



## **The Justice Bill (NIA Bill 07/22-27)**

# **Joint written response to the Justice Committee**

**Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland**

**11/02/2026**

**Dear Kathy,**

Thank you for your letter dated 28th January 2026 requesting our views based on the latest DOJ response dated 13<sup>th</sup> January and on the recent engagement with the Department.

As noted by the DOJ, after the last response submitted by CRJI and NIA on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 2025, both organisations met with representatives from the restorative justice team within the department. In our view, this was a very constructive meeting and despite the DOJ noting the issues presented in previous papers had been discussed at the RJWG, this meeting was a unique opportunity to discuss at length the concerns regarding implementation of the new accreditation process.

To be clear, while the DOJ provided welcomed clarity on the rationale for some of the identified gaps noted by both organisations, CRJI and NIA did not wholly agree with the rationales provided and these critical questions are not misinterpreted from our perspective. The gaps provided in the last two responses to this committee remain informed key concerns that, unless mitigated through the duration of the pilot or a change in the policy, will potentially cause ongoing problems/risks for effective implementation. For example:

- **Pilot geographical areas**

The latest response offered by the DOJ clarifies the decision for the pilot areas, however, it remains the view of CRJI and NIA that these areas were decided rather than discussed.

Despite continuous raising of concerns regarding these areas, there seems to be an unwillingness to change or adapt any aspect of the policy or pilot. A key example of this is the DOJ hoping to expand RJ services into Londonderry/ Derry and Strabane. As noted at the most recent Restorative Justice Working Group in December, CRJI again raised the concerns around this and the need to do localised on the ground relationship building with the PSNI before implementation. The RJ lead from the PSNI also attended this meeting and agreed with CRJI that confidence in policing should not be presumed in this area and from their perspective, there are concerns expanding RJ services in those areas.

- **Developing a local Practice Standards and Accreditation Framework**

We have consistently raised an issue that the protocol is not sympathetic to the indigenous context of NI context. As noted in previous responses, we continue to feel the narrow consultation process in developing this framework may hinder the DOJ from developing a

new accreditation framework that “is unique to, and shaped by cultural, social, political and historical contexts, applied in Northern Ireland in a locally relevant manner” DOJ, 2025, p.9).

### **Closing statement**

CRJI and NIA wish to reiterate ongoing safeguarding concerns regarding the new process, which we have raised consistently with the Department of Justice. While we welcome the rationales provided, the vague, generalised responses create risk moving forward (see Appendix 1 for recent procedural queries requiring clarification). Given our organisation role and duty to safeguard our practitioners delivering restorative justice daily, both within and outside the criminal justice system, greater clarity is essential.

We hope these issues will be addressed as the pilot develops and trust the committee will remain abreast to the situation. It is worth noting that the 2007 protocol was substantially undermined by similar ambiguities and gaps that we have repeatedly highlighted in the renewed 2025 framework. This apparent ambiguity can erode confidence rather than providing the safeguarding assurances that should be central to such frameworks.

Both NIA and CRJI remain extremely grateful for the committee's ongoing support. Both organisations have made the decision to test the current model and in light of this approach, we have applied for both organisational and practitioner accreditations. We will enter this process in the spirit of making it work and with the hope that our issues will be addressed along the way. We will continue to be part of the Restorative Justice Working Group. However, we must stress that a robust review process needs to be in place alongside actionable solutions, rather than continued conversation from the department , as this will impact ongoing participation in the new structure.

## Appendix 1- Correspondence between CRJI, NIA and DOJ regarding a procedural gap in the new accreditation process sent 8<sup>th</sup> January 2026 after meeting DOJ representatives.

### CRJI and NIA query to the DOJ restorative justice team:

Yes the concern around this was mainly a procedure one, I understand only those in the hub would be taking on formal criminal justice referrals and even in future the idea is that eventually everyone who applies would be in the hub, (unless numbers outweighed this). In any case, along with individual practitioner accreditation the organisations would also be accredited which means the standards, training and procedures outlined in this policy still needs to cover staff working in an accredited org to safeguard them but also the DOJ.

For example, in the latest response the DOJ is putting to committee it states "The Department is not suggesting that cases involving paramilitary threats, violence, exploitation or coercive control would not require the experience of a level three facilitator"- so, if an organisation is accredited, where are the procedures for the other 30/40 members of staff when those types of cases are received?

Also, as I am sure you will know, CRJI and NIA receive referrals from individuals sometimes as a direct result of a formal criminal justice process. For example, an alleged offender is arrested by the PSNI, that individual is charged by the PPS for domestic violence (for example) , goes through the court (formal) but the burden of proof is not met and they are found not guilty. Simultaneously, and as a result of, that person becomes under serious threat in the community for what they are alleged to have done and is referred to CRJI or NIA.

Or another example would be if an alleged offender has been charged (released on bail) but has not plead guilty or not guilty yet and have self referred in to CRJI and NIA. Or someone has been arrested, released on bail but not charged pending further investigation and self refers into the accredited organisations.

My concern is in those cases ,regardless of the practitioners in the hub or not,they are accredited practitioners organisationally and still need to have details on what level of complexity those cases fall into and what the processes are. Yes the organisational accreditation is clear to report to police which both organisations do but what comes after that in terms of a process? The organisations still have a restorative duty of care that is governed by DOJ accreditation. The policy needs to safeguard all parties, just as at the formal stages of the court process where the hub would be involved there are I am sure very distinct and clear guidelines.

### Responses from DOJ RJ team highlighted in green:

Yes the concern around this was mainly a procedure one, I understand only those in the hub would be taking on formal criminal justice referrals and even in future the idea is that eventually everyone who applies would be in the hub, (unless numbers outweighed this). In any case, along with individual practitioner accreditation the organisations would also be accredited which means the standards, training and procedures outlined in this policy still needs to cover staff working in an accredited org to safeguard them but also the DOJ.

For example, in the latest response the DOJ is putting to committee it states "The Department is not suggesting that cases involving paramilitary threats, violence, exploitation or coercive control would not require the experience of a level three facilitator"- so, if an organisation is accredited, where are the procedures for the other 30/40 members of staff when those types of cases are received? **The standards for practitioners are set out for those that are accredited in the context of criminal justice cases that are referred through the hub.**

Also, as I am sure you will know, CRJI and NIA receive referrals from individuals sometimes as a direct result of a formal criminal justice process. For example, an alleged offender is arrested by the PSNI, that individual is charged by the PPS for domestic violence (for example) , goes through the court (formal) but the burden of proof is not met and they are found not guilty. Simultaneously, and as a result of, that person becomes under serious threat in the community for what they are alleged to have done and is referred to CRJI or NIA. **The Hub practitioners will only be dealing with those cases where a referral is being progressed through the Independent Referral Body (IRB) (in the first 18 months as a diversionary disposal that would otherwise be taken forward as a prosecution). The Hub practitioners will not be dealing with cases that are not being progressed / instigated through the formal criminal justice system and IRB.**

Or another example would be if an alleged offender has been charged (released on bail) but has not plead guilty or not guilty yet and have self referred in to CRJI and NIA. Or someone has been arrested, released on bail but not charged pending further investigation and self refers into the accredited organisations. **As above.**

My concern is in those cases ,regardless of the practitioners in the hub or not,they are accredited practitioners organisationally and still need to have details on what level of complexity those cases fall into and what the processes are. Yes the organisational accreditation is clear to report to police which both organisations do but what comes after that in terms of a process? The organisations still have a restorative duty of care that is governed by DOJ accreditation. The policy needs to safeguard all parties, just as at the formal stages of the court process where the hub would be involved there are I am sure very distinct and clear guidelines. **While an organisation may be accredited, practitioners are not accredited unless they go through the formal 'organisational practitioner' accreditation process. This is distinctly different from the previous 2007 accreditation, when practitioners were automatically accredited by virtue of working for an accredited organisation.**



**Northern Ireland Assembly  
Committee for Justice**

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28 January 2026

**Justice Bill – CRJI/NIA Paper – Department of Justice Response**

Dear Jim

At its meeting on 22 January 2026, the Committee for Justice considered a response from the Department of Justice to your joint paper with NI Alternatives (dated 5 December 2025) regarding the restorative justice amendments.

The Committee agreed to forward the response from the Department to CRJI for your feedback on the response and on the recent engagement with the Department.

I would be grateful if your response could be provided by 11 February 2026.

I have also written directly to NI Alternatives on this matter.

Yours sincerely

*Kathy O'Hanlon*

**Kathy O'Hanlon  
Clerk to the Committee for Justice**

**Enc:** Department of Justice response