

# **CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL CONSULTATION**

**NIPSA RESPONSE  
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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This response is on behalf of NIPSA, the largest trade union in Northern Ireland representing over 45,000 members employed across the whole of the public services in organisations such as the Northern Ireland Civil Service and its Agencies, Local Government, Education Authority, the Health Trusts, the NI Housing Executive as well as a host of Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs). NIPSA also represents a significant number of members in the Voluntary Sector.

## **2. CRIMINAL JUSTICE BILL**

The Criminal Justice Bill was introduced into the Assembly on 3 March 2026; this written evidence is a response to the Committee for Justice call for evidence.

As a trade union representing workers across public services and community-facing roles, NIPSA has a direct interest in the Bill's provisions on sentencing policy, public protection, workplace safety, victims' rights, hate crime, and substance misuse. NIPSA supports a criminal justice system that is fair, proportionate, consistent, and evidence-based, while also addressing the underlying social causes of offending behaviour.

NIPSA's overall position is that the Bill contains several important and necessary reforms, particularly in relation to assaults on public workers, hate crime aggravations and serious violence. However, we also stress that policy reform alone will not reduce crime in a sustainable way unless it is accompanied by investment in prevention, education from early childhood, and properly resourced public services.

We are also supportive of an augmentation to the Bill to include a misogyny aggravator given the acute levels of misogynistic violence against women and girls in NI, most gravely measured by 30 murders in recent years. Violence against women and girls is a serious and systemic issue. Women in public service roles are disproportionately exposed to harassment, sexual harassment, intimidation, and physical assault.

Misogyny and gender-based violence are unacceptable and must be met with strong legal consequences. They should also be tackled through education from an early age to promote equality and respect. NIPSA supports properly funded services that actively prevent harm, support victims, educate and intervene early to stop abuse.

## **3. NEW OFFENCE OF ASSAULTING A PUBLIC WORKER**

### **CLAUSES 11-13**

Any proposal which sees offenders moving from custodial to noncustodial sanctions will increase the work of our members in the Probation Service (PBNI). Therefore, PBNI needs to be given adequate resources to support its work. NIPSA is concerned that currently some probation officers are dealing with caseloads that are 30% above the recommended number. To implement this without the necessary investment and support would prove detrimental to staff health & wellbeing.

### **CLAUSE 33**

This clause introduces an aggravator to an offence if the offence is aggravated by the person's race, religion, sexual orientation or because of disability. NIPSA supports the inclusion of aggravating factors where offences are motivated by hostility based on race, religion, sexual orientation or disability.

NIPSA also notes that public service workers may be exposed to hostility-driven behaviour in the course of their duties, particularly in public-facing roles. Ensuring that such conduct is recognised and addressed within the justice system is therefore important in supporting safe and respectful working environments across public services.

The categories identified in the clause reflect established and widely recognised forms of prejudice-based offending. NIPSA considers that their inclusion is appropriate in the context of this legislation. We believe it will be important, however, to ensure that the application of these aggravating factors is supported by clear guidance and monitoring to ensure that they are applied consistently and effectively in practice.

### **CLAUSES 37-39 - ASSAULT ON PUBLIC WORKERS**

NIPSA supports the creation of a specific offence of assaulting a public worker. Workers across health, education, social care, housing, civil service and other public services are increasingly exposed to violence, threats, and verbal abuse in the course of their duties. This is unacceptable and has a direct impact on staff safety, morale, recruitment, retention, and service delivery.

NIPSA welcomes stronger legal protections, but stresses that criminal sanctions must be accompanied by preventative workplace measures, including safe staffing levels, security provision, de-escalation training, reporting systems, and occupational health support. Assaults on public workers are not only criminal acts but also a threat to the functioning of essential public services.

### **CLAUSE 37**

Introduces a new offence of assault on a public worker and defines a public worker as being a person employed or engaged to provide a service to the public, performing a public duty or delivering a public service. NIPSA supports the introduction of a specific offence of assault on a public worker. However, we would ask why is there is no separate distinction for "*Public Sector Workers*" given the exposure to situations that could trigger a public sector worker being assaulted, such as workers in frontline public services? Offences against "blue light" workers already exists but this is a much wider

definition that in our view is so vague that it could apply to almost anyone and we believe that further consideration should be made on the point.

Evidence demonstrates that violence and abuse toward public service workers is a significant and a growing issue across Northern Ireland. In the health and social care sector alone, over 16,000 incidents of physical and verbal abuse were recorded in 2024/25, alongside thousands of assaults reported in education and other public services.

However, these figures are widely recognised as an underestimate, due to inconsistent reporting systems and the absence of centrally collated data across the public service organisations. Many incidents are not formally reported or are recorded in ways that do not capture their nature as assaults.

The introduction of a clear and specific offence for assaulting public workers is therefore an important step and sends a strong message that violence against those delivering public services is unacceptable and will be treated seriously.

NIPSA emphasises that this protection must apply across all public service roles, including those who are public facing on a regular or occasional basis. The risks identified above are not confined to traditional frontline roles and can affect staff across a wide range of functions.

NIPSA notes that many incidents involving assaults on public service workers arise in complex circumstances, including situations where individuals may be experiencing mental health crises, learning disabilities, addiction, or extreme distress.

While we support measures to protect workers, it is important that the justice system retains the ability to respond proportionately in such cases. In particular, where offending behaviour is linked to underlying health or social issues, responses should include access to appropriate support, treatment and intervention alongside any enforcement measures.

This reflects the reality faced by many public service workers, who are often required to engage with individuals in vulnerable or crisis situations.

NIPSA's position is clear that no worker should face violence or abuse as part of their job, and the definition must be sufficiently robust to ensure that all relevant public service workers benefit from this protection – and we do recognise that a narrow or overly restrictive interpretation could risk undermining the intention of the legislation by excluding workers who face real and evidenced risks.

### **CLAUSE 38**

This clause proposes introducing a new aggravator if an offence is committed against a public worker who is acting in the exercise of functions as a public worker. NIPSA strongly supports the inclusion of an aggravating factor where an offence is committed against a public worker acting in the exercise of their functions.

The statistics are likely to underestimate the true scale of the problem due to inconsistent reporting arrangements and the absence of a centrally collated dataset across the Civil Service, with many incidents going unreported or not formally recorded as assaults.

Public service workers are required, as part of their duties, to engage with individuals in complex, high-pressure and sometimes confrontational situations. This includes dealing with distress, crisis, enforcement activity, or the consequences of wider social issues such as poverty, addiction and mental ill-health. As a result, they face a heightened and predictable level of risk compared to the general workforce.

The introduction of a statutory aggravating factor is therefore an important recognition that assaults on public workers are not simply individual acts of violence but can also undermine the delivery of essential public services and affect public confidence.

The proposed aggravator will help ensure that the seriousness of these offences is appropriately reflected and sends a clear message that violence and abuse toward those delivering public services is unacceptable.

#### **4. SENTENCING AGGRAVATIONS FOR PUBLIC WORKERS, VULNERABLE VICTIMS, AND PROTECTED GROUPS**

NIPSA supports the proposed aggravating factors relating to assaults on public workers, vulnerable victims, and protected groups.

NIPSA has a strong commitment to equality and anti-discrimination and recognises the serious harm caused by offences motivated by racism, sectarianism, homophobia, transphobia, disability hatred, misogyny, or other forms of prejudice.

Crimes motivated by hate or prejudice have impacts that extend beyond the immediate victim and can create fear and insecurity across entire communities and hate-motivated violence have no place in society.

NIPSA particularly welcomes recognition of the risks faced by workers providing essential public services and those who may already experience heightened vulnerability to violence or abuse.

NIPSA is particularly concerned about violence and hostility motivated by racism, disability, sectarianism, misogyny, and LGBTQIA+ prejudice. These offences cause harm not only to individuals but also to wider communities by increasing fear, division, and social exclusion.

Racism and sectarianism remain significant issues in Northern Ireland. Racially motivated attacks on workers in public-facing roles including health and social care, are unacceptable and must be treated with appropriate seriousness. Sectarian violence also continues to undermine community cohesion and trust.

## **5. ALCOHOL AND DRUG RELATED ABUSE**

NIPSA is concerned about the significant role of alcohol in violent offending, particularly in assaults on public service workers. Alcohol-fuelled violence is a recurring issue in emergency care settings, with workers frequently reporting intoxication as a major contributing factor in aggression, verbal abuse, and physical assault. At the same time, we recognise that both alcohol and drug-related offending can, in many cases, be driven by addiction and dependency, where individuals are not simply acting out of criminal intent but are influenced by harmful patterns of substance use and underlying health and social issues.

## **6. EDUCATION, PREVENTION, AND BUILDING A RESPECTFUL AND EQUAL SOCIETY FROM BIRTH**

NIPSA believes that one of the most important long-term responses to the issues addressed in this Bill is sustained investment in education from early childhood onwards. A safe and equal society cannot be created through policy alone; it must be built through prevention, cultural change, and education that begins from birth and continues throughout life.

We therefore strongly support a lifelong education approach that begins in early years settings and continues through schools, youth services, and adult education. This should include education on equality and human rights, anti-racism and anti-sectarianism, disability, gender equality and prevention of violence against women, LGBTQIA+ inclusion, and respect, emotional development, and the harms of alcohol and drug misuse.

A society that educates children from birth to respect difference, value equality, and reject violence is significantly more likely to reduce hate crime, sectarianism, substance misuse-related violence, and workplace aggression in the long term.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

NIPSA welcomes the introduction of this Bill as an important step in strengthening protections for public service workers. We recognise that no worker should be subjected to violence, abuse or intimidation simply for carrying out their duties. Staff across public services provide essential functions to the public and must be able to do so in a safe and respectful environment. The measures within this Bill, particularly those relating to assaults on public workers and associated aggravating factors, represent a positive move toward recognising the seriousness of such offences.

At the same time, NIPSA emphasises that many public service workers operate in complex environments and regularly engage with individuals who may be experiencing mental health difficulties, learning disabilities, addiction or other forms of vulnerability. These factors can lead to challenging and sometimes high-risk interactions. It is therefore important that the legislative framework is applied in a balanced and proportionate way, recognising the wider context in which such incidents occur.

NIPSA's position is that strong legal protections for workers must sit alongside investment in public services, including mental health support, early intervention and

prevention. This is essential not only to protect workers, but also to address the underlying causes of offending behaviour.

NIPSA also notes that the implementation of these provisions will have implications for the public service and justice system workforce. Staff within courts, probation, prisons and related services are already operating under significant pressure, and any additional legislative requirements must be supported by adequate staffing, training and resources to ensure they can be delivered effectively.

Overall, we welcome the Bill as a necessary step in protecting public service workers, while emphasising that legislation must be supported by proper resourcing, prevention measures and a wider commitment to safety and dignity at work.

## STATS ON NUMBER OF ASSAULTS ACROSS PUBLIC SECTOR

### Health

- The instances of physical and verbal abuse against health and social care 2024/2025: **16,229**
  - *Verbal: 2,924*
  - *Physical: 13,305*

Source: NI HSCT, 09/04/2026

Link: <https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/questions/printquestionssummary.aspx?docid=458533>

- Approx. 89,000 attacks on healthcare staff over the past decade (2015-2025)

Source: <https://factcheckni.org/articles/health-in-ni-have-there-been-nearly-100000-attacks-on-healthcare-staff-in-a-decade/>

### Education

- Assaults on staff 2024/2025: **3,647**

Source: *Education Authority Quarterly JNC Accident Reporting Paper, Operations and Estates, Health & Safety, 26 Jan 2026*

### Local Government

There is no statutory reporting requirement to NISRA or DoF on assaults on Local Government employees. The Figures below were provided by each of the relevant Local Government organisations:

- Newry Mourne Down – none reported
- Causeway Coast – **2** (verbal)
- Fermanagh and Omagh District Council - **8** recorded instances of aggressive, rude or threatening behaviour (0 physical assaults)

### NIHE

- Abusive Behaviour Incidents reported by NIHE staff in 2025-26 financial year: **166**
  - *Email: 7*
  - *Face to face: 70*
  - *Social media: 5*
  - *Telephone: 80*
  - *Physical assault: 4*

Source: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

## **Civil Service**

Individual departments are responsible for maintaining their own Health and Safety incident records and for putting in place appropriate controls, reporting arrangements, and support for staff. While some departments may hold internal registers or have specific arrangements for front line services (for example, under unacceptable customer behaviour guidance), these are not collated or maintained centrally.

Confirmed recorded assaults on civil servants over the previous 12 months:

- Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre: 8 staff injured
- Department for Infrastructure: 2 incidents
- Department of Finance: 1 assault
- Departments of Education & Economy: 0 reported assaults

*Source: Minister of Finance, Northern Ireland Assembly March 2025*

## **Libraries**

No official published stats publicly available online

## **Key Point on Recorded Assaults**

These are only *recorded* assaults - many incidents go unreported for many reasons, including:

- sickness data often not specifying assault as the cause
- public sector workers not reporting assaults they see as “part of the job”
- fear of blame or lack of employer action
- assault injuries being recorded as “accidents”
- stress or trauma being logged without reference to violence
- minor assaults not reaching formal reporting
- inconsistent health & safety systems within departments

## **Other Notes**

- The risk of physical violence is significantly higher in public sector jobs than private sector ones (12% vs 4%).  
*Source:* <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2025-04/how-common-is-workplace-abuse.pdf>
- Healthcare staff, prison officers, police, teachers, and transport staff are disproportionately affected.  
*Source:* <https://www.clydeco.com/en/insights/2025/03/violence-and-harassment-in-the-workplace>