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Why did Lucy Connolly receive a 31-month sentence for Southport tweet?

Connolly, who was jailed for inciting racial hatred online following the Southport attacks, has been released from prison.

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Lucy Connolly was released from HMP Peterborough in Cambridgeshire on Thursday (Joe Giddens/PA) (PA Wire)

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The case of Lucy Connolly has sparked intense debate since she was jailed for inciting racial hatred online following the **Southport** attacks, with some criticising her sentence as excessive.

Conservative leader **Kemi Badenoch** said Connolly’s sentence was “harsher than the sentences handed down for bricks thrown at police or actual rioting”.

Here, the PA news agency explores her case and 31-month prison sentence.

– What offence did Lucy Connolly commit?

Connolly pleaded guilty in September to a charge of inciting racial hatred by publishing and distributing “threatening or abusive” written material on X, formerly Twitter.

The post was viewed 310,000 times in three and a half hours before she deleted it.

The charge, contrary to section 19(1) of the Public Order Act 1986, said that she “published and distributed written material on the social media platform X, formerly Twitter, which was threatening, abusive or insulting with the intent thereby to stir up racial hatred or whereby, having regard to all the circumstances, racial hatred was likely to be stirred up thereby”.

The 1986 Act covers offences around incitement, public disorder and harassment, and covers both online and offline offences.

– How was Lucy Connolly sentenced?

Connolly admitted a “category 1A” offence, meaning that her culpability was deemed to be in “category A”, and the harm was in “category one” – both the highest categories.

Guidelines on how to sentence offenders for several crimes are published by the **Sentencing Council**, an independent body which is led by the judiciary.

The guidance for racial hatred offences states that those who commit such a crime are to be deemed to have high culpability if they demonstrate one or more of three factors.

These are using a “position of trust, authority or influence to stir up hatred”, showing an “intention to incite serious violence” and demonstrating “persistent activity”.

A publication is considered to cause “category one” harm if it “directly encourages activity which threatens or endangers life”, and there is “widespread dissemination”.

The maximum sentence for the offence is seven years behind bars.

Defendants who commit category 1A offences can be sentenced to between two and six years in prison, with the “starting point” for sentences – the point used before aggravating and mitigating factors are considered – being three years.

– How did the sentencing judge categorise the offence?

During sentencing, Judge Melbourne Inman KC said both prosecution and defence barristers agreed that the case involved a “category 1A” offence.

He said the timing of the post was a “further significant aggravating factor” to the offence, which came amid a “particularly sensitive social climate”.

He added that in the three and a half hours between Connolly publishing and deleting the post, it was “widely read”, having been viewed “310,000 times with 940 reposts, 58 quotes and 113 bookmarks”.

In mitigation, Judge Inman said Connolly had no previous convictions, that it was her first time in prison, that she did not repeat her statement and deleted the post, and that she “sent some messages to the effect that violence was not the answer”.

He also said he accepted she still “very keenly” felt the loss of her own child several years ago, and that she regretted her actions.

But he also found that Connolly had “little insight into, or acceptance of” her offending.

He said: “Whilst you may well have understood the grief of those who suffered their own tragic losses in Southport, you did not send a message of understanding and comfort but rather an incitement to hatred.”

He added that the sentence he would have imposed after a trial was one of three and a half years – 42 months – but then reduced this by a quarter because of Connolly’s early guilty plea, resulting in the final sentence of 31 months.

– What happened when Connolly appealed against her sentence?

At the Court of Appeal in May, judges dismissed a legal challenge against her sentence.

In a written judgment, Lord Justice Holroyde, said: “There is no arguable basis on which it could be said that the sentence imposed by the judge was manifestly excessive.”

Lawyers for Connolly had said that Judge Inman “miscategorised” the offence, claiming her culpability should have been deemed as “category B”, and that the mitigating factors outweighed the aggravating features.

But Lord Justice Holroyde, sitting with Mr Justice Goss and Mr Justice Sheldon, ruled that Connolly “willingly pleaded guilty” to the offence and that Judge Inman was “entitled, and indeed obviously correct, to categorise the case as he did”.

Connolly’s husband, Conservative councillor Ray Connolly branded the decision “shocking and unfair”.

The Northampton town councillor, and former West Northamptonshire district councillor, said his wife had “paid a very high price for making a mistake”.

But Prime Minister Sir **Keir Starmer** defended it earlier this year.

He was asked about Connolly's case after her Court of Appeal application against her jail term was dismissed.

Asked during Prime Minister's Questions whether her imprisonment was an "efficient or fair use" of prison, Sir Keir said: "Sentencing is a matter for our courts and I celebrate the fact that we have independent courts in this country.

"I am strongly in favour of free speech, we've had free speech in this country for a very long time and we protect it fiercely.

"But I am equally against incitement to violence against other people. I will always support the action taken by our police and courts to keep our streets and people safe."

– What has the response been to her case?

Lord Young of Acton, founder and director of the Free Speech Union, which funded Connolly's legal challenge, said: "The fact that Lucy Connolly has spent more than a year in prison for a single tweet that she quickly deleted and apologised for is a national scandal."

Conservative and Reform politicians have decried what they call "two-tier justice" in her case comparing it with that of Ricky Jones, a suspended Labour councillor who was found not guilty of encouraging violent disorder at an anti-racism rally in the wake of the Southport murders.

Lawyers have said the cases should not be conflated as Connolly and Jones faced allegations of a different nature – and Jones faced trial where Connolly, having pleaded guilty, did not.

Reform UK's deputy leader **Richard Tice** has also proposed 'Lucy's Bill' after

against punishments they deem to be too severe or lenient.

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