



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 29 January 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
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolfosa McHugh MLA
Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA

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 10.00 a.m.

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - Member of GAA, Charity trustee, private sector landlord, Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness.

Cathy Mason – Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Andy Allen – Charity trustee, private sector landlord.

Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community, Chairperson of the Committee for Procedures.

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

Maolfósa McHugh – Chairman of pre-school Naíscoil na Deirge, Treasurer Conrad na Gaeilge na Deirge, Charity Trustee, Member of GAA.

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.

Mark Durkan – Licensed Premise owned by family, Member of GAA, Member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he had taken part in the debate on the subsequent LCM on the Pensions Scheme Bill which was debated in Plenary on



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27 January during which he had emphasised that the Committee did not have sufficient time to carry out effective scrutiny.

The Chairperson then informed Members of the recent Commissioner for Standards Report and advised that, as the Minister would be in attendance later in the meeting to respond to Members questions, he would move on.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 22 January 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters Arising

Department for Communities - Fraud and Error Financial Breakdown

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister of Finance requesting any further detail of revenue for Northern Ireland and the potential level of penalties which could ensue and to further request if conversations have concluded / whether there is certainty in terms of funds and percentages which could be returned to Northern Ireland.

Committee for Communities - Clerk Memo Local Housing Allowance and average rents

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department asking whether they can provide:

- data on how many households in each Broad Rental Market Area have (a) rent that exceeds the Local Housing Allowance and (b) the average gap (per month) between full rental amount and Local Housing Allowance.
- data on how many households receiving Local Housing Allowance are also in receipt Discretionary Housing Payments

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Housing Rights to ask if they have plans to commission any updated research on the gap between Local Housing Allowance and the availability of affordable private rented accommodation in Northern Ireland.



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The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Irish Language Strategy
East Belfast Mission	Stakeholders affected by reductions in income allocations – Supporting People

6. Correspondence

Department for Communities - Deferral of Employment Support Scheme Briefing

Agreed: That the briefing is rescheduled to take place at a future meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that, once the Local Growth Fund has been finalised, the Department clarify for the Committee the extent of the impact of the changes to the fund on the Department's ability to deliver on its objectives.

Angel Eyes NI - Charity Commission requirement to carry out annual full audit for income over £500k

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities seeking the Departmental position in relation to the points raised in the correspondence.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Outscape	Conference invitation - an integrated approach to developing and managing our outdoor green and blue spaces on 05 March 2026
Executive Information Service	Communities Minister 'reawakens' the Ulster Folk Museum with £50m in funding



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Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Proposed Statutory Rule The Licensing City of Derry Airport
Assembly Communications	Derry MLAs back motion calling for robust rent controls
Youth Assembly	Youth Assembly Committees
Assembly Communications	Media Clippings - Ministerial Code and keeping NI banner for Commonwealth Games
Executive Information Service	Press release - Local Growth Fund

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Communications	Media Clippings - Ministerial Code
Agenda NI	Northern Ireland Housing Conference

The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 10.14.a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.15.a.m. with all Members present.

7. Ministerial Briefing

The Chairperson welcomed the following people to the meeting:

Gordon Lyons, Minister for Communities, accompanied by;



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John Greer, Acting Permanent Secretary

Paul Price, Deputy Secretary, Housing Sustainability Group

Cherrie Arnold, Deputy Secretary Work and Health Group

Iain Greenway – Director of Culture, Engaged Communities Group

The Chairperson allocated time to each Member during the question and answer session and the main areas of discussion were:

- Commissioner for Standards Report
- Committee Scrutiny
- Departmental briefing deferrals
- Departmental vacancies and employment by geographical area
- Draft Budget Allocation and constraints
- Social Inclusion Strategies and their funding (Anti-Poverty, Gender Equality, LGBTQIA, Irish Language and Ulster Scots, Disability Strategy and Disability Forum)
- Local Growth Fund
- Rates Support Grant
- Social Housing and Ringfencing of funds for Social Housing
- Housing Association Grant
- Fuel Poverty Strategy
- Recouping of funds from Fraud and Error Recovery
- SWEP Protocol Review
- Department Prioritisation and Programme for Government priorities
- Cultra Museum Funding
- Welfare Mitigations, Two Child Limit and Benefit Cap

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities requesting a copy of the Executive paper and associated Business Case in relation to ringfencing of funds for Social Housing referred to during the question and answer session, to allow the Committee to effectively scrutinise and come to an informed decision on further action.



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Agreed: That the Clerk draft an options paper for Members' consideration setting out options for improving engagement and information flow / exchange between the Committee and the Department.

Kellie Armstrong proposed that, correspondence is sent to the Secretary of State to seek their opinion on actions that the Northern Ireland Assembly could take in relation to the Ministerial breach found by the previous Commissioner for Standards.

The Committee failed to reach consensus in relation to the proposal.

The question was put that the Committee "ask the Secretary of State for their opinion under Section 30 (6) of the Northern Ireland Act on whether the Northern Ireland Assembly ought to consider a resolution with regard to the report of the previous Commissioner for Standards".

The Committee divided: Ayes 7; Noes 2; Abstain 0

AYES

Mr Colm Gildernew
Mrs Cathy Mason
Mr Andy Allen
Mrs Kellie Armstrong
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Maoliosa McHugh
Mrs Sian Mulholland

NOES

Mr Maurice Bradley
Mrs Pam Cameron

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to write to seek an opinion from the Secretary of State.

[The Chairperson later returned to Agenda Item 7 to propose that legal advice is requested prior to sending any correspondence to the Secretary of State.]

Agreed: That legal Advice is sought in relation to the processes which underpin S30 of the NI Act and whether it is an appropriate route for the Committee.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 11.48.a.m.



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The meeting resumed at 11.54.a.m. with all Members present.

8. Oral evidence from the Department of Communities - Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill LCM and Pensions Schemes Bill - subsequent LCM

The Chairperson proposed that as this agenda item contains briefings in relation to two LCM's, the subsequent LCM on the Pensions Scheme Bill will be fully considered in the first instance, followed by the second LCM on the Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill.

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Mr David Tarr, Director, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision-Making Services, Department for Communities

Mr Andrew Yeates, Interim Policy Lead, Universal Credit, Department for Communities

Ms Michelle Grills, Policy Lead, State and Private Pensions, Department for Communities

Mr Tommy Boyle, Deputy Policy Lead, State and Private Pensions, Department for Communities

A question-and-answer session followed the briefing on the subsequent LCM on the Pensions Scheme Bill and the main areas of discussion were:

- Potential Negative Impacts
- Discussions with DWP regarding Timelines
- Northern Ireland Specific Context within Bills

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Devolution Team in DWP to emphasise the requirement for adequate time to be planned-in in order for effective scrutiny to be undertaken by the Committee in relation to LCMs.



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The Chairperson invited Departmental officials to further brief Members on the Universal Credit (Two Child Limit) Bill LCM and a question-and-answer session followed the briefing. The main areas of discussion were:

- Eligible Cohort of Applicants
- Departmental Communication to local claimants
- Welfare Mitigations and Supplementary Payments
- Budget Allocation and Forecast Allocation
- Equality Impact Assessments

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.10 p.m.

The Chairperson further proposed that, as agenda items 9 and 10 contain briefings in relation to the impact of the Universal Credit (Two Child Limit) Bill LCM, that any follow up actions be considered in relation to agenda items 8,9 and 10 together following the final briefing at agenda item 10.

9. Oral evidence from Advice NI - Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill LCM

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr Kevin Higgins, Head of Policy and Information, Advice NI

Mr Matt Cole, Information Officer, Advice NI

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

- Universal Credit Uptake
- Departmental Engagement
- Impact of Mitigations

Andy Allen left the Meeting at 12.27 p.m.



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10. Oral evidence from the Law Centre NI and Cliff Edge Coalition - Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill LCM

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Sarah Corrigan, Director of Legal Services and Engagement, Law Centre NI

Holly Knox, Policy and Community Engagement Officer, Law Centre NI

Siobhán Harding, Working Group member, Cliff Edge Coalition

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

- Departmental Engagement
- Departmental Communication with Advice Sector and Claimants
- Tailored Communication with Claimants regarding Transitional Protection
- Amendment of Bill at Westminster
- Transitional Protection Payments and their erosion

Following briefings at Agenda Items 8, 9 and 10, the Chairperson requested the Committee consider any follow up actions as requested by Members.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Law Centre Northern Ireland to seek clarity on any unintended consequences of the removal of the two child limit and in relation to proposing a disregard for those in receipt of transitional protection.

11. Sign Language Bill – Initial Consideration of draft report

Agreed: The Committee agreed to review the report and revert to the Clerk with any suggested amendments prior to formally agreeing the report at the next meeting on 5 February 2026.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.



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13. Any other business

Kellie Armstrong informed Members of a film produced by, and featuring Members of the Deaf community due to be screened in the forthcoming weeks via the Queens Film Theatre (QFT).

Kellie Armstrong further informed Members of correspondence received in relation to the Licensing Review.

Agreed: That the correspondence would be circulated to Members for consideration via the next meeting pack.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 5 February 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.56p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities