Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 5 November 2026

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Paul Frew MLA (Chairperson)

Maurice Bradley MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Emma Sheerin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Doug Beattie MLA

Ciara Ferguson MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

In Attendance: Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Gareth Black (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Paula Morrow (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 the deliberation stage of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill; and to receive a legal briefing on the Convention Rights Memorandum for the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Deliberations

Aoife Finnegan joined the meeting at 2.04pm.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.05pm.

The Committee discussed aspects of Part 1 to Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill. Liz Marsh, Assembly Clerk, Bill Office, was in attendance to provide advice to the Committee.

Patsy McGlone joined the meeting at 2.10pm.

The Committee considered the Department's responses on several matters that the Committee had previously requested views on and asked whether the Minister would be content to take forward amendments on those issues. The Committee identified a number of potential amendments to the Bill and asked the Bill Clerk to provide draft texts for further consideration.

Liz Marsh left the meeting at 4.02pm.

3. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Convention Rights Memorandum – Legal Services oral briefing

The following Legal Advisor joined the meeting at 4.03pm:

Adam Leitch – Legal Advisor, Northern Ireland Assembly Legal Services.

The Advisor provided a briefing on Convention rights considerations for the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.

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

The Chairperson thanked the Legal Advisor and he left the meeting at 4.22pm.

Agreed: To forward the Convention Rights Memorandum to the Department of Justice for a response to the matters raised regarding the Convention rights that are engaged.

The meeting moved to public session at 4.22pm.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 22 October 2026.

Connie Egan left the meeting at 4.23pm.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – RaISe written paper

The Committee noted a Bill paper on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill prepared by Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) which provided an overview of the provisions of the Bill, along with a 'Review of Costs' paper, which scrutinises key implications for the public purse in relation to the provisions in the Bill.

Agreed: That the Committee team examine the Bill papers and draw out the scrutiny points for the Department of Justice and other bodies contained therein for the consideration of the Committee at next week's meeting.

7. Immigration and Asylum Bill – Legislative Consent Motion – Department of Justice oral evidence

The following officials joined the meeting at 4.25pm:

Claire McCormick - Head of Legislation Management Unit;
John Bradley - Head of Legal Reform Branch; and
Ross Moore - Deputy Principal - Modern Slavery Human Trafficking and Child Exploitation Branch

The officials provided oral evidence on the Department of Justice's proposal to seek legislative consent to extend provisions in the Immigration and Asylum Bill to Northern Ireland.

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

During the evidence session, officials agreed to provide further information on what is meant by 'parent organisation' and 'subsidiary organisation' for the purposes of Clause 45 in the Bill.

Patsy McGlone left the meeting at 4.51pm.

Brian Kingston left the meeting at 4.52pm.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials and they left the meeting at 4.54pm.

8. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Recording of decisions

The Chairperson put on record a number of actions agreed by Members during the Committee's deliberations on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill in closed session.

Agreed: To ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment at Clause 1 to exempt good character references at sentencing stage for certain offences for the Committee's consideration.

Agreed: To seek legal advice from Assembly Legal Services on whether exempting good character references at sentencing stage for certain offences will engage any Convention rights.

Agreed: To ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment to make provision for the televising of sentencing remarks for the Committee's consideration.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice to provide further information on the possible unintended consequences or risk of challenge it considers may occur from prohibiting the use of suspended sentence orders for certain offences such as domestic abuse offences, sexual offences, and offences related to technology-assisted child sexual abuse; as well as data on how often suspended sentences have been used for these offences.

Agreed: To seek legal advice from Assembly Legal Services on whether restricting the use of suspended sentence orders for certain offences would engage any Convention rights.

Agreed: To ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment to make specific reference to gambling addiction alongside drug and alcohol dependency in Schedule 1 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 for the Committee's consideration.

Agreed: To ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment akin to Olivia's Law to compel an offender to attend court for sentencing and be subject to sanction if they fail to attend for certain offences for the Committee's consideration.

Agreed: To ask the Bill Clerk to draft an amendment to include the presence of a child at the time of a murder as an aggravating factor at paragraph 5(1) of the new Schedule A1 at Schedule 3 for the Committee's consideration.

The Committee noted a submission and addendum from Parity requesting that the Committee rejects a proposed misogyny aggravator and a separate femicide offence.

The Committee noted a response from Northern Ireland Alternatives and Criminal Justice Inspection Ireland providing follow up information requested during the oral evidence session on 29 September.

9. Justice Bill – Further Consideration Stage amendments

The Committee further considered a paper from the Department of Justice advising of its intention to make a number of amendments to the Committee's amendments to the Justice Bill relating to Clause 4 (the retention, use and destruction of photographs), and Clause 37 (the review of police use of live links), which the Department intends to table at Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Members indicated that they are minded to oppose the first three proposed Ministerial amendments to Clause 4 (Retention, use and destruction of photographs); and that they had no objections to any of the Minister's proposed amendments to Clause 37 (Review of the use of Live Links).

Agreed: To seek further clarity and detailed information from the Department of Justice on the proposed Ministerial amendments to Clause 4.

10. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Written papers

10.1 – Department of Justice – Response regarding information Commissioner's Office

The Committee considered a response from the Department to matters raised and clarity sought in the submission from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill.

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

Agreed: To forward the correspondence from the ICO and the Department to the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime NI for any comment they may wish to make, given that responsibility for many of these matters will rest with that office.

10.2 – Caoimhe's Law

The Committee noted a submission from Road Victims Support Northern Ireland– Donegal on the potential to add Caoimhe's Law as an amendment to the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill. Members were reminded that the Committee had previously engaged with the Department on this matter, and while deeply supportive of the policy intention, the Committee had communicated to the Minister that the significant policy work and capacity required to progress this type of legislation would be more appropriately handled by Department.

10.3 – Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime – Scoping paper regarding the development of Statutory Commissioner role

The Committee noted a scoping paper by the Commissioner Designate produced to help inform the Department of Justice's development of the office and role of the Commissioner for Victims of Crime Northern Ireland in statute.

11. Financial Services and Markets Bill – Legislative Consent Memorandum

The Committee considered the Legislative Consent Memorandum and the draft LCM laid before the Assembly on 23 October 2026 to seek legislative consent for relevant provisions in the Financial Services and Markets Bill.

Agreed: That the Committee supports the Minister of Justice in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the Legislative Consent Motion, as per the final Memorandum laid on 23 October 2026.

Patsy McGlone returned to the meeting at 5.11pm.

Members also noted that a draft report on the LCM will be prepared for consideration by the Committee at the meeting on 12 November 2026.

12. Armed Forces Bill – Legislative Consent Memorandum

The Committee considered an update from the Department of Justice advising the Justice Minister is unable to progress the Legislative Consent Motion for the Armed Forces Bill as the Executive was unable to reach agreement, and that a Memorandum explaining why consent would not be sought for this Bill had been laid with the Business Office.

Agreed: To ask the Department for its assessment of how the UK Government have handled legislating on this matter; whether they think the provisions could have been included in any of the Department's Bills instead of it being legislated for by the UK Government; and whether they are content that an LCM was the most appropriate method by which to legislate on these provisions, given that they involve devolved matters.

13. SL1 The County Courts (Financial Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

14. SL1 The County Courts (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered proposals from the Department of Justice to make two Statutory Rules related to County Courts.

The proposed The County Courts (Financial Limits) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 rule is being made under powers conferred by Article 22(1) of the County Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1980 ("the 1980 Order") to increase the jurisdiction of the county court; and the second The County Courts (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2026 rule is made under Article 47 of the same Order to amend the County Court Rules (Northern Ireland) 1981.

Both Rules will be subject to the negative resolution procedure and are proposed to come into operation on 30 November 2026.

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Justice to correspondence from insurance companies and representative organisations to the Department to request that officials liaise with the County Court Rules Committee to provide a response to the concerns outlined.

Members also noted a related response from the Department on what is being done to address the factors influencing higher personal injury awards in Northern Ireland, and whether the Department is considering any initiatives to address the disparities in awards and their influence upon higher insurance premiums in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To forward the Department's response to the insurance companies and representative organisations who raised concerns with the Committee.

Agreed: That the Committee is content with the proposals for each of the Statutory Rules.

15. SL1 The Police (Conduct) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice to make a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by sections 25, 26 and 59(8) of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 to make 12 changes to the Police Conduct Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2016 and to reflect the Code of Ethics in statute as a schedule to the Conduct Regulations, as per section 52 of the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000.

The Rule will be subject to the negative resolution procedure and is proposed to come into operation in December 2026.

Agreed: To issue a call for views on the proposed Statutory Rule using the standard survey; to publish the SL1 and the copies of the proposed Statutory Rules on the Committee's website; and consider the proposed Statutory Rules at the meeting on 26 November 2026.

The Committee also noted that concerns were raised with regard to eight of the 13 changes consulted on by one respondent to the consultation.

Agreed: To request clarity from the Department on whether it was the same consultee raising concerns in each case; and whether any changes were made to the draft SR as a result of the consultation

Agreed: To request an oral evidence session with Department of Justice officials on the proposed Statutory Rule.

16. SL1 The Parole Commissioners' (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice to make a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by Article 100(5) of, and paragraph 4 of Schedule 4 to the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. The purpose is to amend Rule 22 of the 2009 Parole Commissioners' (Northern Ireland) Rules

2009, which deals with the “Location and Privacy of Oral Hearings” to make provision for the Commissioners to conduct an open or partly open hearing should they wish to do so.

The Rule will be subject to the negative resolution procedure and is proposed to come into operation on 25 January 2027.

Agreed: To issue a call for views on the proposed Statutory Rule using the standard survey; to publish the SL1 and the copies of the proposed Statutory Rules on the Committee’s website; and consider the proposed Statutory Rules at the meeting on 26 November 2026.

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

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Justice advising of the need to withdraw a draft Statutory Rule to expand Out of Court Disposals to allow the Police Service of Northern Ireland to issue Penalty Notices for a broader range of offences and increase penalty amounts for these offences, which the Committee had previously agreed to recommend be approved by the Assembly. Members also considered an updated SL1 proposal with the revised details, the amended draft Rule which proposes a new commencement on 1 February 2027 and a cover note explaining the need for change.

Agreed: That, as the only change to the SL1 and draft Rule is to the operational commencement date, it is not necessary to undertake another call for views and that Members are content for the Department to proceed as outlined in its papers.

The Committee also noted the draft Department of Justice guidance for the PSNI on penalty notices.

18. Code of Practice for the appointment of independent members of PCSPs and DPCSPs - Targeted Consultation

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice informing the Committee of its intention to undertake a review of the Code of Practice for the Appointment of Independent Members to PCSPs and DPCSPs, arising from recommendations contained within the 2024 Impartial Assessor's Report on the most recent recruitment competition.

19. Reducing Offending and Reoffending - Strategic Framework 2026-2027

The Committee noted a paper from the Department of Justice advising of the publication of a cross-Departmental Strategic Framework and delivery plan on Reducing Offending and Reoffending 2026–2027.

20. Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Business Plan – 2026-27

The Committee noted a copy of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service's Business Plan 2026-27.

21. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- Correspondence from the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee seeking views on the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice if it has any comments to make on aspects of the Bill which may be relevant to the justice sector.

- Correspondence from the Committee for the Economy seeking views on the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill.

  Agreed: To respond to the Committee with a nil response.

- Correspondence from the Committee for the Economy seeking views on a legislative consent memorandum laid by Economy Minister to seek the legislative consent for relevant provisions in the Commercial Payments Bill.

  Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice if it has any comments on the criminal and civil offences and sanctions in the Bill.

- Correspondence from an individual seeking the Committee's views on their providing the Committee with a confidential submission raising concerns about the handling of a cross-border criminal investigation, based on their lived experience as a reporting victim.

  Agreed: To respond to the individual to advise that these are operational matters, and would therefore be for the NI Policing Board or the Police Ombudsman to consider.

Aoife Finnegan left the meeting at 5.28pm.

- Further correspondence from an individual regarding reapplications for posts for Independent Monitoring Boards for prisons in NI.

  Agreed: To forward the correspondence to the Department for a response to the issues raised.

- Two further items of correspondence from an individual relating to the publication of Police Ombudsman's report on PSNI response to vulnerable persons; and, separately, on Employment Tribunals.

Agreed: To ask the Police Ombudsman for an update on any work with the PSNI on this issue.

Agreed: To advise the individual that the Committee is content that Lady Chief Justice and the Minister for the Economy have outlined the position regarding the oversight of tribunal practice and procedure in previous correspondence; that the implementation of recommendations in reports on employment tribunals are a matter for the Department for the Economy, and they may wish to contact that Department directly; and to also advise that the Committee is unable to intervene in, investigate or adjudicate individual cases.

Aoife Finnegan returned to the meeting at 5.33pm.

- Copied correspondence from an individual to the Secretary of State regarding the family justice system in NI; and separate correspondence from the same individual requesting a joint meeting with the Committee for Health regarding ongoing concerns about family justice, child welfare, safeguarding, domestic abuse and the treatment of protective mothers within Northern Ireland's family justice and social services systems.

Agreed: To advise the individual that the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime NI has set up a task and finish group, which may deal with some of the matters raised; that the Committee is unable to consider the matters further due to its heavy legislative work programme; and that the

Committee intends to include matters relating to family courts in its Legacy Report.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Minister of Justice – Copy correspondence to Committee for the Executive Office regarding the NI Survivor Council "Nothing About Us Without Us" Expert Insights Report.
- Department of Justice – Copy correspondence to the Committee for Communities regarding the Housing (Amendment) Bill.
- Department of Justice – correspondence to the Committee for The Executive Office regarding additional Access NI categories.
- Department of Justice – Copy correspondence to the Committee for the Economy regarding the Regional Balance Bill.
- Department of Justice – Copy correspondence to the Committee for Communities regarding the Anti-Poverty Strategy.
- Department of Justice – Response regarding the uptake of domestic abuse offence training in the NICTS.
- Committee for Finance – 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – September Position.
- NI Youth Forum – Results from 'Your Voice, Our Future.'
- Investment Strategy Northern Ireland - Investing Activity Report – October 2026.

22. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the latest draft of the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: To commence the Committee meeting on 12 November 2026 at 1.30pm.

23. Chairperson's Business

23.1 – Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland Invitation

The Chairperson advised that he has received an invitation, in his capacity as Committee Chairperson, to meet with the new Police Ombudsman to discuss her vision and plans to contribute to public and police confidence through the work of her office.

Agreed: That the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson meet with the Ombudsman on behalf of the Committee.

24. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

25. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on Tuesday 10 November at 9.30am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.37pm.

Paul Frew MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Justice
12 November 2026