

Committee for Health End of Session Report

September 2025 – July 2026

Powers and Membership

Powers

1. The Committee for Health is a statutory departmental committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No. 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department of Health and has a role in the initiation of legislation.
2. The Committee has power to:
 - Consider and advise on departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
 - Approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
 - Call for persons and papers;
 - Initiate inquiries and make reports; and
 - Consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Health Minister.

Membership

3. The Committee has 9 members, including Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is:
 - Philip 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

Committee meetings

Between September 2025 and July 2026, the Committee for Health held **41** meetings consisting of **303** individual sessions. **260** sessions (86%) were held in public with **41** in closed (14%). The Committee heard from 64 individual organisations.

Closed sessions were held in relation to the Adult Protection Bill, as well as to take legal advice. Other closed sessions were held to discuss the Committee's priorities and to plan for expected legislation to come towards the end of the mandate.

The Committee held 3 external meetings at Shankill Women's Centre, South West Acute Hospital, Enniskillen and at the 2025 NICON conference.



Pictured: Phillip McGuigan MLA, Danny Donnelly MLA, Órlaithí Flynn MLA and Diane Dodds MLA with CEO, Dr Betty Carlisle at the Shankill Women's Centre, Belfast.

The Committee for Health took part in 12 visits over the 2025-26 session. Some of these visits include:

- Antrim Area Hospital
- Craigavon Area Hospital
- NICON Conference 2025
- Balmoral Show
- Waterloo Health Centre, London
- Hurley Group GP Centre, London
- Shankill Shared Women's Centre



Pictured: Philip McGuigan MLA, Alan Robinson MLA and Diane Dodds MLA at the Farm Families Health Check stand at the Balmoral Show.

Informal meetings

The Committee held a number of additional informal meetings over this period, this included 3 briefings from the Department of Health in relation to its workstreams and one briefing from the Minister in relation to palliative care. It also met with x organisations informally, including the Trusts, Arms Length Bodies, Unions and representative bodies.

The Committee also met with a number of individuals and families with lived experience of the Health and Social Care system. This included on issues such as SAs, Cervical Screening, Respite Services and real living wage for healthcare workers.

Committee Clinics

The Committee for Health hold a number of Committee Clinics throughout the year. These Clinics are an opportunity for organisations to present to Committee Members in an informal setting. Any decision or action agreed at this informal meeting is then ratified at the next formal Committee meeting.

Over the period covered by the report the Committee held two Committee Clinics where it heard from a total of 16 individual organisations:

- Alzheimer's Society
- Mental Health Policy Alliance
- Community Transport Association
- NIADA
- British Heart Foundation
- Auditory Verbal
- Cubbie
- Alliance for Choice
- Sarcoma UK
- Gambling With Lives
- Diabetes UK
- Arthritis UK
- Royal College of Psychology

- niNCA
- National Autistic Society
- SOS Daisy Hill

The Committee took forward a number of actions in follow-up to briefings from these organisations.

Primary Legislation

Adult Protection Bill

During 2025 - 2026, the Committee undertook scrutiny of the Adult Protection Bill through a public consultation, written submissions and evidence sessions with key stakeholders.

Members considered evidence from statutory organisations, professional bodies, advocacy groups and other interested parties, examining the Bill's provisions, implementation challenges and potential impact on adult safeguarding arrangements.

While publishing its report and recommendations, the Committee agreed to reserve a position on certain aspects of the Bill while pending the report from the Muckamore Abbey Hospital Inquiry. The Committee considered that the findings and recommendations of the Inquiry were directly relevant to issues of adult protection, oversight and safeguarding, and should inform its final deliberations.

Forthcoming Legislation

The Committee received initial briefings from the Department on the Data Use & Access Bill and the Safe and Effective Staffing Bill, which are expected to be introduced by the Department in September and October 2026.

Legislative Consent Motions

No Legislative Consent Motions (LCMs) were considered in this period, although some Statutory Rules considered did relate to the Tobacco and Vapes Act which was previously considered as an LCM – see below.

Delegated Legislation

The Committee considered **12** Statutory Rules during the period of this report. These included, but not limited to, regulations regarding:

- Hantavirus Diseases
- Tobacco Retailer (Fixed Penalty)
- Feed and Food Regulations
- The Jam and Similar Products Regulations
- The New Firefighters' Pension Scheme Order

The Committee also implemented the new SL1 process for consideration of delegated legislation at policy stage, which came into effect for SL1s from the 1 January 2026 onwards. This meant that **14** SL1s were considered under the new process.

Budget Scrutiny

Over the 2025 - 2026 session, the Committee received a number of briefings on the Department of Health's budget, including updates on resource and capital allocations, in-year monitoring rounds, and the significant financial pressures facing the health service. The Committee also scrutinised the measures being taken by the Department to manage expenditure and deliver efficiencies within an extremely constrained financial environment.

The Committee also considered the Department's capital investment programme in detail, receiving updates on major healthcare infrastructure projects, including the new Maternity Hospital, the new Children's Hospital, and other significant developments.

Policy Scrutiny

Over the 2025-26 session the Committee has received regular briefings on over **30** different policy areas. Outlined below are some of the key priorities from the 2025/26 session.

Access to Palliative Care

A significant focus of the Committee's work during the 2025 - 2026 session was the conclusion of its Inquiry into Access to Palliative Care. The Committee acknowledged that the extensive groundwork for the Inquiry had been undertaken during the 2024 - 2025 session, including the call for evidence, oral evidence sessions with organisations and healthcare professionals, visits to hospices across Northern Ireland and St Francis Hospice in Dublin, and engagement with patients' families on their experiences of accessing palliative care services.

The Committee's Report on Access to Palliative Care was published in November 2025. Since the publication of the Report, the Committee has continued to engage closely with the Department of Health on the implementation of its recommendations. The Committee has also worked collaboratively with hospice leads and other stakeholders to support progress in securing sustainable funding and improving access to palliative care services. Through ongoing discussions with the Department, the Committee has sought to ensure that the findings and recommendations of the Inquiry translate into tangible improvements in the availability, sustainability and quality of palliative care services across Northern Ireland.



Pictured: Alan Robinson MLA, Diane Dodds MLA, Christine Campbell, Prof. Max Watson (Hospice UK), Trevor McCartney (NI Hospice), Fintan Fagan (AIHPC), Philip McGuigan MLA (Committee Chairperson), Alan Sheppard, Nuala McAllister MLA, Linda Dillon MLA and Alan Chambers MLA at the Access to Palliative Care Services inquiry report launch



Pictured: Attendees of the Access to Palliative Care Services inquiry report launch watching the Inquiry debate in the Assembly Chamber

Neighborhood Model

During the 2025 - 2026 session, the Committee scrutinised the development of the Department of Health's Neighbourhood Care Model and its potential to deliver more integrated, preventative and community-based care. To inform its work, the Committee undertook a fact-finding visit to a number of GP practices in London alongside the Department's Permanent Secretary, Mike Farrar, to examine established neighbourhood models of care and consider how best practice could be adapted for implementation in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also hosted a joint event alongside Mental Health Champion event to explore how mental health support could be embedded within the Neighbourhood Care Model through early intervention, prevention and community-based services. Throughout the session, the Committee continued to engage with the Department and key stakeholders to monitor the model's development, emphasising the importance of sustained investment, workforce planning and cross-sector collaboration to ensure its successful implementation.



Pictured: Phillip McGuigan MLA and Danny Donnelly MLA along with the Permanent Secretary, Mike Farrar, with representatives from Waterloo Health Centre.

Respite Services

Throughout 2025/26, the Committee continued to prioritise respite services, recognising the essential role they play in supporting individuals with disabilities, those with complex needs, and their families and carers. The Committee maintained regular scrutiny of the Department's work to improve respite provision and received updates on progress to increase capacity and address ongoing challenges in access to services.

As part of its scrutiny, the Committee met with representatives from Caleb's Cause, the National Autistic Society, and Forgotten Voices NI to hear directly about the experiences of families accessing respite services. These engagements highlighted significant pressures on families, particularly those supporting children and young people on the edge of care, as well as the lack of appropriate respite provision for young adults following the transition to adult services after the age of 19.

Following these evidence sessions, the Committee wrote to the Department seeking a response to the issues raised by stakeholders, with particular emphasis on the provision of respite services for children on the edge of care and the availability of respite following the age of 19. The Committee will

continue to monitor the Department's response and progress in addressing these concerns.

Waiting Lists

During 2025/26, the Committee received regular written updates from the Department on waiting lists and the actions being taken to reduce waiting times across health and social care services. The Committee continued to scrutinise the implementation and impact of initiatives aimed at improving access to care and reducing the number of people waiting for assessment and treatment.

The Committee also met with Mark Taylor, Interim Chief Executive of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, to discuss waiting list pressures, and received a briefing from Dr Paul Rice on the implementation of Encompass, including its impact on service delivery and waiting times during the transition period.

As part of its scrutiny, the Committee wrote to each Health and Social Care Trust seeking information on waiting list figures, including the number of patients removed from waiting lists through validation exercises and other administrative processes. The Committee will continue to monitor progress in reducing waiting lists and seek assurance that improvement initiatives are delivering timely and sustainable benefits for patients.

Key Priorities for Next Session

The Committee's identified key priorities for the next session include:

- **Primary Legislation** – based on information from the Department, 3 Bills are expected. Committee Stage scrutiny of these Bills is expected to dominate the Forward Work Plan from now until the end of the mandate in March 2027.
- **Ongoing scrutiny** – In addition to scrutiny on the Department's budget and priorities, the Committee will continue to scrutinize progress in relation to palliative care, waiting lists, winter preparedness and respite services.
- **Meeting with stakeholders** - hosting our Committee Clinic in September and a number of informal meetings with lived experience organisations and representative bodies.

Committee for Health

Expenditure for the period September 2025 – July 2026

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee Travel - committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	Includes the cost of committee visits to: • South West Acute Hospital, Enniskillen • London with Permanent Secretary on the Neighbourhood Model • 3 external committee meetings • Committee visits to Antrim Area Hospital; Craigavon Area Hospital; St Francis' Hospice, Dublin; Men's Shed Ballymoney; Mater Hospital; City Hospital; Royal Victoria Hospital; Ulster Hospital.	£4801.98 cost of committee travel and subsistence £5479.65 for broadcasting costs for 3 external Committee meetings Total £10281.63
Printing of committee reports	Includes the cost of committee reports on: • Inquiry into Palliative End of Life Care • Adult Protection Bill	Nil
Advertising – the cost of public notices relating to committee inquiries, the committee stage of Bills and meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	Photography- Palliative Care Inquiry Launch	£550.00
Specialist Advice - the cost of specialist advisers appointed by the committee and commissioned research, also the cost of drafting Standing Orders		Nil
Refreshments & Hospitality	Includes the cost of all refreshments and hospitality provided by the committee; to include meetings, working lunches, seminars and any other such expenditure.	£3,622.90
General expenses	Includes the cost of seminars (excluding refreshments and hospitality); room hire; witness expenses; gifts provided by the committee during visits; and conference fees for members.	£520.00
Total Expenditure		£14974.53

Notes:

1. It is not necessary to break down costs for individual visits, reports etc. These should be described under “details”, with only totals included in the “expenditure” column.
2. It is not necessary to include budget areas on which there has been no expenditure