The 2022 – 2027 Mandate

The Committee for Communities

Legislation

During the current Assembly mandate, the Committee for Communities has considered six Bills. Three have completed their passage through the Assembly and become law:

- the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Act 202
- the Child Support Enforcement Act 2025 and
- the Sign Language Act (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee is currently undertaking detailed scrutiny of

- the Charities (Amendment) Bill
- the Housing (Amendment) Bill and
- the Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill.

An example of effective Committee scrutiny arose during consideration of the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill. The Committee sought to introduce a statutory requirement for the Department to review the impact of the legislation following implementation. The Minister initially considered this unnecessary and offered instead to provide a departmental review. However, the Committee was concerned that a non-statutory commitment might not be honoured by future Ministers or Departments. It therefore tabled its own amendment at Consideration Stage on 28 January 2025. During the Assembly debate, the Minister indicated that he would support the amendment, which was subsequently agreed. As a result, the legislation now requires the Department to report to the Assembly between 36 and 42 months after the first relevant regulations come into operation.

The Sign Language Bill provides another important example of Committee influence. Following extensive evidence-gathering and engagement with the Deaf community, the Committee secured several changes to the Bill, including stronger consultation arrangements, greater Assembly scrutiny of delegated legislation (to be made by the Minister under powers granted in the Bill) and more frequent reporting on the legislation's impact. The Bill subsequently received Royal Assent on 9 July 2026.

The Committee's future role includes monitoring implementation of the Act, particularly the development of statutory guidance, accreditation arrangements and the regulations required to give practical effect to its provisions.

(See separate case study on the Sign Language Bill.)

The Committee has also examined a substantial volume of **Statutory Rules (delegated legislation)** relating to social security, welfare payments, pensions and

housing. During the 2025–26 session alone, it considered 30 Statutory Rules and 27 proposals for rules.

An important aspect of this work is the scrutiny of regulations subject to the *negative resolution procedure*. These can become law without a prior Assembly vote but may subsequently be annulled through a successful Prayer of Annulment within the statutory period. (See Education Service Glossary.)

An example of the interaction between devolved decision-making and UK-wide social security policy arose over Winter Fuel Payments. Following the UK Government's decision to restrict entitlement in 2024, the Northern Ireland Minister for Communities secured Executive funding for a one-off £100 payment to affected pensioners during winter 2024–25. The wider UK Winter Fuel Payment was restored from winter 2025–26, although payments to pensioners with taxable incomes above £35,000 are subject to recovery through the tax system.

The Committee scrutinised the associated regulations, including questions about entitlement, cross-border arrangements and the communication of changes to pensioners.

The Committee has also considered several **Legislative Consent Memoranda**, including proposals relating to the Pension Schemes Bill progressing through Westminster. These provide an opportunity for the Assembly to examine whether Westminster should legislate on matters that would otherwise fall within the Assembly's devolved responsibilities.

Inquiries and Reports

In addition to scrutinising legislation, the Committee has undertaken several substantial evidence-gathering and engagement exercises, resulting in published reports and recommendations to the Minister.

In July 2025, it published a report following engagement with the **Arts and Cultural Sector**. This included a public call for information and an innovative *World Café* event at Parliament Buildings, where representatives of the sector discussed challenges directly with Committee Members. The Committee subsequently made recommendations on funding, accessibility, fair pay and the development of a cross-departmental arts and culture strategy.

The Committee has continued to scrutinise the development of the **Anti-Poverty Strategy**, questioning delays, the adequacy of consultation and the effectiveness of proposed measures to tackle poverty.

In May 2026, it published a report on engagement with local government (councils) and its role in tackling poverty. The Committee subsequently brought a motion to the Assembly calling for its recommendations to be implemented. The motion was agreed on 26 May 2026, providing an example of how Committee scrutiny can influence debate and decisions in the Assembly Chamber.

The Committee also published a report in April 2026 on **Homelessness and the Supporting People Programme**, following direct engagement with organisations delivering homelessness services. Its recommendations included improved funding arrangements, greater emphasis on homelessness prevention and stronger cross-departmental cooperation.

These activities demonstrate that Committees can influence public policy beyond the scrutiny of individual Bills, even where they do not have direct responsibility for implementing services.

Budget Scrutiny

The Committee regularly examines how the Department for Communities allocates and spends public money across its extensive responsibilities.

Particular areas of scrutiny have included funding for new social housing, homelessness services, the Supporting People Programme, the voluntary and community sector, arts and culture, and major sporting infrastructure.

The Committee has questioned the Department about the availability and reliability of financial information, the evidence supporting funding decisions and the implications of competing budget priorities.

Its scrutiny of the Northern Ireland Football Fund, for example, has included questions about regional balance, assessment criteria and transparency in decision-making.

This illustrates an important distinction: **the Committee does not control the Department's budget, but it can challenge spending priorities, seek evidence and hold the Minister accountable for how public resources are allocated.**

Impact of Party Loyalty on Committee Work

Statutory Committees are made up of MLAs from different political parties, and Members may bring different political priorities and perspectives to their work.

This can be particularly evident when examining social security policy, housing, language rights and other areas where political differences exist.

However, Committees also provide opportunities for Members to work collaboratively on issues of shared concern. The scrutiny of the Sign Language Bill demonstrated considerable cross-party cooperation in examining evidence, engaging with the Deaf community and securing amendments intended to strengthen the legislation.

The Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill also demonstrated how a Committee can collectively challenge a Minister's position and successfully secure a change to legislation.

While party loyalties and political differences can influence Committee proceedings, effective scrutiny depends on Members being willing to examine evidence, question departmental decisions and work constructively across party lines.

Relationship with the Minister and Department

Following the restoration of the Assembly in February 2024, the Committee faced the challenge of re-establishing effective scrutiny across one of the largest and most diverse departmental portfolios.

The Department for Communities is responsible for major programmes covering housing, social security, poverty, sport, arts and culture, languages, regeneration and the voluntary and community sector.

The Committee has continued to challenge the Department on the pace of policy development, transparency, financial information and the availability of evidence to support decisions.

Examples include its scrutiny of delays to the Anti-Poverty Strategy, its requests for greater clarity on departmental spending decisions, and concerns about the timeliness and completeness of information provided to the Assembly.

In September 2025, the Committee also raised concerns about major departmental announcements being made outside the Assembly, emphasising the importance of Ministers being accountable to elected representatives.

Nevertheless, the Committee and Department have maintained regular engagement through Ministerial appearances, briefings by officials, correspondence and legislative scrutiny.

The Committee's successful amendment to the pensions legislation, and the departmental amendments secured during scrutiny of the Sign Language Bill, illustrate how a constructive relationship can still involve robust challenge and disagreement.

Innovative Practices to Improve Effectiveness

The Committee's work on the Sign Language Bill provides a particularly valuable example of how parliamentary procedures can be adapted to improve public participation.

Recognising that British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) are first or preferred languages for many Deaf people, the Committee sought to ensure that its Call for Evidence did not rely exclusively on written English.

Working with Assembly Information Services, the Committee introduced arrangements enabling people to submit evidence directly in BSL or ISL through WhatsApp video messages.

This approach proved effective. The Committee received **44 signed submissions through WhatsApp**, alongside **42 responses through the conventional Citizen Space online consultation platform**.

The Committee also provided sign language interpretation during evidence sessions, engaged directly with Deaf and Deafblind communities, children and families, and produced accessible BSL and ISL video updates and summaries of its work.

These arrangements required additional planning, technical support and resources, but enabled people who might otherwise have encountered barriers to contribute directly to legislative scrutiny.

The experience offers an important lesson for other Assembly Committees: **meaningful consultation is not simply about inviting people to provide evidence; it is about ensuring that they have a practical and accessible opportunity to do so**. (see separate case study on the Sign Language Bill).

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