Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 22 October 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:
Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA (via Zoom)
Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
Mr Paul Boggs MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
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)

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, Charity Trustee, Private Sector Landlord.

Andy Allen – Charity Trustee, Private Sector Landlord, Trade Union Member.

Paul Boggs – Member of the Committee for Infrastructure.

Pam Cameron – Former Junior Minister with sight of Executive and cross-departmental policy, strategy and legislation, family member is a member of the Arts Council.

Sian Mulholland – Member of the All Party Group for Funerals and Bereavement, supported a team involved in the Northern Ireland Football Fund application process, Member of the Policy Advisory Group for EPPOC.

2. Apologies

Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised Members that he had attended an online update meeting with the Department accompanied by the Clerk on 19 October 2026 regarding the Draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. A summary of the points discussed issued in the Tabled pack.

The Chairperson then thanked Members for attending an additional formal Committee meeting on Tuesday, 20 October to enable continuation of Committee deliberations of Clauses 9-14 of the Charities (Amendment) Bill.

The Chairperson then advised Members that the Committee were broadly content with Clauses 9,11,12 and 14 and further formally recorded the following in relation to Clauses 10 and 13 of the Bill:

That a letter is sent to the Department seeking clarity on use of the word "Department" in regards to clause 10, line 4 of the Explanatory Financial Memorandum.

That the Bill Clerk draft amendments on the following for consideration:

- Clause 10(4) to require the Commission to undertake "consultation and publication" in advance of making future Regulations under subsection (1);
- Clause 10(4) in the event that future Regulations pertain to "significant changes"; and
- Addressing Committee concerns in relation to the absence of a commencement timeline in relation to Clause 13(2).

The Chairperson then thanked Members for attending an informal meeting with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on Tuesday, 20 October in relation to its Poverty in NI 2026 report and highlighted the need for the Department to consider the report findings in relation to the updating work ongoing with the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Finally, the Chairperson acknowledged it being *"Book Week"* and the Speaker's event to celebrated it, held on Tuesday 20 October.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with copies of draft minutes from the Committee meetings on 15 October 2026 and 20 October 2026.

Agreed: That both sets of minutes are agreed as drafted.

The Chairperson then informed Members that agenda items 5-7 would take place in closed session to allow briefings from The Examiner of Statutory Rules and Assembly Legal Services in relation to the Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill, and Committee Legislative Scrutiny Planning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session for Agenda Items 5-7.

Mark Durkan joined the meeting at 10.06a.m.

The meeting moved into closed session at 10.06a.m.

5. Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill: Examiner of Statutory Rules advice on delegated powers

The Examiner of Statutory Rules and Legal Advisor briefed the Committee on the Delegated Powers associated with the Bill and a question-and-answer session followed the briefing.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Bill Sponsor to ask whether or not they had considered the need to require the Department of Health to consult prior to exercising the powers afforded to them in Clause 4.

6. Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill: Convention Rights Memorandum briefing from Legal Services

The Legal Advisor resumed the CRM briefing to the Committee, recommencing from Clause 4 of the Bill and a question-and-answer session followed the briefing.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Bill Sponsor to seek the following:

- **clause 1 and 2 -** his view on whether the offence is drafted with sufficient precision to satisfy the requirement of legal certainty;
- **clause 3 -** why the third element of the offences created by clauses 1 and 2 require that a person who is the subject of the conversion practice

or coercive behaviour suffers physical or psychological harm, while clause 3 requires only that the person who causes or facilitates the subject to leave Northern Ireland is reckless as to whether the subject suffers physical or psychological harm;

- **clause 4 -** whether the definition provides sufficient clarity as to the scope of conduct captured by the offences; and
- **clause 6 -** whether any more detailed provision in this clause was considered.

Agreed: That the Clerk enquire with Parliamentary Services as to whether the policy of Committees receiving the briefing from Legal Services on a Bill's Convention Rights Memorandum in closed session can be reviewed.

7. Committee legislative scrutiny planning

The Committee considered a Clerk's memo in relation to available room bookings for additional meetings should they be required in the three months ahead for Committee Scrutiny of Bills.

Agreed: That additional bookings should be retained with one Member registering that they did not support the proposals in the memo.

The Chairperson proposed that the meeting move back into public session to continue with the remainder of the agenda.

The meeting resumed in open session at 11.25a.m. with all Members present.

The Chairperson requested that the Clerk read into the formal record the agreed actions from Agenda Items 5, 6 and 7.

8. Housing (Amendment) Bill: Oral evidence from The Simon Community

As the Chairperson is the sponsor of this Bill, the Deputy Chairperson, Nicola Brogan MLA, assumed the Chair for items 6 and 7.

The Deputy Chairperson then welcomed the following Officials to the meeting:

Jim Dennison, CEO, Simon Community

Cathy Brolly, Public Affairs and Policy Manager, Simon Community

Laoise McDonnell, Lived Experience Advocate

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

- Impact of extension from 28 to 60 days
- Preventative measures within 28 day period
- Statutory prevention duty
- 6 month Commencement
- Impact of longer period in other jurisdictions
- Temporary accommodation costs as a result of the Bill
- Current 28 day timeline and process
- Legislative Review requirements
- Current 28 day engagement and options
- Role of the Homeless Commission

9. Housing (Amendment) Bill: Oral evidence from Department for Communities and Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following officials to the meeting:

Paul Price, Deputy Secretary, Housing and Sustainability Group, Department for Communities

Heloise Brown, Director of Social Housing Policy and Oversight, Department for Communities

Brian O'Kane, Assistant Director, Policy and Business Excellence, Northern Ireland Housing Executive

Staci Bradley, Homelessness Policy Manager, Northern Ireland Housing Executive

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

- Policy intent of Bill and role of temporary accommodation
- Cost implications of the Bill
- Department and NIHE's view of the Bill
- Department's actions following the Public Accounts Committee report into Homelessness
- Revised costings to support Committee deliberations
- Homelessness Commission role and impact on homelessness
- Timeline and process for current 28 day period
- Appeals process
- Central point of contact for all housing within NIHE
- Increased number of individuals' facing homelessness
- Rationale for Department and NIHE providing joint evidence

Sian Mulholland left the meeting at 12.53p.m.
Pam Cameron left the meeting at 12.54p.m.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request that both the Department and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive provide updated figures for the Bill and are asked to set out the potential positive impacts which could stem from the Bill.

Agreed: That the Clerk seeks procedural advice in relation to the second stage debate on the Bill and whether the Committee needs to seek and amendment in relation to the £2.5million figure cited as the associated cost of the Bill throughout the debate (and in Committee since the second stage debate).

Sian Mulholland rejoined the meeting at 12.57p.m.
The Chairperson resumed the Chair at 12.57p.m.

10. SL1 -The Discretionary Support (Amendment) (Fuel as a Grant) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the SL1 was received on 12 October 2026, and that the proposed rule was subject to draft affirmative resolution procedure with an operational date of 4 January 2027.

The Chairperson then informed Members that:

- The Committee team will issue a call for views on the SL1 using the standard survey on Citizen Space from 23 October 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.
- The Committee would consider the SL1 on 5 November 2026 alongside responses to the call for views

Pam Cameron rejoined the meeting at 12.58p.m.

***Agreed*:** That the Committee is content to publish the Citizen Space call for views, publish the Departmental documents in relation to this SL1, and notify relevant stakeholders as appropriate.

***Agreed*:** That the Committee will next consider this SL1 on 5 November 2026 alongside a summary of any comments and feedback received via Citizen Space**.**

***Agreed*:** That Department Officials are requested to brief the Committee on the proposed rule at its meeting on 5 November 2026.

***Agreed*:** That a letter is sent to the Department to request the following in advance of the briefing:

- What funding has been allocated for this proposal and how was it allocated;
- What happens if an individual has previously received a living expenses grant? and
- Any other impacts of this in relation to other similar benefit awards; and
- The rationale for the grant commencement being in January (and not earlier).

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11. Matters Arising

Andy Allen left the meeting at 1.03p.m.

Arts Council NI - Musical Instruments Programme – Application Process

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Arts Council NI requesting the breakdown of the number of applications which were started online and not completed.

Department for Economy - Anti-Poverty Strategy - Planned Actions and Financial Bids;
Department for Finance - Anti-Poverty Strategy - Planned Actions and Financial Bids;
Department for Infrastructure - Anti-Poverty Strategy - Planned Actions and Financial Bids; and
Minister for Health - Anti-Poverty Strategy - Planned Actions and Financial Bids

Agreed: That this issue should be drawn out in the Committee's Legacy Report, in order that any future Committee can follow-up in relation to individual Departmental bids in support of the delivery of actions under the Executive's Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Doug Beattie MLA All Party Group - Funerals and Bereavement Committee Response

Agreed: That the response is sent to the Department and that the Department is requested to respond to the issues raised within the correspondence.

