



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 17 September 2026

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Maurice Bradley 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 2.08 pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence sessions with Men’s Alliance, Rape Crisis NI, and with the joint panel from the Rainbow Project, Women’s Resource and Development Agency and HERe NI on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill will be recorded by Hansard.

Maurice Bradley joined the meeting at 2.10pm.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 10 September 2026.

3. Matters Arising

Brian Kingston joined the meeting at 2.11pm.

3.1 – Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – The Bar of Northern Ireland oral evidence

Maurice Bradley raised concerns that the court listings published online by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, and highlighted by The Bar of Northern Ireland as part of their oral evidence on the Sentencing Bill, was lacking in meaningful information.

Agreed: To write to the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service to raise the concerns and ask what additional information could be included for the public in court listings.

3.2 – Prisoner Unlawfully at Large

The Committee expressed concerns in relation to a recent incident of a convicted murderer absconding from prison following temporary release to attend the funeral of a relative. Members conveyed that the incident raises urgent questions for the Department of Justice, the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the judiciary.

The Committee wished to place on record its concern for the family of the victim and affirmed that its thoughts are with them during this particularly difficult period. The Committee also urged the Minister to meet with the victim's family at the earliest opportunity.

Doug Beattie joined the meeting at 2.18pm.

Agreed: To write to the Minister of Justice and the Lady Chief Justice to ask for:

- a full account of the circumstances surrounding the abscondment, including how the prisoner was able to evade supervision;
- the rationale for the decision to use a civilian chaperone to accompany the prisoner, together with details of the policy governing such arrangements, the frequency with which civilian chaperones are utilised in cases of temporary release, and how the

- role and powers of a civilian chaperone differ from those of a chaperone from the Prison Service;
- details of the information provided to the court during the judicial review proceedings, including any risk assessments, recommendations or objections submitted by the Northern Ireland Prison Service in relation to the application for compassionate temporary release;
 - whether electronic tags can be or are used when prisoners are granted temporary release;
 - details of all conditions attached to the temporary release, including whether travel to the Republic of Ireland or any other jurisdiction was permitted;
 - clarification regarding the legal consequences and any additional penalties that may apply should the prisoner be apprehended; and
 - details of any other prisoners who are currently unlawfully at large.

Agreed: To invite the Minister or Department of Justice officials to brief the Committee on the circumstances of, and factors relevant to, the abscondment.

4. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Men’s Alliance oral evidence

The following witness joined the meeting at 2.19pm:

Carey Baxter, Chairman of Men’s Alliance NI

The witness 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 witness agreed to provide further information on:

- Examples of the impact on some men of issues related to child maintenance payments;
- Men's Alliance's views on Clause 1, subsection (4)(a) and (b); and
- The operation of models in Australia and New Zealand cited in their submission that they would like to see mirrored under Enforceable Article 8 sanctions.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and they left the meeting at 3.23pm.

5. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Rape Crisis NI oral evidence

The following witness joined the meeting at 3.24pm:

Karen Sweeney, Director of the Women's Support Network

The witness 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 witness agreed to provide further information on:

- Rape Crisis NI's views on a potential amendment to the Bill to add an offence of femicide and misandry as an aggravator;
- A potential mechanism for review of sentencing that mitigates trauma for victims who have to go through an appeal.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness and they left the meeting at 4.02pm.

Doug Beattie left the meeting at 4.03pm.

6. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – joint panel Rainbow Project, WRDA and HERe NI oral evidence

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 4.03pm:

Alexa Moore - Policy and Public Affairs Manager, The Rainbow Project;
Elaine Crory, Women's Sector Lobbyist, WRDA; and
Sophie Nelson, Senior Policy Development Officer, HERe NI.

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

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

Doug Beattie rejoined the meeting at 4.29pm.

During the evidence session the witnesses agreed to provide further information on:

- Examples of best practice regarding the offence of femicide in other jurisdictions;
- Analysis from other jurisdictions on how hate crime is determined and how hate crime aggravators function.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 5.19pm

Agreed: To write to the Department of Justice for clarity on how the term 'immediately' in Clause 33, subsection (2)(a) of the Sentencing Bill is to be interpreted.

7. Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill – Sexually Explicit Deepfake Images - RalSe written paper

The Committee noted a research paper prepared by the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RalSe) overviewing some of the different international approaches taken in jurisdictions which have introduced criminal offences to tackle the creation, sharing and solicitation of sexually explicit deepfake images of adults.

8. Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Written papers

8.1 – NI Assembly Participation and Outreach – Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill Engagement Planning

The Committee considered a proposed engagement plan to support the Committee's evidence gathering for the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill, prepared by the Assembly's Engagement Team.

Agreed: That the Committee team liaise further with the Assembly's Engagement Team in order to develop a suitable approach to Option 2 of their proposal.

8.2 - 8.8 – Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill – Written submissions

The Committee considered submissions in response to the call for evidence on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill from the following bodies:

- NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)
- Homeless Connect
- Committee for the Economy
- AREA Committee
- Northern Ireland Mental Health Champion
- A victim and campaigner for Jade's Law
- An individual

Agreed: To add the submissions as written evidence on the Bill, and to consider further when the call for evidence has closed and the Committee is planning for the oral evidence gathering and detailed consideration of the Bill.

The Chair advised Members that agenda items 9 and 10 will be considered together.

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

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

The Committee considered a proposal 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.

Agreed: To issue a call for views on the proposed Statutory Rules using the standard survey; to publish the SL1s and the draft Statutory Rules on the Committee’s website; and to consider both proposed Statutory Rules at the meeting on 8 October 2026.

11. Department of Justice Business Plan – 2026-2027 and Corporate Plan 2025 – 2028 – Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a copy of the Department of Justice’s Interim Business Plan for 2026-27, setting out the actions the Department is seeking to deliver within the second year of the 2025-2028 Corporate Plan. The Department had advised that, as a budget has not yet been confirmed for 2026-27, the business

plan has been prepared as an Interim Plan and it will be updated as necessary when a budget is confirmed.

Emma Sheerin left the meeting at 5.37pm.

12. Correspondence

The Committee considered the following items of correspondence:

- Three separate responses from the NI Policing Board, the Department of Justice and the Minister of Health in relation to the Right Care Right Person initiative to correspondence from PIPs Suicide Prevention raising several concerns about the initiative following a serious incident involving a person at risk.

Agreed: To forward each of the responses to PIPs for information.

- Copied correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office (TEO) to the Justice Minister highlighting the justice-related recommendations in a recent NI Survivor Council report, *‘Nothing About Us, Without Us’*.

Agreed: To request a copy of the Department’s response to the TEO Committee.

- Copied correspondence from the TEO Committee to the Department for Justice regarding correspondence to that Committee from an individual highlighting concerns in relation to the MOD’s handling of Armed Forces Veterans’ claims to the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme.

Agreed: To request a copy of the Department’s response to the TEO Committee.

Emma Sheerin returned to the meeting at 5.39pm.

Aoife Finnegan left the meeting at 5.40pm.

- Correspondence from the Royal College of Pathologists regarding their Forensic Pathology Workforce Report.

Agreed: To meet informally with the Royal College of Pathologists at a later stage when the Committee has capacity.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on current numbers of pathologists and funding for the forensic pathology service.

Aoife Finnegan left the meeting at 5.43pm.

- Department of Justice – Update on Prison Population in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To request information from the Department of Justice on the current number of prisoners on remand in NI prisons, including age profiles and the types of offences they are on remand for.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- Department of Justice – Review of Trial of the Facts Legal and Procedural Framework.
- Department of Justice – Publication of Two Domestic Homicide Review reports.
- Committee for Finance – ABI Briefing – Motor Insurance Premiums and Claims Northern Ireland.
- Committee for Finance – Revised Section 59/Section 7 Authorisation letters for the Department of Finance and the Department of Justice.
- Committee for Finance – 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – June and July Position.
- Committee for Finance – Costs associated with the application of provisions of Bills.

- Individual – Safe Justice UK – Safer Streets. Safer Prisons. Fewer Victims: A four-nation framework for public protection, prison safety, rehabilitation and reduced reoffending.
- Individual – Copy correspondence from Ms C Lockhart MP enclosing correspondence from the PSNI indicating that following review of an incident, the investigation is closed.
- Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission – Save the date – Launch of Frontier Workers Case Studies Booklet

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered an updated proposed forward work programme for September from the Department of Justice and the latest draft of the Committee's forward work programme.

Agreed: To schedule the proposed work items from the Department of Justice into the Committee's forward work programme.

14. Chairperson's Business

Law Centre NI – NI Somali Association report

The Chairperson advised that he had received an invitation from Law Centre NI in his capacity as Chair of the Committee to a roundtable event on Monday 12 October 2026.

Members noted that a copy of the report is not currently available to the Committee and that the Chair will defer making a final decision on attending the event until Members have had an opportunity to see the report.

15. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

16. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that the next meeting will take place on Tuesday 22 September at 9:30am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.49pm.

Paul Frew MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice

24 September 2026