



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 23 January 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)
Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Stephen Dunne MLA
Connie Egan MLA
Ciara Ferguson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Doug Beattie MLA
Jemma Dolan MLA
Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: Maurice Bradley MLA

In Attendance: Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Mark McConnell (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

Agreed: That the meeting should begin in closed session for a briefing from Legal Services regarding Part 2 of the Justice Bill.

The meeting commenced at 2.07pm in closed session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Justice Bill — Part 2: Children — Assembly Legal Services oral briefing

Simon Kelly, a Legal Adviser with the Assembly's Legal Services Office, joined the meeting at 2.08pm.

The official provided an analysis of human rights issues in Part 2 of the Justice Bill, which relates to Children.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2.12pm.

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

The Chairperson thanked the official and he left the meeting at 2.40pm.

The meeting moved into public session at 2.44pm

Agreed: That the oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on the Department's proposed amendments to the Justice Bill 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.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 16 January 2025.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 — Correspondence regarding K9 Search and Rescue Northern Ireland

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice regarding K9 Search and Rescue's application to join the Northern Ireland search and rescue practitioners' group.

Agreed: To share the Committee's letter to the Department and the Department's response with K9 Search and Rescue Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for more information on the application process, including how the non-statutory organisations included in the Northern Ireland Search and Rescue (NISAR) Practitioners Group are commissioned and whether a similar model is used for other groups; and to request clarification of how often a SAR needs analysis is done and a copy of the current needs analysis.

The Committee noted an item of correspondence raising a number of issues about K9 Search and Rescue that had been deferred from the meeting on 16 January 2025. Members noted that the correspondence had also been copied to a number of Department of Justice officials by the original correspondent.

4.2 — Correspondence from the Bar of Northern Ireland

The Committee considered correspondence from the Bar of Northern Ireland requesting that the written paper from the Minister of Justice on the Enabling Access

to Justice Reform Programme, which the Committee considered at its meeting on 16 January 2025, be shared with it.

Agreed: To share the written paper on the Enabling Access to Justice Programme with the Bar of Northern Ireland, the Law Society of Northern Ireland and the Solicitors' Criminal Bar Association.

4.3 — Correspondence from McGibbon Consultancy and Safeguarding Services

The Committee considered a number of additional items of correspondence forwarded by the Chairperson that related to an item of correspondence from McGibbon Consultancy and Safeguarding Services which was deferred from the meeting on 16 January 2023.

Deirdre Hargey informed the Committee that she had met with the correspondent.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for more information, including a copy of the terms of reference of the review; clarification of the status of the review; who will be conducting the review and details of their expertise in safeguarding; what consideration the review will give to the experiences of others involved in the case, aside from the victim and perpetrator; and whether there is anything in law that specifically prevents the case being referred for a serious case review.

Agreed: To forward the correspondence to the Department of Justice, the Department of Health and to copy to the Committee for Health, subject to the agreement of the correspondent, given the cross-departmental nature of the issues.

5. Justice Bill — Department of Justice amendments (Reform of Rehabilitation Periods; Repeal of Vagrancy Legislation; and Live Links (Courts and Tribunals)) — Department of Justice oral evidence session

The following departmental officials joined the meeting at 3.01pm:

- Andrew Lavery — Bill Manager;

- Maura Campbell — Senior Bill Sponsor;
- Lorraine Ferguson-Coote — Head of the Criminal Policy Unit; and
- Máire Sheehan — Policy Lead on Live Links.

The officials briefed the Committee on the proposed departmental amendments to the Justice Bill.

Jemma Dolan joined the meeting at 3.02pm.

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

During the evidence session, the officials agreed to provide the following:

- information on work that the Department is doing regarding organised crime and begging;
- information on the powers and options that will be available to councils should there be an increase in begging;
- an update on the outcome of the public consultation on the repeal of vagrancy legislation.

Agreed: To request that the Department of Justice engages with the Belfast Chamber of Commerce, the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce regarding the repeal of vagrancy legislation, in the absence of any specific response from these organisations to the public consultation.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 4.26pm.

The Committee noted the papers from the Department.

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that, as previously agreed, the papers would be published on the Committee's web page.

6. Justice Bill — Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People oral evidence

The Chairperson informed the Committee that the Children's Commissioner was unwell and was therefore unable to attend the meeting to give evidence on the Justice Bill, and that Committee staff will liaise with the Commissioner's office to rearrange the oral evidence session for a suitable date in the Committee's work programme.

7. SR 2024/219 — The Police Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/219 — The Police Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 which will amend contributions payable by members of the Police Pension Scheme.

The Chairperson reminded members that, at its meeting of 12 December 2024, the Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had no comment to make by way of technical scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee for Justice considered SR 2024/219 — The Police Pensions (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and had no objection to the Rule.

8. SR 2024/224 — The Insolvency (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/224 — The Insolvency (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2024, which will amend the Insolvency Rules (Northern Ireland) 1991 in relation to the financial limits for eligibility for the Northern Ireland debt relief scheme.

The Chairperson reminded members that, at its meeting of 27 June 2024, the Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had no comment to make by way of technical scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee for Justice considered SR 2024/224 — The Insolvency (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2024 and had no objection to the Rule.

9. SL1 — The Electronic Monitoring Requirements (Responsible Officer) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered a proposal for a Statutory Rule to authorise the organisations providing Electronic Monitoring services in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for further information on whether any other organisations applied for the contract, including the current holders of the contract; whether the company that was awarded the contract will have a physical presence in Northern Ireland; what employment opportunities will exist here; details of contractual commitments, including monitoring of the contract and performance reviews; and whether there are any changes to the terms of the contract compared to the existing contract.

10. Correspondence

- Correspondence from the Minister of Justice advising that the UK Government intends to bring forward a Crime and Policing Bill, which is likely to contain measures that apply to Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on measures it anticipates may be included, and a clearer indication of the time frame for the Bill's expected introduction at Westminster.

- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee's request for more information on trauma-informed practice.

The Chairperson informed Members that, due to the volume of information that was included in the response, additional research papers were issued via the Electronic Committee Pack post box.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the papers include a request for Members to attend a trauma-informed practice masterclass.

Agreed: That the Committee Clerk will liaise with the Clerking and Member Support Office regarding the masterclass workshops.

- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding the draft Budget for 2025-26 and the Budget Sustainability Plan.

The Chairperson advised Members that, while formal notification has yet to be received, the Committee for Finance is expected to request that Committee responses to the 2025-26 Budget are provided by the end of February, and that departmental officials will therefore provide oral evidence on the draft Budget for the Department of Justice at the meeting on 6 February 2025.

Agreed: To request the views of the Northern Ireland Policing Board, the PSNI and the Department of Justice's other non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) on their draft Budget position.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on the anticipated impact of the increase in National Insurance contributions on the Department, its NDPBs and organisations that the Department works with in the community and voluntary sector and whether there exists any flexibility in funding and budget lines.

- Correspondence from the Committee for Health providing a copy of correspondence to the Minister of Justice regarding Caleb's Cause — post-19 Special Educational Needs.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on the current controllership framework and what guidance is available; when the last review was conducted and how it compared with elsewhere; or what plans there are to review controllership.

- A response from the Department of Justice to a request for further information on Northern Ireland Civil Service quarterly sickness absence statistics.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice how matters of diversity, equality and inclusion are linked to sick absences and what was meant by the reference to “the case for change”.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice regarding non-molestation orders in the context of Enabling Access to Justice;
- A response from the Department of Justice to a request for further information on the January Monitoring Round;
- Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Prison Service providing a copy of a letter from the Chair of the Prison Service Pay Review Body to the Minister of Justice, endorsing the 2024 pay award proposals; and
- Correspondence from the Committee for The Executive Office providing a copy of correspondence to the Northern Ireland Policing Board regarding Historical Institutional Abuse prosecutions. Correspondence sent to the Public Prosecution Service and the PSNI about the same topic were also included.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson advised Members that the forward work programme will be amended to include the oral evidence session on the draft Budget 2025-25 for 6 February 2025.

Agreed: To proceed with the evidence sessions as set out in the forward work programme, subject to changes agreed during today's meeting.

12. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed Members that she had received a request from the Police Federation for Northern Ireland to sponsor an event in her capacity as Chairperson of the Committee about assaults on police officers.

The Chairperson advised that, for such requests, her approach to making remarks in her capacity as Chairperson would be to reflect the Committee's views and to clearly differentiate these from any remarks made in her capacity as an MLA.

Agreed: That the Chairperson could sponsor the event in her capacity as Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.

13. Any other Business

The Chairperson referred to the recent plenary motion 'Custodial Facilities: Protection of Rights and Safety' and stated that the Minister of Justice said that no one had requested the guidance from the Assembly Library.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to provide a copy of the instructions that were issued to prison governors regarding the handling of transgender prisoners.

14. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

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

The Meeting was adjourned at 4.44pm.

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Justice