



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Communities

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 10 September 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

- Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (Chairperson)
- Mrs Cathy Mason MLA (Deputy Chairperson) (via Zoom)
- Mr Andy Allen MBE MLA
- Mrs Kellie Armstrong MLA
- Mr Maurice Bradley MLA (via Zoom)
- Ms Nicola Brogan MLA (via Zoom)
- Mrs Pam Cameron MLA
- Mr Mark Durkan MLA (via Zoom)
- Mrs Sian Mulholland MLA (via Zoom)

In Attendance:

- Mrs Emer Boyle (Assembly Clerk)
- Mrs Victoria Bourquin (Assistant Clerk)
- Ms Katie Egan (Clerical Officer)
- Ms Patrice Morris (Senior Assistant Clerk)

The meeting commenced in public session at 10.00 a.m.



Northern Ireland Assembly

1. Declarations of Interest

The following interests were declared:

Colm Gildernew - Member's Bill on mitigating the threat of homelessness, Member of Public Accounts Committee, Private Sector Landlord, Chairperson, Brantry Area Rural Development Association (BARD), Member, Achadh Lú Gaelic Football Club.

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

Kellie Armstrong – Occupational pension scheme, on a waiting list for a Hearing Test

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

Sian Mulholland – Named in an item of correspondence within the meeting pack

2. Apologies

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 10.02am

The Chairperson welcomed Members back following summer recess.

The Chairperson welcomed Nicola Brogan MLA back to Committee following maternity leave and wished her well in her role.

The Chairperson also placed on record the Committee's thanks to Maolíosa McHugh for his hard work on the Committee and wished him well for his retirement. The Chairperson then proposed that the Committee write to him accordingly.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Maolíosa McHugh thanking him for his work on the Committee and wishing him well in his retirement.

The Chairperson acknowledged and thanked Members for attending informal information sessions on the (forthcoming) Pensions Scheme Bill, during the summer, to assist with Committee Scrutiny. The Chairperson then proposed that, the Department is requested to “map out” how the upcoming Bill relates to the previous LCM which Committee examined and the ongoing stream of SL1s and SRs which involve Pension Schemes.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department requesting that it “map out” how the upcoming Bill relates to the previous LCM and the ongoing stream of SL1s and SRs which involve Pension Schemes.

The Chairperson acknowledged the delay in the progress of the Anti-Poverty Strategy, and advised that the Department had requested to update the Committee on the Strategy in closed session. The Chairperson advised Members that the Clerk had liaised with the Department to secure a date for the briefing.

Agreed: That a briefing in closed session is scheduled for a future meeting.

The Chairperson acknowledged the success of local athletes in a range of Sporting events over the Summer recess, including the Commonwealth Games athletes, the Eagles Special Olympics Club for Team Ulster at the All-Ireland Games and Katie Taylor’s recent success and retirement from professional boxing.

Finally, The Chairperson acknowledged the success of Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann which took place in 2026 and welcomed its return in 2027.

4. Draft Minutes

The Chairperson informed Members that they had been provided with a copy of draft minutes from the Committee meeting on 2 July 2026.

Agreed: That the minutes are agreed as drafted.



Northern Ireland Assembly

5. SL1 The Housing Benefit (Earned Income Disregards) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Minister and Department have requested that consideration of this SL1 is expedited and within a shortened timeframe, to help ensure the Rule can be made by 14 September 2026 in line with the 21-day rule, ahead of the planned operational date of 5 October 2026.

The Chairperson informed Members that a revised SL1 had been received on 8 September advising that DWP had identified errors in the legislation which had been identified during implementation testing.

The Chairperson further informed Members that the Committee agreed the following at its meeting on 2 July:

- The Committee would consider the SR on 10 September alongside a summary of any comments and feedback received via Citizen Space.
- The Committee team would issue a call for views on the SL1 using the standard survey on Citizen Space.
- To publish the SL1, and any relevant papers from the Department on the Committee website and notify stakeholders, alongside the relevant deadline, when available.

The Chairperson then advised that the call for evidence issued was based on the original SL1 and not the amended SL1 and due to the expedited and compressed timeframe, there would be no opportunity to reissue the call for evidence.

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

Helen Vaughan – Deputy Director, Social Security Policy and Legislation Division

Sean McDevitt – Deputy Principal, Social Security Policy and Legislation Division

Mike Haslett – Staff Officer, Social Security Policy and Legislation Division



Northern Ireland Assembly

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 10.12 am

Nicola Brogan rejoined the meeting at 10.12 am

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

- Detail of the amendments to the SL1 and SR
- Significance and impact of amendments and timeframe
- Remunerative Work definition
- Earned Income Disregard
- Future Policy Process and lessons learned
- Rectifying issues following implementation
- Individuals' loss of income
- The associated communication strategy

Andy Allen left the meeting at 10.35am

The Chairperson proposed that the Committee writes to the Department to remind it of the SL1 scrutiny process and the need to adhere to this process in all circumstances, including for Statutory Instruments made in Westminster.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to emphasise the need to adhere to the new SL1 process and to ask what resources the Department has and considers that it needs, in order to be able to adequately check the detail of DWP's regulations, which are applicable on a parity basis in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson further proposed that the Committee Clerk develops an internal register for Members' information in relation to SR's not aligning with the new process.

Agreed: That an internal register is developed for Members' information in relation to SR's not aligning with the new process.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) in Westminster to ask whether it encountered any issues during scrutiny of the associated Statutory Instrument in Westminster.

Finally, the Chairperson informed Members that 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.

6. SR 2026/149 The Home Heating Oil (Temporary Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meeting on 2 July 2026, when the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, subject to amendments being made to the Explanatory Memorandum.

The Chairperson further advised that the SR and Explanatory Memorandum when laid, contained an additional provision that was not provided to or considered by the Committee at the SL1 stage.

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

Cherrie Arnold – Deputy Secretary, Work and Health Group

Anne Murdock – Director, Work and Health Group

Conrad McConnell - Director, Work and Health Group

Andy Allen rejoined the meeting at 10.40am

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



Northern Ireland Assembly

- Eligible criteria
- Voucher activation
- Communication strategy
- Helpline details and Jobs and Benefits Offices
- Potential Misuse of the Scheme
- Number of Applications
- Application and Appeal processes
- Briefing sessions with the Deaf Community
- HMOs, temporary accommodation and individuals moving homes
- Process and advice for Oil Suppliers
- Qualifying period
- Estimated Administration Costs
- Use of Data for other Schemes
- Use of Excess Funds for Discretionary Support

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request regular financial updates against forecast throughout the life of this scheme to ensure effective budgetary management of any emerging underspend.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered 2026/149 The Home Heating Oil (Temporary Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

7. SR 2026/146 The Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Employment and Support Allowance and State Pension Credit (Carer's Allowance Reassessment Capital Disregard) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson advised Members that the Rule had been laid *without* being considered by the Committee under the normal SL1 scrutiny process.

The Chairperson further advised that the Regulations were considered by the Examiner of Statutory Rules, who was content that the Department had provided satisfactory explanation in relation to the breach of the 21 day rule.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/146 The Universal Credit, Housing Benefit, Employment and Support Allowance and State Pension Credit (Carer's Allowance Reassessment Capital Disregard) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

8. SR 2026/144 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Preservation of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 11 June and 2 July 2026, when the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with new scrutiny process for delegated legislation.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/144 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Preservation of Benefit) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and has no objection to the rule.

9. SR 2026/151 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) (Extension to Unconnected Multiple Employer Schemes and Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson reminded Members that following consideration of the SL1 at the Committee Meetings on 11 June and 2 July 2026, when the Committee had agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed to make the rule, in line with new scrutiny process for delegated legislation.

Agreed: That the Committee for Communities has considered SR 2026/151 The Occupational Pension Schemes (Collective Money Purchase Schemes) (Extension to Unconnected Multiple Employer Schemes and Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

10. Retention and Disposal Schedule – Addendum to the Department for the Economy



Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for the Economy on 1 July 2026 which had corresponded to confirm that it was content with the schedule.

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

11. Retention and Disposal Schedule – Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry

The Chairperson informed Members that this schedule had been considered by the Committee for Health on 2 July 2026 which had corresponded to confirm that it was content with the schedule.

Agreed: That the decision to approve the schedule is deferred.

Agreed: That the Committee writes to the Committee for Health, to seek assurance that the Committee for Health is content that adequate records will be retained in relation to the Inquiry.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to PRONI, to ask what restrictions would apply to the retained documents given the sensitive information contained within them.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 11.25 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.31 a.m. with all Members present.

12. Matters Arising

Committee for the Economy - Renewable Electricity Generation Bill

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

Committee for Justice - Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill



Northern Ireland Assembly

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

Minister of Finance - Written Ministerial Statement - Local Growth Fund - 2026-27 Capital Allocations and agreed Investment Plan; and

Department for Communities - Letters of Funding and Support Community and Voluntary Sector; and

Minister for Communities - Local Growth Fund

Agreed: That the items of correspondence are considered (again) at the Committee meeting on 17 September, together with a relevant oral briefing session from NICVA.

Department for Communities - Further update on the Timms Review

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for an update following the consultation events on the number of participants and benefit recipients from Northern Ireland that took part and how the consultation events had gone.

Kellie Armstrong MLA - Request for list of SPOD recipients with Committee for Communities

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive setting out the Committee's Statutory Remit and to request a copy of the September 2021 report which included costings and options for the future of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

Individual - Charities Amendment Bill query re Church of Ireland registration

Agreed: That the response is sent to the Department for consideration and response. Further, that the response is added to the Bill Folder, collated with



Northern Ireland Assembly

other responses and returned to the Committee for consideration during Committee Stage scrutiny of the Bill.

Department for Communities - Charities (Amendment) Bill – Consultation

Agreed: That the response is added to the Bill Folder, collated with other responses and returned to the Committee for consideration during Committee Stage scrutiny of the Bill.

Department for Communities - Review of the Decent Homes Standard

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to ask what consideration of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 occurs when considering the provision of solar panels in rural areas, and to further request detail of the differential in the cost of solar panel installation / fitting between urban and rural areas.

Department for Communities - Motability Scheme Changes; and

Department for Communities - Ministerial Response to Changes to the Motability Scheme queries; and

Motability Foundation - Further response to Scheme changes

Agreed: That Departmental officials and Motability Foundation are invited to brief on this issue at a future Committee meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department and Motability UK to ask for the eligibility criteria for additional support for those individuals requiring more than 3000 miles per annum, to include a breakdown of numbers affected by Council area.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask for a timeline in relation to completion of the outstanding Data Sharing arrangement.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Department for Communities - Financial Update Briefing

Agreed: That Departmental officials are invited to brief on this issue at a future Committee meeting.

Department for Communities - Shaping Sustainable Places Consultation

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

Department for Communities - Pathways to Work and Wellbeing Transformation Project

Agreed: That Departmental officials are invited to brief on this issue at a future Committee meeting.

Department for Communities - Help with Funeral Fees

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether the Department has examined evidence of the differential in the cost of funerals in Great Britain compared to Northern Ireland as compared to the level of financial support available here.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Chair of the All Party Group on Funerals and Bereavements to ask for any relevant recent information and details on the differential in the cost of funerals in Great Britain compared to Northern Ireland.

Housing Executive - Map of Social Housing Need and Closed Areas for Development; and

Department for Communities - Map of Social Housing Need and Closed Areas for Development Housing; and



Northern Ireland Assembly

Department for Communities - Funding Announcements and Budget Scrutiny

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask that the Minister directs Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Northern Ireland Water to jointly publish a map of closed areas of development by constituency area.

Agreed: That the Permanent Secretary is asked to meet with the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and Clerk informally, to discuss concerns on behalf of the Committee.

Housing Executive - Housing Allocations and Probation Approved Premises

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive to request a geographic breakdown of non-standard accommodation units for those leaving the prison system and the extent to which they are used.

Department for Communities - New Approach to Tackling Social Housing Tenancy Fraud and Misuse

Agreed: That Departmental officials are invited to brief on this issue at a future Committee meeting.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether a person loses their right to a Housing Executive Property due to tenancy fraud or misuse proceedings, would they still avail of Homelessness support.

12.32 Minister of Finance - Data Strategy - potential of administrative data research to support evidence-based policymaking

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask how data is currently being used to inform the outstanding draft strategies, particularly in relation to the Anti-Poverty Strategy.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Minister for Health - Help With Health Costs Scheme – hearing tests

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask whether High Street Providers e.g. Specsavers are being considered as possible providers of hearing tests under the Help with Healthcare Costs Scheme.

12.34 Housing Executive - Oral Briefing - Homelessness Policy Implementation

Agreed: That a letter is sent to Homeless Connect to ask for the sector's views and concerns regarding the forthcoming winter pressures on homelessness and the limited Department funding available.

Department for Communities - Housing (Amendment) Bill Call for Evidence

Agreed: That the response is added to the Bill Folder, collated with other responses and returned to the Committee for consideration during Committee Stage Scrutiny of the Bill.

Department for Communities - Consultation on the draft Local Government Cremation Regulations NI 2024

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Communities to ask for an explanation of the reasons why legislation cannot be introduced to cover pre-24-week pregnancy loss.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department for Health to ask for its position on legislation not being introduced for pre-24-week pregnancy loss.

