



Mr. Paul Frew,
Chair of the Committee for Justice
C/o Kathy O'Hanlon,
Clerk to the Committee for Justice
Via email: committee.justice@niassembly.gov.uk

9 October 2026

RE: Oral Evidence Follow-Up on Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill

Dear Paul,

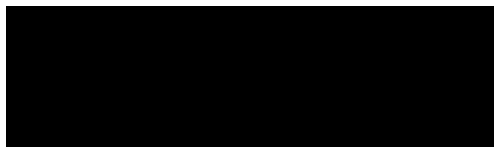
Thank you for inviting me to attend the Justice Committee meeting on 22 September 2026. I hope that you and the other committee members found the discussion helpful and I am happy to provide the additional information that you requested via email on 28 September.

We have presented information on the following points in the attached briefing:

- Evaluations conducted in relation to post-court support for victims of crime: Please note that the evaluations of our After Court Support and Journey to Recovery programmes are confidential and are just for yourself and the committee members. They are not for wider distribution;
- Data or information in relation to trends in hate crime, including the levels of non-reporting of such crimes;
- Our views on whether Schedule 2 makes any provision for a custodial sentence if suspended sentence orders are breached.

We look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,



Janice Bunting MBE
Chief Executive,
Victim Support NI



Briefing for the Committee for Justice

This briefing is in response to the Committee for Justice's written request for further information following our oral evidence session on 22 September 2026.

The Committee requested the following information via email on 28 September 2026:

- Evaluations conducted in relation to post-court support for victims of crime;
- Data or information in relation to trends in hate crime, including levels of non-reporting of such crimes;
- Our views on whether Schedule 2 makes any provision for a custodial sentence if suspended sentence orders are breached.

I. After Court Support Service

Due to the confidential nature of the evaluation, we are only able to provide the Executive Summary from Alison Wightman's "The After Court Support Service - Building Resilience for Recovery Evaluation Report." It was published in September 2023. We have also attached the foreword from the Mental Health Champion Professor Siobhán O'Neill in the appendices.

Executive Summary from Alison Wightman

In 2022 Victim Support NI initiated a new service in 2022 to support a highly vulnerable group of victims of crime. Having experienced the most damaging crimes to the person, they spend years focused on the process of seeking redress from the criminal justice system and then find themselves dealing with the impact of the crime and the court proceedings, with no support. It was a cliff edge for victims and a clear gap in provision.

The After Court Support Service supports victims of all types of crime who have been identified as the most vulnerable and distressed. The majority of those who go on to access its full support process, are victims of crimes of domestic and sexual violence. They are highly traumatised first by the crime, and then by the process of seeking redress through the courts. They often continue to live in the same community as the perpetrator and his family and are subject to continued harassment or attacks. They are at high risk of long term mental and emotional distress.

Service Model

The After Court Support Service aims to enable people to move forward in their lives, to address the feelings and triggers created by their trauma and learn to manage them and rebuild their hopes and ambitions and their support network. After comprehensive literature searches, academic research and reviews of global practice, Victim Support NI found no model of recovery to address the needs of this group. The organisation used its expertise and knowledge to design and build an entirely new model. The core of this groundbreaking recovery model was its outcome focus, evidenced through use of a robust and internationally recognised measure of resilience – the Connor Davidson CD-RISC-10 scale.

Service Outcomes

This evaluation was commissioned after the service's first full year of service delivery to research:

- The extent to which the service increased the resilience of its clients and reduced their anxiety and their subsequent use of health service resources.
- The application and fidelity of the service model,
- The effectiveness of the targeting and filtering process to reach those in highest need.

The evaluation report describes consistently large increases in resilience, averaging 23%, from the CD-RISC-10 Scale. This evidence is supported by interviews with 12 clients (1 in 4 of those completed within the first year), and analysis of service recording and feedback systems.

Client surveys reveal that 67% reported a significantly reduced anxiety level, and a further 28% reported a somewhat reduced level at the end of the programme. There is strong evidence from client interviews that these reductions are sustained in the medium term and that the resilience they built through understanding and learning to manage trauma enabled them to manage their anxiety and get on with their lives.

Client records and interviews evidence the uniqueness of this groundbreaking service. The safe place and trusted relationship which the service provides with its action focus, trauma informed practice, and asset building approach enables clients to move out and beyond their years of trauma and long wait for redress. Clients often had significant experience of other services and reported that it was the After Court Support service approach which met their specific needs and enabled them to change and move on.

