



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 25 September 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

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

In Attendance:

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



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

1. **Declarations of Interest**

The following interests were declared:

Andy Allen – Charity trustee, trade union member, private sector landlord

Kellie Armstrong – Member of Deaf Community, Associate of Chartered Institute for Housing

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

Colm Gildernew - Private sector landlord, Secretary, Brantry Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann

Maolíosa McHugh – Chairperson of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.02a.m.

2. **Apologies**

There were no apologies.

3. **Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson welcomed Pam Cameron to the Committee and wished her well in her role.

The Chairperson asked Members if they were content to send a letter of thanks to Brian Kingston for his work on the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter of thanks is sent to Brian Kingston.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had attended a Cricket Ireland event the previous Friday which was to be a T20 match between Ireland and England and although there was no play on the day due to bad weather, he



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congratulated Cricket Ireland on the welcome provided and the scale of the international event.

Agreed: That Cricket Ireland is asked to provide the Committee with a written update in relation to the extent of their work, to include any issues that the organisation has with funding.

The Chairperson informed Members that he had raised the issue of the recent Departmental data breach in plenary on Monday.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what action is being taken following this breach and to ask what measures are being put in place to ensure that this does not happen again.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Information Commissioner Office to ask about the process to be followed in the event of a data breach and specifically whether those individuals directly affected by the breach should be informed.

The Chairperson informed Members that he found the tone and manner of the officials in answering questions during last week's briefing on the Northern Ireland Football Fund to be defensive and reflected that Members had raised this with him.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to outline the Committee's concerns around the tone of the session and to ask how often officials are trained on the role of a Committee as Members feel that the Committee is being disrespected and set aside.

The Chairperson informed Members that that there would be a closed session briefing from the Department on the Disability and Work Strategy at the end of the meeting and asked Members to stay on for this session if possible.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 18 September 2025.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed subject to a minor amendment.



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5. Matters Arising

Draft Committee Response to AERC call for evidence

Agreed: That the response is forwarded to AERC.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Departmental Briefing on Benefit Fraud and Error
Individual	Reduced Earnings Income Allowance [REIA] ~ Complaint
Individual	Masters in Sign Language Interpreting at QUB
Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC)	Memo from AERC to all Review of the Assembly Committees' engagement on cross-cutting Executive Strategies

6. Correspondence

Committee Representing Independent Supporting People Providers (CRISSP) - Request to Brief Committee on the future of the Supporting People Programme

Agreed: That a briefing is arranged for a future meeting to include representatives from a number of Supporting People organisations.

Sian Mulholland MLA - Ulster Hockey Facilities Report July 2025

Agreed: That Ulster Hockey are invited to brief at a future meeting.

Department for Communities - Letter from Paddy Rooney, Deputy Secretary DfC, re. retirement

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Mr Rooney thanking him for his work with the Committee over the years and to wish him well in his retirement.

The Committee noted the following items:



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Source	Summary of content
Committee for Finance	Cyber Security and Resilience Network and Information Systems Bill
Committee for Finance	Public Office (Accountability) Bill final
Press Recognition Panel (PRP)	PRP Annual Report and Financial Statements for year ending 31 March
Northern Ireland Consumer Council	Household Expenditure Tracker - Invite to event in the Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings, 23 Oct 2025

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Clerk to Committee for Communities	Fiscal and Budget Context Presentation - MLA Event 20 Sept 2025
Department for Communities	Press Release - Consultation - Independent Advice and Debt Services in Northern Ireland
Department for Communities	Press Release - Launch of the 36th Belfast Cinemagic Festival
Department for Communities	Press Release - West Wing star visits PRONI

7. SR 2025/149 - The Housing Benefit (Habitual Residence) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2025/149 - The Housing Benefit (Habitual Residence) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.



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8. Department of Justice Retention and Disposal schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for Justice who were content with the schedule.

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

The Chairperson informed Members that, to allow time for the interpreters to set up for live broadcast interpreting the next session, he proposed a short suspension.

The meeting was suspended at 10.23a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.25a.m. with all Members present.

9. Sign Language Bill

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee had been due to be briefed today by the Foyle Deaf Association but, unfortunately, they advised that they were not able to attend. A copy of their submission on the Bill, along with their presentation, and a copy of a submission from the Deaf Women's Group NI had been included in Members' meeting papers.

Agreed: That a copy of the submissions and the presentation are included in the final Committee report on the Bill.

The Committee noted a copy of the Belfast statement on Mental Health and Deafness.

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a RaISe paper on a Review of Costs associated with sign language legislation in GB, Scotland, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland.

The Chairperson welcomed RaISe official Aidan Stennett to the meeting and invited him to brief on the paper.

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

- Concerns in relation to costs leading to non-implementation of the Bill



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- Affordability
- Awareness for organisations that might be affected by the Bill
- Potential repercussions for prescribed organisations that do not implement the Bill
- Provision for BSL in Republic of Ireland
- Costs of building capacity

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask if it has updated costs for the implementation of the Bill.

The Chairperson informed Members that, to allow time for the interpreters to finish up the live broadcast, he proposed a short suspension.

The meeting was suspended at 10.48a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.49a.m. with all Members present.

10. Departmental briefing on the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill (Clauses 12 and 13)

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting.

Heloise Brown - Acting Director, Social Housing Policy and Oversight

Martina Campbell - Head of Local Government Finance Team

Sorcha Hassay - Acting Deputy Director, Social Housing Policy & Oversight

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

- Current level of tenancy fraud
- The recovery of properties following identification of housing fraud
- Scope and remit of a review
- Legal abilities for landlords to remove tenants when fraud is identified
- Penalties for tenancy fraud
- Breakdown of information on tenancy fraud types / categories
- The possibility of an independent body being set up to deal with Councillor salaries
- Checks and balances on the work of Councillors



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a breakdown of tenancy fraud types and an update on the review of tenancy fraud procedures.

The Chairperson informed Members that the next agenda item would take place in closed session as the Committee has been provided with an embargoed copy of the strategy.

The meeting went into closed session at 11.34a.m.

11. Departmental briefing on the Disability and Work Strategy

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Michelle Furphy, Acting Director for Labour Market Policy and Delivery

Stephen McGlew, Head of Disability and Work

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

- Engagement with those with lived experience
- Co-design
- The omission of transport/infrastructure from the strategy
- The need for an inter-departmental action plan
- The need for the inclusion of carers in the discussions on the strategy
- Funding for the strategy
- Support for employers
- Sustaining and progressing employment

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Infrastructure to ask what work it is carrying out on its areas of responsibility in the strategy, whether it has considered multi-year budgets for the department's responsibilities within the strategy and what work it is carrying out to ensure that transport is no longer a barrier to sustaining employment.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for details of the current disability work schemes and whether regional day scheme placement opportunities are included in these schemes.



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Executive Office to ask for a for details of the current disability work schemes across all NICS departments.

The meeting resumed in public session at 12.19a.m. with all Members present.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the forward work programme.

13. Any other business

The Chairperson raised the issue of reported delays with the migration to Universal Credit.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for a written update on the progress of migration from legacy benefits to Universal Credit.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 2 October 2025, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.23p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities