



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 21 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

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Justin McNulty MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Sinéad Ennis MLA

Apologies:

Mr Alex Easton MLA

In Attendance: Caroline Perry (Assembly Clerk)
Kathy O'Hanlon (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Supervisor)
Ryan Feeney (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.05pm in open session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the oral evidence sessions with the Right Honourable Dame Siobhan Keegan, The Lady Chief Justice, and the officials from the Reducing Offending Directorate of the Department of Justice would be recorded by Hansard.

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

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 14 March 2024.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Lady Chief Justice of Northern Ireland

The Right Honourable Dame Siobhan Keegan, The Lady Chief Justice, joined the meeting at 2.07pm.

The Lady Chief Justice provided an overview of her work and issues in the justice system.

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

Ciara Ferguson declared an interest in relation to a previous job as the manager of a family support hub.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 3.00pm.

The Chairperson thanked The Lady Chief Justice for her attendance and she left the meeting.

5. Reducing Offending Directorate: Overview Briefing

Beverly Wall, Director of the Reducing Offending Directorate and Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service; David Kennedy, Director of Prisons; Steven McCourt, Director of Rehabilitation; and Stephen Martin, Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Agency joined the meeting at 3.26pm.

The officials provided an overview of the Reducing Offending Directorate of the Department of Justice.

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

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to follow up on a number of issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the session on the overview of Legislative Consent Motions and Memorandums be held in closed session.

The meeting moved into closed session at 4.28pm.

6. Overview of Legislative Consent Motions and Memorandums

Senior Assistant Clerk to the Committee for Justice, Kathy O'Hanlon, provided an overview of Legislative Consent Motions and Memorandums.

The meeting moved into public session at 4.40pm.

7. Criminal Justice Bill — Proposed Legislative Consent Motions

The Committee considered a paper from the Department of Justice on proposed Legislative Consent Motions in relation to the Criminal Justice Bill, which was introduced in the House of Commons in November 2023.

The Committee considered a number of options, including a proposed backstop option if a potential second Legislative Consent Motion cannot be brought because of time constraints.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reserve its position on the proposed Legislative Consent Motions and to invite Departmental officials to give oral evidence on them at the earliest opportunity and before the first Memorandum is laid.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to provide:

- details of any consultation with relevant justice bodies or stakeholders on the implications of the extension of the provisions to Northern Ireland;
- confirmation that the Department has engaged with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland on Article 2 implications; and

- clarification of how the backstop will work in practice, including how the Committee's agreement on the commencement of provisions made at Westminster will be sought.

8. SL1 Draft Lay Magistrates (Eligibility) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a proposal for a Statutory Rule to set the eligibility criteria for the reappointment of lay magistrates until the age of 75, after they were previously required to retire at the age of 70.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

9. SL1 The Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Application of Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a proposal for a Statutory Rule to amend the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (Application of Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

10. Organised Crime Strategy 2021-24 — Proposal for Addendum Workplan

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice outlining its plan to bring forward an addendum workplan to the Organised Crime Strategy 2021-24, which is due to expire shortly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to provide additional information on the strategy.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the updated Forward Work Programme.

The Committee considered a draft Forward Work Programme from the Department of Justice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson and Clerk would meet to further consider the Department's draft Forward Work Programme.

12. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice regarding SR 2023 No. 220 The Insolvency (Amendment No. 2) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2023 advising that the power to amend eligibility criteria for the Northern Ireland debt relief scheme sits with the Department for the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this item and to ask the Department for the Economy if it has any plans to amend the limits for items to be excluded for the purposes of a Debt Relief Order.

The Committee noted the following:

- ii. a response from the Department of Justice regarding the impact of the increase in the jurisdiction of the small claims court from £3,000 to £5,000;
- iii. a response from the Department of Justice regarding Ulster University's research on Litigants in Person in Civil and Family Proceedings, including an update on work to improve the experience of litigants in person;
- iv. a response from the Department of Justice providing an update on a range of matters that are within the Department's remit relating to Brexit and Northern Ireland;
- v. a response from the Department of Justice regarding the implications of the High Court ruling in relation to the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023;

- vi. a response from the Police Service of Northern Ireland providing an update on progress of the Violence Against Women and Girls action plan;
- vii. a copy of a Committee for Finance briefing on the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund;
- viii. a copy of a Committee for Finance briefing regarding an update on Fujitsu and issues around the Horizon System Post Office scandal;
- ix. correspondence from the Director of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) that included an introduction to the work of the PPS and an invitation to the Chairperson and the Committee to visit its offices. Also included was a copy of correspondence to the previous Justice Committee, dated 14 June 2021, regarding engagement between it and the PPS;
- x. correspondence from the Minister of Justice advising that she has asked the Prison Service Pay Review Body to publish its report on the pay of operational prison grade staff for 2023; and
- xi. correspondence advising that Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland has laid its report 'An Inspection of Community Safety and Local Policing Arrangements in Northern Ireland'.

13. Chairperson's Business

There were no items of Chairperson's business.

14. Any other Business

Committee Member Stewart Dickson advised the Committee of the establishment of an All-Party Group on Access to Justice and encouraged Committee Members to get involved.

15. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Chairperson advised Members that the next Committee meeting will take place on 11 April 2024 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings. Members were advised of an

earlier starting time of 1.30pm to accommodate a closed session in order to receive advice from the Assembly's Bill Office on the implications of the Department's plan to introduce significant provisions to a Bill at Consideration Stage.

The Meeting was adjourned at 4.51pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice