



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 30 January 2025**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:** Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Doug Beattie MLA

Jemma Dolan MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Justin McNulty MLA

**Apologies:** Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

**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)

*The meeting commenced at 2.05pm in public session.*

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence session with Barnardo's Northern Ireland and the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland on the Justice Bill and the oral briefing by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) 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.*

### **1. Apologies**

As above.

### **2. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 23 January 2025.

*Justin McNulty joined the meeting at 2.07pm.*

### **3. Matters Arising — Correspondence from the Committee for Finance**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance requesting that each Committee provides its views on its Department's 2025-26 budget position by 28 February 2025.

#### **4. Justice Bill — Recap on the Administration of Justice Provisions — RalSe briefing**

Judith Bailie, a Research Officer with the Assembly's Research and Information Service, joined the meeting at 2.08pm.

The Research Officer provided a recap of the administration of justice provisions in the Justice Bill.

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

During the briefing, the Research Officer agreed to provide a copy of her slide show for circulation to Committee Members.

The Chairperson thanked the Research Officer and she left the meeting at 2.27pm.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice:

- what engagement has taken place with the relevant professions regarding the proposed changes that will be brought about by clause 25 (Death of child or vulnerable adult: limitation of power to “No Bill” alternative charge);
- how it will militate against the concerns that were raised regarding clause 27 (Legal aid charges to be registerable in the statutory charges register) during the consultation;
- for an update on any work that has been done to ensure that the proposed change that will be brought about by clause 28 (Restriction on ordering taxation of legal aid costs) will not adversely impact access to justice for people; and
- what new systems are being developed in relation to clause 28 (Restriction on ordering taxation of legal aid costs) to ensure that remuneration will appropriately recognise the skill of the legal profession and whether any such new systems will include a review mechanism.

## **5. Justice Bill — Children's Panel — Barnardo's Northern Ireland and the British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland oral evidence**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.27pm:

- Trása Canavan — Senior Policy and Public Affairs Lead, Barnardo's Northern Ireland; and
- Orlaith McGibbon — Chair of the British Association of Social Workers UK Independents' Committee.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

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

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

- further information on the recommendations to reduce the minimum age of criminal responsibility and the rationale for such recommendations; and
- statistics and experiences from other countries that have higher minimum ages of criminal responsibility regarding impact on levels of crime etc.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 3.12pm.

## **6. Justice Bill — Proposals for Call for Evidence**

The Committee discussed proposals for the Call for Evidence on the Justice Bill.

**Agreed:** That the call for evidence will run for six weeks from the date of issue.

**Agreed:** That the Committee was content with the draft media signposting notice, subject to an amendment to include the closing date.

**Agreed:** That the Committee was content with the lists of key stakeholders and the draft letter for issue to stakeholders seeking evidence on the Bill.

**Agreed:** That the Committee was content with the draft Citizen Space questionnaire.

**Agreed:** To explore options for a round-table event for community groups and grassroots organisations to provide their views on the Bill.

**Agreed:** To invite the Taxing Master to give oral evidence on clause 28 (Restriction on ordering taxation of legal aid costs) of the Justice Bill.

**Agreed:** To invite the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland and the Equality Commission to give oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

## **7. Organised Crime — Update on strategic approach — Department of Justice Written Paper**

The Committee noted a written paper from the Department of Justice that provided an update on proposals for an updated strategic approach to tackle serious and organised crime and a review of the Organised Crime Task Force structures and governance arrangements.

## **8. Correspondence**

- Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission requesting that a joint event with the Committee for Justice and the Committee for The Executive Office that was scheduled for 25 February 2025 be rescheduled.

**Agreed:** That the event is rescheduled to a suitable date in May or June.

- A Department of Justice news release regarding the Minister's commitment to engaging with the legal profession in light of the Criminal Bar Association's announcement that it plans to extend its withdrawal of services.
- Correspondence from the Bar of Northern Ireland advising of the extension to the withdrawal of services on the part of the Criminal Bar Association.

**Agreed:** To request details of the specific engagement that has taken place with the Minister and/or Departmental officials from the profession and what the key issues are.

- A report on the Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

**Agreed:** To include the written report on the agenda for the Committee meeting on 6 February 2025.

*Ciara Ferguson left the meeting at 3.28pm.*

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing a response from the Department of Finance regarding the merit of an amendment to the Northern Ireland Civil Service Staff Handbook in respect of Prison Service Staff. The Department's response lists a number of services and initiatives that are available and concluded that there are no plans to create a separate annex to the Handbook for Prison Service Staff;
- Correspondence from the Department of Justice providing an update on the 2024-25 January Monitoring outcome;
- A news release from the Department of Justice regarding a funding boost to help tackle domestic and sexual abuse;
- A response from the Department of Justice regarding catfishing in relation to the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022;
- An update from the Public Accounts Committee on its primacy over Northern Ireland Audit Office reports published up to 31 December 2024;
- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing a response from the Department of Finance regarding Northern Ireland Civil Service sickness levels;
- A response from the Police Service of Northern Ireland regarding potential costs for Domestic Abuse Protection Notices and Orders;
- An update from Ofcom on the Online Safety Act in relation to age verification to prevent underage access to harmful content;
- Attorney General for Northern Ireland Annual Report 2023-24;

- Correspondence from the Attorney General for Northern Ireland providing a Partnership Agreement between The Executive Office and the Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland; and
- Investment Strategy Northern Ireland Investing Activity Report — January 2025.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered an updated forward work programme and a proposed Department of Justice forward work programme for February 2025.

**Agreed:** To schedule the items of business from the Department's proposed forward work programme.

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

Members considered the proposed itinerary for the Committee visit to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service on Thursday 20 February 2025.

**Agreed:** That the Committee was content with the proposed itinerary for the visit.

The Deputy Chairperson advised Members that they should inform Committee staff of their availability to attend the visit.

The Deputy Chairperson advised that she is unable to attend the visit.

## **10. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's Business.

## **11. Any other Business**

There was no other business.

## **12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The Deputy Chairperson advised Members that the next meeting will take place on 6 February 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

*The Meeting was adjourned at 3.33pm.*

**Joanne Bunting MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**