



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 10 October 2024

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stewart Dickson MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Justin McNulty MLA

Sinéad Ennis 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)

The Committee agreed to start the meeting in closed session for a briefing on post-legislative scrutiny and a discussion on the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill.

The meeting commenced at 2.02pm in closed session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Post-legislative scrutiny: Committee Approach

Jonny Redpath, Assistant Assembly Clerk to the Committee for Justice, joined the meeting at 2.02pm.

The official briefed the Committee on post-legislative scrutiny work that has been conducted by the Committee for Justice team.

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

The official agreed to provide further information on some of the Acts that were reviewed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to wait for further information before agreeing to write to the Department with questions as a result of the post-legislative scrutiny.

The Chairperson thanked the official.

3. Justice Bill Committee Stage: Committee Approach

The Chairperson reminded Members that a formal decision on a motion regarding the length of the extension to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill would need to be taken at this week's meeting to enable the motion to be tabled in the Business Office within the 30-day period set out in Standing Orders.

Stephen Dunne joined the meeting at 2.55pm.

The Committee Clerk outlined a number of options for the timing of the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill.

Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 3.14pm.

There followed a discussion about the options for the timing of the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill.

The Chairperson advised Members that the question on the motion regarding the length of the Committee Stage would be put during the Committee Stage agenda item in public session.

The meeting moved into public session at 3.25pm.

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 3 October 2024.

5. Matters Arising

The Chairperson reminded Members that a visit to Maghaberry Prison has been arranged for Thursday 17 October 2024 and asked them to confirm their attendance or otherwise with the Committee for Justice team.

The Committee noted an updated itinerary for the visit to Maghaberry Prison that was included in the tabled pack.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the publication of a press release after the visit to Maghaberry Prison.

6. Justice Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill commenced on 2 October 2024 and that the 30-working day period provided for completion under Standing Orders is due to finish on 19 November 2024.

The Chairperson informed Members that Standing Orders provide that, before the conclusion of the 30 working days, a motion may be tabled for debate in the Assembly by the Chairperson of the Committee, or the Deputy Chairperson on the Chairperson's behalf, to extend the period of the Committee Stage. The motion must specify a date to which the Committee Stage will be extended.

The Chairperson reminded Members that, whatever length of extension is agreed, the Committee can report earlier if it is ready to do so.

Deirdre Hargey rejoined the meeting at 3.29pm.

There followed a discussion about the options for the length of the extension to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill.

The Committee considered a motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill until 27 March 2026.

Question put and agreed:

"That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 27 March 2026, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill (NIA 07/22-27)."

7. Mental Health and the Criminal Justice System: Cardiff University School of Medicine

Professor Andrew Forrester from Cardiff University joined the meeting at 3.22pm.

The witness briefed the Committee on mental health and the criminal justice system.

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

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his attendance and he left the meeting.

The Committee considered and noted correspondence from the Department of Finance in response to a Committee query raising concerns that psychological and mental-health issues are not included in the Civil Service staff handbook.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance to ask whether post-traumatic stress disorder is appropriately considered under the sickness absence policy, how this and other psychological illnesses are considered and for further information on this topic.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 4.23pm.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Justice regarding mental-health issues and the criminal justice system, including the issue of prisoners being released on a Friday.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Beverley Wall in the Department of Justice to seek clarity on the issue of prisoners being released on a Friday.

8. Programme for Government: Department of Justice

Permanent Secretary Hugh Widdis; Deborah Brown, Director of the Justice Delivery Directorate; and David Lennox, Deputy Director of the Corporate Engagement and Communications Division, joined the meeting at 4.24pm.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the draft Programme for Government.

Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 4.47pm.

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

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

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

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for The Executive Office advising that it takes the lead role in co-ordinating a response for all the Assembly's statutory Committees to the consultation on the draft Programme for Government and that the deadline for responses is 18 October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for The Executive Office to outline the areas of the draft Programme for Government that it discussed with the departmental officials.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Chief Constable of the PSNI regarding the consultation on the draft Programme for Government.

The Committee noted the Chief Constable's Accountability Report to the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted an updated Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson advised Committee Members that some changes to the Forward Work Programme may be necessary.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to queries raised about reporting requirements in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider any follow-up action as part of its post-legislative scrutiny work.

- ii. The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to queries raised about certain aspects not being included in the report on the operation of the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider any follow-up action as part of its post-legislative scrutiny work.

- iii. The Committee noted a further response from the Department of Justice to queries raised about airsoft gun usage and Northern Irish legislation. The Committee was reminded that it had previously agreed to forward any correspondence on this matter to Sammy Wilson MP.
- iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Bar of Northern Ireland requesting to appear before the Committee to give oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to include the Bar of Northern Ireland in its Call for Evidence and that the Law Society of Northern Ireland should be invited to give evidence separately.

- v. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual requesting to meet the Committee regarding the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to explore options for engagement with victims' groups with the Committee for The Executive Office.

The Committee noted the following:

- vi. a response from the Department of Justice regarding the review of the Northern Ireland Policing Board;
- vii. a response from the Department of Justice regarding SR 2024/147 — Police Service of Northern Ireland Reserve (Injury Benefit) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations;
- viii. a forwarded written ministerial statement on the Budget sustainability plan from the Committee for Finance;
- ix. correspondence from the Committee for Finance containing a response from the Department of Finance regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund;
- x. correspondence from the Committee for Finance containing a response from the Department of Finance regarding unfilled vacancies across the Northern Ireland Civil Service;

- xi. correspondence from the Police Service of Northern Ireland providing an update on its data breach and the actions taken by the Information Commissioner's Office;
- xii. correspondence from the Assembly's Engagement Office providing an update on the Older People's Parliament;
- xiii. correspondence from the Truth Recovery Independent Panel advising that the panel is widening its truth-recovery process;
- xiv. correspondence from the Law Society of Northern Ireland containing further information about the LawtechUK conference;
- xv. correspondence from Queen's University Belfast containing further information about the launch of the Centre for Public Policy and Administration; and
- xvi. correspondence from a PhD student about a project advisory group that considers domestic abuse and coercive control.

11. Chairperson's Business

There were no items of Chairperson's Business.

12. Any Other Business

The Chairperson reminded Members about the informal meeting with the Association of British Insurers, which is scheduled for Tuesday 15 October 2024 at 1.00pm.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

Members were advised that, owing to the visit to Maghaberry Prison on Thursday 17 October 2024, the next Committee meeting will take place on Thursday 24 October 2024 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 5.22pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice