



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 16 April 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 (via Zoom)
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's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness.

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

Maolíosa McHugh – In receipt of a Pension.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson welcomed Members back to Committee following Easter recess.

The Chairperson drew Members' attention to the Sign Language Bill being scheduled for Further Consideration Stage in plenary on 20 April 2026.

The Chairperson then referred to the Minister's announcement in relation to £200,000 being pledged for the repair of historic Churches in Northern Ireland. The Chairperson proposed that the Committee revisit the previous request from the Committee to the Department to share up-to-date financial information in a timely manner, to allow the Committee to carry out effective budget scrutiny. Members noted previous correspondence from the Department outlining a commitment to routinely share financial information and further noted that, to date, the commitment did not appear to have been actioned.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to remind it of the commitment and highlight recent examples, (including this announcement) of funding allocated and to provide a proforma template for adoption for use by the



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Department which is to be provided to the Committee within three working days of the announcement.

Finally, the Chairperson informed Members that the SL1 on The Social Security (Removal of Two Child Limit) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 which Committee had originally considered at its meeting on 26 March 2026 and the SR for which was to be reviewed on 16 April would now be deferred for one week until the Examiner of Statutory Rules has reported.

4. Draft Minutes

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

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Executive Pensions Scheme Bill: Pre-introductory evidence from the Department for Communities

The Chairperson advised Members that additional correspondence from the Department had been received in relation to this item – offering informal briefing sessions to help support Members’ scrutiny of the forthcoming Bill.

The Chairperson then welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ms Michelle Grills, Pensions Policy Lead, Department for Communities

Mr Tommy Boyle, Deputy Principal, Pension Policy, Department for Communities

Ms Kiera McKeown, Deputy Principal, Pension Policy, Department for Communities

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

- Appropriate time being afforded for adequate Committee Scrutiny
- Comparison to passage of the Westminster Bill
- Surplus Division



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- Trustee Definition
- Small Pots requirement and amalgamation process
- Number of Businesses concerned within Scale and Asset Allocation
- Northern Ireland Representation on the Payment Protection Fund Board and Pensions Regulator
- Value for money and impact on Scheme Members
- Super Funds definition and benefits
- Northern Ireland specific data
- Areas of concern
- Pensions dashboard
- Delegated Legislation

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the relevant Committees in the Welsh Senedd and the Scottish Parliament to ask whether any issues of concern have emerged during their scrutiny of the Bill.

Agreed: That informal information sessions with Departmental officials are scheduled for future dates.

6. Local Government on the Anti-Poverty Strategy: Consideration of Committee Motion

The Chairperson reminded Members, that at the meeting on 26 March, the Committee considered the draft Report on Engagement with Local Government on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and agreed that the Committee team draft options for a Motion based on the recommendations in the report with a view to seek a motion in Plenary in relation to this. The Chairperson further advised that the Department had also published its consultation responses on the draft Strategy and that officials are scheduled to brief Committee on 7 May 2026.

The Committee then considered a Clerk's memo which set out options for Committee to progress a debate in Plenary.

Agreed: That a motion based on Option 2 is laid with the Business Office seeking an date for debate prior to 6 May 2026, if possible.



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7. SR 2026/59 The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meeting on 8 January 2026, the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with the old scrutiny process for delegated legislation.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/59: The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department acknowledging the that the SR proposes no help with funeral fees and to further ask whether there is any ongoing review in relation to this or any alternative route for assistance with funeral costs.

8. SR 2026/61 The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meeting on 8 January 2026, the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with the old scrutiny process for delegated legislation.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/61: The Social Security Benefits Up-rating Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

9. SR 2026/60 The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meeting on 8 January 2026, the Committee had agreed that it



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was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with the old scrutiny process for delegated legislation.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/60: The Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and subject to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

10. Matters Arising

Department of Finance - Pooled Budgets and Children's Services Cooperation Act

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department of Finance requesting a copy of the March 2026 updated guidance on the Children's Services Cooperation Act for the Committee.

Department for Communities - Written briefing on Retrofitting and Future-Proofing Homes

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department welcoming the information provided and to request further detail on the meetings and actions plans detailed in the response, to include a schedule of the sub-groups in relation to the Cross – Executive Housing Supply Strategy.

Minister for Communities - T20 Cricket World Cup

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department positively welcoming the information and its unlocking potential and to further ask if the Committee can be kept apprised of any updates while preparations for the T20 continue.

Minister for Communities - Committee Report on Homelessness and Sectoral Funding

Agreed: That the Report is published and forwarded to witnesses who provided evidence to the Committee.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether a co-design approach to the process is being considered and to ask whether Members can be involved within the meetings.



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Northern Ireland Housing Executive - Anti-Social Behaviour Processes

Agreed: That the Committee reconsider this correspondence from NIFHA in relation to the Housing Amendment Bill, once this has been received.

Department for Communities - Rural Proofing Exercise regarding Three-year Social Housing Development Programme

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether there are examples of public land being unlocked for social housing and if so, where these are located and how many units have been / will be unlocked as a result.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ask whether a mapping exercise in relation to “closed areas” that cannot be further developed for Social Housing has taken place and to provide detail in relation to the areas where this has happened.