Clerk to the Committee for Communities - Hunting with Dogs Bill



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agreed: That a nil return response is submitted to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

The Committee noted the following items:

Source	Subject Matter
Linda Dillon MLA	Summer Youth Club Coalisland
Department for Communities	DWP - The Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes General Levy Regulations review 2026
NI Commissioner for Children and Young People	Response to Call for Evidence - Housing Amendment Bill
Minister for Health	EQIAs and CRIAs - impact on policy change
Head of the Civil Service	EQIAs and CRIAs - impact on policy change
Minister for Communities	HMO Registry Publication
Department for Communities	Northern Ireland Placename Project
Department for Communities	DWP Call for Evidence on the future of Carer's Allowance
Homeless Connect	NI Homelessness Conference 2026
Department for Communities	T20 Men's Cricket World Cup 2030 – Shared Island Funding
Department for Communities	Funding for Neighbourhood Renewal Summer Scheme
Department for Communities	People and Place Review - A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal
Department for Communities	Northern Ireland Place-Name Project
Department for Communities	Request for a matrix that clearly maps consultation response point alongside the relevant change(s) made to the updated [Anti-Poverty] strategy
Commissioner for Older People NI (COPNI)	New Decade New Approach - Review recommendations
Department for Communities	Fraud and Error Business Case and Vacant Properties Pilot



Northern Ireland Assembly

Cathy Mason left the meeting at 11.48am

13. Correspondence

Men's Alliance - Domestic Abuse - Request to meet with Chair/Deputy Chair

Agreed: That Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson schedule a future meeting with Men's Alliance.

Women's Resource and Development Centre - Local Growth Fund - how funding decisions will be made given the absence of an application process

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to ask, in terms of delivery and Regional Balance how the £7 million allocated to it has been allocated and that the Department outline how funding decisions will be made given the absence of an application process.

LastSay - Partnerships, Advocacy and Impact - Bereavement Administration in NI

Agreed: That the requested information is released and sent to LastSay.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to request an updated position on "Tell us once" since its previous correspondence to the Committee in 2024.

Individual - PIP extensions

Agreed: That the correspondence is sent to the Department for its response and to highlight the Committee's concern that the correspondence refers to possible systemic policy and procedural issues.

Individual - Conversion Practices Bill Response (2 separate items);



Northern Ireland
Assembly

NI Federation of Housing Associations - Response to Housing (Amendment) Bill - Call for Evidence;

**Renters' Voice - Housing (Amendment) Bill - Call for Evidence response
Homeless Connect - Housing Amendment Bill Submission;**

Women's Resource and Development Centre - Call for Evidence Housing Amendment Bill Response;

Department for Communities - Housing Amendment Bill response to Call for Views;

Individual - Response to Housing Amendment Bill;

Simon Community - Response to Call for Evidence on Housing Amendment Bill;

Committee for the Economy - Charities Amendment Bill - nil response;

Committee for the Economy - Housing (Amendment) Bill - nil response;

Committee for the Economy - Conversion Practices Bill- nil response;

Department for Communities - Conversion Practices Bill response to Call for Views; and

Charity Commission for Northern Ireland - Charities (Amendment) Bill 2026 - response to Call for Views

Agreed: That each response is added to its relevant Bill Folder, collated with other responses to the relevant Bill and returned to the Committee for consideration during Committee Stage Scrutiny of each Bill.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Source	Summary of content
NICVA	Excerpt from NICVA eNews which signposted the Committee for Communities' call for views on three Bills recently introduced which propose changes to Homelessness (Housing - Closing 3 Sept), Charities (10 Sept) and Conversion Practices (1 Oct)
Information Commissioners Office	Home Heating Oil (Temporary Financial Assistance) - response
Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission	E-Newsletter August 2026
Strategic Investment Board	Assembly Committee Report
Youth Assembly	Summer Update
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Minister welcomes new access link in Downpatrick town centre
Pivotal	Tracker Report - Running Out of Time
Examiner of Statutory Rules	71st Report Of the Examiner of Statutory Rules

The Committee noted the following items of tabled correspondence:

Source	Summary of content
Executive Information Service	Press Release - Reissue - £100 Home Heating Oil Support Scheme goes live for applications
Examiner of Statutory Rules	72nd Report Of the Examiner of Statutory Rules



Northern Ireland
Assembly

14. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a copy of the Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson informed Members of an additional briefing from the Department in relation to the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy and highlighted the forthcoming sessions on the Charities(Amendments) Bill.

15. Any other business

The Chairperson raised the issue of the Arts Sector's dissatisfaction with the Minister for Communities, the call for his resignation and the de-prioritisation of funding for the Arts.

Agreed: That a letter is sent to the Department to raise concerns and hurt within the sector and to request an update of actions taken in regards to the recommendations that the Committee made in its 2025 Report on Engagement with the Arts Sector.

16. Date, time and location of the next meeting

The next meeting is at 10.00 a.m. on Thursday 17 September 2026, in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 12.30p.m.

Colm Gildernew MLA



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Chairperson, Committee for Communities