copy of the DWP letter is shared with The Executive Office (TEO) and that TEO is asked whether other victims and survivors' schemes are subject to a disregard and, if so, why the Mother and Baby Scheme is being treated differently as the Committee feels that any victim payment scheme should also be subject to a disregard.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:



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Danny Donnelly MLA	Proposed Member's Bill - offer to brief the Committee
IMTAC	Chairperson and Member recruitment reminder
Committee for Finance	Cost of Doing Business in NI research
Dept for Communities	Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill - technical amendment
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Thirty-first Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
National Deaf Children's Society	Assembly Member's Sign Language Taster Event
Individual	Private Landlord
Department for Communities	Legislative Consent Motion - Employment Rights Bill
Committee for Finance	Memo to all Stat Comm re NI Open Government Network
Committee for Finance	Memo to all Stat Comm re NICS Sickness Absence
Aberystwyth University	Policy in a Devolved UK
Department for Communities	Listed Buildings Survey
Department for Communities	Scheme of Delegation – Charity Commission
Department of Education	Public Sector Policy Development
Department of Education	DE - Memo re Lisneal College Pitch Upgrade.



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The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Dept for Communities	Press Release: DfC Make the Call Wraparound Service
Dept for Communities	Press Release: Líoфа 2025 open for applications
Dept for Communities	Press Release: Minister welcomes a new community led approach to placemaking in the Greater Shankill
Dept for Communities	Press Release: PRONI issues call for records
Dept for Communities	Press Release: Third phase of Women's Community Programme open for applications
Chief Commissioner NIHRC	Invite from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission for its Annual Human Rights Lecture 24 February 2025

Dept for Communities - Press Release: Communities Minister drives safety with £187,000 motorsports investment

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask why the Committee was not provided with advance notice of this investment and the opportunity for scrutiny thereof.

6. Departmental briefing on the Welfare Mitigations Statutory Report

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

David Tarr, Director Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision-Making Services

Jennifer Gibb, Welfare Mitigations Lead



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Eamon Lynch, Welfare Mitigations

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

- The 2-child limit and mitigations for this
- Logistical challenges for rolling out mitigations
- IT issues and modernising systems
- The need for accurate and timely welfare supplementary payments
- Long term funding for the advice sector
- Welfare supplementary payment waivers
- Long term funding for any additional mitigation schemes
- 5 week wait for a Universal Credit payment
- Funding for social supermarkets
- The possibility of an independent review of Make the Call and the independent advice sector
- The rationale for the 3-year extension period for mitigations
- Loss of carer payments
- Updated figures for mitigations for the 2-child limit

Agreed: That the Department provides the Committee with a breakdown of recent benefit fraud and error figures and a detailed breakdown of the Department's updated refresh of Welfare Mitigation options and figures.

7. SR 2025/23 - The Emergency Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2025 - Pension age fuel support payment

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

David Tarr, Director Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision-Making Services

Conrad McConnell, Director, Universal Credit Programme and Working Age Service

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

- Payments to people in residential care



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- The need to issue guidance to care homes
- The date for payments
- Protection against scammers

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/23 - The Emergency Fuel Payment Regulations (NI) 2025 - Pension age fuel support payment and has no objection to the Rule.

8. SR 2025/22 - The Gaming (Gaming Machines in Registered Clubs) Regulations (NI) 2025

Agreed: That a decision on the Rule is deferred and that the Department is asked to provide an updated brief urgently on Committee concerns in relation to the Rule.

9. SR 2025/24 - The Social Security (Income and Capital Disregards) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/24 - The Social Security (Income and Capital Disregards) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.59a.m.

The meeting restarted at 12.05p.m.

10. Arts and Humanities Research Council Creative Communities project briefing

The Chairperson welcomed the following representative to the meeting:

Helen Apsey, Policy Lead, AHRC Creative Communities



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

- How this work could be shared on a cross border basis
- The need for co-design
- Recommendations for the Department for Communities
- Gaps in cultural data collection
- Opportunities for funding
- AHRC's presence in Northern Ireland
- Rural access to the arts

Maolíosa McHugh left the meeting at 12.25p.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.28p.m.

11. Briefing by Arts Council NI

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Roisin McDonough, Chief Executive

Javier Stanziola, Director of Strategic Development & Partnerships and Gilly Campbell

Gilly Campbell, Director of Arts Development

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

- Financial pressures
- Alternative ways to supplement funding streams
- Discussions with the Minister on core funding
- Potential job losses
- The Arts Council's arm's length body status



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- Reprioritisation
- How data collection is used to shape policy
- The timescale for the Department's new arts policy
- Capital funding

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a copy of the letter of expectation sent from the Minister to the Arts Council and to ask what work is ongoing to avoid a situation where arts organisations are receiving funding letters late in the financial year.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

13. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong informed the Committee that the launch of the Civic Initiative Report will take place on Monday 24 February 2025.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 9.30a.m. on Thursday 27 February 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.00p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities