



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 26 March 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Ms Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Maolíosa 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)

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



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1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Cathy Mason – Member of Drumaness GAC.

Maurice Bradley – Member of Harry Gregg Foundation.

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

Maolíosa McHugh – Charity trustee of Naíscoil na Deirge.

2. Apologies

Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA

Mr Mark Durkan MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

The Deputy Chairperson made reference to the Sign Language Bill proceeding through its Consideration Stage during Plenary on 24 March.

The Deputy Chairperson then made reference to the Ministers statement delivered in Plenary also on 24 March in relation to the US/NI 250 programme and event. The Deputy Chairperson further expressed concern that some Members questions put to the Minister during this session had not been fully answered and the Deputy Chairperson then proposed to write to the Minister to seek clarification on the cost of the event and the budget allocated to the “*broader programme of commemorative activities*”, specifically “*local projects*”.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to seek clarification on the cost of the event and the budget allocated to the broader programme of commemorative activities, specifically local projects.



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Finally, the Deputy Chairperson informed Members about an addition to the meeting agenda, due to an additional SL1 which had been received from the Department after the issue of Member's Meeting Packs.

4. Draft Minutes

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 19 March 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Charities (Amendment) Bill: Pre-introductory evidence from the Department for Communities

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr Raymond Caldwell, Director of Voluntary and Community Division,
Department for Communities

Ms Colleen Bell, Head of Charities Policy and Legislation Team, Department for
Communities

Mr Martin Ireland, Charities Policy & Legislation Team, Department for
Communities

Mr Gerard Reilly, Charities Policy & Legislation Team, Department for
Communities

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

- Charity Commission's role and Regulatory Powers
- Safeguarding Commission abuse of Power and shared information
- Removal of Independent Examination
- Public Consultation timeframe and anticipated responses
- Right to Appeal Process
- Independent Review Recommendations
- Assembly Scrutiny Control for associated regulations



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6. SL1 The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment Support Allowance (Claims And Payments) Amendment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that the SL1 was received on 13 March 2026 and that the Committee received a Departmental briefing at its meeting on 19 March 2026, when no Draft Rule or EM were available. The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that these had now been received by the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson then reminded the Committee of its actions agreed at its meeting on 19 March and further informed Members that:

- The Department intended to lay the rule on 9 April 2026
- After postponing consideration on the basis that a Draft SR and EM were not available, the Committee was asked to consider the proposed statutory rule (SL1) at this meeting, so that the Department could proceed to make and lay the Rule.
- If the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) could report on this SR in their report on 20 April, the Committee will consider this SR alongside the ESR report at its meeting on 23 April.

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

The Deputy Chairperson brought forward Agenda Item 21 for consideration.

21. SL1 The Social Security (Removal of Two Child Limit) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson informed the Committee that the Department for Communities advised that this Rule would need to come into effect from 6 April 2026 to correspond with Great Britain (GB) and therefore, the 21-day convention between laying date and commencement date would be breached.

The Deputy Chairperson further advised that as the Department for Communities could not make and lay Parity Legislation in advance of the



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corresponding Great Britain Instrument being made and laid, the 21-day rule would also be breached in Northern Ireland.

The Deputy Chairperson then welcomed the following Departmental Officials to the meeting:

Mr Mark McCartney, Policy & Legislation Lead for Universal Credit, Department for Communities

Ms Jennifer Gibb, Policy & Legislation Lead for Housing Benefit, Department for Communities

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

- Timeframe
- Analysis of Westminster SI and its relevance in Northern Ireland

The Deputy Chairperson advised the Committee that the Minister for Communities had requested that the Committee consider the proposed statutory rule within a *shortened timeframe*.

Agreed: That the Committee consider the proposed statutory rule within the shortened timeframe, and that:

- The Social Security (Removal of Two Child Limit) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 would be considered at the Committee Meeting on 16 April 2026.

The Deputy Chairperson then advised Members that a shortened timeframe did not preclude the committee from issuing a call for views.

The Deputy Chairperson then requested views from Members on whether they wished to publish a call for views given that the Department requested a decision on the proposal within two weeks of the implementation date (6 April 2026).



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Agreed: That the Committee is content to *not* publish a call for views, due to the *exceptional nature* of this proposal and because the Committee had recently carried out additional scrutiny of this policy change.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that:

- The Department intend to lay the rule on 6 April 2026
- The Committee should indicate whether it *is content* or *not content* for the Department to make the Statutory Rule.

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

The Deputy Chairperson proposed that, any time sensitive SL1's received by the Committee Team during the upcoming period of recess, would be published on Citizen Space, pending consideration at a future scheduled meeting.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Committee team to publish time-sensitive SL1's during the two week recess period.

7. SR 2026/43 The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 26 February and 5 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 2026/43: The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

8. SR 2026/44 The Social Security and Statutory Maternity Pay (Evidence of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 26 February and 5 March 2026 when the



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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 2026/44: The Social Security and Statutory Maternity Pay (Evidence of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

9. SR 2026/51 The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 26 February and 12 March 2026 when 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 2026/51: The Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

10. SR 2026/52 The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 26 February and 12 March 2026 when 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 2026/52: The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

11. SR 2026/54 The Universal Credit and Employment and Support Allowance (Rates of Allowances) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 12 February and 12 March 2026 when the



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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 2026/54: The Universal Credit and Employment and Support Allowance (Rates of Allowances) (Amendment and Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

12. Department for Communities Retention and Disposal Schedule

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

13. Engagement with Local Government on the Anti-Poverty Strategy: Draft report update

The Deputy Chairperson invited Members' views in relation to the Draft report on Engagement with Local Government on the Anti-Poverty Strategy, and sought points of feedback for inclusion and next steps.

Agreed: That a letter and a copy of the report is sent to the Minister under the Committee's advisory remit and asking that the recommendations be incorporated into the ongoing update of the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Agreed: That the Committee Team draft wording for a potential plenary Motion for Members' review and consideration at a future meeting.

14. Matters Arising

Department for Communities - Severe Weather Emergency Protocol (SWEP)

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for the rationale for deciding to *not* place SWEP on a statutory footing.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Fundamental Review of Allocations

Agreed: That a briefing from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive on the Fundamental Review of Allocations is scheduled for a future meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) to ask whether there is any plan to undertake a review in relation to a



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Statutory Committee's ability to scrutinise Policy decisions and operations delivered by Arms-Length Bodies, where they are delivering services on behalf of the sponsoring Department.

Department for Communities - Welfare Mitigations and 2028 Cliff-Edge

Agreed: That a letter is sent to The Executive Office to ask that priority is given to discussions around welfare reform in this mandate, in order to prepare for legislative change in advance of the next cliff edge in 2028 – outlining that the Minister's response to the Committee has reflected that this is a broader Executive issue.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to express concern in relation to the lack of preparatory work being undertaken in this mandate given that this will inevitably create another cliff edge early in the next mandate.

Department for Communities - Conversion to new style ESA - Easy Read Accessibility

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland to seek a view on whether Departments can decide to use Easy Read Versions as standard and whether Easy Read Versions could be made mandatory in specific circumstances.

Department for Communities - Active Ageing Strategy

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether, when they engaged with other Executive Departments, they set out the objectives of the overall strategy when asking individual Departments *what actions* each would progress in relation to the Strategy and *how these actions would be delivered*.

Department for Communities - Veterans and Armed Forces Pathway

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department thanking them for the information and to further ask:

- Whether the "*potential eligibility for benefits, support, and services*" outlined in the letter will extend to Housing Allocations
- How disadvantage has been / will be defined for this demographic?
- How the outcomes will be measured?
- What specific targeted measures are being proposed to better support veterans.



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Committee for Communities - Draft Memo to Committee for The Executive Office re Windsor Framework and EU Matters

Agreed: That the Memo is sent to the Committee for the Executive Office.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Chairpersons' Liaison Group (CLG)	Management of Committee Legislative Workloads Legislative Consent Motion – Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill
Department for Communities	Funding of Your School Your Club Programme
Department for Communities	Request from Committee for Communities for a list of Statutory Rules up to Summer Recess 2026
Department for Communities	Local Housing Allowance and Average Rents

15. Correspondence

Committee for The Executive Office - Grand Central Station - oral briefing from the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression – request to Committee for Communities

Agreed: That the Committee team respond to the TEO Committee with the most recent updates on the languages Strategy provided by the Department.