Department for Communities - Update on USA-NI 250 funding allocations

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for further information on the economic and social benefits and the forecast outcomes and value for money that the USA-NI 250 funding allocations will bring.

First Minister and deputy First Minister - Local Growth Fund

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Minister for Communities asking for detail of the associated impact of the absence of funds on the Department’s ability to deliver employment support to people with disabilities.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Minister of Finance	Public Authorities (Fraud, Error, Recovery) (PAFER) Bill
Speaker – Northern Ireland Assembly	Individual Members’ Bills
Minister for Communities	Construction Employers Federation response to draft Budget



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Economic Secretary to the Treasury	Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (Regulated Activities) Order 2001
Department for Communities	Anti-Poverty Impact Assessments
Department for Communities	Welfare Mitigations Report

11. Correspondence

Department for Communities - Anti-Poverty Strategy - Summary of Public Consultation

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to raise concerns about how Citizen Space quantitative responses can be used to inform qualitative decision-making and to further ask whether the Committee can access the full consultation responses and whether the Department will reflect the substance of these responses in the redraft of the Strategy.

Committee for Justice - Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill Call for Evidence

Agreed: That the Committee Team review the Bill and draft a response for Committee consideration at a future meeting, if appropriate.

Value Oils - Home Heating Oil Relief Fund Solution

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting an update in relation to the support scheme, to include updated information following on from the Executive's meeting on 16 April.

Department for Communities - Request to postpone EPOCC briefing originally scheduled for 23 April

Agreed: That the briefing is rescheduled for a future meeting.

Executive Information Service - Housing and Health Ministers welcome "life-changing" benefits of home adaptations through Disabled Facilities Grant



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Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether there has been a review or a report into the effectiveness of the Disabled Facilities Grant which could be provided to the Committee.

Department for Communities - Minister Quarterly Update Availability

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting an update briefing from senior officials including the new Permanent Secretary is scheduled for a this allocated time, in the absence of the Minister.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Minister for Communities	Private rented sector reforms
Northern Ireland Union of Supported Employment	Exploring models of Supported Employment for people with disabilities: Lessons for Northern Ireland research report
Clerk to the Committee for Finance	2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – February 2026
Clerk to the Committee for Justice	Extern Prisoner Support Project
Department for Communities	Employment Rights Act 2025 (Commencement No.3 And Transitional Provisions) Regulations 2026 and the Employment Rights Act 2025 (Statutory Sick Pay) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026
Department for Communities	Public consultation on Charities Bill to amend The Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008
Committee for the Executive Office	Ending Violence Against Women and Girls – Sporting Bodies



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Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Annual Report and Accounts of the Commissioner for Older People Northern Ireland (COPNI) 2024-25
Committee for the Executive Office	Armed Forces Covenant
Speaker	Public Petition - Bangor Castle
Committee for the Executive Office	Ending Violence Against Women and Girls - funding allocated to DfC
Strategic Investment Board	Assembly Committee Report
Committee for Finance	Local Growth Fund letter to Minister
Youth Assembly	Youth Assembly Update
Brown O'Connor Communications on behalf of Independent Autism Reviewer	Invite - First Annual Report Launch of the Independent Autism Reviewer
Department for Communities	SR 2026 No. 70 - The Licensing (City of Derry Airport) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026
Executive Information Service	Press Release - The Executive Office - Local Growth Fund
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Lyons Raises Co Ownership Property Value Limit
Department for Communities	Budget 2025-26 - EQIA - Final Decision Report and Consultation Outcome Report
Rural Action	Invitation - Maximising Community Spaces
Individual + NIHE	Housing Conditions Issue
Northern Ireland Audit Office	Forward Work Programme 2026-27



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Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Department for Communities Press Release - Lyons invests £200,000 for repairs to Northern Ireland's historic churches
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission	Appointment of four new Commissioners

The Committee further noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	The Social Security (Contributions) (Republic of India) Order NI 2026
Department for Communities	Sign Language Bill - Further Consideration Stage
Department for Communities	Changes to legislation by DWP following the introduction of Scottish social security benefits
Department for Communities	Universal Credit – “Right to Try Work Commitment”

12. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson proposed that, in light of the Committee agreeing on 26 March to forgo an engagement session at the Balmoral Show, that the Committee consider holding an external Committee Meeting prior to Summer Recess.

Agreed: That the Committee Team investigate possible venues and begin preparations for an external Committee Meeting.



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The Chairperson then proposed that a reciprocal informal meeting with the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development of the Oireachtas be explored, to continue developing a working relationship.

Agreed: That an invite is extended to the Joint Committee on Social Protection, Rural and Community Development.

The Clerk proposed to schedule RaISe information briefings on the Public Authority Fraud and Error Recovery Bill (PAFER) and its passage through Westminster, into the future slots which have become available due to recent deferrals.

Agreed: That briefings on the PAFER Bill be scheduled for future Committee meetings.

The Committee then 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 23 March 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11.30 a.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities