



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 5 June 2025

Meeting Location: Ulster Folk Museum, Cultra

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

In Attendance: Mr James Gilsenan (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
Mr Jim McManus (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10.02a.m.



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1. Declarations of Interest

Colm Gildernew – Member of Public Accounts Committee

2. Apologies

Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA

Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA

Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson acknowledged the Minister's Statement to the house on Monday 2 June which contained some welcome details relating to the Department's spending plans for this financial year.

The Chairperson reminded members that the Committee will be briefed by the Minister on 3 July. In preparation, the Chairperson asked members to email the Committee team with to any issues they would like to be addressed at that session by close of play on Friday.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 29 May 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters Arising

DfC - Financial Provision Bill - Social Housing Tenancy Fraud

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the NI Housing Executive to ask the following relating to the anticipated Financial Provisions Bill and /or Tenancy Fraud Policy:



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- Will NIHE provide an appeal process for the tenant
- For a written briefing from NIHE on the system including the appeal system once it is agreed
- Will there be a single contact number/email for public or others to report tenancy fraud
- If a tenant is found guilty of tenancy fraud, what powers will NIHE have to prosecute, recover monies etc.

DfC - Local councils and the Anti-Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That SOLACE are invited to a future meeting to brief on how councils feed into the strategy and how local councils can benefit from the strategy.

DfC - Fuel Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the department seeking additional information on the mapping of areas at risk of Fuel Poverty and if the map will be updated before any actions derived from the fuel poverty consultation are considered.

DfC - Homelessness Oversight

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the department to ask, following the budget allocation, will the department be bidding for additional revenue monies in June to add to Supporting People to ensure need and resource costs can be met - overheads, wages etc.

DfC Minister - Proposed changes to disability payments

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the department to seek further information on proposed bids for additional and recurring resource.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
DfC	Disability Carers Service
DfC	Initial decisions on 2025-26 Budget
DfC	Terms of Reference for Co-Design Programmes
DfC	Workforce Planning
DfC	Sign Language Bill
DfC Minister	Arts Sector funding allocations



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Northern Ireland Audit Office	Information/research on the impact of funding to public bodies being provided late in the financial year
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6. Correspondence

Beat Carnival - R Boyd	Arts Funding Timetable
Beat Carnival - T Kearns	Arts Funding Timetable
Moving on Music - M Bonner	Arts Funding Timetable
Oh Yeah - C Dryden	Arts Funding Timetable
Thrive – F Bell	Arts Funding Timetable
Ronan McManus Kabosh Theatre	Arts Funding Timetable

Agreed: That copies of the arts funding timetable correspondence are sent to the Department and the Arts Council NI for comment and that this correspondence is included in the Committee's arts sector engagement report.

Agreed: That a cover letter is added to the Committee report on the arts sector outlining the Committee's concerns around late funding being provided to organisations potentially leading to them having to rely on their reserves to operate.

The Committee welcomes anticipated multi-year budgets to ensure that organisations have more assurance.

Strategic Investment Board – Investing Activity Report - Department for Communities 25/05/2025

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Strategic Investment Board seeking further information on the implication of 'Last Update Status - amber' relating to regeneration work in Newry in the May 2025 Investing Activity Report.



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Fermanagh and Omagh District Council - Central Government Policy And Financial Support

Agreed: That a written briefing on this issue is requested from the Council.

Individual - Sign Language Bill Concerns

Agreed: That the Committee seeks the individual's agreement for the correspondence to be accepted as evidence for the Committee and that the individual is invited to the upcoming informal evidence gathering session, provisionally scheduled for Monday 23 June.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) - Committee for Communities Crosscutting Strategies – Call for Evidence

Agreed: That the Committee Clerk drafts a response to bring back for agreement at a future meeting in September 2025.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Committee for Finance	Deaths Still Births and Baby Loss Bill as Introduced + Explanatory & Financial Memorandum + Research Paper
Committee for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs	Letter to SOLACE - Deaths Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill
Marie Curie Northern Ireland	Note of correspondence to Minister for Communities re Bereavement Service
Assembly Business Office	Charities Annual Report 2024
The Executive Office: Equality Rights and Identity Directorate	Period Products Report May 2022-2025
Committee for Finance	2024-25 March Restated R13 Outturn and Forecast Outturn



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Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission	Invite to launch of independent research report - The Environment, Human Rights and the Windsor Framework
Committee for The Executive Office	Memo From Clerk to Clerk of the Communities Committee ref Historical Institutional Abuse
Department for Communities	Publication of EQIA Final Report on housing Anti-Social Behaviour proposals
Committee for The Executive Office	Ending Violence Against Women and Girls – Complex Needs Points within the Common Selection Scheme - Letter to Minister for Communities
Department for Communities	Copy correspondence between DfC and Committee for Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs re Northern Ireland Shows Association (NISA) funding request

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Minister for Communities	Letter to Speaker - Promoting Cultural Links between NI and US
Department for Communities	Invite to Consultation Event 16 Jun Green Paper Welfare Reform Pathways to Work

7. Briefing by National Museums NI

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Kathryn Thomson, Chief Executive
William Blair, Director of Collections



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Aaron Ward, Director of Public Engagement

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

- Budgetary constraints
- Repatriation of artefacts
- Outreach
- Future plans and capital investment
- Shared history
- Data collection
- Collaboration with local councils
- America250 celebrations
- Promotion of languages

Agreed: That NMNI forwards its Artefacts Returns Policy to the Committee.

8. Departmental briefing on benefit fraud and error

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Julie Nelson, Acting Director Debt Management, Benefit Security, Child Maintenance NI and Make the Call Wraparound

Brian Hanna, Head of Fraud and Compliance Operations

Cherrie Arnold, Director of Finance

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

- The breakdown for fraud and error
- The figures for Universal Credit fraud and error
- Proposed 'naming and shaming' of benefit fraudsters
- Benefit fraud allegations and how they are progressed
- Nudge calls
- Systems in place to detect fraud at application stage



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- The use of data analytics
- The criteria for fraud and error
- The numbers of prosecutions
- Debt recovery and fraud deterrents
- Measures to address official error
- Tenancy fraud

Agreed: That the department provides the Committee with further information on its work with NI Housing Executive on housing fraud policy development.

Agreed: That the department provides the Committee with a copy of the final report and recommendations of the Task and Finish Group.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Finance to ask for an update on discussions with the Treasury on Invest to Save.

9. Forward Work Programme

The committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

10. Any other business

There was no other business.

11. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 12 June 2025, in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.50a.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities