



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 27 March 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Danny Baker MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Maurice Bradley MLA

Doug Beattie MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Apologies: Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

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 2.15pm in open session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence sessions with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Children's Law Centre on the Justice Bill would be recorded by Hansard.

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

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

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

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 20 March 2025.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

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

The following witnesses from the office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) joined the meeting at 2:18pm:

- Chris Quinn, Commissioner for Children and Young People;
- Joanne McGurk, Head of Legal and Investigations; and
- Rachel Woods, Senior Policy and Research Officer.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill, with specific reference to the provisions that relate to children and young people.

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

During the evidence session, the witnesses agreed to provide:

- Information relating to children being prosecuted as adult offenders;
- NICCY's response to the consultation on proposals to amend legislation to help to tackle anti-social behaviour; and
- Information on the experiences of other countries where children are afforded equal protection as adults from assault.

Agreed: To forward NICCY's written submission to the Department of Justice for comment.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

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

5. Justice Bill — Children's Law Centre oral evidence

The following witnesses from the Children's Law Centre joined the meeting at 3.51pm:

- Paddy Kelly, Director;
- Eamonn McNally, Senior Solicitor; and
- Fergal McFerran, Policy and Public Affairs Manager.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill, with specific reference to the provisions that relate to children and young people.

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

During the evidence session, the witnesses agree to provide:

- Statistics on police attendance at children's care homes or other facilities or environments where looked-after children reside.

Agreed: To forward the Children's Law Centre's written submission to the Department of Justice for comment.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.31pm.

6. Justice Bill

6.1 Department of Justice Written Paper

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice to its request for information on a number of matters in relation to the biometrics provisions of the Justice Bill and the proposed amendments to those provisions, including the rationale for the retention periods and the accountability of the proposed Biometrics Commissioner.

Agreed: To again ask the Department of Justice to detail the specific rationale for determining the retention periods in the Bill.

6.2, 6.3, 6.4 and 6.5 — Call for Evidence Written Submission

The Chairperson referred Members to responses from the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland; the Law Society of Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Policing Board; and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland to its Call for Evidence and advised that oral evidence sessions have or will be scheduled with a number of those organisations.

Agreed: To note the written submissions.

6.6 Justice Bill — Round-table Event

The Chairperson reminded Members that, at its meeting on 30 January 2025, the Committee agreed to explore options for a round-table event for community groups and grassroots organisations to provide their views on the Justice Bill.

The Committee considered a number of options for the venue and agreed to consider the matter further at next week's Committee meeting.

7. Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme —Taxation of Legal Aid Remuneration for High Court Bail Applications — Update on Consultation Proposals — Department of Justice Written Paper

The Committee considered an update from the Department of Justice on the consultation on the Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme —Taxation of Legal Aid Remuneration for High Court Bail Applications.

The Chairperson advised Members that, although the paper was to provide an update on proposals for a consultation, the Department has responded to a number of issues that were raised by the Bar of Northern Ireland during its oral evidence session on the Justice Bill on 6 February 2025.

Agreed: To publish the paper on the Committee's Justice Bill web page.

Agreed: To forward the paper to the Bar of Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice what further steps it will take to address the issues regarding lack of engagement by the Bar of Northern Ireland.

8. Anti-social Behaviour — Response to Consultation and Proposed Way Forward — Department of Justice Written Paper

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice on the responses to the consultation on proposals to amend legislation to help to tackle anti-social behaviour. The Chairperson informed Members that the Department advised that the policy development on this matter is ongoing; that it will keep the

Committee informed of any key developments; and that any proposed legislative change will not occur until the next Assembly mandate.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for details on the “divergence of opinion” within the advisory group.

9. Court-ordered Community Sentences for Children — Proposed Consultation — Department of Justice Written Paper

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to questions that it had asked regarding the Department’s engagement with relevant children’s organisations and how the proposed court-ordered community sentences will relate to or impact on the Justice Bill.

Agreed: To note the proposed consultation and to consider further when the results of the consultation are available.

10. Correspondence

- Correspondence from the Assembly’s Public Engagement Manager inviting the Committee to participate in the 2025 Balmoral Show.

Agreed: That the Committee would not formally participate but that individual Members may do so in different capacities.

- Correspondence from Relatives for Justice requesting an opportunity to provide evidence about the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to provide a written response to the issues raised with a view to possible evidence sessions with Relatives for Justice and other relevant groups in future.

- A number of items of correspondence further to previous correspondence from two individuals about judicial practice in family courts and domestic abuse.

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee previously agreed to meet informally with the Lady Chief Justice and, separately, with the Minister of Justice to discuss family court matters and that the meeting with the Minister has been arranged for Monday 31 March 2025.

Agreed: To forward the latest items of correspondence to the Minister of Justice in advance of the informal meeting.

Agreed: To hold an informal lunch with the Lady Chief Justice, Mr Justice Kinney and Her Honourable Judge McCormick on Tuesday 29 April 2025.

- A response from the Department of Justice regarding risk assessments and transgender prisoners.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on how risk assessments for all prisoners entering custody are conducted; and for clarification of matters relating to transgender prisoners and self-identification, including learning from experiences in other jurisdictions.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A copy of the Department of Justice return to the Department of Finance regarding the alignment of the 2025-26 draft Budget allocations with the Programme for Government.
- A response from the Department of Justice regarding the Open Government Network Northern Ireland and publications of Freedom of Information and Environmental Information Regulation statistics.
- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee's request for clarification on how equality, diversity and inclusion relate to sickness absence.
- Pivotal report – 'Achieving greater integration in education and housing'.

- Correspondence from an individual regarding a complaint against the PSNI and a Housing Association.

11. 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.

12. Any other Business

There was no other business.

13. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 3 April at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 4.58pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice