



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 12 December 2024

Meeting Location: Clooney Hall Methodist Mission, Derry City

Present:

- Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
- Ms Ciara Ferguson (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Brian Kingston MLA
- Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies:

- Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA

In Attendance:

- Ms Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)

The following Members declared an interest as a member of NILGOSC:

Sian Mulholland, Kellie Armstrong, Brian Kingston

Maolíosa McHugh declared an interest as Chairman of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge.

The meeting commenced in open session at 10.05 a.m. with the Deputy Chairperson in the chair.

1. Apologies

Apologies are listed above.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson commended the work on homelessness carried out by the Clooney Centre and all organisations in the North West.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft press release on the main focus of the Committee's visit which was to discuss homelessness and to hear directly from groups providing services to people locally.

Agreed: That the press release is issued.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.09a.m.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the Committee agreed not to move its motion on welfare supplementary payments on Monday 9 December. This was in light of the announcement by the Minister on the previous Thursday. As a result of the decision not to move the motion, the Deputy Chairperson informed the Committee that, from a procedural perspective, the Committee had taken a decision which has subsequently not been actioned and the way of dealing with this is for the Committee to rescind its decision to table a motion. The Deputy Chairperson proposed that the rescinding of the decision be placed on the agenda for the meeting on 16 January 2025.

Agreed: That the Committee considers this issue at the meeting on 16 January 2025.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 5 December 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes 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 they wished to discuss further.

DfC - Ministerial announcement on the creation of 1,000 Departmental posts.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to emphasise the need for geographical spread in any further job announcements and to ask:

- Why there is a lack of regional balance in the distribution of posts
- For the criteria used to determine the locations for the location of posts across all constituencies
- Why the number of temporary promotions in the Department remains high, some of which appear to be for a long period of time as Committee is concerned that this could prevent career progression for staff

Ards and North Down Borough Council - Housing planning applications currently on hold.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to NI Water to ask:

- How many planning applications have been turned down over the past 2 years due to lack of capacity
- For information on NI Water's prioritisation process
- For information on the state of infrastructure at a comparative level across constituencies
- For information on the impact of negative conditions being place on planning applications and the range of delays associated with this

DfC - Bereavement Services.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to express the Committee's concerns about the absence of sensitivity in their communications when a bereavement occurs. Committee considers that the letters lack sympathy and are being issued within very short timeframes following a death occurring which adds to people's suffering. The Committee feels the language used in the correspondence needs to be amended to show a more human approach and to put people at the centre of the issue. The Committee also requested a copy of the relevant legislation referenced in the reply along with a copy of the guidance issued to staff. The Committee is also concerned that there may be a break in parity with the rest of the UK in relation to the 'Tell Us Once' service and would support the Minister in lobbying the UK Government to become part of this service.

DfC - Defective building blocks

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to express the Committee's disappointment with the reply as the Committee feels the Department is not doing enough to be proactive on this issue. The Committee would like to know what the Department is actively doing to ascertain the size and scale of the defective block / materials problem and the numbers of people affected, whether any scenario planning has been undertaken and whether the Department is planning to introduce a mechanism to support people to come forward to report issues with defective building blocks.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Agency, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Local Authorities and Approved Housing Bodies, to ask if it has records of the number of properties in Northern Ireland affected by defective building blocks, if it has knowledge of defective blocks being sold across the border into Northern Ireland and for information on the level of engagement it has had with Northern Ireland departments on this issue.

Agreed: That a briefing from the Office of Product Safety and Standards is requested for a future Committee meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) to ask if it has carried out a survey on defective building blocks in its properties.

DfC - Financial Provisions Bill

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask it can provide assurance that this Bill will ensure a reduction in red tape and minimise delays.

Departmental reply on the Right to Buy Scheme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Housing Executive to ask what impact the lack of receipts from house sales will have on its services.

Brian Kingston raised the issue of a replacement for the outgoing Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office seeking an update on the recruitment of a new Commissioner.

Members noted the following items:

DfC	Communication with the Committee and Committee expectations
DfC	Equality Commission Briefing - Disability Strategy
Department of Health	Adult Protection Bill

DfC	Irish Language Strategy and appointment of Irish Language Commissioner.
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5. Correspondence

Dept of Finance - Quarterly Sickness Absence in The Northern Ireland Civil Service July 2024 – September 2024.

