



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 1 May 2025**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:**

Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Danny Baker MLA

Doug Beattie MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Justin McNulty MLA

**In Attendance:**

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Stephen Corr (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

*The meeting commenced at 2.06pm in public session.*

The Chairperson thanked the Deputy Chairperson for chairing the Committee meeting of 10 April 2025 in her absence.

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence sessions with the Northern Ireland Policing Board on the Justice Bill and the Bar of Northern Ireland on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme would 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.*

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

*Joanne Bunting declared an interest as a former trustee of the Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation.*

*The Chairperson noted that a number of Committee Members are members of the All Party Group on Access to Justice.*

## **1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

## **2. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 10 April 2025.

### 3. Matters Arising

*Doug Beattie joined the meeting at 2.09pm.*

The Chairperson reminded Members that, at the Committee meeting on 10 April, the Committee considered SR 2025/61 — the Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules' report, recommended that it be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson advised Members that the Examiner's report was published on 11 April 2025 and that she did not draw this Statutory Rule to the special attention of the Assembly.

**Agreed:** To note the Examiner of Statutory Rules' report.

The Chairperson advised Members that the plenary debate on the Statutory Rule has been scheduled for Tuesday 6 May 2025.

**Agreed:** That the Chairperson will reflect the Committee's view during the plenary debate on the Statutory Rule.

### 4. Justice Bill — Northern Ireland Policing Board oral evidence

The following officials from the Northern Ireland Policing Board joined the meeting at 2.10pm:

- Sinead Simpson, Chief Executive;
- Adrian McNamee, Director of Performance; and
- Sarah Reid, Temporary Director of Police Pensions and Injury Benefits.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

*Justin McNulty joined the meeting at 2.16pm.*

*Connie Egan joined the meeting at 2.29pm.*

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

The witnesses agreed to provide a number of extracts from different Northern Ireland Policing Board reports that are relevant to provisions in the Justice Bill and the matters discussed during the evidence session; to clarify if any work has been undertaken on costings for a case management system; and to provide figures relating to Independent Custody Visitors and details of information included in custody records.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice whether it considered including provisions relating to police misconduct in the Justice Bill; for a timeline of the work in relation to reviewing policing misconduct regulations; and whether it will take into account recent changes made by the Government regarding policing misconduct regulations.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 3.31pm.

## **5. Enabling Access to Justice Programme — The Bar of Northern Ireland oral evidence**

The following witnesses from the Bar of Northern Ireland joined the meeting at 3.32pm:

- Donal Lunny KC, Chair;
- Denise Kiley KC, Vice Chair; and
- David Mulholland, Chief Executive.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme.

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

*Danny Baker left the meeting at 4.11pm.*

*Justin McNulty left the meeting at 4.15pm.*

During the evidence session, the witnesses agreed to provide the Bar of Northern Ireland's detailed response to the consultation on the Enabling Access to Justice delivery plan and remuneration proposals.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice:

- for details of the evidence base that it used to inform the Enabling Access to Justice Programme, including the sources used and transparency of processes;
- to comment on the Committee's concern about consultations being conducted over the summer period;
- to detail what the relevant legislation states about a duty to conduct reviews in relation to criminal legal aid remuneration; whether the required reviews have been conducted and, if they have not, why they have not; and when the next review is due;
- to explain the rationale behind the proposal for a statutory registration scheme;
- to provide further information on statutory charges and private financing;
- to clarify if leave applications for judicial reviews will be removed from the scope of legal aid;
- to clarify why neither the Bar of Northern Ireland nor the Law Society for Northern Ireland are represented on the Criminal Justice Board; and
- to provide an update on the work of the Burgess working group.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.47pm.

## **6. Justice Bill — Restorative Justice Proposed Amendments: Research and Information Service written paper**

The Committee noted the Assembly Research and Information Service's paper 'Justice Bill: Restorative Justice Amendments'.

## **7. Justice Bill — written papers**

### **7.1 — Department of Justice: Response regarding Biometric Retention Periods in the Justice Bill**

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice to queries that it had raised regarding the rationale used for retention periods in the Justice Bill.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department to provide more information on the proposed “robust review mechanism”; and to provide details of any further evidence used in determining the length of the proposed retention periods.

### **7.2 — Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People: Follow up to evidence session**

The Committee considered a response from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) to its request for information on a number of matters, including a copy of NICCY’s submission to the consultation on proposals to amend the legislation to help to tackle anti-social behaviour and information on the removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement in other jurisdictions.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice what engagement it has had with the Department of Health regarding reasonable chastisement and whether there are plans to progress work on that matter in future.

### **7.3 — Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime: Comments on Proposed Amendments to the Justice Bill**

The Committee considered a written submission from the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime outlining her views on a number of the proposed amendments to the Justice Bill.

**Agreed:** That Committee staff will review the Department’s proposed amendment regarding the rehabilitation of offenders in relation to the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime’s comments on that amendment.

#### **7.4 — Lady Chief Justice: Comments on the Justice Bill and Proposed Amendments**

The Committee considered a written submission from the Lady Chief Justice The Rt Hon Dame Siobhan Keegan on a number of provisions in the Justice Bill and a number of the proposed amendments.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice for clarification on the implications arising for taxation in district judge ancillary relief matters, on which the Bill is silent; and for its views on the comments from the Lady Chief Justice regarding the proposed age limits for the new custodial disposal.

#### **7.5 — Lady Chief Justice's Office: Role of the Taxing Master**

The Committee considered a response from the Lady Chief Justice's office to correspondence it had issued outlining of a number of issues that had been raised during evidence sessions on the Justice Bill in relation to clause 28 (Restriction on ordering taxation of legal aid costs) and the role of the Taxing Master.

**Agreed:** To consider this matter further once the response from the Bar of Northern Ireland providing further evidence requested during its oral evidence session on the Bill is available.

**Agreed:** That the correspondence and papers at agenda items 7.1 to 7.5 will be published on the Committee's web page.

#### **7.6 — Justice Bill: Requests for Further Information**

The Committee noted a paper from the Committee for Justice team collating a list of the Committee's requests for information on the Justice Bill and the responses received to date.

The Chairperson advised Members that the table will be updated weekly for inclusion in the meeting pack.

## **8. Crime and Policing Bill — Legislative Consent Memorandum: Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice to its requests for further information on a number of issues in relation to proposed legislative consent for the Crime and Policing Bill and a response from the PSNI regarding its engagement with the Home Office on certain provisions of the Bill.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice for further information on a number of issues including: proposed changes regarding registered sex offenders; access to driver licensing information, including potential searches or disclosures of photographs; EU law enforcement directives and GDPR; access to information by law enforcement agencies; compliance with retention schedules; an update on any joint working between the Department of Justice and the Department for Infrastructure; clarification on whether the proposed offence regarding encouraging or assisting serious self-harm extends to suicide; information on the proposal regarding the discharging of registered sex offenders; and what parameters will be put in place to implement the proposed changes.

**Agreed:** To ask the PSNI for its views on the proposal regarding the discharging of registered sex offenders and what parameters will be put in place to implement the proposed changes.

## **9. Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill — Proposal for Legislative Consent**

The Chairperson informed Members that the Department of Justice has advised that some provisions in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, which was introduced in Westminster on 30 January 2025, will engage the legislative consent process.

**Agreed:** To schedule an oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on the provisions of the Bill that will require legislative consent.

## 10. Correspondence

- A response from the Minister of Health to the Committee's request for information about child contact centres.

**Agreed:** To forward the response to the Committee for Health for information.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Health for information on the quality assurance process for child contact centres; whether complaints and sanctions are monitored; and whether a review has been conducted.

- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee's request for information on a number of matters following the oral evidence session with the Minister and departmental officials on 13 March 2025.

**Agreed:** To raise with the Department of Justice matters regarding the Northern Ireland Civil Service sick absence policy and the Northern Ireland Prison Service; issues around accommodation on release and to again ask whether there were other cases that were similar to that of Sophie Rodgers; and to request clarification of the accountability mechanism for the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, including who complainants should contact if they are dissatisfied with the process.

- Two items of correspondence from individuals regarding domestic abuse and family courts issues.

**Agreed:** To note the items of correspondence.

- Correspondence from an individual regarding a complaint about the Lady Chief Justice.

The Chairperson advised Members that a further item of correspondence on this matter was received in the Committee Office on 30 April 2025.

**Agreed:** To consider the items of correspondence at the Committee meeting on 8 May 2025.

- An invitation from the Open University in Ireland to the launch of the research report 'Why Riot?'.

The Chairperson advised Members that they should respond to the invitation directly should they wish to attend.

- Correspondence from the Department of Justice regarding the final Budget outcome for 2025-26.

The Chairperson stated that it is important that the Committee continues to monitor issues around the Department delivering against its Programme for Government commitments.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice regarding the illegal erection of billboards.
- An update from the Department of Justice on final Budget 2025-26 allocations to departmental business areas.
- Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's report 'Annual Review of the Effectiveness of Part 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 – Year Two Progress Review'.
- A response from the Lady Chief Justice regarding an individual's complaint about family courts and domestic abuse issues.
- A summary of Ofcom's decisions on protecting children online.
- Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland's Investing Activity Report for the Department of Justice for April 2025.
- Further correspondence from an individual about a number of matters.
- Royal Ulster Constabulary George Cross Foundation Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2023.

## **11. Forward Work Programme**

The Chairperson informed Members that a written briefing on pre-consultation proposals for a Victim and Witness Strategy 2025-26 had been included on the work programme for today's meeting but that the papers were not received in time for inclusion in the meeting pack and the item will therefore be added to the agenda for the Committee meeting on 8 May 2025.

The Committee considered a request from the Department of Justice to schedule a written briefing regarding a proposed consultation on sentence reduction for guilty pleas for 15 May 2025.

**Agreed:** To schedule the written briefing for the Committee meeting on 15 May 2025.

The Committee considered a request from the Department of Justice to split the oral evidence session on matters relating to domestic abuse, including the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, across two Committee meetings.

**Agreed:** To schedule the oral and written evidence as outlined by the Department of Justice.

The Chairperson informed Members that the legal advice scheduled for 15 May 2025 on the Justice Bill relates to the proposed restorative justice amendment and that legal advice on the proposed rehabilitation of offenders amendment will be scheduled for 22 May 2025.

The Committee considered an updated Committee forward work programme.

**Agreed:** To proceed with the sessions in the updated forward work programme, subject to the changes as agreed at today's meeting.

## **12. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's business.

### **13. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

### **14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 8 May 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 5.22pm.

**Joanne Bunting MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**