



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 6 February 2025

**Meeting Location:** Room 29, Parliament Building

**Present:**

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

**Apologies:**

- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

**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 10.00a.m.

Colm Gildernew declared an interest as a private sector landlord.

### 1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

### 2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Ciara Ferguson, Deputy Chair for all of her support and work on the Committee over the last year and wished her all the best with her new Committee. The Chairperson also welcomed Nicola Brogan to the Committee as the new Deputy Chair.

The Chairperson passed on the Committee's best wishes to Andy Allen who was travelling to Vancouver as part of Team UK to compete in the Invictus Games in the Nordic Skiing, Indoor Rowing and Wheelchair Rugby.

The Chairperson raised the issue of recent reports of the £710K investment in a school pitch in the North/West as it was still not clear if any portion of the funding was coming from the Department for Communities budget. The Chairperson proposed that a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities seeking clarification in relation to any contribution from his Department to bring the pitch up to Irish league standards.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Minister seeking clarification in relation to any contribution from his Department to bring the pitch up to Irish league standards.

The Chairperson acknowledged how helpful the session with the Departmental Leadership Team was at last week's meeting. The Chairperson stated that it was a constructive conversation and it was useful to make clear the expectations of the Committee and to understand better the priorities for them and to hear about the constraints in which they are working.



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The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee is due to meet again with the Minister at the meeting on 27 February and asked that Members highlight any particular issues they would like to be added to topics for discussion at this session.

Kellie Armstrong raised an issue in relation to the Department of Health currently consulting on the Help with Health Costs to passport people on Universal Credit into the scheme and proposed that the Committee writes to the Department for Communities to ascertain if there is additional work involved with providing evidence for eligibility for the scheme and if cross departmental costings have been agreed.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what additional work it will have to do in relation to this issue and whether there is an agreement with the Department of Health in relation to payments for this work.

### 3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 20 January 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 - Neighbourhood Renewal and Dilapidation Bill

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask at what point it will be able to provide clarification on the budget for Neighbourhood Renewal given that it has not been confirmed and for an update on how the application process is going since it opened on 31 January.



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Members noted the following items:

Office for Product Safety and Standards	Defective building blocks and materials
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### 5. Correspondence

NICVA - Voluntary and Community Sector All-Party Group

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to NICVA to ask for a written briefing on the work of the Community Sector All-Party Group and to ask that NICVA avoids scheduling the All-Party Group meetings at the same time as Committee meetings, in order that Members would be able to attend.

Dept for Communities - The Northern Ireland Football Fund - Performance Programme

**Agreed:** That a Departmental briefing is requested for a future Committee meeting and that the briefing includes information on how the Department intends to replace 3G and 4G pitches with more environmentally friendly options.

Committee for the Economy - Work Incentives Report

**Agreed:** That a Departmental briefing on this report is requested for a future Committee meeting as the Committee is concerned about the ending of the employment support scheme and is keen to know what incentives there will be going forward for those seeking employment.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

IMTAC	Recruitment for new Chairperson and Members
Pivotal	New Pivotal report - Review of the first year of the restored Northern Ireland Executive



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Housing Rights	Legislative Theatre event on domestic abuse and homelessness prevention
Public Accounts Committee	The Primacy convention

### 6. SL1 - The Emergency Fuel Payment Regulations

The Chairperson informed Members that the scheme will now be known as the Pension Age Fuel Support Payment Scheme. In terms of the minor policy changes, the planned one-off £100 payment to pensioner households will be shared. This means that a payment of £50 will be made to each claimant where there are two eligible claimants in a household (i.e. the household payment will be £100).

Furthermore, if there are more than two eligible claimants in the same household, they will each receive a £50 payment.

In relation to claimants in residential care, they will now receive a payment of £50 if they were:

- (i) in residential care throughout the qualifying week (Monday 16 September to Sunday 22 September 2024), and
- (ii) in residential care for the period of 12 weeks immediately before the qualifying week, and
- (iii) not in receipt of a means tested benefit.

