



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 12 February 2026

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Doug Beattie MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

In Attendance:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Joshua Devlin (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 2.02pm in closed session.

Agreed: That the meeting begin in closed session to continue Committee deliberations on the Justice Bill and the planned Departmental amendments.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.03pm.

2. Justice Bill – Committee Deliberations

Liz Marsh, Assembly Clerk, Bill Office, attended the meeting to provide advice on various technical aspects of the Justice Bill and planned Departmental amendments.

The Committee discussed the planned Departmental amendments in relation to Biometrics, the Repeal of Public Order Offences: Consequential Amendments (which relate to the repeal of the vagrancy legislation), and Live Links (Courts and Tribunals), and identified a number of areas that Members would like to follow up with the Department of Justice.

Liz Marsh left the meeting 2.47pm.

The meeting moved to public session at 2.47pm.

Agreed: That the joint oral evidence session with the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland (PPS) on delays in

the criminal justice system, as well as the oral evidence on the Justice Bill with Department of Justice officials, will be recorded by Hansard.

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

Connie Egan declared an interest in relation to item 5 of the agenda due to her fiancé being a victim of crime and having an open case with the Public Prosecution Service.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 5 February 2026.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Delays in the Criminal Justice System – Police Service of Northern Ireland and Public Prosecutions Service Northern Ireland joint oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.50pm:

Gary McDonald, Chief Superintendent, PSNI;
Martin Reid, Superintendent, PSNI;
Michael Agnew, Deputy Director, PPS; and
Peter Luney, Senior Assistant Director, Resources and Change, PPS.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on various aspects of delays in the criminal justice system, as well as current and proposed measures to mitigate delays and deliver efficiencies across the system.

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

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 4.24pm.

Connie Egan left the meeting at 4.24pm.

Ciara Ferguson left the meeting at 4.24pm.

6. Justice Bill – Committee Deliberations – Department of Justice oral evidence

The following Department of Justice officials joined the meeting at 4.25pm:

Dr Veronica Holland, Deputy Director of Rehabilitation and Reducing Offending Division;

Jenny McAlarney, Policy Official, Reducing Offending Division; and

Andrew Laverty, Bill Manager, Department of Justice.

The officials provided further information on specific aspects of Part 2 of the Justice Bill that Members had agreed to seek clarity on during previous Committee deliberations on the Justice Bill.

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

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 4.52pm

The Chairperson outlined the key matters discussed during the deliberations on the planned Departmental amendments in relation to Biometrics, the Repeal of Public Order Offences: Consequential Amendments and Live Links (Courts and

Tribunals), and noted that Members had identified a number matters they wish to further engage on with the Department of Justice.

In relation to the amendments on Biometrics, Members expressed concerns in relation to the need to consider an individual's personal circumstances when directing them to attend a police stations at a designated time and date as outlined in the new Clause 23B(2)(a) and (b).

In relation to Part 1 of the Justice Bill on Biometrics, Members expressed concerns in relation to 63Q that a person given a penalty notice under section 60 of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 in respect of a recordable offence, may have their biometric material retained until the end of the period of 2 years from the date at which they were given a penalty notice, even if no proceedings are brought against them in relation to the offence.

Members noted that amendments relating to the repeal of the vagrancy legislation may no longer be progressed by the Minister of Justice.

In relation to the Live Links (Courts and Tribunals), Members advised of their view that provision should be included in the Bill to review the operation of live links.

Agreed: To write to the Department to ask whether the Minister of Justice would be content to bring forward an amendment to include photographs within the scope of Part 1 of the Bill, as well as an amendment to the text of Clause 4 of the Bill to add 'vulnerabilities' to the factors that a custody/court officer must consider in respect of a child who has been arrested.

Agreed: That, in advance of the next Committee meeting on 19 February, Members will consider what should captured by review mechanisms for the provisions in the Bill and the planned Departmental amendment relating to Live Links, and for the new Youth Custody and Supervision Orders.

7. Justice Bill – Written Papers

7.1 – Department of Justice – Further amendments to the Justice Bill – Barred and Advisory Lists and former officer misconduct proceedings

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing an update on the targeted stakeholder consultation exercise in respect of the review of the police officer misconduct procedures.

Agreed: To request an oral briefing from Departmental officials on the proposals for delegated legislation on these matters at the appropriate time.

7.2 – Department of Justice – Independent Custody Visitors Scheme – notification of proposed amendment

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Justice advising of the Minister's intention to bring forward an amendment to the Justice Bill relating to the Independent Custody Visitors Scheme. The amendment will aim to address the identified gap in access to custody records, particularly in cases where detainees are not capable of providing consent for their custody record to be reviewed.

7.3 – Committee for Health – Forward Department of Health written paper on Justice Bill Part 2 – Children

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Department of Health on Part 2 of the Justice Bill in relation to Children, which was forwarded to the Committee by the Committee for Health

7.4 – NICCY, CLC, VOYPIC, Include Youth, CiNI and NIACRO – Justice Bill – 10 Is Too Young

The Committee noted a joint briefing paper by the ‘10 is too young’ member organisations which set out a number of ‘key asks’ in relation to the Justice Bill for the Committee’s consideration.

7.5 – The Christian Institute report – Does Smacking Contribute To Negative Outcomes for Children?

The Committee noted correspondence from the Christian Institute regarding the removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement and a copy of the paper ‘Does Smacking Contribute to Negative Outcomes for Children.’

7.6 – Minister of Health Response – Secure Care Accommodation

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Health on how it has benchmarked the provision of secure care accommodation against other jurisdictions in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, and the use of other providers, such as the community and voluntary sectors, in providing this service within other jurisdictions.

7.7 – Department of Justice – Clause 28 of the Justice Bill

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department providing an update on developments with regard to the taxation reform elements of the Justice Bill. The Department advised that advice was sought on the impact on Clause 28 of a proposed amendment to set legal aid rates and arrangements for all proceeding types and, as Clause 28 does not relate to the current policy position of setting legal aid rates and arrangements for the Taxing Master to apply, it will be removed from the Bill by way of amendment.

Agreed: To consider the matter further when the amendment to remove Clause 28 from the Justice Bill is received by the Committee.

8. SL1 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Chairperson person advised that this is the Committee's first proposal for a Statutory Rule to be handled under the Assembly's new scrutiny procedures, and Members were asked to formally agree a number of standard actions for the handling of this and all future SL1s in line with the new procedures.

Agreed:

- To issue a call for views on the proposed statutory rule using the standard survey;
- To publish the SL1, the draft copy of the proposed statutory rule and any relevant departmental documentation on the committee website;
- To publish any responses received to the committee survey for each SL1, after they have been considered by the Committee.
- That the Committee staff may seek information from the Department, where necessary, on any matters raised during consideration of any SL1, including any arising from a survey; and that all information provided by the Department will be provided to the Committee to inform its decision making on the proposal.

The Committee considered SL1 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026.

Agreed: To note the receipt of the SL1 and the draft copy of the proposed Statutory Rule and that these will be published as part of the call for views on the proposal.

Agreed: To consider the SL1 at the meeting on 5 March 2026.

9. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice to the research by the Women’s Research and Development Agency (WRDA) on the Use of Firearms in Violence Against Women and Girls.

Agreed: To forward the Department’s response to the WRDA.

- Responses from the PPS and the Probation Board for Northern Ireland on operational aspects of provisions in the Adult Protection Bill currently being considered by the Committee for Health.

Agreed: To forward both responses to the Committee for Health to inform their consideration of the Bill.

- A response from the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB) providing information on their processes and procedures for handling Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and Data Protection Act (DPA) requests.

Agreed: To request clarification from the Department on what oversight or assurance mechanisms exist in respect of FOIA compliance by arm’s length bodies.

- Further correspondence from an individual seeking the Committee’s assistance in accessing a copy of the Guidance to Medical Practitioners on Injury on Duty Awards.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice and the NIPB to clarify where the Guidance can be accessed.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice - Response providing clarification on the commencement and duration of engagement associated with the legal aid engagement papers.
- Department of Justice - Response providing information requested on the Planned Consultation on the Future of Limavady Courthouse.
- Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland - Launch of Consultation on Police Ombudsman Five Year Legislative Review.
- The Bar of Northern Ireland - Written briefing on the Criminal Bar Association (CBA) withdrawal of services.
- Public Accounts Committee - Retention and Release of Northern Ireland Audit Office reports.
- Northern Ireland Youth Assembly - Update on the activities of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly for the month of January.
- Further copy correspondence from an individual to various recipients including the Police Ombudsman and Carla Lockhart MP regarding an ongoing personal matter.
- The Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland – copy of an embargoed Report into a Death in Custody.

10. Forward Work Programme

10.1 Forward Work Programme

Members noted the latest draft of the Committee’s forward work programme.

11. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

Agreed: To commence next week's meeting at 1:30pm to continue deliberations on the Justice Bill and planned Departmental amendments.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 19 February at 1.30pm in the Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.13pm.

Paul Frew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Justice
19 February 2026