

Communications & Engagement Strategy 2021 – 2024

Scottish
Sentencing
Council



Communications and Engagement Strategy 2021-2024

Introduction

1. The Scottish Sentencing Council is an independent statutory body responsible for:

- preparing [sentencing guidelines](#) for the courts,
- publishing [guideline judgments](#) issued by the courts; and
- publishing information about sentences handed down by the courts.

It can also conduct research, and provide general advice or guidance on sentencing.

2. The Council's statutory objectives are to:

- promote consistency in sentencing,
- assist the development of sentencing policy; and
- promote greater awareness and understanding of sentencing.

3. This Communications and engagement Strategy has been developed alongside the [2021-2024 Business Plan](#) and is to be read in conjunction with that document. A new communications strategy will be developed for each business plan period and published on the Council website. We will review the document and our communications planning arrangements annually.

4. The strategy outlines how we intend to:

- deliver on our objective to promote awareness and understanding of sentencing policy and practice,
- engage with those who have an interest in our work; and
- ensure effective communications activity to support implementation of individual guidelines.

5. This document covers activity carried out under all three of the Council's objectives, with a particular focus on public education carried out in pursuit of its third objective.

6. The Strategy was approved by the Council on 08 October 2021.

Aims and objectives

7. The Council's communications aims and objectives are to:

- increase the Council's communications activity, including increased engagement with stakeholders, media and parliament;
- improve understanding and awareness of the sentencing process generally and in relation to specific offence guidelines under development;
- increase understanding and awareness of different types of disposals; and
- establish the Council as an authoritative voice on sentencing.

Focus for 2021-2024

8. Our communications will primarily be forward looking, designed to support the activity outlined in our 2021-24 Business Plan. However, we will continue to promote work carried out to date, including raising awareness of the Council's existing guidelines on the principles and purposes of sentencing, the sentencing process and the sentencing of young people.

9. This business plan period will see the Council give specific focus to offence specific guidelines.

10. It is anticipated that substantial progress will be made on guidelines involving:

- death by driving;
- rape;
- sexual assault;
- indecent images of children, and;
- sentence discounting.

11. Work will also begin on the development of guidelines on environment and wildlife offences and domestic abuse.

12. In line with these priorities, we will seek to give particular focus to the following specific matters in our communications.

How sentences are decided

The Council has published 3 general guidelines, which will apply to all offences. Guidelines on the sentencing process and the principles and purposes of sentencing apply to every person being sentenced in any court in Scotland. If that person is under the age of 25, the sentencing young people

guideline will also apply. These guidelines will help to improve current knowledge and understanding around sentencing.

The sentencing process guideline provides a framework for all offence guidelines. We will seek to promote this and the sentencing young people guideline, as well as the specific offence guidelines being prepared, so that all of those involved in the criminal justice system and the wider public have a greater understanding of how courts arrive at a sentence.

Community-based sentences

Recent years have seen a number of developments aimed at expanding the role of community based sentences within the criminal justice system, including, among other things, the extension of the presumption against short-term sentences and legislation enabling greater use of electronic monitoring. However, a nationally representative survey carried out on our behalf exploring public perceptions of sentencing highlighted a lack of public knowledge of and confidence in community sentencing.

Understanding and awareness of sentencing is vital to public confidence in the criminal justice system. We will therefore, subject to resources, examine in detail public perceptions on this issue and carry out activity designed to improve awareness of community-based sentencing options.

Sexual offences and gender-based violence

Sexual offending and gender-based violence have increasingly become an area of public concern in recent years, with increased reporting, prevention, and enforcement action. Sexual offences account for a high proportion of sentencing, particularly in the High Court, often involving difficult decisions in complex circumstances. Through the development of sentencing guidelines for offences involving rape, sexual assault and indecent images of children, as well as a guideline on domestic abuse, we will raise awareness of the issues involved in sentencing these offences.

Audience

13. The Council raises awareness of sentencing practice by targeting major audience groups:

- judiciary
- legal profession
- public
- victims' and survivor organisations
- teachers and students
- people involved in criminal proceedings
- media
- justice delivery organisations
- MSPs, MPs and other policymakers
- researchers and academics
- university students
- other interested persons and bodies including:
 - third sector organisations
 - other public bodies
 - NGOs

How we will achieve our aims

14. The Council will seek to maximise opportunities for promoting awareness and understanding through the activities described in its work programme as follows.

Guidelines

15. Sentencing guidelines play an important role in explaining sentencing to the public. They will be drafted with both public accessibility and judicial users' needs in mind.

16. These guidelines will enhance consistency and help judges decide what sentences to give to people who have committed offences. They will also give greater predictability to practitioners, those who have offended, and, importantly, victims of crime and their families, as well as helping the wider public to better understand sentencing decisions.

17. Through effective communications planning we will promote our guidelines as widely as possible, targeting specific activities to particular audiences as appropriate.

Engagement and collaboration

18. We listen to views across the justice system and beyond and welcome input from a wide range of interested organisations and individuals.
19. We will continue to work closely with stakeholders, judicial partners, criminal justice organisations, victims'/survivors' groups and academia to increase knowledge and awareness of sentencing policy and practice.
20. The Council has decided to carry out full public consultation on draft guidelines. Public consultation are usually open to all for a period of 12 weeks using our online consultation facility. This is supplemented by other forms of consultation, such as visits, discussion events or workshops, where appropriate. The Council will give consideration to the best means of gathering different groups' views when planning communications and engagement activity for individual guidelines.
21. We will seek to increase engagement with interested parties over the next few years including through publication and broadcast media, social media and our website.
22. Opportunities to contribute to other organisations' activity, both inward- (such as training) and outward-facing (such as public communications) particularly with a view to promoting understanding and awareness of sentencing, will be explored.

Policy assistance

23. Assisting in the development of sentencing policy is one of the Council's statutory aims. Where the Council undertakes activity to assist with the development of policy, such as contributing to consultations or giving parliamentary evidence, consideration will be given to how that activity can contribute to improved understanding and awareness of sentencing.

Research

24. A broad range of research and engagement activity supports our guideline development and other work. Research reports, including reviews of existing academic literature on a topic, focus group studies on specific offences, and other sentencing related work are all publicly available on our website. We have now commissioned several studies which are the first of their kind in the Scottish context.
25. We will promote and disseminate our research findings, including through academic engagement.

Website and digital media

26. We will continue to develop our public resources, particularly by producing them in more accessible formats such as videos, and to promote our website as a comprehensive and authoritative source of information on sentencing.

Social media

27. By building our social media presence, including on Twitter and LinkedIn, we will engage with the public and others to provide information on sentencing, guidelines and the work of the Council.

Media

28. The Council will seek to maximise opportunities for promoting its work programme through broadcast, print and online media.

Evaluation

29. Evaluation will focus on media exposure and interest, social media analytics, levels of interest and feedback from core audiences. Monitoring will be undertaken regularly and evaluation of general communications activity will be carried out on an annual basis, and in relation to specific projects as and when appropriate.



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