

Judicial Communications Office

3 June 2026

COURT IMPOSES TARIFF OF 31 YEARS ON STEPHEN McCULLAGH FOR THE MURDER OF NATALIE McNALLY

Summary of Judgment

Mr Justice Kinney, sitting today in the Crown Court in Belfast, imposed a tariff of 31 years on Stephen McCullough following his conviction for the murder of Natalie McNally on 18 December 2022. This is the minimum term he must serve in custody before he can be considered for release by the Parole Commissioners.

Background

Stephen McCullagh (“the defendant”) and Natalie McNally (“the deceased”) were in a relationship from August 2022. In October 2022, the defendant met Natalie’s family to announce her pregnancy. The relationship continued but during this time, the deceased kept in contact with other men including her ex-boyfriend. In early December 2022 the deceased appeared to demonstrate some unease in her relationship with the defendant to these individuals, with suggestions that she was not fully committed. The jury was told that the defendant had access to the deceased’s phone and appeared to be aware of some of her messages, saying she was distressed by some of the content she was receiving.

On the evening of 14 December into 15 December 2022, the defendant pre-recorded a six-hour video for streaming on YouTube. It was designed to be shown on 18 December 2022, the day of Natalie’s murder. The defendant told no one that he had recorded the video and told the deceased he was going to live stream on 18 December. The court was satisfied beyond reasonable doubt that the creation of the video was an integral part of the defendant’s planning for her murder.

CCTV evidence showing an individual, who the court was satisfied was the defendant, moving from the vicinity of his home in Lisburn, taking the bus to Lurgan, and walking onwards to the deceased’s address. He had attempted to change his appearance for the return journey. The footage showed him getting into a taxi which took him to his home address. The defendant’s phone was inactive during the period of the livestream. He returned home at 23:13 hrs and his phone was again active at 23:16 hrs. Shortly after this, and at the conclusion of the “livestream”, the defendant deleted the video from his computer into his recycle bin and then emptied the recycle bin in an attempt to remove all trace.

A pathologist gave evidence that the deceased sustained three separate types of injury. The first was bruising to the left and right-hand sides of her neck, which the pathologist said were in keeping with some form of neck compression prior to death. The second was three stab wounds to the neck, one of which nicked the jugular vein and could have been expected to bleed out quite rapidly. All of the stab wounds were caused by a bladed weapon such as the knife found at the scene. The third type of injury was lacerations to her head which were in keeping with having sustained at least five heavy impacts. Multiple bruises to the scalp and face were in keeping with the deceased having sustained additional blunt impacts, some possibly the result of blows such as punches. The pathologist said it was a complex case and it was difficult to be

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certain of the exact fatal sequence. Both the neck compression and the stabbing injuries could have caused death on their own. It was also difficult to completely exclude the possibility that the multiple severe head injuries the deceased sustained may have played some part in the overall fatal sequence. The pathologist concluded that the compression to the neck, stab wounds to the neck and blunt force trauma to the head all contributed to the fatal outcome.

In the immediate aftermath of the murder and after he had returned to his own home, the defendant engaged in a complex set of false messages both to the deceased's phone expressing some concern and asking why she was not replying to him and to a friend who he attempted to persuade to join him in going to the deceased's home on 19 December to check that she was okay. The court said he laid one of the planks of his alibi by suggesting the deceased may be angry with him for drinking during his livestream.

After going to the deceased's home on the day after the murder, the defendant engaged in a further orchestrated sequence of contacts, first with the emergency services operator after he made a 999 call and thereafter with the police and the paramedics who attended the scene. He pretended to be distraught. He said he had performed CPR on the deceased and described how he had found her with her head in a dog bowl when he arrived that evening. He attempted to blame an ex-boyfriend, describing how the ex-boyfriend was harassing the deceased by calling her. The jury heard evidence from various family members about their exchanges with the defendant after the murder and at a time when he was not a suspect. They described the lengths they went to console the defendant. During this period, he left his phone in the McNally home after he left, recording the family. That recording was subsequently found on his phone by police.

