



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health

Minutes of Proceedings

16 January 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Liz Kimmins MLA (Chairperson)

Danny Donnelly MLA (Deputy Chairperson),

Alan Chambers MLA

Diane Dodds MLA

Órlaithí Flynn MLA

Nuala McAllister MLA

Alan Robinson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Linda Dillon MLA

Colin McGrath MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance:

Keith McBride, Clerk

Roisin Donnelly, Assistant Clerk

Angela McParland, Assistant Clerk

Jonathan Lamont, Clerical Supervisor

Stephen McGlennon, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2.01pm in public session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

Órlaithí Flynn MLA joined the meeting at 2.02pm

Alan Robinson MLA joined the meeting at 2.02pm

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised Members of recent meetings which she had been involved in concerning groups representing people with injuries and clinical complications caused by mesh implants, and groups representing people with the medical condition myalgic encephalomyelitis (chronic fatigue syndrome or ME/CFS).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Health (DoH).

On mesh implant complications, that the Department will:

- I. reissue guidance for GPs on caring for patients with mesh related complications; reinstate the production of information leaflets for GP surgeries;
- II. provide the Committee with an update on the redress scheme (as it is progressing in England); and

- III. provide an update to the Committee on the Department's understanding of work being carried to raise awareness of the Yellow Card Scheme.

On ME/CFS, that DoH will:

- I. provide the Committee with an update on Department policy on ME/CFS. Including confirmation that there is currently no commissioned service; whether funding is still available for the position of specialised consultant; and what work is being done to proactively recruit for the post; and
- II. provide the Committee with a breakdown, by Trust, on what ME/CFS services are available.

3. Draft Minutes

The Committee agreed the draft Minutes of the meetings held on 12 December 2024 and 7 January 2025.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo regarding meetings which the Committee held with stakeholder groups on 9 January 2025. These were Versus Arthritis, Northern Ireland Obesity Coalition, Ark Ante-natal screening, Caleb'sCauseNI, and Hourglass.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DoH to receive:

- I. the Department's assessment of the MSK core skills programme (outlined by Versus Arthritis) at a cost of £10k and whether the Department will consider funding that programme as part of its Transformation work;
- II. information on the next steps following consultation on the proposed Regional Obesity Management Service (ROMS), which closed in March 2024, and information on what engagement there has been with the Obesity Coalition and the ROMS group.
- III. information on what work is being undertaken on introducing first trimester screening and a response to the briefing paper from ARK;

- IV. confirmation the Department is exploring a regional approach across Northern Ireland in relation to assessments for post-19 special educational needs (SEN) (outlined by Caleb's Cause), as the Committee is concerned at the inconsistent approach across Trusts; and
- V. confirmation on whether there has been an assessment of the English model for transitioning and post-19 SEN support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Public Health Agency (PHA) in relation to public messaging on obesity and the language used by public bodies when talking about obesity, including examples from the Northern Ireland Direct website;

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Justice in relation to controllership for young people with disabilities to ask whether legislation is required to provide further support for families and young people transitioning into adulthood.

5. 2024/25 January Monitoring – Oral Briefing from the Department of Health

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:07pm:

- Brigitte Worth, Director of Finance, DoH;
- Preeta Millar, Investment Director, DoH;
- Danielle Mallen, Head of Financial Management, DoH;
- Brian Dunlop, Capital Resources Unit, DoH; and
- David Keenan, Financial Planning Unit, DoH.

Diane Dodds joined the meeting at 2.18pm

The officials briefed the Committee on 2024/25 January Monitoring.

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.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DoH to receive:

- I. further information on when personal protective equipment (PPE) stocks were purchased;
- II. detail of plans to minimise waste and ensure that PPE stock, rather than being allowed to pass their 'use by' date before being used, are distributed throughout the health service, even to areas normally categorised as independent, and which would normally not receive such stock;
- III. further information regarding the Answer to Written Question (AWQ) 16684 which was discussed by Members, in particular where the figure of £14m was funded from; and
- IV. further information on any assessments carried out regarding planning for a 3-year budget, and whether there has been any discussion of the matter within the Executive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson write to the Minister to request information on any engagement the Minister has had with Executive colleagues or UK Government Ministers in relation to the need for additional funding for health and social care in Northern Ireland.

Alan Robinson left the meeting at 3.29pm

6. Inquiry on Access to Palliative Care Services – Oral Briefing from the Department of Health

The following officials joined the meeting at 3.33pm:

- Gearóid Cassidy, Director of Primary Care, DoH;
- Roger Kennedy, Programme Director Community Care Directorate; and
- Ryan Wilson, Director of Secondary Care, DoH.

The officials briefed the Committee on palliative care services.

Alan Robinson returned to the meeting at 3.42pm

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.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DoH to receive detail of the PHA Needs Assessment on short breaks, once available; and confirmation on legal requirements around commissioning palliative care services in Northern Ireland.

7. SR 2024/222 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024;

and

8. SR 2024/223 The Misuse of Drugs (Designation) Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The following officials joined the meeting at 4.24pm:

- Canice Ward, Head of Medicines Regulatory Group, DoH;
- Gary Maxwell, Head of Health Development Policy Branch, DoH; and
- Karen Simpson, Head of Medicines Legislation Unit, DoH.

The officials briefed the Committee on SR 2024/222 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and SR 2024/223 The Misuse of Drugs (Designation) Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

Agreed: The Committee has considered SR 2024/222 The Misuse of Drugs (Amendment No.2) Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the Rule.

Agreed: The Committee has considered SR 2024/223 The Misuse of Drugs (Designation) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (NI) 2024 and has no objection to the Rule.

9. Legislative Consent Memorandum - Tobacco and Vapes Bill

The Committee considered a Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill which was laid on 18 December 2024.

Agreed: The Committee has considered the LCM for the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and is content with the LCM as laid.

Agreed: The Committee will consider its draft report at its next meeting on 23 January 2025.

10. Hospital Car Parking Charges – Written Briefing from the Department of Health

The Committee noted a written briefing from the Department on hospital car parking charges, as part of the Committee's request for 8-weekly updates to scrutinise the Hospital Parking Charges Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department providing information on the latest developments surrounding the Infected Blood Inquiry Final Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing.

- ii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on indemnity arrangements in support of the Royal College of Physicians participation in the DoH Neurology Review Phase three.
- iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department on a public consultation on the Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) for a proposed new regional management structure for Health and Social Care Pathology services.
- iv. The Committee noted a response from the Department on the Cervical Screening and Cytology Review in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT).

Agreed: The Committee welcomes indication that there will be a detailed analysis of the findings of the Review Report by representatives from the Scottish Screening Programme and Public Health Wales and NHS England has agreed in principle to undertake, for PHA, a peer review of their Quality Assurance processes for the cervical screening programme with a particular focus on SHSCT during 2008-2021. The Committee believes this is a positive development to help assure women across Northern Ireland that the screening service is safe to use.

- v. The Committee considered a response from the Department on a routine lung cancer screening programme for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee welcomes that Northern Ireland is at the early stages of scoping out what requirements of a new screening programme will be and will keep a watching brief and encourage developments in this, as such programmes are proven to save lives.

- vi. The Committee noted a response from the Department on medical and dental pay issues.

- vii. The Committee noted a response from the Department providing an update on the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 funding, Suicide Prevention Strategy, and Red Flag Referrals.
- viii. The Committee noted a reply from the Department regarding engagement with the Health and Social Care workforce for the Childcare Strategy.
- ix. The Committee considered a response from the Department concerning the Community Pharmacy Strategic Plan 2030 and noted that the response states that capital funding for the ePharmacy programme is not likely to be prioritised until 2026/27 at the earliest. The Committee was concerned with this statement considering that community pharmacy is a key part of health service reform.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive information on the Department's assessment of what impact the slow delivery of the ePharmacy programme will have on health service reform.

- x. The Committee noted correspondence from the House of Lords concerning the launch of a Food, Diet and Obesity Committee podcast.
- xi. The Committee noted a response from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust following the meeting on 21 November 2024.
- xii. The Committee noted correspondence from Community Pharmacy NI on Autumn Budget National Insurance Contributions mitigation.
- xiii. The Committee noted an Investing Activity Report from Investment Strategy Northern Ireland.
- xiv. The Committee noted correspondence from Ofcom on an Online Safety Act - Publication of Illegal Harms Statement.

- xv. The Committee noted correspondence from Ofcom providing detail of its proposed plan of work for 2025-26.
- xvi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Pharmaceutical Society Northern Ireland on its public consultation for its draft Equality, Diversion and Inclusion Strategy.
- xvii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Speaker's Office on a public petition 'Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome – Diagnosis and Management'.
- xviii. The Committee considered an invitation from the Allied Health Professions Federation (AHPFNI) to 'AHPs doing what matters most' event on 24 February 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would respond directly.

- xix. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual concerning a Children's Commissioner report of findings on the deaths of children who were known to social services in England.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

13. Any Other Business

The Committee discussed recent reports concerning Dr Hussam Abu Safiya.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Secretary of State on the matter.

The Committee considered recent comments by the Minister of Health on appointment of a senior role to oversee Trusts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson write to the Minister for further information on his comments that he intends to appoint a senior role that oversees the Trust CEOs, including: how the Minister will approach identifying the responsibilities of the new role; the timescale for the implementation of the new role; and whether there will be a review of the roles of Trust CEOs.

14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee was scheduled to take place at 2.00pm on 23 January 2025 at the Southern Health and Social Care Board Room, Newry.

The Committee moved to closed session at 4.52pm.

The Committee held a discussion on strategic planning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a forward work programme which included a visit to London for a series of meetings and a possible external meeting of the Committee to scrutinise best practice, and a visit to women's health hubs. The Committee also agreed for the Clerk to scope work on a seminar series on accountability and patient safety to commence in the next session.

The Closed session ended at 5.12pm.

Liz Kimmins MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Health

23 January 2025