

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

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Paul Frew
Chair, Committee for Justice
Room 345, Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw,
Stormont,
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BT4 3XX

14 April 2026

Dear Paul,

RaISe PAPER RE FAMILY COURTS

Thank you for sharing RaISe's briefing paper, which you commissioned, on domestic abuse in family law proceedings. There is no doubt that research assists policy makers through raising awareness of particular issues and identifying options for change. It is particularly helpful when it comes to considering what more can be done to tackle domestic abuse.

The research is timely given the recently published report of the research on family courts by Queen's University Belfast for the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime. I note that both reports identify similar themes.

Of particular interest is the recommendation that consideration should be given to alternative private law models that adopt a more trauma-informed approach and place children's voices at the centre of the decision-making process. I was already aware of the Private Law Pathfinder Court Pilot in England and Wales and noted that the initial evaluations suggested that it delivers positive outcomes, particularly for children and parties who are victims of domestic abuse. I understand that the UK Government recently

announced on 17 March that Pathfinder Courts, to be renamed Child Focused Courts, would be rolled out across England and Wales.

To take the development of a new model in this jurisdiction forward, the Commissioner Designate is seeking the formation of a cross-departmental, multi-agency working group, which she would chair, to scope the feasibility of a pilot and has written to me about this.

As was noted in the RaISe paper and as the Committee will know, my Department's responsibilities in relation to family justice are limited to provision of administrative support to the courts, court procedure and legal aid. Therefore, my Department, by itself, has only a few levers by which it can effect change to the family justice system.

However, I am very aware from correspondence that I receive that many people engaging with the family justice system unfortunately find their experience challenging and difficult, especially in relation to arrangements for children. Therefore, I am content for my Department to work collaboratively with the Commissioner Designate, other departments with responsibilities in relation to family justice, and those working in the family justice system, to scope proposals for a pilot.

That said, given the current challenging financial position facing the Department, I welcome the Commissioner Designate's acknowledgement that participation does not imply any future commitment.

The scoping work may be informed by the outcome of the Lady Chief Justice's new Early Resolution Court pilot that commenced at the Family Care Centre in Belfast on 4 March given the similarities to the Pathfinder model, particularly through seeking to improve the welfare of the children who are the subject of proceedings before the courts.

I will be interested to learn the outcome of the working group's considerations when its scoping exercise is completed.

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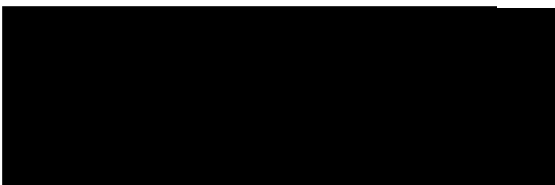
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With regards to the other recommendations in the QUB report, I will be giving careful consideration to those that come within the responsibilities of my Department.

As I have previously said, I will also do what I can, within the limited remit of my Department, to bring forward improvements to the family justice process. In this regard, the Committee may be aware that the Department recently launched an engagement process as part of the Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme. This process seeks views on my strategic legal aid reform opportunities, aimed at ensuring wider and more targeted access to support. These proposals have the potential to impact positively on vulnerable citizens, such as victims of domestic abuse who may be suffering further abuse and financial stress as a result of family proceedings being used maliciously. Options within the proposals include the introduction of a new simpler, fairer approach to financial eligibility testing and a new approach to merits testing that would limit repeat contact and residence applications within the family courts, that could be used to perpetuate abuse.

I look forward to receiving the post-engagement report in due course and this will also be shared with the Justice Committee.

Yours sincerely,



NAOMI LONG
MINISTER OF JUSTICE

Please ensure that you quote our reference number in any future related correspondence.



**Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Justice**

Naomi Long MLA
Minister of Justice
Department of Justice
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23 March 2026

Dear Minister

Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings

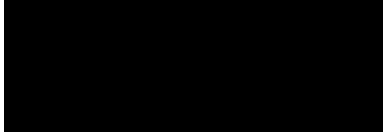
At its meeting on 12 March 2026, the Committee for Justice considered a briefing paper by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) on Domestic Abuse in Private Family Law Proceedings. The paper provides an overview of the current academic research and literature relating to domestic abuse 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 Health and the Minister of Finance to seek their views.

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

Yours sincerely



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Chair of the Committee for Justice

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