Clerk to Committee for Communities – Clerk's memo to Committee For Infrastructure - Nil Return - Harbours Bill;
Clerk to Committee for Communities – Clerk's memo to Committee For Infrastructure - Nil Return - Tree Protection Bill; and
Clerk to Committee for Communities – Clerk's memo - Committee For Infrastructure – Flags and Emblems Bill Response

Agreed: That the relevant Bill responses are submitted to the Committee for Infrastructure.

Department for Communities - Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime – (EPPOC) - Written Briefing

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a comparison of actions between EPPOC and SPOD, and whether there is any overlap.

Clerk to Committee for Finance - Budget briefings from Department in past 6 weeks

Agreed: That a response is sent to the Committee for Finance with details of Department's Briefing session in relation to the Budget which took place on 8 October 2026.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Department for Communities	Access to Work - Deaf Employment Rights
Department for Communities	Help with Funeral Fees
Department for Communities	Local Growth Fund
Department for Communities	Libraries and Safeguarding
Social Security Advisory Committee	The Housing Benefit (Earned Income Disregards) (Amendment) Regulations NI 2026
NI Housing Executive	Housing Allocations and Probation Approved Premises
Department for Communities	The Northern Ireland Football Fund - Grassroots Briefing to Committee
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	Local Development Plans

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12. Correspondence

Department for Communities - Voluntary and Community Sector Infrastructure Support Policy Framework - Outcome Report

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how the framework has changed since the consultation in 2024 and how these changes have informed the pressures on local and rural needs assessments and further, that a briefing session is scheduled with the Department for a future Committee Meeting in early 2027.

Committee for Finance - Departmental 5 year plans

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request its 5 Year Plan.

Safety Nets - Details of research project

Agreed: That a briefing is scheduled with Safety Nets at a future Committee Meeting, in early 2027.

Residents against Incineration (RAin) - Opposing Incineration - RAIn Letter to Communities Committee

Agreed: That the correspondence is sent to the Committee for Infrastructure and the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, for information.

Individual - PIP assessment interview - interrupted

Agreed: That a letter is sent to both the Department and to Capita to seek clarity on the process that is followed during a PIP interview if communication is interrupted or breaks down and to further ask what the assessment process involves for a non-verbal child or adult and whether they should be required to be in attendance during a telephone interview.

Policy Advisor on behalf of John O'Dowd MLA - Home Heating Oil – Sheltered Accommodation claims

Agreed: That the correspondence is forwarded to the Department to highlight the issue raised in relation to the HHOSS and Sheltered Accommodation claims.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Co-Ownership	Co-Ownership Newsletter
Money and Pensions Service	It All Counts: Building Better Financial Futures in NI
Department for Communities	Historic Environment Historic Church Repair Fund 2026-27
Executive Information Service	Press release - Lyons launches PRONI's 'Activity Book for Kids' during visit to Carrickfergus Library
Pharmaceutical Society NI	Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Call for Evidence Consultation response
Committee for Economy	Safety Nets research project
Department for Communities	Small Capital Programme - ACNI to Arts Sector
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Lyons launches funding programme for arts organisations
Horizon Research Project	Invitation to 'Supported Employment: Creating inclusive pathways to employment' - Webinar 12th November 2026

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Local Government Staff Commission – Progress Update and copy of Draft Dissolution Order
IMTAC	Annual General Meeting on Thursday 5th November 2026 at 2pm in the Belfast Room of the Ulster Museum

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Department for Communities	Private Sector Grants - 10 week Consultation - launched 19 Oct 2026
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Lyons welcomes start of final phase of £2m Environmental Improvement Scheme in Markethill
Eóin Tennyson MLA	Bill Sponsor offer to discuss Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill with Committee
Royal College of Occupational Therapists	Invite to Northern Ireland Parliamentary Reception and Manifesto Launch
Policy Advisor on behalf of John O'Dowd MLA	Home Heating Oil – Sheltered Accommodation claims

13. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson highlighted the CILIP Ireland Event "*Libraries Deliver: Impact, Outcomes and Value for Communities"* on Tuesday 3 November, at which he would be delivering opening remarks and extended an invitation to Members.

The Chairperson then advised Members that the Department had requested advance topics for discussion during the briefing session with the Minister schedule for 12 November 2026, and any topics should be forwarded to the Clerk in advance of the briefing.

Agreed: That Department Finance Officials be requested to attend to answer Members' queries alongside the Minister.

The Committee then noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

14. Any other business

There was no other business.

15. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 5 November 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 1.19p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Communities