



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings
Bill: Committee Report

15 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Ms Linda Dillon (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Doug Beattie
Ms Sinéad Bradley
Ms Jemma Dolan
Mr Gordon Dunne
Mr Paul Frew
Miss Rachel Woods

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): The executive summary has just been handed out to members. The Committee staff have worked incredibly hard to get this so that we can approve it today. If members want to have a very quick perusal of it, we will reconvene at 4.10 pm to go through it.

The Committee suspended at 4.02 pm and resumed at 4.10 pm.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): OK, members?

Ms Dillon: Chair, I am sorry, but I have two wee things that I would like changed.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): OK.

Ms Dillon: Part 2 of the report states:

"The Committee is supportive of the calls for the appointment of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner".

We are sympathetic to it. I had not decided whether it was the right thing, and I thought that that was where it had been left, to be honest. I would prefer that it said, "sympathetic to" the calls.

The Committee Clerk: Linda, what paragraph are you at?

Ms Dillon: Sorry. It is page 22, paragraph 31.

The Committee Clerk: Paragraph 21?

Ms Dillon: Yes. It is not a big thing.

The Committee Clerk: I do not have page numbers in my copy.

Mr Dunne: No.

Ms Dillon: It is under "Domestic Abuse Commissioner" at paragraph 31 in part 2.

The Committee Clerk: It is in part 2 of the report. That is fine. The reports have been renumbered. I have a renumbered copy. What was the heading?

Ms Dillon: The "Domestic Abuse Commissioner". The reports says:

"The Committee is supportive of the calls for the appointment of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner"

I would be more inclined to say "sympathetic to".

The Committee Clerk: Would you like to change it to "sympathetic to"?

Ms Dillon: Yes, if the Committee agrees.

Mr Dunne: That is a bit weaker, though. It is a lesser statement.

Ms Dillon: It is, and that is my point. It is intended to be a lesser statement. I did not believe that we had agreed that we were supportive of the appointment of a domestic abuse commissioner specifically. We discussed how the amendment that we put in would, potentially, recommend such an appointment. If it does, that is absolutely fine, but that is where the recommendation should come from. That, in my view, is where we came down. I am not unsupportive of it, to be fair. We specifically said that those recommendations would be important because they could say that a domestic abuse commissioner needed to take on those responsibilities.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): OK. I am happy to change it to "sympathetic to", if members are. It still conveys a positive consideration of the issue. We then reached a view that was based on the advice on going for, ultimately, what we decided to go for. Where the report relates to the appointment of a domestic abuse commissioner, we will amend that to read "sympathetic to" as opposed to "supportive of". Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

Ms Dillon: Thank you.

There is one other tiny thing. You might think that I am being pedantic, after saying that I thought that you would not get speaking until 1:00 am.

This is in paragraph 50, under "Paid Special Leave". I do not have the paragraph in front of me, but it states that we are content that the Minister is taking that forward. I am certainly not content. We have nothing concrete to say that it is being taken forward. We should be calling on the Minister to do that.

Mr Frew: What paragraph is it?

Ms Dillon: It is paragraph 50 in the second part of the report.

Mr Frew: The report says:

"The Committee is supportive of this initiative".

Ms Dillon: Yes. It says that the Committee is content that the Minister will take that issue forward, but I am not.

The Committee Clerk: OK, it is paragraph 611 in my copy.

Ms Dillon: It is under "Paid Special Leave".

Mr Frew: The report says:

"The Committee is supportive of this initiative and welcomes the commitment from the Minister",

The Committee Clerk: That is what it says. Am I on the same paragraph?

Mr Frew: It does not say "content".

Ms Dillon: Sorry, it says, "welcomes the commitment", but is there a commitment? I am not sure that there is. I was not welcoming the commitment. I was calling on the Minister to give a commitment.

The Committee Clerk: This is from paragraph 609:

"Minister Dodds has advised that if there is a consensus that legislative provision is required, then her Department will identify a suitable legislative vehicle."

Ms Dillon: OK, that is fair enough. If it is an absolute commitment from the Minister, I do not want to dwell on it. I was not sure that there was a commitment there.

