

Scottish
Sentencing
Council



Scottish Sentencing Council

Annual Report 2025-26

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Chair's foreword

The Rt Hon Lord Beckett, Lord Justice Clerk, Chair of the Scottish Sentencing Council



It is my pleasure to present the Scottish Sentencing Council's eleventh annual report, covering the period of 01 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, highlighting the Council's activities, achievements and progress.

This year marked the Council's tenth anniversary, a significant milestone commemorated with a conference in November. Over 100 justice professionals from across Scotland attended to reflect on the Council's achievements over the last decade. The event featured speeches from distinguished speakers, including the Lord Justice General and the then Lord Advocate, and insightful contributions from numerous participants. The conference not only allowed us to take stock of the Council's work to date, but also encouraged consideration

of the important role it will continue to play in the years ahead.

I am pleased to say that in 2025-26 substantial progress was made in delivering the Council's statutory objectives: promoting consistency in sentencing; assisting the development of sentencing policy; and promoting greater awareness and understanding of sentencing. These objectives were advanced through the approval of new sentencing guidelines and continued development of draft guidelines, research and engagement, and the creation of innovative communication tools and resources.

Perhaps the key achievement this year was the High Court's approval of two guidelines on rape offences: rape and rape of a young child. Rape is an extremely serious offence of significant public concern, and sentencing can be complex. These guidelines aim to promote greater consistency in the sentencing process and aid public understanding of how courts determine an appropriate sentence. Their finalisation and approval also informed the ongoing development of guidelines on offences involving indecent images of children, sexual assault, and domestic abuse.

Significant progress was made on the guideline on domestic abuse offences. A wide range of research and engagement informed the preparation of a wider public consultation exercise that began shortly after the period covered by this report.

We are grateful to everyone who has participated in the development of these guidelines to date

and particularly those with lived experience who have contributed to our research and consultation exercises.

Good progress was made with the drafting of a guideline on sentencing after a guilty plea, while consideration was also given to the scope, content, and approach of guidelines on environmental and wildlife offences.

In February, we published a report on the second national survey on public perceptions of sentencing, conducted on our behalf by Ipsos Scotland. The survey provides valuable insight into the Scottish public's views and understanding of different aspects of sentencing, including community sentencing; sentencing of domestic abuse offences; media coverage of sentencing; and the sentencing of people with mental health conditions and developmental or intellectual differences. Our extensive in-house research covered areas related to sentencing practice, guideline development and the operation of guidelines in practice. This research supports the Council's ongoing commitment to evidence-informed decision-making.

We also made significant contributions to aiding public understanding of sentencing through our communications and engagement work. We developed and published a new easy read guide, 'Sentencing of Crimes in Scotland'. This aims to provide simple and accessible explanations on how a court decides a sentence and the sentencing options that are available. The guide was produced with input from the Supporting Offenders with Learning Disabilities (SOLD) Network, a charity supporting offenders with communication support needs.

Development also began on a video on the sentencing process (now published on our YouTube channel), intended to aid public understanding of sentencing. We continued our engagement with the public, hosting Doors Open Day events in Glasgow and Edinburgh, publishing free interactive lesson plans for secondary school students on community and prison sentencing and adding to our spotlight on sentencing blog. These developments are positive and important steps, ensuring that the Council is providing accessible and authoritative resources to aid public understanding of sentencing in Scotland.

We also contributed to the development of policy on wider criminal justice issues, for example by submitting responses to the Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission's (SPPC) call for evidence, to the consultation on the Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill, and to the Scottish Government 'Voices in Justice: Parole Reform Scotland' consultation on possible reforms to the parole system.

I sincerely thank the members and advisors who have served on the Council and its committees over the past year, and indeed the last decade, dedicating their efforts, time and expertise to the Council's work.

On behalf of all Council members and advisors, I also wish to thank the Council's secretariat for their continued professionalism and the indispensable support they have provided to the Council this year.

The Rt Hon Lord Beckett
Lord Justice Clerk and Chair of the Scottish Sentencing Council

Timeline of key achievements

2025

12 September

Literature review on modern slavery and human trafficking in Scotland published

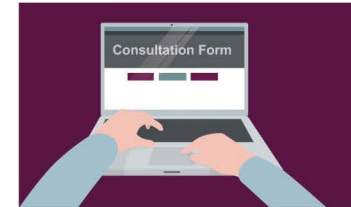
20 May

Council hosts its second research symposium



29 October

Consultation report on draft guidelines for rape offences published



3 December

Rape offence guidelines approved by the High Court



2 December

New research published on public attitudes towards the sentencing of environmental and wildlife offences



10 November

Conference marking the Council's 10-year anniversary is held

9 December

Easy read guide on sentencing in Scotland published

2026



15 February

Second national survey on public attitudes published

26 February

Report published exploring unwanted disparities in sentencing in Scotland

3 March

Rape offence guidelines came into effect



Introduction

Introduction

The Scottish Sentencing Council was established on 19 October 2015 under Part 1 of the [Criminal Justice and Licensing \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#).

This annual report covers the period 01 April 2025 – 31 March 2026 and sets out the Council's work in relation to the development of sentencing guidelines, its key achievements and work in progress, its expenditure, and other information relating to its work over the course of the year.

Statutory objectives and functions

The Council is an independent advisory body with the following **statutory objectives**:

- to promote consistency in sentencing practice
- to assist the development of policy in relation to sentencing
- to promote greater awareness and understanding of sentencing policy and practice.

The Council's **functions** include:

- preparing sentencing guidelines for the courts
- publishing guideline judgments issued by the courts
- publishing information about sentences imposed by the courts.

It also has powers to **publish information** about, and **conduct research** into, sentencing and to **provide advice and guidance** of a general nature on sentencing matters.

Sentencing guidelines

The Council must prepare sentencing guidelines for the consideration of the High Court of Justiciary, Scotland's highest criminal court. If the High Court approves the guidelines, it may do so in whole or in part, and with or without modifications.

Guidelines do not have effect unless approved by the Court.

The Council has **broad discretion** as to the format and subject matter of sentencing guidelines. Guidelines may cover:

- the principles and purposes of sentencing
- sentencing levels
- the particular types of sentence that are appropriate for particular offences or offender.

Membership

The Scottish Sentencing Council is made up of **12 members**. The categories of membership are [provided for in the 2010 Act](#).

The Lord Justice General is responsible for appointing the judicial and legal members, after consulting the Scottish Ministers. The Scottish Ministers are responsible for appointing the lay members, after consulting the Lord Justice General.

The following changes in membership took place during 2025-26:

- Lord Colbeck's term of office as a judicial member ended on 11 July 2025.
- Sheriff Scott Pattison, Summary Sheriff Joanna McDonald and Summary Sheriff Alison Michie were appointed as judicial members on 1 August 2025.
- Lord Matthews' term of office as the Council's Senator member ended on 27 November 2025. Lady Drummond became the new Senator member on 1 January 2026.
- Sheriff Iain Fleming's term of office as a judicial member ended on 9 March 2026.

In addition, Sheriff Principal Aisha Anwar, Sheriff Principal of Glasgow and Strathkelvin, was appointed as an advisor to the Council in September 2025 for a two-year term. Sheriff Amel Elfallah's term of appointment as an advisor to the Council ended on 31 December 2025.

Council membership during 2025-26 is set out in page 10.

Staff

During 2025-26, the Council's Secretariat comprised the following posts:

- Director
- Principal legal officer
- Principal research officer
- Principal policy officer (corporate)
- Principal policy officer (engagement)
- Senior policy officer
- Senior research officer
- Head of communications and engagement
- 3 Communication managers (1.6 FTE)¹
- Business manager
- Assistant business manager
- Research officer (temporary)

¹ This is an approximation of numbers as contracts changed during the year.

MEMBERSHIP TABLE

CATEGORY	POSITION	TITLE
Chair	The Lord Justice Clerk, by virtue of that office	The Rt Hon Lord Beckett
Judicial members Appointed by the Lord Justice General, after consulting the Scottish Ministers	One other person holding the office of judge who normally sits as a judge of the Outer House of the Court of Session or the High Court of Justiciary	The Rt Hon Lord Matthews (until November 2025) The Hon Lady Drummond (from January 2026)
	One sheriff	Sheriff Iain Fleming (until March 2026)
	Two persons holding the office of summary sheriff or justice of the peace	Summary Sheriff Joanna McDonald
		Summary Sheriff Alison Michie
	One further eligible judicial member or a sheriff principal	The Hon Lord Colbeck (until July 2025) Sheriff Scott Pattison (from August 2025)
Legal members Appointed by the Lord Justice General, after consulting the Scottish Ministers	One prosecutor	Lindsey Miller, Deputy Crown Agent
	One advocate	Victoria Young
	One solicitor	Joanne McMillan
Lay members Appointed by the Scottish Ministers, after consulting the Lord Justice General	One constable	Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith
	One person with knowledge of the issues faced by victims of crime	Lynn Burns
	One other person who is not qualified as a judicial or legal member	Dr Jay Gormley

Committees

The Council has two types of committees: standing committees and working group committees. Standing committees are established on a long term basis to handle particular areas of ongoing work. Working group committees are established for a defined period of time and will generally focus on the development of a particular guideline, lasting only until this work is finished.

The 2010 Act provides that only members of the Council can be members of its committees. However, under the Council's standing orders, committees can appoint advisors who are not members of the Council, subject to the approval of the Chair of the Council.

Standing committees

The Council has two standing committees, the Communications and Engagement Committee and the Research Committee.

The **Communications and Engagement Committee** leads on promotional and public awareness work. A key part of this involves engaging with organisations and individuals to raise awareness and understanding of sentencing, and to encourage participation in the Council's work.

The committee met four times in 2025-26. Activities of the committee this year included: the development and publication of a new easy read guide, '[Sentencing of Crimes in Scotland](#)', offering simple explanations on how a court decides a sentence and the different sentencing options available; developing and implementing communications plans for engagement and awareness-raising, including in relation to the High Court's approval of the guidelines on rape offences and publication of the second national survey on public perceptions of sentencing; and overseeing activities to mark the Council's 10-year anniversary. The committee also updated the Council's [social media policy](#) and contributed to the development of new content for its channels.

The agendas and minutes of its meetings, along with its remit and terms of reference, can be found [here](#).

Further information about communications and engagement activities can be found at pages 22-28 of this report.

