



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 3 April 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Building

Present:

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA

Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA

Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA

Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA

Mr Brian Kingston MLA

Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies:

In Attendance:

Mr Peter Hall (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 10.01a.m.

The following interests were declared:

Brian Kingston – Member of Committee for the Executive Office

Sian Mulholland – formerly employed in the arts sector

Colm Gildernew - Secretary, Brantry Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

Kellie Armstrong – relative in process of buying a house through Co-Ownership

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that there would be a closed session at the end of the meeting to discuss a draft report and recommendations for the Minister following on from the Arts Sector consultation survey and engagement event and he encouraged Members to stay on for this session.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 27 March 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

4. Matters Arising

SSE - Closure of Energy Services Division in NI

Agreed: That Bryson Charitable group is invited to brief at a future meeting on the impact of the closure of the Energy Services Division and on its emergency fuel payment scheme.

Housing Executive - Disabled Facilities Grant



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask if the Committee can offer views on the survey it intends to undertake with each applicant whose Disabled Facilities Grants project has finished.

Department for Communities - Sign Language Bill, Delegated Powers Memorandum

Agreed: That a copy of the delegate powers memorandum is sent to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for comment.

Department for Communities - Impact of ENIC on Voluntary and Community Sector

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for the total cost of the recently announced additional funding of £1500 to DfC funded voluntary and community groups and to ask when groups will start to receive the funding. The Committee would also like to know if the Department is ensuring that salaries in the voluntary community sector are not falling below the minimum wage.

Department for Communities - Fresh Start Programmes

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if the post project evaluations for the programmes can be shared with the Committee and to ask for a briefing at a future meeting by officials working on the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC).

Department for Communities - Irish Language Strategy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to ask what he is doing to ensure that this strategy is brought to the fore and to ask for an updated timeline for the publication of the strategy.

Department for Communities - Review of Liquor Licensing System

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what the purpose of the upcoming reviews are if there are no plans to introduce further subordinate legislation in this mandate and whether this work might then be duplicated in the next mandate with a possible change of minister. The Committee would also like to know how many officials are currently working on liquor licensing.



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Lisburn and Castlereagh Council	Youth Homelessness
Department for Work and Pensions	Universal Credit

The Committee noted the following tabled items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Active Ageing Strategy
Department for Communities	Legislative Timetable
Fermanagh and Omagh Council	Homelessness

5. Correspondence

Queens University Belfast - The Potential for AI in the Public Sector

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it has plans to use AI in relation to the benefits system.

Department for Communities - Report on the Review of the Role and Responsibilities of Councillors in NI

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what calculation was used for the new basic allowance salary figure and to ask If a salary baseline has been set for all local councils.



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Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs - Community Asset Transfer (CAT)

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to state that the Committee has not undertaken any work or had any briefings from Minister Lyons regarding CAT.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a briefing on Community Asset Transfer at a future meeting.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Engagement Team	Panel preparing for the Disabled People's Parliament Engagement
Committee for The Executive Office	Memo to Communities Committee - Outstanding Strategies

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Clerk to the Committee for Finance	All Statutory Committees 24-25 Outturn and Forecast
Clerk to the Committee for Finance	To Communities DALO re Financial Transactions Capital Expenditure
Department for Communities	Health and Disability Benefits and Employment Support Reform
Department for Communities	Funding from Department for Community and Voluntary Sector
Assembly Business Office	Laying of Charitable Donations and Bequests (CDB) Accounts March 2024



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Source	Summary of content
Clerk to the Committee for Finance	All Statutory Committees 24-25 Outturn and Forecast
Clerk to the Committee for Finance	To Communities DALO re Financial Transactions Capital Expenditure
Department for Communities	Press Release - Explore new heritage sites and monuments with HERoNI this Spring
Department for Communities	Press Release – Minister Lyons announces new partnership with historical institutions of Washington

6. SR 2025/64 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (NI) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/64 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report.

7. SR 2025/66 - The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (NI)

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/66 - The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) and has no objection to the Rule subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report.

8. SR 2025/67 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (NI) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/67 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report.

9. SR 2025/68 The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (NI) 2025



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Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/68 The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules Report.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 10.24a.m.

The meeting restarted at 10.32a.m.

10. Briefing by Trussell

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Fiona Cole, Policy & Public Affairs Manager (Northern Ireland)

Chris Leech, Craigavon Area Foodbank

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

- Current income levels
- The effects of the recently announce disability benefit cuts
- Social supermarkets
- The Anti-Poverty Strategy
- The use of food banks
- Universal Credit
- The essentials guarantee
- Skill sets for employment
- PIP
- Childcare

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 11.38a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.44a.m.

11. Briefing by Co-Ownership on the barriers and solutions to building homes in NI



The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Mark Graham, Chief Executive

Charles O'Neill, Director of Product Development

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

- Revitalisation of the Housing Executive
- Constraints faced by Co-Ownership
- Social housing
- The process for buying homes
- Property prices
- Skills and capability
- Property value limits
- The length of Co-Ownership mortgages
- Financial Transaction Capital
- Areas of identified need
- The way to address skills gaps

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Economy to ask for its assessment of the skills gaps within the construction sector and the measures it is taking to address these gaps. The Committee would also like to know what skills are specifically needed to ensure targets in the Department's Energy Strategy are met.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the local councils to ask if they have introduced measures to monitor the length of time to process planning applications and to ask if planning application process times are improving.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what role, if any, it has in holding councils to account for planning application processing times.



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12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

12. Any other business

Sian Mulholland raised an issue in relation to organisations in the community arts sector not having received letters of offer for funding for the new financial year.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister to express the Committee's concerns around the length of time it is taking to process and issue letters of offer for organisations that have now had to put staff on protective notice as they are unsure of their level of funding for the new financial year.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Arts Council to ask what work it is carrying out in relation to funding for the arts sector for the new financial year.

Kellie Armstrong raised the issue of £250k funding being made available by the Department for organisations to mark the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to express the Committee's disappointment that it was not informed of this funding and that it was announced via the media. The Committee would like information on the criteria for applications for this funding.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 10 April 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.29p.m.

The meeting went into closed session for consideration of the draft Committee report on its Arts Sector event.

15. Draft Committee report on Arts Sector Event

The Chairperson asked for Members' views on the draft recommendations in the report.



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Agreed: That several amendments are made to the report in relation to recommendations and that a motion on the report for debate is drafted for Members' agreement prior to it being lodged in the Business Office.

Colm Gildernew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Communities