



Response to the Criminal Justice Sentencing Bill

Men's Advisory Project Northern Ireland | Committee for Justice call for evidence

Original submission text for the 22 May 2026 deadline, reconstructed on 23 September 2026 for MAP review. A separately dated addendum follows the original response.

Our central request

We ask the Committee to make sentencing more accurate about what domestic and sexual abuse does, more transparent to victims and families, and safer when custody is suspended. That requires a court to see the proved course of conduct, the harm to children and family members, the offender's actual risk and the limits of an attractive public reputation. The measure of these reforms is whether they help the justice system recognise harm, protect people and explain decisions. [1]

MAP is Northern Ireland's specialist service for men aged 18 and over affected by domestic and sexual abuse. We also run a project for boys aged 13 to 17 affected by domestic abuse. Our work encompasses abuse by partners, former partners and family members, including abuse in same sex relationships. We participate in Domestic Homicide Reviews where the victim is male for the Department of Justice, in the Expert Reference Group on Domestic and Sexual offences, the MARAC reform process, the All Party Group on Domestic and Sexual Abuse, are members of each Domestic and Sexual Violence Partnership across NI and are members of the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's victims group. We helped shape the domestic abuse law, supported the commissioning of the Gillen Review and developed practitioner training on the new law with Women's Aid, NSPCC and other partners. We coproduce work with other credible partner organisations, Victim Support Ni, Nexus, Women's Aid Federation, Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid and Foyle Family Justice Centre. We are direct referral partners from the Police Service Northern Ireland for male victims of domestic abuse and have a service level agreement to support male homeless applicants impacted by domestic abuse [2] [21]

The violence faced by women and girls demands sustained, dedicated work and resources. We support that work and the expertise of the services leading it. MAP brings the perspective of men and boys whose abuse may be overlooked to the same shared task: making the response to domestic and sexual abuse safer and more effective for every victim. Recognising distinct needs is how a system meets them. It does not require one group of victims to compete with another.

What real experiences tell us

In research with men in Northern Ireland, one participant described his partner taking his keys and telling him he was not allowed to leave. Another described being pressed each month to hand over his pension to pay his partner's mortgage. Those

are men's accounts to researchers, not findings in criminal proceedings. They show why a court needs to understand the pattern behind an individual charge.

Confinement, isolation and control of income may explain both the harm and the difficulty of leaving. [15]

Another participant said that, after separation, his daughter had harmed herself while the family remained in court proceedings. A different man described reporting abuse to police and being dismissed because he was physically larger than his wife. These accounts point to two practical questions for this Bill: is harm to children properly identified when an adult is sentenced, and is the history of abuse captured early enough to be available to the court at all? A sentencing law cannot repair an investigation that never happens. [15]

Victim Support NI describes a man who survived sexual abuse as a child and wanted to read his Victim Personal Statement himself. He wrote to the judge and was permitted to do so. That example shows how much a clear, consistent option to be heard can matter. It does not mean every victim should be asked to speak in court. [4]

Recommendations at a glance

- Clause 1: make the sentence reflect the harm caused and the offender's responsibility. A good public reputation should not reduce a sentence for domestic or sexual abuse.
- Clause 2: require judges to explain which abuse was proved, what made it more serious, how the victim and children were harmed, and why the sentence was chosen.
- Clauses 3 to 14: assess danger before allowing an offender to remain in the community under a suspended prison sentence. State who will supervise and respond to breaches.
- Clauses 18 and 19: recognise domestic homicide within couples and families, and explain the minimum period in custody to bereaved relatives.
- Family safety before trial: ask for a parallel review of bail practice in domestic homicide cases. No previous convictions should never stand in for a proper inquiry into the history and current risks.
- Clauses 24 to 32: support families where a convicted killer withholds information about remains, with careful checks, a named contact and specialist help.
- Clauses 20 to 23 and 36: allow relevant Magistrates' Court sentences to be considered for review, and apply extra seriousness for a victim's impaired ability to protect themselves only when proved.
- Children: apply the existing child aggravator whenever its conditions are proved, whatever the child's age; expressly recognise a child present at a domestic murder; respond to harmed boys who show abusive behaviour as children needing both support and accountability.
- Implementation: fund specialist risk work and publish anonymised data that show who receives the benefit of the reforms.

What specialist practice tells us

Our service meets men at different points in a crisis. An initial conversation may have to address immediate danger, housing, children's safety, isolation, distress and the practical question of what can safely be recorded. Support can include risk assessment and safety planning, short term stabilisation, specialist therapeutic work and advocacy with other agencies. Risk can change at separation, during court proceedings, when protective orders are breached or when bail conditions change. A single incident record rarely conveys that changing picture. Our work with boys and our participation in Domestic Homicide Reviews make the impact on children and relatives impossible to set aside.

That practice shapes a specific request of this Committee. Police, prosecutors, probation, courts and specialist services should agree how relevant information about

a pattern of abuse and current safety reaches the decision maker, with lawful information sharing and proper regard to confidentiality. They must distinguish a victim's therapeutic disclosure from evidence that can properly be used in court, and must not make a survivor responsible for proving risk or releasing confidential counselling notes. The same disciplined approach helps a woman, a man, a child or a bereaved family. Specialist expertise means recognising conduct, examining where information was missed and improving the response at each stage.

Sentencing must recognise harm and culpability

Clause 1 lists the purposes of sentencing but defines a sentence that fits the crime without expressly naming harm or culpability, meaning the offender's responsibility for what happened. We ask the Committee to name both in the Bill. A course of threats, isolation, sexual coercion and control of money can cause severe harm even if the charge describes only one episode. The court may consider only facts properly proved or admitted. When important incidents are missing from a charge, agencies must improve investigation and presentation of the case. A court cannot punish someone for allegations that were never established. [1] [10]

The reference to "character" in clause 1(4)(b) needs a limit. A person who is admired at work or in the community can also abuse a partner or family member in private. A neighbour's letter saying the offender is generous does not make a proved assault, rape or pattern of control less serious. We ask for a rule that prevents such general testimonials from reducing sentence in defined domestic and sexual cases. This is about mitigation, meaning material used to argue for a lower sentence after guilt has been established. Courts must remain able to consider facts that really matter, including health, responsibility taken and evidence of rehabilitation. The rule must cover abuse within families as well as intimate relationships. [1] [3] [5] [9]

A clean criminal record is a factual matter, distinct from a favourable testimonial. It should not yield an automatic discount; the Court of Appeal has recognised that a lack of convictions may be neutral. That distinction matters acutely to families after a domestic killing. In a Home Office analysis of 109 people identified as perpetrators in domestic homicide reviews, 34 were recorded as having no previous offending history and the answer was unknown for 24. In three cases recorded as having no previous offending history, the review nevertheless identified abuse of a previous partner or family member. Those figures concern reviews in England and Wales, and cannot establish what happened in a particular Northern Ireland case. They do show why "no convictions" is narrower than "no abusive history". The court must not treat a lack of police records as proof that a family member was safe at home. Questions about character evidence at trial require separate consideration because they engage different rights and rules from mitigation after conviction. [16] [17]

Reasons, voice and reparation

Clause 2 is welcome. A court should identify the applicable guidance and give reasons that an ordinary person can understand. In a domestic case the explanation should state what conduct was proved; whether the offence was part of a repeated pattern; which domestic, child or vulnerability aggravators were alleged and proved; the harm evidenced by the victim and children; and why the chosen sentence manages any continuing risk. The court should explain when a feature has already been counted, so the same harm is not counted twice. Published guidance must be easy for sentencers to locate and maintain, as the PPS has highlighted. [1] [4] [12]

Victim Personal Statements should be offered without pressuring anyone to relive abuse or infer that a victim who declines suffered less. We support a presumption that victims who wish to read an approved statement may do so, subject to the court's control of relevance and the person's safety. Bereaved families need a clear explanation of a life sentence, its minimum tariff and what happens later at parole. Written sentencing remarks should be accessible without an avoidable financial barrier, together with a plain language explanation of any review route. [3] [4]

Reparation is valuable where it restores a proven loss. It must never imply that a victim should meet, mediate with, forgive or reconcile with an offender. In domestic and sexual cases, any restorative process needs an informed, continuing choice and independent specialist risk assessment. A financial order and a face to face meeting are different things. [1] [5] [6]

Suspended custody must be accompanied by a safety decision

A suspended sentence is a prison sentence that the offender does not serve immediately, provided the terms of the order are met. Clause 3 would allow suspension where the prison term for a serious offence does not exceed seven years. Clauses 4 and 10 mean that a court could suspend custody without imposing supervised community requirements and without obtaining a pre-sentence report. For the victim, the offender may therefore leave court and remain nearby without a credible plan to manage the danger. The concerns raised by sexual violence and child protection specialists deserve weight. PBNi also makes the sound point that properly funded supervision can be effective. We ask for a safety test in each case rather than a blanket rule based only on the name of the offence. [1] [5] [7] [9] [11]

We propose a statutory presumption of a specialist pre-sentence assessment before suspension in a domestic or sexual case, whether or not the court proposes a community requirement. Departure should require exceptional reasons recorded in open court, including how victim and child safety was assessed by other means. The assessment should examine past and escalating conduct, breaches of protective orders, coercive and economic control, sexual offending, post-separation risk, access

to the victim, contact with children and other potential victims, and the offender's response to prior interventions. It should obtain relevant police, prosecution, probation and safeguarding information. Specialist victim information should reach the court through safe channels, without making the survivor responsible for predicting risk or disclosing confidential therapy material.

Where suspension is imposed, reasons should identify the conditions, who supervises them, how prohibited contact is enforced, the response to breaches, and any residual risk. Victims must have a safe means to report new abuse and be told what an order means. Completion of a behaviour change programme is evidence of attendance, not proof that coercive control has ended. Specialist work must be properly funded, independently assessed and linked to victim safety; anger management alone is not a domestic abuse intervention. [6] [11]

Domestic homicide and the people left behind

Clause 19 and Schedule 3 recognise murder where victim and offender were personally connected or where repeated or continuous controlling or coercive behaviour preceded the killing as cases normally attracting a higher starting point. We support that recognition. The law should work when the victim was a woman or man, when the abuse was within a family rather than a couple, and where disability or dependence altered the means of control. A higher starting point is not automatically the final minimum period in custody. The judge must explain the facts proved and the factors that increase or reduce seriousness. Families should understand the tariff, meaning the minimum period before release may be considered, and why a life sentence does not mean the person will necessarily spend the rest of their life in prison. [1]

A domestic homicide can leave children without a parent, relatives exposed to intimidation and families facing decisions about contact, housing and information. Sentencing alone cannot decide parental responsibility or child contact. Before any custodial or release decision that affects contact, agencies should communicate relevant risk to the proper child protection and family court processes. The family needs a named liaison route and timely, accurate information. This applies to families of male and female victims alike.

What families need to know when bail is considered

In our work with families of men killed in domestic settings, we hear a particular concern about bail. Relatives ask why a person accused of killing someone who trusted and depended on them may be described as low risk because they have no previous convictions. For a family now grieving a death, the charge is itself of the utmost seriousness. They may also know of threats, control, violence or fear that never led to a police report or conviction. They need a decision based on the available facts,

not an assumption that a blank record describes the relationship. A research model tracing a pattern of control and escalation before intimate partner femicide supports looking for the history behind the final event. That model studied the killing of women by male partners, however, and must not be treated as a fixed sequence proven for every male victim or family homicide. [17] [18]

Bail is a decision about whether an accused person can be in the community before trial. The accused remains innocent unless proved guilty. This Sentencing Bill does not change the law on bail, so we ask the Committee to seek a parallel review of practice with the PPS, PSNI and judiciary. Before a bail hearing in a domestic homicide case, the prosecutor should assemble and present relevant, lawfully usable evidence about the alleged killing, protective orders, earlier reports or disclosures, coercive control, threats, attempts to contact witnesses, risks to children and the bereaved family, and whether important information is missing. Family members should have a safe way to pass on relevant concerns; the burden of investigating must stay with the authorities. The court should assess whether restrictions could manage specific risks, give reasons that make sense to the family, and require prompt notice of any release or changed conditions. No conviction history may be a relevant fact, but it cannot by itself answer these questions or justify automatic release. Nor should an allegation lead to automatic detention without an individual, lawful decision. The PPS already describes protection of victims, prevention of further offences and witness interference as reasons it may oppose bail. [19]

Where a person is later convicted, the bail decision and the sentence answer different questions. At sentencing, the judge can take account of an earlier pattern only where it has been proved or admitted. If no such history is known, investigators should ask whether it was missed, while the court must not invent past offences. Families deserve an explanation of both decisions in ordinary language. [1] [17]

Part 5 addresses a particular further cruelty: withholding the location of a person's remains after conviction for murder or manslaughter. We support the additional time in custody under clause 24 and the requirement in clause 31 that parole decision makers consider continuing non-disclosure and its reasons. These provisions apply only when the conditions in the Bill are met, including evidence supporting the belief that the offender has information they have not given. They should never assume that every convicted person who cannot locate remains is withholding them. [1] [3] [10]

Verification under clause 28, and any reduction under clause 29, need a family protocol. A nominated professional should explain the process, seek family information where safe and relevant, arrange an independently verified disclosure, and offer specialist trauma and bereavement support before any distressing detail is conveyed. The family should be told the decision and its practical effect without being asked to negotiate with the offender. The clause 29 reduction is limited to a portion of

the additional period, not the base penalty for killing. Guidance should explain that limit clearly and give families information and support at subsequent parole stages. [1][3][10]

Review of sentences and meaningful victim information

The wider route for challenging an unduly lenient sentence in clauses 20 to 23 is welcome. In plain terms, this is a limited legal review where a sentence may be so low that it falls outside the proper range. It is not a second chance to sentence someone whenever a victim is disappointed. The Bill includes all Crown Court cases, but only Magistrates' Court offences later selected by regulations. Many domestic cases are heard in the Magistrates' Court. We ask for a published timetable and criteria for selecting those offences, with regular review. Victims and families must be told promptly about the 28 day window and how to ask the Director of Public Prosecutions to consider a referral. [1][4][10]

Children and young people must be seen

MAP works with boys aged 13 to 17 who live with domestic abuse and its effects. Children can be directly abused, can experience the control of a parent, and can be used as a means of continued control. Section 9 of the 2021 Act already allows an extra measure of seriousness for the domestic abuse offence when a child sees, hears or is present during an incident that forms part of the abusive behaviour. It also covers other defined ways a child is involved or likely to be adversely affected. A child does not cease to count because they are a baby, too young to explain what happened, or reluctant to speak in court. The relevant statutory facts must be proved. A child should not have to give evidence simply to validate an adult's victimhood. We ask the PPS to record and pursue the aggravator in every case where the conditions are met, and for the court to state plainly when it was proved and what effect it had. [2][21]

The existing child aggravator is attached to the domestic abuse offence; it is not itself a general child aggravator for a charge of murder or every other domestic offence. If the charge is assault rather than the course of conduct offence, guidance should still require the court to consider a child's proved presence and harm. Schedule 3 of this Bill lists factors for setting the minimum term for an adult convicted of murder, including a history of cruelty and abuse of another connected person, but does not expressly name a child's presence during the killing. We ask the Committee to add that as a factor to be considered when proved, whatever the child's age. A child in the home when a parent is killed may be a baby in a cot or a teenager who sees or hears it. Every child present should be identified and offered a child centred assessment of safety, loss and longer term needs. The judge should explain any proved effect on children, including the loss of a parent, without counting the same harm twice. The absence of a child's statement should never be treated as evidence that no harm

occurred. NSPCC evidence describes fear, self-harm and lost support under coercive control. [1] [8] [13]

When an abused boy begins to harm others

Our boys project also gives us the opportunity to meet boys who were themselves harmed by domestic abuse and are beginning to use frightening or abusive behaviour. For example, if a boy who has lived with coercive control starts threatening a parent or controlling a girlfriend, both the person being harmed and the boy need help. We must act on the threats and protect the other person. We must also ask what the boy experienced, whether an adult is drawing him into abuse, what needs or disabilities may affect him, and what the pattern and seriousness of his own behaviour show. Childhood abuse can be relevant to understanding and responding to the behaviour; it neither makes abuse inevitable nor excuses it. This example describes a practice question, not an identifiable MAP client. [13] [20]

We ask for a joined response from safeguarding, specialist domestic abuse services, health, education and youth justice. It should include the boy's own assessment and therapeutic support, a clear safety plan for anyone he has harmed, and a proportionate response that requires him to change his behaviour. It must not force a victim into contact or reconciliation. For a serious offence, lawful youth justice action may still be needed; diversion is appropriate only when risk can be managed and the person harmed is protected. The Youth Justice Agency describes a Child First approach that addresses harmful behaviour, supports children's reintegration and meets victims' needs. This is the right direction for children who may be victims and also cause harm. Our adult sentencing proposals must not treat an abused boy aged 13 to 17 as an adult perpetrator. We support NICCY's call for a child rights impact assessment of the Bill. [8] [20]

The Marie Collins Foundation describes the lasting harm of circulating child sexual abuse images, the danger of general character references and the risk of treating online abuse as less serious. We agree. A blanket custody rule for every such offence would need testing against different conduct and the defendant's age. We favour a reasoned assessment of harm, responsibility and risk before any suspension. [9]

Vulnerability, fairness and evidence of delivery

Clause 36 creates an aggravator, a fact that can make an offence more serious. It could apply where a victim's ability to protect themselves is significantly impaired and the offender knew or ought to have known. For example, a person dependent on an abusive relative for care, transport, communication or money may find it harder to get help. The court would still need evidence of the actual impairment and the offender's knowledge. Being male, older or disabled does not by itself meet the test. Guidance

should explain this clearly and avoid unnecessary intrusion into the victim's private life.
[1][12]

The Department should publish anonymised information on the domestic abuse offence and aggravators alleged and proved, sex and age of victim and offender where recorded reliably, relationship type including family abuse, court tier, suspended orders and conditions, breaches and sentence review outcomes. Qualitative review should ask why an aggravator was not pursued and whether victims received clear reasons. Small groups must be suppressed to prevent identification. Data broken down by sex can reveal questions worth investigating; it cannot by itself explain a difference in outcomes. Review the case files, reporting, charge selection, evidence and support offered, and hear from victims before concluding why a difference arose. Use those findings to improve practice for everyone.

We ask the Committee to seek a funded implementation plan with the PPS, judiciary, PBNI, police, safeguarding agencies and specialist victim services. Changes to the words of a sentence cannot compensate for a case that never reached court or a pattern that was never recorded. We would welcome an opportunity to provide oral evidence on male victim recognition, family abuse, specialist risk assessment and the safe operation of suspended orders. Our purpose in doing so is to bring what we learn from men and boys into a common standard of safety and justice for all victims.