The committee's membership during 2025-26 was as follows:

- Chair: Sheriff Scott Pattison (from October 2025)
- Lindsey Miller
- Joanne McMillan (interim chair from May 2024 to October 2025)
- Lynn Burns

The committee's advisors in 2025-26 were:

- Sheriff Amel Elfallah (former judicial member of the Council)
- Sheriff Paul Brown (former judicial member of the Council)

The **Research Committee** advises the Council on the commissioning, progress, and dissemination of research projects. It met four times in 2025-26. It oversaw both commissioned research, such as the development and publication of the second national survey on public attitudes to sentencing, and in-house research to inform the Council's understanding of sentencing practice and the development and review of guidelines.

In particular, the committee supervised:

- a project exploring the operation of the statutory presumption against short sentences
- arrangements for the routine reviews of the sentencing young people guideline after three years in effect, and the guideline on death by driving offences after one year in effect, in accordance with the Council's methodology for review of in force guidelines
- research in relation to the development of the rape and domestic abuse guidelines, which assisted the Council in finalising the former and in preparing a public consultation on the latter.

Additionally, the committee updated the Council's [research framework](#), with the revised version published in July 2025 alongside [a blog post explaining how research shapes guidelines](#). The framework supports the Council in making decisions regarding research projects, and provides guidance to those considering submitting research proposals to the Council.

The agendas and minutes of its meetings, along with its remit and terms of reference, can be found [here](#).

Further information about research carried out by the Council can be found at pages 28-30 of this report.

The committee's membership during 2025-26 was as follows:

- Chair: Dr Jay Gormley
- Sheriff Iain Fleming (until March 2026 and subsequently an advisor)

The committee had one advisor in 2025-26:

- Sheriff Louise Arrol KC (former advocate member of the Council)

Working group committees

These committees support the development of specific sentencing guidelines, including making recommendations to the Council as to the scope, content, and approach of its work, preparing draft guidelines, supporting engagement with relevant stakeholders, and overseeing the guideline consultation process.

During 2025-26, there were four working group committees supporting the Council's work to develop guidelines on the offences of rape, sexual assault, offences involving indecent images of children, domestic abuse, sentencing after a guilty plea, and environmental and wildlife offences.

Sexual Offences Committee

The Sexual Offences Committee met five times during 2025-26. Its main focus was overseeing the finalisation and submission to the High Court of the guidelines on rape offences as well as continuing work to develop guidelines on sentencing indecent images of children offences and sexual assault offences.

The committee's membership during 2025-26 was as follows:

- Lord Matthews (chair until November 2025)
- Lady Drummond (chair from January 2026)
- Sheriff Scott Pattison (from October 2025)
- Lindsey Miller
- Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith

The committee's advisors in 2025-26 were:

- Sheriff Matt Jackson KC (former advocate member of the Council)
- Sheriff Andrew McIntyre (former judicial member of the Council)

Domestic Abuse Committee

The Domestic Abuse Committee met five times during 2025-26. It oversaw the launch of a judicial survey on the draft domestic abuse guideline and preparations for the public consultation exercise, which launched shortly after the period covered by this report.

The committee's membership during 2025-26 was as follows:

- Lord Colbeck (chair until July 2025)
- Summary Sheriff Joanna McDonald (chair from November 2025)

- Lindsey Miller
- Joanne McMillan
- Lynn Burns

The committee's advisors in 2025-26 were:

- Lord Colbeck (former judicial member of the Council – from July 2025)
- Sheriff Paul Brown (former judicial member of the Council)
- Sheriff Amel Elfallah (former judicial member of the Council)

Sentencing After a Guilty Plea Committee

The Sentencing After a Guilty Plea Committee met twice during 2025-26. It focused on developing a draft guideline and considered the results of commissioned research into public attitudes towards sentencing following a guilty plea.

The committee's membership during 2025-26 was as follows:

- Lord Colbeck (chair until July 2025)
- Sheriff Iain Fleming (chair from July 2025 until March 2026)
- Summary Sheriff Alison Michie (from October 2025)
- Dr Jay Gormley

The committee's advisors in 2025-26 were:

- Lord Colbeck (from July 2025) (former judicial member of the Council)
- Sheriff Principal Aisha Anwar (from November 2025)
- Sheriff Iain Fleming (from March 2026) (former judicial member of the Council)

Environmental and Wildlife Crime Committee

The Environmental and Wildlife Crime Committee met four times in 2025-26. It focused on defining the scope, content and approach of guidelines on environmental and wildlife offences and heard from representatives of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA) and COPFS's Wildlife and Environmental Crimes Unit.

The Committee's membership during 2025-26 was as follows:

- Sheriff Iain Fleming (Chair until March 2026 and subsequently an advisor)
- Victoria Young
- Deputy Chief Constable Bex Smith

A photograph of a historical judicial robe, possibly a judge's or magistrate's garment, hanging on a black wrought-iron coat rack. The robe is white with a prominent red cross pattern. It has a red lining and red sleeves. The setting is a room with dark wood paneling, a wooden cabinet with glass doors containing books, and a wooden chair with a purple cushion. The floor is covered with a red carpet. The overall atmosphere is formal and historical.

Sentencing guidelines

Sentencing guidelines

While the Council has broad discretion as to what guidelines it should prepare, under the 2010 Act:

- The High Court and the Sheriff Appeal Court may require the Council to prepare or review sentencing guidelines when issuing a guideline judgment under the relevant provisions of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.
- The Scottish Ministers may request that the Council consider preparing or reviewing sentencing guidelines. The Council must have regard to such a request but is not obliged to comply with one.

No statutory requests to prepare or review guidelines were made of the Council in the period 01 April 2025 to 31 March 2026.

The Council has a statutory duty under the 2010 Act to review its sentencing guidelines from time to time. It has developed [a methodology for the monitoring and review of guidelines](#) once they have been approved by the High Court and are in force.

Guidelines development

A key priority for the Council during 2025-26 was the finalisation of two sentencing guidelines on rape offences – these were **rape and rape of a young child**. In the first half of the year, the Council revised the guidelines to take account of points raised in the public consultation held in 2024. The guidelines were finalised and submitted to the High Court in October 2026. The Council's [report on the public consultation](#), explaining the changes made to the guidelines, was [published](#) at the same time. The guidelines were approved by the High Court in December 2025 and came into force in March 2026.

The sentencing of rape offences is highly sensitive and complex. The guidelines aim to enhance consistency and predictability in sentencing of these offences; assist sentencers and court practitioners; and increase public understanding and awareness of sentencing of rape offences.

The rape sentencing guidelines are the first in a series of guidelines covering a range of sexual offences. Substantial work was carried out in the reporting year on these guidelines. Progress was made towards a judicial survey on a guideline on the sentencing of **indecent images of children offences** and decisions were reached on the scope of guidelines for **sexual assault offences**, allowing for the preparation of initial draft guidelines.

Significant progress was also made on a guideline on **domestic abuse offences**, including a judicial survey. This informed crucial decisions on the public consultation exercise on the draft

guideline, which launched shortly after the period covered by this report.

Drafting of a guideline on **sentencing after a guilty plea** continued throughout the year and preparations for a judicial survey began.

Progress was made in relation to the scope and approach of guidelines on **environmental and wildlife offences**. Research was also published on [public attitudes to sentences for environmental and wildlife offences](#).

Each guideline's current stage of development is [shown on our website](#).

Methodology for guideline development

The Council's guideline development methodology determines the various steps taken to ensure guidelines are robust, evidence-based, and useful to both the public and the judiciary.

The process starts with consideration of possible guideline topics. Once the Council has agreed to proceed with a guideline, it will engage with stakeholders and those with an interest or expertise in the area.

As the Council is committed to an evidence-based approach to guideline development, it will also gather information about the guideline topic. This might be through new research, evidence about current sentencing practice, or a review of research and information available from other sources.

Development of a draft guideline then takes place, based on the information gathered. Thereafter, the Council seeks the views of judges and, once the draft guideline has been further adjusted, it will consult on its terms. The Council has made a commitment to carry out a full public consultation on each of its guidelines and is keen to hear from all those who wish to comment on a guideline. It must also, by law, consult the Scottish Ministers and the Lord Advocate. When the consultation has finished, the Council will analyse the responses and carefully consider what changes may need to be made to the guideline.

Although the development process takes time, it is essential in ensuring that guidelines are fit for purpose and that they do not have any unintended or unhelpful consequences for the criminal justice system.

The Council takes steps to raise awareness of each new guideline once it has been approved and must review each guideline from time to time.

The various steps in the guideline development process are summarised in the table on page 18.

Stage 1 – Initial consideration of the guideline topic

We will agree the aims and scope of a guideline and a plan for its development. We will also establish a committee to oversee the work involved.

Stage 2 – Development of a draft guideline

We will focus on stakeholder engagement and evidence gathering when developing early drafts of the guideline.

Stage 3 – Seeking the views of judges

We will seek the views of judges on current sentencing practice and any areas of difficulty in which guidance would be helpful. This will help to ensure that the guideline is useful and that potential impacts are identified.

Stage 4 – Consulting on the guideline

We will take a broad range of views into account in developing guidelines. To that end, we will carry out public consultation on all our guidelines. We are also required to consult the Scottish Ministers and the Lord Advocate.

Stage 5 – Finalising the guideline

We will take into account what we have heard during consultation, and make any necessary revisions to the draft guideline and accompanying impact assessment.

Stage 6 – Submitting the guideline for approval

The High Court requires to approve our guidelines before they can take effect. When approving a guideline, the High Court will also specify when it is to come into force.

Stage 7 – Raising awareness about the guideline

We will take steps to raise awareness of each new guideline once it has been approved. We will work to ensure that all those who have an interest in, or are affected by, a guideline are prepared for it.

Stage 8 – Monitoring and review

We must review each guideline from time to time. We have developed a staged approach to this, enabling us to react promptly to any unexpected or undesirable consequences while establishing a solid evidence base for longer term reviews.

A close-up, low-angle shot of a classical architectural element. A white, fluted column rises from the bottom right, topped with a highly ornate, gilded capital featuring intricate scrollwork and floral motifs. The background is a blurred interior space with light-colored walls and a white door frame visible in the upper left.

Key achievements and work in progress

Key achievements and work in progress

Approval of sentencing guidelines on rape offences

One of the most important achievements for the Council in 2025-26 was the approval of sentencing guidelines on offences of [rape](#) and [rape of a young child](#) by the High Court in December. The High Court approval hearing can be viewed [here](#) on the Council's YouTube channel.

These guidelines are the first in a suite of sentencing guidelines on sexual offences, and represent an important milestone in delivering the Council's commitment to provide clear sentencing guidance and enhance awareness of sentencing in this area. Sentencing rape offences is a sensitive and complex process. The guidelines aim to assist judges in determining an appropriate sentence for rape offences, recognising in particular the harm caused by these offences, and also to improve public understanding of how sentencing decisions are reached.

A public consultation on the draft guidelines took place the year prior, which was a significant step in the guidelines' development. The Council produced a report drawing on the independent analysis of the public consultation as well as other sources of evidence outlining what changes would be made to the guidelines. Some of these changes included increasing the sentencing ranges to better reflect current sentencing practice as set out by the Appeal Court, removing specific mitigating factors and instead making reference to those listed in the sentencing process guideline, adding a section on non-harassment orders as well as clarifications to assist general understanding of certain features and factors which can make the offences more serious for the purpose of sentencing.

[The Council's response](#) was published in October 2025. Impact assessments on [both guidelines](#) were published. These fulfil a statutory duty to provide an assessment of the costs and benefits of sentencing guidelines as well as the impact on the criminal justice system more generally.

Following the High Court approval and the guidelines coming into effect in March 2026, the Council conducted several awareness raising activities including a webinar for legal professionals and engagement with victim and justice organisations. Details of these activities are included in the [Openness and Engagement](#) section of this report.

The guidelines were later revised to align with amendments to the [Criminal Procedure \(Scotland\) Act 1995](#) introduced by the [Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform \(Scotland\) Act 2025](#) regarding the imposition of non-harassment orders when sentencing rape offences. These revisions were approved by the High Court on 20 August 2026 and came into force on 01 September 2026.

A routine review of the guidelines' operation in their first year will begin in March 2027 in accordance with the Council's agreed [methodology](#) for monitoring and review of in force guidelines.

10-year anniversary

This year the Council marked its 10-year anniversary. [A conference was held in November](#) where delegates reflected on the Council's achievements over the last decade and looked ahead to its future.

Over 100 justice professionals from across Scotland attended the conference. The event was chaired by the Chair of the Council and speakers included the Lord Justice General (Lord Pentland) and the Lord Advocate (Dorothy Bain KC).

During his speech, the Lord Justice General highlighted the importance of open justice and commended the Council on its public education work designed to support understanding of the sentencing process.

There was a panel discussion with professionals from the Scottish Prison Service, justice social work and the Parole Board for Scotland on challenges in custodial and community sentencing options. Conversation centred around population and demographic trends and the various approaches to the management and rehabilitation of people who offend.

In the afternoon, the conference heard from Rachel Ormston, research director at Ipsos Scotland, about the findings of the second national survey on public perceptions of sentencing conducted by Ipsos Scotland on behalf of the Council (details of this report are included in the [Promoting awareness and understanding section](#) below). The conference closed with an open discussion with delegates on the Council's future priorities.

A [report of the conference proceedings](#) is available on the Council's website.

In addition to the conference, the Council launched, in partnership with the Modern Studies Association, an essay writing competition for secondary school pupils around the country. The competition posed the question "Is sentencing in Scotland fair?". [The prize for first place was an award of £100 and a certificate presented by the Chair of the Council.](#) There were also five runners up who received a special mention.

Research symposium

In May the Council hosted, alongside the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) and the Sentencing Academy, its second research symposium. The event was held at Edinburgh Law School, University of Edinburgh. The symposium was chaired by the Chair of the Council. It focused on three themes: the effectiveness of sentencing; public perceptions and awareness of sentencing; and the impact of research on sentencing practice and policy. The event was attended by participants from across the UK and Ireland. A [report](#) was published on our website, and presentations were posted on our [YouTube channel](#).

Promoting awareness and understanding

One of our key roles is to promote awareness and understanding of sentencing. In 2024 the Council published a [communications and engagement strategy](#) covering the period 2024-27. The aims of the strategy are to:

- continue to bolster the Council's ongoing communications activity, including increased engagement with stakeholders, media and the Parliament
- continue to improve understanding and awareness of the sentencing process generally and in relation to specific offence guidelines in effect and under development
- deliver opportunities to increase understanding and awareness of different types of disposals and evaluate their effectiveness
- continue to increase the Council's reputation as an independent voice on sentencing.

The Council's communications and engagement work is supported by the Communications and Engagement Committee.

Openness and engagement

Engagement and transparency are key commitments for the Council. The Council seeks to engage with views across the justice sector and from organisations and individuals interested in our work.

Public engagement is a core part of our work to increase public understanding and awareness of sentencing.

In 2025-26, we published four editions of our newsletter [Spotlight on Sentencing Circular](#). The newsletter offers news and information about sentencing across Scotland and the work of the Council, including on the guidelines in development and our latest research publications. To subscribe to the newsletter, follow the instructions [here](#).

In September, we took part in Doors Open Days events held at Parliament House, Edinburgh Sheriff Court, the High Court at Glasgow and Glasgow Sheriff Court. Members of the public took part in interactive sessions on sentencing, including a quiz.

Engagement with the judiciary and criminal justice practitioners remained a priority for the Council during the year. In December, a fact-finding visit was made to Hamilton Sheriff Court to observe court hearings and discuss issues relevant to the work of the Council with sheriffs, lawyers, and justice social workers. A visit was also made to the Mental Health Tribunal for Scotland headquarters at Hamilton to gain an insight into tribunal proceedings arising from criminal cases involving offenders with mental health conditions and related issues.

In March, the Council hosted a webinar for the legal profession to coincide with the sentencing guidelines for rape offences coming into effect. The webinar provided an overview of the work of the Council and its guidelines, the development of the rape offence guidelines, and what the approved guidelines comprise. A recording of this session was [published on our YouTube channel](#).