Agreed: That the Committee for The Executive Office is asked to supply the Briefing Papers received by it from the three Commissioners.

Department for Communities - Commission on Work and Wellbeing

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request a future briefing on the Transformation Project and its Terms of Reference.

The Committee noted the following items:



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Source	Summary of content
Department for Work and Pensions	Letter to Lord Carlile of Berriew re Publication of the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Chemicals Legislative Reforms consultation response
Individual	Committee for Communities copied into update regarding Housing Issue
Assembly Business Office	Department of Education Retention and Disposal Schedule
Rural Action	PEACEPLUS 'Maximising Community Space – Inclusive and Connected Rural Communities' Project – Invitation to Launch
Executive Information Service	Press Release: Lyons hails Ulster-Scots contribution to founding of the US at special reception in Washington
Examiner of Statutory Rules	61st Report Of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Committee for The Executive Office	Grand Central Station - oral briefing from the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression – copy of correspondence to the Minister for Communities
Executive Information Service	Press Release Minister Lyons welcomes launch of All Ireland Heritage Skills Programme
Department for Communities	Update on the Timms Review of Personal Independence Payment

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Minister for Communities	Ministerial Statement - Update on US NI 250
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Lyons Historical US documents to make their way across the Atlantic
Executive Information Service	Press Release Lyons announces start of construction on the Shankill Gateway Public Realm Scheme
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Extension of appointments Management Committee of the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium

16. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo in relation to managing the Committee's workload for the remainder of the current mandate including a thematic approach to scheduling briefings, initially prioritising Social Security and data, and the operation of Homelessness prevention measures in practice.

The Committee further considered its participation at the Balmoral Show on 14 May 2026.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to agree that pending Forward Work Programme items are considered on a modular approach, initially focusing on Social Security and data, and the operation of Homelessness prevention measures in practice.

Agreed: That the Committee forgo the engagement session offered at the Balmoral Show and continue with the normal scheduled Committee meeting on 14 May 2026.

The Committee then noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

17. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong raised concern around the timeline for scrutiny of potential Member's Bills which could come to the Committee for scrutiny.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Speaker requesting an outline number of the (likely) number of Members Bills which are pending a decision and would be for the Committee for Communities in this mandate.

18. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 16 April 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the next agenda items would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to receive a briefing from the Department for Communities on Assistance with Fuel Costs and Sport NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to receive briefings from the Department for Communities on Assistance with Fuel Costs and Sport NI.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11.26 a.m.

19. Assistance with Fuel Costs: Oral evidence from Department for Communities

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Emer Morelli, Interim Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities

Ms Cherrie Arnold, Deputy Secretary, Work and Health Group, Department for Communities

Mr Angus Kerr, Director, Climate Change Division, Department for Communities

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

- Subordinate Legislation Requirements
- Lessons Learned from Previous Schemes
- Possible Scheme Options and ability to deliver
- Eligibility Criteria
- Stakeholder Engagement



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- Fuel Poverty Strategy
- Funding and FTC Bids

Agreed: That a letter is sent to The Executive Office expressing the need to progress of the distribution of these funds, and to further express concern that previous Departmental bids which would have enabled planning for an emergency payment scheme had repeatedly not been met and to reiterate the need for this type of project to be funded in order that the government can react in a timely way in times of global emergency.

Agreed: That a letter is also sent to the Minister of Finance emphasising the need to progress of the distribution of available funds, and to further express concern that previous Department bids had not been met and the impact this now has on the ability to react in challenging circumstances.

The Deputy Chairperson advised Members that Ms Emer Morelli would also be briefing the Committee in relation to agenda item 20.

20. Sport NI: Oral evidence from Department for Communities

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following official to the meeting alongside Ms Emer Morelli:

Mr Mark McLaughlin, Director of Active Communities, Department for Communities

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

- Future Progress and Transformation Process
- Future Evidence Session with Sport NI

Agreed: That a briefing with Sport NI is scheduled for a future briefing.

Agreed: That a briefing with the Department is scheduled for a future briefing.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.19 p.m. and wished the Members a Happy Easter.



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Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities