



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 26 March 2026**

**Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:** Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Aoife Finnegan MLA

**Apologies:** Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

**In Attendance:** Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Joshua Devlin (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.00pm in public session.

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence session with officials on the proposed expansion of Out of Court Disposals and the consideration of the Report on the Justice Bill will be recorded by Hansard.

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

*Patsy McGlone declared an interest in relation to agenda item 8 due to his interest in country sports.*

### **1. Apologies**

As above.

### **2. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 19 March 2026.

### **3. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

#### **4. Out of Court Disposals – Proposed expansion - Permanent Secretary oral evidence**

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.02pm:

Hugh Widdis, Permanent Secretary, Department of Justice;

Lisa Rocks, Assistant Secretary, Justice Performance Team, Department of Justice;

Gary McDonald, Chief Superintendent, PSNI; and

Peter Luney, Senior Assistant Director, Public Prosecution Service.

*Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.03pm.*

*Aoife Finnegan joined the meeting at 2.08pm.*

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Department of Justice's proposed expansion of Out of Court Disposals (OOCDS).

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

During the evidence session, the officials agreed to provide a copy of the Police Federation for Northern Ireland's response to the consultation on the expansion of OOCDS.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 2.48pm.

**Agreed:**

The Committee was content with the following proposals in respect of the expansion of out of court disposals:

- Giving powers to the PSNI to issue Penalty Notices for four new offences of: common assault; possession of Class A controlled drugs; possession of Class B controlled drugs; and possession of Class C controlled drugs.

- Increasing the penalty notice amounts for existing offences across two tiers - £120 and £150; and
- That the Department will bring forward primary legislation in the next mandate to strengthen Prosecutorial Fine legislation by increasing the maximum fine amount that a prosecutor can issue and enabling the PPS to issue penalty points in combination with a prosecutorial fine for a low-level motoring offence.

**Agreed:** That the Committee will reserve its position on giving police powers to issue Penalty Notices for the offence assault on police until Members have considered the Police Federation’s response to the consultation on the expansion of OOCs.

## **5. Justice Bill – written papers**

### **5.1 Legal Services – Justice Bill Convention Rights Memorandum**

The Committee noted a Memorandum prepared by the Legal Services Office, summarising the advice already received by the Committee in briefings from Legal Services on the human rights considerations of the Justice Bill.

**Agreed:** That the Memorandum be published on the Committee’s website.

### **5.2 Bar of Northern Ireland – taxation provisions**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Bar of Northern Ireland offering to provide written or oral evidence on the new Clause 27A relating to taxation reform, which the Minister intends to bring by way of amendment to the Justice Bill at Consideration Stage.

**Agreed:** To take oral evidence from the Bar of Northern Ireland on the proposed Ministerial amendment to insert new Clause 27A in the Justice Bill.

**Agreed:** To request the views of the Law Society on the proposed Ministerial amendment.

## **6. Justice Bill – Consideration of draft report.**

The Committee considered a draft Committee Report on the Justice Bill, following completion of the formal clause by clause scrutiny of the Bill at the meeting on 19 March 2026.

### **Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page**

The Committee considered the Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page as drafted.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page.

### **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms Used in the Report**

The Committee considered the List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in the Report as drafted.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in the Report.

### **Introduction**

The Committee considered the Introduction to the report at paragraphs 15 to 37 as drafted, which includes sections on Pre-Introductory Scrutiny, The Justice Bill and The Committee Approach.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Introduction section of the report.

### **Considerations of the Provisions of the Bill**

The Committee considered the Considerations of the Provisions of the Bill at paragraphs 38 to 244 as drafted, which covers Parts 1 to 5 of the Bill as introduced.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Consideration of the Provisions of the Bill section of the report.

### **Consideration of Planned Ministerial Amendments**

The Committee considered the Consideration of Planned Ministerial Amendments section of the report at paragraphs 245 to 319 as drafted.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Considerations of Planned Ministerial Amendments section of the report.

### **Consideration of other matters not in the Bill**

The Committee considered the Consideration of Other Matters not in the Bill section of the report at paragraphs 320 to 349 as drafted.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Consideration of Other Matters not in the Bill section of the report.

### **Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill**

The Committee considered paragraphs 350 to 442 of the Report as drafted, which detail the Committee's Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill section of the report.

### **Executive Summary**

The Committee considered the Executive Summary of the Report at paragraphs 1 to 14 as drafted.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Executive Summary.

### **Links to Appendices**

The Committee considered the Links to Appendices section of the report.

**Agreed:** That the Links to Appendices be included in the report.

**Agreed:** That the the Minutes of today's meeting be added to Appendix 1, when agreed.

**Agreed:** That the report should be published and issued to all MLAs.

**Agreed:** To circulate a link to the report to the individuals and organisations who provided evidence to the Committee on the Bill.

The Deputy Chairperson expressed thanks to the Committee team, the Bill Clerk, Hansard, Assembly Legal Services, the Examiner of Statutory Rules, the Communications Office and other Assembly staff who assisted the Committee during its scrutiny of the Bill.

## **7. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Call for Evidence proposals**

The Committee considered a number of matters relating to the Call for Evidence on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

**Agreed:** That the Call for Evidence will be issued during w/c 30 March and close on 8 May 2026.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the draft media signposting 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.

#### **7.7 Mark Durkan MLA - Forwarded correspondence from P Duddy regarding Jasmin's Law**

The Committee considered correspondence forwarded from Mark Durkan MLA on behalf of a constituent, Mrs Duddy, seeking support for the campaign for Jasmin's Law.

**Agreed:** To respond to Mark Durkan and Mrs Duddy inviting a formal submission to the Call for Evidence on the Sentencing Bill to include further information on the case for Jasmine's Law as part of their response.

#### **7.8 Harper's Law NI – Request to be included in Call for Evidence**

The Committee considered correspondence from a campaigner for Harper's Law requesting that they be included in the Call for Evidence on the Sentencing Bill.

**Agreed:** To respond to the individual, advising of the launch of the Committee's Call for Evidence on the

Sentencing Bill and invite them to submit a formal response to the Bill via Citizen Space.

#### **8. Firearms licensing fees – Department of Justice written paper**

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice advising that it has prepared a consultation to seek views on proposals to amend Schedule 1A “Relevant firearms for Article 11(4)(c)”, commonly referred to as the “banded system”, and Schedule 6 “Fees” of the Firearms (NI) Order 2004.

**Agreed:** To request an oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on the consultation to increase firearms licensing fees and on the Ministerial Directive which quantifies how many firearms a registered dealer can hold.

#### **9. Strategic approach to Safer Communities/Organised Crime – Department of Justice written paper**

*Doug Beattie declared an interest as a member of the working group on the Executive Programme on Paramilitarism and Organised Crime (EPPOC).*

The Committee considered a written paper from the Department of Justice which provides a further update on the continued development of its collective strategic approach to tackling serious and organised crime, as well as outlining a number of proposed next steps.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department to outline whether, and to what extent, this approach has linked with EPPOC to ensure a coherent and consistent approach.

*The Committee agreed to consider agenda item 15 next.*

## 10. Legislative Consent – Armed Forces Bill

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Justice advising of the Justice Minister's intention to lay a Memorandum in the Assembly giving notice of the need for a Legislative Consent Motion in respect of measures in the Armed Forces Bill. The measures that require consent are Clauses 6 and Schedule 3 regarding the protection from domestic abuse and stalking, and Clause 7 relating to Service restraining orders.

## 11. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- A further response from the Department of Justice on assistance for litigants in person.

**Agreed:** To forward the Department's response to Peter Martin MLA, as well as to the individual who had originally raised the matter with Mr Martin and to another individual who had raised concerns regarding litigants in person.

- A response from the Department to questions the Committee had forwarded from an individual in relation to a 2020 Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Injury on Duty awards, and subsequent evidence provided to the Committee by officials from the Department of Justice.

**Agreed:** To forward the Department's response to the individual who raised the questions with the Committee.

- A response from the NI Policing Board to the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland's recent report on Abuse of Position for Sexual Purposes by PSNI Officers.

**Agreed:** To consider further when the responses from the Department of Justice and the PSNI are also available.

- Further correspondence from an individual in relation to Pre-Release Testing prior to Tariff Expiry Date.

*Doug Beattie declared an interest on the basis that he knows and has met with the individual who submitted the correspondence to the Committee.*

**Agreed:** To ask the Department for information on the proposed review of the current pre-release testing framework by an independent expert panel, including who will be undertaking the review and a copy of the terms of reference.

- Correspondence from the Founder of Figtec Ltd requesting an opportunity to make both a written submission and a presentation on the matter of covert digital support provision for victims of coercive control in Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** To request a written briefing in the first instance.

- Further correspondence from an individual on PSNI Injury on Duty Statutory Guidance, and separate correspondence from the same individual to request a copy of the training materials provided to the Committee for Justice in relation to the training of Selected Medical Practitioners (SMPs) under the Police Service of Northern Ireland Injury on Duty framework.

**Agreed:** To forward the latest correspondence to the Policing Board for response.

**Agreed:** That the Committee team confirm over the Easter recess period whether the Committee holds the papers referred to in the correspondence.

- Report of an unannounced inspection of Magiligan Prison by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** To write to the Director General of the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the Governor of Magiligan Prison to express the Committee's congratulations on such a positive report.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice - Response clarifying responsibility for the release of foreign nationals for deportation.
- Department of Justice - Response providing further information on the victims and witnesses of crime strategy 2026-2032.
- House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee - Copy correspondence from Lord Carlile of Berriew to Sarah Jones MP regarding Monitoring and Controlling drug precursors.
- An individual - further correspondence on an ongoing issue regarding an outstanding Police Ombudsman Report.
- An individual - Further correspondence regarding an ongoing issue.
- Department of Justice - Asset Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) 2025-26.

### **13. Forward Work Programme**

#### **13.1 Forward Work Programme**

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

### **14. Chairperson's Business**

There was no Chairperson's business.

**15. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

**16. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

Members were advised that next meeting will take place following Easter recess on Thursday 16 April at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

*The meeting was adjourned at 3.20pm.*

**Paul Frew MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**

**16 April 2026**