



Department of

**Justice**

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

[www.justice-ni.gov.uk](http://www.justice-ni.gov.uk)

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William Humphrey MBE MLA  
Chairperson  
Public Accounts Committee

15 March 2021

Dear Mr Humphrey

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE EVIDENCE SESSION – NIAO REPORT ON SPEEDING UP JUSTICE: AVOIDABLE DELAY IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM**

Thank you for your letter of 23 February in relation to a Public Accounts Committee evidence session on the NI Audit Office (NIAO) report 'Speeding up justice: avoidable delay in the criminal justice system'.

In your letter you indicated the evidence session would be in May 2021 at the earliest. I am writing to ask whether, exceptionally given the covid context, the Committee would be willing to defer the hearing until the autumn.

Speeding up justice is a key priority for the Department of Justice and its criminal justice partners who are working collaboratively to improve performance. You have requested a written update on progress in implementing the NIAO recommendations and I will share this with the Committee by the end of March. That update will demonstrate the improvements that have been made.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on the criminal justice system as with the rest of society. Whilst the system has responded rapidly and innovatively so that confidence in the system is maintained and to ensure the safety of our staff, those who use the system and those in our care, there will be delays until the system returns to normal.

The coming months will be critical to the continued recovery the justice system as, for example, we continue to expand court capacity and manage backlogs. This will require intense effort from staff across a range of front line organisations, including the PSNI, Public Prosecution Service and the NI Courts and Tribunals Service.

As speeding up justice and delivering the NIAO recommendations is a system-wide issue and involves these organisations, key staff would, therefore, be required to prepare for the inquiry, impacting on the resources devoted to recovery.



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Similarly, staff in the Department responsible for speeding up justice are leading the co-ordination of the justice system's response to COVID-19. They are also currently taking a Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill through the Assembly – directly related to the delivery of one of the NIAO recommendations – and, as I am sure you are aware, this will require significant resources over the coming months.

I fully recognise the importance of the Committee's work in relation to NIAO reports and recommendations. But, in these unprecedented times, given the pressures on the criminal justice system and its staff, and to ensure that the system can remain fully focussed on COVID-19 recovery, I would be grateful if you would consider the option of receiving a comprehensive written update now and deferring the inquiry until the autumn.

Yours sincerely