



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 23 January 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 Ciara Ferguson (Deputy Chairperson) MLA
Mr Brian Kingston MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

Apologies:

In Attendance:

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

The meeting commenced in open session at 10.01a.m.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that, ahead of the session next week with the Permanent Secretary and senior officials, Members had been provided with a memo from the Clerk, a copy of the Committee letter sent to the Department on the issue of timely communication with the Committee and the Departmental reply.

The Chairperson further informed Members that the purpose of the memo from the Clerk was to seek Committee agreement on the range of topics to be raised with officials and for Members to confirm if there were any further topics or queries which should be added to the list, which will be provided to the Department to assist with preparations.

The Chairperson also discussed the information session the Committee held with officials on Tuesday 21 January on Universal Credit which he stated was very informative, useful and worthwhile. Officials had offered to meet the Committee for more of this type of information session and the Chairperson asked Members to identify a list of topics or issues for which an informal would be useful.

Agreed: That a further session on Universal credit, to focus on rural issues and the different "bolt-on" elements of Universal Credit, is requested for a future informal meeting.

3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 16 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.

NIFHA - Defective blocks and change of tenancy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to NIFHA seeking further information on the policy / procedure for commencing a new tenancy in order to understand why Housing Associations and the NI Housing Executive seem to handle change of tenancy payments differently following a homelessness support placement.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request sight of the relevant legislation that governs the allocation or payment of funds when a resident moves from a homelessness support placement to a new tenancy, which is currently preventing funds going to homelessness support organisations for the full term of the support provided.

Gambling Commission - Online gambling and regulatory extent in Northern Ireland

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request an informal briefing session on gambling to focus on the overall regulatory landscape, including roles and responsibilities of all involved and to identify where the current loopholes or areas of risk are.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.15a.m.

DfC - National Insurance Contributions and the Impact on the Voluntary and Community Sector

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for more detail on how the voluntary and community sector can avail of the £5K HMRC Employers Allowance and what work is ongoing to raise awareness of this allowance.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to NICVA to ask how many of its members could potentially benefit from the HMRC Employers Allowance.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Homeless Connect to ask what proportion of its organisations will benefit from the HMRC Employers Allowance increase.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Finance to request a copy of the report on the Cost of Doing Business once published.

DfC - Impact of staff vacancies

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

- Are the positions described as “vacancies” unfilled positions or are they being filled by agency staff?
- Is the Department proactively seeking to employ fully trained agency staff as permanent members of staff when opportunities arise?
- What will happen with the Tenant Participation Survey now that work on it has been put on hold, how long will this situation last and how will co-design work be progressed?
- Will the 1000 DWP jobs recently announced by the Department be affected by staff vacancies and will the Department need to move existing staff to fill these roles?
- How many sites within the Historic State Care Sites and Historic Environment are subject to full or partial closure
- What is the scale of the backlog of yet-to-be-listed buildings that are otherwise unprotected

- Whether the Department has an investment strategy to protect historic buildings by taking legal action when owners let properties fall into a state of disrepair
- What powers the Department has to compel historic building owners to take action when a building has fallen into a state of disrepair
- What the Department intends to do to improve the figure of 21% for the frontline support service, particularly at a time when the need for support is greater than ever?

Daniel McCrossan joined the meeting at 10.27a.m.

TEO - Social Inclusion Matters

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Chairpersons' Liaison Group raising the issue of effective scrutiny and the roles and responsibilities of individual Committees in relation to scrutiny of Executive Strategies, particularly when actions fall outwith the scope of the individual Department.

Members noted the following items:

DoF	Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service
TEO	Recruitment of a new Commissioner for Older People

5. Correspondence

Dept for Communities - Update on Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC) Funded, DFC Led Fresh Start Projects from April 2025 Onwards

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for more detail on the work being carried out on each of these programmes.

Dept for Communities - Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill – Committee Report

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Education to request that it progress the Committee recommendation to introduce pensions to the curriculum as part of the teaching of Learning for Life and Work (LLW).

Dept for Communities - Departmental Climate Change Action Plan 2024/25

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if funding contracts have been updated to require grant recipients to take on-board the Climate Change Action Plan responsibilities.

Agreed: That a Departmental briefing on this issue is requested for a future Committee meeting.

Golden Thread Gallery - Invitation to visit

Agreed: That a visit is arranged post Easter recess, in the summer term, time-permitting.

Housing Policy Panel - Request to brief the Committee

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

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Committee for AERA	Correspondence from Solace NI regarding Single Use Vapes
Dept of Finance	Housing and Homelessness Organisations Urgent Call for Adequate Housing and Homelessness Funding in Northern Ireland's 2025/26 Budget
Committee for Finance	Draft Executive Budget for 2025-26 and the Budget Sustainability Plan

6. Rescission of Committee Motion

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee agreed not to move its motion on welfare supplementary payments on Monday 9 December 2024. This was in light of the announcement by the Minister that welfare reform mitigations would be extended. As a result of the decision not to move the motion, from a procedural perspective the Committee has a decision which had not been actioned.

The Chairperson asked Members if they were content that the Committee rescinds its decision to table a motion.

Agreed: That the Committee rescinds its decision to move a motion on welfare supplementary payments.

7. SL1 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee needed to consider several uprating proposals for secondary legislation and that Departmental officials were present to answer any queries the Committee may have on these.

The Chairperson welcomed the following Officials to the meeting:

Janis Irwin – Deputy Principal, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making

Patricia Quinn – Staff Officer, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making

The Chairperson informed Members that the Secretary of State has determined that benefits linked to prices have not maintained their value in relation to the general level of prices and these benefits will be up-rated for 2025-26 by 1.7% in line with CPI. This Order is the principal statutory rule giving effect to the increased benefit rates.

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

8. SL1 - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that the rates of most social security benefits, pensions and lump sum payments are reviewed each year and usually up-rated in April. These 2025 Regulations are part of a package of statutory rules relating to the annual up-rating.

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

9. The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that the 2025 Regulations amend the Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) Regulations (NI) 2008 to increase the amounts payable under the Mesothelioma Scheme by 1.7% in line with the up-rating of industrial injuries benefits from April 2025.

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

10. SL1 - The Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed Members that these Regulations amend the Pneumoconiosis, etc., (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) Regulations (NI) 1988 to increase the amounts payable under the 1979 Scheme by 1.7% in line with the up-rating of industrial injuries benefits.

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

11. SR 2025/3 The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/3 The Social Security (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule.

The Chairperson informed Members that a comfort break was needed to allow staff to set up a Powerpoint presentation for the next briefing session.

The meeting was adjourned at 10.42 a.m.

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 10.42 a.m.

The meeting resumed in public session at 10.52 a.m.

12. Briefing by NI Water on housing supply and infrastructure

Daniel McCrossan rejoined the meeting at 11.04 a.m.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Dr Gary Curran - Director of Engineering & Sustainability

Stephanie McCullagh - Director of Customer Operations

Gary Lawther - Head of Developer Services, Metering & Billing

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

- The impact on house building
- Liaison with planning and local councils
- Developer led funding solutions
- Social and environmental guidance
- Upgrade costs without developer contributions
- Costs to connect properties
- Funding models such as mutualisation
- Overall funding for NI Water
- Wastewater impact assessments
- Rural proofing
- The cost of infrastructure improvements

Agreed: That NI Water forwards a copy of its social and environmental guidance, a copy of its prioritisation process and information on any engagement it has had with the Ministerial Advisory Group.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities to ask what his department is doing to ensure the prioritisation of social homes being built, to ask how the Housing Supply Strategy can ensure any barriers in relation to wastewater are removed so that social homes can be built and to express the Committee's concern that equality issues and disadvantage persists in certain

areas when it comes to the building of new homes due to the problems with wastewater infrastructure.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Infrastructure to highlight the Committee's concerns that public services, the economy and the building of schools and hospitals are being affected by the lack of investment in wastewater infrastructure and to ask that the Minister prioritises capital investment in this area.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what work it is carrying out to ensure that vacant properties are brought back into use and what work is being done to repurpose town centres and to encourage "living above the shop". The Committee would also like to know whether the Department has taken into account the costs of associated sewerage works in its Housing Supply Strategy targets.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) to ask for a breakdown in relation to social housing needs (akin to that presented in NI Water table), to ask whether the NIHE has had discussions with NI Water on the number of social homes that can actually be built due to wastewater infrastructure restrictions and to outline Committee concerns about the accuracy of figures in relation to social housing need (given that those forced to go to the Private Rented Sector are then not counted in waiting list figures).

13. Forward Work Programme

Sian Mulholland raised the possibility of inviting Arts Council NI to brief at a future meeting.

Agreed: That Arts Council NI is invited to brief at a future meeting.

Kellie Armstrong raised the possibility of inviting the authors of the Citizens Initiative Report on Housing to brief at a future meeting.

Agreed: That the authors of the Citizens Initiative Report on Housing are invited to brief at a future meeting.

14. Any other business

Daniel McCrossan raised the issue of tenants moving into housing association properties which are unfurnished and not painted or floored, citing the financial pressures this brings for new tenants.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the NI Federation of Housing Associations (NIFHA) seeking information on any alternatives for tenants who are being

forced to go into debt to cover the expense of furnishing and painting and flooring properties and whether housing associations can offer any financial support for this.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what support is available to tenants to help with the costs involved in furnishing, painting and flooring social homes.

Daniel McCrossan raised the issue of the Universal Credit Contingency Grant not being readily available to claimants.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that this grant is more widely publicised, to ask for a breakdown of payments under the grant, the criteria for payment of the grant and for the advance loan as Members are concerned that applicants for the grant are being directed to the loan.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to DWP to request that consideration is given to extending repayment of the Universal Credit Contingency Grant to 36 months instead of the current 24 months.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10am on Thursday 30 January 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.33 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities