

Alastair Ross (DUP), Chair for the Committee for Justice

I'm Alastair Ross. I'm an Assembly member for the Democratic Unionist Party. My constituency is East Antrim, and I also chair the Justice Committee here at Stormont.

So the Justice Committee is made up of members of a range of different political parties here at Stormont. We look at a number of different areas.

A huge proportion of the justice budget goes towards policing. There's a Policing Board as a scrutiny body for the police. We deal with prisons, and how they're operating, for the three prisons across the estate here in Northern Ireland.

We deal with the courts, as well. Of course, one of the big issues, in terms of the courts, is legal aid. And we also deal with a number of charity and voluntary sector groups, as well, such as NIACRO, who will help rehabilitate offenders, and the Probation Board, who will help to resettlement offenders into the community.

Justice in the Digital World – Social Media

One of the big issues that has emerged in recent times is around social media. Most young people will be on various social media platforms, and I think there's an education that needs to be taking place so that young people realise that their actions online have consequences in the real world. So comments that they make, perhaps malicious or cyberbullying, has consequences in the real world. Pictures that they may exchange that they lose control of can have consequences for them.

And I think that's a challenge for the justice sector as well. First of all, educating young people about how they behave online, and secondly, in terms of what legislation is required to protect people online. I think one of the big pieces of work that we're doing in the future is looking at online reputation and making young people understand that the things they say online will have impact in terms of their career prospects, in terms of any run-ins that they have with anyone else, because it's very easy for people to do a quick Google search and see what people have been up to.

One of the other issues of social media, of course, is a challenge for the courtroom. Judges, and when they swear in a jury, it's very tempting for the jury to go and do their own investigative work on a defendant. And, perhaps, by a quick Google search, they will come to their own conclusions on the character of that defendant before a trial begins. So, social media is causing difficulties for the justice system in a number of areas.

Justice in the Digital World – Policing the Internet

So justice in the digital world is particularly difficult because we have a global, borderless community out there, and it's very hard for judges and for law enforcement agencies when there's not one single jurisdiction that perhaps is involved in this. One of the big debates that's happening at the moment within the political world, and the legal world, is around getting the right balance between individual freedoms online and freedom of speech online, versus the state's responsibility to look after their citizens.

So we know already that terrorist organizations are able to recruit online. So the government has to have a certain ability to be able to police the Internet. That's one of the big discussions that's taking place at the moment and it will be a huge one in future years.

Youth Justice

So in recent months, the committee has engaged in a look at youth justice, and what we need out of our youth justice system.

Again, we recognise the fact that if young people get into the formal criminal justice system at an early age, they're more likely to then enter that revolving door of prison and offending. So we want to break that cycle as early as possible. We need early interventions to rehabilitate young offenders. We need to have a discussion around whether an offence that you commit as a child, or as an under 18, should hold you back from future career prospects.

So the idea of wiping the slate clean is something that many charities are calling for. There's filtering arrangements in place to make sure that you need an ID check before some of those offences are known to employers. But we also need a real discussion about appropriate diversions and disposals of offences for young people and how we actually keep them out of the criminal justice system. So rather than sending them to juvenile centres and to prison, we need actually to have youth conferencing.

So involving the offender, involving the victim and trying to find a different way of paying back their debt to society. I think, increasingly, we're seeing more young people who are offenders engaging in community service, which is a better way of rehabilitating them, and the evidence shows that it's less likely they'll re-offend. So that's one of the areas that we're looking at within youth justice.

Reform of the Justice System

I think there's an acceptance that over future years there'll be less and less public money available for all departments. Justice is no different. So there's a real emphasis now on trying to look at doing things differently. We have a responsibility to speed up justice, to make the justice journey for individuals easier, and to protect access to justice and to be a more efficient service.

Some of the areas that we've been looking at in the Justice Committee is alternatives to dispute resolution and the technology that we have today allows that. So, for example, many people will be familiar with eBay and the eBay resolution system for if there's a dispute between somebody who's bought a product that may be faulty.

There's no reason why that can't be extended into the justice sector. So for low-level compensation claims, the eBay model is something that we should be looking at within justice. I think we also need to look at problem solving courts. Again, they've been hugely successful in Texas and New York, where courts will look at the problem of why somebody has offended. For example, a drug addict will be offending to feed their drug habit. So unless you tackle the reason why people are offending, then that person will continue to offend into future years.

So the idea of problem solving courts, whether they're drugs courts, mental health courts, or domestic violence courts, is something which I think is taking place within the criminal justice sector across the world, and is something in Northern Ireland we should be very much leading on as well.