



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 15 May 2025**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:**

Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Danny Baker MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Doug Beattie 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 2.07pm in public session.*

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence session with the Law Society of Northern Ireland on the Justice Bill 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.*

*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 8 May 2025.

### **3. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider agenda item 5 (Justice Bill — written papers) prior to agenda item 4 (Justice Bill — Law society of Northern Ireland oral evidence).

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

##### **4.1 — Clerk’s Memo: Update on Written and Oral Evidence on the Justice Bill**

The Committee considered a written update on the written and oral evidence received to date on the Justice Bill.

The Chairperson advised Members that Voice of Young People in Care (VOYPIC) and Include Youth have requested an opportunity to provide oral evidence to the Committee in advance of the Committee event with young people, which is scheduled to take place in the Long Gallery on 3 July 2025.

**Agreed:** To schedule oral evidence sessions with VOYPIC and Include Youth for mid-to-late June.

The Chairperson noted the particular focus on the biometrics provisions and those relating to children in the evidence sessions on the Justice Bill to date, and that there is a need to ensure that all other aspects of the Bill are also fully considered.

**Agreed:** To ask community-based restorative justice practitioners to provide written evidence on the proposed restorative justice amendments.

**Agreed:** To schedule an oral evidence session on the Justice Bill with AccessNI.

**Agreed:** To ask Aberdeen City Council and Glasgow City Council to provide details of the impact of the repeal of vagrancy legislation in those cities.

**Agreed:** That Committee Members will email the Committee team if they identify any other organisations or individuals who they would like to provide evidence to the Committee.

The Chairperson reminded Members that an informal roundtable event with grassroots community organisations will be held in the Long Gallery on 5 June 2025 and that organisations have been asked to respond to confirm attendance by Friday 16 May 2025.

#### **4.2 — Northern Ireland Policing Board: Further Information**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Policing Board that provided follow-up information on number of matters further to its oral evidence session on the Justice Bill on 1 May 2025.

**Agreed:** To schedule an oral evidence session with the Northern Ireland Policing Board’s human rights adviser.

**Agreed:** To seek a copy of the Police Scotland’s Data Ethics Governance Framework.

#### **4.3 — 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.

### **5. Justice Bill — Law Society of Northern Ireland oral evidence**

Council Members of the Law Society of Northern Ireland Eoghan McKenna and Joe McVeigh joined the meeting at 2.24pm.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

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

The witnesses agreed to provide the Committee with a written briefing outlining any concerns regarding the proportionality of the retention periods for biometric material and the impact on the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 codes of practice.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice to provide information on the rationale for the proposed retention periods regarding biometric data being calculated from the point of conviction rather than from when it was obtained.

**Agreed:** To seek clarification on the point from which the retention periods for biometric data are calculated in Scotland.

**Agreed:** To ask the PSNI, in the context of the proposal to repeal vagrancy legislation, for information on how the police currently operationalise this legislation, whether it is used consistently across Northern Ireland, what approach they take to people begging and whether any evidence exists of organised begging.

**Agreed:** To schedule an oral evidence session with street teams and street pastors regarding the proposal to repeal vagrancy legislation.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.44pm.

## **6. Budget 2025-26 — Main Estimates and Estimates Memorandum — Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee noted a written briefing from the Department of Justice on its 2025-26 Main Estimates and a Main Estimates Memorandum, which was submitted to the Department of Finance.

## **7. Improving Health within Criminal Justice Strategy and Action Plan — Outcome of Consultation and Way Forward — progress report**

The Committee considered the Department of Justice and the Department of Health's Improving Health within Criminal Justice Strategy and Action Plan Progress Report.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice for its response to a number of concerns, including social care in prisons and lack of access to it; available appropriate accommodation for people leaving prison; forensic medical officers not having access to health data; and the need for the further roll-out of multi-agency triage teams; and to ask the Department to provide details of the proposal for an interim solution for the provision of personal care in prison, which was rejected by both Departments; and detailed information on the reasons for the delay in progress on the Strategy.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Health to provide details of when the outline business case for personality disorder services will be completed; information on waiting lists for the transfer of prisoners to an acute psychiatric hospital bed; and for a precise time frame for the publication of the research into the current and projected demand for regional ADHD services in Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** To ask the PSNI to provide a copy of its Police Custody Health Needs Assessment.

**Agreed:** To consider an oral evidence session on the report when progressing work regarding mental health in the criminal justice system.

**Agreed:** To forward the report to the Committee for Health and to consider a concurrent meeting with the Committee for Health in the next Assembly session.

## **8. Sentence Reduction for Guilty Pleas Consultation — Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice advising of its intention to launch a public consultation on sentence reduction for guilty pleas. The plan is to launch the consultation on 16 May 2025 and that it will run for eight weeks.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the papers and to consider further when the results of the consultation and the way forward are available.

## **9. Correspondence**

- Correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee to the Northern Ireland Policing Board regarding PSNI fleet management.

**Agreed:** To request a copy of the Northern Ireland Policing Board's response to the Public Accounts Committee.

- A response from the Department of Justice regarding remuneration for Northern Ireland Search and Rescue (NISAR) and details about the review.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice to provide details of the criteria used to determine how funding is allocated; whether the funding criteria will form part of the review; and details of the training involved to ensure NISAR organisations are qualified to the same standard.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A copy of correspondence from the Department of Finance to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding the disaggregation of funding for Programme for Government priorities.
- An update from the Public Accounts Committee on primacy of Northern Ireland Audit Office reports.
- A copy of correspondence from the Committee for The Executive Office to the Department of Justice regarding the provision of information that is relevant to historical institutional abuse.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered an updated 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.

## **11. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's business.

## **12. Any other Business**

There was no other business.

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

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 22 May 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 5.00pm.

**Joanne Bunting MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**