Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 4 November 2026

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present:	Ms Paula Bradshaw MLA (Chairperson)
	Mr Stewart Dickson MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
	Ms Sinéad Ennis MLA
	Ms Deborah Erskine MLA
	Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
	Ms Claire Sugden MLA
Online:	Mr Timothy Gaston MLA
Apologies:	Mr Phillip Brett MLA
	Ms Sinéad McLauglin MLA

In Attendance: Mr Nick Mitford (Assembly Clerk)

Ms Aoife Keating Fitzpatrick (Senior Assistant Clerk)

Ms Sarah-Anne McKinley (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Mr Jonathan Lawless (Clerical Supervisor)

Ms Andrienne Magee (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.00pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declarations of Interest

Claire Sugden declared a standing interest, as Bill Sponsor in relation to agenda item 8.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Informal Meeting Note – Open College Network Northern Ireland

The Chairperson advised Members that she met with Open College Network Northern Ireland on Wednesday 21 October to discuss its report 'A higher skills ambition for Northern Ireland: A revised skills outlook for Northern Ireland for 2035.'

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if any thought has been given to the consideration of adopting a measurable skills target across government and or in any future Programme for Government.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 21 October 2026.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 The Executive Office - Five Year Sustainability Plan Consultations, Reviews and Strategies

The Chairperson reminded Members that during the oral briefing with the TEO Permanent Secretary prior to Halloween recess, Members were provided with a hard copy tabled briefing paper detailing the consultations, reviews and strategies that are currently live, under development, or under review within the Department. As this paper was not included in the meeting pack for 21 October, it has now been included in today's pack for the record.

The Committee noted this item.

5.2 Clerk's Note - Privilege in Committee Proceedings

The Chairperson reminded Members that at the meeting on 21 October 2026, the Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk would seek advice on the level of privilege afforded to Committee proceedings.

A number of Members put on record theirs concerns regarding the conduct of the Committee at its meeting on Wednesday 21 October 2026.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Clerk has sought clarification from the DALO on the implications of the recent announcement regarding changes to the working relationship between the First Minister and deputy First Minister, particularly in relation to the work of the Committee and whether these will affect correspondence and any impact on joint appearances by the Ministers before the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek formal clarification on the implications on the recent announcement in relation to the Ministers' working relationship.

6. Oral Briefing: Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill – RaISe

Agreed: The Committee agreed for Hansard to cover this session.

The officials joined the meeting at 2.24pm.

Members received an oral briefing from:

- Kathryn Barr, Research Officer, Northern Ireland Assembly
- Ross Connolly, Research Officer, Northern Ireland Assembly

The officials provided an oral briefing on the Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Carál Ní Chuilín left the meeting at 2.53pm and returned at 2.58pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 3.25pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following for the Committee Stage of the Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill:

- The consultation questions for the Committee's Call to Evidence
- The list of stakeholders for the Committee Stage of the bill ensuring all local trades of Commerce across Northern Ireland are included
- The press release to be issued once the Call to Evidence is live
- The additional Committee meetings scheduled for January 2027
- For the Committee Clerk to explore the feasibility of holding the additional meeting on Tuesday 8 December 2026, in light of the scheduled AERC meeting on the same day and the implications for achieving quorum.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission research from RaISE on the feasibility of amending the Bill to remove the age threshold of 16 years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (Great Britain) to request further information on the number of age discrimination cases in Great Britain and to ask that this information be provided in advance of the Commission's oral evidence session with the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take a short comfort break and suspend the meeting.

The meeting was suspended at 3:30pm.

Proceedings resumed in open session at 3.38pm with the following Members present: Paula Bradshaw, Stewart Dickson, Sinéad Ennis, Deborah Erskine, Claire Sugden and Timothy Gaston online.

7. Oral Briefing: Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill – Departmental Officials

Agreed: The Committee agreed for Hansard to cover this session.

The officials joined the meeting at 3.39pm.

Carál Ní Chuilín rejoined the meeting at 3.43pm.

Members received an oral briefing from:

- Carolyn Mada, Director, Equality, Rights & Identity Directorate, TEO
- Ben Johnston, Grade 7, Equality, Rights & Identity Directorate, TEO

The officials provided an oral briefing on the Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 4.08pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask Assembly Legal Services to provide advice on the following areas:

- How the Bill interacts with existing equality law, court procedures and the Equality Commission's statutory framework as a whole.
- To advise on the scope of future Secretary of State consent including whether any proposed amendments or regulations would require further consent in the Bill as drafted.
- Whether any exceptions should be set out on the face of the Bill rather than provided for through subordinate legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask whether any other related policy or legislative in the area of Equality is currently being developed that could have implications for the Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill. Also to request an analysis of the consultation process undertaken by OFMDFM in 2015 on age discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services, including any key findings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include in its Legacy Report concerns regarding the perceived lack of understanding of equality law across Departments and Arm's Length Bodies, and to highlight the need for improved awareness across the public sector.

8. Oral Briefing: Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy and Phase 2 of the Delivery Plan

The officials joined the meeting at 4.15pm.

Members received an oral briefing from:

- Geraldine Fee, Director of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Division, TEO
- Ryan Somerville, Head of Policy & Research, TEO
- Fionnuala French, Head of Community Investment, TEO

The officials provided an oral briefing on the Ending Violence Against Women & Girls Strategy and Phase 2 of the Delivery Plan.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 4.54pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 5.15pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for the following information:

- Details of the business cases for both phases of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) Challenge Fund.
- Any written briefings provided by the Department for the Economy and the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) detailing their input into the Fund.
- Details of the four successful applicants, including the projects funded and the level of funding awarded to each; a breakdown of how the funding has been spent to date.
- Information on any anticipated revenue costs that may fall to private companies as a result of implementing the funded solutions, together with an assessment of value for money.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Committee Clerk to email Members to ask if there any additional actions for inclusion before sending the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy and the Department for the Economy seeking further information on Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) Challenge Fund and how the initiative contributes to the wider delivery of the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

9. SR2026/XXXX The Period Products (the Executive Office Specified Public Service Bodies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee considered a proposal by TEO to amend S.R. 2024 No.185 to update the list of public service bodies specified under section 2 of the Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

10. Correspondence

i. The Committee noted the summary of Committee correspondence.

Carál Ní Chuilín left the meeting at 5.24pm.

ii. The Committee noted two responses from Victims and Survivors Service to its correspondence of 16 October 2026 requesting a breakdown of the £750,000 in additional funding allocated by the Department to VSS in relation to the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to VSS and ask that they provide an update on the final funding position in respect of the two organisations whose funding allocations remain pending, and to provide details of how many unmet or unallocated funding has been reallocated once known.

iii. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual requesting an opportunity to present evidence to the Committee on the need for an independent public inquiry into institutional responses to gender- based violence in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agree to write to the individual to ask that they provide a written briefing in the first instance, due to the limited time available in the Committee's forward work programme.

iv. The Committee considered an invitation from the Welsh Parliament to the to the ninth meeting of the Interparliamentary Forum, to be held on Friday 4 December 2026 at the Senedd, Cardiff Bay.

The Committee noted this item.

v. The Committee considered a response from the Maze Long Kesh Development Corporation to its correspondence of 8 October 2026 requesting a copy of any current or draft masterplan relating to the regeneration and development of the site, including any plans referenced within the Corporation's forthcoming priorities and if these have been submitted to Ministers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for an update of the next steps regarding the site following the First Minister and deputy First Minister meeting with the MLKDC Board in June and to highlight that the current Spatial Framework is now over a decade old and to highlight the importance of securing ministerial agreement. Also to ask for a breakdown of funding from TEO to MLKDC for the current financial year.

vi. The Committee considered a response from the Head of the Civil Service to its correspondence of 8 October 2026 requesting further detail on the independent person appointed to conduct the Scoping and Assurance Exercise within NICS following the conviction of Jeffrey Donaldson.

The Committee noted this item.

vii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee regarding the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask whether TEO has any views or comments on this Bill and whether there are any implications or any role for TEO arising from the Bill.

viii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Economy in relation to the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask whether TEO has any views or comments on this Bill and whether there are any implications or any role for TEO arising from the Bill.

ix. The Committee considered a response from the Secretary of State to its correspondence of 10 September 2026 regarding the issue of Irish

Government cooperation with the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery (ICRIR).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Irish Government to highlight the UK Government's current position regarding sharing of information between ICRIR and the Irish Government and next steps.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to An Garda Síochána to seek information on the operational status of the structures and processes that may need to be put in place to facilitate engagement with the ICRIR and the implementation of any related information-sharing mechanisms.

x. The Committee noted a Hansard Report – Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill: Ms Claire Sugden MLA - 14 October 2026.

xi. The Committee noted correspondence from NIA Legal Services – The 76th Report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules. There are no rules for the attention of this Committee.

xii. The Committee noted a response from The Executive Office to its correspondence of 17 September 2026 in relation to the Queen's University Belfast report on Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland.

xiii. The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Justice to its correspondence of 10 September 2026 regarding Survivor Council NI's report "Nothing About Us".

xiv. The Committee noted a response from The Executive Office to its correspondence of 17 September 2026 asking for further information in relation the TEO resource expenditure for the Language Bodies the Communities in Transition Programme.

xv. The Committee noted correspondence from Visual Arts Ireland - The Arts: our role in the future of Northern Ireland. Why sustaining cultural infrastructure matters across public policy.

xvi. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department of Justice to the Committee for Justice regarding the prevalence and impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland.

xvii. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department of the Economy to the Economy Committee in relation to the prevalence and impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland.

xviii. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department of Infrastructure to the Infrastructure Committee regarding the prevalence and impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences in Northern Ireland.

xix. The Committee noted a News Release from The Executive Office - Launch of Public Appointment Competition for Strategic Investment Board.

xx. The Committee noted a response from The Executive Office to its correspondence of 1 October 2026 regarding the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors and specifically an update on the status of the Business Case for the additional funding.

xxi. The Committee noted a copy of further correspondence from The Dromore Group to the Minister of Finance regarding the costs of childhood sexual abuse to the Northern Ireland Budget.

xxii. The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Finance to its correspondence of 1 October 2026 in relation to The Dromore Group Policy Paper.

xxiii. The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to its correspondence of 1 October 2026 regarding AccessNI additional categories.

xxiv. The Committee noted an invitation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to the launch of its Annual Statement on 10 December 2026.

xxv. The Committee noted a response from the Head of the Civil Service to its correspondence of 24 September 2026 requesting further information following the EQIA and cross departmental working oral evidence session.

xxvi. The Committee noted a response from the Safeguarding Board NI to its correspondence of 1 October 2026 requesting further information on the safeguarding systems available to faith based organisations.

xxvii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – September (R6) Position.

xxviii. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Finance to the Head of the Civil Service in relation to the Public Sector Transformation Fund.

xxix. The Committee noted correspondence from The Executive Office - Investment Strategy NI – Investing Activity Report.

xxx. The Committee noted correspondence from Hourglass regarding the Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to proceed with the remaining briefings as set out in the forward work programme.

12. Any Other Business

Timothy Gaston raised an issue about Dervock, North Antrim in relation to communities transitioning away from paramilitarism.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write the Department to ask whether the area concerned falls within the CIT Programme's eligibility criteria and if not, what alternative funding streams or support mechanisms may be available to assist the area.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Justice to ask whether funding opportunities could be made available to the area through the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime programme.

Timothy Gaston raised a further issue regarding a data breach by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Committee Clerk to follow up with the Member on the matter following discussions with the Department.

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 11 November 2026 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.34pm.

Paula Bradshaw MLA

Chairperson, Committee for The Executive Office

Wednesday 4 November 2026