

Dear Mr Frew,

I am writing following a recent conversation with Geri Hanna, the Commissioner for Victims, who suggested that I contact you directly as Chair of the Justice Committee regarding the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc.) Bill.

My name is Coleen McGleenon. In [REDACTED] nephew, [REDACTED] was murdered. His killer received a life sentence, but mitigation and a guilty plea reduced the tariff to thirteen years. Our family had to take the case to the Court of Appeal to have that increased to sixteen.

That experience exposed serious structural issues within our justice system which I believe the current Criminal Justice Bill presents an opportunity to address.

I would respectfully ask the Committee to consider the following amendments and reforms:

1. A mandatory minimum tariff for the murder of a baby or very young child.

The murder of a baby is fundamentally different from the murder of an adult.

When an adult is killed, a life that has been lived is taken. When a baby is murdered, an entire lifetime is taken before it even begins. Every first. Every stage. Every possibility.

First steps. First words. School. Independence. Love. Work. Growing old.

All of it is erased.

The word “life” in sentencing does not currently guarantee a sentence that reflects that reality. Flexible starting points, mitigation and guilty plea reductions can reduce tariffs dramatically.

Increasing the maximum sentence alone does not necessarily change the reality of sentencing. If starting points remain flexible and mitigation and guilty plea reductions can significantly reduce tariffs, then the sentence actually served may still fall far short of what the public reasonably understands a “life sentence” to mean.

For the murder of a baby or very young child, there should be a mandatory minimum tariff of twenty-five years to reflect the totality of the life that has been taken and the absolute vulnerability of infants.

2. Victims’ right to read Victim Impact Statements directly in court.

Victim Impact Statements are not simply procedural documents. They are a crucial moment of accountability.

They allow victims and families to stand in court and speak directly about the human consequences of the crime.

Too often in Northern Ireland this opportunity depends entirely on judicial discretion. In many cases statements are submitted but never spoken.

Victims should have a clear legal right to read their Victim Impact Statements directly in court, face-to-face with the offender, if they wish to do so.

This is about recognition, dignity and accountability.

3. The right to read Victim Impact Statements to offenders in prison if this was denied in court.

Where victims were not permitted to read their statements in court, they should have the opportunity to do so later within the prison system.

Currently, victims are told this can only happen if the offender agrees.

This effectively gives the person who caused the harm the power to decide whether they must hear the impact of what they did.

That is a deeply troubling contradiction within the justice system.

A formal process should exist allowing victims to read their statements directly to offenders already in custody, without offender veto, with appropriate safeguards in place.

Victims should not need permission from the perpetrator to speak the truth of what was done to them.

4. Victims' presence and participation in parole hearings.

Families are often permitted to submit statements to parole hearings but are not always allowed to remain present for the full process.

Victims should have the right to attend, read their statements in-person to the perpetrator, and observe the full hearing where appropriate, including after delivering their statement.

Being asked to speak and then leave the room undermines the principle that victims are legitimate participants in the justice process.

5. Specialist domestic abuse, coercive control, rape and sexual assault courts.

Domestic abuse, coercive control, rape and sexual assault cases require specialist understanding.

I would strongly encourage the establishment of specialist courts for these offences, with:

- Judges and prosecutors trained in coercive control, trauma and risk assessment
- Fast-tracked cases to reduce delays and victim attrition
- The ability to handle linked criminal and family law issues together where appropriate

These courts already operate successfully in other jurisdictions and improve both accountability and victim safety.

These proposals come from direct experience of navigating the justice system after the murder of a child in my family, but they also reflect wider systemic gaps that many victims encounter.

The Criminal Justice Bill presents a rare opportunity to address those gaps in a meaningful way.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss these proposals further with the Committee if that would be helpful.

Kind regards,
Coleen McGleenon

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Coleen McGleenon.