



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 5 March 2026

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, 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 – Charity Trustee.

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

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson reminded Members about a forthcoming joint informal meeting with the Committee for Finance on Digital Infrastructure and Cybersecurity Risks across the Community and Voluntary Sector taking place on Tuesday 10 March.

The Chairperson then acknowledged the Speaker's event which took place on Tuesday 3 March 2026, celebrating Seachtain na Gaeilge / Irish Language Week and acknowledging that Scoil na Seolta and Conradh na Gaeilge were in attendance.

Finally, the Chairperson made reference to the announcement in relation to £9M Grassroots football facilities programme which was announced in media and via WMS yesterday.

Agreed: That a briefing from the Department in relation to the programme is scheduled for a future meeting.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the meeting on 26 February 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.



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5. SL1 - The Pension Protection Fund and Occupational Pension Schemes (Levy Ceiling) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the SL1 was received on 18 February 2026 and that the Minister for Communities had requested that the Committee consider the SL1 within a shortened timeframe.

The Chairperson further reminded Members that at its meeting on 26 February 2026, the Committee agreed to:

- Publish the Departments papers;
- Issue a call for evidence - with a closing date of 11 March 2026, and;
- Reconsider the SL1 on 5 March together with any responses from the call for evidence

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.

6. SL1 - The Social Security and Statutory Maternity Pay (Evidence of Pregnancy) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the SL1 was received on 18 February 2026 and that the Minister for Communities had requested that the Committee consider the SL1 within a shortened timeframe.

The Chairperson further reminded Members that at its meeting on 26 February 2026, the Committee agreed to:

- Publish the Departments papers;
- Issue a call for evidence - with a closing date of 11 March 2026, and;
- Reconsider the SL1 on 5 March together with any responses from the call for evidence

The Chairperson then informed Members that a Draft Statutory Rule and Explanatory Memorandum had now been received for the SL1.

Agreed: That the Committee is content for the Department to proceed to make the Rule.



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The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 10.05 a.m.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 10.05 a.m.

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.08 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 10.09 a.m. with the following Members present: Colm Gildernew, Cathy Mason, Andy Allen, Kellie Armstrong, Pam Cameron, Mark Durkan, Maolíosa McHugh and Sian Mulholland.

Maurice Bradley rejoined the meeting at 10.11 a.m.

The Chairperson informed Members that the eleven Local Government Councils would be represented in three sets of panels, discussing each Council's position and approach to Anti-Poverty efforts in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson further reminded Members and Council Officers that since it was established, the Committee has taken a particular interest in and focus on the Anti-Poverty Strategy. The Chairperson then advised that within the Committee's statutory scrutiny role, Members highlighted that Local Councils undertake a significant amount of work in the area and that in 2025, the Committee agreed to hold a focused meeting with all Councils regarding their role in the implementation of the (draft) Strategy to understand more fully how the collective partnership approach works and differs across NI Council areas.

The Chairperson then thanked all Council Officers for their attendance at Committee, for their correspondence with the Committee since 2025 and finally, for their submissions of additional information for Members in advance of the Committee meeting.

7. Local Councils and the Anti-Poverty Strategy: Oral evidence Panel 1

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr Ronan McKenna, Head of Community Planning, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council

Ms Patricia Mackey, Community Planning and Climate Manager, Ards and North Down Borough Council



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Mr Kevin Heaney, Head of Inclusive Growth and Anti-Poverty, Belfast City Council

Mr David Burns, Chief Executive, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council

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

- Implementation of the draft Strategy
- Targets, Outcomes and Challenges
- Community Planning Partnerships
- Housing, Skilled Jobs and Skills Gaps
- Data Sharing and GDPR
- Duplication of Services, Statutory functions and responsibilities
- The Executive's role
- Employment Regional Balance
- Integration of Services
- Council Resources
- Draft Anti Poverty Strategy Consultation and Council Responses

The Chairperson advised Members that any follow-up actions would be agreed after the Committee had heard evidence from all three Panels.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting to allow the panel members to change.

The meeting was suspended at 11.02 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.06 a.m. with all Members present.

8. Local Councils and the Anti-Poverty Strategy: Oral evidence Panel 2

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Ruth Allen, Head of Community Development, Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council



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Mr John McVeigh, Acting Director of Community, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

Ms Claire Linney, Assistant Director Development, Mid Ulster Council

Mr Andy Patterson, Director, Active and Healthy Communities, Newry Mourne and North Down Council

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

- Community and Voluntary Sector's role
- Draft Anti Poverty Strategy and its role in tackling Rural Poverty
- Draft Budget and Ring-Fencing of Funds
- Social Housing and Affordable Housing
- Central Government Involvement
- Northern Ireland Skills Gaps
- Community Planning Partnership
- Council involvement with the Draft Anti Poverty Strategy
- Council Resources to carry out the Draft Anti Poverty Strategy
- Co-Ordinated Delivery Approach
- Sustainable Funding
- Community Transport
- Lived Experiences and Social Exclusion
- Department for Communities Involvement
- Education as a preventative measure

The Chairperson suspended the meeting to allow the panel members to change.

The meeting was suspended at 11.56 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 12.03 p.m. with all Members present.

9. Local Councils and the Anti-Poverty Strategy: Oral evidence Panel 3

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:



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Ms Julie Welsh, Head of Service for Community and Culture, Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

Ms Oonagh McGillion, Director of Legacy, Derry and Strabane District Council

Mr John Boyle, Director for Community and Wellbeing, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council

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

- Engagement with Department for Communities
- Impact and Contribution of Local Councils with the Draft Anti Poverty Strategy
- Particular impact on Rural Communities
- Policy decisions, Mitigations and Implications
- Priorities to ensure successful implementation
- Effective Schemes in helping tackle Poverty, with focus on rural areas
- Local Councils as delivery partners
- Employment Opportunities in Seasonal Towns
- Challenges for Local Councils and individuals regarding the reduction in Rates Support Grant
- Ongoing Engagement with Local Councils and the Department for Communities

The Chairperson thanked all Council Officers for their attendance at Committee and reiterated Member's appreciation for the contribution that Local Councils are making regarding supporting people in poverty in Northern Ireland. The Chairperson then reiterated that Poverty is a critical issue requiring a combined partnership effort.

The Chairperson advised Members that as evidence had now been heard from all three Panels, follow-up actions would be agreed.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether the Department is undertaking work in relation to development and implementation of *Poverty*



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Impact Assessments or a Poverty Screening Exercise in relation to new Policy Development and legislative proposals.

Agreed: That NILGA is scheduled to brief the Committee at a future meeting.

Agreed: That the Committee Team draft a mini-report based on the evidence heard from Local Councils to be returned for Committee consideration and next steps at a future meeting.

10. Matters Arising

Committee for Communities - Draft Memo to Committee for Finance regarding Scrutiny of the draft Multi-Year Budget for 2026–29

Agreed: That any Members amendments or additions are sent through to the Clerk by Monday lunchtime and that the updated draft response is brought back for Members consideration at the next meeting.

Cathy Mason left the meeting at 12.52 p.m.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Individual Housing Issue
Assembly and Executive Review Committee	Timeliness of Responses from Department for Communities to Committee for Communities
Department for Communities	Departmental Logo
Minister of Finance	Local Growth Fund
Department for Communities	Sign Language Bill Amendments

11. Correspondence

Cathy Mason rejoined the meeting at 12.56 p.m.



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Department for Communities – Request to Committee for Communities to reconsider holding a joint Committee session

Agreed: That the Committee liaise with relevant Committees to ascertain if they are content for a joint Committee briefing session to be arranged for a future meeting.

Committee for The Executive Office - Memo from Committee for TEO – writing to all Statutory Committees to ask for an update on issues identified or discussed in relation to the Windsor Framework and wider EU matters

Agreed: That the Committee Team draft a response to be brought back to a future Committee meeting for Members’ consideration.

Assembly Business Office - Local Government Draft Code of Practices

Agreed: That Departmental Officials and the Local Government Auditor are scheduled to brief the Committee at a future meeting.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Angel Eyes Charity	Charity Audit Thresholds - correspondence with Department for Communities
Individual	Social Housing Issue
Abandoned NI / Rebecca Brownlie	Policy Brief Strengthening Protections for Historic Buildings After Fire or Neglect in NI
Assembly Audit Committee	Correspondence with Minister for Communities: Code of Conduct NIPSO Adjudication function in respect of complaints that a councillor may have failed to comply with the Northern Ireland Local Government Code of Conduct for Councillors



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Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office Press Recognition Panel	Recognition Report February 2025
Assembly Business Office	Laying Probation Board for Northern Ireland retention and disposal schedule
Assembly Business Office	Laying Urology Services Inquiry retention and disposal schedule
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Lyons welcomes contractor appointment for £2m Environmental Improvement Scheme in Rathfriland, Gilford and Markethill
Committee for Finance	Department of Finance Outturn and Forecast Outturn 2025-26 January
Executive Information Service	Press Release – Lyons: The Normans are coming to Carrickfergus
Department for Communities	Synopsis of responses and Department for Communities' response to the Consultation on Statutory Guidance for the implementation of the McCloud Remedy
Examiner of Statutory Rules	58th Report Of the ESR
Executive Information Service	Press Release Minister praises range of opportunities available in JobStart scheme
Bytes	Pilot to Support Digital Infrastructure in the Community and Voluntary Sector in Northern Ireland
Executive Information Service	Press Release Minister Announces Consultation on Landlord Registration Scheme

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Individual	Social Housing Issue
Minister of Finance	Oral Statement - Chancellor's Spring Forecast

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

13. Any other business

There was no other business.

14. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 12 March 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.59 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities