



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 7 May 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)
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
Mr Maolfosa McHugh MLA (via Zoom)

In Attendance: Mr Peter Hall (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 - Charity Trustee

Cathy Mason – Member of the Committee for Education

Andy Allen – Charity Trustee

Maurice Bradley – Charity Trustee of the Harry Gregg Foundation

Maolíosa McHugh – Charity Trustee of Naíscoil na Deirge and in receipt of a pension

Kellie Armstrong - Member of NILGOSC pension scheme

2. Apologies

Mrs Pam Cameron MLA

Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson raised the issue of funding for the Placenames NI Project and stated that he found it really disappointing that the project funding had ended. The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had written to the Department following correspondence from Queen's University and also raised the issue during the briefing session with the Permanent Secretary at last week's meeting, however a response to the issues raised is still awaited.

Agreed: That the Minister is invited to brief on the Placenames NI Project at the meeting on 14 May 2026.

Agreed: That the Department is asked to provide all correspondence and information on the Placenames NI project to the Committee in advance of the meeting.



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The Chairperson drew Members' attention to the meeting agenda and informed Committee that Departmental officials had been scheduled to brief the Committee on its consultation on the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. However, the Committee secretariat received an email late on Tuesday afternoon stating that the session should be deferred until later this month.

The Chairperson further informed Members that he will be meeting with Departmental officials, the Minister and the Permanent Secretary on Monday 11 May to discuss the post-consultation response to and updating of the strategy. An update will be provided to Members following that meeting.

Agreed: That the Department is asked to brief on its consultation on the Anti-Poverty Strategy, alongside the Minister for Communities at the meeting on 14 May 2026.

The Chairperson informed Members that he intended to speak in the debate scheduled in Plenary next week, in relation to the draft budget, with comments based on the response agreed previously by the Committee.

The Chairperson also raised the issue of the Northern Ireland Football Fund and ongoing concerns that had been raised with him in relation to the fund.

Agreed: That the Department is scheduled to brief on this issue, in closed session, at 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 30 April 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.

5. Anti-Poverty Strategy post-consultation: Oral briefing from the Department for Communities

The Chairperson reminded Members that, as per his earlier comments, this agenda item would not be taken following notification from the Department that it wished to defer the briefing.



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6. UK Statutory Instrument - Breathing Space (Debt Respite Scheme) for Northern Ireland: Consideration of response to Committee for Justice

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Ray Caldwell, Director, Voluntary & Community Division

Anne Armstrong, Deputy Director, Voluntary & Community Division

Patricia Mulligan, Head of Financial Inclusion Team, Voluntary & Community Division

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

- The reason for using a Statutory Instrument rather than bespoke legislation
- How this will be managed in border towns where creditors are from the Republic of Ireland
- If the scheme will cover app based banks
- Responsibility for operational delivery
- Approved mental health professionals
- Benefit error
- The operation of similar legislation in Scotland
- Discussions with the Irish Government
- Engagement with the Department of Health
- Comparison on the need for debt advice in Northern Ireland with England, Scotland and Wales
- How the need for debt advice is measured
- Communications strategy
- If the legislation will be delivered in the current Assembly mandate
- Timetable for the legislation
- Charges and interest that might not be paused by the legislation



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

- Benefit Fraud and Error – Clarification on the process of benefit error leading to crisis debt;
- Figures and data comparisons on how debt advice is provided in other UK jurisdictions;
- Clarification on what communication channels the Department plans to use when engaging with counter parts in the Irish Government; and
- Clarification on the interface with eviction legislation.

Agreed: That RaiSe is asked to provide a research paper on the numbers of creditors/lenders that are not UK based (including Challenger Banks) and what rules they are subject to.

7. SL1 - The Draft Local Government Pension Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the SL1 was received on 24 April 2026 and provided Members with an overview of the SL1.

The Chairperson then informed Members that:

- The Committee will next consider this SL1 on 28 May alongside a summary of any comments and feedback received via Citizen Space.
- The Committee team will issue a call for views on the SL1 using the standard survey on Citizen Space from 7 May 2026.
- The SL1, and any relevant papers from the Department will be published on the Committee website and notified to relevant stakeholders, alongside the relevant deadline, when available.

Agreed: That Department officials are asked to brief on the SL1 at the meeting on 28 May and that, in advance of this, information is sought from the Department on why the McCloud Remedy will not be applied and the reasons for the software development delays.



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8. SL1 - The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Decisions and Appeals) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Minister for Communities had requested that the Committee consider the proposed statutory rule within a *shortened timeframe*.

The Chairperson then welcomed the following Departmental officials to the meeting:

John Noble – Principal, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision

Patricia Quinn – Staff Officer, Social Security Policy, Legislation and Decision

John Loughran - Deputy Principal, PIP Operations

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

- The need for consideration in a shortened timeframe
- The risk to effective scrutiny with a shortened timeframe
- Communications strategy with claimants
- Waiting time for assessments

Agreed: That the Committee consider the proposed statutory rule within the shortened timeframe, and that:

- The Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Jobseeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance (Decisions and Appeals) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 would be considered at the Committee Meeting on 28 May 2026.

The Chairperson reminded Members that a shortened timeframe does not preclude the committee from issuing a call for views. However, this requires the



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committee making a decision on the SL1 proposal at this meeting and before any responses are received.

The Chairperson then informed Members that:

- The Committee will next consider the SR on 28 May alongside a summary of any comments and feedback received via Citizen Space.
- The Committee team will issue a call for views on the SL1 using the standard survey on Citizen Space from 7 May 2026.
- The SL1, and any relevant papers from the Department will be published on the Committee website and notified to relevant stakeholders, alongside the relevant deadline, when available.

Finally, the Chairperson informed Members that:

- The Department intends to lay the rule on 11 May 2026
- The Committee should indicate whether it *is content* or *not content* for the Department to make the Statutory Rule.

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

9. Matters Arising

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Equality and Social Justice Committee Wales	Pension Scheme Bill
Department for Economy	Good Jobs Bill

10. Correspondence

**Clerk to Committee for Education Holiday hunger Bill - Raise briefing paper; and
Clerk to Committee for Education - Irish Medium Education Bill Raise briefing paper**



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Agreed: That the Committee is content for the secretariat to review the Bills for intersection with Department for Community areas of responsibility and draft Committee response(s) for consideration, if appropriate.

Agreed: That the Department for Education is asked to outline its role in the promotion and support for language, particularly the Irish language.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Summary of content
Assembly Business Office	Northern Ireland Investment Fund for Charities Annual Report Accounts
IMTAC	Open Letter - Introduce free travel for Disabled people in NI
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Infrastructure Fund will help communities thrive
Individual	Scheme of Delegation for the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
Chair to the Committee for the Executive Office	Sign Language Bill
Chair to the Committee for the Executive Office	Access to records
All Party Group Children and Young People	Invite to launch of Report - Left Out Disabled Children's Rights and Experiences in Northern Ireland

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:



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Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Reappointment to the Board of the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland
Youth Assembly	Update - April 2026
Executive Information Service	Press Release - 17 percent increase in Social Home Building
Solace NI	11 Councils' Meeting 05 March 2026
Department for Communities	Anti-Poverty Strategy Briefing - correspondence re deferral of briefing

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

12. Any other business

There was no other business.

13. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 14 May 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson informed Members that the next agenda item would take place in closed session in order for the Committee to receive a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Services (RaISe) in relation to the Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to receive a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Services (RaISe) in relation to the Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11.33a.m.

Maolíosa McHugh and Mark Durkan left the meeting at 11.33a.m.

**14. Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025:
Background briefing from RaISe**

The Chairperson welcomed the following Assembly official to the meeting:

Eleanor Murphy, Research Officer, Assembly Research and Information Services (RaISe)

The Committee received a briefing in relation to the next two background briefing papers (3 & 4) from RaISe regarding the Westminster Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025, designed to assist Members in advance of the Committee Stage of the Fraud, Error and Recovery Bill.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.12p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities