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Assembly

# Committee for Communities

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 30 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  
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)  
Mrs Pam Cameron 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 Kathryn Black (Senior Assistant Clerk)

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



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### 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, Charity Trustee.

Andy Allen – Trade Union Member, Staff engaged via Workable Scheme, Charity Trustee, Private Sector Landlord.

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

Maolfosa McHugh – Charity Trustee of Naíscoil na Deirge.

### 2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

### 3. Chairperson's Business

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.02 a.m.

The Chairperson acknowledged that the Sign Language Bill's Final Stage took place on 28 April 2026 and that he spoke on behalf of the Committee at the Department's celebratory event in Parliament Buildings.

**Agreed:** That the next steps associated with implementation of the Sign Language Bill are highlighted in the Committee's Legacy report.

Cathy Mason joined the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

The Chairperson advised Members that he had been invited to meet Department Officials, in his capacity as Chairperson, in relation to the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.

The Chairperson further advised Members of correspondence he had received from constituents regarding proposed changes to the Motability Scheme. The



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Chairperson proposed that a briefing is sought Motability in relation to the recent changes and associated impacts.

**Agreed:** That a briefing from Motability is scheduled for a future meeting.

The Chairperson referenced the upcoming Irish Cup Final and wished both teams good luck. The Chairperson also congratulated Tyrone Under 20's following their Ulster Under 20 title win and wished them well in the upcoming All Ireland Under 20 Final.

Finally, the Chairperson informed Members about an amendment to the meeting agenda order at Items 5-7, due to a request which had been received from the Department after the issue of Members' meeting papers.

#### **4. Draft Minutes**

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 23 April 2026.

**Agreed:** That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

#### **5. Employment Support Scheme: Oral briefing from the Department for Communities (Previously Scheduled as Agenda Item 7)**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Michelle Furphy, Director of Labour Market Policy and Delivery, Department for Communities

Ms Shauna Robinson, Head of Health and Work Support Branch, Department for Communities

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

- “Right to Try” Scheme
- Measurable Targets and Outcomes
- Transferring from Employment Support Scheme to Workable Scheme
- The role of employers
- EQIA consultation report timeline
- Impact to organisations of the reduced Local Growth Fund



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- Timeframe of Workable Programme Allocation
- Unsubsidised opportunities for employment
- Ownership of the Benefit – employer or individual
- Progression of employment
- Wage subsidies
- Communication strategy for the available schemes
- Employer responsibility
- Joint bids to support guidance to employers

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to Ulster Supported Employment Limited (USEL) and Disability Action to seek their views on the scheme, including the positive and negative aspects of the Scheme.

**Agreed:** That agenda Items 8 & 9 are brought forward for consideration.

### **6. Criminal Justice Bill: Consideration of response to Committee for Justice**

The Chairperson reminded Members that, at the meeting on 16 April, the Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Justice seeking views on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill's Call for Evidence.

The Chairperson further informed Members that it was also agreed that the Committee Secretariat were to review the Bill and draft a response for Committee consideration.

The Committee considered a Clerk's memo which set out the draft response.

**Agreed:** That the response is forwarded to the Committee for Justice.

### **7. Matters Arising**

#### **Committee for The Executive Office - Draft Irish Language Strategy and draft Ulster Scots Strategy**

**Agreed:** That the Irish Language Commissioner and the Commissioner for Ulster Scots are invited to brief the Committee, in individual briefing slots, at a future Committee meeting.



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**Minister of Finance - Guidance on the Pooling of Budgets**

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Public Accounts Committee to ask whether it is reviewing cross-departmental pooling of budgets, setting out the Committee's experience in relation to the CSCA and the PfG priorities, emphasising that a cultural shift may require mandating of budget pooling.

The Committee noted the following item:

Source	Subject Matter
Scottish Parliament	Pension Schemes Bill

**8. Departmental quarterly update: Oral briefing from Permanent Secretary and Deputy Secretary, Corporate Service**

The Chairperson reminded Members that agreed suggested topics for discussion were forwarded to the Department following the Committee Meeting on 23 April but that did not preclude Members' from asking questions on other topics.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Grainia Long, Permanent Secretary, Department for Communities

Mr John Greer, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services Branch, Department for Communities

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

- Homelessness Prevention Strategy
- Delay in purchasing of 600 homes for social housing
- Placenames NI project funding
- The timeline for an Irish Language Strategy
- Prioritisation decisions re the Department's budget
- Social Inclusion Strategies within the current mandate
- Cost of Departmental legal proceedings
- Revitalisation of the NIHE estate



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- Structural barriers to social housing new builds
- Intermediate housing targets
- Multi-year budget
- Public land for housing
- Single occupancy homes
- Workforce strategy and recruitment processes
- Local government role within the Anti-Poverty Strategy, dedicated funding and an action plan timeline
- Discretionary Support funding
- Benefit fraud and error
- Anti-social behaviour
- Timeframe for primary legislation
- Regional balance of Departmental employment opportunities

Andy Allen left the meeting at 11.56 a.m.

**Agreed:** That the Gender Equality and LGBTQIA Strategy Co-Design groups are invited to brief the Committee at a future meeting.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to request the following:

- Timeline for delivery of 600 social housing homes
- Timeline for the Gender & LGBTQIA strategies
- Reasons for the delay in both the Charities and Housing Bills
- Detailed information on statistics discussed re benefit fraud and error
- Whether the Department plans to introduce a dedicated budget line for the Anti-Poverty Strategy
- A briefing on strategic workforce planning
- Information on better use of existing spaces / homes

The meeting was suspended at 12.07 p.m.

The meeting resumed in open session at 12.14p.m. with the following Members present: Colm Gildernew, Cathy Mason, Kellie Armstrong, Maurice Bradley, Pam Cameron, Maolíosa McHugh and Sian Mulholland.



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**9. Quarterly Financial Update: Oral briefing from the Department for Communities (Previously Scheduled as Agenda Item 5)**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr John Greer, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services Branch, Department for Communities

Ms Kathy Sands, Finance Director, Department for Communities

Ms Olga Beagon, Finance Director, Department for Communities

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

- Non-ring-fenced pressures
- Ministerial prioritisation of draft budget
- Specific high risk projects
- Queen's Parade funding and regeneration project
- Cessation or deferral of lower-priority activity
- Housing Supply Scheme
- Community & Voluntary sector funding
- Placenames NI project funding
- Funding gap for welfare delivery and financial crisis for Individuals
- Maintaining parity for welfare delivery
- Equality impact assessments
- Ministerial recommendations and decisions timeline

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.39 p.m.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Department to request the following information:

- A breakdown of the Department for Communities contribution to all City Deal Investment Projects by area
- The options provided to the Minister regarding financial cuts to service delivery



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- A list of interim funded projects for Community and Voluntary sector programmes, with particular focus on Queen's University Belfast - Placenames NI Project
- Specific lower level detail on general capital
- Whether a review of Debt Advice Services is being considered / undertaken; and
- A definition of "Lower Priorities" and specific examples of what these are

Pam Cameron rejoined the meeting at 12.47 p.m.

### 10. Correspondence

#### **Youth Assembly - Youth Assembly Involvement in Legislative Scrutiny**

**Agreed:** That representatives from the Youth Assembly and the APG are invited to brief the Committee at a future meeting with particular focus on the Department for Communities remit.

#### **Housing Rights - A discussion Paper to Support Homeless Prevention in Northern Ireland**

**Agreed:** That a briefing is scheduled for a future meeting.

#### **Equality Coalition Co-Convenors - Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy consultation report**

**Agreed:** That a briefing with is scheduled for a future meeting.

**Agreed:** That a letter is sent to the Equality Coalition Co-Convenors to ask what communication they have had from the Department in relation to the consultation report.



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**Committee for Finance - Marriage Bill**

**Agreed:** That the Committee Secretariat reviews the Bill and drafts a response for Committee consideration at a future meeting.

**Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) - Invite CILIP Ireland event “Libraries Deliver: Impact, Outcomes and Value for Communities” on 03 November 2026**

**Agreed:** That the Chairperson sponsors the event in Parliament Buildings and speaks at the event on behalf of the Committee.

**Cricket Ireland - Invitation Test Match Day 1 Ireland vs Zimbabwe, 27 May at Stormont Cricket Ground**

**Agreed:** That the Chairperson attends the event on behalf of the Committee.

Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.57 p.m.

The Committee noted the following items:

<b>Source</b>	<b>Summary of content</b>
House of Lords	COM (2025) 526 - Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) 2024/2865 as regards dates of application and transitional provisions  COM (2025) 531 - Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulations (EC) No 1272/2008, (EC) No 1223/2009 and (EU) 2019/1009 as regards



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<b>Source</b>	<b>Summary of content</b>
	simplification of certain requirements and procedures for chemical products
House of Lords	COM (2025) 1020 - Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No 528/2012 as regards the extension of certain data protection periods.
Assembly Business Office	Charitable Donations and Bequests Annual Report 2024-25
Open College Network Northern Ireland	A higher skills ambition for Northern Ireland: A revised skills outlook for Northern Ireland for 2035
Committee for Finance	Outturn and Forecast Outturn data - Round 12 (March)
Department for Communities	Written Ministerial Statement - Launch of Museum Policy Consultation
Department for Communities	Written briefing - Legislation Programme
Independent Autism Reviewer for Northern Ireland	Annual Report
Committee for TEO	New Foundations Pilot Scheme
Examiner of Statutory Rules	63rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Department for Communities	Charities (Amendment) Bill – correction following Committee pre-brief on 26 March: scrutiny procedure for Accounts and Reports Regulations



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<b>Source</b>	<b>Summary of content</b>
Department for Communities	Football Banning Orders and the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011
Strategic Investment Board	Assembly Committee Report - Investing Activity
Assembly Business Office	Presentation of Memorandum of Reply - Homelessness in Northern Ireland
Department for Communities	Invitation to Sign Language Event Parliament Buildings on 28 April 2026
Department for Communities	Proposal to extend the Landlord Registration Scheme Regulations Consultation for 6 weeks

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

<b>Source</b>	<b>Summary of content</b>
IMTAC	Publication Report on surveys of Blue Badge use in Belfast City Centre
Executive Information Service	Press Release Lyons heralds historic day for Deaf community
Department for Work and Pensions	Department for Work and Pensions' Response to House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee on Draft Chemicals Regulations 2026
Department for Communities	Written Ministerial Statement Breathing Space protections in Northern Ireland

## 11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson informed Members that, due to a bank holiday on Monday 4 May, the papers for the meeting on 7 May would be circulated to Members on Friday 1 May 2026.



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**12. Any other business**

Kellie Armstrong informed Members of a future meeting (scheduled for 2 June 2026) of the All Party Group on homelessness that the Minister for Communities is due to attend.

**13. Date, time and location of the next meeting**

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 7 May 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.04 p.m.

**Colm Gildernew MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Communities**