Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 8 October 2026

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Ciara Ferguson MLA

In Attendance: Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Paula Morrow (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 2.04 pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence sessions with NIACRO and with Department of Justice officials on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill will be recorded by Hansard.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 1 October 2026.

3. Matters Arising

3.1 – Lady Chief Justice response regarding Prisoner Abscondment

The Committee noted a response from the Office of the Lady Chief Justice to questions the Committee had asked regarding the judicial review of the Compassionate Temporary Release of Gary Anderson, who subsequently absconded. Members expressed that it is important that lessons are learned and they await the outcome of the Department's independent review on this matter.

4. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – NIACRO oral evidence

The following witness joined the meeting at 2.09pm:

Fiona Greene, Chief Executive, NIACRO

The witness provided oral evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

Patsy McGlone joined the meeting at 2.11pm.
Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.17pm.

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

During the evidence session, the witness agreed to provide further information on:

- The rationale for a Sentencing Council for Northern Ireland and whether there is any risk that the provision of a Sentencing Council might simply add further expense, complexity and delays to the justice system;
- Views on how the Sentencing Bill will interact with the Rehabilitation of Offenders (Northern Ireland) Order 1978 and with the changes made by the Justice Bill, and whether any potential increase in sentence due to provisions in the Sentencing Bill impact on Access NI disclosures.
- An amendment to the Bill to include 'accountability for one's actions' instead of 'denunciation' at Clause 1(2) regarding the purposes of sentencing.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and they left the meeting at 2.59pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take agenda item 6 next.

5. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – written papers

5.1 – Department of Justice – Response regarding NIHRC views on aggravator models provisions

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice regarding models to prosecute hate crimes that allow for multiple and intersectional hostility motivations and the collection of data on hate crimes.

Agreed: To forward the Department's response to the NI Human Rights Commission for information.

5.2 – Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime - Response following oral evidence session

The Committee noted further information from the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime NI on evaluations conducted in relation to post-court support for victims of crime and trends in hate crime, in follow up to her oral evidence on the Sentencing Bill on 22 September 2026.

5.3 – Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland - Response following oral evidence session

The Committee noted further information from the Commissioner for Older People NI, following her oral evidence on the Sentencing Bill on 24 September 2026, on how the provisions in Scotland relating to age as an aggravator by hostility are framed.

5.4 – Homeless Connect - Written submission

The Committee noted a submission from Homeless Connect expressing views on the Sentencing Bill.

Members noted that there would be an opportunity during the forthcoming oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials to discuss what additional costs might be reasonably expected to be incurred if the additional support infrastructure that Homeless Connect have suggested is required in order to meaningfully achieve rehabilitation outcomes was delivered.

5.5 – Marie Collins Foundation - Response following oral evidence session

The Committee noted further information from the Marie Collins Foundation on aspects of the Sentencing Bill following the oral evidence session on 24 September 2026.

Agreed: That the Committee would welcome an opportunity to consider the text of a draft amendment from Marie Collins

Foundation on the exclusion of good character evidence for child sexual offences, including technology-assisted child sexual abuse (TACSA) and child sexual abuse material (CSAM) as well as a draft amendment on an exemption to the use of suspended sentences for TACSA and CSAM offences

5.6 – Public Prosecution Service - Response regarding aggravation by reason of vulnerability

The Committee considered a paper from the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) in response to the Department of Justice's response to a series of potential difficulties relating to "Aggravation by reason of vulnerability" at Clause 36 of the Sentencing Bill, which were raised by the PPS in their oral evidence on the Bill.

Agreed: To forward the paper to the Department of Justice for comment on the PPS' continuing concerns and on the areas the PPS suggested that the Committee may wish to seek further clarification from the Department.

5.7 – National Preventative Mechanism - Impact of Sentencing Bill on prison population

The Committee considered correspondence from the UK National Preventative Mechanism expressing views that several of the provisions in the Sentencing Bill are likely to result in more people in custody and/or longer sentences, and will have a significant impact on already pressurised prison populations and conditions.

Agreed: To forward the paper to the Department for a response to the specific questions raised.

5.8 – Department of Justice - Draft summary of responses report and options on way forward on deepfake amendment

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Justice providing a Summary of Responses and Next Steps Report for the consultation to criminalise

behaviours associated with nonconsensual sexually explicit deepfake images. The Minister's paper also advised that the draft clauses for the amendment are not yet available.

5.9 – Department of Justice - Response regarding Clause 33(2)(a): Use of word "immediately"

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing clarification on and an explanation for the inclusion of the term 'immediately' at Clause 33(2)(a) of the Sentencing Bill.

5.10 – Department of Justice - Response following the oral evidence session with Lisa Dorrian and Charlotte Murray's families

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice to questions raised during the oral evidence sessions on the Sentencing Bill with the families of Lisa Dorrian and Charlotte Murray.

5.11 – Men's Advisory Project - Response regarding Part 4: Unduly Lenient Sentences

The Committee noted follow up information from the Men's Advisory Project regarding the application of unduly lenient sentencing provisions at Part 4 following their oral evidence on the Sentencing Bill on 6 October 2026.

6. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Department of Justice oral evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 3.12pm:

Andrew Dawson, Director of Criminal Justice Policy and Legislation Division;
Angela Bell, Bill Manager and Policy Lead;
Alan Weir, Head of Sentencing Policy Unit; and
Chris McElwee, Head of Hate Crime Branch

The officials provided oral evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

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

During the session, the officials agreed to provide information on the following:

- Clarification on how, and by whom, the application of sentencing guidelines will be monitored.
- The rationale for why the Department concluded that a Sentencing Council for Northern Ireland is not required and the evidence considered in reaching that conclusion.
- Views on whether, in relation to Clause 18(3A) of the Bill, an offender issued with a life sentence could be compelled to attend court to hear, in open court, the reasons for deciding on that order.

Members also noted that a paper from the Department of Justice was issued to the Committee shortly before today's meeting, giving notice of the launch of a consultation by the Department on the use of good character references at sentencing stage in certain criminal proceedings; and that the consultation launched at the same time that the Committee was notified.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 4.37pm.

Agreed: To write to the Men's Advisory Project to advise that the Department has clarified that the provisions in Part 4 of the Bill in relation to Unduly Lenient Sentences apply only to cases in the Crown Court.

7. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Written papers

Doug Beattie left the meeting at 4.39pm.

7.1 and 7.2 – Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Written submissions

The Committee noted submissions in response to its call for evidence on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill from the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime NI and from Victim Support NI.

8. SR 2026/161 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered Statutory Rule SR2026/161 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026, 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 until 24 March 2027. The Rule is subject to the confirmatory resolution procedure.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not yet reported on the Rule.

Doug Beattie returned to the meeting at 4.41pm.

Agreed: The Committee for Justice considered SR 2026/161 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and, subject to the Examiner of Statutory Rules' report, recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

The Chairperson advised that he will reflect the Committee's consideration of the Statutory Rule during the debate on the motion.

9. Northern Ireland Judicial Pension Scheme legislation – Consultation on amendments to Pension Scheme legislation

The Committee noted a paper from the Department advising the Committee of its intention to consult on two pieces of draft delegated legislation. The first is the draft Judicial Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, that would permit the recovery of outstanding, backdated pension contributions; and the second is the draft Public Service Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2014

(Judicial Offices) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 which would add a number of judicial offices to the Northern Ireland Judicial Pension Scheme.

Agreed: That the Committee will consider the matter further when the outcome of the consultation and the SL1s for the delegated legislation are available.

10. DNA and fingerprint retention framework for Northern Ireland – Consultation on the review mechanism

The Committee noted a paper from the Department advising the Committee of its intention to launch a consultation on the Review Mechanism for the DNA and Fingerprints Retention Framework (Part 6 of the Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1989).

Agreed: That the Committee will consider the matter further when the outcome of the consultation and way forward are available.

11. Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act 2021 - Annual Domestic Abuse Training Statement

The Committee noted an annual training statement from the Department of Justice, required under section 32 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, which outlines the uptake of domestic abuse training across PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service and Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and other relevant statutory bodies between 1 August 2025 and 31 July 2026.

Agreed: To ask the NICTS why less than 50% of its staff have completed domestic abuse training.

12. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice to correspondence regarding a request for consideration of mandatory enhanced AccessNI checks for self-employed private tutors.

  Agreed: To forward the Department's response to the individual who raised the matter with the Committee.

- Copied correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office to the Department seeking clarification on the AccessNI disclosure check categories currently available and whether additional categories could be introduced to ensure greater inclusivity for individuals working in faith-based settings in Northern Ireland.

  Agreed: To request a copy of the Department's response to the TEO Committee.

- A response from the Department of Justice regarding the Neurology Recall, access to justice and patient safety concerns; and copied correspondence from the Committee for Health to the PSNI and the Minister of Justice on these matters.

  Agreed: To forward the Department's response to Neurology Justice Collective and to the Committee for Health for information.

- A response from the Office of the Lady Chief Justice to concerns from an individual about the adequacy of support and provisions available to litigants in person, particularly in relation to reasonable adjustments to ensure the effective participation of persons with disabilities within court proceedings.

Agreed: To forward the Department's response to the individual who raised the matter with the Committee.

- Copied correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department of Justice seeking details of any financial bids made, or intended, in relation to planned actions associated with the draft Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Agreed: To request a copy of the Department's response to the Communities Committee.

- Correspondence from Protective Mothers NI in relation to political priorities on domestic abuse, sexual violence and safeguarding concerns.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice, the Department of Finance, the Department of Health and the Executive Office for comment and response to questions raised in the correspondence.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice – Response to ARK Report: The Experiences of Unvisited Men In Prison in NI;
- Committee for Communities – Fermanagh and Omagh District Council – Rural Affairs Research;
- Committee for Finance – Department of Finance response regarding Motor Insurance Claims and Premiums and Claims Management Regulation;
- Assembly and Executive Review Committee - Advanced notice of evidence session with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (HoCS) and Permanent Secretaries scheduled for 20 October;

- NI Assembly Public Engagement – Information on the Older People's Parliament and invitation to attend a pre-Parliament roundtable lunch event;
- An individual – Copy correspondence to the Minister for Justice regarding Prisoner Release;
- CILIP Ireland – Invitation to Libraries Deliver: Impact, Outcomes and Value for Communities drop in event.

13. Department of Justice –Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered an updated work programme for October from the Department of Justice and the latest draft of the Committee's forward work programme.

Agreed: To amend the Committee's forward work programme to reflect that the proposed session on 15 October 2026 on Enabling Access to Justice has been withdrawn and the Department will instead provide two written updates on 15 October and 22 October 2026.

14. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

15. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

Ciara Ferguson left the meeting at 4.52pm.

16. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on Tuesday 13 October at 9:30am in the Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.53pm.

Paul Frew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Justice
15 October 2026