



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 14 MARCH 2024

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stewart Dickson MLA

Sinéad Ennis MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Alex Easton MLA

Justin McNulty MLA

In Attendance: Caroline Perry (Assembly Clerk)
Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Supervisor)
Ryan Feeney (Clerical Officer)

In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

The meeting commenced at 1.37pm in open session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the oral evidence sessions with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service would be recorded by Hansard.

Deirdre Hargey declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works for the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.

Joanne Bunting declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works in the legal profession.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 7 March 2024.

3. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Law Society of Northern Ireland regarding trainee solicitors and entry to the legal profession.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the item of correspondence.

4. Probation Board for Northern Ireland: Overview Briefing

Amanda Stewart, Chief Executive of the Probation Board for Northern Ireland; Stephen Hamilton, Director of Operations for prisons, programmes and public protection; and Gillian Montgomery, Director of Operations for community and courts, joined the meeting at 1.40pm.

The witnesses provided an overview of the work of the Probation Board.

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

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Alex Easton and Doug Beattie joined the meeting at 1.49pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance and they left the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to follow up on a number of issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Justice regarding statistics around terrorist-related offenders.

5. Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service: Overview Briefing

Glyn Capper, Director of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service; Elaine Topping, Acting Chief Operating Officer; and Patrick Butler, Head of Legacy Inquests and Coroners Service for Northern Ireland, joined the meeting at 2.27pm.

The officials provided an overview of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.

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

The officials agreed to keep the Committee updated on the digitisation project.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance and they left the meeting.

6. Budget 2024-25 — Department of Justice Response to Department of Finance

The Committee considered the Department of Justice's return to the Department of Finance, which provided its resource and capital requirements in relation to Budget 2024-25.

The Committee discussed a number of concerns regarding the Department's financial situation and related matters that had been raised in previous evidence sessions by Justice-sector organisations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this paper and to write to the Department of Justice and the Minister of Finance on a number of budgetary issues.

7. Injury on Duty — Proposals for a Consultation

The Committee considered the Department's proposal to launch a consultation at the end of March regarding injury-on-duty schemes for officers in the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the draft consultation and to consider the matter further when the results and proposed way forward are available.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department of Justice whether it had considered delaying the consultation in light of a legal case regarding injury-on-duty awards and given the review of the Policing Board.

8. Legal Aid for Pilot to Fast-track Serious Sexual Offence Cases Involving Children Under 16 — Proposal to Consult on Draft Ministerial Direction

The Committee considered the Department's proposal to launch a consultation on a draft ministerial direction to ensure that appropriate temporary legal aid arrangements are in place for a pilot scheme to fast-track serious sexual offence cases involving children under 16 years of age.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the proposed consultation and to consider the matter further when the results and proposed way forward are available.

9. The Police Pensions (Remediable Service) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 — Proposals for a Consultation

The Committee considered the Department's proposal to launch a targeted consultation on the draft Police Pensions (Remediable Service) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the proposed consultation and to consider the matter further when the results and proposed way forward are available.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the updated Forward Work Programme.

The Committee noted that a visit to the Remote Evidence Centre in Belfast is scheduled to take place on 18 April at 2.00pm.

Agreed: Committee Members agreed to advise Committee staff of their availability to attend.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice to correspondence issued by the Committee following up on a number of issues after a briefing from the Permanent Secretary. The Department's response noted four areas of a proposed Bill that it plans to bring by amendments at Consideration Stage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this item and to seek procedural advice from the Assembly Bill Office on the implications of the Department introducing significant provisions to a Bill in this way.

The Committee noted the following:

- ii. a response from the Department of Justice providing an update on actions taken by the Department to address the issues identified in the research on over-representation in the youth justice system;
- iii. a response from the Department of Justice providing an update on its work in relation to ending violence against women and girls;
- iv. a response from the Department of Justice providing an update on its proposed actions following the public consultation to increase the minimum age of criminal responsibility;
- v. correspondence from the Department of Justice regarding the appointment of Martina Jordan as the Restorative Justice Interim Protocol Lead. The Department also advised that a written briefing is being developed to update the Committee on the progress of the Adult Restorative Justice Strategy and developments in restorative justice;
- vi. a copy of correspondence from Lord Jay of Ewelme, Chair of the House of Lords Sub-Committee on the Windsor Framework, to Lord Sharpe of Epsom, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Home Office, regarding the Illegal Migration Act 2023;

- vii. a report from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council on the updated estimate of the relative need for public spending in Northern Ireland;
- viii. correspondence regarding the ongoing issue of legal proceedings in respect of residential properties at Victoria Square, Belfast;
- ix. a response from the Department of Justice regarding the ongoing issue of legal proceedings in respect of residential properties at Victoria Square, Belfast advising that civil law is a matter for the Department of Finance;
- x. an email from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance noting that that Committee had agreed to write to the Department of Finance and the Head of the Civil Service on this matter; and
- xi. correspondence from the Minister of Justice advising that the Northern Ireland Prison Service has launched an online booking service, which is the first of its kind in the UK.

12. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson provided the Committee with an overview of a meeting that she and the Deputy Chairperson had with the Right Honourable Lady Chief Justice, Dame Siobhan Keegan.

13. Any other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Chairperson advised Members that the next Committee meeting will take place on 21 March 2024 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 3.34pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice