Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 12 November 2026

Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:	Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)
	Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
	Doug Beattie MLA
	Maurice Bradley MLA
	Connie Egan MLA
	Ciara Ferguson MLA
	Aoife Finnegan MLA
	Brian Kingston MLA
	Patsy McGlone MLA
In Attendance:	Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)
	Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
	Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
	Paula Morrow (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 1.32pm in closed session.

Agreed: That the meeting begin in closed session to continue deliberations on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

Aoife Finnegan joined the meeting at 1.34pm.

2. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Deliberations

Liz Marsh, Assembly Clerk, Bill Office, was in attendance to provide advice to the Committee.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 1.40pm.

The Committee discussed Part 7 and Part 8 of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, as well as a number of draft Committee amendments to the Bill that the Committee agreed to consider.

The Committee also noted a number of papers from the Department of Justice providing further information on areas of the Bill and views on several potential amendments to the Bill which the Committee is exploring.

Liz Marsh left the meeting at 3.33pm.

The meeting moved to public session at 3.33pm.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 November 2026.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime oral evidence

The following witness joined the meeting at 3.35pm:

Geraldine Hanna, Commissioner for Victims of Crime Designate.

The witness provided oral evidence on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.

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

Ciara Ferguson and Aoife Finnegan left the meeting at 4.32pm.

Doug Beattie left the meeting at 4.34pm.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Commissioner Designate and she left the meeting at 4.40pm.

6. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Recording of decisions

The Chairperson put on record a number of actions agreed by Members during the Committee's deliberations on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill in closed session on 10 November and at today's meeting.

At the meeting on 10 November, the Committee agreed:

- To ask the Bill Clerk to draft a standalone misogyny aggravator, in line with the Committee's previous agreement, on division, on 22 October to explore such an amendment.
- After division, that the Committee would not table an amendment to add transgender to the list of aggravators at Clause 33.
- After division, to ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment to increase the maximum period of imprisonment at Clause 41 from 20 years to life.

At today's meeting, the Committee agreed:

- To consider an amendment to restrict the use of character references by courts at sentencing for certain offences further when the requested legal advice is available.
- To table a Committee amendment to permit the recording of sentencing hearings in the Crown Court or Court of Appeal, subject to consideration of the requested legal advice.
- To forward the draft Committee amendment to permit the recording of sentencing hearings in the Crown Court or Court of Appeal to the Lady Chief Justice for information.
- To table a Committee amendment to Part 2 of the Bill to add treatment for addiction to gambling as an additional requirement that a court may impose when making an Suspended Sentence Order.
- To table a Committee amendment to create a power to compel an offender convicted of an offence in the Crown Court to attend court for sentencing.
- To table a Committee amendment to insert the presence of a child as an aggravator into the new Schedule A1 of the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001.
- To table a Committee amendment to add two new clauses to the Bill to create a standalone aggravator of misogyny and consequences of aggravation by misogyny.

- To table two Committee amendments to replace the proposed maximum penalty of 20 years' imprisonment with one of life imprisonment for the serious road traffic offences of causing death, or grievous bodily injury, by dangerous driving (Clause 41(2)) and causing death, or grievous bodily injury, by careless driving when under influence of drink or drugs (Clause 41(3)).
- To ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment that will include in the Bill those aspects of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Act 2020 (known as 'Helen's Law') which require for the Parole Board to take into account the failure to disclose the identity of a child or children in images of sexual abuse when considering the release of a convicted child sex offender.
- To write to the Department of Justice to request: a detailed assessment of the resource implications of a provision to provide free access to sentencing remarks for victims in Crown Court cases; whether this should also apply to Court of Appeal cases which deal with sentencing; and views on a timeframe within which sentencing remarks must be provided to victims that will allow them to properly consider the remarks and make a request to the Director of Public Prosecutions within the timescales allowed for referral for unduly lenient sentences.
- That the Bill Clerk will consider the application of the amendment for free access to sentencing remarks to victims to the Court of Appeal.
- To write to the Department of Justice to ask how 'victims' or 'nominated persons' should be defined in any amendment to make provision for a victim's right to read their Victim Personal Statement in court; to request clarification of the stage of the process that victims' statements are normally read out in court; and to ask if the Department is content that the draft amendment considered by the Committee includes the text "grant such permission unless the court considers that there are compelling reasons not to do so."
- To ask the Bill Clerk to draft a Committee amendment to change the current opt-in procedure for the Victim Information Scheme to an opt-out scheme.

- To forward the text of all currently agreed Committee amendments to the Bill to the Department of Justice for information.

7. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Written papers

7.1 – RalSe Bill Papers Scrutiny Questions

The Committee considered a memo from Committee staff compiling various scrutiny questions and areas that the Committee may wish to seek further information on that were included in the Assembly's Research and Information Service's (RaISe) Bill paper and the Review of Costs paper on the Victim and Witnesses of Crime Bill.

Agreed: To forward the questions to the Department of Justice and the other bodies, as appropriate, for a response to the matters raised.

7.2 – Mental Health Champion – written submission

The Committee noted that Professor Siobhan O'Neill, the Mental Health Champion, had advised that she is unavailable to provide oral evidence on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill at the time proposed in the Committee's forward work programme. Members noted that, in her written submission on the Bill, the Mental Health Champion had questioned whether sufficient safeguards exist to prevent therapeutic notes, created for treatment purposes, being used in ways that risk misunderstanding the nature and trauma of mental illness.

Agreed: To forward the Mental Health Champion's written submission on the Bill to the Department of Justice for a response to the concerns raised.

8. Justice Bill – Further Consideration Stage

The Committee considered correspondence from a representative of the Motorcycle Action Group UK, forwarded to the Committee by Mr Patsy McGlone

MLA, in relation to an amendment to the Justice Bill made at Consideration Stage regarding the misuse of scramblers and e-scooters in public places.

Agreed: To forward the correspondence to the Department of Justice to seek its views on the issue raised.

Doug Beattie returned to the meeting at 4.48pm.

9. Financial Services and Markets Bill – Legislative Consent Memorandum – Consideration of draft Committee Report

The Committee considered a draft report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum and the draft Legislative Consent Motion laid before the Assembly on 23 October 2026 to seek legislative consent for relevant provisions in the Financial Services and Markets Bill

Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers

The Committee considered the Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers stand part of the Report.

Background

The Committee considered the Background section at paragraphs 1 to 6 as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Background section stand part of the Report.

Provisions which require Legislative Consent

The Committee considered the Provisions which require Legislative Consent section at paragraphs 7 to 11 as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Provisions which require Legislative Consent section stand part of the Report.

Committee Consideration

The Committee considered the Committee Consideration section at paragraphs 12 to 19 as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Committee Consideration section stand part of the Report.

Conclusion

The Committee considered the Conclusion section at paragraph 20 as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Conclusion section stand part of the Report.

Appendices

The Committee considered the Appendices section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Appendices stand part of the Report.

Agreed: The Committee was content for the minutes of today's meeting to be added to Appendix 2, when agreed.

Agreed: The Committee was content for the Report on the Financial Services and Markets Bill Legislative Consent Memorandum to be published and issued to all MLAs.

10. SL1 Compensation for Miscarriages of Justice (Alteration of Overall Compensation Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered proposal from the Department of Justice to make a Statutory Rules under powers conferred by section 133A of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, which will increase the statutory compensation awards payable as compensation for miscarriages of justice in Northern Ireland, in cases administered by the Department of Justice, by 30%.

The Rule will be subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure and is proposed to come into operation on 31 March 2027.

Agreed: To issue a call for views on the proposed Statutory Rule using the standard survey; to publish the SL1 and the copies of the proposed Statutory Rules on the Committee's website; and consider the proposed Statutory Rules at the meeting on 10 December 2026.

11. Probation Board for Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule – Addendum

The Committee considered an addendum to the Probation Board's Retention and Disposal Schedule which makes a number of amendments to the Schedule regarding Public Protection Arrangements in Northern Ireland (PPANI) Category 1 Service Users and for some administrative functions.

The addendum is subject to the negative resolution procedure and the statutory period will end on 7 December 2026.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the addendum to the Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To inform the Committee for Communities of the decision on this matter, as the Public Records Office for NI falls within the remit of the Department for Communities.

12. Youth Justice Agency – Performance Impact Report 2025-26

The Committee noted copy of the fifth Youth Justice Agency Performance Impact Report covering the 2025-26 year.

Emma Sheerin left the meeting at 4.54pm.

13. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- Separate responses from the Department of Justice regarding the Display of Flags and Emblems Bill and on the Tree Protection Bill.

  Agreed: To forward both responses to the Committee for Infrastructure to support their scrutiny of these Bills.

- A response from the Department of Justice to correspondence from The Bar of Northern Ireland raising concerns about proposals for taxation reform.

  Agreed: To forward the response to The Bar for information.

- A report by Criminal Justice Inspection NI on An Inspection of Adults Safeguarding Arrangements in NI's Criminal Justice System.

  Agreed: To ask the Department (including its relevant agencies), Department of Health, the PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service for NI and the Probation Board for NI for comment on the report's findings and recommendations.

- Correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office seeking views on the Age Discrimination (Goods, Facilities and Services) Bill.

  Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for its views on any aspect of the Bill it considered to be relevant to the justice sector.

Emma Sheerin returned the meeting at 4.57pm.

- Further correspondence from an individual regarding ongoing concerns about family justice, child welfare, safeguarding, domestic abuse and the treatment of protective mothers within Northern Ireland's family justice and social services systems.

  Agreed: To respond to the individual to reiterate that the Committee does consider this an important matter, but

due to the demands of its current legislative programme the Committee is unable to facilitate a meeting or conduct further detailed work on the issued raised, and that it will be included in the Committee's Legacy Report.

- Notification from the Department of Justice of a public consultation on the review of the Offender Levy Rate.

  Agreed: To note the consultation and consider further when the outcome of the consultation and way forward are available.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Committee for the Executive Office – Copy correspondence to Department of Justice regarding communities transitioning away from paramilitarism.
- Committee for Finance – Visual Arts Ireland Report – "The Arts: Our Role in the Future of NI".
- Individual – Further correspondence regarding a Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety Report from November 2000.
- Northern Ireland Fiscal Council – Retention and use of income: How almost £3.5 billion of departmental spending power depends on the Budget Act.
- Separate items of copy correspondence from an individual to the Lady Chief Justice, the Equality Commission and Jim Allister MP regarding support for self-litigants with disabilities.

14. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Department's revised forward work programme for November and the latest draft of the Committee's forward work programme.

Agreed: To update the Committee's forward work programme to reflect the Department's revised programme.

Agreed: To reschedule the oral evidence session with Voice and Justice Alliance on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill for 1 December.

15. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

16. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

17. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on Tuesday 17 November at 9.30am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.00pm.

Paul Frew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Justice
19 November 2026