

Communications and Engagement Strategy 2024 – 2027



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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
 - 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
 - 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
 - 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 4 October 2024.

Aims and objectives

7. The Council's communications aims and objectives 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.

Focus for 2024-2027

8. 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, sentencing young people, and Scotland's first offence guideline which is on causing death by driving offences. In particular we will focus on increasing understanding of how the sentencing process operates and how guidelines interact.

It is anticipated that this business plan period will see the Council give specific focus to guidelines relating to:

- rape
- sexual assault
- indecent images of children
- sentence discounting
- domestic abuse
- environment and wildlife crime
- assault
- mental health

We will also consider the content of the sentencing process guideline to determine whether adjustments are required to ensure it remains aligned with developments in legislation, case law, and sentencing practice.

9. We will also consider other topics for further research and engagement including around modern slavery and associated offences relating to human trafficking and prostitution.
10. As part of the Council's methodology for monitoring guidelines, we will complete and publish a routine review of the impact of the sentencing young people guideline.
11. In line with these priorities, we will seek to give particular focus to the following specific matters in our communications.

Sexual offences and gender-based violence

Sexual offending and gender-based violence remain an area of public concern and account for a high proportion of sentencing, particularly in the High Court, often involving difficult decisions in complex circumstances. Through the ongoing 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 continue to raise awareness of the issues involved in sentencing these offences.

Sentencing practice

As the Council continues to publish both general and offence based guidelines, it is important to make clear how these guidelines interact, and the role that they play in the sentencing process. The Council will aim to raise awareness of that process, including the considerations taken into account, amongst those with an interest in sentencing, as well as more generally. With the intention of improving understanding of sentences imposed and to assist

the wider development of sentencing policy, the Council will also aim to publish increased data around the sentences imposed by the Scottish courts.

Mental health and sentencing

The Council has commenced work on research and engagement to support awareness-raising and other activity in relation to the sentencing of those with mental health and welfare issues. The result of this work indicates that a guideline on mental health and sentencing would assist both the judiciary in deciding these sentences and the public in understanding how these decisions are made. Alongside and as part of the development of a sentencing guideline, we will raise awareness of the issues involved in sentencing those with mental health issues.

Audience

12. The Council raises awareness of sentencing practice by targeting major audience groups, including the following:

- judiciary
- legal profession
- justice delivery organisations
- MSPs, MPs and other policymakers
- public
- people involved in criminal proceedings (including offender, victims, and support and advocacy workers)
- other interested persons and bodies such as:
 - third sector organisations
 - other public bodies
 - NGOs
- teachers and pupils
- university and college students
- researchers and academics
- the media.

How we will achieve our aims

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

Guidelines

14. Sentencing guidelines play an important role in explaining sentencing to the public. They will be drafted with both public accessibility, and assisting sentencers, in mind.

15. 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 their families, and, importantly, victims of crime and their families, as well as helping the wider public to better understand sentencing decisions.

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

Promoting awareness and understanding

17. During the timeframe of the Council's previous business plan, we have increased communications activity, including increased engagement with stakeholders, and the media.

18. We have expanded our educational resources to provide new material including videos, podcast, higher education lecture, school lesson plans and interactive case studies. We have increased awareness of our work through the launch of a newsletter and information pack.

19. We will continue to build on all of this work to extend our reach both online and through in-person engagement. In particular, we will produce further educational videos in our series on sentencing. The next will be on prison

sentences, followed by one explaining the sentencing process itself. We also intend to provide further information packs tailored to different stakeholders

Engagement and collaboration

20. We listen to views across the justice system and beyond and welcome input from a wide range of interested organisations and individuals.
21. The Council conducts full public consultations on each of its draft guidelines. This is supplemented by other forms of consultation, such as visits, discussion events, workshops and conferences, where appropriate. The Council will give consideration to the best means of gathering the views of different groups when planning communications and engagement activity for individual guidelines.
22. We will seek to increase engagement with interested parties over the next few years through direct engagement as well as through print, online and broadcast media, social media and through our website.
23. We will continue to work closely with stakeholders, judicial partners, criminal justice organisations, victims' groups and academia to increase knowledge and awareness of sentencing policy and practice. We will extend our reach in providing webinars, and training events to justice and third sector organisations, and educational institutions, and we will continue to provide lectures and presentations at universities, schools and community events.
24. In recent years, the Council has held a conference on sentencing and mental health, a collaborative academic research symposium, and participated in events involving sentencing bodies in other jurisdictions. We will continue to hold such events, enabling us to gather a wide range of experience under one roof to discuss ideas and share information. This form of engagement provides a useful platform for those who attend, allowing participants to engage more fully with us and each other, while also directly assisting our work.
25. The Council will celebrate its 10-year anniversary in 2025 and this ongoing work, alongside our educational resources, will feature as part of this.

Policy assistance

Assisting in the development of sentencing policy is one of the Council's statutory aims. Where the Council undertakes such activity, for example contributing to consultations, giving parliamentary evidence or considering legislative proposals, thought will be given as to how that activity can further contribute to improved understanding and awareness of sentencing, and what communications strategy is required to support that.

26. The Scottish Government has announced plans for an independent review of sentencing and penal policy as well as a range of measures to address the prison population. To the extent that these fall within the Council's remit or have implications for its work, the Council will seek to carry out activity to educate and inform where that is appropriate.

Research

27. 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. This includes research into the perceptions of sentencing amongst the public and with victims - providing views within a Scottish context. We will promote and disseminate our research findings, including through academic engagement.
28. In 2019, the Council conducted a national survey on public perceptions which was published in 2019. We have commissioned a second national survey on public perceptions which will be published to coincide with the Council's 10-year anniversary. This will build on the first survey, repeating general questions around awareness and understanding of sentencing to help establish a longitudinal dataset, and examine new topics of: community sentencing; mental health; domestic abuse; and media consumption and understanding of sentencing.

Website and digital media

29. Our recent website work has included an accessibility update and new information page for victims. We will continue to develop our public resources, particularly through the production of more accessible and engaging formats, such as videos and interactive case studies, and we will further promote our website as a comprehensive and authoritative source of information on sentencing.

Social media

30. By building our social media presence, including on X, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, we will engage with the public and others to provide information on sentencing, guidelines and the work of the Council. We will continue to provide visually engaging material including video clips, and weekly facts.

Media

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

Evaluation

32. 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 in relation to specific projects, as and when appropriate. In particular, we will make further use of survey results following events to help evaluate the effectiveness of those events.

33. The Council's second national survey on public perceptions will also provide comparative information over time to assist an evaluation of any change in public understanding. We aim to extend this work into the future.



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