Sources available by 22 May 2026

- [1] Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, as introduced, March 2026. [Source](#)
- [2] Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021. [Source](#)
- [3] Commissioner for Victims of Crime in Northern Ireland, written evidence, 22 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [4] Victim Support NI, written evidence, 22 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [5] Nexus NI, written response, 21 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [6] Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, written evidence, 21 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [7] Rape Crisis Northern Ireland, written evidence, 29 April 2026. [Source](#)
- [8] Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, advice, May 2026. [Source](#)
- [9] Marie Collins Foundation, written evidence, 5 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [10] The Katie Trust, published consultation response, 26 April 2026. [Source](#)
- [11] Probation Board for Northern Ireland, written evidence, 13 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [12] Public Prosecution Service, written evidence, 22 May 2026. [Source](#)
- [13] NSPCC, The impact of coercive control on children and young people, August 2023. [Source](#)
- [14] Youth Justice Agency, about the Agency and its principles. [Source](#)
- [15] Spikol, McGlinchey and Armour, Queen's University Belfast, Male Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence, November 2024. [Source](#)
- [16] The King v Jonathan Hutton, Northern Ireland Court of Appeal, 2024, paragraph 53. [Source](#)
- [17] Home Office, Key findings from analysis of domestic homicide reviews, October 2019 to September 2020, published 2024. [Source](#)
- [18] Monckton-Smith, Intimate Partner Femicide, Violence Against Women, 2020. [Source](#)
- [19] Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland, Domestic Violence and Abuse, bail and victim information. [Source](#)
- [20] Youth Justice Agency, Annual Report and Accounts 2024 to 2025. [Source](#)
- [21] Department of Justice, ministerial statement on commencement of the domestic abuse offence and child aggravators, 2022. [Source](#)

Addendum on the Anthony domestic homicide review

Men's Advisory Project Northern Ireland | 23 September 2026

This addendum responds to material published after the 22 May 2026 call for evidence. It is not part of the reconstructed original submission.

What the review establishes

The Department of Justice published the executive summary of the Domestic Homicide Review of Anthony on 14 September 2026. Anthony was a man from the Traveller community with an acquired disability who had experienced physical, emotional and financial abuse by members of his family. The review records seven non-molestation orders relating to family members, 23 occasions on which police did not complete a DASH risk assessment, and no referral to MARAC, the multi-agency process for high risk domestic abuse cases. These were missed chances to assemble a shared picture of danger. [22]

The review states that there was no trial or prosecution concerning Anthony's death. It cannot establish that a bail or sentencing decision failed, that any person was criminally responsible for his death, or that the proposed Bill would have prevented it. We ask the Committee to respect that distinction. Its clear lesson for the main submission is that decision makers can consider only the risk and history that agencies identify, evidence and bring before them in a case that does proceed. [22]

How it strengthens our recommendations

- Make abuse by relatives visible in risk assessment and sentencing guidance. A victim may live with or depend upon the very people causing harm. A process built only around couples misses that danger. [22]
- Record what disability and dependence meant for Anthony in practice, and apply clause 36 only when its legal conditions are proved in a future case. Do not assume that an adult man can protect himself or that disability alone proves vulnerability. [1] [22]
- Before a bail or suspended sentence decision in any future case, make relevant protective orders, breaches, risk assessments and safeguarding information available to the decision maker where legally admissible. A missing assessment is a reason to seek information, never evidence that risk is low. Anthony's case involved no homicide prosecution or bail decision, so the review cannot be cited as proof that one failed. [1] [22]
- Carry the review's lessons into MARAC reform. MAP participates in domestic homicide reviews concerning male victims and in MARAC reform. Agencies need a measurable route for identifying and referring men at high risk, including men abused by relatives. [22]

- Give bereaved families a named person for clear information at each stage that does occur. Anthony's review reminds us that relatives also need support when there is no prosecution or sentence. [22]

These steps are about better recognition and evidence, followed by a proportionate legal response when a case reaches court. They apply to every victim. Anthony's experience gives the Committee a concrete reason to ask whether the Bill's protections can operate when the person at risk is a man, the alleged abuse takes place within a wider family and several agencies each hold part of the history.

Addendum sources

[1] Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill, as introduced, March 2026. [Source](#)

[22] Department of Justice, Domestic Homicide Review Executive Summary Anthony, published 14 September 2026. [Source](#)