Mr Frew: You could always speak to the report in the Chamber to try to get a commitment on the record.

Ms Dillon: Yes, that is grand.

The Committee Clerk: I think that what the Minister had said was that, if the review showed that change was needed, she would identify a suitable legislative vehicle at that time.

Ms Dillon: That is fair enough. I will say this: anybody would struggle to find anything wrong with that report. It is excellent; first class. I know how much work you all put into it, and I appreciate it.

Mr Frew: Absolutely.

Ms Dillon: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): We can go through this formally now.

Are members content that the title page, the Committee membership and powers, table of contents and list of abbreviations pages stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the introduction at paragraphs 1 to 22 stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the consideration of the Bill provisions section at paragraphs 23 to 522 stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the implementation of legislation section at paragraphs 523 to 561 stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the other issues not covered in the Bill section at paragraphs 562 to 591 stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Paragraph 592 is the proposed amendment from Linda. Are members content that we agree that we amend our position on the appointment of a domestic abuse commissioner from "supportive of" to "sympathetic to"?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that paragraphs 593 to 655 stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Bill section at paragraphs 655 to 703 stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the appendices stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Are members content that the executive summary stand part of the report?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members, do we agree that the report will be published on the Committee's web page and issued to all MLAs?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members, do we agree that I have cleared the draft minutes of today's meeting, which will be included in appendix 6? This will enable the report to be finalised, and the draft minutes will be replaced by the final version of the minutes, which will then be agreed by the Committee.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members, if you are content, we will issue an electronic copy of the Bill report to all organisations and individuals who provided evidence to the Committee on the Bill.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): Members, I inform you that I did not identify any typographical or formatting errors, but they will be checked and, if required, amended at proofing stage before the report is circulated to MLAs and published on the Committee web page.

I thanked the staff for their work when we last discussed the Bill. It was a mammoth amount of work, even in the last two weeks to get the report through to members. Again, I really appreciate the work that the Committee staff have put into this and the assistance that they have provided to all members in getting us to this stage. I shall say more about that when we are in the Chamber, and I am sure that other members will as well.

Ms Dillon: Chair, I echo what you have said. You mentioned how long it took us to read it, but even that will not really give people an idea of how long it will have taken to pull all of that stuff together to reflect so well and so accurately everything that was said. It is the first time that I have been part of a Committee that was scrutinising legislation, and I think that very few Committees have given the kind of scrutiny that we gave to this. The manner in which the work was done was excellent, and the report at the end of it captured everything excellently. Not only was it a very accurate reflection but it was easy to read and easy to follow. It was excellent work by everybody involved. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): I commend members as well, because they have done an excellent job, in my opinion. I have been on a number of Committees that scrutinised legislation, and, for some

members, this was their first time. It will stand those members in good stead for future legislation. Members, for those of you for whom it was the first time, you have shown expertise that will be of great value going forward. Well done to all members on that. Hopefully, I was as forbearing as I possibly could be. Maybe, on occasion, I was frustrated when trying to get us to an agreed position, but we got there in the end. We can be rightly pleased, I think, as a Committee with the work that we have done in such a short time.

I will update you on the next stages. Ultimately, we are trying to get this into law as soon as possible. The Minister has provided a written update on the timescale for the remaining stages of the Bill. That correspondence was in the tabled pack, and it outlines the passage of the Bill. It is intended that Consideration Stage will be on 10 November, followed by Further Consideration Stage on 30 November, with Final Stage taking place on 8 December. The Minister has put on record her sincere thanks to the Committee for its work on the Bill.

Members, that is when it is intended that the Bill will move to the next phase. I think that victims will be particularly pleased to see that, given the delays that they have had to face. We made it clear that we wanted to do this ourselves, but there was always a risk that Westminster could have moved faster than us. We have been able to move at pace, and I think that we will have completed our work before Westminster has completed its work.

Ms Dillon: Not that it is a competition, but, if it was —.

The Chairperson (Mr Givan): No, but we would have been open to criticism had we been behind Westminster.