

**Annual Report of the Interagency Group for a Fairer, Safer Ireland**

**2023**

**May 2024**

Minister,

I have the pleasure of submitting to you the 2023 Annual Report of the Interagency Group for a Fairer, Safer Ireland (IAG).

The main purpose of the Group is to implement two key recommendations of the Penal Policy Review Group Report (*July 2014 Report of the Strategic Review of Penal Policy*, <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/405a6-penal-policy-review/>), which call for much greater cross-Government cooperation in the management and rehabilitation of offenders and crime prevention in general.

2023 represented the first full year since 2019 in which Ireland remained free of the public health restrictions which were so crucial in combatting the spread of COVID-19. An Garda Síochána, Courts Service and the Health Service Executive, among others, dealt admirably with the increased volume of work that this return to normality entailed.

It was in this context that progress continued during 2023 to improve access for offenders to the public services they need on release to increase the likelihood of desistance, and the IAG discussed and contributed to various important initiatives requiring interagency cooperation throughout the year.

The Department of Justice Criminal Justice Sectoral Strategy 2022-2024 includes at 3.1 a commitment to support a data culture to ensure an evidence-based approach to policymaking. In accordance with this, the Department of Justice, the Probation Service and other key stakeholders have identified the need for an up-to-date study on homelessness amongst those coming into contact with the Irish Criminal Justice system. This research will inform policy responses to address the evident and significant homelessness and accommodation challenges among this cohort, assisting these individuals' reintegration into their communities and giving them the best possible chance of making change for the better.

The *Building Bridges* project, co-led by SOLAS and the Irish Prison Service and sponsored by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, seeks to improve the outcomes for learners who engage with Further Education and Training while in custody or through transition from custody, and to raise awareness of available pathways and options. Meanwhile, the Department of Social Protection's Public Employment Services have been tasked in particular with looking at cohorts with specific needs: people with disabilities, young people in danger of long-term unemployment, young people interacting with the Youth Diversion Programme, Traveller/Roma people, ex-offenders, and one-parent families. Across all cohorts, great emphasis is placed on the importance of collaboration with other Government agencies and community representative bodies to produce minority-specific approaches, protocols for engagement and alignment of priority actions. Both SOLAS and the Department of Social Protection were among the presenters to the IAG in 2023.

I would like to give my sincere thanks to all members of the Group for their commitment to improving interagency cooperation in relation to offenders and penal policy.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John O'Callaghan', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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John O'Callaghan  
Chair  
May 2024

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## **1. Context**

### **1.1 Background to the establishment of the Interagency Group**

The Penal Policy Review Group (PPRG) conducted a wide-ranging strategic review of penal policy, taking into account relevant work already carried out in this jurisdiction and elsewhere, the rights of those convicted of crimes, the perspective of those who are victims of crime, and the interests of society in general.

The PPRG advocated an approach to crime and the penal system which emphasised rehabilitation and advocated for an improved penal system, the reduction of reliance on imprisonment as a sanction, and an increased focus on alternatives to prison. A strong thread running through all of its recommendations is the need to see the wider social context of offending, and to ensure that the work of the criminal justice agencies is integrated with social services, broadly conceived.

The Government endorsed the Penal Policy Review Group recommendations in 2014.

The two key recommendations of the Review Group Report relevant to the work of the Interagency Group are recommendations 3 and 41 below. These recommendations promote interagency and interdepartmental cooperation, on the basis that crime is a matter of social as well as penal policy.

#### ***Recommendation 3***

*The Review Group recommends that there must be greater emphasis, if necessary through legislation, on promoting inter-agency cooperation in the management and rehabilitation of offenders. In addition to the criminal justice agencies, there is a need to recognise that a whole-of Government approach is required in collaboration with relevant agencies and local authorities in addressing offending behaviour and assisting offenders in maintaining crime free lives.*

#### ***Recommendation 41***

*The Review Group recognises that crime is a question of social as well as penal policy and recommends that all Government Departments and agencies consider the question of crime prevention when formulating policy. In this regard, the Review Group recommends that the Department of Justice and Equality join with all Government Departments and agencies to facilitate and support research in order to assist in the formulation of penal policy.*

## **1.2 Rationale for the establishment of the Interagency Group**

The rationale for the Interagency Group is that crime is a challenge for all of society and requires a whole-of-society response. Crime is associated with many social problems such as economic deprivation, unemployment, low levels of educational achievement and substance misuse. Society suffers as a result of crime and everyone has an interest in preventing crime; it is not just the responsibility of criminal justice agencies.

The socio-economic factors which may be involved when someone goes to jail are the same factors which need to be addressed when he or she comes out of prison. That is to say, many people convicted of criminal offences have similar characteristics and challenges which have contributed to their offending, and issues that are likely to inhibit them from leading lives free of crime and increase the risk of reoffending.

For example, a significant percentage of those in prison or on probation are low income, unemployed, with low levels of educational attainment, and many are relatively young men, often with histories of substance misuse. Marginalised groups including homeless people, those with mental illness and members of the Traveller community are also considerably over-represented in the prison and probation populations.

The number of committals to prison – both prisoners on remand and those who have been sentenced – demonstrates the scale of the challenge to public bodies of facilitating successful reintegration of prisoners into society and reducing recidivism. The table below, provided by the Irish Prison Service, shows the size of the prison population and the through-put of the prison system in recent years. The figure for 2021 showed that there were over 2,500 fewer committals compared with 2019, an acceleration of a dramatic reduction visible almost year-on-year. The sheer scale of this reduction between 2019 and 2021 was undoubtedly exaggerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and associated delays in prosecutions and in the courts, as 2022 and 2023 saw the number increase by almost 1,000 and 900, respectively.

While overall, the trend demonstrated in the table below since 2012 is of a significant fall in the number of people committed to prison, it is notable, however, that in recent years the total number of prisoners released was less than those committed. The number of committals continues to rise into 2024. Even if the number of committals to prison returns to a more normal pattern, the trend of more committals than releases raises concerns about the strains that this will put on prison capacity.

## TOTAL COMMITTALS INTO AND RELEASES FROM PRISONS

Year	Total Committals	Total Releases
<b>2023</b>	<b>7,946</b>	<b>7,307</b>
2022	7,055	6,450
2021	6,133	6,075
2020	6,340	6,682
2019	8,939	8,656
2018	8,071	7,811
2017	9,287	9,313
2016	15,099	15,205
2015	17,206	17,403
2014	16,155	16,662
2013	15,735	15,905

Source: Irish Prison Service

## DAILY AVERAGE NUMBER OF PRISONERS IN CUSTODY

The table below provides figures in relation to the daily average number of prisoners in custody over recent years. The overall daily average number of prisoners in custody in 2023 was 4,606, compared to 4,095 in 2022, an increase of 12.5%.

It is to be noted that the 2020 and 2021 figures represent a significant decrease on the 2019 figures due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Year	Average Daily Population
<b>2023</b>	<b>4,606*</b>
2022	4,095
2021	3,794
2020	3,824
2019	3,971
2018	3,893
2017	3,680

2016	3,718
2015	3,722
2014	3,915
2013	4,158

\* Provisional data pending publication of Irish Prison Service's Annual Report 2023

### OFFENDERS SUPERVISED BY THE PROBATION SERVICE

The figures for offenders supervised by the Probation Service show a trend of increasing numbers in recent years, with a significant reduction in the number of people referred from courts in 2020/2021 associated with the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figures for 2023 will be provided in the Probation Service's Annual Report 2023.

Year	Total offenders dealt with in year*	Total offenders referred from courts
2022	16,347	7,508
2021	15,448	7,277
2020	15,537	6,059
2019	16,607	9,009
2018	15,777	8,105

\* This includes offenders being dealt with at the beginning of the year in addition to new referrals made during the year.

### REOFFENDING DATA

*An Evidence Review of Recidivism and Policy Responses* (Ian O'Donnell, 2020), published by the Department of Justice in 2020, provided a valuable exploration of the insights that reoffending studies can offer for evidence-based policy making.

