



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 16 October 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Dierdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Danny Baker MLA

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

In Attendance:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Easton Vance (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.02pm in public session.

Agreed: That the joint oral evidence session with Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Northern Ireland Alternatives will be recorded by Hansard.

Danny Baker declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 9 October 2025.

3. Matters Arising

The Chairperson reminded Members that he and the Deputy Chairperson will be meeting with the Justice Minister on 20 October 2025, and requested that any questions or issues that Members wish to be raised at this meeting, including in relation to the proposed updated PACE Codes, be forwarded to the Committee Clerk ahead of the meeting.

4. Justice Bill – Community Restorative Justice Ireland and Northern Ireland Alternatives oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.05pm:

Jim McCarthy, Chief Executive Officer, Community Restorative Justice Ireland
Debbie Watters, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Alternatives

The witnesses provided oral evidence on several aspects of the Justice Bill and broader issues related to community restorative justice.

The oral evidence was followed by a question-and-answer session.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 3.35pm.

Agreed: To write to the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Policing Board to express concern at the small number of Community Resolution Notices (CRNs) referred to Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland and a rationale for why this is the case; information on the process of referrals; and what the PSNI can proactively do to encourage people to engage with community restorative justice initiatives.

Agreed: To request a response from the Department of Justice to the Committee's concerns in relation to the following matters:

- the adequacy of the Level 1 accreditation and its potential for abuse;
- the capacity to have the processes in place in order to launch the pilot in Spring 2026;

- that organisations may appear to be legitimately accredited as a whole when only one or two employees within the organisations are individually accredited;
- the geographic areas chosen as the initial locations for the roll out of the expanded adult restorative justice service provision;
- whether, given its own role in restorative justice, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland is sufficiently independent to fulfil the role of the Independent Referrals Body; and
- why CRNs are being referred to non-accredited community restorative justice organisations over and above accredited organisations.

5. Justice Bill — written papers

5.1 Justice Bill – Requests for further information table

The Committee noted a document prepared by the Committee team which tracks Committee requests and responses received in relation to the Justice Bill.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to respond to the Committee's previous request for an analysis of the Bill's compatibility with the Windsor Framework and relevant EU Directives.

6. SR 2025/151 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered Statutory Rule SR2025/151 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025, made under powers conferred by section 90 of the Coronavirus Act 2020. The Rule will enable the live links provisions for courts and

tribunals to remain in force for a further six months beyond 24 September 2025. The Rule is subject to the confirmatory resolution procedure.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had raised with regard to the technical aspects of the Rule.

Agreed: The Committee for Justice considered SR 2025/151 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

7. SL1 The County Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered a proposal to make The County Court (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2025 under powers conferred by Article 47 of the County Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1980. The proposed Statutory Rule will amend the County Court Rules (Northern Ireland) 1981 to increase County Court Scale Fees to address the effects of inflation since the Scale was last reviewed in 2017. The Rule will be subject to the negative resolution procedure.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

8. Broadcasting of Courts - Consultation response - Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice updating Members on the responses to the Department's consultation on proposals to allow the recording and broadcasting of certain court proceedings.

9. Speeding Up Justice Programme - Update – Department of Justice written paper

Ciara Ferguson declared an interest as a member of the All Party Group on Access to Justice.

The Committee considered a paper from the Department of Justice which provided an update on the Department's Speeding Up Justice Programme.

Doug Beattie highlighted that a high percentage of cases of non-fatal strangulation were being sent to the Magistrates Court, instead of the Crown Court.

Agreed: To ask the Department for further information on the following:

- what engagement the Department has had with those leading on other relevant initiatives and programmes, particularly the Executive Office's Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, to ensure that the Speeding Up Justice Programme's initiatives compliment the objectives of those programmes;
- clarity on why so many cases related to non-fatal strangulation are being referred to the Magistrates' Court, rather than the Crown Court, and whether there is any potential that the seriousness of such cases is being downgraded for the purposes of speeding up justice;
- an update on the public consultations that will be undertaken on the Programme's proposed initiatives and anticipated timeframes for those consultations;
- if it is expected that primary legislation may be required for any of the reforms or initiatives;
- clarity on the timescale for the uplift to Legal Aid remuneration and whether that delayed business case sits within or relates to this Programme; and

- details of any data mapping that has been undertaken in respect of the Programme and confirmation that data will be provided as part of future updates.

10. Committee for Justice End of Session Report – Consideration of draft report

The Committee considered a draft End of Session report prepared by the Committee team, which provides a high level overview of the work undertaken by this Committee between 3 February 2024 and 31 August 2025.

Title Page, Contents Page and Powers and Membership Page

The Committee considered the Title page, Contents page and Powers and Membership page as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Title page, Table of Contents page and the Powers and Membership pages stand part of the Report.

Overview

The Committee considered Overview section at paragraphs 1 to 3 as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Overview section at paragraphs 1 to 3 stand part of the Report.

Primary Legislation, Secondary Legislation, Legislative Consent Motions

The Committee considered the Primary Legislation, Secondary Legislation and Legislative Consent Motions sections at paragraphs 4 to 35 as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Primary Legislation, Secondary Legislation and Legislative Consent Motions sections at paragraphs 4 to 35 stand part of the Report.

Budget Scrutiny and Policy Scrutiny

The Committee considered the Budget Scrutiny and Policy Scrutiny sections at paragraphs 36 to 53 as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that Budget Scrutiny and Policy Scrutiny sections at paragraphs 36 to 53 stand part of the Report.

Visits, Events and Informal Meetings

The Committee considered the Visits, Events and Informal Meetings section of the report at paragraphs 54 to 57 as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Visits, Events and Informal Meetings section at paragraphs 54 to 57 stand part of the Report.

Likely Key Priorities for the Next Session

The Committee considered the Likely Key Priorities for the Next Session section of the report at paragraphs 58 as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that the Likely Key Priorities for the Next Session at paragraph 58 stands part of the Report.

Annex A

The Committee considered the Annex A section of the report as drafted.

Agreed: That the Committee is content that Annex A stands part of the report.

11. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- An Inspection Report on Airport and Harbour Policing in Northern Ireland carried out by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To request a response to the Report's findings and recommendations from the Department of Justice, the PSNI, Belfast Harbour Police and Belfast International Airport Constabulary.

- Further correspondence from an individual regarding a personal matter, which included copy correspondence to the Department of Justice.

Agreed: To request a copy of the Department's response to the individual as a first step and to decide whether the Committee wishes to consider the matter further when that response has been received.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice response to the Committees' request for further information regarding the update on the strategic approach to Safer communities / organised crime..
- Committee for Finance – correspondence from the Department of Finance on Aligning Budget to Programme for Government.
- Committee for the Executive Office – correspondence from the Executive Office advising that Historical Clerical Child Abuse is being considered as a separate process to the Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress Bill.
- Public Accounts Committee update on primacy over Northern Ireland Audit Office.
- Copy correspondence from an individual regarding a personal matter.
- Copy correspondence from an individual regarding family courts.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Department of Justice's proposed forward work programme and correspondence requesting to reschedule the oral evidence session with the Department's Permanent Secretary, originally scheduled for 6 November 2025, to 20 November 2025.

Agreed: To reschedule the oral evidence session with the DoJ Permanent Secretary to Thursday 20 November 2025.

In addition to the items of business included in the Department's work programme, the Chairperson advised that it was proposed the following sessions requested by the Committee are scheduled for November:

- Reasonable Chastisement/Equal Protection – joint Department of Justice and Department of Health oral evidence session will be scheduled for 6 November.
- Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Sentencing Bill – oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials will be scheduled for 27 November.

Agreed: To schedule these two items and the other proposed items of business from the Department into the Committee's forward work programme, subject to any changes as agreed at today's meeting

13. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

14. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

15. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 23 October at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 3.59pm.

Paul Frew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

23 October 2025