Sentencing remarks of Mr Justice Kerr

The King
v
Joanne Bedford and Mark Twigg

Manchester Crown Court

10 October 2025

1. Joanne Bedford and Mark Twigg, please stay seated for the moment. The court is sitting today to sentence you for being in charge of a dog that was dangerously out of control and which, in an appalling tragedy, attacked and killed your 3 year old son Daniel on 15 May 2022 at Carr Farm near Rochdale. After a trial in June and July last, the jury unanimously acquitted you both of the manslaughter of Daniel by gross negligence but unanimously convicted you both of the "being in charge" offence under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

2. Mr Twigg, you are 43 with no previous convictions and one caution many years ago for a theft offence. Ms Bedford, you are 37, with no previous convictions or cautions. You have been together for about 21 years, living in the Greater Manchester area and have had four children together, three of them surviving, now aged 18, 14 and 3. You have both had, and still have, some physical and mental health issues to which I will return.

3. You have a history of owning and keeping dogs and other animals. When your children were born, a health visitor gave you a standard warning about not leaving a child alone with dogs. A dog you were caring for bit your eldest son in 2017, when he was 6 and the wound became infected. Daniel was born in January 2019. You knew the people at Carr Farm at that time and often visited. The owner's wife or ex-wife was bitten by a dog there in March 2020.

4. The dogs at the Farm belonging to the owner, Matthew Brown, were guard dogs and known to behave as such, often barking and jumping up at people. There were incidents. Neighbours who moved in next door built a high fence around their property to protect themselves against Mr Brown's dogs. In March 2022 you and your then three children moved to the Farm House at a nominal rent, in return for looking after the security of the property and the dogs, while Mr Brown was spending some time on remand in custody.

5. After his release in March 2022, you, Mr Twigg, were responsible for buying food for the dogs and feeding, watering and mucking them out at weekends when he was away. Daniel was familiar with the Farm and had known the dogs there since he was a baby. The dogs called Sid and Tiny belonged to Ms Westwood, Mr Brown's then partner. You dealt with complaints about escaping dogs, for example from the neighbour, Ms Thornton. You kept Tiny at your home in the Farm House for a time.

6. I am sure of the above and of the following further facts. You were both responsible for the security of the pen at the side of the farmhouse where Sid and, later, Tiny lived. Tiny moved there after you, Mr Twigg, put her in the pen with Sid about a week before the attack on Daniel. The door to the pen nearest the house was secured by a carabiner clip. Daniel was an inquisitive and "dare devil" child with a tendency to "open things up" (in your words, Mr Twigg). He had at least tried to remove the clip once before, as you, Ms Bedford, knew and later admitted to police and a doctor.

7. You knew Sid and Tiny were powerful, sometimes aggressive dogs, not easy to control. They had previously escaped outside the Farm, had been involved in fights and were kept in conditions described by the experts as very poor. They lived in insanitary conditions, without any exercise outside their pens. Your family was using a dog pen with Sid and Tiny in it as the way in and out of the house. You knew Daniel was attracted to Sid and Tiny. On 25 March 2022, you were warned of danger by an RSPCA inspector who gave the example of a fatality involving a child. Your neighbour used the phrase "ticking time bomb" to describe Tiny in text messages to you, Ms Bedford.

8. On the day of the tragedy, 15 May 2022, you Mr Twigg were not present but the jury's verdict was that you remained "in charge" of Sid and Tiny; you had general control of the premises and the dogs and their condition and any threat to others they might cause; you were responsible for the security arrangements including precautions needed to protect the children; they could not go in and out of the Farm House without walking right past them; and you exposed your children to serious risk of being bitten. You remained in charge of the dogs, jointly with Ms Bedford, despite going to work.

9. You, Ms Bedford, were present at the Farm House, in the late stages of pregnancy. I am sure, from the biometric evidence from your phone, that you failed to watch over Daniel during the morning and early afternoon of 15 May 2022 when he opened the pen and was subjected to a sustained and fatal attack by at least one of the dogs. Sid was a male Cane Corso. Tiny is a female South African Boerboel. It is probable that Sid rather than Tiny inflicted the fatal injuries though, like the experts, I cannot be sure.

10. I am sure that your first account given to Mr Twigg by phone soon after the event, while in a police van, was the truth: that you, your daughter and Daniel "had all been out in the garden when Daniel somehow got into the yard". The evidence from your phone of you being on social media sites from 12.50pm, about the time the attack on Daniel started, to 1.09pm contradicts the account you gave in interview that you left Daniel for no more than a minute

or two. I am sure that account is untrue.

11. Daniel sustained multiple bite injuries, principally to his neck, compatible with repeated biting and rapid shaking. It is likely that he was rendered unconscious by blunt force head injury. He was treated at the scene by paramedics and at Manchester Children's Hospital but sadly his life could not be saved and he was pronounced dead at 3.31pm that day. Daniel's sister Kia witnessed the immediate aftermath of the attack. She ran to get help from a neighbour who described her as distressed and frantic.

12. You have both lost your beloved son. You, Ms Bedford, saw the immediate aftermath of the attack and tried to resuscitate Daniel. Your acute distress at the time, captured on film, at the hospital and later during the trial, was obvious and must evoke the deepest sympathy. You, Mr Twigg, are a man of few words and less expressive of your feelings than Ms Bedford, but I do not estimate your pain and grief as any the less for being kept contained within.

13. No sentence in a case such as this can undo the damage done, nor assuage the grief of the bereaved. Sentencing in such a case is very difficult. As has often been said in cases such as this, on the one hand, the sentences must reflect the natural and strong feelings of the public that needless loss of life by reckless disregard for safety cannot go unpunished. On the other hand, the sentence must take account of the person being sentenced: here, the very people most painfully affected by their own wrongdoing.

14. I am acutely conscious that you are both suffering continuing punishment through bereavement. However, your pain and suffering at the loss of your son, and the suffering of your other children for the loss of their brother, does not change the fact that it the wrongdoing of you, Daniel's parents, that has deprived him of his life, you of your son and his siblings of their brother. The wrongdoing that led to Daniel's death must be punished and it is my mournful duty to see it done. I come to the question of sentence.

15. I have considered three sentencing guidelines: one concerned specifically with this offence; the general guideline on overarching principles; and the guideline on the imposition of community and custodial sentences. I have considered the helpful written and oral submissions of counsel and the legal materials –statutory provisions and cases – cited in them. I have considered medical, psychological and psychiatric evidence and the two pre-sentence reports from probation officers. I also presided at the trial and have drawn on my recollection of the evidence given.

16. I begin with you, Ms Bedford, though much of what I will say applies to both of you. I have to determine the offence category with reference only to the factors in the tables in the guideline on this offence. The maximum sentence is elevated to 14 years' imprisonment because a person has died from his injuries. The harm done by the offence is therefore, by definition, of the utmost seriousness and not variable. The question is the level of culpability, or in plainer English, fault or blame.

17. For reasons I now give, I accept the crown's submission that the level of

culpability is medium. There are some indicators of high culpability. To an extent, the dogs were "trained to be aggressive"; they were guard dogs and behaved as such. Signs outside the property warned: "dogs are loose"; "do not exit your vehicle" and "beware of the dogs they bite!" The defendants also did, in my judgment, fail "to respond to official warnings", reading the word "official" not in any technical sense but in a common sense way, as including the warning given by officers or an officer of the RSPCA on 25 March 2022, less than two months before Daniel's death.

18. But the main characteristics of Ms Bedford's offending were those listed under medium culpability, all five of which were present. The first is failure to respond to warnings and concerns expressed by others about the dog's behaviour. The bite to your eldest son in 2017 was a warning, though not about Sid or Tiny in particular. You were bitten yourself on that occasion. There was the warning from the RSPCA officers. And there was a warning in strong language from the neighbour who called Tiny a ticking time bomb.

19. The second feature is failure to act on prior knowledge of the dog's aggressive behaviour. That factor is also present. You knew both Sid and Tiny could be aggressive and both had previously escaped. The third feature is lack of safety or control measures taken in situations where an incident could reasonably have been foreseen. The exit route from the house required your children to walk through the pen right past Sid and Tiny.

20. You both failed to upgrade the carabiner clip at the entrance to the pen, nearest the house, to a secure padlock, even after Daniel had shown he might manage to open it. The contemporary records made by DI Crewe and Dr Ellison on the evening of Daniel's death when you were both interviewed at the hospital suggest that Daniel had actually entered the pen having succeeded in opening the clip on a previous occasion. That is possible but after reflection I find myself unsure that he actually succeeded in opening it fully and I therefor do not sentence on that basis.

21. The fourth feature of medium culpability is your failure, Ms Bedford, to intervene in the incident where it would have been reasonable to do so. I acknowledge that this is not a case where you were aware of the incident but turned a blind eye. Far from it. You tried to intervene, but sadly too late to save Daniel who was already mortally wounded. You would undoubtedly have intervened earlier if you had known Daniel was under attack. This feature therefore, on the facts here, adds nothing to your failure to supervise Daniel that day. This point does not of course apply to you, Mr Twigg.

22. The fifth feature applies to both of you: ill treatment or failure to ensure the welfare needs of the dog, where connected to the offence. I am satisfied that ill treatment of the dogs at the property, in particular Sid and Tiny, was connected to the offending. The dog expert, Dr D'Sa, gave unchallenged evidence that confinement of dogs in an unrewarding, barren environment such as a filthy outdoor enclosure, can lead to pathological or abnormal behaviour; and that there is a correlation between poor welfare and the propensity of a dog to be involved in a fatal attack.

23. The above findings indicate a medium level of culpability in Ms Bedford's case, but within that level of culpability, a case of a very serious kind, at or near the top of the scale. I do not accept the defence submission that to find medium culpability for this offending fails to respect the jury's verdict of acquittal on the count of manslaughter. The required level of culpability to satisfy the very high threshold of gross negligence required for manslaughter would, necessarily, be high culpability under this guideline.

24. It is for me to decide the level of culpability here and I must do so, as Mr Thomas KC correctly submits, by weighing the factors in the guideline in order to decide which category "most resembles the offender's case". I am performing that duty in this sentencing exercise and by doing so I am respecting the jury's verdict of not guilty on the manslaughter charge. It is irrelevant that the offence here is one of strict liability, which may be committed with or without fault. Here, it was committed with fault. It is for me to assess the degree of that fault, i.e. culpability, under the guideline.

25. For the reasons just given, I reject the submission of the defendants that the offending fell into the lesser culpability category. That argument ignores the context. This was not just an accident that occurred through a momentary lapse of concentration leading to a temporary absence of supervision for Daniel. The accident happened because of the broader contextual matters I have just mentioned. The carabiner clip and bolt were safety measures, which are mentioned in the lesser culpability factors, but were inadequate.

26. The guideline range for a medium culpability offence is from 2 to 7 years' custody, with a starting point of 4 years. There are no statutory aggravating factors. A non-statutory aggravating factor mentioned in the guideline is that the victim is vulnerable because of his personal circumstances including his age. Daniel was obviously vulnerable because he was only 3 and of small stature, unable to defend himself against the dog or dogs that attacked him.

27. I do not accept the submission that the vulnerability of the victim here is an inherent part of the offence. The dogs were dangerous and dangerously out of control. They endangered adults such as the neighbours, not just Daniel. But I do accept that I must be careful not to count twice over the victim's vulnerability when making any appropriate adjustment to the starting point of 4 years, within the medium culpability guideline range of 2 to 7 years. I take that very much into account in my assessment.

28. I am very cautious also about the crown's submission that I should treat as an aggravating feature of significant weight the traumatic impact of the aftermath on police officers. I have every sympathy with the suffering of those police officers but, like doctors, lawyers and indeed judges (but not jurors), they are trained professionals whose job requires them to withstand the strains and stresses of dealing with crimes that unhappily may involve horror and distress. To an extent, it goes with the territory. They are not direct victims as they are where, say, an emergency worker is assaulted.

29. The guideline states that an adjustment, upwards or downwards, may be necessary to reflect particular features of culpability, for example, the

presence of multiple factors within one category or the presence of factors from more than one category, where that has not already been taken into account in selecting the level of culpability.

30. Subject to mitigating features, I would make a substantial upward adjustment from the starting point in your case, Ms Bedford, because all five of the factors pointing to medium culpability are in some way present, with some factors from the high culpability category. That upward adjustment would point to a sentence at or near the top of the medium culpability range. However, I have to balance that against the mitigating features in your case. I come to those mitigating features next.

31. You are a woman of good character, with no convictions or cautions. Nor have there been any further incidents since this offence, while the investigation took place and while you were on bail and during the trial. You suffer from deafness in both ears and wear hearing aids. You were heavily pregnant at the time of the offence. I accept that you are remorseful about what happened; it could hardly be otherwise as you have lost your son.

32. You suffered the trauma of witnessing the immediate aftermath. Your horror, distress and suffering can be seen on the film. You are now a bereaved and grieving mother. I have carefully considered the psychiatric report of Dr Afsal from last week. You are able to function and to look after your other children but you present with post-traumatic stress disorder with comorbid depressive symptoms related to Daniel's death, for which medication is prescribed.

33. I accept that the intense pain and suffering of your bereavement is a significant mitigating feature. The deceased was your own child. Through your pain and grief, you cooperated with the police investigation, albeit your account was not consistent or completely true. There was a delay in bringing the charges because of the complexity of the issues. You had to undergo trial for manslaughter, of which you are not guilty, as well as for being in charge of a dangerously out of control dog, of which you are guilty.

34. Furthermore, and importantly, I must take into account that you are responsible for the care of your other children. The oldest is now 18 but still very much in need of parental help. Then there is your teenage son and your 3 year old who, very sadly, never met Daniel. You are not working and are able to care for your children, but not without difficulty because of the bereavement. I am told that Mr Twigg is not working either and can no longer do heavy lifting. He too undertakes some of the child care.

35. In passing sentence on both of you, I am required to take into account the substantial interference with family life, in particular the life of the affected children, that imprisonment of a parent brings with it, inevitably and unfortunately. This is a problem the courts often face. In the complicated task of deciding on the appropriate sentence, I have to consider what punishment would be proportionate, balancing the impact on the family against the legitimate aims that sentencing must serve.

36. In the present case it cannot be guaranteed that the three children will be

fully looked after by friends or relatives. Mr Twigg told his probation officer that there are proposed arrangements for a family friend to help with caring for the two younger children if custodial sentences are imposed. But I recognise the risk that they could be taken into care, for a time; probably, at the longest, for any period during which both parents are serving a custodial sentence and are actually in prison, before their release on licence.

37. Those, then, are the mitigating features. After careful reflection, I regret to say I have come to the conclusion that a sentence of imprisonment is required to mark the seriousness of the offending, even taking account of all the mitigating features I have mentioned. I am required to impose the shortest sentence commensurate with the seriousness of the offence.

38. In your case, Ms Bedford, aside from the child care issue, the mitigating features impel me to make a further adjustment, this time downwards, back to the starting point of 4 years' imprisonment for a medium culpability case. I then make a further reduction of 6 months in recognition of the interference with the life of the family and in particular your three children which your time in custody will cause them to suffer. In my judgment, the shortest period of imprisonment commensurate with the seriousness of the offence is a sentence of 3½ years' imprisonment.

39. Under the Dangerous Dogs Act, I have power to disqualify you from having custody of any dog for such period as I think right. I am satisfied from the facts of this dreadful case that you are a wholly unfit person to have the care of a dog. There was evidence at the trial that you asked about whether you could have your dogs back even after Daniel's death. You keep other animals and, I am told, might want to keep a dog in the future. I will make an order disqualifying you from having custody of any dog for a period of 15 years.

40. I come next to your case, Mr Twigg. The sentencing exercise in your case requires me to go through the same steps as I have already gone through in Ms Bedford's case. Much of what I have said about the background evidence is common to both your cases. I will not repeat the points mentioned above which apply to both of you. But some of that contextual evidence relates to you in particular.

41. It was you that was responsible for feeding, watering and mucking out the dogs when Mr Brown was away at weekends. It was you that put Tiny in the pen with Sid about a week before Daniel was attacked. It was you that, I am sure, told your neighbour, Ms Thornton, that Tiny was nasty and if you annoy her she will rip you to shreds. It was you who, I am sure, on 12 May 2022, told a social worker, Ms Chadwick, that you would not be responsible if the dogs should bite her. You well knew that these were dogs that could do that.

42. On the other hand, there is a very important difference between your case and Ms Bedford's. You were not present at the house when Daniel was attacked. You had gone to work. You were still, as the jury found, "in charge" of Sid and Tiny. You are jointly responsible for Daniel being able to enter the pen by opening the carabiner clip which, you knew, he might be able to do and try to do. But you cannot be blamed for Ms Bedford's failure to supervise Daniel

and prevent the attack by intervening before it was too late.

43. In your case, two of the factors indicating high culpability apply: the dogs were to an extent trained to be aggressive; and you failed to respond to "official" warnings. I have already explained this. Four of the five factors indicating medium culpability are present. I have gone through the five factors already. The fourth factor is failure to intervene in the incident where it would have been reasonable to do so. That factor does not apply in your case, but the others do. Of the factors indicating lesser culpability, only use of the inadequate carabiner clip as a safety measure is present in your case.

44. Your case is, in my judgment, also one of medium culpability, but within that category, less serious than Ms Bedford's because you were not present when Daniel was attacked. Subject to mitigation, to which I am coming shortly, I would make a significant upwards adjustment to the starting point of 4 years, towards the top of that range, but not at the very top of it and not as high as in Ms Bedford's case because you were not at the scene of the attack.

45. In mitigation, you are effectively a man of good character apart from this offence. Your caution for theft many years ago is of no relevance and I disregard it. You too have hearing difficulties. You had a learning difficulty at school and spent some time in a special school before being transferred back to a mainstream setting. You may have autism. You were diagnosed with autism by a psychologist and a clinician in 2023, after Daniel's death. You have mostly worked as a landscape gardner. You cannot do that anymore as you have back problems and use a crutch. You are on pain relief and anti-depressant medication. You have assistance from an intermediary in court.

46. Most importantly, you have lost your son. Your probation officer suggests you may be having difficulty processing and expressing that grief but I am sure it is no less agonising for that. That is a significant mitigating feature. The loss of a child is punishment beyond any this court can impose. As your counsel, Mr Thomas KC reminds me, in the different context of causing death by careless or dangerous driving, the sentencing guideline recognises as a mitigating feature the fact that the deceased is a close friend or relative.

47. I bear in mind that you cooperated with the police investigation and there have been no further incidents since. There was delay because of the complexity of the investigation. I accept that you had to wait over two years before you were charged and that you had the charge of manslaughter hanging over you for about a year until the jury relieved you of that burden at the end of the trial. You had to undergo the ordeal of being tried for the manslaughter of your son as well as for this offence.

48. Those mitigating features, and most importantly your bereavement, require a significant downward adjustment back towards and indeed below the starting point of 4 years for the medium culpability range. As in Ms Bedford's case, I must also take into account the impact your imprisonment would have on your three surviving children. I have, after careful reflection, concluded that only a custodial sentence can meet the seriousness of your offending. I must impose the lowest period commensurate with the seriousness of the offence.

49. Aside from the child care issue, that period would be one of 3 years' imprisonment. From that period, I make a further deduction of 4 months in recognition of the disruption to family life, in particular to the lives of your children, which your imprisonment may cause during the part of your sentence spent in custody rather than in the community, on licence. The sentence in your case is therefore one of 2 years 8 months' imprisonment.

50. In your case also, I am clear in my mind that you are not a fit and proper person to have care of any dog. I have said more than enough already to make that proposition obvious to any sensible person. I will make an order disqualifying you from having the custody of any dog for a period of 15 years. There must not be a dog in the household you share with Ms Bedford and you will both be in breach of that order even if the dog is nominally in the care of one or more of your children.

51. Lastly, I have the power to order the destruction of any dog in respect of which the offence was committed, subject to an exception. The dog Sid has already been destroyed. The dog Tiny is also a dog in respect of which the offence was committed. I must order her destruction unless I am satisfied that she would not constitute a danger to public safety. I recognise that an expert witness on dog behaviour called at the trial, Dr d'Sa, thought Tiny was responding well to being looked after and could be rehomed.

52. With all due respect for that view, I am very uncomfortable with the prospect of Tiny returning to the public domain. You, Mr Twigg, told a neighbour that she could rip someone to shreds if she became annoyed. She had escaped and has been known to behave with serious aggression towards people as well as other dogs. That is all evidence that she may well remain a danger to public safety.

53. I have been narrowly persuaded to adjourn the question whether Tiny should be destroyed. Her owner, Ms Westwood, has not been notified of the possibility. The crown has agreed to notify her so she can make representations if she wishes to do so. I am told Tiny is being kept in secure kennels at no cost to the public purse and that is no current risk that the public will be exposed to her. I have asked to see a letter from the proprietors of the kennels so that I can consider whether such a risk may arise. That should be provided to the parties and the court within 14 days.

54. Ms Bedford, please stand. The sentence of the court for being in charge of a dangerously out of control dog is one of 3 years and 6 months' imprisonment. You will serve up to half that period in custody before being released back into the community, on licence. You are disqualified from having custody of any dog for a period of 15 years.

55. Mr Twigg, please stand. The sentence of the court for being in charge of a dangerously out of control dog is one of 2 years and 8 months' imprisonment. You will serve up to half that period in custody before being released back into the community, on licence. You are disqualified from having custody of any dog for a period of 15 years.

56. I conclude by extending my heartfelt thanks, on behalf of the court, to all the police, medical and social services professionals, the RSPCA officers, the probation officers, the experts and other witnesses, the lawyers and court staff including, not least, my clerk, and the jury, for their invaluable contribution to bringing this tragic and difficult case to its resolution today.