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

- For information on the reasons why the staff absence rate is particularly high
- For a definition of industrial and non-industrial staff
- Why the absence rate is particularly high for reasons of anxiety/stress/depression
- What is being done across departments to improve the sickness absence rates
- What proactive support is being provided to staff to minimise staff absences
- If sickness absence has worsened since Covid and for a comparative analysis of absence figures pre and post Covid.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee for Health to ask if it is carrying out work in relation to staff absence figures in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Dept for Communities - Welfare Supplementary Payments, Discretionary Support, Standards of Advice and Assistance, Sanctions, Annual Report 2023/2024.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether there have been more applications recently for Discretionary Housing Support payments and for information on the number of payments over the past 5 years. The Committee would also like to know details of the criteria used for payments and what channels the Department uses to ensure the private rented sector is made aware of the fund.

Dept for Communities - reply on request for briefing on Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update on the progress of the strategy in January 2025.

DFC press release - Minister announces cross-departmental approach to tackle housing issues.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for more information on the locations of shared housing and what the outcomes of shared housing are.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Dept for Communities	Consultation on draft statutory guidance for the implementation of the McCloud Remedy in the Local Government Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland)
UK Sport	Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24
Co-operation Ireland	Invite - €40m PEACEPLUS Change Makers Small Grants Programme
Peace Summit Partnership	Inclusive Peace Plan - integrating peace across all government policies and decision-making and request to meet Committee
Dept for Communities	Welfare Supplementary Payments, Discretionary Support, Standards of Advice and Assistance, Sanctions Annual Report 2023/2024 – notice that document has been laid
Housing and Homelessness Organisations: Homeless Connect, Chartered Institute of Housing, Housing Rights, Sixty Years and NIFHA	Housing and homelessness orgs - funding in NI 25-26 budget
CEF	Press release - publication of NI Executive's Housing Supply Strategy
DfC	Public Consultation on a new Fuel Poverty Strategy
DfC	Pensions Investment Review Unlocking the UK Pensions Market
DfC	Press Release - Communities Minister announces £1.3m for an Integrated Advice Partnership Fund

DfC	Press Release - Minister announces cross-departmental approach to tackle housing issues
DfC	Press Release - Welfare mitigation payments to be extended for another three years
Carers NI	Carers NI 60th Anniversary Event - Invitation

6. SL1 - The Emergency Fuel Payment Regulations (NI)

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Regulations will provide for a one off £100 payment to those pensioner households which lost out on the Winter Fuel Payment after the recent announcement by the UK Government.

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

7. SL1 - The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the purpose of the proposed Rule is to make a range of miscellaneous amendments to NI social security legislation in order to align with legislation being progressed by DWP in respect of the rest of the UK in line with the principle of parity under sections 87 and 88 of the NI Act 1998.

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

8. SL1 - Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Modification) Regulations (NI)

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Statutory Rule provides for Local Housing Allowance rates in 2025/26 to be retained at the same cash levels as applied at April 2024 for the 2024/25 year.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Chancellor to state that the LHA rates in Northern Ireland are not reflective of current costs and that freezing that LHA rate is going to put more people into poverty.

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

Daniel McCrossan wished it to be noted that he was not content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

9. Briefing by North West Methodist Mission

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following representative to the meeting:

James Jennings, Homeless Service Manager - Men's Hostel, North West Methodist Mission

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

- Funding
- Lack of social housing
- Resettlement
- The Supporting People Programme
- Starter packs
- Housing Benefit
- The social housing points system
- Behavioural contracts

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 11.47a.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to NIFHA to ask if anything can be done by Housing Associations when someone is moving from one tenancy to another to prevent additional costs as homeless organisations are losing money due to these moves.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 12.01p.m.

10. Briefing by First Housing Aid and Support Services

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Eileen Best, Director of Services

Adrian Kehoe, Project Manager

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

- The range of services provided by the organisation
- The main challenges faced by the organisation
- Housing benefit
- Funding
- Staff retention
- Supporting People Programme
- Floating support
- Care leavers
- Rental deposits
- Inter-agency support
- Youth homeless action plan
- Resources and the need for 3 year budgets
- Adult services

Brian Kingston left the meeting at 12.36p.m. and quorum was lost.

11. Forward Work Programme

Members noted a copy of the forward work programme.

12. Any other business

Sian Mulholland raised the issue of funding being withheld from the NI Rural Women's Network and agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Committee for information.

13. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 16 January 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.53p.m.

Ciara Ferguson MLA
Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Communities