



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 23 April 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

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

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 10.02 a.m.

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness, Member of Public Accounts Committee, Private Sector Landlord.

Kellie Armstrong – Family Member resident in NIHE accommodation.

Pam Cameron – Former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and Cross Departmental policy, strategy and legislation; Director of Production Company, family member is a member of the Arts Council.

2. Apologies

Mr Maurice Bradley MLA.

3. Chairperson's Business

Maolíosa McHugh joined the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

The Chairperson acknowledged that the Sign Language Bill's Further Consideration Stage was debated in plenary on 20 April 2026 and drew Members' attention to the Final Stage which was scheduled for Plenary on 28 April 2026.

The Chairperson then referred to the Minister for Communities joint announcement with the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the Community Infrastructure Fund and advised that associated press coverage had confirmed £8.32 million investment for 243 buildings, halls and facilities used by Community and Voluntary Groups. The Committee noted that the Minister for Communities had increased the investment by £2million from his previous announcement in Autumn 2025.



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4. Draft Minutes

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 10.06 a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 16 April 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Local councils and the Anti-Poverty Strategy: Oral briefing from NILGA

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Alderman Hazel Legge, Vice President, NILGA

Councillor Matt Garrett, Vice President, NILGA

Councillor Paul Robinson, Member, NILGA

Ms Alison Allen, Chief Executive, NILGA

Pam Cameron joined the meeting at 10.14 a.m.

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

- Absence of Measurable Targets within the draft Strategy
- Local Councils' as Operational Delivery Partners
- Integration of Departments at Policy Level
- Executive Funding and Investment
- Community Partnerships as delivery mechanisms
- Impact of reduced Rates Support Grant
- Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and addressing Rural Poverty
- Co-Design of the Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy
- Anti-Poverty Strategy Board Members and Council Representation
- Council's Agility to respond with lack of funding
- Regional Balance
- Communication between Department's and Local Council's
- Top Priorities within the Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy



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- Bureaucratic challenges in Pooling Budgets

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, in advance of the briefing with the Committee on 7 May 2026;

- Will Councils be represented on the Anti-Poverty Strategy Board
- Members would like an understanding and update in relation to the existing working relationship between the Department and Local Government
- A timeline of the engagement which has taken place with local councils during the Strategy development
- To see action plans and in particular the “new” detail on how the Anti-Poverty Strategy will be implemented.

6. SL1: The Registered Rents (Increase) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

Mark Durkan left the meeting at 11.09 a.m.

The Chairperson reminded Members that initial correspondence in relation to the SL1 was received on 2 April 2026 (during Assembly Recess) and that the minimum 4 week period does not begin until after Recess and the SL1 is accompanied with a Draft SR.

The Chairperson then welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr David Polley, Director of Housing Supply and Policy, Department for Communities

Ms Emma Sisk, Acting Grade 7, Private Rented Branch, Department for Communities

Mark Durkan rejoined the meeting at 11.11 a.m.

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

- Geographical Spread of Homes affected
- The Rental Officer
- Affordability for Fixed Income Tenants
- Housing Benefit Tenants



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- Unfit Properties for Habitation
- Application Process
- Increase Rate
- Limits on Succession
- Impact on Vulnerable Tenants

The Chairperson then proposed an extension of the four-week consideration period due to the SL1 being received on 2 April (during recess where recess is discounted from the 4 week period).

Agreed: The Committee agreed an extension of the four-week consideration period.

The Chairperson then informed Members that the Committee Team will calculate the timeline to next consider the SL1 and drew Members attention to the change in operational date from 8 June 2026 to 6 July 2026.

Finally, the Chairperson informed Members that:

- The Committee team would issue a call for views on the SL1 using the standard survey on Citizen Space from 23 April 2026.
- The SL1, and any relevant papers from the Department would be published on the Committee website and notified to relevant stakeholders, alongside the relevant deadline, when available.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to seek a breakdown of the homes affected by Constituency Area.

7. SR 2026/65 The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 19 March and 26 March 2026, the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with new scrutiny process for delegated legislation.



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Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/65 The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Claims and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

8. SR 2026/68 The Social Security (Removal of Two Child Limit) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meeting on 26 March 2026, the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with new scrutiny process for delegated legislation.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/68 The Social Security (Removal of Two Child Limit) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule, subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

9. Department of Education - Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for Education which had corresponded to confirm that it was content with the schedule.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to approve the schedule.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 11.33 a.m.

The meeting resumed in open session at 11.39a.m. with the following Members present: Mr Colm Gildernew, Ms Cathy Mason, Mr Andy Allen, Mrs Kellie Armstrong, Mrs Pam Cameron, Mr Maolíosa McHugh and Mrs Sian Mulholland.

10. Matters Arising



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Mark Durkan rejoined the meeting at 11.42 a.m.

Department for Communities - Proposals to provide an indefinite disregard in relation to Republic of Ireland Mother and Baby Institutions Payment Scheme

Agreed: That the DfC correspondence is forwarded to the Committee for The Executive Office, for information.

