



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 13 March 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Danny Baker MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Doug Beattie MLA

Justin McNulty MLA

In Attendance: Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)
Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Stephen Corr (Clerical Supervisor)
Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 1.58pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence session with the Minister of Justice and the oral evidence session with Forensic Science Northern Ireland on the Justice Bill would be recorded by Hansard.

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

Danny Baker declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

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

The Chairperson noted that a number of Committee Members are members of the All Party Group on Access to Justice.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 6 March 2025, subject to one amendment.

3. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a draft letter to the Lady Chief Justice, which included a list of issues raised during evidence sessions on the Justice Bill in relation to Clause 28 (Restriction on ordering taxation of legal aid costs) and the role of the Taxing Master.

The Chairperson suggested the inclusion in the letter of a concern raised by the Bar of Northern Ireland about the possibility that the proposed changes may lead to a two-tier system in relation to the awarding of costs for privately funded cases and for those funded by legal aid.

Agreed: To issue the draft letter to the Lady Chief Justice, subject to the amendment proposed by the Chairperson.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.02pm.

4. Ministerial Briefing — Minister of Justice oral evidence

Naomi Long, Minister of Justice; Hugh Widdis, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Justice; and Deborah Brown, Director of the Justice Delivery Directorate joined the meeting at 2.03pm.

The Minister briefed the Committee on a number of issues, including:

- the Programme for Government, the Safer Communities priority and ongoing work with stakeholders;
- the challenges facing the PSNI regarding the number of officers;
- the Department of Justice budget;
- public-sector transformation bids;
- the Criminal Bar Association's withdrawal of services; and
- the Justice Bill and the Department's wider legislative agenda.

Maurice Bradley left the meeting at 2.17pm.

There followed a question-and-answer session. Members asked questions on a number of issues, including:

- the withdrawal of services and the relationship between the Department and the Criminal Bar Association;
- the Creswell case review;
- the review of the Northern Ireland Policing Board;
- the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) staff handbook, with particular reference to prison officers;
- assaults on prison staff and the number of prison officers;
- the Office of the Police Ombudsman;
- the Justice Bill, with particular reference to the minimum age of criminal responsibility, reasonable chastisement and abuse of trust;
- public-sector transformation bids; and
- a domestic abuse waiver.

Maurice Bradley rejoined the meeting via Zoom at 2.24pm.

The Minister and officials agreed to discuss matters relating to prison officers, sickness policies and the NICS handbook with the Department of Finance; and to provide statistics on the number of prison officers who have accessed the Police Rehabilitation and Retraining Trust services.

The Chairperson asked the Minister to raise issues regarding accountability and levels of dissatisfaction in the forthcoming review meeting with the Police Ombudsman.

Agreed: To arrange an informal meeting with the Minister of Justice to discuss a number of matters, including family courts.

Agreed: To forward a list of questions that were not covered during the evidence session to the Department of Justice for written response.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance and they left the meeting at 3.50pm.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee noted correspondence that had been circulated before the meeting regarding a correction to a Ministerial statement made by the Minister of Justice on Enabling Access to Justice and the proposed uplift to fees.

The Committee noted the Annual Report and Accounts for the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland for the year ended 31 March 2024.

5. Justice Bill — Forensic Science Northern Ireland oral evidence

The following witnesses from Forensic Science Northern Ireland joined the meeting at 3.54pm:

- Alison McElveen — Chief Executive;
- Stephen Campbell — Director of Laboratory Service; and
- Ian Craig — Head of Biology.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Biometrics provisions in the Justice Bill.

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

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.30pm.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Agreed: To explore with the PSNI the decision-making process in relation to the deletion of biometric data.

Agreed: To arrange a Committee visit to Forensic Service Northern Ireland at a suitable time in the forward work programme.

6. Correspondence

Danny Baker left the meeting at 4.31pm.

- An update from the Committee for Finance on the capital easements that were highlighted in the Spring Supplementary Estimates because of an ongoing legal challenge.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to provide details of any Justice projects that have been delayed because of the legal challenge.

- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing correspondence from the Department of Finance regarding work with the Department of

Justice during the review of defamation law in 2023-24 and the Department's role with the strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP) taskforce.

Agreed: To note the correspondence.

- A response from the Law Society of Northern Ireland regarding the Committee's request for its view on how wider system reforms would assist solicitors, particularly in respect of family law cases.

Agreed: To note the correspondence and to follow up on any issues with the Minister of Justice during an informal meeting that is to be arranged.

- An update from the Department of Justice on public-sector transformation bids.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to provide updates to the Committee on the progress of the transformation bids, and on the outworking of the new contract that has been awarded further to the Electronic Monitoring Requirements (Responsible Officer) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025, including a timeline for progressing GPS monitoring in line with the transformation project.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee's request for an update on cross-departmental working to address reoffending and work in respect of short sentences and other options available to the judiciary.
- A written briefing from the Department of Justice advising of its request for a cash advance from the NI Consolidated Fund;
- An update from the Department of Justice on its return to the Department of Finance on the draft budget equality positive outcomes;
- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance on the status of budget sustainability plans;
- A response from the Northern Ireland Policing Board regarding correspondence from an individual; and
- Further correspondence from an individual about an ongoing matter.

7. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered an updated forward work programme.

Agreed: To proceed with the sessions in the updated forward work programme, subject to the changes as agreed at today's meeting.

8. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that the Director of Public Prosecutions has invited the Committee Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to a short informal event for MLAs to discuss themes that were identified during a perception audit of the Public Prosecution Service.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson should attend the event.

9. Any other Business

There was no other business.

10. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Chairperson advised Members that the next meeting will take place on Thursday 20 March 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 4.34pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice