



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday 8 May 2025

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA (Chairperson)
Danny Baker MLA
Connie Egan MLA
Ciara Ferguson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Deirdre Hargey MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: Doug Beattie MLA
Maurice Bradley MLA
Stephen Dunne MLA

In Attendance: Kathy O'Hanlon (Assembly Clerk)

Thomas McKillop (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Jonny Redpath (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

Stephen Corr (Clerical Supervisor)

Aaron Pakenham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.04pm in public session.

Agreed: That the oral evidence sessions with the Probation Board for Northern Ireland and NIACRO on the Justice Bill would be recorded by Hansard.

Danny Baker declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works for the Probation Board for Northern Ireland.

Joanne Bunting declared an interest in relation to an immediate family member who works in the legal profession.

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

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 1 May 2025, subject to one amendment.

3. Matters Arising

The Committee noted a note of the informal meeting between the Lady Chief Justice and judicial colleagues and a number of Committee Members on 29 April 2025 regarding family courts.

Agreed: To forward the meeting note to the Committee for Health.

Agreed: To consider scheduling a concurrent meeting of the Committee for Health and the Committee for Justice for a future date.

4. Justice Bill — Northern Ireland Probation Board oral evidence

The following witnesses from the Northern Ireland Probation Board joined the meeting at 2.09pm:

- Amanda Stewart, Chief Executive;
- Gillian Montgomery, Director of Operations; and
- Aideen McLaughlin, Assistant Director.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

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

The witnesses agreed to provide the Committee with:

- an update on the establishment of the accommodation working group;
- its views on the biometrics provisions in the Justice Bill; and
- its views on the proposed amendments to the Justice Bill regarding restorative justice and the rehabilitation of offenders.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 2.59pm.

5. Justice Bill — NIACRO oral evidence

The following witnesses from NIACRO joined the meeting at 3.01pm:

- Fiona Greene, Chief Executive;
- Rachel Long, Director of Operations; and
- Andrea Moreland, Senior Practitioner, Disclosure.

The witnesses provided oral evidence on the Justice Bill.

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

During the evidence session, the witnesses agreed to provide a copy of the publication ‘Tracing the Review: Developments in Youth Justice in Northern Ireland 2011-2021’ in relation to the minimum age of criminal responsibility.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice:

- in relation to when convictions become spent, what consideration it gave to the legislative developments in England and Wales on this subject;
- for its view on NIACRO’s concern about the use of fines as a court disposal for under 16s and its recommendation that the Department considers how Youth Custody and Supervision Orders will align with youth justice practice, the review of sentencing and the proposed single community order for children;
- clarification on the inclusion of cautions and disposals in the biometric retention framework and whether it extends to informed warnings for minor offences;
- if there can be any flexibility with regard to the transfer of young offenders to Hydebank Wood at age 18;
- information on Access NI filtering; and
- whether consideration has been given to providing for an independent review mechanism during the current Assembly mandate.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses and they left the meeting at 3.51pm.

6. Justice Bill — Research and Information Service written papers

The Committee noted the Assembly Research and Information Service’s papers ‘Justice Bill: Rehabilitation of Offender Amendments’ and ‘Justice Bill: Restorative Justice Amendments’.

Agreed: To forward to the suggested questions in the above papers to the Department of Justice for response.

Agreed: To ask the Department of Justice for information on work regarding the Restorative Justice Protocol, including a timeframe for the work of the Interim Protocol Lead on a new practice standards and accreditation framework.

7. Justice Bill — written papers

7.1 — Department of Justice: Legislative Provision for a Deepfake Offence

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice to schedule an oral briefing on the proposed consultation on legislative provision for a deepfake offence, as requested by the Committee.

Agreed: To schedule the oral briefing for the Committee meeting of 26 June 2025.

7.2 — Justice Bill: Requests for Further Information

The Committee noted a paper from the Committee for Justice team collating a list of the Committee's requests for information on the Justice Bill and the responses received to date.

8. SL1 — The Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 (PACE NI) 2025

The Chairperson informed the Committee that the Deputy Chairperson had requested that consideration of the SL1 be deferred.

Agreed: To defer consideration of the SL1 until the Committee meeting on 22 May 2025.

Agreed: To reschedule the oral evidence with Department of Justice officials on post-legislative scrutiny of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 to a Committee meeting in June 2025.

9. Amendments to Legal Aid Remuneration — Outcome of Consultation and Way Forward — Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a written paper from the Department of Justice and the post-consultation report on proposed amendments to Legal Aid remuneration.

10. SL1 — The Civil Legal Services (Remuneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered a proposal for a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by the Access to Justice (Northern Ireland) 2003 to replace the Civil Legal Services (Remuneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015. The Rule will make provision for a number of changes to give effect to the Ministerial decisions that were announced on 2 December 2024 regarding the Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme in respect of remuneration payable for civil legal services.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

11. SL1 — The Magistrates' Courts and County Court Appeals (Criminal Legal Aid) (Costs) (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered a proposal for a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 to amend the Magistrates' Courts and County Court Appeals (Criminal Legal Aid) (Costs) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2009. The Rule will make provision for a number of changes to give effect to the Ministerial decisions that were announced on 2 December 2024 regarding the Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme in respect of remuneration payable for criminal legal aid in Magistrate Court cases and County Court appeals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

12. SL1 — The Legal Aid for Crown Court Proceedings (Costs) (Amendment) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee considered a proposal for a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by the Legal Aid, Advice and Assistance (Northern Ireland) Order 1981 to amend the Legal Aid for Crown Court Proceedings (Costs) Rules (Northern Ireland) 2005. The Rule will make provision for a number of changes to give effect to the Ministerial decisions that were announced on 2 December 2024 regarding the Enabling Access to Justice Reform Programme in respect of remuneration payable for criminal legal aid in the Crown Court.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

13. Victims and Witnesses Bill — Outcome of Consultation and Draft Legislative Proposals — Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted a Department of Justice report on the outcome of its consultation on proposals to enhance the support and representation of victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system, which will inform the Victims and Witnesses Bill that the Department intends to bring forward later in the current Assembly mandate.

Agreed: To schedule an oral briefing with Department of Justice officials.

14. Victim and Witness Strategy 2025 to 2030 — Pre-consultation Proposals — Department of Justice written paper

The Committee noted written paper from the Department of Justice on a proposed consultation on a draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy for Northern Ireland 2025-2030, which included a summary report of responses to the Department's earlier Call for Views to inform the content of the strategy.

Agreed: To explore a number of issues, including the role of the proposed Commissioner, accountability mechanisms and potential barriers faced by victims, during the oral evidence session as agreed for agenda item 13.

15. Correspondence

- Responses from the Department of Justice, the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service and the PSNI regarding the recommendations in the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland report ‘An inspection of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland’s investigation of Abuse of Position concerns and complaints’.

Agreed: To accept the offer from the Police Ombudsman to provide oral evidence to the Committee.

- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee’s request for its views on a number of issues raised by Relatives for Justice regarding the Troubles Permanent Disablement Payment Scheme.

Agreed: To forward the response to the Committee for The Executive Office and Relatives for Justice.

Agreed: To ask the Committee for The Executive Office to provide an update following the upcoming evidence sessions with a range of stakeholders on this matter.

- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee’s request, further to a request from the Committee for The Executive Office, for information regarding the Department’s role in funding and activities relating to the Ending Violence against Women and Girls Strategy.

Agreed: To forward the response to the Committee for The Executive Office.

- A response from the Department of Justice to the Committee’s request for its views on a written paper from Retail NI.

Agreed: To forward the response to Retail NI, the Committee for Finance and the Committee for the Economy.

- A number of items of correspondence from an individual regarding a complaint about the Lady Chief Justice and Health Trusts.

Agreed: To write to the individual to advise that the Committee has a strategic, policy and legislative role in relation to justice matters; the Committee recently engaged informally with the Lady Chief Justice and the Minister of Justice on issues regarding family courts and domestic abuse but that the Committee does not get involved in individual complaints; the Committee noted that the correspondence had been copied to others, who may be better placed to assist; and the individual may wish to contact her local representatives.

- Correspondence from an individual regarding complaints about family courts and Health Trusts.

Agreed: To write to the individual to advise that the Committee has a strategic, policy and legislative role in relation to justice matters; the Committee recently engaged with the Lady Chief Justice and the Minister of Justice on issues regarding family courts and domestic abuse but that the Committee does not get involved in individual complaints; and the individual may wish to contact her local representatives.

Agreed: To consider what organisations that the individual may helpfully be signposted to.

- An invitation from Legal Futures Research to a conference on data in the public and commercial realms.

Agreed: That Members will respond directly using the email address in the correspondence should they wish to attend.

- An invitation from the Lady Chief Justice's office to a lecture at Ulster University on sentencing practice in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: That Members will respond directly using the email address in the correspondence should they wish to attend.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- A further response from the Department of Justice regarding risk assessments for prisoners.
- A response from the Department of Justice regarding the anti-social behaviour consultation.
- A response from the Department of Justice regarding engagement with the Bar of Northern Ireland.
- A copy of the 2024-25 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn from the Committee for Finance.
- Notification of the launch of the consultation on court fees for 2026-29 by the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service.
- Notification of the launch of the consultation on the contents of the list of qualifying offences as specified under Article 53A of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 by the Department of Justice.
- An update from the Youth Assembly for April 2025, which included the oral evidence session with the Committee for Justice on the Justice Bill.

16. Forward Work Programme

16.1 Department of Justice Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a proposal from the Department of Justice to schedule the oral evidence session requested by the Committee on the proposed Legislative Consent Memorandum for the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill for 29 May 2025.

Agreed: To schedule the oral evidence session for 29 May 2025.

16.2 Department of Justice Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered an updated Committee forward work programme.

Agreed: To proceed with the sessions in the updated forward work programme, subject to the changes as agreed at today's meeting.

17. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

18. Any other Business

There was no other business.

19. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

Members were advised that next meeting will take place on Thursday 15 May 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Meeting was adjourned at 4.31pm.

Joanne Bunting MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Justice