Detailed information about the population of offenders is contained in the CSO's studies of recidivism or reoffending. The studies report on:

- Prison Reoffending Statistics, which provides information on recorded reoffending by people who were released from a custodial prison sentence from 2017 to 2020, and
- Probation Reoffending Statistics, which provides information on the level of recorded reoffending by individuals placed under the management of the Probation Service.



The latest study primarily relates to individuals who were referred to the Probation Service in 2019.

The findings from these are set out below.

It should be noted that the CSO's Probation and Prison Reoffending publications were developed separately. While they are broadly similar, there are differences. For example, convictions must be secured within 24 months of the date that the crime incident was reported to be included in the calculation of the Probation Reoffending rate; no such requirement exists with respect to the calculation of the Prison Reoffending rate. Also, the exact list of exclusions can differ between the publications, and due to the differences it is not possible to make direct comparisons.

### **PRISONER REOFFENDING STATISTICS**

Prison reoffending estimates are calculated using data provided by the Irish Prison Service and An Garda Síochána's PULSE reporting system. This publication introduced greater coverage in analysis of prisoner reoffending in Ireland by including additional reoffending incidents related to court-convicted Road and Traffic incidents (RTIs) that have previously been excluded from the methodology.

Of prisoners released from custody in 2017, 61% were linked to a reoffending incident within three years of their release. The data also indicate that younger age groups of released prisoners are much more likely to reoffend, with over four out of five (84%) individuals released from custodial sentences and aged under 21 at the time of entering prison reoffending within three years of release. In contrast, just over one quarter (27%) of individuals who were over 50 years old reoffended within three years of release.

Reoffending continues to decrease over time, whether one looks at three-year or one-year windows for reoffending following release from custody. 41% of individuals released in 2020 reoffended within one year of release, compared to the 54% of individuals released in 2011 who reoffended within one year of release.

### **PROBATION REOFFENDING STATISTICS**

The CSO Reoffending Statistics report includes all persons subject to an order supervised in the community. It tracks their offending behaviour over one, two and three years following their sentencing or release. In order to include all possible convictions, a further two years is allowed to complete any Court proceedings.

The Probation Reoffending study of 2019 reported that 77% of persons supervised by the Probation Service did not reoffend within one year of their order being made. Probation reoffending rates are remaining relatively static over time.

In the most recent cohort for which a three-year reoffending rate is available (2017), almost half (47%) of individuals committed at least one reoffence for which they received a conviction.

There is an inverse relationship between age and reoffending rates. Individuals who are subject to probation supervision tend to reoffend less when they are older, with just 9% of over 65s reoffending within a year of receiving probation in 2019. In contrast, 44% of under 18s who were subject to probation supervision reoffended within a year.

In 2019, persons who received probation orders relating to Public Order and Other Social Code Offences had the highest likelihood of reoffending, with over one-third of them doing so (34%). The largest number of probation orders issued by the courts in this year were linked to referrals for Road and Traffic Offences or Theft and Related Offences. The one-year reoffending rates in these two categories were 18% and 33%, respectively. These two categories accounted for just over one-third of all probation orders issued.

The report on the 2019 cohort included a classification of whether a Probation reoffender received a custodial or non-custodial sanction for their reoffence. This classification provides a useful indication of the degree of escalation and de-escalation of the reoffending Court sanctions that the Probation reoffenders receive. Of those persons who did reoffend within one year in 2019, 78% received a non-custodial penalty.

The improvements in reoffending rates over time appear to reflect developments in Probation Service supervision. Reoffending by persons subject to post-custody supervision is encouragingly low and suggests that supervision in the community after release does support positive resettlement and reduces harmful behaviour.

In presentations to the Interagency Group, CSO representatives have drawn attention to the limitations of their reports on recidivism. The absence of a shared identification system in the Criminal Justice system makes it time-consuming and resource intensive to track individuals from the Pulse system used by An Garda Síochána, through the Courts Service and, on conviction, to the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service. It is not possible to track an estimated 5 per cent of offenders.

Limited information is collected about the profile of those who reoffend or those who do not reoffend. As part of its data holdings, the CSO has access to and use of other administrative datasets such as those of the Department of Social Protection, Revenue, Education and other agencies and Departments. It also has access to mortality data from the General Registry Office, the Geo-directory and Census data.

Other information which would be useful in predicting the risk of recidivism before or at the time of incarceration include age at first offence, prior arrests, family status, health status and education level. The addition of these variables could be used to enrich the existing prison and probation datasets to provide a better understanding of the factors that predispose offenders to reoffend or, conversely, to lead a crime-free life. They would also draw attention to the cross-Government nature of the responses needed to reduce recidivism and crime.

## **ACCESS TO SERVICES**

People who have offended can experience resistance, delays and even rejection in trying to access mainstream services. As a result, from a very practical point of view, their level of risk of reoffending can be unwittingly increased. Clearly, Criminal Justice services – prison and probation – have a responsibility to do what they can to facilitate reintegration, by virtue of their specific roles, responsibilities, experience and expertise. However, they can only go so far; to address some of the issues that have a significant impact on the risk of reoffending – e.g. homelessness, unemployment, addiction, and mental illness – the cooperation of the relevant Government Departments and Agencies is required.

Therefore, there is a clear need to have joined-up services, including improved information sharing and operational cooperation to achieve optimal impact on reducing offending and victimisation in our communities. It is also important to recognise that prisoners retain rights and entitlements to public services despite being in custody – that they have only lost the right to liberty. We need to ask what is being done to ensure that prisoners, like all other citizens, have access to public services and what can be done to reduce the barriers that exist.

A key role played by the Interagency Group is to raise awareness among its members from Government Departments and Agencies of the implications of policy and services on the reintegration and rehabilitation of offenders and the prevention of crime and of the need to adapt or coordinate those policies/services to facilitate reintegration and reduce recidivism.

## **2. Working Methods**

### **2.1 Representation on the Interagency Group**

The Interagency Group consists of representatives of the main Departments and Agencies with responsibilities for the management and rehabilitation of offenders. The membership of the Interagency Group in 2023 is included at Appendix A.

### **2.2 Meetings**

In 2023, the Group met four times on the following dates: 01 March, 07 June, 06 September and 06 December. The meeting of June 07 was held in the Atrium of the Department of Justice building at 51 St. Stephen's Green, while the March, September and December meetings were held via Zoom. In total, to the end of 2023, the Group has held 30 meetings. A table of those Departments/Agencies in attendance at the 2023 meetings is attached at Appendix B.

### **2.3 Terms of Reference**

The following are the terms of reference of the Group:

The mission of the Interagency Group for a Fairer, Safer Ireland is to improve interdepartmental and interagency coordination in the integration and rehabilitation of offenders and the prevention of crime as recommended by the Report of the Penal Policy Strategic Review Group.

To this end, the Interagency Group will:

1. Review existing pathways that involve interagency coordination and cooperation to improve the integration and rehabilitation of offenders;
2. Based on this review, propose improved interagency coordination arrangements for the integration and rehabilitation of offenders;
3. Promote pro-social behaviour by offenders, to those most at risk of offending and anti-social behaviour, which results in positive participation in society;
4. Recommend how the consideration of crime prevention could be incorporated in the formulation and implementation of public sector penal and social policies;
5. Consider how fairness and greater equality could be achieved in the areas of penal and social policy in relation to crime prevention issues;
6. Identify where research and data collation could assist in greater integration across the Public Service in terms of the rehabilitation of offenders and the formulation and impact of penal policy.

### **3. Report for 2023**

#### **3.1 Issues dealt with by the Group**

##### ***Education***

In March 2023, Ann Gorman, Principal Officer in the Student Support section, gave this presentation on behalf of the team from the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. Launched in August 2022, the National Access Plan aims for a Higher Education student population which reflects the diversity in makeup of the wider population of Ireland.

The National Access Plan was conceived in line with the two overarching ambitions for Ireland's higher education system: (1) that the higher education student body, at all levels and across all programmes, reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population, and (2) that our higher education institutions are inclusive, universally designed environments which support student success and outcomes, equity and diversity. To achieve these ambitions, the Plan targets underrepresented students, vulnerable students, and students who have experienced disadvantage and who face barriers to accessing higher education.

The consultation process for the National Access Plan identified three main Priority Groups, with much intersectionality between them. One of these – students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged – comprises students from a wide variety of backgrounds, including those with experience of the Criminal Justice system.

As there is currently no official data available to describe or track the educational attainment and progress of students who have experience of the Criminal Justice system, a priority under this Plan is to consider ways to collect more reliable data of this nature.

##### ***Housing***

Lisa Cuthbert and Hilary Frances of PACE gave a presentation in June on their organisation's accommodation service for homeless men leaving prison.

Founded over 50 years ago, accommodation was the first need that PACE tried to meet, and over the years their focus has evolved into three separate areas – Prevention, Training and Social Enterprise, and Accommodation. PACE – as a Housing Association – currently has 38 housing units for individuals who have interacted with the Criminal Justice system and who find themselves in need of accommodation.

All in all, PACE's focus is on restoration, reintegration, self-improvement, and movement away from the Criminal Justice sector. They work to provide the conditions for change; they are not solely providing accommodation, but encouraging these individuals to the next phase of their personal development.

PACE are grateful for ongoing cooperation with the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service, and see that there is great value to be gleaned from even greater interconnectedness across Departments and Agencies.

## ***Employment and Social Inclusion***

In September 2023, Olive Monahan of Deonach gave an overview of her organisation's work in Tallaght and the surrounding area.

Deonach are based in Tallaght, but receive referrals from areas as geographically varied as Blessington, Dún Laoighaire, Inchicore, Walkinstown and Dublin city centre. They provide their services to people who have interacted, are interacting or are at risk of interacting with the Criminal Justice system. When working with participants, they aim to address the reasons why they are in the project. In all cases, a care plan is put in place, addressing the nature of the referral from the relevant agency (Probation Service, Juvenile Liaison Officer, An Garda Síochána, Irish Prison Service, etc.) which is matched to an intake assessment. Workers develop, with the participant, a case management and care plan encompassing the offence, the reasons for the offending, and any number of complex issues that may impact the participant's life. Deonach provide formal training and education (levels 3 and 4 QQI) and maintain work experience partnerships of which their participants may avail.

On average, participants come to the project for at least a year, with some court-ordered for a couple of months and some 1 to 2 years. At present, Deonach are working with eighteen under-18s, all of whom were unable to make it through either primary or secondary education. Fourteen of these are receiving supports for socialisation/learning difficulties.

## ***Healthcare***

Following on from their first presentation to the IAG in December 2022, June 2023 saw Clara Leonard of HSE and Clare Healy of Ana Liffey Drug Project gave an update on the Dublin North-East Inner City Healthcare Navigation Service project for prisoners post-release.

A pilot community aftercare programme developed by the HSE and the NEIC (North-East Inner City), the Healthcare Navigation Service aims to ensure that residents or people with strong local links to the NEIC who are leaving prison will be supported to navigate and engage with health services.

Within the Healthcare Navigation Service project, there is a strong emphasis on reintegrating people back into the community and connecting them with their families. The Service aims to work with a caseload of 20 people at any given time. For the pilot programme, referrals are taken from Mountjoy Prison and the Dóchas Centre. A clear and precise healthcare plan is developed with service users pre-release, with healthcare needs identified. Social supports within the community are pinpointed, while engagement with peer mentors is encouraged pre- and post-release.

There were some barriers to progress which they have had to overcome, such as the existing heavy workload of prison staff and identifying and communicating with the appropriate contacts. In addition, there was a natural uncertainty in terms of the referrals and who would meet the criteria, and a lack of presence in the prison, simply for the people there to get to know those involved, was also an issue. Networking events, meetings with stakeholders, prison visits and training sessions have all assisted in overcoming obstacles.

As of June 2023, 12 out of 19 referrals to the Healthcare Navigation Service have been eligible. 10 of these were self-referrals, while 2 were made by IPS – 8 male and four female. All were returning to temporary homeless accommodation post-release, 5 needed support with addictions, 5 with mental health problems, 2 with physical health problems, and 3 needed social supports. One individual was referred following early release, but did not engage with service. 2 others changed their minds, but can re-engage at a later date should they choose.

### **3.2 Research proposals**

The Review Group on Penal Policy highlighted the need for evidence-based research to inform penal policy and recommended that the Department of Justice join with other Government Departments and agencies to support research in order to assist in the formulation of penal policy.

The terms of reference of the Interagency Group mandate the Group to identify where research and data collation could assist in greater integration across the public service in terms of the rehabilitation of offenders and the formulation and impact of penal policy.

The Group's Work Programme includes a commitment to review research and data on the rehabilitation of offenders and the formulation and impact of penal policy and recommend where, from an interagency perspective, further research and data are required to underpin policy and to monitor the implementation of service initiatives in the rehabilitation of offenders and the impact of penal policy.

People leaving prison and people supervised by the Probation Service face barriers in accessing and retaining stable and suitable accommodation, which can be a key component of successful rehabilitation. People in prison are over twenty times more likely to be homeless than those in the general population. This is likely attributable to a range of health and social factors. The results from an international review of research highlights the global burden of this issue and a clear necessity for targeted interventions to address homelessness in this population.

A research study was commissioned and published by the Probation Service in 2005. The goal of the study was to generate path-finding data to inform policy development in the Probation Service and other bodies responding to the needs of offenders who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, in order to better aid their resettlement and reduce offending. Within the Review of Policy Options for Prison and Penal Reform 2022-2024, Action 11 recommends repeating and building on the 2005 study.

The Department of Justice, with its services and partners, including the Probation Service, is seeking to address the significant homelessness and accommodation challenges evident among people in the criminal justice system to enable them in making choices that help them live productive and rewarding lives in their communities. The IAG, given the breadth of membership and the terms of reference of the group, was identified as an appropriate group to progress this work. A subgroup of the IAG will be established to aid progression of the research.

## **Appendix A**

### **2023 Membership of Interagency Group**

Mr. John O’Callaghan, Department of Justice, Chairperson  
Ms. Anne Keeley, Department of Social Protection  
Mr. Ben Ryan, Department of Justice  
Ms. Bríd McGlinchey, Department of Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science  
Ms. Edel Higgins, Irish Prison Service  
Mr. Felix Coleman, Central Statistics Office  
(alternate: Mr. James Dalton, September 2023)  
Mr. Fergal Black, Irish Prison Service (to September 2023)  
Ms. Fíona Ní Chinnéide, Probation Service  
Ms. Gillian Treacy, Department of Health (from December 2023)  
Mr. Jim Walsh, Department of Health  
Mr. Joseph Doyle, Health Service Executive  
(alternate: Ms. Caro Theunisz, December 2023)  
Ms. Karen O’Connor, Department of Health  
Ms. Karolina Farrell, Department of Health (to December 2023)  
Ms. Kate Mulkerrins, An Garda Síochána  
Mr. Ken Keating, Department of Justice  
Ms. Louise Quinn, Department of Social Protection (from December 2023)  
Ms. Mary O’Regan, Department of Justice  
Ms. Rachel Lillis, Probation Service  
Ms. Rosemarie Tobin, Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage  
Mr. Ruairí Ferrie, Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage  
Ms. Ruth Penney, Courts Service  
Ms. Siobhán Cafferty, Project Manager of Department of Justice’s *Working to Change Social Enterprise & Employment Strategy 2021-2023*  
Mr. William O’Brien, Department of Social Protection (to December 2023)

### **Secretary to the Interagency Group**

Mr. Aidan Ryan, Department of Justice



## Appendix B

### Attendance at 2023 meetings of the Interagency Group

Bodies represented	Meetings	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Total meetings attended
Chairperson*		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Central Statistics Office		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Courts Service		✓	✗	✓	✓	3
Dept. Further & Higher Education, Research, Innovation & Science		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Dept. Health		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Dept. Housing, Local Government & Heritage		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Dept. Justice		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
Dept. Social Protection		✓	✓	✓	✓	4
An Garda Síochána		✗	✗	✗	✗	0
Health Service Executive		✓	✗	✓	✓	3
Irish Prison Service		✓	✗	✗	✗	1
Probation Service		✓	✓	✓	✗	3
Working to Change		✓	✓	✓	✗	3

\* Ben Ryan (Department of Justice) stood in as Chair for meeting of 07 June 2023