



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 27 November 2025**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:**

Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Danny Baker MLA

Doug Beattie MLA

**Apologies:**

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 2.02pm in public session.*

The Chairperson welcomed Emma Sheerin MLA as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee and expressed thanks to outgoing Deputy Chairperson Deirdre Hargey MLA.

**Agreed:** To write to Deirdre Hargey MLA expressing Members' appreciation of her contribution to the work of the Committee throughout her tenure as Deputy Chairperson.

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence session on the Justice Bill with the PSNI and with Department of Justice officials on the Sentencing Bill 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**

As above.

## **2. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 20 November 2025.

### **3. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **4. Justice Bill – Police Service of Northern Ireland oral evidence**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.06pm:

Anthony McNally, Assistant Chief Constable, Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI);

Jacqui Gillespie, Chief Inspector, PSNI; and

Jeff Logan, Grade 7, PSNI

The witnesses provided oral evidence on a number of parts of the Justice Bill and planned Departmental amendments.

*Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.08pm.*

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

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

- Details of the PSNI's understanding of the demarcations between the authority and responsibilities of the Chief Constable and the new proposed Biometrics Commissioner.
- Information on whether the jurisdictions used to benchmark against in terms of live links have a review mechanism on the use of live links in custody contexts and what quality assurance methods they use.
- Details of the views of the project board regarding DNA and biometric data collection for fixed penalty notices, including the offence of breach of the peace which may result from parading or public protest.

- Clarification on whether the annual figures for begging and trespass with intent offence have been declining, increasing or consistent year-on-year since 2018.
- Details of where the PSNI believes that gaps in police powers will occur under the current proposals in the Repeal of Vagrancy amendment.
- A copy of the guidance relating to holding children in custody.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

**Agreed:** That the PSNI will attend the Committee on 15 January 2026 to discuss any matters in the Bill and proposed amendments which were not covered during the evidence session.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.02pm.

## **5. Sentencing Bill – Pre-legislative scrutiny – Department of Justice oral evidence**

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 4.02pm:

Andrew Dawson, Director, Criminal Justice Policy and Legislation Division (CJPLD), Access to Justice Directorate;

Angela Bell, Sentencing Bill Manager, CJPLD, Access to Justice Directorate;

Máire Sheehan Legal and Legislative Support, CJPLD, Access to Justice Directorate; and

Michael McAvoy, Director, Community Safety Division, Safer Communities Directorate.

The officials provided oral evidence on the matters that are expected to be included in the forthcoming Sentencing Bill.

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

*Brian Kingston left the meeting at 4.57pm.*

During the session, the officials agreed to provide the Committee with the following:

- A paper outlining the reasons for the delay in introducing the Bill and what the specific areas/aspects of the Bill are which have led to the delay.
- Details of the evidence base and relevant statistics from other jurisdictions that was used to determine the protected groups to which the statutory aggravator model for hate crime will apply, including clarification of whether any consideration was given to online abuse and crime; and how the evidence base shaped the decision to not include reference to gender, at this time, as a statutory aggravator in the proposed hate crime model.
- Further information on the use of victim personal statements and the ability of a victim to read their statement into the record in court proceedings.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 5.20pm.

*Connie Egan left the meeting at 5.21pm.*

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

### **6.1 Department of Justice – Response regarding Delegated Powers within the Justice Bill and amendments**

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to questions the Committee had raised in relation to Delegated Powers within the Justice Bill and proposed amendments.

## **6.2 Department of Justice – Response regarding the Justice Bill: Removal of Defence of Reasonable Chastisement**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing follow up information that officials had agreed to provide during the joint oral evidence session with the Department of Health on the removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement.

## **6.3 Department of Justice – Response regarding the Justice Bill: Repeal of Vagrancy Legislation amendment**

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to questions the Committee had asked following the oral evidence session with Professor Kevin Brown on the planned Repeal of Vagrancy amendment.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice to clarify when it expects to be in a position to provide the Committee with its views on Prof. Brown's paper on the Repeal of Vagrancy amendment.

## **6.4 Homeless Connect – Response regarding the Repeal of Vagrancy legislation**

The Committee noted a response from Homeless Connect to the Committee's request for follow up information to their oral evidence session on the Repeal of Vagrancy legislation.

**Agreed:** To forward the Department of Justice response to Prof. Brown's Repeal of Vagrancy paper, as well as the Hansard report of today's oral evidence session with the PSNI on the Justice Bill and amendments, to Homeless Connect when available.

## **6.5 Justice Bill – Requests for further information table**

The Committee noted the latest draft of the document prepared by the Committee team which tracks Committee requests and responses received in relation to the Justice Bill.

## **7. SL1 The County Court Fees (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee considered a proposal to amend the County Court Fees Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to provide general inflationary uplifts to court fees during the period 2026-2029 and the introduction of new fees in the Small Claims Court, which the Department advised aims to work towards a position of full cost recovery in the provision of civil and family court business. The rule is not subject to any Assembly procedure.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

## **8. SL1 The Magistrates' Courts Fees (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee considered a proposal to amend the Magistrates' Courts Fees Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to provide general inflationary uplifts to court fees during the period 2026-2029 as well as the introduction of new fees to the Magistrates' Courts, which the Department advised aims to work towards a position of full cost recovery in the provision of civil and family court business. The rule is not subject to any Assembly procedure.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

**9. SL1 The Court of Judicature Fees (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee considered a proposal to amend the Court of Judicature Fees Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to provide general inflationary uplifts to court fees during the period 2026-2029, which the Department advised aims to work towards a position of full cost recovery in the provision of civil and family court business. The rule is not subject to any procedure.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

**10. SL1 The Court of Judicature (Non-Contentious Probate) Fees (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee considered a proposal to amend the Court of Judicature (Non-Contentious Probate) Fees Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to provide inflationary uplifts to court fees during the period 2026-2029, which the Department advised aims to work towards a position of full cost recovery in the provision of civil and family court business. The rule is not subject to any procedure.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

**11. SL1 The Family Proceedings Fees (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee considered a proposal to amend the Family Proceedings Fees Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to provide general inflationary uplifts to court fees during the period 2026-2029 as well as the introduction of a new fee in matrimonial proceedings, which the Department advised aims to work towards a position of full cost recovery in the provision of civil and family court business. The rule is not subject to any procedure.



**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

## **12. SL1 The Judgment Enforcement Fees (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee considered a proposal to amend the Judgment Enforcement Fees Order (Northern Ireland) 1996 to provide general inflationary uplifts to court fees during the period 2026-2029 as well as changes to fees for enforcement of money judgments, which the Department advised aims to work towards a position of full cost recovery in the provision of civil and family court business. The rule is not subject to any procedure.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

The Committee noted a response from the Department to the request for further information relating to the outcome of the consultation on changes to court fees.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice to confirm it has conducted as thorough an evaluation as possible of the potential impact of the increases to court fees.

## **13. Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1989 - Outcome of the consultation on the list of qualifying offences as specified under Article 53a – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice on the outcome of the consultation on the list of qualifying offences as specified under Article 53A of the Police and Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1989.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department for the final list of qualifying offences and whether the views of the Northern Ireland

Human Rights Commission have been sought on this matter.

**14. Victim engagement in the parole process – Consultation on measures for improvement – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice advising of its intention to consult on measures aimed at enhancing victim engagement within the parole review process.

**Agreed:** To consider further when the results of the consultation and proposed way forward are available.

**15. Legal Aid Reform - Improving impact and value for money by reforming scope and merits testing - Consultation - Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice giving notice of its intention to launch an engagement paper to initiate a structured process of stakeholder engagement on a range of options for legal services reform commencing in January 2026.

**Agreed:** To consider further when the results of the engagement process and proposed way forward are available.

**16. Legal Aid Reform - A simpler, fairer approach to means testing – Consultation - Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice giving notice that it intends to launch an engagement paper on a simpler, faster, fairer approach to financial eligibility testing for legal aid.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice whether a targeted list of stakeholders has been identified with whom the Department plans to engage with directly on both legal aid reform consultations.

#### **17. Budget 2025-2026 - December Monitoring – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee noted a written briefing from the Department of Justice on the Department's 2025-26 December Monitoring position submitted to the Department of Finance on 20 November 2025.

#### **18. Correspondence**

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- A call for Statutory Committee views on the RHI (Closure of Non-Domestic Scheme) Bill from the Committee for the Economy.

**Agreed:** That the Committee return a nil response to the Clerk of the Committee for the Economy.

- Further correspondence from Causeway Coast Dog Rescue requesting reconsideration of Committee's decision not to review or investigate animal welfare in NI Prison Service facilities.

**Agreed:** To respond reiterating the Committee's position that it is unable to conduct a review or inquiry, but advising that Members may, if they wish, raise this matter during any future briefings with Northern Ireland Prison Service officials.

- Further correspondence from an individual regarding personal matters.

**Agreed:** That all future correspondence which raise no new issues will not be included in meeting packs, but will be indicated in the Committee's correspondence memo and made available to any Member who wishes to receive a copy.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice Response – Aarhus Convention response to individual.
- Department of Justice - Executive News Service publication of two Domestic Homicide Reviews: 'Maeve' and Alyson Nelson.
- Public Accounts Committee - Memorandum of Reply – Reducing adult reoffending in Northern Ireland.
- House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee Copy Correspondence to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Ministry of Justice – Sentencing Bill (UK Government Bill).
- Lady Chief Justice - Media in Court Pilot Leaflet.
- Ofcom invitation to Plan of Work consultation event.

## **19. Forward Work Programme**

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

**Agreed:** To schedule the Finance update (including December Monitoring Round) for 11 December; and to ask the Department of Justice to reschedule the Electronic Monitoring update for a suitable date in January.

## **20. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's business.

## **21. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

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

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 4 December at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.45pm.

**Paul Frew MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**

**4 December 2025**