



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 2 July 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
- Mrs Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson) (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
- Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
- Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

In Attendance:

- Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mr Sean McCann (Assistant Clerk)
- Mr Chris McAfee (Clerical Supervisor)
- Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
- Ms Kathryn Black (Senior Assistant Clerk)



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

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew – sponsor of Member's Housing (Amendment) Bill, charity trustee, Member of the Public Accounts Committee, private sector landlord

Andy Allen – charity trustee, private sector landlord, armed forces

Maolfosa McHugh – charity trustee

Kellie Armstrong – member of occupational pension schemes

Maurice Bradley – member of Harry Gregg Foundation

Sian Mulholland – member of local government pension scheme

Pam Cameron – Former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and cross-departmental policy, strategy and legislation; Director of a production company, family member is a member of the Arts Council.

2. Apologies

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson noted the following in anticipation of summer recess:

Freedom of Information requests

Agreed: That Members agree to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson in relation to submitting views on the releasing or withholding of information relating to non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee during recess.



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Correspondence

Agreed: That Members are content that any urgent matters are dealt with via correspondence during the recess period.

Agreed: That Members are also content to consider Correspondence papers on two occasions over the summer recess in order to better facilitate the first meeting in September.

End of Session Reports

Members will consider the 2025/26 End of Session report in draft form in September 2026. Once agreed, the report will be published providing a record of the activities of the committee.

The Chairperson congratulated the Irish cricket team on their recent T20 series win against India.

The Chairperson acknowledged the thanks received from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development for the previous week's informal meeting, lunch and tour.

The Chairperson raised an issue in relation to funding for youth groups under the existing Neighbourhood Renewal programme.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether there are any issues or disruption to funding for youth groups under the existing Neighbourhood Renewal programme and to ask what level of communication the Department has had with youth groups on this issue.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.06 a.m.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the Committee meeting on 25 June 2026.



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Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 10.07 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.08 a.m. with all Members present.

5. Oral briefing from Administrative Data Research Centre NI

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives to the meeting:

Professor Jamie Murphy, Ulster University and ADRC-NI

Dr Lisa Kent, Queen's University Belfast and ADRC-NI

Mr Richard Tanswell, Homeless Strategy Manager, Housing Executive

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

- The need for a data sharing strategy for NI
- Data on homelessness
- The need for more NI specific data
- The need for legislative change
- Administrative data's role in evaluating policy success
- How data can feed into good government
- Societal benefits of administrative data
- Data sharing with the Republic of Ireland
- Relationship with NISRA

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister of Finance to ask that he considers the development of a data sharing strategy for NI in line with those that exist in Scotland, Wales and England.

6. Charities (Amendment) Bill: Oral evidence from the Department for Communities

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Colleen Bell, Head of Charities Policy and Legislation Team



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Mr Martin Ireland, Deputy Principal, Charities Policy and Legislation Team

Mr Gerard Reilly, Charities Policy and Legislation Team

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

- Audit threshold
- Reporting rules for charities operating on a North/South basis
- Communication with the charity regulator in the Republic of Ireland
- The need to update the Explanatory Memorandum
- The Charity Commission's official warning system
- Vesting of property
- Section 167 charities
- The commercial aspect of charities
- Exemptions for designated religious charities
- Anti-avoidance provisions

Agreed: That the Department provides the Committee with a copy of the consultation report as soon as possible and with a tracked-changes version of the Bill.

The Chairperson proposed that the Committee launches a public Call for Evidence on the Charities (Amendment) Bill over the summer, using the standard survey on Citizen Space, and that the Bill and accompanying papers are published and stakeholders notified.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to agree the consultation questions and launch a Call for Evidence on the Charities (Amendment) Bill, to inform the Committee Stage scrutiny.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 11.24 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.27 a.m. with the following Members present:

Colm Gildernew, Maurice Bradley, Andy Allen, Kellie Armstrong, Cathy Mason, Sian Mulholland, Maolíosa McHugh.



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Pam Cameron rejoined the meeting at 11.28 a.m.

Mark Durkan rejoined the meeting at 11.29 a.m.

7. Housing (Amendment) Bill

As the Chairperson is the sponsor of this Bill, the Deputy Chairperson, Cathy Mason MLA, assumed the Chair for this item.

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following people to the meeting:

Mr Colm Gildernew MLA, Bill Sponsor; and

Mr Dermot Browne, Policy Advisor

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

- The 6-month window of support in Scotland and Wales
- What a longer window of support would look like in practice
- Cost implications of the Bill for the Housing Executive
- The reasons for commencement of the Act after 6 months on receiving Royal Assent
- Lack of housing stock for temporary accommodation
- The additional resources needed by the Housing Executive
- The potential for cost savings by preventing homelessness
- The potential need for a review period

The Deputy Chairperson informed Members that the Clerk's memo set out a proposed Committee Stage timeline and – although not usual – proposed a pre-second stage call for views over the summer, with an eight-week consultation period given the brevity of the Bill. The Call for Views would launch on 9 July and close on 3 September 2026.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to agree the proposed Committee Stage plan and timeframe.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to agree the draft Citizen Space consultation questions, subject to any amendments Members wish to make.



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Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Committee team proceeds with;

- placing the advertisement for the Call for Views
- uploading the consultation questions to Citizen Space
- seeking the advice of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and Human Rights advice from Assembly Legal Services; and
- commissioning a RaSe paper, and contacting relevant stakeholders

The Deputy Chairperson suspended the meeting at 11.56 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.57 a.m. with all Members present.

The Chairperson resumed the Chair at 11.57 a.m.

8. Occupational Pension Schemes delegated legislation: Oral briefing from the Department for Communities

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr Mark McCartney, Policy and Legislation lead for State and Private Pensions

Mr Neil McAlinden, Policy and Legislation officer for State and Private Pensions

The Chairperson thanked the officials for a comprehensive briefing.

9. SL1 The Home Heating Oil (Temporary Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson welcomed the following official to the meeting via Zoom:

David Tarr, Director, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision Making

The Chairperson informed Members that the Minister had requested that the Committee consider this SL1 within a shortened timeframe, citing exceptional circumstances – the need to deliver financial assistance to eligible households as quickly as possible.

The Chairperson further informed Members that:



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- the SR provides the legal framework for the Home Heating Oil Support Scheme, delivering targeted financial assistance – via a prepaid card restricted to fuel purchases – to low-income households, and those in receipt of specified benefits, who rely on heating oil as their main source of heating;
- the scheme follows the UK Government's allocation of £17.2 million to Northern Ireland, together with a further £19.2 million agreed by the Executive, and could benefit around 300,000 households;
- the Department for Communities was designated as the relevant Department by the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 24 June 2026; and
- the scheme is temporary, with applications not accepted after 31 March 2027.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to consider this SL1 within the shortened timeframe requested by the Minister, in light of the exceptional circumstances.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the SL1 and has no objection to the Department proceeding to make the Rule subject to amendments being made to the Explanatory Memorandum.

Agreed: That the Department clarifies how a single household will be treated in relation to Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).

Agreed: That the Committee is content to publish the Citizen Space call for views, publish the Departmental documents in relation to this SL1, and communicate to stakeholders as appropriate.

The Chairperson informed Members that the standard survey will go live as soon as possible when the Department provides the Committee with updated documents and will remain open for the usual period of time. The Committee will then consider whether or not it agrees to the rule at the next meeting on 10 September 2026.

10. SL1 The Housing Benefit (Earned Income Disregards) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 – initial consideration



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The Chairperson informed Members that the Minister and Department have requested that consideration of this SL1 is expedited and within a shortened timeframe, to help ensure the Rule can be made by 14 September 2026 in line with the 21-day rule, ahead of the planned operational date of 5 October 2026.

The Chairperson further informed Members that:

- the purpose of the SR is to amend the Housing Benefit Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 to introduce five targeted earned income disregards for working-age claimants residing in Supported Housing and Temporary Accommodation;
- the changes are intended to reduce a financial disincentive that arises for this cohort due to the interaction between Universal Credit and Housing Benefit rules; and
- the SL1 is subject to the negative procedure

The Chairperson reminded Members that the absence of the draft copy of the rule did not prevent the Committee from proceeding, but that this should be exceptional and should be recorded as such in the minutes of proceedings.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to consider the SL1 within the shortened timeframe.

The Committee noted that:

- the Committee team will issue a call for views on the SL1 using the standard survey on Citizen Space. The standard survey will go live on 3 July 2026 and the call for views will close at midnight on 30 July 2026; and
- alongside this, the SL1 and any relevant papers from the Department will be published on the Committee website and notified to relevant stakeholders, where appropriate.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to publish the Citizen Space call for views, publish the Departmental documents in relation to this SL1, and alert stakeholders as appropriate.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how many people, in the groups that this legislation would apply to, could potentially be placed in accommodation without access to kitchen facilities.

11. SR 2026/111 The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members the Committee noted the SL1 and associated documents and agreed a call for views on 7 May, received a departmental briefing on 28 May, and at that meeting agreed it was content with the policy merits of the proposal and content for the Department to make the Rule. The Department has confirmed there have been no changes to policy intent since the SL1 was submitted.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Examiner of Statutory Rules has advised that these Regulations will be included in her next report, which will be issued after recess, and that they are not required to be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: That the Committee has considered SR 2026/111 The Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the Rule.

12. Retention and Disposal Schedule – Libraries NI

The Chairperson informed Members that the Libraries NI Retention and Disposal Schedule was laid in the Business Office on 29 June 2026 and fell to the Committee for scrutiny. The end of the statutory period has been calculated as 5 October 2026.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to note the Libraries NI Retention and Disposal Schedule.

13. Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill

The Chairperson welcomed the following people to the meeting, via Zoom:

Mr Eóin Tennyson MLA, Bill Sponsor; and

Ms Jessica Johnston, party colleague



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

- What the Bill will mean, if passed, in practice
- The offence of coercive and controlling behaviour in the Bill
- Safeguards in the Bill
- How the Bill will close legislative gaps on harmful conversion practices
- Current domestic abuse legislation
- Protections for pastoral and faith-based organisations
- Changes in the Bill since consultation with faith-based organisations
- Legislation in other jurisdictions

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.48 p.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that the Clerk's memo set out a proposed Committee Stage timeline and, as with the Housing (Amendment) Bill, proposed a pre-Second Stage Call for Views over the summer – in this case a full twelve-week consultation period. The Call for Views would launch on 9 July and close on 1 October 2026.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 13.04 p.m.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to agree the proposed Committee Stage plan and timeframe.

Agreed: That the Committee is content to agree the draft Citizen Space consultation questions, subject to any amendments Members wish to make.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Committee team proceeds with:

- placing the advertisement for the Call for Views
- uploading the consultation questions to Citizen Space
- seeking the advice of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and Human Rights advice from Assembly Legal Services; and
- commissioning a RaISe paper, and contacting relevant stakeholders

Andy Allen left the meeting at 13.06 p.m.

14. Matters Arising



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Minister for Communities - Briefing on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy
Consultation Report

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a matrix which sets out the responses received to the consultation against the Department's response and changes made.

Department for Communities Barriers to participation in the Timms Review of
Personal Independence Payment

Agreed: That a copy of the response is forwarded to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to highlight Committee concerns in relation to the inadequacies of Northern Ireland specifics in the review.

Department for Communities - Financial issues faced by Supporting People

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a definition of 'transition phase' and whether this refers to a change in outcomes or a change in the amount of funding.

Department for Communities - Minister for Health reply regarding Help with
Health Costs Scheme

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Health to highlight Committee concerns that no data is held on hearing tests and to ask how many hearing tests have been applied for via the Help with Health Costs Scheme.

Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly - Northern Ireland Commission for
Children and Young People (NICCY)

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Assembly Commission to ask what engagement it has had with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) around alternative governance options.

The Committee noted the following items:



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Source	Subject Matter
Committee for Justice	Letter to Department of Justice - Housing Rights discussion paper
Department of Health	Housing Rights discussion paper
Department for Communities	Northern Ireland Housing Executive response re Social Housing Development Programme
Department for Communities	Commission on Work and Wellbeing
Department for Communities	Homelessness Prevention
Department of Finance	Northern Ireland Place-Name Project
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Displaced Persons
Minister for Communities	Committee for Communities' Report on Anti-Poverty Strategy

Cathy Mason left the meeting at 13.16 p.m.

15. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Laying addendum to the Department for the Economy retention and disposal schedule
Ulster Supported Employment Ltd (USEL)	Invitation to Committee for Communities to hold meeting at USEL
Committee for The Executive Office	Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Northern Ireland
Chair to The Committee for Education	Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill



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Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Press Release – Lyons: Once in a generation opportunity to support people into work
Assembly Business Office	Laying Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry Retention and Disposal Schedule
Committee for Economy	Regional Balance Bill
Committee for Finance	Oireachtas response re Inquiry Performance and Culture of the Northern Ireland Civil Service
House of Lords	Draft Chemicals (Health and Safety) (Amendment, Consequential and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2026
Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Hunting with Dogs Bill – Call for Evidence
Strategic Investment Board	Investing Activity Report

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Youth Assembly	Youth Assembly June 2026 Report
Assembly Business Office	Press Recognition Panel - Recognition Report

16. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson reminded Members of the series of informal Pension Schemes Bill briefing sessions to be held online over the summer recess period on 9 and 16 July, and 13 and 27 August 2026.



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Agreed: That the informal Pension Schemes Bill briefing sessions are recorded, so that Members who are unable to attend, or their researchers, are able to access them.

17. Any other business

There was no other business.

18. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 10 September 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13.19 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities