



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 2 July 2026

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

In Attendance:

Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.04 pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence sessions with the Law Society of Northern Ireland on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, and with the Minister of Justice on the proposed deepfake amendment to the Sentencing Bill will be recorded by Hansard.

Maurice Bradley declared an interest in relation to agenda item 8 on account of his membership of the Irish Football Association.

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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 25 June 2026.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

The Committee agreed to move to agenda items 6 and 7 next.

Patsy McGlone joined the meeting at 2.08pm.

4. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Written papers

4.1 and 4.2 – Department of Justice responses

The Committee noted responses from the Department of Justice to matters raised in the Convention Rights Memorandum prepared by Assembly Legal Services and in the written submission from the Information Commissioner's Office.

Agreed: To forward the respective responses to the Assembly Legal Services and to the Information Commissioner's Office for any additional comments they may wish to make.

4.3 – Probation Board for Northern Ireland – Response following oral evidence session

The Committee noted a response from the Probation Board providing information requested during their oral evidence on the Bill.

Agreed: To forward the response to the Department of Justice for information.

4.4 and 4.5 – Domestic Abuse Suicide Law Campaign

The Committee noted two items of correspondence from an individual regarding domestic abuse related suicide which provided links to information on the campaign, including two letters from the Justice Minister to the individual. Members noted that the Committee is scheduled to take oral evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill from Women's Aid, who raised similar issues in their written submission on the Bill, in September.

4.6 – L Ramsey – Jonny’s Law addendum to submission

The Committee noted further correspondence from L Ramsey providing an addendum to her earlier submission in relation to Jonny’s Law.

Agreed: To forward the additional correspondence to the Department of Justice for consideration alongside the Committee’s previous request to the Department for information on any work conducted or consideration given to matters not included in the Bill, including Jonny’s Law.

5. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill - Call for evidence proposals

The Committee considered a number of matters relating to the Call for Evidence on the Victims and Witnesses of Bill.

Agreed: That the Call for Evidence will begin in w/c 6 July 2026 and close on 25 September 2026.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the draft media sign-posting notice.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the draft Citizen Space questionnaire; and that the questionnaire be published on Citizen Space.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the draft letter inviting written evidence from key stakeholders and the list of key stakeholders to be invited to provide evidence.

Agreed: That Committee staff and the Communications team will make and publish necessary social media posts to support the Call for Evidence.

Agreed: To publish all Bill-related documents on the Committee website, including those received before the start of the Committee Stage.

The Committee moved to agenda item 5 next.

6. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Law Society of Northern Ireland oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.23pm:

Joe McVeigh, Solicitor, Council Member and Chair of Law Society Criminal Law Committee;

Eoghan McKenna, Solicitor, Junior Vice President of the Society and Criminal Law Committee member; and

Ann McMahon, Head of Practice and Procedure and Criminal Law Committee Secretary.

Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 2.24pm.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

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

During the evidence session the witnesses agreed to provide follow-up information on:

- Cases from the Court of Appeal demonstrating the exceptions used for the application of suspended sentences, which may be of relevance to the provisions of the Bill relating to assaults on public workers;
- Evidence/data in relation to attacks on officers of the court including, for example, the numbers of cases, the types of offence, outcomes (suspended sentences or other penalties) etc; and
- Suggestions as to how offences such as harassment, intimidation and stalking could be captured in Clauses 37 – 39 of the Bill, in relation to offences against public workers.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 3.45pm.

7. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Deepfake amendment – Minister of Justice oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3.46pm:

Naomi Long, Minister of Justice;
Andrew Dawson, Director of Criminal Justice and Legislation Division,
Department of Justice; and
Lorraine Ferguson-Coote, Head of Criminal Policy Unit, Department of
Justice.

The Minister and officials provided oral evidence on the proposed Ministerial deepfake amendment to the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

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

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials and they left the meeting at 4.40pm.

8. SL1 The Justice (2011 Act) (Amendment of Schedule 3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 – Update to football bodies, championships and leagues

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice to make a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by section 35(4) of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The rule will amend Schedule 3 to the 2011 Act to update references to football bodies, championships and leagues in relation to regulated matches for the purposes of Part 4 of that Act.

The Rule will be subject to the negative resolution procedure.

The Committee also considered a response from the Department of Justice to correspondence from Mr J Bryson, which Members agreed to forward to the Department for response at the meeting on 4 June 2026.

Agreed: To forward the Department's response to Mr Bryson for information.

Agreed: To seek legal advice on taking oral evidence on this matter in view of the ongoing judicial review proceedings, which have been adjourned until the delegated legislation process has concluded.

9. SL1 The Justice (2011 Act) (Amendment of Schedule 4) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 – Expansion of Out of Court Disposals

The Committee considered a proposal by the Department of Justice to make a Statutory Rule under the powers granted by the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. This rule seeks to allow the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) to issue Penalty Notices under Part 6, Chapter 1 of Schedule 4 for a broader range of offences by adding four additional offences: common assault; possession of Class A drugs; possession of Class B drugs; and possession of Class C drugs.

Emma Sheerin left the meeting at 4.44pm.

The Rule will be subject to the draft affirmative procedure and is proposed to come into operation on the day after the Order is approved by the Assembly.

Members also noted responses from the Department of Justice and the PSNI on what the impact for the scheme may be of not including the offence of assault on a police officer in the final list of offences in the expansion of Out of Court Disposals.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

10. SL1 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Extension of Provisions Relating to Live Links for Courts and Tribunals) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered the Department of Justice's proposal to make a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by section 90 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 ("the 2020 Act") to enable the provisions in Parts 1 and 2 of schedule 27 to the 2020 Act to remain in force for a further six months to 24 March 2027.

The Rule will be subject to the confirmatory resolution procedure and the Department has proposed that the Rule will come into operation on 24 September 2026.

Agreed: To issue a call for views on the proposed Statutory Rule using the standard survey; to publish the SL1 and the draft Statutory Rule on the Committee's website; and to consider the proposed Statutory Rule at the meeting on 10 September 2026.

The Chair advised Members that agenda items 11, 12 and 13 will be considered together.

11. SL1 The Offensive Weapons Act 2019 (Commencement No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

12. SL1 The Surrender of Offensive Weapons (Compensation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

13. SL1 The Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Offensive Weapons) (Amendment, Surrender and Compensation) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice to make three Statutory Rules related to the commencement of provisions in the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, which will make it a criminal offence to possess certain dangerous weapons for private use.

Members noted that the Commencement Order at agenda item 11 will not be subject to any procedure, and the two Rules at agenda items 12 and 13 will be subject to the draft affirmative procedure.

Agreed: To issue a call for views on each of the proposed Statutory Rules using the standard survey; to publish the revised SL1 and the draft Statutory Rules on the Committee's website; and to consider the proposed Statutory Rule at a suitable meeting following summer recess.

14. Reform of Legal Services - Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a summary report from the Department of Justice on a recent stakeholder engagement exercise to explore potential reforms to legal aid, which focused on ensuring legal aid remains fair, effective and targeted at those most in need, which advised that work is ongoing to determine which proposals should be further developed and taken forward to formal public consultation.

15. Access to the Bar - RalSe written paper

Emma Sheerin returned to the meeting at 4.49pm.

The Committee noted a research paper from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RalSe), commissioned by the Committee, on the process for accessing the Bar in Northern Ireland and in other neighbouring jurisdictions, and for details of any support or sponsorship offered in this regard.

Agreed: To forward the RalSe paper to the individual who raised the matter of access to The Bar with the Committee.

16. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice to correspondence from the Neurology Justice Collective.

Agreed: To forward the response to the Neurology Justice Collective and to the Committee for Health for information.

The Committee also noted copy correspondence from the Neurology Justice Collective to the Northern Ireland Office.

- A copy of a recently published review from the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) on the effectiveness of arrangements to assess and manage the risks posed by terrorist risk offenders by the Multi-Agency Review Arrangements (MARA).

Agreed: To seek responses to the report's findings and recommendations from the MARA Strategic Management Board, the NI Prison Service, the Department of Justice and HM Prison and Probation Service.

- A copy of a response from the Department of Finance forwarded by the Committee for Finance to proposals contained in correspondence from an individual to introduce interim lump sum orders in financial remedy proceedings in Northern Ireland. Members noted that the Committee had also written directly to the Department of Finance on this issue.

Agreed: To forward the response to the individual who raised the matter with this Committee.

- A request for views on the Regional Balance Bill from the Committee for the Economy.

Agreed: To provide a nil return to the Committee for the Economy on the Bill.

- A request for views on the Hunting with Dogs Bill from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA) and separate correspondence from the Countryside Alliance Ireland expressing a number of concerns in relation to aspects of the Bill and its accompanying documents.

Agreed: To forward the Countryside Alliance Ireland correspondence to the AERA Committee, suggesting that it may wish to engage with relevant organisations in the justice sector on the issues raised.

Agreed: To advise the Countryside Alliance Ireland that scrutiny of the Hunting with Dogs Bill is a matter for the AERA Committee and of the action that the Committee has taken in relation to their correspondence.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice if it has any comment to make on the Bill before responding to the AERA Committee's call for views.

- The Committee noted work undertaken by Committee staff in response to two items of correspondence relating to Injury on Duty, which Members considered at the meeting on 4 June 2026. The work identified that the questions for the Department of Justice and the Northern Ireland Policing Board, asked by the individuals in the correspondences considered on 4

June 2026, had not been asked in previous correspondence or that additional information had been requested.

Agreed: That the questions from the correspondences considered on 4 June are forwarded to the NI Policing Board and the Department of Justice for response, along with additional questions relating to Version 3 of the Joint Guidance.

Members also considered a draft response to the requested information from an individual on the Committee's scrutiny of a statutory rule which placed the Joint Guidance for Medical Practitioners on a statutory footing.

Agreed: That the draft response be issued to the individual.

- Correspondence from an individual with communication difficulties in relation to their experience of access to justice for vulnerable parents in Family Proceedings.

Agreed: To forward the correspondence to the Department, with the individual's permission, to seek information on what support is available and what is being done to ensure people with communication difficulties can fully participate in Family Courts.

- A copy of letter from PIPS Suicide Prevention Ireland to the NI Policing Board, raising several concerns about Right Care Right Person (RCRP) initiative following a recent serious incident involving a person at risk.

Agreed: To ask the Policing Board for a copy of its response to PIPS.

Agreed: To forward the correspondence to the Department of Justice and the Department of Health for

response, as well as to request information on the current position of RCRP and clarity on which aspects of the initiative are now operational

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Minister of Justice - Agency arrangements requisition of land at Invest NI site (Forthriver Business Park), Springfield Road, Belfast.
- Department of Justice - notification of error in Damages for Bereavement (Variation of Sum) Order (NI) 2022 and arrangements to rectify it.
- Department of Justice - Notification of publication of Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) Judicial Statistics.
- Department of Justice - News Release - Recruitment competition for Independent Chairperson for the Northern Ireland Search and Rescue (NISAR) Practitioners Group.
- Committee for Finance - Correspondence from Oireachtas Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure, Public Services Reform and Digitalisation providing a copy of the Public Service Performance report, which was received as part of the Committee for Finance's Inquiry into the Performance and Culture of the Northern Ireland Civil Service.
- Public Accounts Committee – Update regarding primacy and NI Audit Office Reports.
- An individual - Copy of correspondence to CJINI raising concerns about the PSNI.
- An individual - Copies of correspondence to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and to the Equality Commission.
- Strategic Investment Board - Investing Activity Report for Department of Justice, June 2026.
- Minister of Health and Minister of Justice - Joint Written Ministerial Statement to the Assembly on Regional Children and Families Authority.
- Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) - Save the Date - Sea Across Society launch event on Tuesday 3rd November.

17. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the latest draft of the Committee's forward work programme.

The Committee agreed to review whether a roundtable informal event on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill will be necessary as the oral evidence on the Bill progresses.

18. Chairperson's Business

18.1 Freedom of Information Requests

Members noted that it is standard practice to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, during periods of recess, to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee; and that any such views expressed would be brought to the attention of the Committee at the first meeting after summer recess.

Agreed: To delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

18.2 Correspondence

Members noted that correspondence will continue to be received over the summer period, and is usually provided to the Committee for consideration at the first meeting after summer recess. The Committee team will advise Members if any urgent matters arise or any matters that may require agreement via correspondence over the summer period.

The Chairperson also offered congratulations, on behalf of the Committee, to Connie Egan MLA on her upcoming wedding.

19. Any Other Business

Agreed: To commission a paper from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) on deepfake legislation in other jurisdictions.

20. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on Thursday 10 September at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.05pm.

Paul Frew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

10 September 2026