



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 11 December 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson) (via Zoom)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA

In Attendance: Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
Mrs Victoria Bourquin (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)
Ms Kathryn Black (Senior Assistant Clerk)



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The meeting commenced in public session at 10.00 a.m.

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - Charity trustee, private sector landlord, Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness.

Andy Allen – Charity trustee, private sector landlord.

Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community.

Pam Cameron – former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and Cross Departmental policy, strategy and legislation.

Maolíosa McHugh – Chairman of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge, Treasurer Conrad na Gaeilge na Deirge, Charity Trustee.

2. Apologies

Mr Maurice Bradley.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Members for their attendance at the previous week's Committee meeting held in The Skainos Centre, he further thanked the Skainos Centre and BCM for hosting the Committee.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Minister for Communities delivered a statement in Plenary on 9 December 2025, regarding the publication of the draft Disability Strategy, for consultation.



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The Chairperson further reminded Members that the Minister for Finance also delivered a statement in Plenary on 9 December 2025, regarding the 2025-26 December Monitoring Round.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to seek clarity on whether the announcement of the Housing Fund additional payment will be affected by 1 December change to the Housing Association Grant.

Finally, the Chairperson reminded Members of the scheduled informal meeting with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development due to take place on 17 December, and requested that any Members who wish to attend should indicate by 12 December to facilitate travel arrangements.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meetings on 2 December and 4 December 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters Arising

Department of Finance - Retrofitting and Future Proofing Cross Departmental Briefing, and;

Department for the Economy - Retrofitting and Future Proofing Cross Departmental Briefing

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department collating the concerns about the lack of co-ordinated retrofitting strategy for Northern Ireland and to emphasise that the Committee considers there should be a single NI strategy, applicable across all tenures, not restricted to social housing only.



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Department of Health - Process for accessing Help with Health Costs - Universal Credit

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

- Request sight of planned communication activities in relation to dissemination of the Help with Health Costs change
- Emphasise the need for public information on both the UC update and the process of how to claim for Help with Health (in opticians / dentists)
- Request sight of a clear, linear process for the public (and Committee) to follow in relation to making a claim for Help with Health costs
- Ask whether the Universal Credit Journal could also be used as a ID / entitlement status for a Help with Health costs claim.

Department for Communities - The Northern Ireland Football Fund – delay in responding to the request for further information from the Committee for Communities

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting specific evidence of ongoing legal action in relation to The Northern Ireland Football Fund.

Department for Communities - Child Poverty and the Anti-Poverty Strategy – Targets, and;

Department for Communities - Ministerial Briefing Session

Agreed: That a letter is sent the Department to:

- Advise that a clear cross-Government definition of priority is needed, that the Department's current guidance is out of date and that additionally, the Committee is conscious that the Northern Ireland Housing Executive has established a definition in relation to its functions.
- Request the timeline for the completion of the current work programme of the Cross-Departmental Working Group for the Irish Language and Ulster Scots strategies.
- Request further information on how the Department, as the lead Department will gather information from all Departments in relation to child poverty



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actions; and that a response to this can be discussed at the scheduled Ministerial Briefing with the Committee in January 2026.

Department for Communities - Fraud Error and Recovery Bill – Task and Finish Group, and;

Department for Communities - Fraud Error and Recovery Bill - Committee scrutiny of Bill – Timeline

Agreed: That a letter is sent to The Executive Office to raise concerns about the timely introduction of Bills to the Assembly, in order that adequate time is afforded for robust Committee scrutiny of Bills, given the number and potential impact of Bills (financial penalties) which are due for introduction pre-Summer 2026.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Committee for the Executive Office requesting clarification in relation to how and when it receives a definitive list and timeframes from The Executive Office for the introduction of proposed legislation in the forthcoming year.

Department for Communities - Community Infrastructure Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request sight of the “*substantial evidence*” which was provided to the Commercial Services Branch that underpinned the advice that a competitive scheme was not required to identify and appoint a programme administrator for the NICIF.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Armagh Banbridge Craigavon Council	Plans to Future -Proof House Building and Retrofitting
Department of Finance	Review of Arm's Length Bodies
Department for Communities	Request for further information regarding Retrofitting and Future Proofing Letter from Committee for Communities
East Belfast Mission	Commonweal Final Report 26/11/2025



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Sian Mulholland joined the meeting at 10.29a.m.

6. Correspondence

Participation and the Practice of Rights - Fundamental Review of Allocations - PPR Policy Brief

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Northern Ireland Housing Executive to raise concerns in relation to the Briefing Paper :Participation and the Practice of Rights Policy on the Fundamental Review of Allocations of Social Housing (FRA) – to ask when the *no detriment rule* is anticipated to come into effect as Committee is concerned about how long the allocation process takes and the absence of social homes available.

Individual - Sign Language Bill

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the correspondent to check they are content for a summary of the main points of their correspondence be provided to the Department for information and learning; and that the Committee's Bill report refer to the need to review course content / syllabus along with the deaf community (in due course).

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether there is a plan to review the existing interpretation courses and whether they are fit for purpose and whether the deaf and deafblind community will be involved in the curriculum and the review of these courses in the future.

Department for Communities - Conversion to new style Employment and Support Allowance

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



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- Raise concerns in relation to “easy read” versions of letters issued to recipients not being standard practice
- Request a copy of the process / prompts used by staff to undertake cognitive assessments and request clarity in relation to whether staff are specifically trained to carry out these assessments
- Ask what communication and support has been offered to claimants to support the rollout process
- Ask what clear communication has been given to the Independent Advice Sector to support claimants and if they receive advance notification prior to mailshots being sent to claimants.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Update on the Department for Work and Pensions Independent Review of Carer's Allowance Overpayments
Clerk to Committee for Finance	Copy of correspondence to the Minister for Communities regarding Review of ALBs and ALB Pay Landscape Review
Executive Information Service	Press release - Department for Communities protects some of Northern Ireland's hidden gems
House of Lords - Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee	COM (2025) 526 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2024/2865 as regards dates of application and transitional provisions
House of Lords - Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee	COM (2025) 531 Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EC) No 1272/2008, (EC) No 1223/2009 and (EU) 2019/1009 as regards simplification of



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Source	Summary of content
	certain requirements and procedures for chemical products
Executive Information Service	Press release - DoF Maintaining access to cash vital to local communities – O'Dowd
Executive Information Service	Press release - DFI - Concerns raised re NI Water Contracts
Executive Information Service	Press release - DoF - O'Dowd - Have your say and help shape future of Small Business Rate Relief
Committee for Finance	Review of Arm's Length Bodies
Individual	Sign Language Bill
Department for Communities	UK Government implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Intangible Cultural Heritage
Examiner of Statutory Rules	Fifty-second Report of the ESR
Joseph Rowntree Foundation	Poverty in Northern Ireland 2025 Report

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Information Commissioner's Office	Better Records Together Campaign
Department for Communities	Oral Statement - The Executive Disability Strategy
Executive Information Service	Press release - Lyons launches consultation on ten-year Executive Disability Strategy
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Executive agrees £273 Million Investment in Public Services
Minister of Finance	Oral Statement 2025-26 December Monitoring Round
Pivotal	Pivotal Report - Multi Year Budget Challenges and Opportunities

7. SL1 - The Housing Benefit and Universal Credit Housing Costs (Executive Determinations) (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

Cathy Mason left the meeting at 10.52a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that the proposed rule would retain Local Housing Allowance rates in 2026/27 at the same cash levels as applied in April 2025 for 2025/26. For Housing Benefit, the determination will apply from 1 April 2026; for Universal Credit housing costs, from Monday 6 April 2026.

The Chairperson welcomed the following official to the meeting:

David Tarr - Director, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making, Department for Communities.



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

- LHA rates
- Average Awards for Discretionary Payments
- Budget Allocation
- Awareness of Discretionary Support
- Policy Intent and Ongoing Quality Screening Exercise
- Projected Underspend and any future Ringfenced Budget Implications

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request detailed information on the level of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHP's) for the last 5 years, to include:

- The last number of years underspend(s)
- The comparison of previous years number of claimants and allocated funds
- The average award for Discretionary Housing Payments

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

8. Briefing from Department for Communities – Changes to funding for new social homes

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Mr Paul Price, Deputy Secretary of the Housing Sustainability Group, Department for Communities

Mr Gerry McAreavey, Head of Housing Investment Branch, Department for Communities

Mr David Beck, Social Housing Investment Manager, Department for Communities

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

- LHA rates



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- Level of reduction in Grant Rate
- Programme for 2026-2027
- Level of engagement with stakeholders
- Geographical areas of highest need
- Terms of reference and safeguarding quality
- Calculations and Breakdowns per unit
- Demographics of Northern Ireland population
- Level of reduction in homes and comparison with other jurisdictions
- Impact and cost for tenants
- Housing Associations analysis and concerns
- Design Standards and Lifetime Specification
- Review and consultation timeline

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request:

- Detailed figures, assumptions and worked examples that were used in the decision making process to change the Funding Model
- Comparative figures of the impact of similar changes from other jurisdictions
- Detailed information on the recent innovation lab to include which Housing Associations were in attendance

Agreed: That Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations are asked to attend to brief the Committee as soon as can be arranged.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 12.05p.m.

The meeting resumed at 12.12p.m. with all Members present.

9. Briefing from Department for Communities Briefing - Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Mr Iain Greenway, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for Communities

Mr Tommy McAuley, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for Communities



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Mr Gerard Flynn, Sign Language Policy and Legislation Branch, Department for Communities

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

- Amendments to Clauses in Bill and Proposed Text
- Technology advancements and future Regulations
- Stakeholder engagement, Sign Language Partnership Group and consultation with Deaf Community
- Definition of “Promotion” within the Bill
- Affordability, reasonable steps and reliance on Disability Discrimination Act for recourse
- Statutory Guidance and Best Practice
- Timeline of Amendments
- Ministerial Approval
- Engagement with the list of prescribed organisations including Health and Social Care and the Education Authority

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to confirm that the Committee is content for the Department to proceed with the ‘accepted’ amendments and request that Department Officials be available to attend Committee meetings scheduled for 8 and 15 January 2026.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: That Children’s Law Centre and Queen’s University are invited to brief the Committee on the Children’s Services Co-operation Act, at a future meeting.

11. Any other business

There was no other business.



12. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 8 January 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson wished Members a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.56p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities