



Committee for Health

Minutes of Proceedings

15 January 2026

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Phillip McGuigan MLA (Chairperson)

Danny Donnelly MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Alan Chambers MLA

Linda Dillon MLA

Diane Dodds MLA

Órlaithí Flynn MLA

Nuala McAllister MLA

Colin McGrath MLA

Alan Robinson MLA.

Apologies: None.

In Attendance: Keith McBride, Clerk
Roisin Donnelly, Senior Assistant Clerk
Michael Doran, Senior Assistant Clerk
Shannen Lofthouse, Assistant Clerk
Angela McParland, Assistant Clerk
Jonathan Lamont, Clerical Supervisor

The meeting commenced at 2:05pm in public session.

1. Apologies

None.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chair reported that he and the Deputy Chair visited Antrim Hospital's Emergency Department over recess and expressed thanks to the staff who accommodated them. The Chair noted that the visit provided invaluable insight into the workings of the department and the pressures faced by the ED team.

The Chair also advised that he attended the NI Hospice Christmas Light Switch On event in December.

The Committee held a Committee Clinic on Thursday 8 January and met with a number of stakeholders. The Chair stated that this had been an excellent opportunity for engagement and expressed thanks to all who attended and shared their insights.

The Chair raised the issue of patient flow through hospitals, highlighting ongoing concerns regarding patients who are medically fit for discharge but unable to leave due to the absence of appropriate care packages. He noted that, in recent weeks,

conflicting information had been presented. The Minister has indicated that community capacity is insufficient and that resolving the issue may take five years or more, while some sector representatives have stated that capacity does exist but that they are unable to secure contracts.

The Chair emphasised that this is a serious and urgent matter and proposed that the Committee receive urgent briefings from both the sector and the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule urgent oral briefings from the Permanent Secretary of the Department and the Independent Health Care sector on the issue of hospital flow, community care, and winter plans.

3. Draft Minutes

The Committee agreed the draft Minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2025.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the suggested actions drafted in the Clerk's Memo for the 'Committee Clinic' held on 8 January 2026.

The Committee agreed on the following actions to be taken:

I. Sarcoma UK (and Boom Foundation):

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the written briefing to the Department and ask that it comment on the Sarcoma UK June 2025 report 'Unique Among Cancers' recommendations that Sarcoma UK believes would help end the inequalities that exist in sarcoma care and improve outcomes for people affected by sarcoma and those who care for them in Northern Ireland. They include actions by the Department such as:

- Expanding access to imaging and diagnostic tools in primary care and developing optimal diagnostic pathways for sarcomas to make sure that people with sarcoma get a much faster diagnosis in line with Cancer Waiting Times;

- Referral pathways ensuring that people with a suspected sarcoma reach specialist sarcoma services, to confirm a diagnosis and start treatment within 62-days in line with Cancer Waiting Times, especially for patients with gastrointestinal tract or gynaecological sarcomas which affect women, who may be overlooked or misdiagnosed;
- Health service workforce planning ensuring that specialist sarcoma services comprise the full complement of staffing and skills to meet the population needs of people diagnosed with sarcoma;
- Urgent investment in sarcoma-specific research and clinical trials and a shared UK-wide research strategy for rare and less common cancers, including sarcoma, to overcome barriers including lack of profitability;
- Mental health support being fully integrated into sarcoma care to ensure the acute mental wellbeing needs of people with sarcoma are addressed, due to rarity, incidence among young people and changes in body function or appearance due to treatment. Similarly, there needs to be co-ordinated and effective palliative and end-of-life care;
- On mental health and palliative and end-of-life care, the Health Department should report against its commitments and develop action plans with commissioners and health providers, to improve delivery for cancer patients; and
- Better and more accurate data collection about sarcoma and agreed consistent UK-wide standards of data collection and analysis timelines, to inform commissioning and performance monitoring including against the Cancer Waiting Times.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if consideration is being given to how, once referred into a specialist centre, patients face challenges in travelling long distances to the specialist service in Belfast, with rural communities, families with children, and people on lower incomes are disproportionately affected. For example, has consideration been given to schemes to provide support such as bus passes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if consideration is being given to a helpline for sarcoma patients and referrals, considering efficiencies could be brought about by a nurse consultant manned helpline that could co-ordinate biopsies, MRI scans, ahead of consultant appointments for improved care pathways.