The defendant in this early period of the weeks immediately after the murder presented to the family as devastated, distraught and shocked. He refused to cooperate with or speak to the police. When the family tried to persuade him to help the police, he listed a series of grievances he had about his initial arrest as a reason for his refusal. At trial, he continued to pass the blame onto the deceased's ex-boyfriend.

Pre-sentence report

A pre-sentence report, prepared by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, was the only report presented to court for sentencing. The defendant initially claimed to have no memory of the night of the murder, telling the probation officer he was not guilty of the murder, but when the jury returned a guilty verdict, he began to suspect that he must be responsible. He described the murder as "horrible, evil and vicious" and referred to himself as a monster. He said he was sorry for what he did to the family and to Natalie and to Dean, their unborn son. The defendant maintained that he had started his YouTube broadcast and was then drinking heavily in his own house. He said he remembered having a bath around 01:32 hrs, after the livestream, and then no memory until he awoke the following morning. He acknowledged that he might have left his house.

Counsel on behalf of the defendant said that he was not advancing any case of remorse or an acceptance of responsibility. He also described the defendant's account in the report as inherently contradictory and said that he was making no submissions that there should be any reduction in sentence in the light of those matters. The defendant was assessed by probation as

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posing a significant risk of serious harm and there was a high likelihood of reoffending. He has no criminal record.

Sentencing guidelines

The court applied Article 5(2) of the Life Sentences (Northern Ireland) Order 2001 (“the 2001 Order”) and the principles in *R v McCandless* [2004] NICA 269, as refined by *R v Whitla* [2024] NICA 65. The Court of Appeal in *McCandless* had emphasised that the 2002 Practice Statement ([2002] 3 All ER 412), was intended to be only guidance and the starting points were points at which the sentencer may start on a journey towards the goal of deciding upon a right and appropriate sentence. Starting points should be varied upwards or downwards by taking account of aggravating and mitigating factors. The process is not one of rigidity or inflexibility such that a case must be fixed into one specifically defined category.

In *R v Whitla*, the Court of Appeal affirmed with qualifications, the starting point in *McCandless* of 12 years and described the higher starting point of 15/16 years as a normal starting point based on high culpability. Cases involving exceptionally high culpability could have a starting point of 20 years applied. The Court of Appeal again cautioned against an overly mechanistic approach and the risk of double counting. It said it is important to consider the individual features of the case with due regard to the circumstances of the offence and also the circumstances of the offender.

The starting point

The task of the court under Article 5(2) of the 2001 Order is to determine a sentence which satisfies the requirements of retribution and deterrence having regard to the seriousness of the offence and to find the appropriate sentence for that case. The court had no hesitation in concluding that the appropriate starting point in this case is the higher starting point of 20 years. It considered that the defendant’s culpability is extremely high and that the starting point must be varied upwards because of the aggravating factors:

“In this case, I am satisfied that the nature and extent of the injuries sustained by Natalie McNally before and at the time of her death clearly require the higher starting point. This was a brutal and frenzied attack which involved the use of a knife, some form of blunt instrument which caused the head injuries and also the neck compression which was part of the cause of death. [The pathologist] also observed a range of other injuries to Natalie indicative of other impacts including possibly punching.”

Aggravating factors.

The court said it was difficult to find words adequate to describe the abhorrence that any right-thinking person would have about this attack. It said the case was replete with significant aggravating factors which must be considered as part of the sentencing process:

- The level of planning involved in this murder. The court was satisfied that the defendant had conceived of his plan days before the murder and had created a false alibi in the form of his so-called livestream. The defendant’s commentary during the video set the time at regular intervals. He carefully cultivated the impression that he was drunk. The defendant referred to the unavailability of live interaction with viewers, thus preventing

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any attempt to contact him “live” and expose the lie. He immediately sought to delete and erase the stream from his computer.

- Manipulation of other people including his friends, the deceased, her family after her death and the police.
- Deliberate attempts to incriminate an innocent third party: “He embarked upon a complex and determined plan to falsely incriminate an innocent person and maintained this façade throughout the trial.”
- Efforts to avoid detection including the way in which he travelled to the deceased’s house, his attempts to change his appearance, his attempts to control the way in which he travelled, using bus and train timetables to plot his route.
- The domestic violence context of this crime. The court noted a report published by the PSNI entitled “Trends in domestic abuse incidents and crimes recorded by the police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2024/25” which states that in the period between 2021-2025, there were 24 murders with a domestic abuse motivation¹. The court said there is understandably considerable public concern surrounding violence against women and girls and that punishment and deterrence remain legitimate sentencing purposes. It was satisfied that the deceased was a vulnerable individual in the circumstances of this murder:

“She was murdered by someone she trusted. She was murdered by the father of her unborn child. Indeed, her pregnancy contributed to her vulnerability. She lived alone and was murdered within what ought to have been the security and safety of her own home, a place of sanctuary to which the defendant had gained access on the night of the murder.”

- Unnecessary and pointless degradation of the deceased, including treatment of her body and subsequent representations to her family.
- The death of the unborn child, which the court considered as a contributor to the deceased’s vulnerability. The court said the defendant was fully aware that the deceased was pregnant and, intending to kill her, he knew that her baby, at such an early stage of the pregnancy, would have no chance of surviving the attack. It commented that the law does not treat an unborn baby of that age as a separate crime, however that does not diminish the depravity of the defendant’s actions:

“There is an emotional and moral gravity in deliberately and prematurely ending a pregnancy, especially, as in this case, a wanted pregnancy. The circumstances of the murder were exceptionally brutal, and I am satisfied that grave additional harm was caused by the loss of the pregnancy and of the unborn child.”

- Continued deception causing further distress to the deceased’s family.

Mitigating factors

No substantive mitigating factors were identified. The court said the defendant’s personal circumstances carried little weight in the sentencing process and did not justify any reduction in the starting point or in the ultimate tariff.

¹ Out of a total of 32 murders.

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Impact on the deceased and her family

The court considered victim statements describing the profound grief and loss suffered by the family, including the loss of unborn baby Dean. The deceased did not know that she was expecting a boy. It also acknowledged the dignity and resilience displayed by the family throughout the proceedings, stating that their demeanour was never short of exemplary, they exuded a quiet dignity throughout the trial, and despite all the obstacles and adversity they faithfully followed and participated in the proceedings ensuring justice was obtained for Natalie.

Conclusion

The court concluded this was a case of exceptionally high culpability, requiring a substantial upward adjustment from the starting point due to the cumulative aggravating factors. The judge said:

“Stephen McCullough, you have committed a brutal and senseless murder. You planned this murder in remorseless detail. You attacked someone you professed to love in a frenzied assault which was characterised by its excessive and gratuitous violence. In spite of that frenzy, the killing was cold-blooded and calculated as evidenced by the extensive planning leading up to the murder and to your actions afterwards. Your behaviour towards the McNally family showed your absolute determination to cover your tracks. ... Offences of murder are always extremely serious and are heinous crimes at all times. Your culpability in this case is exceptionally high and has many outstanding features which mean it is far more serious than most cases of murder.”

The court imposed a minimum term of 31 years that the defendant must serve in custody before he can be considered for release by the Parole Commissioners. At the end of this term, it will be for the Parole Commissioners to consider whether it is safe and appropriate to release him. Otherwise, he will remain in custody. If he is released from custody, he will remain subject to the life sentence already imposed for the remainder of his life which means that, if necessary, he can be returned to custody at any time.

NOTES TO EDITORS

1. This summary should be read together with the judgment and should not be read in isolation. Nothing said in this summary adds to or amends the judgment. The full judgment will be available shortly on the Judiciary NI website (<https://www.judiciaryni.uk/>).

ENDS

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