



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 7 MARCH 2024

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stewart Dickson MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Justin McNulty MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Alex Easton MLA

Sinéad Ennis MLA

In Attendance: Caroline Perry (Assembly Clerk)
Kathy O'Hanlon (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 2.03pm in open session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the oral evidence session with the Victims of Crime Commissioner Designate, the session with departmental officials from the Access to Justice Directorate and the session with the Bar of Northern Ireland and the Law Society of Northern would be recorded by Hansard.

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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 29 February 2024.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Victims of Crime Commissioner Designate

Geraldine Hanna, Victims of Crime Commissioner Designate, joined the meeting at 2.06pm.

The Commissioner Designate provided an introduction to her role, an overview of her findings and strategic priorities, and suggested actions to improve the experience and confidence of complainants and victims of crime in Northern Ireland.

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

The witness agreed to provide further information on a number of issues discussed during the evidence session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for her attendance and she left the meeting.

5. Access to Justice Directorate: Overview Briefing

Sean Holland, Director of the Access to Justice Directorate; Lisa Rocks, Deputy Director of the Justice Performance Team; Julie Wilson, Deputy Director of the Victims Support Division; Maura Campbell, Deputy Director of the Criminal Justice and Legislation Division; and Andrew Dawson, Deputy Director of the Civil Justice and Judicial Policy Division, joined the meeting at 2.58pm.

The officials provided an overview of the Access to Justice Directorate of the Department of Justice.

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

The officials agreed to provide further information on a number of issues discussed during the evidence session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance and they left the meeting.

Doug Beattie left the meeting at 3.25pm.

6. Bar of Northern Ireland and Law Society of Northern Ireland: Overview Briefing

David Mulholland, Chief Executive of the Bar of Northern Ireland; Moira Smyth, Chair of the Bar of Northern Ireland; David A Lavery CB, Chief Executive of the Law Society of Northern Ireland; and Darren Toombs, President of the Law Society of Northern Ireland, joined the meeting at 3.34pm.

The witnesses provided an overview of their work and talked about issues within the justice system.

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

The witnesses agreed to provide further information on a number of issues discussed during the evidence session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance and they left the meeting.

Alex Easton left the meeting at 4.00pm.

7. SL1 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

Máire Sheehan and Maura Campbell from the Department of Justice joined the meeting at 4.30pm.

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice for a Statutory Rule using the powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020 to further extend the provisions to allow courts and statutory tribunals to receive evidence wholly or in part through the use of audio or video links. The Rule will also permit a court or tribunal to make arrangements for all or part of a hearing to be conducted by live link to be broadcast or for a recording of the proceedings to be made.

The officials advised the Committee that it is the Minister's intention to include permanent provision for the use of live links in the first Bill of this Assembly mandate,

which the Minister plans to introduce before the summer recess, and that the reliance on the powers in the 2020 Act is therefore an interim arrangement.

The officials further advised that the plan is to add the aforementioned permanent provisions to the Bill by way of amendments at Consideration Stage, as opposed to including them in the proposed Bill as introduced.

The Committee expressed concern at this suggestion. It was noted that, in such circumstances, the Committee would not be able to include provisions that were not in the Bill as introduced within its Call for Evidence and that this approach would have implications for effective scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

8. The Police Pensions (Remediable Service) Amendment Regulations 2024

The Committee was advised that the Department of Justice had provided advance notification of its intention to undertake a consultation on amendments to The Police Pensions (Remediable Service) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023. Members were further advised that the consultation paper will be included on the agenda for the next Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee noted the paper and will consider the matter further at the next meeting.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the updated Forward Work Programme

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland regarding its inspection of Forensic Services in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this item to request confirmation that the Department and all other relevant bodies have accepted the recommendations and details of timescales for implementation.

- ii. The Committee considered a copy of correspondence from the Minister of Health to the Committee for Health regarding The Human Tissue Act 2004 (Supply of Information about Transplants) Regulations 2004.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note this item and to ask the Department for further information on the aspects of the Statutory Instrument that fall under its remit.

The Committee noted the following:

- iii. a response from the Department of Justice regarding the impact of the abolition of preliminary investigations and mixed committals in committal proceedings on the defence and the ability to maintain faith in due process; and
- iv. correspondence from the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) regarding its work and its desire for future collaboration and engagement.

11. Chairperson's Business

The was no Chairperson's business.

12. Any other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

Members agreed to begin the meeting on 14 March 2024 at the earlier time of 1.30pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 4.53pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice