



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 22 January 2026

Members Room, Inn of Court, Royal Courts of Justice

Present: Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)
Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Doug Beattie MLA
Connie Egan MLA
Ciara Ferguson MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Brian Kingston MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA

Apologies: Maurice Bradley 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 2.01pm in public session.

The Chairperson offered thanks, on behalf of the Committee, to The Bar of Northern Ireland for hosting today's meeting.

Agreed: That the oral evidence sessions with Lady Chief Justice on taxation and delays in the criminal justice system will be recorded by Hansard.

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

1. Apologies

As above.

Agreed: To write to Danny Baker to express the Committee's thanks and appreciation for his contribution and dedication to the work of the Committee.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 15 January 2026.

3. Matters Arising

3.1 Committee for Finance – Scrutiny of the draft Multi-Year Budget for 2026-29/30

The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance seeking its views on the Department's draft multi-year budget allocation for 2026-2029/30, as well as any comments the Committee may have on the Department of Justice's 2025-26 Budget position and management.

4. Justice Bill – Taxation – Lady Chief Justice oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2.07pm:

The Right Honourable Dame Siobhan Keegan, Lady Chief Justice
Master Joe Moore, Taxing Master, Independent Judiciary

The witnesses provided oral evidence on broader matters relating to legal aid taxation and the functions of the Taxing Master.

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

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

During the session, the witnesses agreed to provide further information on the role of the Taxing Master, which they advised was also available on the Judiciary NI website.

The Chairperson thanked the Taxing Master and he left the meeting at 3.18pm.

5. Delays in the Criminal Justice System – Lady Chief Justice oral evidence

The following witness joined the meeting at 3.18pm:

The Right Honourable Dame Siobhan Keegan, Lady Chief Justice

The witness provided oral evidence on delays in the criminal justice system.

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

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

During the session, the witness agreed to provide the following:

- The template document and further information on the family resolution pilot;
- The practice directions related to family courts;
- Clarification of whether there is a direction for the courts to alert the Home Office the release of foreign prisoners for deportation.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and she left the meeting at 4.25pm.

The Chairperson left the meeting at 4.26pm

The Deputy Chairperson took the Chair at 4.26pm.

6. Justice Bill – Written Papers

6.1 Department of Justice – Response regarding joint paper Northern Ireland Alternatives and Community Restorative Justice Ireland on the Justice Bill: Restorative Justice

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice to the joint paper by Northern Ireland Alternatives (NIA) and Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) which had been considered at the Committee meeting on 11 December. The response advised that the Department has recently held a productive meeting with the Chief Executives of both organisations and considers them key partners in the delivery of services going forward.

Agreed: To forward the Department’s response to NIA and CRJI and ask for their views on the recent engagement with the Department.

6.2 Professor Kevin Brown (Queen’s University) – Justice Bill – Repeal of Vagrancy

The Committee considered a paper from Professor Kevin Brown providing further clarification on the Repeal of Vagrancy amendments, following the Department’s response to his draft amendment and its oral evidence on the Repeal of Vagrancy amendment at the Committee’s meeting on 11 December 2025.

Agreed: To forward Professor Brown’s paper to the Department to request its views on the points raised.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session to take advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on the next agenda item.

The meeting moved into closed session at 4.30pm.

7. SR 2025/190 The Police Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

Angela Kelly, the Examiner of Statutory Rules, joined the meeting at 4.30pm.

The Examiner provided an update to her technical scrutiny of the SR 2025/190 The Police Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the Examiner and she left the meeting at 4.33pm.

The meeting moved into public session at 4.33pm.

The Committee considered Statutory Rule SR2025/190 The Police Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, which will amend the Police Pensions Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015. The Rule will provide officers in the 2015 Police Pension Scheme who were previously excluded from accessing ill-health retirement for the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2024 with the option to elect to retire under ill-health retirement if they satisfy the requirements for those benefits, subject to the full employee contribution for that period having been paid.

The Rule is subject to the negative resolution procedure and will come into operation on 1 February 2026.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had indicated that she will report on a number of technical errors in relation to the Rule, and that she is content with the Department's proposed approach to rectify the errors.

Agreed: That the Committee for Justice has considered SR2025/190 The Police Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule.

8. Crime and Policing Bill – Second Legislative Consent Memorandum – Consideration of Committee Report

The Committee considered the Legislative Consent Memorandum relating to a second Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) in respect of additional measures included in the Crime and Policing Bill, that was laid in the Assembly on 13 January.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the proposal to extend the provisions as outlined in the Legislative Consent Memorandum laid in the Assembly on 13 January to Northern Ireland by way of a Legislative Consent Motion.

The Committee considered a draft report on the second Legislative Consent Memorandum for the provisions in the Crime and Policing Bill to be extended to Northern Ireland.

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: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Title Page, Contents Page and Committee Membership and Powers Page.

Background

The Committee considered the Background section of the report (paragraphs 1 to 4) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Background section of the report.

Provisions which require Legislative Consent

The Committee considered the Provisions which require Legislative Consent section of the report (paragraph 5) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Provisions which require Legislative Consent section of the report.

Committee Consideration

The Committee considered the Committee Consideration section of the report (paragraphs 6 to 19) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Committee Consideration section of the report.

Conclusion

The Committee considered the Conclusion section of the report (paragraphs 20 to 21) as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Conclusion section of the report.

Appendices

The Committee considered the Appendices section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the Appendices be included in the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the minutes of today's meeting to be added to Appendix 2, when agreed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the report on the Crime and Policing Bill Second Legislative Consent Memorandum to be published and issued to all MLAs.

The Deputy Chairperson advised Members that that the debate on the LCM is expected to take place on 2 February, and the Chairperson will reflect the Committee's consideration of the LCM in the debate.

9. Sentencing Bill – Pre-Legislative Scrutiny – Department of Justice correspondence

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice providing follow-up information that officials had agreed to provide during the oral evidence session on the Sentencing Bill on 27 November 2025.

Members noted that the response indicated that the Sentencing Bill was expected to be introduced in January 2026, though it has not yet been scheduled.

Agreed: To ask the Department for a definitive date when the Bill will be introduced.

10. Review of Sentencing Policy – Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice providing an update on the Department's review of sentencing policy. The paper provided a summary of the review's proposed format and content and advised that the Department will keep the Committee informed throughout the review period.

Agreed: To ask the Department to provide the following information:

- what resources will be allocated to conduct the review;
- which team will lead the review;
- how long the review is expected to take and the rationale for the timeframe; and
- what parts of sentencing policy will be prioritised in the review.

11. Proposed increase to the general civil jurisdiction of the county court – Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted paper from the Department of Justice advising of its intention to increase the financial boundaries to determine whether civil claims,

such as personal injury, clinical negligence, breach of contract or defamation, are heard in the county courts or the High Court. The proposals include an increase in the general civil jurisdiction (including clinical negligence) from £30,000 to £60,000, with an increase in the district judges jurisdiction from £10,000 to £20,000; and an increase of the upper limit for defamation claims from £3,000 to £10,000.

The proposed changes will be made by way of secondary legislation and

Members noted that the Department had been advised by the Lady Chief Justice's Office that the changes for which the County Court Rules Committee is responsible for will be subject to a period of consultation.

Agreed: To request that the Lady Chief Justice's Office keeps the Committee updated on the consultation on the proposed changes.

12. Reducing Offending and Reoffending – Update on the Strategic Framework for 2026-2027 and the development of a Cross-Departmental Strategy – Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a written update from the Department of Justice on the development of a long-term cross-Executive strategy to reduce offending and reoffending, with the intention of scheduling this for Executive consideration in 2027. The paper also provided information on a shorter-term Strategic Framework for 2026–2027 that will provide a bridge to the new strategy by aligning existing Executive initiatives and exploring new collaborative approaches to reduce offending and reoffending across Northern Ireland.

13. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- Responses from the Department of Justice, the Law Society of Northern Ireland, and the Department of Finance to matters raised in

correspondence from an individual regarding the handling of legal complaints in Northern Ireland; and further correspondence from the individual in relation to their complaint to the Law Society

Agreed: To forward the responses from the Department of Justice, the Department of Finance, and the Law Society to the individual who raised the matter with the Committee.

- Correspondence from Peter Martin MLA about pro bono assistance for self-litigants, and correspondence from an individual raising concerns about litigants in person.

Agreed: To forward the items of correspondence to the Department for comment on the general issues raised and to request an update on any work in respect of litigants in person.

Agreed: To respond to Mr Martin's constituent to advise that the Committee is unable to intervene in, investigate or adjudicate on individual cases and to outline the action that the Committee has agreed to take.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice – Response regarding the Chairpersons' Liaison Group's guidance on delegated legislation and the sharing of proposals with the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.
- Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland - Press release regarding a death in custody report.

- House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee - Copy correspondence to the Home Office regarding the Windsor Framework and the Westminster Sentencing Bill deportation provision.
- Northern Ireland Youth Assembly - The 'Big Youth Survey Report 2025'.
- Association of British Insurers - Welcome letter to Paul Frew MLA regarding his appointment as the Chairperson of the Committee for Justice.
- An individual - copy correspondence to the Department of Justice regarding an extension to a Freedom of Information Act response deadline.
- Further correspondence from an individual regarding a personal matter.

14. Forward Work Programme

14.1 Forward Work Programme

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

15. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

16. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

17. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 29 January at 2.00pm In Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.47pm.

Paul Frew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Justice
29 January 2026