



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 16 April 2026

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

In Attendance:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.03pm in public session.

The Deputy Chairperson noted that a number of Committee Members are members of the All Party Group on Access to Justice.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 26 March 2026.

3. Matters Arising

3.1 British Association for Shooting and Conservation correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) in Northern Ireland, requesting a copy of a Department of Justice paper that was considered by the Committee on 26 March 2026, which outlined the consultation on proposals for amendments to firearms licensing fees and the banded system.

Agreed: To seek the Department's views, as a courtesy, on forwarding the paper and, if there are no concerns, to forward the paper to BASC for information.

Agreed: To schedule an oral evidence session with BASC on the Department's proposed amendments to firearms licensing fees and the banded system.

3.2 Department of Justice update on Firearms Licensing Consultation

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Justice advising that the consultation on the proposed amendments to firearms licensing fees and the banded system has been launched and will close on 29 May.

Agreed: To proceed with an oral evidence session with Departmental officials on the proposed amendments to firearms licensing fees and the banded system.

3.3 Department of Justice – Justice Bill Deepfake amendment update

The Committee noted that an update on the Justice Minister's planned Deepfake amendment to the Justice Bill had been circulated to Members via email before today's meeting.

Agreed: To consider the update at the next meeting, once all Members have had an opportunity to properly consider the content of the update.

4. Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings – Research and Information Service oral briefing

The following Research Officer joined the meeting at 2.16pm:

Judith Bailie, Research Officer, Assembly Research and Information Service (RalSe)

The Research Officer provided an oral briefing on their recent RalSe paper, 'Rapid Literature Review: Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings.'

Aoife Finnegan joined the meeting at 2.18pm.

The briefing was followed by a question-and-answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the Research Officer and she left the meeting at 3.10pm.

Agreed: To forward RaISe’s Literature Review on Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings, as well as the responses to the paper from Minister of Justice, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Finance, to the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland (CVOONI) ahead of her upcoming oral evidence session with the Committee.

Agreed: To seek clarification from CVOONI on why the Department for Communities (DfC) is not included in the Family Court Pilot Task and Finish Working Group given that areas that may be relevant to family court matters, such as child maintenance, fall within DfC’s policy responsibilities.

Agreed: To post papers relevant to the Committee’s consideration of family court matters on the Committee’s webpage.

4.3 Correspondence from an individual regarding family court issues

The Committee considered correspondence from a father in relation to his experience of the family court system, raising concerns about the impact that the family court system and Child Maintenance Service has on fathers; and suggesting several matters that the Committee may wish to consider further, including legislative reform to establish the presumption of equal parenting and a review of Family Court practices to ensure fairness and impartiality.

Agreed: To forward, with the individual’s permission, the correspondence to the Committee for Communities for any action they may wish to take,

given that Child Maintenance falls within the policy responsibility of the Department for Communities.

Agreed: To forward RaISe’s Literature Review on Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings to the individual and provide an update on the Committee’s consideration of family court matters.

5. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Proposal for Committee Stage and Committee Stage extension

The Committee considered a proposed timetable for the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill. Members were advised that Standing Orders provide that, before the conclusion of the 30 working days, a motion may be made in the Assembly by the Chairperson of the Committee, or the Deputy Chairperson on his behalf, to extend the period of the Committee Stage. The motion must specify a date to which the Committee Stage will be extended.

Members discussed options for the length of the extension to the Committee Stage of the Bill.

The Committee considered a motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill to 27 November 2026.

Agreed: That the following motion to be lodged in the Business Office:

“That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 27 November 2026, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill (NIA 26/22- 27).”

Agreed: That the Chairperson will request that the debate on the motion be scheduled on 27 or 28 April 2026.

5.3 Chairperson’s letter on the call for evidence

The Committee considered a draft letter from the Chairperson which it is proposed is issued to the letters’ pages or to letters’ editors of daily and weekly newspapers towards the halfway point of the call for evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the letter as drafted.

6. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Written papers

6.1 – Department of Justice written paper – Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice providing further information in relation to aspects of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill that officials had agreed to provide during the oral evidence session on the Bill on 5 March 2026.

6.2 – Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Delegated Powers Memorandum

The Committee noted the Delegated Powers Memorandum for the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

Agreed: To forward the Memorandum to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for advice on the delegated powers in the Bill.

6.3 – Emmet Doyle (Aontu) – Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill amendments

The Committee noted forwarded correspondence from a local area representative of Aontú requesting that the Committee give consideration to a number of amendments to the Sentencing Bill.

Agreed: To treat the correspondence as written evidence on the Bill and to consider further when the call for evidence has closed and the Committee is considering its next steps.

7. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Pre-legislative scrutiny – Written papers

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Justice advising that the Justice Minister has recently written to NI Assembly Commission and the NI Assembly Audit Committee to advise of her intention to include provision in the upcoming Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill to add the substantive Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime, which is being established through the Bill, to the list of authorities that fall under the remit of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

8. Justice Bill – Written papers

8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 – Bill Office – Justice Bill: Technical Updates to Committee amendments

The Committee considered the text of two minor technical changes prepared by the Bill Clerk to improve the text of the Committee's agreed amendments to the Justice Bill.

Agreed: That the two changes are made to the Committee's amendments to the Justice Bill.

Agreed: That the amendments that have been agreed by the Committee will be tabled in the Chairperson's name.

8.4, 8.5 and 8.6 – Department of Justice response - Review of the Use of Live Links in custody and in courts and tribunals

The Committee considered a further response from the Department of Justice to assist its consideration of whether to table Committee amendments to the Justice Bill to include provision to review the use of Live Links in courts and tribunals.

After discussion, Members indicated that they would be content not to proceed with a Committee amendment to make provision for the review of Live Links in courts and tribunals, but that existing reporting processes could instead be improved.

Agreed: To ask the Department that the current monitoring and review mechanisms for Live Links in courts and tribunals are improved, made more robust and expanded to include qualitative data, including the evaluation of the operation of Live Links from an end-user perspective.

8.7 – Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland – Pre-accreditation inspection of restorative justice providers

The Committee noted a response from the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) to its request for the organisation's views on a potential Committee amendment to the Justice Bill to introduce a requirement for a pre-accreditation inspection for new restorative justice providers and on the potential impact this might have on CJINI. The response outlined a number of areas that CJINI feels would need due consideration regarding the proposal.

Agreed: To invite officials from the Department of Justice to provide oral evidence on the revised arrangements and accreditation process for adult restorative justice following completion of the first cadre of accreditations under the new process, including how the outcomes of the new arrangements compare to earlier accreditation arrangements before 2016, when CJINI did deliver pre-accreditation checks.

8.8 – An individual – Secure accommodation in the Children Order 1995

The Committee considered further correspondence from an individual regarding their response to the Committee's Justice Bill Call for Evidence. The individual asked whether Members were satisfied with an earlier response from the Health Minister regarding a recommendation in a historic Health Committee report about the provision of secure care accommodation. The individual also asked if it was within the Committee's remit to progress an FOI request to Claire Hanna MP.

Agreed: To respond to the individual to advise that it would be for the Health Minister to determine how to take forward the recommendations in Committee reports; that the Committee was content with the update provided in the Health Minister's earlier correspondence; that progressing FOI requests are not within the remit of the Committee; and that MPs are not public authorities for the purposes of the FOI Act.

9. Adult Restorative Justice – Update on accreditation process outcome - Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing an update on the revised arrangements and accreditation process for adult restorative justice.

10. Out of Court Disposals – Proposed expansion – Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice which provided the Police Federation's response to the Department's consultation on its proposal to expand Out of Court Disposals (OOCs). The Department's paper also provided Members with further information on engagement that it has had with the PSNI on the expansions, following its consideration of the Police Federation's response.

Pasty McGlone left the meeting at 4.00pm.

The Committee held deliberation on whether it was now content with the Department's proposal in respect of the expansion of OOCs to give powers to the PSNI to issue Penalty Notices for the offences of assault on a Police Officer.

Members of the Democratic Unionist Party and Ulster Unionist Party stated that they were not presently content to support the proposed expansion.

Members of Sinn Fein and the Alliance Party expressed that they were content to support the expansion.

Question put:

That the Committee is content with the Department's proposal in respect of the expansion of out of court disposals to give powers to the PSNI to issue Penalty Notices for the offence of assault on a Police Officer.

The Committee divided: Ayes: 4; Noes: 4

Ayes: Emma Sheerin, Connie Egan, Ciara Ferguson, Aoife Finnegan.

Noes: Paul Frew, Doug Beattie, Maurice Bradley, Brian Kingson.

The motion fell.

Agreed: To inform the Department of the outcome of the Committee's vote and that the Committee therefore did not reach an agreed position on the proposal to give powers to the PSNI to issue Penalty Notices for the offence of assault on a Police Officer.

11. Review of the Northern Ireland Policing Board - Response to the Independent Review - Department of Justice written paper

The Committee considered the Department of Justice's response to the Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, due for publication later this month.

Agreed: To ask the Department whether it plans to include legislative provision to transfer the administration of the injury on duty and ill health retirement schemes from the NI Policing Board to the PSNI in any Departmental Bills being progressed in this mandate; to clarify what the Department actually means by 'accept in principle'; and to provide a breakdown of actions it intends to take in relation to those recommendations that have been accepted in principle.

12. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- Responses from the Minister of Justice, the PSNI Chief Constable and the Chair of the NI Policing Board to the recent Police Ombudsman's Report regarding Abuse of Position for sexual purposes by PSNI Officers.

Members were advised that this report has also been the subject of discussion by the Committee for the Executive Office (TEO), which had agreed to explore holding a concurrent meeting with this Committee to hear from the Police Ombudsman and the PSNI.

Agreed: To hold a concurrent meeting with the Committee for the Executive Office on the Ombudsman's report.

Agreed: To forward the responses from the Minister of Justice, the PSNI and the Policing Board to the Committee for the Executive Office for information.

- A response from the Minister of Justice to correspondence forwarded from Pam Cameron MLA, on behalf of the McCollum family, regarding the impact of the ongoing strike by the Criminal Bar Association on court proceedings.

Agreed: To forward the Minister's response to Pam Cameron MLA for information.

- A response from the Policing Board explaining why Guidance for Medical Practitioners when evaluating cases for Injury on Duty awards was withdrawn and then reinstated for public access. The Committee also noted further correspondence from an individual on this issue.

Agreed: To forward the response to the individual who raised the matters with the Committee.

- A copy of the training materials provided to the Committee in October 2024 in relation to the training of Selected Medical Practitioners under the Police Service of Northern Ireland Injury on Duty framework, which an individual had requested were issued to them.

Agreed: To ask the Department to confirm that it is content that the papers are forwarded to the individual for information, and if content, to forward them to the individual.

- Further correspondence to the Committee from an individual which asks a number of further questions in view of the Department's response to previous

correspondence regarding the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Injury on Duty awards published on 10 March 2020, and subsequent evidence provided to the Committee by officials from the Department of Justice.

Agreed: To forward the further correspondence and additional questions to the Department for response.

- Correspondence from the Committee for Education seeking the Committee's views on any relevant cross-cutting scrutiny points within the General Teaching Council NI Bill.

Agreed: To provide a nil response to the Committee for Education.

- A response from the Director General of the NI Prison Service to the Committee's congratulations on a successful outcome to an unannounced CJINI inspection of Magilligan Prison. The Director General extended an invite to the Committee to visit Magilligan Prison.

Agreed: To schedule a Committee visit to Magilligan prison at a suitable occasion in the Committee's forward work programme.

- Correspondence from an individual raising concerns about child access to the accused and highlighting the need for legislation akin to Jade's Law in Northern Ireland, which automatically suspends the parental responsibility of individuals convicted of the murder or voluntarily manslaughter of a partner with whom they share children.

Agreed: To forward the correspondence to the Department of Justice and to the Department of Finance for comment and to ask if any policy development work has been undertaken in this area.

- Further correspondence from an individual on the issue of support for litigants in person, particularly around the adjustments for disabled individuals.

Agreed: To forward to the Department for response to the further issues raised in the correspondence.

- Correspondence from an individual raising concerns about the transparency and accountability of the PSNI following a recent judgment by the Court of Appeal in *The Police Service of Northern Ireland vs Information Commissioner*.

Agreed: To write to the Department of Justice and the PSNI to request that the Committee be provided with the information requested by the Information Commissioner from the PSNI on 22 May 2020 regarding gold mining in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice - Response regarding the Electronic Monitoring Transformation Project.
- Department of Justice, PPS and PSNI responses regarding the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's report on 'Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts: An inspection of their use and operation'.
- An individual - Copy correspondence to the Department of Justice requesting they reconsider their Subject Access Request.
- Committee for Finance - Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn for the month of February.
- Committee for TEO - Copy correspondence to the Department of Justice requesting information on work undertaken in relation to the Armed Forces Covenant; and a copy of the response from the Department of Justice to the Committee for TEO on this matter.

- Committee for TEO - Copy correspondence to the Department of Justice requesting an update on work undertaken in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls framework.
- Committee for Infrastructure - Copy correspondence to the Minister of Justice regarding the impact that court awards have upon insurance premiums.
- RaiSe - Public Finance Scrutiny Unit Briefing Paper Series on the Draft Budget 2026 2029/30.
- EquiSent - Offer to send presentation on “Pre Sentence Reporting Innovation”.
- NI Audit Office - Public Reporting Programme 2026-27.
- NI Youth Assembly - Update on the activities in March.
- Nina Briggs - Response providing a written briefing on modern slavery and sexual exploitation.
- Investment Strategy Northern Ireland - Investing Activity Report for Department of Justice, March 2026.

13. Forward Work Programme

13.1 Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the latest draft of the Committee’s forward work programme and changes to a number of items that had been provisionally scheduled by the Department of Justice.

14. Chairperson’s Business

There was no Chairperson’s business.

15. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

16. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 23 April at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.23pm.

Paul Frew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

23 April 2026