II. **Gambling with Lives:**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the written briefing to the Department and ask that it provide:

- information on the support that the Department and the five Trusts can give to each of the ten-points of the Plan;
- what consideration is being given for one of the Trusts to lead on a treatment centre that caters solely in supporting those affected by gambling;
- clarity on the forthcoming levy and whether funding is ringfenced and therefore protected from the levy; and
- a commitment that the Department will ensure the NI Direct website holds information to direct individuals to the Gambling with Lives information.

III. **Diabetes UK:**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what work is being done on the following:

- Equitable Access to Hybrid Closed Loop Technology (HCL) for Type 1 Diabetes HCL significantly improves management for type 1 diabetes and reduces complications. Despite NICE endorsement, people in Northern Ireland still do not have equitable access. Diabetes UK is calling for a funded and urgent implementation plan, with a defined timescale, to ensure equitable access for all eligible people;
- Understanding the impact of diabetes in Northern Ireland through better data. Diabetes UK states Northern Ireland is the only UK region without a national diabetes audit. Without this, accurate and effective planning for clinical services, workforce, and funding is not possible and Northern

Ireland risks falling even further behind. Diabetes UK calls on the Minister to announce a long -term plan for a national diabetes audit, including deliverable milestones by the end of 2026;

- Diabetes UK states investment in prevention and early intervention Type 2 diabetes is the biggest preventable health condition in Northern Ireland. Prevention and remission programmes can delay disease progression and, for some people, put it into remission. Investment will reduce future healthcare burden . Diabetes UK calls for recurrent investment in public health information, education, testing, early diagnosis and intervention; and
- Future focus for diabetes in Northern Ireland. The current Diabetes Strategic Framework ends in October 2026. Diabetes must remain a priority and Diabetes UK calls on the Minister to clarify the next strategic steps, preventing a diabetes cliff--edge in October 2026.

IV. **Arthritis UK (previously Versus Arthritis):**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for an update on the Department taking forward the following four calls for action by Arthritis UK which the DoH has previously stated support for:

- a strategic approach to MSK health - introduce MSK leadership within the Department of Health and create a coordinated policy framework;
- improve care pathways and diagnosis - enhance GP training, streamline referrals, address transition to adult services for young people and integrate mental health support;
- transform service user experience - tackle waiting lists, improve communication and support while waiting; and
- increase public awareness and patient education - launch public health campaigns and empower patients to manage their condition.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for detail of the Department's understanding about individuals transferring from children's to adult's waiting lists i.e. the numbers involved and the impact and whether

consideration is being given that, considering the small numbers involved but the harm that transferring to long adult waiting lists causes the individuals, there should be more strategic planning around catering for this group.

V. **niNCA – Neurological Charities Alliance:**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive a written update on neurology services. A date will be agreed with the DALO on consideration of the FWP.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarity on what it means for neurology services that the services are listed by the Minister of one of his nine priorities.

VI. **National Autistic Society (NAS) NI – Forgotten Voices campaigners:**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the written briefing to the Department asking why there has been no solution for families dealing with this issue and ask for detail of further residential and respite build.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister on its disappointment that the £13m has not addressed the issue, considering the commitment given at the announcement of the funding, for comment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek confirmation regarding the oversight panel and an oral briefing from SPPG on the matter.

VII. **SOS Daisy Hill:**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the written briefing from SOS Daisy Hill to the Department and ask that it provide comment on all of the points made in the paper.

5. Adult Protection Bill- Oral Briefing from General Medicine Council and Nursing and Midwifery Council.

The following representatives joined the meeting at 2.20pm:

- Professor Pushpinder Singh Mangat, Director for Education and Standards, General Medical Council; and
- Ms Cathy Finnegan, Assistant Director for Standards and Guidance, General Medical Council; and
- Ms Donna O'Boyle, Acting Executive Director, Nursing and Midwifery Council.

The representatives briefed the Committee on the Adult Protection Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their briefing.

6. Adult Protection Bill- Oral Briefing from ARC, Volunteer Now and Hourglass

The following representatives joined the meeting at 3.15pm:

The representatives briefed the Committee on the Adult Protection Bill.

- Ms Denise Hayward, CEO, Volunteer Now; and
- Ms Ruth Mulholland, Safeguarding Manager, Volunteer Now; and
- Mr David McClure, External Affairs Lead: Scotland & NI, Hourglass; and
- Ms Donna Johnston, Representative, ARC NI.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further detail on the rationale for including volunteers within the Bill when this is not the case in England and Wales.

7. SL1- The Health and Personal Social Services (Optical Charges and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026

The Committee considered the SL1 – The Health and Personal Social Services (Optical Charges and Payments) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content with the merits of the policy and that the Statutory Rule be made.

8. SL1- The Health and Social Care Pension Scheme (Member Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee was briefed by the Chair on the new processes for considering SL1s, which commenced on 5 January. The Chair noted that the above SL1 was received after that date and therefore falls under the new process.

Agreed: The Committee has agreed that, as part of the new arrangements for handling delegated legislation, it will note each proposal (SL1) in the first instance, publish all supporting documentation on the Assembly website, and issue a 'Call for Views' on Citizen Space to inform its future consideration.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee staff can seek information from the Department, as and when required, during each SL1 stage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that any responses received to any SL1 survey should be published once the Committee has considered the responses.

The Committee considered the SL1 - The Health and Social Care Pension Scheme (Member Contributions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed statutory rule and that these will be published as part of the call for views on the proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the SL1 will be scheduled for consideration at the meeting on 5 February and will write to the Department to inform them of this decision.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from officials is not necessary at this stage.

9. Written Briefing from the Department- Waiting Lists (Red Flag Cancer Treatment and Paediatrics Waiting Lists).

The Committee considered a written briefing from the Department regarding waiting lists.

The Committee welcomed the reduction in the number of children waiting for PEG surgeries and paid tribute to the families involved.

Agreed: Due to the late receipt of the paper, the Committee agreed to reschedule consideration of the written briefing to next week to allow Members further time to consider the briefing.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding Cancer Waiting Times and Funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written briefing by 13 February 2026, for consideration at the Committee meeting 19 February 2026. The meeting is to provide an update on implementation of the Elective Care Framework and to include an update on the Framework in relation to the Budget.

- ii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding Timeline of Integration of Primary Care into Encompass.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing before the summer recess as part of its consideration of the Transformation Agenda.

- iii. The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding Poverty of Young Care Home Residents.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarification from the Department of Health on the rationale for this position, given that the Department has since accepted, alongside the Department for Communities, that the correspondence will transfer to the Department for Communities.

- iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Cancer Focus Labs.
- v. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding investment in Allied Health Professionals.
- vi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.
- vii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the backlog of maintenance projects.
- viii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding a review of Arm's Length Bodies.
- ix. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Parents for PEGS NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to Parents4Pegs for information.

- x. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Private Tutoring.
- xi. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding HSC Flu Vaccine Uptake.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request the following:

- The current absenteeism levels within the Trust attributable to flu.
- The measures being taken to improve vaccination uptake rates.

- xii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding Psychiatric Assessment and Treatment Hub (PATH).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request the following information:

- A detailed breakdown of the benefits to patients delivered through the PATH initiative.
- A full breakdown of the long-term estimated financial savings to health system services arising from the implementation of PATH.
- An assessment of the potential harm to patients' health, along with the estimated financial impact on other services, should PATH not be implemented.
- A written briefing from the Department outlining:
 - the number of health economists employed by the Department; and
 - the extent to which these economists contribute to evidence-led decision-making on the funding of services.

- xiii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Provision of Secure Care.
- xiv. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding Substance Use Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a further breakdown of the funding.

- xv. The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding Implementation of the Real Living Wage for Social Care Workers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider further at urgent oral briefings with the Department and the Independent Care sector in the coming weeks.

- xvi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the Public Accounts Committee Report on Access to General Practice in NI.

- xvii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Continuing Health Care Assessments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to relevant individual for information.

- xviii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Neurology Action.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to Neurology Action for information.

xix. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Sodium Valproate Redress.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to relevant individual for information.

xx. The Committee considered a further response from the Department regarding a Real Living Wage for healthcare workers following Independent Health Care Providers correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider further at urgent oral briefings with the Department and the Independent Care sector in the coming weeks.

xxi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Caleb's Cause NI.

xxii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding GMS Prescription of Drugs etc Regulations 2004.

xxiii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Abortion Access Safe Zones (SAZ) Annual Report 2025.

xxiv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding the Launch of a UK Wide Consultation to Expand Access to Naloxone.

xxv. The Committee noted correspondence from Committee for Justice regarding Secure Care Accommodation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to await response from the Department.

xxvi. The Committee noted correspondence from Neurology Justice Collective regarding a Formal Notification of Unlawful Decisions, Statutory Breaches and Systemic Failures.

xxvii. The Committee noted correspondence from Pivotal regarding the Multi-year Budget Report.

xxviii. The Committee noted correspondence from regarding the Tobacco and Vapes Bill.

xxix. The Committee considered correspondence from NI Assembly Engagement Office regarding participation at the Balmoral Show 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to participation at Balmoral Show and requested Committee staff produce a paper on potential options for Committee participation.

xxx. The Committee noted correspondence from Commissioner for Older People Northern Ireland regarding a Review of Adult Protection Bill

xxxi. The Committee noted correspondence from UK National Preventive Mechanism regarding the Justice Bill (Children).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a written briefing on the correspondence received from NPM on the Justice Bill (Children).

xxxii. The Committee noted correspondence from Nursing and Midwifery Council regarding Building a new Nursing and Midwifery Council.

xxxiii. The Committee noted correspondence from Women's Resource and Development Agency regarding Health Inequalities in Northern Ireland- Women's Strategy.

xxxiv. The Committee considered a response from Independent Health Care Providers regarding a Real Living Wage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider further at urgent oral briefings with the Department and the Independent Care sector in the coming weeks.

xxxv. The Committee considered correspondence from the Royal College of Nursing regarding the committee briefing held on 13 November 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider as written evidence for the Adult Protection Bill.

xxxvi. The Committee noted correspondence from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust regarding Support and Intervention Level 5 Escalation: Cardiac Surgery Action Plan December 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note ahead of the oral briefing with the Belfast Trust 5 February 2026.

xxxvii. The Committee considered correspondence from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust regarding Support and Intervention Level 5 Escalation: Cardiac Surgery Action Plan Progress Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note ahead of the oral briefing with the Belfast Trust 5 February 2026.

xxxviii. The Committee considered correspondence from Caleb's Cause NI regarding an Invite to Voice of Siblings Event on 9th March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed Members are to respond on individual basis.

xxxix. The Committee considered correspondence from the All-Ireland Institute of Hospice and Palliative Care regarding an invite to visit St Francis Hospice, Dublin.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Clerk take this forward for a mid-March visit.

xli. The Committee considered correspondence from Save our Acute Services regarding follow up actions after meeting at South West Acute Hospital.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to await a response from the Department following the meeting on 27 November at South West Acute Hospital.

xlii. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding a follow up on Public Interest Disclosure.

xlii. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust regarding a Letter of Concern around Whistleblowing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to advise to go through the Whistleblowing process.

xlii. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual regarding Mental Health Project Coverup, Stonewalling and Neglect by System.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to Patient and Client Council for comment.

xliv. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual regarding Support for Children with PANDAS/PANS.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider further in Committee's work programme on 'Clear Pathways'.

xlv. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding a Muckamore patient.

xlvi. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding patient treatment at Altnagelvin Hospital.

xlvii. The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding Caleb's Cause NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Caleb's Cause NI for information.

- xlviii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Palliative and End of Life Care.
- xlix. The Committee considered correspondence from Safefood regarding an invited to an event 'Appetite for Change' on 28 January.

Agreed: The Committee agreed Members are to respond on individual basis.

- I. The Committee considered correspondence from Fermanagh Business Leaders regarding an invite to 'Rural Health and Wealth' on Monday 26 January.

Agreed: The Committee agreed Members are to respond on individual basis.

- ii. The Committee considered correspondence from Belfast Health and Social Care Trust regarding an invite to the formal opening of Belfast Community Palliative Care Hub.

Agreed: The Committee agreed Members are to respond on individual basis.

- iii. The Committee noted correspondence from NI Hospice regarding hospice funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to NI Hospice regarding this matter and also forward the response to the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting an update of the scoping exercise conducted by Department on Palliative Care Services.

- l.iii. The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding further information on a Muckamore Patient.

11. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the draft forward work plan.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee was scheduled to take place in Room 29 at 2pm on 22 January.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.28pm.

Phillip McGuigan MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Health

22 January 2025