



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 12 June 2025**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:**

Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Danny Baker MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Justin McNulty MLA

Doug Beattie MLA

**In Attendance:**

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Stephen Corr (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

**Agreed:** That the meeting should begin in closed session for a briefing from Assembly Legal Services regarding Part 3 of the Justice Bill and the proposed Live Links amendment.

*The meeting commenced at 2:04pm in closed session.*

**1. Apologies.**

There were no apologies.

**2. Justice Bill — Live Links proposed amendments — Assembly Legal Services oral briefing.**

Simon Kelly, a Legal Adviser with Assembly's Legal Services Office, joined the meeting at 2:05pm.

The official provided an analysis of Part 3 of the Justice Bill and the proposed Live Links amendment to the Bill.

*Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:06pm*

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

*Justin McNulty joined the meeting at 2:28pm*

*Stephen Dunne left the meeting at 2:32pm*

The Chairperson thanked the official and he left the meeting at 2:33pm.

The Committee discussed recent incidents of violence and anti-social behaviour.

**Agreed:** That the Chairperson will put the Committee's views on record in public session.

*Stephen Dunne returned to the meeting at 2:40pm.*

*The meeting moved into public session at 2:43pm.*

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairperson expressed condemnation of recent incidents of violence and anti-social behaviour and endorsed the Northern Ireland Executive's statement of 11 June 2025 appealing for calm across society. The Chairperson put on record the Committee's thanks to the emergency services for their efforts in responding to these incidents of public disorder. The Chairperson also extended the best wishes of the Committee to anyone injured or hurt during these incidents.

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence session with the Department of Justice (DoJ) on the Budget 2025-26 Finance Update and June Monitoring Round and the Northern Ireland Policing Board Human Rights Advisor on the Justice Bill will be recorded by Hansard.

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

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

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

### **3. Draft Minutes.**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 June 2025.

### **4. Matters Arising.**

There were no matters arising.

### **5. Budget 2025-26: Finance Update & June Monitoring Round — Department of Justice oral evidence.**

Richard Logan, Finance Director, DoJ, Andrea Quail, Head of Financial Planning, Strategy and Support, DoJ, and Louise Blair, Head of Financial Planning and Support, DoJ joined the meeting at 2:46pm.

The officials provided an update on fiscal matters, including the 2024-25 Provisional Outturn, the Department of Justice's 2025-26 final opening budget and the June Monitoring position.

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

*Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 3:13pm.*

The officials agreed to provide further information on the bids for Northern Ireland Protocol funding.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

### **6. Justice Bill — Written Papers**

#### **6.1 Department of Justice response regarding Justice Bill Delegated Powers Article 63E(11).**

The Committee welcomed a response from the Department confirming that, as requested by the Committee, the rule-making power at Article 63E(11) of the Justice Bill will be amended, at Consideration Stage, from negative resolution to the draft affirmative procedure.

## **6.2 Department of Justice response regarding Reasonable Chastisement-Equal Protection.**

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice in relation to any engagement with colleagues in the Department of Health on the issue of reasonable chastisement-equal protection and for an indication of whether this is a matter that is likely to be progressed by the Department(s) in the future.

*Ciara Ferguson left the meeting at 3:27pm.*

*Danny Baker left the meeting at 3:29pm.*

**Agreed:** To seek further clarity from the Department on any discussions it is having with the Department of Health to ensure that the availability of sufficient and effective support mechanisms for parents is being fully considered in parallel with any proposals to remove the defence of reasonable chastisement.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to highlight this matter to the Committee for Health.

**Agreed:** To explore the potential of a joint evidence session with Department of Justice and Department of Health officials, following summer recess, on the matter of Reasonable Chastisement-Equal Protection.

## **6.3 Department of Justice's response to comments on the Justice Bill by the Lady Chief Justice**

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to concerns raised by the Lady Chief Justice on the proposed new custodial disposal for children aged over 14 years, and providing clarity on the implications arising for taxation in District Judge ancillary relief matters.

#### **6.4 Department of Justice – Response regarding the Justice Bill: NICCY and CLC written evidence**

The Committee considered a paper from the Department of Justice responding to matters raised in the written submissions on the Justice Bill from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) and the Children's Law Centre (CLC).

The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson addressed the comments in the Department's response regarding the Minister of Justice's concerns at the Committee's approach to scrutiny of the evidence received on the Justice Bill, which they did not believe are reflective of the actual approach that the Committee has taken. It was noted that every submission received has not been forwarded to the Department for response, but the Committee has requested further information or clarification on issues raised in the written and oral evidence when it has been necessary to do so. This is in line with the Committee's important scrutiny role and is necessary to ensure that the legislation being considered is as robust as possible.

The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson also noted that the detailed information provided in the response, and in previous Departmental responses, has been valuable in assisting with understanding of the issues and will help Members to form opinions and reach conclusions.

*Danny Baker returned to the meeting at 3:33pm.*

#### **6.5 Department of Justice – Response regarding the Justice Bill: Data retention commencement period**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice outlining the reasons for data retention periods contained in Articles 63J – 63M of the Justice

Bill commencing from the date of conviction, rather than the time from the point at which the material was obtained.

#### **6.6 Department of Justice – Response regarding the Misconduct Review and the Independent Custody Visiting Scheme**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing an update on work to review the Misconduct Regulations, and on details of any engagement the Department has had with relevant justice partners on difficulties in the operation and delivery of the Independent Custody Visitors Scheme (ICVS).

#### **6.7 Probation Board for Northern Ireland – Response following oral evidence**

The Committee noted a paper from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland updating on the establishment of the accommodation working group and information on the Probation Board's consideration of the biometric provisions in the Justice Bill.

#### **6.8 An Individual – Proposal for legislative reform on AI-generated deepfake abuse in Northern Ireland**

The Committee noted correspondence from an individual on amending legislation to tackle the misuse of AI-generated deepfake, particularly in terms of the creation and distribution of non-consensual explicit material.

*Maurice Bradley returned to the meeting at 3:39pm.*

**Agreed:** To respond to the individual advising that the information she provided will be included in the papers for an oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on a proposed deepfake amendment to the Justice Bill on 26 June 2025; and that the Committee may consider

requesting further written or oral evidence on this issue from stakeholders at a later date.

The Chairperson advised Members that, as previously agreed by the Committee, the papers at items 6.1 to 6.8 will be published on the Committee's web page.

### **6.9 Requests for Further Information**

The Committee noted a paper from the Committee for Justice team collating a list of the Committee's requests for information on the Justice Bill and the responses received to date.

**Agreed:** To consider agenda item 12 (Justice Bill – Northern Ireland Policing Board Human Rights Advisor oral evidence) prior to agenda item 7 (SL1 — the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order (Codes of Practice) Order 2025).

### **7. Justice Bill – Northern Ireland Policing Board Human Rights Advisor oral evidence**

John Wadham (Northern Ireland Policing Board Human Rights Advisor) joined the meeting at 15:40pm.

The witness provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

*Ciara Ferguson returned to the meeting at 15:57pm.*

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

The Chairperson paid tribute to Dr Kate Laverty, Policing Board Member, the then Assistant Chief Constable Bobby Singleton (now Deputy Chief Constable) and the Engagement Team at the PSNI for the work they have done in relation to children and the PSNI's Children and Young People Strategy.



The witnesses agreed to update the Policing Board on evidence that the Committee has heard from witnesses regarding concerns that designated appropriate adults were not sufficiently informing children and young people of their right to legal representation and that, at times, this task was falling to Custody Sergeants.

**Agreed:** To forward to John Wadham the responses that the Committee has received from the Department of Justice in relation to the rationale for the biometric data retention periods.

*Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 16:57pm.*

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and he left the meeting at 5:01pm.

#### **8. SL1 The Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order (Codes of Practice) Order 2025**

*Deirdre Hargey rejoined the meeting at 17:02pm.*

The Committee again considered the correspondence from the Minister of Justice outlining the potential options on how to proceed with regard to the amendments to the PACE Codes which requested that the Committee provides a response outlining its preferred option by Friday 13 June 2025.

The Committee noted the response from the Police Federation of Northern Ireland providing its views on the proposal to insert the phrase “Under Review” in place of specific text in Annex L to Code C, Annex H to Code J and Annex H to new Code I.

The Committee noted that a response from the Department of Justice to a number of queries and providing drafts of the proposed interim Annexes had been circulated by email before the meeting. Several Members indicated that they had not yet had an opportunity to consider that correspondence.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee is still waiting to receive responses from the PSNI to questions that it asked and for the legal advice had

been requested at the meeting on 5 June. It is expected that the legal advice will be provided for the meeting on 19 June and the Examiner of Statutory Rules will be available to provide an oral briefing on the advice at that meeting.

**Agreed:** To defer making a decision on the Committee's preferred option for the Department's proposed PACE Codes' amendments until the outstanding response and the legal advice have been received.

**9. Causing or allowing a child or vulnerable adult to die or suffer serious physical harm – Consultation on proposal to increase the maximum sentences – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee considered a paper from the Department of Justice regarding the Department's intention to launch an eight-week public consultation on proposals to increase the maximum sentences for causing or allowing a child or vulnerable adult to die or suffer serious physical harm on 18 June 2025.

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

**10. Aarhus Convention – Update on the consideration of recommendations of the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing a copy of an update issued to the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee (ACCC) on matters within the policy responsibility of DoJ, as well as an update on responses to a call for evidence seeking views on the ACCC's recommendations on access to justice in order to inform the best way for Northern Ireland to be compliant with the Aarhus convention.

### **11. AccessNI – Annual Performance and Activity Report 2024-25 – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice forwarding a copy of AccessNI's Performance and Activity Report for 2024-25.

**Agreed:** To discuss issues in the report with officials from AccessNI when they attend Committee to provide oral evidence on the Justice Bill .

### **12. Youth Justice Agency Corporate Plan 2025-28 and Business Plan 2025-26 – Department of Justice written paper.**

The Committee noted the Youth Justice Agency's Corporate Plan 2025-28 and Business Plan 2025-26.

### **13. Correspondence**

- A copy the Department of Justice's response to The Executive Office (TEO) Committee's oral evidence session on the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme (TPDPS).

**Agreed:** To note the Department's response and to forward it to relevant stakeholders together with the Department's response to issues raised in the TPDPS oral evidence session with the TEO Committee, when available.

- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance seeking views from all Statutory Committees on the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill.

**Agreed:** To respond to the Committee for Finance highlighting the importance of ensuring that the necessary checks and balances are in place in respect of the handling and retention of sensitive data.

- Correspondence from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee regarding its review of Assembly Committee engagement on cross-cutting Executive strategies.

The Chairperson highlighted that the Committee's work regularly intersects with the remit of other Committees, particularly the Health Committee, and that it is important that the Assembly identifies effective mechanisms for engagement across Committees on cross-cutting strategies and issues.

**Agreed:** That Committee staff will prepare a draft response for consideration by the Committee following the summer recess.

**Agreed:** That members would relay to the Committee staff any specific information that they would like to include in the draft response.

*Justin McNulty left the meeting at 5:16pm.*

- Correspondence from the Open University (OU) highlighting a research report launched recently on "*Learnings from 'Why Riot?': The 'whys' beneath youth violence*" and offering a briefing the Committee on the report by the lead researcher. Members noted that the Committee had previously agreed to hear from youth workers involved in the programme.

**Agreed:** To invite the researcher to provide oral evidence along with the youth workers.

- An invitation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) to the launch of its new independent research report '*The Environment, Human Rights and the Windsor Framework*'.

**Agreed:** That Members wishing to attend the event should respond directly.

The Chairperson advised that correspondence from an individual at item 13.19 had been withdrawn.

- Correspondence from the Bar of Northern Ireland regarding its response to the Consultation on the Delivery Plan for Enabling Access to Justice.

**Agreed:** To include the correspondence in the papers for the next oral evidence session with Departmental officials on the Enabling Access to Justice.

- Correspondence from the Department of Justice responding to the Committee's request for information in relation to Prison Officers and the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) sick absence policy, and the Police Ombudsman.

The Chairperson outlined her disappointment at the response regarding the NICS sickness absence policy and Prison Officers, and that the Department has concluded that it does not believe further interventions are required and therefore does not intend to approach the Department of Finance.

The Chairperson noted that the Committee's questions regarding the accountability of the Police Ombudsman had not been satisfactorily addressed.

**Agreed:** To again ask the Department for clarity on accountability mechanisms of the Police Ombudsman and the Office of the Police Ombudsman and who complaints should contact if they are dissatisfied with the service they receive.

- Correspondence from the Department of Health responding to the Committee's request for information regarding Child Contact Centres.

**Agreed:** That the Committee would forward this correspondence to the Committee for Health for consideration.

- Northern Ireland Executive Report - Period Products (Free Provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022

**Agreed:** To seek an update from the Department on the pilot schemes for the provision of free period products in the public-facing areas of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service and the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Copy correspondence from the Department to TEO Committee regarding Historical Institutional Abuse;
- A response from the Department of Justice providing information requested following the oral evidence session with the Bar of NI on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme;
- Publication of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Quarterly Provisional Figures & Mortgage Bulletin;
- Notification that the Minister of Justice has extended the terms of office for the Current Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland for a period of two years;
- Copy correspondence to the Public Accounts Committee regarding the NIAO report on PSNI fleet management;
- A copy of the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report on inspection of offence investigation and criminal case processing by Northern Ireland Departments and organisations;
- A response from the Northern Ireland Policing Board to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Continuous Improvement Arrangements in Policing' recommendations;
- A copy of an invitation to the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council's launch of its Sustainability Report; and
- Investment Strategy in Northern Ireland's Investing Activity Report for May 2025.

#### **14. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered an updated forward work programme.

The Committee Clerk advised Members that additional written papers will be included in the meeting packs for upcoming Committee meetings ahead of the summer recess. The Clerk also advised that it may be necessary to schedule a short, formal meeting in advance of the roundtable event with children and young people on 3 July.

**Agreed:** To proceed with the sessions in the updated forward work programme.

### **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 next meeting will take place on Thursday 19 June 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 5:26pm.

**Joanne Bunting MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**