

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



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Your Ref: EMJM181225

Ms Eilish McGoldrick
Democratic Services and Governance Coordinator
Belfast City Council
Via email: mcgoldricke@belfastcity.gov.uk

9 January 2026

Dear Eilish,

Thank you for your letter of 18 December. I share the concern of Committee Members regarding obstructive, threatening and abusive behaviour in Belfast city centre.

One of my priorities as Justice Minister has been to improve support and legislative protections for victims of hate crime. Proposed new legislative provisions in this Assembly mandate will modernise hate crime law in Northern Ireland and provide a more robust system to sanction offenders. These provisions will be delivered through a Sentencing Bill, that I plan to introduce to the Assembly in early 2026, and a Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill - planned for introduction in spring 2026.

The loss of two years of Assembly business time and the constraint on resources left insufficient time and resource to accommodate the introduction of a stand-alone Hate Crime Bill in the current mandate. The staged approach which I adopted was specifically

to ensure that the key recommended provisions from Judge Marrinan's review of hate crime will be in place before they would have had I remained wedded to a stand-alone Hate Crime Bill which would have fallen into the next mandate, given the restricted legislative programme in this short mandate. Thankfully, it also does no injury to the efficacy of the provisions themselves.

The statutory aggravation model to be included in the Sentencing Bill will become the core method of prosecuting hate crimes in Northern Ireland, allowing all existing criminal offences to be aggravated by hostility based on membership or perceived membership of a protected group. Increased sentences will be allowed, within existing sentence ranges, for aggravated offences. It will also recognise intersectionality for current protected groups by allowing recording of hostility towards more than one protected group in a single offence.

Additional support for victims and witnesses will be included in the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill which will include provisions to allow automatic eligibility for consideration of special measures (such as giving evidence by video link) and protection from in-person cross-examination by the defendant in hate crime cases. These measures aim to help improve the quality of the evidence given by the victim or witness and give the victim greater certainty from the outset that they would not have to face the accused in court.

Regarding the issues being considered by the Council Committee, the Department recognises the importance of freedom of expression, as well as the challenges associated with it when speech becomes hateful. The remainder of Judge Marrinan's recommendations, including freedom of expression and stirring up offences will be considered in the next mandate, to allow policy development work and consultation required in advance of legislation being drafted to take place.

Legislation alone will not stop manifestations of prejudice and hate in our society. Addressing hate and prejudice requires a cross-government approach and my

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Department is engaged in ongoing work with other Departments to tackle the enabling factors of hate crime and align respective strategies and policies - for example, to connect the TEO Racial Equality Strategy and Together: Building a United Community with the Department's work on Community Safety. This work can help enhance efforts to tackle inequalities, promote good relations and strengthen social cohesion.

Yours sincerely



NAOMI LONG MLA
Minister of Justice

Please ensure that you quote our reference number in any future related correspondence.