Officials will be available to brief on the proposal at the meeting on 20 February.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if this proposal adequately covers the residential care element, whether residential homes have any entitlement to the emergency fuel payment and if there is any provision in the regulations for those in need but not of pensionable age.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule subject to the queries from this meeting being responded to.



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**7. SL1 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (NI) 2025**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule specifies the Pension Protection Fund levy ceiling for the financial year beginning on 1 April 2025. Whenever the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions makes a levy ceiling Order under the Pensions Act 2004, the Department is empowered to make a corresponding Order and has no power to set different amounts in Northern Ireland.

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

**8. SL1 - The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (NI) 2025**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule specifies the percentage by which the guaranteed minimum pension element of an individual's occupational pension entitlement (a person could accrue a guaranteed minimum pension in a contracted-out occupational pension scheme between 1978 and 1997) is increased with effect from 6 April 2025.

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

**9. SL1 - The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (NI) 2025**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule provides that earnings factors relating to National Insurance contributions for historic tax years, used in the calculation of additional State Pension and Guaranteed Minimum Pensions, maintain their value in line with the increase in average earnings.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a rationale / explanation of the differential in the proposed percentage increase.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule subject to the query from today's meeting being answered.



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## **10. Departmental briefing on the Sign Language Bill**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Iain Greenway, Director of Culture,

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

Gerard Flynn, Policy and Legislation Officer, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch

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

- Co-design work in the preparation of the Bill
- The tangible impacts of the Bill on the deaf community
- Best practice and guidance
- The need for more interpreters
- The definition of prescribed organisations
- The provision of sign language classes
- Standardisation of sign language
- The responsibilities being place on public bodies
- Monitoring and evaluation of the legislation
- Consultation with the deaf community
- Departmental resources needed to implement the legislation
- Technological support needed to implement the legislation

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.21a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.27a.m.

## **11. Briefing from Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Department for Communities on the Landlord Registration Scheme**



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The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Kieran Devlin, Deputy Director, Housing Supply Policy, DFC

Julie Lavery, Head of Private Rented Branch, DFC

David Burns, Chief Executive, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council

Maria Curran, Landlord Registrar NI, Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council

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

- The requirements on private landlords to register
- Data matching across statutory bodies
- Non-compliance
- Fees
- The ability for renters to access the register
- The involvement of councils in the Landlord Registration Scheme
- Financial penalties for landlords that fail to register

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what the triggers are for Environmental Health to carry out checks and to ask, given that 40% of landlords are not registered, what can be done to assist in the flow of information and if this requires a legislative change or if there are any other steps needed to close that gap of 40%.

### **12. Briefing from the Department for Communities and NIHE on Youth Homelessness**

The Chairperson declared an interest as he is working on a Private Member's Bill on homelessness.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

David Polley, Director of Housing Supply Policy

Jennifer Hawthorne, Director of Housing Services, NIHE





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Richard Tanswell, Head of Homelessness Policy & Strategy, NIHE

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

- The Youth Homelessness Action Plan
- Supporting People Programme
- Links with the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Work that is ongoing to prevent youth homelessness
- Engagement with other Departments on youth homelessness
- Dedicated housing officers for those presenting as homeless
- Availability of accommodation
- The role of housing associations
- Funding to sustain young people in tenancies
- The Complex Lives Programme
- Monitoring and evaluation of the Youth Homelessness Action Plan
- The number presenting as homeless in rural areas
- Funding to address youth homelessness

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to all local councils to ask for details of the housing and homelessness aspects of their community plans and to ask if they have any plans to use their place-shaping powers in similar ways to how the Complex Lives Programme has worked in Belfast.

**Agreed:** That the Housing Executive provides further information on its programme for sustaining tenancies and the specific number of dedicated youth homelessness officers across Northern Ireland and where they are based.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department of Health to ask for the number of care leavers in Northern Ireland.

### 13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.



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**14. Any other business**

There was no other business.

**15. Date, time and location of the next meeting**

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 13 February 2025, in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings when the Committee will engage in an event with the Arts Sector.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.02p.m.

**Colm Gildernew MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**