



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

THURSDAY 16 January 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Jemma Dolan MLA

Stephen Dunne MLA

Justin McNulty 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)

The meeting commenced at 2.14pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence session with officials from the Department of Justice 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 and in relation to her brother who fosters children.

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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 12 December 2024.

3. Matters Arising

3.1 — Correspondence with Individual

The Chairperson advised the Committee that, further to the briefing on 12 December 2024 on a draft response to an individual regarding issues raised about the Northern

Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 and a number of other matters, she liaised with the Clerk Assistant regarding the suggested amendments and the response was subsequently issued.

The Chairperson further advised the Committee that the individual gave permission for his initial correspondence to be shared with the Committee for The Executive Office and the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has confirmed that it will contact the individual on these matters.

The Committee noted the items of correspondence.

3.2 — Correspondence regarding K9 Search and Rescue Northern Ireland

The Committee considered correspondence regarding K9 Search and Rescue Northern Ireland which had been marked by the sender as ‘without prejudice and in confidence’.

The Chairperson reminded Members that, at its meeting on 12 December 2024, the Committee considered correspondence from K9 Search and Rescue Northern and agreed to ask the Department for clarification on the reasons for declining the organisation’s application to join the search and rescue practitioners’ group and a number of other questions.

Agreed: To consider the additional correspondence further when a response to the Committee’s letter has been received from the Department for Justice.

4. Justice Bill — Department of Justice proposed amendments (Part 1: Biometrics, Restorative Justice, AccessNI Filtering and Serious Organised Crime) — Department of Justice oral evidence session

The following departmental officials joined the meeting at 2.19pm:

- Lisa Boal — Reducing Offending Division;
- Andrew Lavery — Bill Manager;
- Veronica Holland — Deputy Director of the Rehabilitation and Reducing Reoffending Division;

- Katie Taylor — Deputy Director of the Protection and Organised Crime Division; and
- Brian Thomson — AccessNI.

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

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

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

- information on the human rights aspects that have been considered in relation to the proposed amendments to the Justice Bill;
- details of the current process for the accreditation of restorative justice organisations and individuals, the de-accreditation process, the appeal process and how that compares to the changes that will be introduced by the restorative justice amendment;
- clarification of how the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA) deals with legacy issues and historical proceeds of crime; and
- clarification of whether there are plans to consider if all children and young people are equally protected from abuse, exploitation and other harms, given that a number of offences listed in respect of AccessNI filtering refer only to girls.

The officials advised that the text of the proposed amendments in relation to Live Links would be provided to the Committee no later than 31 January 2025.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and the evidence session ended at 4.20pm.

The Committee noted the papers from the Department including a revised delegated powers memorandum.

The Committee noted two papers from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on Republic of Ireland: Biometric Data and Policing; and Supplementary Information relating to qualifying and recordable offences.

The Committee noted a response from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission regarding protection from the stigmatisation of children in relation to biometric retention periods.

The Committee noted a response from the Northern Ireland Office regarding different approaches to the retention of NI and GB biometric data.

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

Agreed: To forward the Department's amended delegated powers memorandum to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for information or comment as appropriate.

5. The Fostering Placement and Fostering Agency Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 — Department of Health written paper

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Health in relation to a proposed Statutory Rule, which creates new offences in relation to fostering agencies.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Health to provide more information on the proposed offences, including whether they will attract penalties or what the implications might be.

6. Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme — update — Minister of Justice written paper

The Committee considered a written paper from the Minister of Justice providing an update on the Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for details of the engagement it has undertaken with the relevant sectors regarding the programme and whether any further engagement is planned.

7. Amendments to Legal Aid remuneration — proposals to amend remuneration for civil and criminal legal services for solicitors and barristers — consultation — Department of Justice written paper

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice regarding its plans to conduct a consultation on proposals to uplift civil and criminal legal aid fees following Judge Burgess' fundamental review of criminal legal aid.

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

8. Aarhus Convention — call for evidence — Department of Justice written paper

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice regarding its plan to issue a call for evidence to seek views on the Aarhus Convention Compliance Committee's recommendations on access to justice in order to inform the best way for Northern Ireland to be compliant with the Aarhus Convention.

Agreed: To note the written paper and to consider further when the results of the call for evidence are available.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted an updated Forward Work Programme.

10. Correspondence

Correspondence from the Department of Justice containing a departmental return to the Department of Finance in preparation for the draft Budget 2025-26.

Agreed: To schedule an oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on the draft Budget 2025-26.

Correspondence from Ofcom regarding the publication of its Illegal Harms Statement further to the Online Safety Act 2023.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to provide details of any implications for the justice system in Northern Ireland.

Correspondence from Ofcom regarding a proposed plan of work for 2025-26 and information on a planned consultation event in the Long Gallery on 23 January 2025.

Agreed: That Members would register individually should they wish to attend.

Correspondence from McGibbon Consultancy and Safeguarding Services requesting that the Committee raise with the Minister of Justice, the Department of Justice and the constituent agencies of Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland a number of matters regarding a murder case and the lack of a serious case review.

The Chairperson advised that she had received further correspondence on this matter, which she undertook to share with the Committee.

Agreed: To consider this matter further on receipt of the additional correspondence from the Chairperson.

Correspondence from the Allied Health Professions Federation Northern Ireland containing an invitation to an event in the Long Gallery on Monday 24 February 2025.

Agreed: That Members would register individually should they wish to attend.

Correspondence from the Department of Justice regarding an addendum to the first report on the operation of the Protection from Stalking Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on what protections are in place for victims of catfishing.

Response from the Department of Justice regarding information on bail addresses.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on the process for approving premises that are used for bail addresses and a list of premises.

Response from the Department of Justice providing an update on the Housing First Model.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Health for an update on the work of the Strategic Planning and Performance Group in taking forward the recommendations

made by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority in its Review into the Services provided to Vulnerable Persons detained in NI Prisons.

Agreed: To request clarification from the Department of Justice on whether there is currently a cross-departmental memorandum of understanding in place in relation to the Housing First Model.

Response from the Department of Justice regarding the injury-on-duty scheme and the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Agreed: To again ask the Department of Justice for information about the process that could result in a change in the ownership of the scheme and to clarify whether a formal request has been made by the Northern Ireland Policing Board regarding a change in the ownership of the scheme.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A press release relating to the publication of a report into a death in custody, which was embargoed until 00.01 hours on 20 January 2025;
- Correspondence from the Minister of Justice advising of the successful negotiation of the 2024 pay award for operational prison grades;
- Correspondence from the Minister of Justice providing an update on the establishment of the Truth Recovery Redress Service;
- Response from the Department of Justice regarding key concerns raised during the unannounced Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's inspection of Hydebank Wood College and Women's Prison;
- Correspondence from the Department of Justice providing notice that the Minister of Justice has approved the recruitment of nine Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal lay members;
- A copy of the response from the Department of Justice response to the Committee for Communities regarding expediting work attributed to the Anti-Poverty Strategy;
- Response from the Department of Justice providing further information on the implementation of the Gillen Review recommendations;

- Correspondence from the Department of Justice providing an update on the Department of Justice Stage 2 2024-25 January Monitoring position as submitted to the Department of Finance;
- Notification from the Department of Justice of the publication of an official statistics bulletin on 'The Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 - Prosecutions at Courts and Case Processing Time for Domestic Abuse Related Cases Dealt with in 2022/23 –2023/24';
- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding potential equality impacts of the 2025-26 draft budget;
- Correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding the 2024-25 Spring Supplementary Estimates and January Monitoring;
- Correspondence from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee providing a Committee Report on Regulation (EU) 2024/2865 amending Regulation (EC) No 1272/2008 on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixture;
- Copy of response from the Public Prosecution Service to the Committee for The Executive Office regarding Historical Institutional Abuse prosecutions;
- Investment Strategy Northern Ireland Investing Activity Report for the Department of Justice for December 2024;
- Correspondence from Stratagem Northern Ireland regarding minimum unit pricing for alcohol;
- Correspondence from Eóin Tennyson MLA advising of a public consultation on a Private Member's Bill to ban conversion practices in Northern Ireland; and
- Correspondence from the United Kingdom National Preventative Mechanism providing notification of laying in Parliament of 2023-24 Annual Report monitoring places of detention.

The Chairperson reminded Members that an email was sent to them regarding an invitation from Amnesty International to an event in Parliament Buildings on legacy.

The Chairperson reminded Members that an email was sent to them regarding a drop-in event being hosted by Queen's University Belfast in Parliament Buildings.

11. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

12. Any other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Chairperson advised Members that the next meeting will take place on 23 January 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.47pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice