



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 5 February 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 (via Zoom)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

In Attendance: Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neal Flanagan (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 10.00 a.m.



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1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

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

Kellie Armstrong – Member of the Deaf Community.

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

2. Apologies

Mr Mark Durkan MLA

Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Minister delivered a statement in Plenary on Tuesday 3 February in relation to the North South Ministerial Council Language Body Meeting which was held on 3 December 2025.

The Chairperson advised Members that he had received an invitation to speak at the GAA Club summit, occurring in Dublin.

Agreed: That the Chairperson attends the event in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Communities.

Finally, the Chairperson discussed his recent attendance at the All Party Group meeting on Homelessness and reminded Committee that he was also a member of the Public Accounts Committee which is in the final stages of its inquiry into homelessness. The Chair acknowledged that whilst PAC retains primacy in relation to the topic, it might be helpful if the Committee's recent Homelessness report is forwarded to the PAC for inclusion as evidence in the Appendices to its inquiry report - as a collation of up to date information and evidence provided to the Committee for Communities.



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Agreed: That the Committee for Communities' Report into Homelessness be forwarded to the Public Accounts Committee for inclusion as evidence in the appendices to its Homelessness Inquiry report.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 29 January 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Matters Arising

Department for Communities - Good Relations – Departmental Business Plan

Agreed: That a letter be sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive requesting that it confirms whether any Equality Impact Assessment undertaken in relation to Shared Housing considers the full range of Section 75 categories, and that it provides the geographical locations for Shared Housing schemes.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Acquisition of 600 homes

Agreed: That a letter be sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to request a timeline and action plan for the acquisition of the 600 homes, and to request information on actions taken since the initial announcement of the plan to acquire in March 2025.

Assembly Speaker's Office - Legislative Workload

Agreed: That the Clerk return to a future meeting of the Committee with a Gantt chart setting out the Committee's anticipated Bill management and legislative workload.

Assembly Speaker's Office - Timeliness of Responses from the Department for Communities to Committee for Communities



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Agreed: That correspondence is sent to the Assembly Executive and Review Committee seeking clarification on whether an examination of the process in relation to the timeliness of responses to Statutory Committees and the matter of ministerial sanctions could be considered in its forward work plan.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Participation and the Practice of Rights – Fundamental review of allocations of Social Housing

Agreed: That the Committee ask NIHE to provide a written update on the status of the review into Housing Points, to include an indication of where its thinking is currently in relation to the policy and to emphasise the need for the Committee to have a scrutiny role in relation to the review.

RaISe - RaISe Draft Paper - Fraud Error and Recovery - Westminster PAFER Act

Agreed: That the Committee team request pre-introduction briefings from the Department for Communities on the three further Bills (Charities, Pensions and Housing Miscellaneous Provisions) which the Department has indicated should be introduced between March and May 2026.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Assembly Speaker's Office	Accessibility within Parliament Buildings for those with hearing loss
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Delivering Accessible Homes – Category Types

6. Correspondence

**Individual - Housing Repairs Issue – NIHE, and;
Individual - NIHE – housing condition complaint (further information)**



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Agreed: That a letter be sent to the NIHE seeking assurance in relation to the discharge of its obligations and to highlight matters of systemic concern arising from the case.

Individual - Child Maintenance Service Complaint

Agreed: That a response is sent to the individual indicating that the Committee cannot act on an individual's behalf and to suggest that they contact their local MLA / MP.

Executive Information Service Press Release: Minister announces 'Your School Your Club' investment

Agreed: That a letter be sent to the Department for Communities seeking a breakdown of information on the allocation of the "Your School Your Club" funds, to include the criteria which was applied to applications and how much has been allocated to each.

Unite the Union – Department for Communities approach to licensing policy

Agreed: That a written briefing be requested from Unite, in the first instance.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Minister for Economy publishes response to consultation on Low Carbon Heating Support
Agenda NI	Northern Ireland Housing Conference
Examiner of Statutory Rules	54th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules
Assembly Business Office	Laying Further Education Sector retention and disposal schedule - 22 January 2026



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Source	Summary of content
Pivotal	Two Years of the Restored Northern Ireland Executive
Committee for Finance	Memo 25-26 December 2025 Outturn and Forecasts R8 +R9
Assembly Communications	Media Clippings - Ministerial Appearance at Committee for Communities

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Minister for Communities	Statement – North South Ministerial Council Language Body Meeting

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. Sign Language Bill – Agreement of Committee Report

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft report for consideration and that no suggested amendments had been received.

Kellie Armstrong proposed that, within the report, a note of appreciation be recorded for the work of the Committee Team throughout the scrutiny of the Bill.

Agreed: That the Clerk seek advice on this request with a view to providing draft text for Members' review and approval.

The Committee considered the final draft report on the Sign Language Bill.



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Title Page, Contents Page, Powers, Membership and List of abbreviations and acronyms

The Committee considered the Title Page, Contents Page, Powers, Membership and List of abbreviations and acronyms sections of the report as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Title page, Contents Page, Committee Powers, Membership and list of abbreviations and acronyms pages stand part of the Report.

Executive Summary

The Committee considered the Executive Summary section of the report (paragraphs 1 to 9) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Executive Summary section at paragraphs 1 to 9 stand part of the Report.

Introduction

The Committee considered the Introduction section of the report (paragraphs 10 to 17) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Introduction section at paragraphs 10 to 17 stand part of the Report.

Committee Approach Section

The Committee considered The Committee Approach section of the report (paragraphs 18 to 30) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Committee Approach section at paragraphs 18-30 stand part of the Report.

Consideration of the Bill

The Committee considered the Consideration of the Bill section of the report (paragraphs 31 to 47) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Consideration of the Bill section at paragraphs 31-47 stand part of the Report.



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Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill

The Committee considered the Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill section of the report (paragraphs 48 to 66) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill Section at paragraphs 48-66 stand part of the Report.

Recommendations

The Committee considered the Recommendations section of the report (paragraphs 67 to 90) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Recommendations Section at paragraphs 67-90 stand part of the Report.

Acknowledgments

The Committee considered the Acknowledgements section of the report (paragraph 91) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Acknowledgements Section at paragraph 91 stand part of the Report.

Appendices

The Committee considered the Appendices section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Appendices stand part of the Report.

Agreed: That the Committee agreed that it was content that the Report on the Sign Language Bill is ordered to be published as the Ninth Report of the Committee for Communities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that any formatting or typographical errors be corrected by the Committee team in advance of the publication of the final report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Report on the Sign Language Bill to be published on the Committee webpages and issued to all MLAs on Thursday 12 February.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for an embargoed copy of the Sign Language Bill Report to be issued to the Minister for Communities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the draft press release and that the Committee Team liaise with the Assembly Communications Team to distribute the release to media (including any embargo, if required).

8. **Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill LCM - Consideration of Committee Report**

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a draft report for consideration.

Powers and Membership

The Committee considered the Powers and Membership section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with Powers and Membership section of the report as drafted.

Background

The Committee considered the Background section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the Background section as drafted.

Evidence

The Committee considered the Evidence section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the Evidence section as drafted.

Committee consideration of the Bill

The Committee considered the Committee consideration of the Bill section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the Committee consideration of the Bill section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee orders the Report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Universal Credit (Removal of Two Child Limit) Bill to be published as the Eighth Report of the Committee for Communities.



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The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 10.34 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.41 a.m. with all Members present.

9. Oral evidence from the Department for Communities – Departmental Disability Action Plan 2025-2030

The Chairperson welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

Mr Carl Savage, Deputy Director, Central Policy Division, Department for Communities

Ms Emma Neill, Head of Equality and LGBT Policy, Department for Communities

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

- Consultation Feedback and Department Response
- Progress Reporting
- Cross Departmental Disability Strategies and Cross Departmental Working Group including The Executive Strategy
- Disability Representation on Boards
- Establishment of Forum
- Section 75 Inclusion
- Staff quota, Staff training and resources
- Social Inclusion Strategies
- Impact and Feedback of Action Plans
- Timeline of Legislation
- Public Appointments and ALBs

Agreed: That a recommendation be included in the Committee's legacy report to request that delivery of the action plan is adhered to in the next mandate.



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10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

The Clerk advised of the potential rescheduling of the informal meeting with the Department regarding the new SL1 process, between 12:30- 2:00 pm on Tuesday 10 February, subject to room availability.

11. Any other business

There was no other business.

12. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 12 February 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings, with the provision for an informal Committee meeting on 10 February.

The Chairperson informed Members that the final agenda item would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to receive procedural legal advice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to undertake consideration of the legal advice.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11.16 a.m.

13. Assembly Legal Services - Procedural Advice

The Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:

Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services, Assembly Legal Services

The committee received legal advice in relation to the processes that underpin section 30 of the NI Act 1998.



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Agreed: That the matter be added to the agenda for the next meeting to enable the Committee to rescind its decision of 29 January 2026 in light of the advice received.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.47 a.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities