



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 27 March 2025

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

**Present:**

Mr Colm Gildernew (Chairperson) MLA  
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA (via Zoom)  
Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA  
Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA  
Mr Brian Kingston MLA  
Mr Maolíosá McHugh MLA (via Zoom)  
Ms Sian Mulholland MLA

**Apologies:**

Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

**In Attendance:**

Mr Peter Hall (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.

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – Charity Trustee

Sian Mulholland – Private Member's Bill on Society Lotteries

Andy Allen - Charity Trustee

## **1. Apologies**

Maurice Bradley

## **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.

The Chairperson discussed the recent NIAO Audit Report in relation to Homelessness and the Ministerial Statement that 600 houses will be purchased by the Housing Executive to help to address homelessness.

The NIAO report highlights significant financial and operational challenges faced by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, particularly the escalating costs of temporary accommodation and the persistent shortfall in social housing supply.

The report raises serious questions about the sustainability of current approaches and the effectiveness of existing strategies in tackling homelessness. Given the scale of public expenditure involved and the clear need for better outcomes, the Chairperson proposed that the Committee asks the NIHE how quickly they will be able to react, in light of the Minister's announcement.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the NIHE to ask how quickly it will be able to react in light of the Minister's announcement.

The Chairperson informed Members that, in terms of this Committee's ongoing work programme, the Committee team received an email, from the Department late on Friday afternoon advising that, in terms of Departmental briefings for today's meeting, they were going to have to defer both the Anti-Poverty Strategy and Historic Environment, Culture and Creativity briefings. The Chairperson informed Member that this latter briefing had already been deferred previously at the Department's request. The Department states that these deferrals are due to the announcements on welfare cuts and, due to the impacts these have within the Department and that they are unavoidable.

The Department has now proposed the following:

- Anti-Poverty Strategy briefing – Mid to late April
- Historic Environment, Culture and Creativity briefing – the Department will make contact to arrange a more suitable date

The Chairperson further informed Members that the Committee had suggested a number of informal briefing sessions with officials. The DALO has now informed the team that, having spoken with Senior Officials regarding the list of informal sessions, they have requested the following:

- The Pension Schemes Bill – 8 April 2025
- Pinch Points of HSS/ Benefit Fraud and Error/ Regulatory framework for gambling/ Universal Credit/ Complex Lives and Supporting People – schedule a formal briefing session

The Chairperson informed Members that he was extremely disappointed with the lateness of the cancellation of the 2 sessions scheduled for today and, in terms of the informal sessions, the Committee was asked initially by the Department for informal sessions in relation to topics where Members of the Committee had continued to raise questions and follow-up queries, this position seems to have shifted.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to express the Committee's disappointment with the cancellation of the briefing sessions and confusion regarding the move away from informal sessions to formal sessions. The Committee would like assurances from the Department that, when these briefing sessions are rescheduled, that they will not be cancelled again. Members would also like to know the number of staff that have been diverted from other areas of work to work on the disability benefit cuts and what impact this will have on their current area of work. The Committee would also like the briefing sessions to be rescheduled as soon as possible.

### 3. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of the draft minutes from the meeting on 20 March 2025.

**Agreed:** That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

### 4. Matters Arising

DfC - Public Accounts Committee's report into Child Poverty

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how it is using the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to keep children at the forefront.

TEO - reply re Terms of Reference for Civil Servants Entering into Co-Design

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to TEO to state that when the Committee sends a letter to that office it anticipates a response directly from TEO.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Chairpersons' Liaison Group to ask if any other Committee has had sight of terms of reference for co-design.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
DfC	1000 DWP Jobs
DfC	Departmental briefing on Welfare Reform Mitigations Statutory Report
DfC	DAERA Dilapidation Bill
DfC	Storm Éowyn - £1m Funding
DfC	Work incentives in the tax and benefit system report – Manchester Metropolitan University

The Committee noted the following tabled items:

Source	Subject Matter
Dept for Infrastructure	Wastewater Infrastructure – Housing Supply Strategy
NIHE	Replies to Committee queries on Youth Homelessness
Dept for Communities	Draft Fuel Poverty Strategy briefing
Dept for Communities	Boomhall Trust Shared Island Fund Application
Women's Policy Group	Follow up information requested at meeting of 13 March 2025

## 5. Correspondence

Minister Lyons - Voluntary + Community Support Payment for VCD + CED Funded Organisations

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department welcoming the additional funding and asking for clarification on the rationale as to why the additional funds are only being made available to voluntary and community organisations already funded by the Department as it is responsible for the whole voluntary and community sector, not just those groups that it provides funding to.

Pivotal - Pivotal Report - Achieving greater integration in education and housing

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it has any plans to follow through on the proposals included in the report regarding housing developments, particularly in relation to integrated communities and community building.

Department for Communities - Financial Provisions Bill

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how tenancy fraud will be investigated, who will be responsible for monitoring it and how this Bill applies to housing benefit in other tenures.

Assembly Engagement Team - Balmoral Show Communities Committee Letter

**Agreed:** That the Assembly Engagement Team is contacted in relation to areas of work that the Committee can get involved with at the Balmoral Show.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Minister for Communities	Minister for Communities Announcement of funding for Co-Ownership
Minister for Communities	Committee for Communities Member Comments on Misogyny
Assembly Business Office	NI Audit Office Report - Homelessness in NI

All Party Group on Reducing Harm Related to Gambling - Request for copy of correspondence Committee received in relation to gambling at meeting on 27 February

**Agreed:** That a copy of the correspondence is forwarded to the All-Party Group on Reducing Harm Related to Gambling.

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Dept for Communities	Written Ministerial Statement - update on approval for NIHE to purchase up to 600 homes for use as temporary accommodation
Dept for Communities	Press release - Communities Minister announces £750,000 museum investment during Washington visit
Dept for Communities	Press release - New £153 million FTC funding programme and property value limit raised for Co-Ownership

## **6. Sign Language Bill – update on call for evidence and engagements**

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a memo from the Clerk in relation to the call for evidence and public engagements on the Bill.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content that the call for evidence is extended until 9 May 2025.

## **7. SL1 - The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (NI) 2025**

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule will move Child Maintenance deductions in the priority order that deductions are taken from Universal Credit. It also provides for the amendment of the current priority order by placing water charges below fines in the priority order, to mirror the corresponding Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) legislation and maintain parity.

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

## **8. SR 2025 - The Period Products (Department for Communities Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (NI) 2025**

**Agreed:** That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025 - The Period Products (Department for Communities Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (NI) 2025 and recommends that it is affirmed by the Assembly.

## **9. Briefing by Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network**

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Becca Bor, Development Coordinator

Dr Ciara Fitzpatrick, Vice-Chair

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

- Co-design
- Benefit fraud
- Progress on the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Engagement with the Minister/Department on the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Child poverty

- Disability benefit cuts
- Potential mitigations
- Sanctions
- Pathways to work

Maoliosa McHugh left the meeting at 11.23a.m.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to request a copy of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, embargoed or confidential, in advance of it being published.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 11.48a.m.

The meeting restarted at 11.57a.m.

## 10. Briefing by People's Postcode Lottery

Sian Mulholland declared an interest as the author of a Private Member's Bill on society lotteries. The Chairperson and Andy Allen declared interests as trustees of charities.

The Chairperson welcomed the following representative to the meeting:  
Malcolm Flemming, Director of Public Affairs, Postcode Lottery Group

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

- Gambling related harm
- Money to charitable causes
- The application process for allocating funds
- The impact of society lotteries on the National Lottery
- The consequences of changing legislation to allow society lotteries to operate in Northern Ireland

**Agreed:** That representatives from the National Lottery are invited to brief the Committee at a future meeting.

**Agreed:** That a copy of the research paper on society lotteries is requested from RaISe.

## 11. Briefing by Civic Initiative on Citizens' Forum on Housing

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Les Allamby, independent Chair, Civic initiative

Emma DeSouza, Civic initiative lead and co-facilitator

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

- Housing Executive policies
- Water infrastructure
- Outcomes
- Engagement from people from Republic of Ireland

## **12. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

## **13. Any other business**

The Chairperson informed Members that, due to time constraints, the closed session to consider the draft report on the Arts Sector event would be deferred until the meeting on 3 April.

## **14. Date, time and location of the next meeting**

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 3 April 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.59p.m.

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