Department of Health - Inspire Wellbeing Request for informal joint Committee briefing with Committees for Health and Communities regarding Supported Housing

Agreed: That the correspondence is forwarded to Inspire Wellbeing, for information and to direct them to the Committee for Health.

Department for Communities - Anti-Poverty Strategy and Social Inclusion Strategy - Target setting and Children's Services Co-Operation Act

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask who the responsibility for setting targets lies with and to further ask who is responsible for ensuring accountability of the outcomes in relation to these targets.

Department for Communities - Consultation timeline - Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a clear, consolidated timetable for the remaining Heritage, Culture and Creativity Programme's associated strategies and the planned delivery stages, to include key milestones and expected completion dates.

Department for Communities - Local Growth Fund Impact Assessments

Agreed: That the correspondence is kept under review by the Committee.

Department for Communities - Review of Homelessness Legislation

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request how many properties have been acquired to date and to further ask how many people have been displaced as a consequence of the acquisition.



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Department for Communities - Universal Credit – Help with Health Costs - Advertising Campaign

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Health to ask what communication they have had with service providers (such as dentists and opticians) regarding Universal Credit – Help with Health Costs.

Department for Communities - Home Heating Oil Support Package – request for Minister to brief Committee on 23 April 2026

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to advise of Members' discontent with the tone of the letter and the disregard for the role of the Committee; to remind it about the Committee's advice and scrutiny role and further include a copy of the Timescales for Interaction guidance document, with particular attention to the reference "*at the earliest possible opportunity.*"

Assembly Communications - Draft Press Release

Agreed: That the Committee team collaborate with the Communications Team to distribute the Press Release as appropriate, including any embargo.

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.02 p.m.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Reclassification of Winter Fuel Payment for Social Security Coordination
Department for Communities	Social Housing Development Programme - Review of Design Standards
Department for Communities	Children and Young People's Strategy - data development plans
Department for Communities	Cross-departmental Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategies work being carried out



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11. Correspondence

Individual - The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the individual thanking them for the correspondence and to further request their permission to forward the paper to the Department for Communities, for information.

Department for Communities - Permanent Secretary Briefing 30 April 2026 - Topics to discuss

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department setting out the topics that the Committee would like to discuss at the briefing by senior officials on 30 April 2026.

Committee for Justice - Family Court system and the Child Maintenance Service

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Communities to flag concerns raised by the individual in relation to the Child Maintenance Service.

Agreed: That a response is also sent to the Committee for Justice advising of the Committee's actions.

Queen's University Belfast - Placenames NI Project at QUB - Funding Cuts

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to raise concerns about the funding cuts to seek clarification in relation to why the funding has stopped.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Housing Rights	Invitation to Theatre Event in The MAC re Homelessness in the Private Sector
Assembly Business Office	Charities Annual Report to NI Assembly - 2026



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Source	Summary of content
Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee. House of Lords	Draft Chemicals (Health and Safety) (Amendment, Consequential and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2026
Executive Information Service	Press Release DfC Lyons launches photography exhibition exploring identity, belonging, and cultural heritage
Assembly Business Office	Laying The Executive Office retention and disposal schedule - 15 April 2026
Executive Information Service	Press Release - DFC Lyons announces agreement for home heating oil support
Assembly Communications	BBC Radio Ulster Nolan Show 16 April 2026 Minister Lyons - home heating oil support
Assembly Communications	BBC Radio Ulster Good Morning Ulster 17 April 2026 Minister Lyons - home heating oil support
Department for Communities	Support Framework for Independent Advice and Debt Services - Consultation report
Outscape	New Report Launched with Ministers Muir and Lyons People in the Outdoors Monitor NI
Examiner of Statutory Rules	62nd Report Of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Advice NI	Free School Meals – Auto enrol

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Rural Action	Maximising Community Space (MCS) Programme
Department for Communities	Museum Consultation Questionnaire
Department for Communities	Shaping Sustainable Places

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

13. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong passed on thanks to the Committee from DeafBlind UK for all of its work on the Sign Language Bill.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 30 April 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson informed Members that the next agenda item would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to receive a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Services (RaISe) in relation to the Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025.

The Chairperson referred to comments made in Plenary regarding RaISe research and further expressed his thanks to RaISe staff for all their work and professional, independent research.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to receive a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Services (RaISe) in relation to the Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025.



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The meeting moved into closed session at 12.12 p.m.

**15. Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025:
Background briefing from RaSe**

The Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:

Eleanor Murphy, Research Officer, Assembly Research and Information Services (RaSe)

Cathy Mason left the meeting at 12.13 p.m.

The Committee received a briefing in relation to the first two background briefing papers from RaSe regarding the Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025, designed to assist Members in advance of the Committee Stage of the Fraud, Error and Recovery Bill.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 12.23 p.m.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.50 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities