



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 12 December 2024

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)
Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Connie Egan MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Doug Beattie MLA
Maurice Bradley MLA
Jemma Dolan MLA
Ciara Ferguson MLA
Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: Stephen Dunne MLA

In Attendance: Caroline Perry (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Mark McConnell (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

The Committee agreed to start the meeting in closed session to consider Committee Business and for a briefing from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on the delegated powers in the Justice Bill.

The meeting commenced at 2.04pm in closed session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Committee Business

Dr Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant, joined the meeting at 2.04pm.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.04pm.

Justin McNulty joined the meeting at 2.06pm.

The official briefed the Committee on a draft response to a letter from an individual that the Committee considered at its meeting on 5 December 2024 regarding issues raised about the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and a number of other matters.

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

Justin McNulty left the meeting at 2.10pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson and the official would liaise regarding some suggested amendments to the draft letter and that it could then be issued.

The Chairperson thanked the official and he left the meeting.

3. Justice Bill — Delegated Powers — Examiner of Statutory Rules

The Examiner of Statutory Rules, Angela Kelly, and Catriona Doherty, a Legal Advisor in the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, joined the meeting at 2.13pm.

The officials briefed the Committee on the delegated powers in the Justice Bill.

Justin McNulty rejoined the meeting at 2.23pm.

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

The officials offered to return to brief the Committee again on this topic.

The officials advised that they would be happy to consider the delegated powers in the proposed amendments to the Justice Bill that the Minister of Justice plans to table for Consideration Stage.

Jemma Dolan joined the meeting at 3.11pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting.

The Committee noted the paper from the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted papers from the Department of Justice, which included the text of three sets of amendments that the Minister plans to table for the Consideration Stage of the Justice Bill. The amendments relate to the repeal of vagrancy laws; serious and organised crime; and AccessNI.

The meeting moved into public session at 3.17pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the oral evidence session on trauma-informed practice and the oral evidence session on the January Monitoring Round would be recorded by Hansard.

Deirdre Hargey declared an interest in relation to a family member who works for the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.

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

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 December 2024.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Trauma-informed Practice — Department of Justice

Adele Brown, the Head of the Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime; Helen McKenzie, the Director of Operations for the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland; Colleen Heaney, the Director of Youth Justice Services in the Youth Justice Agency; and Michael McCracken, Principal Psychologist from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, joined the meeting at 3.19pm.

The officials briefed the Committee on trauma-informed practice in the context of the Executive Programme for Tackling Paramilitary Activity and Organised Crime.

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

The witnesses agreed to send follow-up information on research that was conducted in relation to resilience.

The witnesses agreed to send follow-up information regarding the trauma-informed masterclass.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting.

The Committee noted the written papers from the Department of Justice.

7. January Monitoring Round — Department of Justice

Deborah Brown, the Director of the Justice Delivery Directorate; Louise Blair, the Head of Financial Planning and Support; and Andrea Quail, the Head of Financial Planning, Strategy and Support, joined the meeting at 4.22pm.

The officials briefed the Committee on the January Monitoring Round.

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

The officials agreed to provide an analysis of how the Department of Justice budget has been constrained since the devolution of policing and justice powers.

The officials agreed to provide information on protocol funding.

The officials agreed to provide information on the Northern Ireland road safety partnership.

The officials agreed to provide information on the rationale for the differing timescales for providing the Committee for Justice with papers that have been submitted to the Department of Finance.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting.

The Committee noted the written papers from the Department of Justice.

8. SL1 — Police Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a Statutory Rule to amend the Police Pensions Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 and the Police Pension Scheme to address a 0.2% shortfall in the yield of employee contributions identified by the Government Actuary in the 2020 Police Pension Scheme Valuation.

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

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted an updated Committee forward work programme and a proposed Department of Justice forward work programme.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that these documents may be subject to change.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered and noted correspondence from the Prisoner Ombudsman's office requesting an introductory meeting with the Chairperson.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Chairperson to meet the Prisoner Ombudsman.

- ii. The Committee considered and noted an invitation from the Public Prosecution Service for the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to visit its offices.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange a visit for all Committee Members later in 2025.

- iii. The Committee considered and noted correspondence from K9 Search and Rescue Northern Ireland requesting the Committee to seek further clarity on the decision by the Department of Justice not to approve its application to join the Northern Ireland search and rescue practitioners' group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information on a number of matters.

- iv. The Committee considered and noted correspondence from the Peace Summit Partners requesting to meet the Committee and providing a response to the draft Programme for Government 2024-27.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that any Members who are interested should follow this up individually.

- v. The Committee considered and noted follow-up correspondence from the Mental Health Champion to the open letter she sent on 12 November 2024, regarding the Right Care, Right Person model. The Chairperson welcomed the letter.
- vi. The Committee considered and noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding the extension of the Bereavement Service to match the 'Tell us Once' service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate the response to the correspondent who initially raised the issue.

- vii. The Committee considered and noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance stating that it has sought the Department of Finance's views on extending the Bereavement Service, and forwarding the Department's response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate the response to the correspondent who initially raised the issue.

- viii. The Committee considered and noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing forwarded correspondence between the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Assembly Business Office notifying of the publication of quarterly sickness absence data for the Northern Ireland Civil Service between July and September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the Department of Justice for information on the causes of the absence rates and how it plans to address them.

The Committee noted the following:

- ix. a response from the Department of Justice providing a progress update against the 2024-25 Business Plan;
- x. a response from the Department of Justice regarding Victim Personal Statements;

- xi. a response from the Department of Justice regarding current and planned consultations;
- xii. correspondence from the Department of Justice providing a report to the Assembly on the proposal to amend the employee contribution rate and bandings in the Police Pensions (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2015;
- xiii. correspondence from the Committee for the Economy providing forwarded correspondence from the Law Society of Northern Ireland regarding an Association of British Insurers briefing paper;
- xiv. correspondence from the Governor of Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison regarding the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland unannounced inspection report; and
- xv. a notification from Co-operation Ireland that the Special EU Programmes Body and Pobal are preparing to open two new PEACEPLUS grants schemes aimed at grassroots communities.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Committee team will continue to receive correspondence from stakeholders during the upcoming recess period and that it is standard practice to include such items for consideration at the Committee's first meeting after recess, which will be on 16 January 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to agree any urgent matters via correspondence during the upcoming recess period.

11. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised Members that, during periods of recess, it is standard practice to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee and that any such views expressed would be brought to the attention of the Committee at the first meeting after recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to delegate authority to the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson as outlined above.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the staff of Inverary House to thank them and the residents for facilitating the Committee visit.

The Chairperson welcomed Jemma Dolan as a recently appointed Member of the Committee for Justice.

The Committee Members thanked the Committee team for their work throughout the year.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that this would be the Committee Clerk's last meeting clerking the Committee and thanked her for all her work.

12. Any other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on 16 January 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 5.10pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice