



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 12 March 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson) (via Zoom)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolfósa McHugh MLA (via Zoom)
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 Patrice Morris (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.

Andy Allen – Trade Union Member, Charity trustee, private sector landlord.

Maurice Bradley - Member of Harry Gregg Foundation.

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

Maolíosa McHugh – Charity trustee of Naíscóil na Deirge.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked Members for attending the joint informal meeting with the Committee for Finance on Digital Infrastructure and Cybersecurity Risks across the Community and Voluntary Sector that took place on Tuesday 10 March.

The Chairperson then informed Members of the Deaf Arts Festival NI due to take place in the MAC on 13 and 14 March. The Chairperson further informed Members of an invitation extended to them to attend the panel event with Belfast Media and Deaf Arts Together.

Finally, the Chairperson made reference to the announcement in relation to Belfast hosting the Comhaltas Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann, from Sunday 2 August 2026 to Sunday 9 August 2026. The Chairperson further advised that there had been a further announcement that the event will also take place in Belfast in 2027 during its 75th anniversary. The Chairperson then proposed that



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a briefing with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann is scheduled for Member's information on the event.

Agreed: That a briefing on the event with Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann 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 5 March 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. SL1 - The Universal Credit and Employment and Support Allowance (Rates of Allowances) (Amendments and Modifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

Kellie Armstrong joined the meeting at 10.05 a.m.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the SL1 was received on 10 February 2026 and that it was the first SL1 received following the commencement of the new scrutiny process.

The Chairperson further reminded Members that at its meeting on 12 February 2026, the Committee agreed to:

- Publish the Departments papers;
- Issue a call for evidence - with a closing date of 25 February 2026, and;
- Reconsider the SL1 on 12 March 2026 together with any responses from the call for evidence (no responses were received).

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

6. SL1 The Guaranteed Minimum Pension Increase Order (Northern Ireland) 2026



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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 received a briefing from Departmental Officials and agreed to:

- Publish the Departments papers;
- Issue a call for evidence - with a closing date of 11 March 2026, and;
- Reconsider the SL1 on 12 March together with any responses from the call for evidence (no responses had been received at the time of the meeting).

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

7. SL1 The Social Security Revaluation of Earnings Factors 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 received a briefing from Departmental Officials and agreed to:

- Publish the Departments papers;
- Issue a call for evidence - with a closing date of 11 March 2026, and;
- Reconsider the SL1 on 12 March together with any responses from the call for evidence (no responses had been received at the time of the meeting).

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



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

8. Urology Services Inquiry retention and disposal schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for Health which had corresponded with confirmation that it was content with the schedule.

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

9. Probation Board for Northern Ireland retention and disposal schedule

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for Justice which had corresponded with confirmation that it was content with the schedule.

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

The Chairperson proposed that in future, consideration of delegated Legislation be placed on the agenda *after* the planned oral evidence sessions in the meeting.

Agreed: That consideration of Delegated Legislation takes place after oral briefing sessions, at future meetings of the Committee.

10. Children Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015: Oral evidence from Children's Law Centre

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Children's Law Centre

Ms Rachel Hogan BL, SEND Specialist Legal Adviser, Children's Law Centre



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

- Accountability for the Statutory Duties
- Stakeholder Contribution
- Social Strategies and Legislation's role in reducing Child Poverty
- Specific required Executive and Cross Department Actions to ensure delivery of the Act
- Co-ordination of Data Collection
- Strengthening of Children's Rights and the UNCRC
- Framework for Measuring Outcomes
- EQIA's analysis for Data Measurement
- Impact of Homelessness in Children
- Departmental Pooled Budgets and Lead Departments
- Resources and Cultural Shift

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 10.42 a.m.

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 10.45 a.m.

Sian Mulholland rejoined the meeting at 10.46 a.m.

Andy Allen left the meeting at 10.47 a.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to The Executive Office to ask what progress has been made in the last ten years since the Child Services Co-Operation Act has come into effect and to reiterate that a further culture shift in cross-Departmental working needs to be encouraged.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Head of Civil Service to ask whether any consideration of positive cross-departmental work or actions which deliver equity and "no detriment" can be collated and reported as part of the EQIA process.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask what role it has in the Data Development Plan associated with the CSCA.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Chief Scientific Advisor to request her view on how "effective use of data" (including Technology and Artificial Intelligence)



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could be used to improve service delivery and to highlight any opportunities and barriers to effective information sharing.

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

11. Children Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015: Oral evidence from the Department for Communities and Department of Finance

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr John McCord, Director of Central Policy, Department for Communities

Mr Jeff McGuinness, Director of Budget Sustainability, Department of Finance

Andy Allen rejoined the meeting at 11.05 a.m.

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

- Prioritisation of Children and Young People and Homelessness
- Collaborative Working within Departments
- Social Strategies
- Pooled Department Budgets
- Proactive approach to drive Policy
- The use of the Act in reducing Child Poverty
- Data Collection in ALB's
- Local Government Contribution
- EQIA and proactive work
- Communication and Engagement with other Departments'

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Finance to ask what correspondence has gone to all Departments in relation to “pooling of budgets” and to seek clarity on whether ALB's are able to avail of pooled budgets.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask when Social Strategies are finalised, who sets these targets and how is the Cross-Departmental approach and Co-Production element assessed, with particular focus on the Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Agreed: That the Assembly's Research and Information Services (RaISE) is asked to draft a paper on the effectiveness of the previous *Executive*



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Programme Fund in relation to its impact on Children and Young People and improving Cross-Departmental working and stakeholder engagement.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 11.48 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.57 a.m. with all Members present.

12. Draft Local Government Code of Audit Practice: Oral Evidence from Local Government Auditor and Department for Communities

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Local Government draft Code of Practice was last approved in 2021 and is now due its five-year Statutory refresh and the draft will be approved via a resolution of the Assembly during a Plenary session.

The Chairperson further reminded Members that, at the Committee meeting on 5 March 2026, Members agreed to invite Departmental Officials and the Local Government Auditor to brief the Committee on the refreshed Local Government Code of Audit Practice.

The Chairperson then welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Mr. Brian O'Neill, Local Government Auditor, Northern Ireland Audit Office

Dr. Roger McCance, Audit Manager, Northern Ireland Audit Office

Mr Jeff Glass, Head of Local Government Finance, Department for Communities

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

- Departments role in robust scrutiny in Local Government Audits
- Principle-Based Approach Benefits
- Consequences for Local Government Persistent Problems



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- Local Government Auditor Powers
- Extra-Ordinary Audit Examples
- Local Government Reform and demonstration of Council efficiencies

13. Matters Arising

Department for Communities - Housing (NI) Order 1988

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a timeline for the Review of Homelessness Legislation, and to further ask whether a public consultation will be carried out in relation to this Review.

Department for Communities - Universal Credit Help with Health Costs Scheme

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request details of the advertising campaigns which have been rolled-out in relation to the scheme, including when they were released and how the information was disseminated.

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

Agreed: That the Memo or response is sent to the Committee for Finance.

Minister for Communities - Charity Audit Threshold

Agreed: That the Committee team seek confirmation that correspondence in relation to audit thresholds was also sent from the Department to Angel Eyes NI.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Rates Support Grant and RPA
Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Supporting People Modernisation Project
Copy of NILGA response sourced from DfC website	NILGA response to the DfC Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy
BBC Northern Ireland	Charter Renewal



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Department for Communities	Removal Of Universal Credit Two-Child Limit
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14. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
IMTAC	Response re Department for Communities' Draft Disability Strategy
Youth Assembly	Youth Assembly Update – February 2026
Homeless Connect	Draft Budget Submission Final
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Lyons announces £9million for grassroots football facilities
Department for Communities	Written Ministerial Statement – The Northern Ireland Football Fund – Grassroots Facilities Programme
NI Survivor Council	Invitation to Event in Long Gallery Parliament Buildings 30 April 2026
BBC Northern Ireland	Charter Review
Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse	New Foundations Pilot Scheme
Individual	Housing Issue
Department for Communities	Covering Letter and Briefing to the Committee for Communities re The Northern Ireland Football Fund



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Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Gambling Industry Code of Practice
Individual	Social Housing Issue
Executive Information Service	Press Release Lyons - Creative industries provide opportunities for our young people

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Individual	Housing Issue
Housing Rights	Legislative Theatre event on Homelessness Prevention in the Private Rented Sector
Paula Clarke BSL	Deaf Arts Festival NI
Minister for Communities	Invitation - Annual Celebration of Sport events throughout March 2026
Department for Communities	Universal Credit Removal of 2 Child Limit Communications to advise and support Claimants regarding the changes

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

16. Any other business

There was no other business.

17. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 19 March 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.



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The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.34 p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities