

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



Department of
Justice

An Roinn Dlí agus Cirt

Máinnystrie O tha Laa

www.justice-ni.gov.uk

Minister's Office
Castle Buildings Block C
Stormont Estate
Ballymiscaw
Belfast
BT4 3SG

JCP\26\225

Kathy O'Hanlon
Clerk to the Committee for Justice
Room 345
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

8 October 2026

Dear Kathy,

CONCERNS FROM AN INDIVIDUAL REGARDING SENTENCING AND THE IMPACT ON VICTIMS

Thank you for your letter dated 21 September 2026, sharing correspondence from [REDACTED] for the Department's consideration. The Department's response to [REDACTED] requests is set out below.

1. A 25-year mandatory minimum tariff for the murder of a baby or very young child.

Murder carries a mandatory life sentence in Northern Ireland, as well as in England & Wales and Scotland. The minimum custodial term to be served, known as the tariff, is not mandatory or fixed. No UK jurisdiction imposes a mandatory minimum tariff for any offence receiving a life sentence.

The tariff is always set by the sentencing judge, using starting points which are found in statute in England and Wales and, currently, in guideline judgments in Northern Ireland. After selecting the appropriate starting point, the judge then adjusts this to take account of aggravating and mitigating factors before deciding on the final tariff. It is very rare that a compulsory minimum custodial sentence is specified in law. This reflects the valued

principle that, in delivering a sentence, judges should normally be free to take full account of the unique circumstances of each case.

Part 3 of the Department's Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc.) Bill makes provision in relation to the setting of tariffs when the court is imposing a mandatory life sentence. The provisions within the Bill specify that:

- 20 years will be the starting point for murders committed by adults where the court considers the seriousness of the offence to be exceptionally high. Such cases will normally include the murder of a vulnerable person.
- In all other cases the appropriate starting point for adult offenders will be 15 years.

These provisions are reflective of recent case law and sentencing guidelines in Northern Ireland, which already recommends that in murder cases involving a young child a term of 20 years and upwards could be appropriate. Sentencing judges will continue to have the flexibility to vary the starting point upwards or downwards to take into account the particular circumstances of each case, including aggravating and mitigating factors.

A whole life tariff will continue to be available for "rare and exceptionally serious murders". Where a whole life tariff is imposed, the judge is required to be satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that the offender must be kept in prison for the rest of their life. Where a murder or other offence is sufficiently serious to warrant a whole life tariff a guilty plea will not lead to any reduction in sentence.

The Minister corresponded with [REDACTED] in respect of this matter in March of this year and met with her to discuss her proposals in April 2026.

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

The Department recognises that many victims feel that reading their Victim Personal Statement aloud in court, or having it read on their behalf, can contribute to their recovery by enabling them to describe the impact of the offence in their own words. For some, it can provide a sense of empowerment and help to restore a degree of control following what are often highly traumatic experiences. The Minister is supportive of measures that

strengthen the voice of victims within the criminal justice system and considers it important that the courts retain discretion in this area.

Judges are best placed to assess the circumstances of individual cases and to determine how proceedings should be conducted. For that reason, while victims should be able to request to read their statement in court, any such request should remain subject to judicial consideration on a case-by-case basis.

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

The Department recognises that some victims may wish to communicate directly to offenders the impact that a crime has had on their lives. However, the purpose of a Victim Personal Statement is to assist the court in understanding the impact of the offence when sentencing an offender. Where victims wish to engage directly with offenders, restorative justice can provide a structured and supported approach, with appropriate safeguards in place.

Departmental officials are currently progressing work to expand adult restorative justice arrangements, including potential future application within custodial settings.

4. Victims' presence and participation in parole hearings.

The Department recognises that many victims wish to remain present throughout parole proceedings and to see first-hand how decisions are reached. However, parole hearings are distinct from criminal trials and are focused on assessing risk and determining whether an offender can be safely managed in the community. It is important that appropriate arrangements exist to balance the interests of victims with the need to consider sensitive evidence and ensure the fairness and integrity of the process.

The Minister has nevertheless sought to strengthen the voice of victims in the parole system and departmental officials are currently developing proposals to improve victim participation and transparency following a recent public consultation.

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

The Prime Minister's recent announcement of plans to introduce specialist rape and serious sexual offences courts in England and Wales was noted with interest. The Department is keen to learn more about these plans and will monitor progress closely.

While the Department has not undertaken specific work on the establishment of specialist courts for sexual offences, we have led a significant transformational programme of reform aimed at improving the experience of victims of sexual crime as they progress through the justice system. Many of these measures stem from recommendations from the Gillen Review and many reflect key elements of the approach now being explored in England and Wales.

For example, one of the proposals for specialist courts in England and Wales is to enable complainants to give evidence remotely. The Department has been a strong advocate for the use of remote evidence facilities and has established new Remote Evidence Centres (RECs) in Belfast and Craigavon, complementing the existing NSPCC-operated facility in Derry~Londonderry. These centres provide a safe, secure and supportive environment from which vulnerable witnesses can give evidence directly to the court, away from the courthouse. Crucially, they ensure witnesses do not encounter defendants, or their family members and supporters, on the day of the trial.

