



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Health

## Minutes of Proceedings

**6 February 2025**

**Meeting Location:** Room 29, Parliament Buildings

**Present:**

Philip McGuigan MLA (Chairperson)

Danny Donnelly MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Alan Chambers MLA

Linda Dillon MLA

Órlaithí Flynn MLA

Alan Robinson MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Diane Dodds MLA

Nuala McAllister MLA

**Apologies:**

Colin McGrath MLA

**In Attendance:** Keith McBride, Clerk  
Angela McParland, Assistant Clerk  
Jonathan Lamont, Clerical Supervisor  
Stephen McGlennon, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 3.03pm in public session.

## **1. Apologies**

Apologies were received from Colin McGrath MLA.

## **2. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson acknowledged that this is his first meeting as Chairperson of the Committee. The Chairperson thanked Liz Kimmins MLA for her work as previous Chairperson of the Committee and wished her well in her new role as Minister for Infrastructure.

The Chairperson advised that he and the Deputy Chairperson had met with the Minister of Health on Tuesday, 4 February 2025, by way of an introductory meeting.

The Deputy Chairperson provided an overview of the Committee's visit to the Foyle Hospice the previous day, Wednesday 5 February 2025, as part of its evidence gathering for its Inquiry into Access to Palliative Care Services. The Committee received a very informative presentation by hospice staff which provided Members with an understanding of the increasing complexity of people's cases that hospices are dealing with, the effect on hospices of an ageing population, and the funding of hospices.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Minister Kimmins to thank her for her work for the Committee and wish her well in her new role.

*Alan Chambers joined the meeting at 3.05pm*

### **3. Draft Minutes**

The Committee agreed the draft Minutes of the meetings held on 30 January 2025.

### **4. Matters Arising**

There were no Matters Arising.

### **5. The Foster Placement and Fostering Agency Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 – Oral Briefing from The Fostering Network Northern Ireland**

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3.05pm:

- Kathleen Toner, Director of Engagement, The Fostering Network Northern Ireland; and
- Avery Bowser, Fostering Manager, Action for Children, and Committee Member of the British Association of Social Workers.

The representatives briefed the Committee on foster placement and foster agency regulations.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

### **6. SL1 The Foster Placement and Fostering Agency Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 – Oral Briefing from the Department of Health**

The following officials joined the meeting at 4.28pm:

- Martina Moore, Director of Family and Children's Policy, Department of Health (DoH); and
- Stefani Millar, Head of Looked After Children and Adoption Policy Unit, DoH.

The officials briefed the Committee on SL1 The Foster Placement and Fostering Agency Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025. The proposed Regulations includes:

- i. allowing authorities to make arrangements with fostering agencies to assess, approve and review foster parents on the authorities' behalf, to reduce unnecessary duplication and shorten the time taken for approval of foster carers;
- ii. detail set out around the requirements for the assessment and approval of prospective foster parents by an authority or independent fostering agency, a person informed that they are unlikely to be approved able to submit representations to the fostering service provider, and improvement of consistency of approach and transparency across service providers;
- iii. more consistent and robust arrangements for oversight and termination of foster placements;
- iv. minimum information set out of what must be recorded in respect of foster parents, registers of fostering parents established, and records maintained for 75 years;
- v. a duty placed on Trusts and voluntary fostering agencies to promote well-being, development, educational achievement, and provide foster parents with the learning, support and information needed to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child placed with them; and
- vi. fostering agencies brought within scope of inspection and regulation by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee considered SL1 The Foster Placement and Fostering Agency Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, and a tabled copy of a response from the Department to the Committee for Justice detailing offences introduced by the draft Regulations that lie within the responsibility of the Department for Justice (DoJ).

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive the following information in the written briefing scheduled for 13 March:

- i. on the requirement introduced that independent fostering agencies can only operate on a not-for-profit basis and confirmation this will be expanded with regards to all Children's Homes, and receive a written brief setting out the Department's plans on implementation;
- ii. on plans to increase funding for Foster Carers, and a consistent approach to funding across Trusts, the Committee receive information on the analysis regarding options and costs;
- iii. on standards and guidelines to underpin the legislation, confirmation of work being undertaken to ensure every Looked After Child and Foster Carer will receive the same level of service across Trusts;
- iv. on 'bail fostering', how the Department and the Department of Justice work together, and confirmation of what contribution the Department of Justice makes to the scheme.

## **7. Dental Services Reform – Written Briefing from the Department of Health**

The Committee considered a written briefing on Dental Services Reform. The Committee had asked to receive regular updates.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the briefing paper to the British Dental Association and ask that the Association comment on the briefing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department that the next briefing, scheduled for 27 March 2025, include further detail on timescales in relation to delivering reform.

## **8. Encompass – Written Briefing from the Department of Health**

The Committee considered a written briefing on the Encompass IT system being rolled out across the Health and Social Care Trusts.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department concerning back-logs of work of Consultants, due to their workloads being paused or decreased at stages of the roll out of the IT system. The Committee to receive a written briefing giving details of:

- i. the strategic planning behind the roll-out in terms of disruption of Consultants' work and waiting lists across the Trusts;
- ii. the engagement carried out by the Department with Consultants for the strategy;
- iii. the current status of Consultants' back-logs due to the roll-out; and
- iv. the work ongoing for Consultants' back-logs to return to levels as was normal before the roll out and the timescale for this.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing in late June 2025 on the roll out of the system, and to include a visit at that time to view the Encompass system in operation.

## **9. Correspondence**

- i. The Committee noted a response from the Department following the emergency briefing on Winter Preparedness on 7 January 2025.
- ii. The Committee noted a response from the Department following the briefing on the Review of Children's Social Care Services on 12 December.
- iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister advising the Committee that a Progress Report on the joint strategy between DoH and DoJ Improving Health within Criminal Justice will be shared with the Committee by the end of March 2025.
- iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Departments advising the Committee of its intention to launch a targeted consultation on policy proposals to amend the New Firefighters' Pension Scheme Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 regarding the Matthews second options exercise.

- v. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on a Public Consultation on the requirement for new eligibility criteria required to passport certain individuals to exemption from certain health service costs as a consequence of Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland.
- vi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on 2024-25 Spring Supplementary Estimates.
- vii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on SR 2025/9 Period Products (free Provision) The Period products (Department of Health Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.
- viii. The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Education to DoH on Allied Health Professionals.
- ix. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance on Northern Ireland Civil Service sickness levels.
- x. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance on a Budget 2025-26 round robin exercise.
- xi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance on Budget related issues.
- xii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice to the Department requesting for further detail on the offences introduced by the proposed Foster Placement and Fostering Agency Regulations.
- xiii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice to the Department on progress on recommendations from the RQIA Review into the Services provided to Vulnerable Persons Detained in Northern Ireland Prisons.

- xiv. The Committee noted correspondence from Ofcom on the Online Safety Act.
- xv. The Committee considered correspondence from Save Our Acute Hospitals (SOAS) requesting to brief the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with SOAS.

- xvi. The Committee noted an Investment Strategy Northern Ireland Investing Activity Report for January 2025.
- xvii. The Committee noted a response from the Department on additional UK Government funding following the briefing on January Monitoring on 17 January 2025.
- xviii. The Committee noted a response from the Department on the E-Pharmacy Programme.
- xix. The Committee noted a response from the Department on Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) following the briefing on January Monitoring on 17 January 2025.
- xx. The Committee noted a response from the Department to the Committee for Justice on correspondence from the Department to the Committee for Justice on progress on recommendations from the RQIA Review into the Services provided to Vulnerable Persons Detained in Northern Ireland Prisons.
- xxi. The Committee noted a response from the Department providing further information on the Written Ministerial Statement on Children with Disabilities - Short Breaks.
- xxii. The Committee noted a review of the first year of the Northern Ireland Executive from Pivotal.
- xxiii. The Committee considered correspondence from Newry, Mourne, and Down District Council on a Notice of Motion on Residential Rehabilitation Service.



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

xxiv. The Committee noted a response from the Minister for the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to the Committee's letter to the Secretary of State on Dr Hussam Abu Safiya.

xxv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice relating to the murder of Katie Simpson and the bespoke review of the case initiated by the Minister of Justice.

xxvi. The Committee considered correspondence from Housing Rights inviting the Committee to a Legislative Theatre event on domestic abuse and homelessness prevention.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Members would respond directly.

xxvii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee on guidance on operation of the Primacy convention.

xxviii. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual on community pharmacy funding.

xxix. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual in respect of the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and RQIA.

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

xxx. The Committee considered copies of correspondence sent to the Department concerning formal complaints and the accessing of ADHD services in general.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive comment from the Department on work it is currently carrying out to address the issues raised around provision of services, to include service provision to adults.

xxxi. The Committee discussed Members having received concerning reports, including from the Royal College of Nursing, that Band 6 nurses are managing Emergency Departments at night in extremely challenging environments.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive detail of the Department's understanding of the issue and its work to resolve the issue.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered a draft Forward Work Programme.

The Committee discussed the visit to St Francis Hospice in Dublin, scheduled for Wednesday 2 April 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to travel as a group rather than on an individual basis to Dublin.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

## **11. Any Other Business**

The Committee discussed recent findings by Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) of high suicide rates among males. Members agreed the findings to be sad and tragic, and were concerned that the figures have come at a time when the Department has a strategy in place designed to improve suicide prevention.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive a comprehensive written response detailing how the Department intends to respond to these latest statistics and provide urgent support to those most in need. The response to include an analysis on the significance of these latest NISRA findings to the currently active Department Strategy which is designed to improve suicide prevention.

The Committee discussed the review of the case initiated by the Minister of Justice to review the events surrounding the murder of Katie Simpson. The Committee

discussed that there is a possibility of failures having taken place across a number of Executive Departments

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive detail of what conversations have taken place within the Department on the matter to begin to ascertain any failings by the Health and Social Care Service, and whether the Department has had any communication, or intends to have, with Department of Justice, or the Executive as a whole, on the matter.

## **12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled to take place at 2.00pm on 13 February 2025.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.16pm.

**Philip McGuigan MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Health**

**13 February 2025**