



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Justice

### Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 5 March 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

Brian Kingston MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Aoife Finnegan MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

**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 2.02pm in closed session.

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

*Emma Sheerin joined the meeting at 2:02pm.*

*Aoife Finnegan joined the meeting at 2:02pm.*

## **1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

## **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, the planned Departmental amendments and the consideration of potential Committee amendments.

The Committee discussed a number of potential Committee amendments to the Justice Bill and planned Departmental amendments, and considered draft text of potential Committee amendments prepared by the Bill Clerk.

*Patsy McGlone joined the meeting at 2:18pm.*

*Liz Marsh left the meeting at 3.03pm.*

*The meeting moved to public session at 3.03pm.*

*Connie Egan left the meeting at 3.03pm.*

**Agreed:** That the oral evidence session with Departmental officials on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill will be recorded by Hansard.

*Connie Egan returned to the meeting at 3.04pm.*

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

### **3. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 26 February 2026.

### **4. Matters Arising**

#### **Committee Deliberations**

The Chairperson put on record the actions arising from the Committee's deliberations on the Justice Bill and associated amendments, agreed during the discussions in closed session.

**Agreed:** To ask the Department of Justice to clarify why provision has not been made for Part 1 to come into operation within a certain timeframe following Royal Assent, but instead on a day or days that may be appointed by the Department; and to request the Department's views on an amendment being tabled by the Committee to bring the provisions in Part 1 of the Bill into operation within three years of Royal Assent.

**Agreed:** That the Committee will bring forward an amendment to Part 1 of the Justice Bill to provide a regulation-making power to enable the Department of Justice to make provision for the retention and use of photographs; and

amendments to Clauses 4, 5 and 6 to add ‘vulnerabilities’ to the range of considerations that police and courts must have regard to when making bail and remand decisions in children’s cases.

**Agreed:** That the Bill Clerk will draft text for a potential Committee amendment on review provisions for the operation of the new Youth Custody and Supervision Orders for Committee consideration, should the Minister decline to table such an amendment at Consideration Stage.

**Agreed:** That the Bill Clerk will draft text for a potential Committee amendment on the repeal of vagrancy legislation.

The Committee noted an update from the Department providing the text of an amendment for new Clause 27A on taxation reform and the proposed removal of Clause 28 from the Bill.

**Agreed:** To reflect in the Committee Report that, due to the timing of the receipt of the text of new Clause 27A, the Committee did not have the opportunity to consider it.

## **5. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Introductory Briefing – Department of Justice oral evidence**

The following officials from the Department of Justice joined the meeting at 3.07pm:

Andrew Dawson, Director, Criminal Justice Policy and Legislation Division (CJPLD), Access to Justice Directorate;

Angela Bell, Sentencing Bill Manager, CJPLD, Access to Justice Directorate;

Christopher McElwee, Head of Hate Crime Branch, Community Safety Division, Safer Communities Directorate; and

Alan Weir, Head of Sentencing Policy Unit.

The officials provided oral evidence on the content of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, as introduced in the Assembly on Tuesday 3 March 2026.

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

During the evidence session the officials agreed to provide the Committee with follow-up information on:

- The evidence base for the Bill's proposed increase in maximum sentencing tariffs;
- Assessments on potential impacts that the Bill could have on the prison population and how the Department plans to manage any increased capacity requirements in relation to the prison estate that might result from the legislation; and
- The Delegated Powers Memorandum for the Bill.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 3.53pm.

*Connie Egan left the meeting at 3.53pm.*

### **5.5 Law Society for Northern Ireland correspondence**

The Committee noted correspondence from the Law Society for Northern Ireland advising of increasing reports of intimidation and harassment directed at solicitors and asking the Committee to support an amendment to the Criminal Justice (Sentencing Etc) Bill to include a statutory presumption against a suspended sentence where a victim is an Officer of the Court.

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

The Committee considered the Department's proposal to make a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by section 90 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 ("the 2020 Act"). Members were reminded that this is the ninth extension of the powers provided by the 2020 Act, and will 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 September 2026. The Rule will be subject to the confirmatory resolution procedure and the Department has proposed that the Rule will come into operation on 24 March 2026.

Members were advised that there were no responses to the Call for Views on the proposed Rule on Citizen Space.

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

## **7. Probation Board Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule**

The Committee considered the Probation Board for Northern Ireland's Retention and Disposal Schedule, which is required to be laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly under Section 8(2) of the Public Records Act (Northern Ireland) 1923, and in accordance with the Rules of the Disposal of Documents Order 1925, by the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). The Schedule is subject to the negative resolution procedure.

**Agreed:** That the Committee is content with the Retention and Disposal Schedule for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

*Connie Egan rejoined the meeting at 3:57pm.*

**Agreed:** To inform the Committee for Communities of their decision on this matter, as PRONI falls under the policy responsibility of the Department for Communities.

## 8. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- A response from the Department of Justice regarding what oversight or assurance mechanisms exist within the Department in respect of Freedom of Information Act compliance by arm's length bodies.

**Agreed:** To share the Department's response and an earlier response from the Northern Ireland Policing Board with the individual who raised this matter with the Committee.

- A response providing further information on the proposals to expand Out of Court Disposals (OOCd), following the oral evidence session with the Department, the PSS and the PSNI on 19 February 2026 and requesting that the Committee confirm its position on the proposed expansion of OOCds.

**Agreed:** To schedule an oral evidence session on the proposed expansion of Out of Court Disposals with the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Justice.

- An update from the Department on several matters relating to the Crime and Policing Bill. The Committee noted that a number of matters are amendments which will be within the scope of previous Legislative Consent Motions (LCM) agreed by the Assembly. A third LCM is expected to deal with the measures relating to the age verification of the remote sale and delivery of knives and crossbows and strengthened age verification requirements for the online sale and delivery of knives and crossbows. Members noted that the Department hoped to schedule the debate on the LCM for 16 March, subject to the Executive's consent, and that, under Standing Order 42A(9), paragraphs 42A(4) to (8) do not apply to subsequent legislative consent motions. The Memorandum is therefore not

required to be laid and referred to the Committee for consideration and reporting.

*Patsy McGlone left the meeting at 4.06pm.*

**Agreed:** That Members are content that the Committee does not complete a report on the third LCM.

**Agreed:** To publish the Department's correspondence on the Committee's webpage.

- A report by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland: Abuse of Position for Sexual Purposes by PSNI Officers – Analysis and Emerging Findings.

**Agreed:** To write to the Minister of Justice, the Chief Constable and the Northern Ireland Policing Board for their response to the report and an update on actions taken to address the matters it raises.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice - Response regarding Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's (CJINI) follow-up review of Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland.
- Public Prosecution Service - Response regarding CJINI's follow-up review of Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland.
- Department of Justice - Northern Ireland Courts And Tribunals Service quarterly provisional figures & mortgage bulletin.
- Committee for Finance - 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – January 2026.
- Northern Ireland Fiscal Council - Assessment of the Finance Minister's proposed 2026-27 to 28-29/29-30 Budget.
- Committee for Finance – Minister of Finance's Urgent Oral Statement regarding the Chancellor's Spring Statement.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

### **9.1 Forward Work Programme**

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

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

### **10.1 Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime – Invitation to NI Victim Summit Pre-Conference Dinner**

The Chairperson advised that he is unable to attend a Pre-Conference Dinner on 26 March ahead of the Northern Ireland Victim Summit conference and sought Members' agreement that the Deputy Chair attend.

**Agreed:** That the Deputy Chair attend the dinner in her capacity as Deputy Chair of the Justice Committee.

Members also noted that the Victims Commissioner has issued an invitation to all Members of the Committee to attend the NI Victim Summit on Friday 27 March.

**Agreed:** That any Member wishing to attend the Summit should respond directly.

## **11. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on Thursday 12 March at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

*The meeting was adjourned at 4.11pm.*

**Paul Frew MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Justice**

**12 March 2026**