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Subject: Response to Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

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Please see below for a response to the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill from Derry and Strabane PCSP.

Thanks

[REDACTED]

Derry and Strabane Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP)

8 May 2026

Committee for Justice
Northern Ireland Assembly
committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk

Re: Written Submission — Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

Executive Summary

Derry and Strabane PCSP broadly welcomes the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill and highlights the following key points:

- **Balance in sentencing:** Ensure sentencing principles explicitly reflect rehabilitation and reintegration alongside punishment and deterrence.
- **Protection for public workers and vulnerable victims:** Clearly define “public worker” and “vulnerable victim,” with robust enforcement of aggravated offences.
- **Support for families and victims:** Charlotte’s Law and Helen’s Law provisions should be accompanied by specialist bereavement and trauma services, and practitioners must be trained in their application.
- **Consistency and transparency:** Structured sentencing guidance, clear statutory starting points, and extension of the unduly lenient sentence scheme

should include mechanisms for community input, periodic review, and public awareness.

- **Driving offences causing death or serious injury:** Maximum penalties and minimum disqualification periods should be meaningful, consistently applied, and effectively enforced.
-

1. Introduction and Background

Derry and Strabane PCSP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee for Justice's consultation on the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill.

The PCSP is a statutory body established under the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, responsible for improving policing and community safety across the Derry and Strabane District Council area. Our membership includes elected representatives, PSNI officers, statutory partners, and independent community members. Through engagement with local communities - including victims, frontline workers, and those most affected by crime - we are well placed to provide insight into how sentencing policy is experienced locally.

This submission draws on ongoing community engagement, partner agency intelligence, and feedback from victims and practitioners in our district.

2. Principles and Purposes of Sentencing

We welcome the Bill's intention to place sentencing principles on a clearer statutory footing. Transparency in sentencing is critical to public confidence, particularly in communities where trust in the justice system is fragile.

Community feedback consistently supports a balanced approach to sentencing - one that combines punishment with meaningful rehabilitation. Repeat offending remains a significant concern locally, particularly for antisocial behaviour, substance misuse, and low-level violence.

Recommendation:

- Ensure the legislation explicitly requires courts to consider rehabilitation and reintegration alongside punishment and deterrence.
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3. Sentencing Guidance

Structured sentencing guidance to improve consistency and transparency is supported. Perceived inconsistencies in sentencing outcomes are frequently raised in community engagement sessions and can undermine confidence.

Recommendations:

- Establish a mechanism for incorporating community and victim perspectives in developing guidance.
 - Require periodic review of guidance to reflect emerging crime trends.
 - Ensure adequate resourcing for the body responsible for maintaining guidance.
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4. Suspended Sentence Orders

Suspended sentences can support rehabilitation and maintain family and employment ties. However, local communities sometimes perceive them as inadequate for repeat or violent offenders.

Recommendations:

- Introduce statutory requirements for monitoring and enforcing breach conditions.
 - Publish compliance and breach data to support transparency.
 - Provide clear guidance on when suspended sentences are appropriate.
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5. Life Sentence Tariffs for Murder

Statutory starting points for life sentences improve consistency and public confidence. Flexibility is needed to reflect aggravating factors such as domestic abuse or prolonged victimisation.

6. Unduly Lenient Sentence Scheme

Extending the scheme is strongly supported, as it allows sentences that fail to reflect seriousness to be reviewed. Awareness among victims remains low.

Recommendations:

- Statutory duty to inform victims of their right to request a review.
- Targeted awareness campaigns through PSNI, victim support services, and community organisations.

- Clear, accessible guidance on initiating a review.
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7. Charlotte’s Law and Helen’s Law Provisions

We strongly welcome these provisions. Failure to disclose a victim’s remains causes profound distress to families.

Recommendations:

- Provide specialist bereavement and trauma support services.
 - Mandatory training for criminal justice practitioners on these provisions.
 - Monitor and publish data on how non-disclosure influences sentencing and parole decisions.
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8. Offence of Assaulting a Public Worker

Creating this offence is strongly supported. Assaults on frontline staff—police, healthcare, council, and voluntary sector workers—remain a concern locally.

Recommendations:

- Define “public worker” inclusively to cover frontline council and voluntary sector staff.
 - Mandatory recording of offences under this category.
 - Post-legislative review within three years, including impact analysis on offence rates.
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9. Sentencing Aggravations

Aggravating factors for offences against public workers, targeted groups, and vulnerable victims are welcomed.

Recommendations:

- Ensure aggravations cover all recognised strands of hate crime.

- Define “vulnerability” broadly, including situational factors like homelessness or addiction.
 - Provide guidance and training to PSNI and partner agencies to support consistent application.
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10. Driving Offences Causing Death or Serious Injury

We support increased penalties and disqualification periods. Families locally report frustration that sentences do not reflect the severity of these offences.

Recommendations:

- Introduce minimum disqualification periods that are proportionate and consistently applied.
 - Strengthen enforcement mechanisms, including monitoring and penalties for breach.
 - Consider additional measures to reduce reoffending, such as mandatory driver rehabilitation programmes.
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11. Conclusions

Derry and Strabane PCSP broadly welcomes the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill. We are particularly supportive of:

- The new offence of assaulting a public worker
- Charlotte’s Law and Helen’s Law provisions
- Extension of the unduly lenient sentence scheme
- Increased penalties for serious driving offences

The effectiveness of these reforms will depend on **clear definitions, robust enforcement, adequate resourcing, and ongoing monitoring.**

The PCSP would be pleased to provide any further written information or clarification the Committee may require.

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