



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 20 November 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Ms Nicola Brogan (Deputy Chairperson) MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA (via Zoom)
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolfiosa McHugh MLA
Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA

In Attendance: Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
Mrs Victoria Bourquin (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Neal Flanagan (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:

- Andy Allen – Member of The Assembly Commission.
- Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community.
- Maurice Bradley - Member of Harry Gregg Foundation, Member of Coleraine and District League Management, Member of North West Football Association, Member of Irish Football Association Council.
- Pam Cameron – former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and Cross Departmental policy, strategy and legislation.
- Mark Durkan – Licensed Premise owned by family.
- Maolíosa McHugh – Chairman of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge, Treasurer Conrad na Gaeilge na Deirge, Charity Trustee.

2. Apologies

Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)

3. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that, following the meeting, an informal meeting with Members of the Westminster Social Security Advisory Committee was scheduled and encouraged Members to attend if possible.



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4. Draft Minutes

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 13 November 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters arising

Department for Communities - 2025-26 Outturn/Forecast Outturn / Overplanning Position and October Monitoring Round and Budgetary Pressures

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request information on the policy decision-making process which underpins decisions in relation to identification of those areas of the department's budget which can and cannot be over-planned and in particular to understand whether this is possible for budget lines such as that for Supporting People.

Ards and North Down Borough Council - Anti-Poverty Strategy

Agreed: That Committee will consider a suitable format for a meeting with representatives from each of the Councils once a full set of responses has been received.

The Assembly Commission – Accessibility within Parliament Buildings

Agreed: That a response is sent to the Assembly Commission which acknowledges the letter received in terms of the Health and safety steps being considered but to ask what wider preparations it is making for accessibility following the passage of the Sign Language Bill. The Committee noted that the Commission considers the needs of staff and other visitors to Parliament Buildings but it is seeking assurance that wider consideration be given to MLAs working needs, with particular reference to broadcasting and the use of sub-titles on screens etc. (for Members who are Hard of Hearing).



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	2025-26 Outturn/Forecast Outturn / Overplanning Position and October Monitoring Round and Budgetary Pressures
Committee for Finance	Joint Committee Letter to UK Treasury UK Shared Prosperity Fund

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that, as the next agenda item was previously agreed by the Committee to be held in closed session, that the meeting move into closed session.

The meeting moved into closed session at 10.12a.m

6. Departmental briefing on the Fraud, Error and Recovery Bill: Task and Finish Group findings on benefit fraud and error

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Ms Julie Nelson, Director of Debt Management, Benefit Security, Child Maintenance NI, Department for Communities

Ms Cherrie Arnold, G7, Public Authorities Fraud, Error and Recovery Project, Department for Communities

Mr Mark Morrison, Acting Deputy Director Debt Management & Benefit Security, Department for Communities

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

- Funding and Budget
- Technological Benefits



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- Fraud and Error Legislation
- Compliance and Enforcement
- PPS Threshold
- Resources, staff education and training
- Penalties and Performance
- Risk Groups and Vulnerable Customers
- Communication, Awareness and Media Campaign

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to thank officials for the briefing and to request a copy of the stepped process / procedure being followed when officials take forward a case to the PPS.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister of Health to seek clarification on the process a UC claimant (under the threshold) should follow to access the “help with health” costs when “passported”. Members are keen to understand how an individual will let a dentist or audiologist know if they are entitled to this support and how the process will work.

The meeting moved into public session at 10.59am

7. Correspondence

Forum on EU-UK Cultural & Media Relations - The Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS) - Policy Recommendations

Agreed: That Sian Mulholland correspond with the Forum and feedback to the Committee in due course.

Minister for Communities - Oral Statement - Review of the Liquor Licensing System, and;

Department for Communities - Response to Independent Review - Liquor Licensing, and;

Assembly Communications - Liquor Licensing - Media Clipping



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities in relation to the decision to not take forward reform of the Surrender Principle. In particular Committee would like:

- the rationale behind the decision to **not** review this when the recommendations 14, 15 and 16 were so strong
- to invite Officials to brief on the Departmental response and the decision taken
- to receive a list of all of the stakeholders engaged with, prior to the decision being taken

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Individual	Housing Issue
Department for Communities	The Post Office Capture Scheme Disregard (2)(1)
Department for Communities	Update to Committee for Communities - Budget 2026-2030 Input + Budget 2025-26
Executive Information Service	News Release - Lyons – ICC Belfast secured for UEFA EURO 2028 Qualifying Draw
Executive Information Service	News Release - Lyons announces £150,000 investment in Festive Lighting for Mid and East Antrim
Committee for Finance	Chief Secretary to the Treasury – NI Assembly Budget Announcement and Growth Mission Fund
Committee for Finance	Department of Finance - Permanent Secretary reply re request to brief the Finance Committee considered on 12 November 2025
Committee for Finance	Department of Finance - Revised 2025-26 Outturn and Forecast Outturn Guidance



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Source	Summary of content
Equality Commission Northern Ireland	Equality Review - Ulster Boxing
Executive Information Service	News Release - Minister Lyons visits doggy daycare centre to mark JobStart success
Executive Information Service	News Release - Minister Lyons welcomes positive impact of Golf Open Championship

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Work and Pensions	Reply to Lord Carlile of Berriew re EM for proposal dates of application and transitional provisions
Department for Work and Pensions	Reply to Lord Carlile of Berriew re EM for proposal - simplification of requirements for chemical products
Minister for Communities	Oral Statement - Funding of Social Housing

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 11.09a.m

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that, as the next 4 agenda items were briefings from Assembly Legal Services and Bill deliberations for Clauses 5 and 6 of the Sign Language Bill, she proposed, and members agreed, that the meeting move into closed session.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11.11a.m



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8. Briefing by Assembly Legal Services on the potential use of Section 44 powers and Freedom of Information issues / The Northern Ireland Football Fund

Sian Mulholland rejoined the meeting at 11.13a.m

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:

Simon Kelly, Legal Adviser, Assembly Legal Services

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to remind it of its obligations under Section 11 of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 and to request a briefing in closed session. Members further requested sight of the advice and recommendations received by the Minister to include whether the individuals allocating the scores were qualified to do so and if any scores were changed.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 11.36a.m

9. Briefing by Assembly Legal Services on the Irish Language Strategy

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:

Helen Smyth, Legal Adviser, Assembly Legal Services

Agreed: That the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) is asked to provide detail on how other Committees and legislatures are notified of *active* cases, discussion of which could lead to a Member being held in contempt of Court.



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10. Briefing by Assembly Legal Services on the Sign Language Bill

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:

- Htaik Win, Legal Adviser, Assembly Legal Services

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 12.29p.m

Maurice Bradley rejoined the meeting at 12.36p.m

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 12.58p.m

11. Sign Language Bill – Committee deliberations on the clauses of the Bill

Agreed: That this agenda item is deferred for consideration at a future meeting.

The meeting resumed in open session at 1.00p.m. with the following Members present:

Ms Nicola Brogan, Mr Maurice Bradley, Mrs Pam Cameron, Mr Mark Durkan, Mr Maolíosa McHugh

12. SL1 – The State Pension Debits and Credits (Revaluation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule provides for the revaluation of “new State scheme” pension debits and credits so that their value is maintained in line with increases in the general level of prices from the date they are created until the individual reaches State Pension age.

Under the new State Pension, a protected payment can arise where a person’s pre-2016 contributions exceed the full 2016 rate. Debits and matching credits may be recorded against that protected payment in certain circumstances.



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The Order ensures any such debits/credits are revalued by prices up to State Pension age, after which the award is uprated through the normal annual benefits review. The Rule is intended to come into operation on 22 December 2025.

Sian Mulholland rejoined the meeting at 1.00p.m

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

13.SL1 – The State Pension Revaluation for Transitional Pensions Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the proposed Rule provides for the annual revaluation of “protected payments” within the new State Pension for people reaching State Pension age after 6 April 2016, ensuring those who claim in later years are not disadvantaged compared with those who qualified in the first year of the reform.

A protected payment is the part of the new State Pension derived from pre-6 April 2016 National Insurance contributions which exceeded the full 2016 rate (£155.65); it is revalued by reference to increases in the general level of prices up to State Pension age, and thereafter up-rated annually as part of the wider benefits review.

The Department is required to follow the GB position and cannot set a different percentage for Northern Ireland. The Rule is intended to come into operation on 22 December 2025.

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



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14. SR 2025/175 - The Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/175 - The Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Mark Durkan left the meeting at 1.03p.m

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

Agreed: That correspondence is sent to the Department requesting that any drafts of future Regulations to be made under the Sign Language Bill, would be provided to the Committee in advance of the in-person briefing next week.

16. Any other business

There was no other business.

17. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 27 November 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.04 p.m.



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Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities