



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health

Minutes of Proceedings

27 February 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

- Philip McGuigan MLA (Chairperson)
- Danny Donnelly MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Alan Chambers MLA
- Diane Dodds MLA
- Órlaithí Flynn MLA
- Nuala McAllister MLA
- Colin McGrath MLA
- Alan Robinson MLA

Apologies:

- Linda Dillon MLA

In Attendance:

- Keith McBride, Clerk
- Oliver Bellew, Assistant Clerk
- Angela McParland, Assistant Clerk

Jonathan Lamont, Clerical Supervisor

Stephen McGlennon, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2.08pm in public session.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Linda Dillon MLA.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson thanked the staff of Marie Curie for the Committee's extremely informative visit to its headquarters earlier that day and for the engagement on issues relating to the Hospice and Palliative Care.

The Chairperson thanked the staff of the Children's Hospice for welcoming the Committee to its premises on Thursday 20 February and for providing an insight to its work.

The Chairperson informed Members of his recent video call with the Chairperson of the NI Affairs Committee to discuss a potential Committee meeting in Westminster in May. Members noted that the Committee Office was working on a draft programme for the visit and that this would be circulated in due course.

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Department's announcement of the commencement of the build for the new Children's Hospital.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral and written briefing on the new governance arrangements in place for the build and information on the lessons that have been learned from the Maternity Hospital build.

Danny Donnelly left the meeting at 2.16pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that officials provide an oral briefing on the cost of the new build and to provide an explanation for recent inputting errors in figures provided to the Committee.

Danny Donnelly rejoined the meeting at 2.17pm.

3. Draft Minutes

The Committee agreed the draft Minutes of the meeting held on 13 February 2025.

The Committee agreed a note of the concurrent meeting with the Committee for Education on 20 February 2025 and agreed that it be published on its webpages.

4. Matters Arising

There were no Matters Arising.

5. Public Health Bill – Oral Briefing from the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.17pm:

- Chris Matthews, Director of Emergency Resilience and Protecting Health Directorate, Department of Health;
- Anne McNally, Public Health Bill Team Leader, Department of Health; and,
- Dr Jillian Johnston, Public Health Consultant, Public Health Agency

The officials briefed the Committee on the Public Health Bill.

Alan Chambers joined the meeting at 2.21pm.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek information on the changes to working practices within the Public Health Authority as a result of learnings from the Covid pandemic.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

6. Autism Strategy – Oral Briefing from the Department of Health

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.55pm:

- Mark McGuicken, Director of Disability and Older People, Department of Health;
- Nigel Chambers, Head of Learning Disability and Autism, Department of Health;
- Maurice Leeson, Programme Manager, Partnerships, Emotional Health and Wellbeing, Department of Health; and
- Paul Millar, Commissioning Lead, Emotional Health and CAMHS, Department of Health.

The Chairperson welcomed the officials and expressed the Committee's disappointment at receiving a copy of the Autism Strategy 2023-2028 Monitoring Report at such short notice.

The officials briefed the Committee on the Autism Strategy.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: Following a request from the Committee, the officials agreed to provide:

- detailed information on the role and responsibility of the DoH Adult Lead Commissioner of Autism;
- further information on the number of young people with autism engaged with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, by Trust;
- clarity on whether the provision of support through small grants for family members/siblings of persons with autism has been achieved in all Trusts;
- clarity on whether training on dealing with autistic children is mandatory or optional for General Practitioners in Northern Ireland;
- details of the Autism Friendly Roadshows hosted by Mid and East Antrim Council;
- further information on the Department's consideration of controllership issues facing people with autism and the Department's views on the appropriateness of addressing this through legislation; and,

- further information on the number of unallocated assessment and support cases as a result of current vacancies in the Social Work sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to query the disparity in diagnoses in cases of autism between Trusts in Northern Ireland and with other regions.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

7. SL1 The Health and Personal Social Services (Optical Charges and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered the SL1 and a briefing paper by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the Statutory Rule.

8. Committee Inquiry on Access to Palliative Care Services – Briefing from RalSe

The Committee noted a research paper by Assembly Research and Information Services on an Introduction to palliative and end of life care in Northern Ireland.

Dr Grainne Crealey, Assembly Research Officer, briefed the Committee on the paper.

The Chairperson advised Members to inform the Committee Clerk of any additional research requests they may have in respect of the inquiry.

The Chairperson thanked Dr Crealey for her attendance.

9. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in relation to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency's publication of statistics relating to the high suicide rates among males.

- ii. The Committee noted a response from the Department in respect of its concerns around Band Six nurses managing Emergency Departments at night in extremely challenging environments.
- iii. The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Health in relation to Newry Mourne and Down District Council's Notice of Motion on the provision of a Residential Rehabilitation Service.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Newry Mourne and Down District Council for information.
- iv. The Committee noted a response from the Department in respect of concerns for potential disruption to consultants' work due to the implementation of encompass.
- v. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in respect of Social Work Workforce planning.
- vi. The Committee noted a copy of a response from the Minister of Health to the Committee for Communities in respect of the most up-to-date statistics on the current number of care leavers in Northern Ireland.
- vii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Health in relation to approved outturn cost of the new Children's Hospital project.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek confirmation that the error identified has now been rectified in all Investment Strategy Reports.
- viii. The Committee noted correspondence the Minister of Health in respect of the launch of a consultation on proposals for amendments to the HSC Pension Scheme and the associated draft regulations.
- ix. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of sickness and absence statistics in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

- x. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of the Open Government Network's oral briefing on the status of open government in Northern Ireland.
- xi. The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance in respect of employer National Insurance costs and funding.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for a detailed breakdown of the costs outlined by the Department of Health.
- xii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Justice in relation to draft Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request further information on the timeline for the necessary guidelines and framework to be in place to support the regulations.
- xiii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Migrant Centre NI in relation to enforced consent for data sharing and access to public health services.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.
- xiv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Pharmaceutical Society NI in respect of its consultation on Initial Education and Training Reforms.
- xv. The Committee noted an invitation from Marie Curie and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society to its Daffodil Standards event. The Chairperson advised members to respond to the invitation directly.
- xvi. The Committee noted correspondence from the British Medical Association to the Minister of Health in respect of its support for the introduction of a statutory organisational duty of candour and the draft Being Open framework.

- xvii. The Committee noted the 33rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.
- xviii. The Committee considered correspondence from the organisation 'Parents4Pegs NI' which raised concerns around potential inefficiencies within the Health and Social Care system in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.

- xix. The Committee noted a copy of the Investment Strategy NI 'Investing Activity Report' for February 2025.
- xx. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence between the British Medical Association and the Secretary of State for Health and the devolved Health Ministers in response to a statement from the Federation of Royal College of Physicians on wrongfully informed results of an exam taken in 2023.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for clarity on the impact of doctors in Northern Ireland.

- xxi. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence between a member of the public and the Department in respect of a complaint about an ADHD/ASD assessment.
- xxii. The Committee note a response from the Department to the Committee's request for clarity on details specified in the SL1 on draft Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) Regulations 2024.
- xxiii. The Committee noted a response from RQIA in relation to a complaint from an individual.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the individual for information.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson reminded Members of the planned Committee visit to the Southern Area Hospice Services in Newry which had been scheduled for Wednesday 5 March and of the roundtable event on Respite Services which had been scheduled for Tuesday 11 March. The Chairperson asked Members to advise the Committee Office of their availability to attend the events.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

11. Any Other Business

None.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled to take place at 2.00pm on Thursday 6 March 2025.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.52pm.

Philip McGuigan MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Health

6 March 2025