It is anticipated that approximately 1,000 vulnerable witnesses in Northern Ireland will use a REC this year. The conviction rate in cases involving REC evidence has remained consistently around 90%, with over half of these by guilty plea, demonstrating the effectiveness of this approach.

Reducing delay is another core objective of the England and Wales proposals. While there is more to do, significant work is already under way in Northern Ireland to remove unnecessary delay from court proceedings, including:

- the first stage of the NI Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Act was implemented on 17 October 2022. The new committal process means the use of oral evidence during

- committal proceedings in magistrates' courts for new cases was abolished. This change simplifies the committal process, reduces costs and delay, which benefits both victims and witnesses and the accused;
- ongoing work to deliver the second phase of committal reform, known as direct committal. This will remove the traditional committal process entirely for most serious offences, allowing the majority of cases to transfer directly to the Crown Court following the first appearance in a magistrates' court;
- Case Progression Officers are in place in all Crown Court venues and are working to ensure that all procedural or administrative matters in relation to Crown Court cases are being progressed by the relevant agencies and that, as far as possible, any blockages or impediments to effective case progression are addressed; and,
- a judge-led voluntary protocol to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving child witnesses under 13 years of age continues to operate in Belfast and Antrim Crown Courts and is delivering really positive results. In 2024, participating organisations agreed to expedite serious sexual offence cases involving those under 16 years in all jurisdictions, where possible. However, these cases are not subject to the same timeframes as have been formally adopted in the U13 protocol. The Department is now considering how to support the further rollout of the Protocol, but there are some complex issues to be overcome and any additional expansion will require resources and funding.

The proposals for England and Wales also highlight the importance of enhanced training for professionals working within specialist courts. In Northern Ireland, the Department has worked with agencies to prioritise the development and delivery of training, aimed at driving cultural and organisational change and supporting a more trauma-informed and sensitive approach during engagement with victims. This includes the development and rollout of a trauma-informed training framework for frontline professionals across the criminal justice system. The framework is designed to strengthen knowledge, skills and awareness among those working directly with victims of sexual offences.

Other measures and services introduced to support victims of rape and sexual offences include:

- the Adult Sexual Offences Legal Advisor (SOLA) scheme which provides publicly funded legal advice to adult complainants in serious sexual offence cases, with over 2,000 people benefitting from the scheme since its launch in 2021;
- the extension of SOLA provision to children, with more than 400 child victims benefitting from support provided by a CSOLA since its launch in 2025;
- the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) NI Act 2022 which introduced stronger anonymity protection for victims, increased penalties for breaches of anonymity laws, and allowed for the exclusion of the public from courtrooms during serious sexual offence trials;
- the “Rape Myths = Real Harm” social media campaign to dispel misinformation about sexual crimes; and,
- in partnership with PSNI and The Executive Office, the development and launch of the “Power to Change” campaign which is aimed at tackling the attitudes and behaviours that can contribute to sexual offending, violence against women and girls, and other forms of gender-based violence.

In addition, the Department is progressing legislation to strengthen the rights and protections available to complainants in serious sexual offence cases. The Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill introduced to the Assembly in June includes provisions to clarify the entitlement to independent legal representation for complainants of serious sexual offences during certain pre-trial applications; and to enhance safeguards around the disclosure of sensitive personal information, including counselling, health and social services records for complainants of serious sexual offences.

On 28 September, the Justice Minister launched the ‘Justice is Changing’ campaign, which aims to raise awareness of the measures and services introduced to support victims of sexual crime. One can learn more about that campaign, and all of the other

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER

initiatives introduced to support victims of sexual crime on the Department's website at this link: [Gillen review – Justice is changing | Department of Justice](#)

In relation domestic abuse, the Belfast Domestic Abuse Contest Court (DACC) was established by Presiding District Judge (Magistrates Court) Keown in December 2023. The basic operating principle is for several contested domestic abuse cases to be scheduled on the same day with all complainants based in the Belfast Remote Evidence Centre.

Those involved in the proceedings – the judge, police, prosecution and defence counsel and victim support services all have experience and expertise in domestic abuse, which is pivotal to its effectiveness and success.

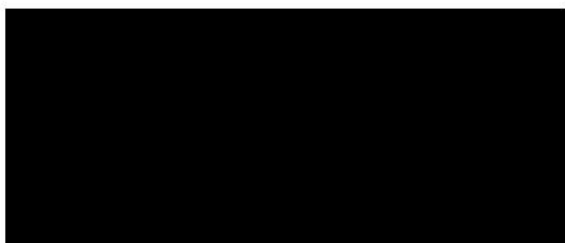
The Court does not start before 11am; this allows for people to attend to school runs or family commitments beforehand. It also allows a prosecutor, highly trained and experienced in domestic abuse cases, to go to the Remote Evidence Centre to speak to all of the witnesses to explain the process and provide reassurance before the first case is heard.

Feedback from all those involved has been extremely positive, and the conviction rate for the 'DACC' stands at around 90%. This is a significant conviction rate as those for domestic abuse offences in a normal court setting are much lower.

A similar court is in operation in Derry~Londonderry.

Taken together, these measures demonstrate the Department's ongoing commitment to improving victims' experiences of the justice system, reducing trauma and delay, and ensuring that victims of serious sexual offences and domestic abuse receive the support and protections they deserve.

Yours sincerely,



DALO