As part of our commitment to transparency, as in previous years, we published [agendas and minutes](#) of all meetings of the Council and its standing committees, [the Communications and Engagement Committee](#) and [the Research Committee](#).

Website and social media

The Council's [website](#) is a key platform for conveying and explaining the full range and nature of our work.

The website aims to be an accessible and engaging resource for people who wish to learn more about sentencing and related issues, and about the Council's role and responsibilities. It is updated regularly with news of Council activities, including research publications, engagement work, educational resources, consultations, and minutes of meetings. The website is also the definitive source of [approved sentencing guidelines](#).

In April, we published free interactive lesson plans for secondary school pupils on [community and prison sentencing](#). The lesson plans were designed on behalf of the Council by a modern studies teacher to be engaging and user-friendly for Scottish secondary school pupils. The lesson plans also provide additional support materials, including a teachers' guide to explain the resources and activities available.

The lesson plans accompany a series of videos commissioned by the Council on sentencing. These videos cover the [steps judges cover when deciding a sentence](#), [community sentencing](#) and [prison sentencing](#).

The website also hosts our [Spotlight on sentencing blog](#), which features contributions from Council members and staff, as well as guest authors. In July, we published a blog written by our Principal Research Officer, Dr Nicole Vidal, on [how research shapes sentencing guidelines](#). In October Jenny Paterson, the CEO of Venture Trust, wrote a blog on [the importance of rehabilitation and the power of the outdoors](#). In November we published a blog by Council member Dr Jay Gormley, in his capacity as a Lecturer in the School of Law at the University of Glasgow, and Professor Cryus Tata, University of Strathclyde on recently published [research on public attitudes toward sentencing following a guilty plea](#). In January 2026 we published a guest blog by Argentinian Judge María Jimena Monsalve about [Argentina's model for a drugs treatment court based on therapeutic justice](#). Finally, in February we published a blog about [the role of guidelines in sentencing firearms offences](#) by Professor Gavin Dingwall from Northumbria University.

Our website was viewed a total of 192,659 times in 2025-26. The top five most viewed pages on our website after the home page were:

- [Jargon buster](#) – 16,469 views
- [Sex offenders register explained blog](#) – 12,664 views
- [Custodial sentences](#) – 10,385 views
- [Community sentences](#) – 8,099 views
- [Disposals and appeals](#) – 6,559 views.

As a key part of meeting our statutory duty to inform and educate the public about sentencing, we were active on social media throughout the year. On our [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) pages and our [Instagram](#) and [X](#) accounts, we posted frequent updates and details about our work and the sentencing guidelines currently in development, as well as a series called Friday Facts. To encourage more engagement with our work, we have begun to create and post more short videos on our social media pages. So far, videos have been made about the death by driving sentencing guideline, the rape sentencing guidelines and the national survey. Videos can be viewed on the Council's [YouTube](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Instagram](#) pages. Over the year our social media followers grew by over 11% across all our social media platforms.

Longer-form videos have been added to the Council's [YouTube channel](#) including the webinar [Introduction to sentencing guidelines for rape offences](#), and a video of the court hearing which saw the [approval of the sentencing guidelines on offences of rape](#), as well as presentations from the research symposium. Development began on a [video on the sentencing process](#) with the video being published shortly after the period covered by this report. These videos are intended to assist people's understanding of sentencing as well as highlight the other work of the Council.

Media

Throughout the year, we engaged constructively with the media, offering comment on sentencing issues where appropriate. In particular, we engaged widely with the media in relation to the launch of the sentencing guidelines on rape. This included issuing media releases when the guidelines were submitted to the High Court, when they were approved by the High Court and when they came into effect.

In addition to this, we responded to a number of media enquiries throughout the year, including on the work of the Council, guidelines and sentencing in Scotland.

Presentations, conferences, seminars, and visits

The following table details some of the presentations delivered and conferences, seminars, and visits attended by Council members and staff:

PRESENTATIONS, CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, AND VISITS	DATE
Northumbria University Lecture by Professor Vanessa Bettinson on 'The importance of embedding understandings of coercive control in the criminal justice system'	09 April 2025
The Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ) webinar 'Navigating the Disclosure Act'	29 April 2025
University of Edinburgh event, former Lord President, Lord Carloway, reflects on his time in office	30 April 2025
CYCJ webinar 'Antisocial behaviour in Scotland – Hearing from the Independent working group'	02 May 2025
Sheriff Appeal Court forum (first decade of the Sheriff Appeal Court)	14 May 2025
Sheriffdom of South Strathclyde Dumfries and Galloway Justice of the Peace Conference	14 May 2025
CYCJ webinar 'Applying desistance thinking with youth justice-involved children'	15 May 2025
Glasgow Bar Association	17 May 2025
CYCJ webinar 'Neurodivergent children's experiences in the Youth Justice System'	22 May 2025
International Society for the Reform of Criminal Law (ISRCL) 2025 conference	02 – 05 June 2025
Women's Network and Judicial Appointments Board for Scotland, a panel event on judicial appointments and diversity	03 June 2025
Meeting with Dr Shona Minson and Judge Monsalve - knowledge-exchange in respect of problem-solving courts for female offenders	06 June 2025
Children and Young People's Centre for Justice's (CYCJ) 2025 National Youth Justice Conference - 'Childhood, Safeguarding and the Children's Hearing System'	11 June 2025
Knowledge-exchange in respect of problem-solving courts for female offenders	12-13 June 2025

PRESENTATIONS, CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, AND VISITS	DATE
University of Glasgow, School of Law annual Gerald Gordon seminar	13 June 2025
University of Edinburgh, presentation by Professor Jane Bailey - 'Rethinking Consent in Light of Scientific and Technological Advances'	24 June 2025
House of Commons - Speaker's Conference inquiry on the security of candidates, MPs and elections	02 July 2025
The Thistle, the safer drug consumption facility in Glasgow – private visit	31 July 2025
Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR) expert roundtable - 'What Works and What Could Work Better: International Lessons on Sentencing Guidelines'	08 August 2025
Justice Sector Equalities Conference 2025	28 August 2025
Government Events – 'Tackling Modern Slavery Conference 2025: Reinvigorating Strategies for Prevention, Identification, and Victim Support'	10 September 2025
Doors Open Days in Edinburgh Sheriff Court and Parliament House	20 September 2025
Doors Open Day in Glasgow High Court	27 September 2025
A talk on the Council and sentencing to students at Trinity High School, Renfrew	September 2021
Community Justice Scotland National Event 2025	07 October 2025
Event on modern slavery, hosted by the Edinburgh branch of the Scottish Association for the Study of Offending	07 October 2025
Risk Management Authority's 20th anniversary event	08 October 2025
Lecture at the University of Edinburgh titled 'Policing, procedural justice and mental health' given by Professor Ben Bradford of University College London	14 October 2025
Lecture to students at Dundee & Angus College	23 October 2025
Ipsos Scotland 30th Anniversary event	30 October 2025
Lecture to students at the University of Edinburgh	30 October 2025
Lecture on the Council and sentencing to criminal law honours students at the University of Glasgow	04 November 2025
Council's 10-year anniversary event	10 November 2025
Expert Voices seminar hosted by the Centre for Justice Innovation	11 November 2025

PRESENTATIONS, CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, AND VISITS	DATE
Lecture to students at Dundee & Angus College	11 November 2025
Empirical Research on Sentencing Network (EROS) gathering and Sentrix workshop	12 – 14 November 2025
Scottish Association for the Study of Offending (SASO) Glasgow event on 'rape shield' legislation	13 November 2025
'Alcohol intoxication in sentencing: a complex cocktail' at the Institute of Alcohol Studies in London	13 November 2025
Presentation at Edinburgh College	13 November 2025
Launch of the Sentencing Academy's Sentencing Hub	17 November 2025
Violence Against Women and Girls in Scotland Conference, hosted by Holyrood Insight	18 November 2025
Presentation to King's Park Secondary School, Glasgow students	20 January 2026
'Rehabilitation: What Future?', Cambridge Society of Criminology: Online Lecture Series	20 January 2026
Observation of Glasgow Sheriff Court's Female Offenders' Court	22 January 2026
Presentation to students at City of Glasgow College on the work of the Council	29 January 2026
Observation of criminal courts at Paisley Sheriff Court	16 February 2026
Presentation to Violence Against Women and Girls group on the work of the Council and rape offences sentencing guidelines	17 February 2026
'Victim Engagement Research Project', The Modern Slavery Organised Immigration Crime Unit	24 February 2026
The British Psychological Society and Division of Forensic Psychology's 'Division of Forensic Psychology Devolved Nations Annual Conference 2026'	27 February 2026
Presentation to Masters students at the University of Edinburgh on the work of the Council	04 March 2026
Presentation to South Lanarkshire social work on the work of the Council and on the sentencing rape offences guidelines	10 March 2026
'Power of Dialogue: Human Stories of Restorative Justice', hosted by Community Justice Scotland	11 March 2026

PRESENTATIONS, CONFERENCES, SEMINARS, AND VISITS	DATE
'A Giant on the Bridge', theatre performance, hosted by the Scottish Centre for Crime & Justice Research (SCCJR)	12 March 2026
Roundtable on the human rights impacts of orders for lifelong restriction	19 March 2026
Then & Now: Voices of Thriving Survivors	25 March 2026
Scottish Prison Service's Prison Research Event	31 March 2026

Research and information

The Council's research programme and related activities are crucial in helping to fulfil our statutory objectives.

Commissioned and in-house research provides an essential evidence base to inform the development and review of guidelines and assists the Council and others in the development of sentencing policy, improving awareness and understanding of sentencing by exploring the experiences of sentencers and the perceptions of victims and the public.

All the Council's research publications can be found [here](#). Our research framework, which outlines what we consider when deciding our research plans, can be found [here](#).

The following commissioned research projects were published in 2025-26:

- In September 2025, a literature review on [the sentencing of offences involving modern slavery and human trafficking in Scotland](#). The review found that these kinds of offences are complex, varied, often linked to organised crime and cause significant harm to victims. The review found only a small number of these kinds of cases in Scotland but insights from other jurisdictions, victim perspectives and effective investigation and prosecution would all be important factors for the development of any future sentencing guideline.
- In December 2025, a report into [public attitudes to sentences for environmental and wildlife offences](#). This research, involving surveys and focus groups, found mixed understandings and perceptions of sentencing for environmental and wildlife offences. Participants focused on a need for sentencing to prioritise rehabilitation, environmental restoration, and crime prevention, alongside greater accountability for corporate offenders. The findings also highlighted concerns about transparency in sentencing decisions, particularly around the use of fines, with participants calling for clearer communication about sentencing outcomes and their effectiveness in deterring future offending.

- In February 2026, a report on [exploring unwanted disparities in sentencing in Scotland](#), which examined whether sentencing outcomes varied across demographic groups and found that more comprehensive, high-quality data on cases and offenders is needed to determine whether any unwarranted disparities exist.

Also in February 2026, we published a report on the [second national public perceptions of sentencing survey](#), which was conducted on our behalf by Ipsos Scotland. The survey asked 1,000 residents of Scotland about their views on different aspects of sentencing, including community sentencing; sentencing of domestic abuse; media coverage of sentencing; and the sentencing of people with mental health conditions and developmental or intellectual differences. The survey forms part of a longitudinal study into public perceptions of sentencing and was able to compare findings with the first survey published in 2019. The survey found that a majority of respondents claimed to know 'little' or 'nothing at all' about sentencing, with self-assessed knowledge generally low and perceptions of leniency in sentencing high. However, the survey also found that attitudes tended to be much more nuanced when respondents were presented with anonymised or hypothetical cases, and that many respondents understood other aspects of sentencing such as the conditions which can be attached to community sentences.

In October, as part of the development of the guidelines on rape offences, we published the independent analysis of the [offences of rape public consultation](#). The public consultation sought to gather the views of the public as well as organisations and bodies. The responses were independently analysed and, based on the findings, the Council published a response and made a number of changes to the guidelines ahead of their finalisation.

In-house research comprised evidence gathering for guideline development and review. This year we published the impact assessments for the sentencing guidelines on [rape offences](#) and [rape of a young child offences](#) alongside the approved guidelines in December 2025.

In September, we published the report from the research symposium [Scottish sentencing research symposium: efficacy in sentencing: a comparative perspective](#) held in May 2025. The report summarised the presentations and panel discussions from the event.

The Council has a [statutory duty](#) to review guidelines from time to time. We take a [staged approach](#) to this, involving reviews after both one year and three years in force. This year work began on the one-year review of the operation of the guideline on [statutory offences of causing death by driving](#) during its first year in effect as well as the three year-review of the [sentencing young people guideline](#).

We also began a research project at the request of the Scottish Government looking at the operation of the presumption against short sentences (PASS). The research seeks to identify the

circumstances in which short prison sentences of 12 months or less are given. Findings of the research will be published in the next reporting year.

All of the Council's research activity is supported and overseen by the Research Committee.

Assisting policy development

One of the Council's statutory objectives is to assist the development of policy in relation to sentencing. Our views on what this role involves are [set out on the Council's website](#).

The Council's business plan for 2024-27 notes that this three-year period appears likely to see significant attention given to reform in the area of sentencing.

In February 2026, the Sentencing and Penal Policy Commission published its report and recommendations. The Commission was established to consider how imprisonment and community-based interventions were used in Scotland and to ensure that it had a sustainable prison population. Our response to the Commission's call for evidence is available on our [website](#). The Council began to consider the Commission's recommendations, particularly those that explicitly mention the Council or relate to sentencing, and how these might impact its work. This assessment of recommendations continued into the following year.

The following contributions were made by the Council in respect of various initiatives with a bearing on sentencing:

- A [response](#) to the Criminal Justice Committee on statements made to Parliament on automatic early and prosecution guidance in the context of the prison populations.
- Responses to the following consultations:
 - [Prostitution \(Offences and Support\) \(Scotland\) Bill](#)
 - [Voices in Justice: Parole Reform in Scotland](#)



Expenditure

Expenditure

The Council's annual budget for direct expenditure and staffing costs is allocated by the Scottish Ministers. The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) provides staff, services and accommodation to the Council under section 62 of the Judiciary and Courts (Scotland) Act 2008 and The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (Administrative Support) (Specified Persons) Order 2015.

The Council was allocated a budget of £1,075,078 for 2025-26.

Staffing costs during the year were £918,990.

Actual expenditure on non-staffing costs is detailed on the table below.

EXPENDITURE 2025-26*		
Category	Description	£
General office expenditure	Printing costs, stationery etc.	3,041
Meetings and events	Venue hire, catering, and conference costs	15,899
Training and expenses	Members' and staff travel and subsistence, and costs of training associated with Council business	18,697
Promoting awareness and understanding	Website development, publications, and educational resources	9,926
Research	Commissioned projects, consultation analysis etc.	26,860
Consultancy	Guideline design, website development etc.	7,194
Total		81,618

*Non-staffing costs - All category figures are rounded to the nearest pound and the total provided is the sum of those rounded amounts.

SCTS associated costs

Costs relating to services and accommodation provided by SCTS are not included in the table, such as shared overheads, telephone charges, judicial travel and subsistence, and provision of data relating to sentencing.



Correspondence, freedom of information, and complaints

Correspondence, freedom of information, and complaints

The following table provides information on the number of requests received under the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA), the Data Protection Act (2018) (DPA), and the Environmental Information Regulations (2004) (EIR), along with the number of items of routine correspondence received.

The Council is also obliged to report on its complaints handling performance information, under schedule 2 to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002.

CATEGORY	NUMBER
FOISA requests	14
DPA requests	1
EIR requests	0
Items of routine correspondence	50
Complaints	0

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