Findings from client and staff interviews demonstrate high fidelity. Staff application of all aspects of the model is consistent across the client group and there is robust evidence that clients understood and benefited from the entirety of the model. This fidelity is further evidenced by the quality of service leadership and mentoring.

Analysis of the design and operation of the targeting and filtering process found that the clients at highest risk and level of vulnerability were effectively targeted and engaged in the service. The filtering process engaged clients with the capacity to undertake the service at the time, and others to be referred to the most appropriate service.

Victim Support NI has identified and engaged a high risk, extremely vulnerable client group for whom the After Court Support Service works. Their level of trauma and chaotic lives creates a burden for the health service. The scale and consistency of improved resilience and reduced anxiety levels produced by this unique recovery-based service is remarkable. The result is to move a group of people at risk of ongoing mental health problems from a place of risk to a place of resilience thereby reducing the burden on health services.

Recommendations

- Resourcing

It is critical for this group of people, that this new highly effective service is sustained. In the context of current, highly challenging political and governance challenges, now more than ever, priority should be given to those who are most vulnerable and at highest risk. Given their duty of care to victims of crime, and the pressing need to invest to save burden on the Health Service, the departments of justice and health should provide funding to sustain this service. The timing of support is vital, and budget setting needs to prevent loss of vital support after May 2024.

- Service Efficiency

Now that the service is established, Victim Support NI should seek funding for additional staffing for administration costs to support the filtering element of the referral process; analysis and reporting on CD-RISC-10 scale and Counsel 360 systems; provide regular updates about the After Court Support service to inform new Court Witness volunteers. This will maximise coordination time spent on service delivery.

- Service Development

The service should explore and develop methods of post service support building on three-month check-ins to check on goals set by the client and clarified in their final session with the coordinator, revisiting the assets they identified for future support. These assets include habits for maintaining emotional wellbeing set out in the Five Ways to Wellbeing model, their social network and volunteer work – all key methods of sustaining resilience.

- Embedding Learning

Victim Support NI, Senior Management Team and Board should embed and replicate the learning and best practice from the impact of this effectiveness as it develops new work including:

- The measurement and outcomes-based approach, including use of recognised measurement scales to track outcomes.

- Outcomes focused leadership to enable staff to have the space to be themselves within a clear model of practice and a strong accountability system.
- Dissemination

Victim Support NI should advocate for the support needs of this group of victims of crime and promote the effectiveness and distinctiveness of this model within criminal justice and health settings, including the offices of the Mental Health Commissioner and the Victims of Crime Commissioner support.

2. Journey to Recovery Project

Due to the confidential nature of the evaluation, we are only able to provide the Executive Summary from Dr Helga Sneddon's "Victim Support: Evaluation of The Journey to Recovery Programme." It was published in May 2026.

Executive Summary from Dr Helga Sneddon

Journey to Recovery was developed by Victim Support NI to address a gap in support for victims after criminal justice involvement ends or when cases do not proceed. The project provided flexible, trauma-informed recovery support, including emotional support, therapeutic intervention, practical guidance, wellbeing resources and signposting to specialist services.

The evaluation draws on project monitoring information, CORE outcome data, participant feedback, interviews with four members of therapeutic/project staff, one service-user interview and case study material provided by Victim Support NI.

The evidence indicates that Journey to Recovery addressed an important need for victims of crime. Staff consistently described victims being left with unresolved trauma, anxiety, shame, self-blame, isolation and loss of confidence after investigations, prosecutorial decisions or court proceedings ended. This was described as common for individuals whose cases did not proceed, who often experienced feelings of invalidation or not being believed.

The project delivered a flexible and person-centred model of support. Participants were able to access different levels and types of support according to their needs and readiness to engage. This flexibility was central to the model and enabled support to be tailored around each person's circumstances, rather than requiring participants to fit a fixed programme.

Quantitative outcome data showed strong positive results. Average CORE-34 scores reduced from 30.4 at entry to 17.4 at completion, representing an approximate 43% reduction in psychological distress. Reliable improvement was achieved by 88.5% of participants, and no participants showed reliable deterioration. Outcomes were similarly positive regardless of whether cases completed the court process, suggesting that support was valuable irrespective of criminal justice outcome.

Qualitative evidence indicates that recovery involved more than reduced distress. Participants developed greater confidence, improved coping skills, stronger self-understanding, reduced shame and self-blame, improved relationships and a greater sense of control over their lives. Feeling heard, understood and believed emerged as a central mechanism of recovery.

The evaluation also found that skilled, trauma-informed staff were critical to effective delivery. Therapists helped participants understand trauma responses, develop emotional regulation strategies, rebuild confidence and make sense of experiences without judgement or blame.

The project generated important learning for future delivery. Referral pathways require time to become embedded; some participants may benefit from pre-engagement or psychoeducation before beginning therapeutic work; and support for children and young people may need to include more explicit work with parents and carers to support engagement and positive outcomes.

Overall, the evaluation concludes that Journey to Recovery delivered meaningful benefits for victims of crime and addressed an important gap in support. The evidence supports continuation and further development of flexible, trauma-informed recovery support beyond criminal justice processes.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Continue and further develop the Journey to Recovery model

The evaluation provides strong evidence that Journey to Recovery addressed an important gap in provision and delivered meaningful improvements in wellbeing, confidence and recovery. Future delivery should build on the core strengths identified through the evaluation, including:

- Trauma-informed and person-centred practice Participants consistently valued support that helped them understand trauma responses without judgement and allowed support to be tailored to their individual circumstances and priorities.

- Flexibility in the timing, duration, mode and content of support Flexibility was central to engagement and positive outcomes, particularly for participants managing caring responsibilities, emotional distress or complex life circumstances.
- Strong therapeutic relationships and relational continuity Feeling heard, believed and understood emerged as a central component of recovery and contributed to trust, engagement and emotional safety.
- Access to both practical and therapeutic support Participants benefited from a combination of emotional support, psychoeducation, practical guidance and onward referral to specialist services where needed.
- Support based on recovery need rather than criminal justice outcome alone Positive outcomes were achieved regardless of whether cases progressed through court processes, highlighting the importance of providing support beyond legal outcomes.
- Delivery through an organisation with established support networks and referral pathways Access to wider support services and existing referral relationships appeared to strengthen engagement, continuity and onward support opportunities.
- Trauma-informed information sharing and continuity of care Appropriate information sharing helped reduce unnecessary repetition of distressing experiences and supported smoother transitions into support.
- Continued collection of outcome data, participant feedback and case study evidence to demonstrate impact and inform service development The combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence provided a strong basis for understanding impact and identifying learning for future delivery.

Recommendation 2: Develop a structured pre-engagement and psychoeducation offer

Some participants may need support to understand what recovery-focused intervention involves before they are ready to engage fully. A brief preparatory stage may improve uptake, readiness and understanding of available support.

Recommendation 3: Recognise and resource work with parents, carers and appropriate adults within support for children and young people

Work with younger participants often requires engagement with parents, carers or appropriate adults. Parent/carers psychoeducation and guidance should be recognised and resourced as part of the model.

In summary, the evidence from this evaluation supports continuation and further development of the Journey to Recovery model. The programme has demonstrated clear benefits for victims of crime, delivered significant improvements in wellbeing and successfully addressed a recognised gap in support provision. Future development should build upon the existing strengths of trauma informed practice, flexibility, strong therapeutic relationships and person-centred delivery while incorporating the learning identified through implementation.

3. Hate Crime Underreporting

During the oral evidence session on the Sentencing Bill, we were asked to provide evidence regarding the underreporting of hate crime. Unfortunately, our Hate Crime Advocacy Service does not always get direct information from victims regarding underreporting. Therefore, it is difficult, without a more in-depth assessment, to present the true level of under-reporting.

However, what we can provide information on is why victims do not continue to report repeat hate crimes. Through our own feedback from some clients, as well as some research we have undertaken and gaps and issues that we have flagged in our '[NI Hate Crime Manifesto](#)', we can provide the following information related to underreporting in hate crime:

- Statistics from the PPS in 2024/25 show that fewer than 3% of hate crime cases proceeded to trial, and fewer than 1% resulted in convictions with enhanced sentencing for hate aggravation. The less than 3% trial rate and less than 1% sentencing rate for hate crimes speak for themselves – victims simply say to HCAS Advocates: “What is the point in reporting given I’m not likely to have any sort of favourable court outcome?”
- Hate crime has a very high repeat victimisation rate – victims simply get exasperated by having to report crimes multiple times with no outcome.
- The paramilitary coercive control in some estates strongly encourage if not prevent people from successfully reporting, out of fear of reprisals for themselves, their children, family and wider community. Even in cases where victims are brave enough

to do so, they will request not to be visited by police, therefore making it difficult if not impossible to take accurate statements, collect evidence, investigate further or question alleged offenders. This is true across the hate crime categories.

- Disability:

- Disability has one of the highest rates of underreporting
- One barrier is that to report a 'disability' hate crime, one has to accept that they have a disability, which can be an issue.
- Repeat victimisation is unusually high. Most hate crimes across categories occur at or around the victim's home (across the protected characteristics). Even more so in disability, given that many of them are at home more often, which may create a higher level of isolation than some of the other categories. This leads to compounding mental health issues on top of being a victim and whatever they may be struggling with physically or cognitively. Reporting fatigue then sets in, and they often just stop reporting.
- Simply put, disability victims' needs are higher per case than some of the other categories, exacerbating reporting fatigue issues.
- So-called 'mate crime' is a significant blind spot. Perpetrators are family members or present as friends, befrienders or helpers, and the abuse — financial exploitation, use of the victim's home, coercion, humiliation — builds slowly out of an apparent relationship. Victims frequently do not classify this as a crime at all, let alone a hate crime, because the person doing it is someone they believe cares about them. Where the perpetrator is a carer, support worker or family member, reporting may also mean risking the loss of the support the victim depends on to live.
- Communication needs are a barrier at the point of first contact. If a victim has a learning disability, a speech or language difference, or a cognitive or mental health condition affecting how they recall and recount events, and no registered intermediary or appropriate support is in place at initial report, the account taken is often incomplete. That feeds directly into evidential difficulties later, and into the victim's own

sense that they were not believed or understood — which we often see leading to a reduction in the likelihood of any further report.

- LGBT (sexual orientation and transgender identity):
 - The first barrier is ‘outing’. Many LGBT individuals may not already be ‘out’ to family, friends and community. Reporting a crime as such puts it on record and can create further issues for them.
 - Risk of reprisal and high evidentiary thresholds create a fear of reporting and the same reporting fatigue
 - Many online based crimes, including threats, have been ‘normalised’ to a point victims either do not think to report it or are tired of doing so.
 - Trans individuals have the highest repeat victimisation rates with no lawful definition in Northern Ireland. Therefore, there is an actual legislative barrier to reporting crimes.
- Race:
 - Fear of reprisals toward not just homes, but businesses. This includes wider signal crimes – i.e., if I report, “Not only may I feel the reprisal, but my whole community/background could be targeted, too.” People are simply coerced not to report in some areas.
 - Language and cultural barriers make it difficult to know to report a hate crime. This has been evidenced many times through HCAS. Our community team would often receive referrals that are indeed hate crimes, but investigating officers did not mark it as such. This means they likely did not use an interpreter or did not press the matter enough during initial response and investigation.
 - The language barriers are an obvious issue and they are real – someone may not have the words to say ‘hate crime’ in English. For example, in Victim Support NI’s own service delivery, in the first quarter (April to June 2026), it supported victims across a span of 23 languages.
 - Cultural barriers also play a significant role. The term ‘hate crime’ and hate crime laws do not exist in all languages, countries, cultures and legal systems – so they simply may not know that they can report these crimes in Northern Ireland.

- There is also a profound fear of the police among certain communities. This is usually influenced by experiences in their home country, which, depending on the situation there, people may have learned not to go to or trust the police and judicial system.
- Immigration status is a deterrent in its own right, separate from experiences of the police in their home country. Many of the clients we support are asylum seekers, refugees or people on precarious, time-limited or dependent visas. Their calculation is not only what the police will do about the crime, but what contact with the police might trigger for them. And this is not unfounded. For a time, the PSNI's system was making automatic referrals to the Home Office for immigrant witnesses. While this has ceased, it has not helped build confidence in reporting crimes to the police.
- Religion:
 - Much the same as racial, but the signal crime issue is even more of a concern. People fear that if they report a crime based on, for example, wearing religious-oriented clothing, attending a certain religious/cultural institution, being part of or perceived to be part of certain religious groups, that not only they but their congregations/community could be targeted too. And we have tangible evidence of this happening to HCAS clients we have supported (e.g., BMCA arson attacks, 2021 Lawrence Street assaults, 3 summers of rioting between 2024-2026, which targeted both racial and religious minorities).
 - These issues affect members of embedded and international Christian denominations as well as other religions, too.
 - Businesses and workplaces suppress reporting independently of the victim. Where a business is targeted, owners often weigh a report against the risk of repeat attacks, insurance implications, or being seen to draw attention to themselves in an area. Employees who experience hate at work are frequently steered towards an internal HR process instead of a police report or discouraged outright to avoid reputational

attention for the employer. Neither route produces a recorded hate crime.

- Sectarian:

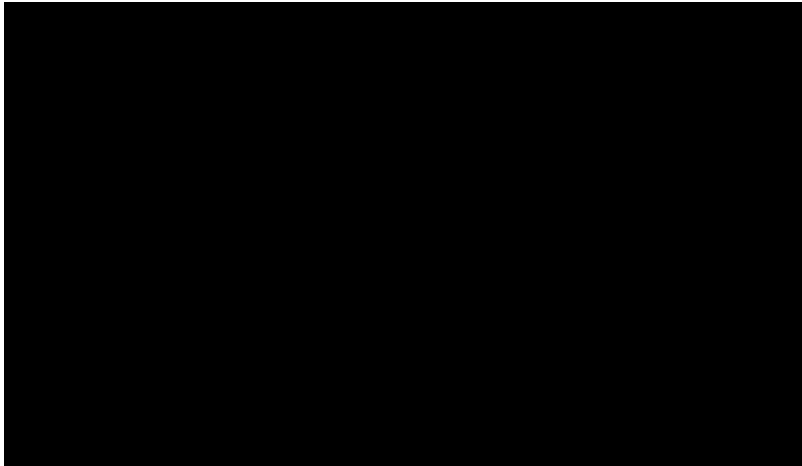
- Sectarian hate crimes are vastly underreported, in large part due to the embedded normality of sectarian and legacy issues in Northern Ireland. Some people may be so used to it that 'it's not a big deal'. Or they have had such little success reporting over years to decades, they will have simply stopped reporting.
- The same fear of reprisal is very strong, if not the strongest for this category. Coercive control and extortion from paramilitaries affect vulnerable women and children the most.
- Unfortunately, no statutory support or specific advocate has been allocated to sectarian victims, so they are one of the highest categories of hate crime with the least amount of tangible support. HCAS was set up to prevent hate crime victims from dropping out of the criminal justice system, but it is impossible to prevent sectarian hate crimes without a sufficient level of advocacy.
- There is also no statutory definition for sectarianism, which provides another legal and practical barrier.

4. Suspended Sentences

Following your request for our view on Schedule 2 of the Bill, we consulted with one of our Sexual Offences Legal Advisers (SOLAs), who is a qualified solicitor. They support the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime's interpretation of the wording used in the Bill. However, given that questions have been raised on this issue, there is evidently a lack of clarity in the current wording of the Bill. Therefore, in the interests of transparency, being victim focused and building confidence, we would suggest that the wording be changed so that it is more readily understood. We would also recommend that the Committee seek its own independent legal advice on this section of the Bill.

Next Steps

We would like to thank the Committee for Justice for inviting us to share our oral evidence on the Sentencing Bill on 22 September and we are happy to provide further information if required as the Bill progresses through the Assembly.



Appendices

Foreword from the “The After Court Support Service - Building Resilience for Recovery Evaluation Report”.

As the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland and a Professor of Mental Health Sciences, I am delighted to introduce the evaluation report for the After Court Support Service following its first full year in operation. This revolutionary service, developed and rolled out by Victim Support NI, seeks to provide support for victims of all types of crimes following the Court process and particularly aims to support those who are most vulnerable and distressed. Victims of crime are a group of people who are at high risk of long term mental and emotional distress and the After Court Support Service will allow these people to access timely and high quality advice, guidance and practical assistance in order to allow them to begin to heal, to become more resilient, and to go on to live a productive and happy life, despite being victims of the most serious crimes.

Prior to the introduction of the After Court Support Service, many victims of crime left the justice system suffering from poor mental health as a result of their victimisation. The After Court Support Service model, designed and developed by Victim Support NI, aims to increase resilience and set victims of crime firmly on the road to recovery. This evaluation report sets out conclusive evidence that the After Court Support Service dramatically improved the experiences and outcomes for those victims of crime who used the service during its first year. In addition to increasing resilience in vulnerable victims of crime after court, the evaluation report found that those who used the After Court Support Service enjoyed significantly lower levels of anxiety and were far less likely to seek additional support from the health and social care system.

I would commend Victim Support NI for introducing the After Court Support Service and for conducting the service evaluation after its first year. The findings of the evaluation speak for themselves with regards to the positive outcomes it has had for victims of crime. It is clear to me that the After Court Support Service meets a previously unmet need which will have positive outcomes not only for those in direct contact with the service, but by helping to reduce the burden on our already stretched health and social care service.

I am hopeful that the recommendations identified through the evaluation are recognised and acted upon to make the After Court Support Service sustainable and to ensure that it can grow in order to help as many victims of crime as possible going forward.

I would like to thank each of the service users who helped Victim Support NI to evaluate the After Court Support Service. Their resolve to ensure that the service works well for all who use it and continues to remain available to other victims of crime into the future, is a credit to them and to us all.

