

From the Minister of Finance

*Paul Frew MLA
Chair of the Committee for Justice
Room 345, Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX*

Private Office
2nd Floor
Clare House
303 Airport Road West
BELFAST
BT3 9ED

Tel:
Email:

Our reference: *COR-0183-2026*
Date: *30 March 2026*

Paul, a chara

DOMESTIC ABUSE IN PRIVATE LAW PROCEEDINGS

Thank you for your correspondence forwarding the Research and Information Service (RaISe) Briefing Paper on domestic abuse in private family law proceedings and seeking my views on the key issues identified.

My Department will want to give the paper closer consideration but in general I welcome the comprehensive review of the academic research and recent policy developments across these islands and further afield. The issues highlighted—particularly those relating to litigation abuse, the ‘pro-contact’ culture, children’s participation rights, and the need for trauma-informed practice—are matters of clear importance for the wider justice and family law system in the North.

As you will be aware, the Department of Finance’s role in family law is focussed on the substantive legislative framework, including the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, which does not include any statutory presumption of parental involvement or contact, unlike the current legislation in England and Wales. Operational responsibility for the family courts, legal aid, and the wider administration of justice rests with the Department of Justice, while the Department of Health leads on public family law matters concerning children in care.

Notwithstanding the Department’s limited direct remit in this area, I fully acknowledge the significance of the issues raised in the RaISe paper, including:

- the potential for family court proceedings to inadvertently facilitate coercive or controlling behaviour;
- the financial and emotional impacts of repeated litigation on victims and children;

- concerns about inconsistent recognition of children’s voices and participation rights;
- the need for improved information-sharing between agencies; and
- the growing consensus on the importance of trauma-informed, child-centred approaches within family law processes.

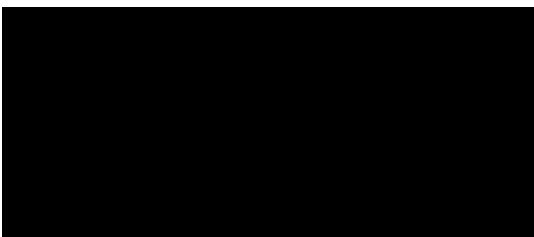
In this context, I welcome the recent guidance issued by the Lady Chief Justice in June 2025, which is expected to strengthen protections for victims and children engaging with the family courts. The guidance makes clear that no parent has an automatic right to contact and requires that all decisions – including interim orders – fully address risk and apply the Article 3 welfare checklist. While still relatively new, it represents a significant step toward embedding more trauma-informed, child-centred decision-making across the system.

I note in the paper particular reference to the Family Court Pilot Task and Finish Working Group, which the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime is establishing to explore alternative family law models that are more trauma-informed and place children’s voices at the centre of decision-making.

In support of this cross-departmental work, I have nominated an official from the Department of Finance to participate in the Working Group. My Department will engage constructively alongside colleagues in the Department of Justice and the Department of Health as the Group examines potential reforms and considers international best practice, including models such as the Pathfinder and Lighthouse approaches referenced in the research.

I trust this response is helpful to the Committee in its ongoing scrutiny of these important issues. Please do not hesitate to contact me should further information be required.

Is mise le meas



**JOHN O’DOWD MLA
MINISTER OF FINANCE**



**Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Justice**

John O'Dowd MLA
Minister of Finance
Department of Finance
Clare House
303 Airport Road
Belfast
BT3 9ED

23 March 2026

Dear Minister

Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings

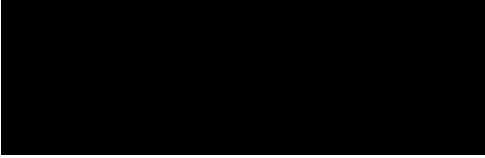
At its meeting on 12 March 2026, the Committee for Justice considered a briefing paper by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) on Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings. The paper provides an overview of the current academic research and literature relating to domestic abuse experienced by adult and child victims/survivors engaged in the family court system.

The Committee agreed to forward the RaISe paper to you to seek your response to the key issues and themes raised in the research. A copy of the paper is attached.

The Committee has also written to the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health to seek their views.

I would be grateful for a response by 9 April 2026.

Yours sincerely



Paul Frew
Chair of the Committee for Justice

Room 345, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast, BT4 3XX
Telephone: (028) 905 21033

E-mail: committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk