



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 4 December 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Danny Baker MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

In Attendance:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Easton Vance (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.01pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on the Justice Bill and proposed departmental amendments will be recorded by Hansard.

Danny Baker declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works for the Northern Ireland Probation Board.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 27 November 2025.

3. Matters Arising

3.1 The Bar of Northern Ireland – Request for papers

The Committee considered a request from the Bar of Northern Ireland for copies of papers for the oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on 20 November 2025 on Enabling Access to Justice and Taxation Reform; and for the written papers for the two items relating to Legal Aid reform from the meeting on 27 November 2025.

Agreed: To forward the requested papers for both Legal Aid reform items and for Enabling Access to Justice and Taxation Reform to The Bar of Northern Ireland.

3.2 Draft response to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee

The Committee noted a draft response to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) on examples of Westminster Statutory Instruments handled by the Committee.

Agreed: To issue the draft response to the AERC.

4. Justice Bill – Department of Justice oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.06pm:

Dr Veronica Holland, Deputy Director of Rehabilitation and Reducing Offending Division; and

Jenny McAlarney, Policy Official, Reducing Offending Division

The witnesses provided oral evidence on Part 2 of the Justice Bill and planned Departmental amendment on Restorative Justice.

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

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

During the session, the witnesses agreed to provide the following:

- Confirmation of the geographical areas where the restorative justice pilot programmes are being conducted; and
- Copies of the Restorative Justice Protocol, accreditation framework and practice standards for restorative justice organisations.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.00pm.

5. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- Correspondence from the Minister of Justice to the Secretary of State regarding the Renewal of the Direction under section 1A(7) of the Prison Act (NI) 1953, which was forwarded to the Committee by mistake.

Agreed: That the correspondence is withdrawn.

- A response from the Department of Justice to questions the Committee had asked in relation to whether changes to the processes and implementation of the scheme to address unintended consequences relating to the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme can be made locally by the Department of Justice or if they can only be made via legislation at Westminster.

Agreed: To forward the Committee's questions to The Executive Office for response.

- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance copying an update from the Department of Finance on the review of Arm's Length Bodies to all statutory committees; and copy correspondence from the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance to the Minister of Justice on this matter.

Agreed: To request that the Department provides the Committee with a copy of its response to the Committee for Finance.

- A response from the Public Prosecution Service to questions the Committee had asked on why so many cases related to non-fatal

strangulation are being referred to the Magistrates' Court, rather than the Crown Court.

Agreed: To seek clarification on why no sentencing guidelines were in place for the commencement of the offence of Non-Fatal Strangulation; why the Public Prosecution Service's internal guidance was not updated until July 2025 when the Court of Appeal verdict was in February 2025; and whether cases heard between February and July 2025 may have been heard in the wrong court and, if so, what right to recourse victims may have.

- Correspondence from a victim raising issues in relation to the Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme (PRVIS).

Agreed: To respond to the individual outlining the work that the Committee is conducting to seek answers from the Department on prisoner release matters.

- Further correspondence from an individual in relation to access for students to The Bar of Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To note the correspondence at this time and consider further when the paper commissioned from Assembly Research and Information Service is available.

- Correspondence from an individual requesting that the Committee give consideration to issues in the handling of Legal Complaints in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To forward the correspondence to Department of Justice, the Department of Finance, the Legal Services Oversight Commissioner and the Law Society of Northern Ireland for their views on the

issues raised and their response to the specific questions in the correspondence.

- An invitation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Agreed: That Members will RSVP directly if they wish to attend.

- Chairpersons' Liaison Group - Guidance for Departments on delegated legislation.

Agreed: To seek clarification from the Department of Justice on whether proposals for Statutory Rules (SL1s) are being sent to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and Equality Commission for their views on the proposed Statutory Rule.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Responses from the Department of Justice, the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service to the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report on the PSNI's use of Community Resolution Notices.
- Committee for Finance – 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – October position.
- PSNI - Response on Out of Court Disposals team lead contact
- PSNI - Response on Unlawfully at large individuals (release of images)
- An individual regarding a personal matter.

6. Forward Work Programme

6.1 Lady Chief Justice – Response regarding delays in the criminal justice system and taxation

The Committee noted a response from the Lady Chief Justice advising that she would be content to meet with the Committee to discuss delays in the criminal justice system and taxation reform.

6.2 Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the latest draft of the Committee's forward work programme and agreed to proceed with the proposed schedule.

7. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

8. Any Other Business

Danny Baker left the meeting at 4:15pm.

Doug Beattie raised the matter of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) no longer publishing findings of employment tribunals if a Non-Disclosure Agreement has been signed by parties, and its potentially negative impact on future employment opportunities.

Agreed: To request clarity from the Department of Justice on why the findings of employment tribunals are not published by the NICTS, and ask whether the potential impact on the future employability of individuals bound by NDAs has been considered.

9. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 11 December at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.18pm.

Emma Sheerin MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Justice

11 December 2025