

MR JUSTICE LINDEN

IN THE BRISTOL CROWN COURT

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V

ZACK COUGHLAN

SENTENCING REMARKS

Introduction

1. On the seventh day of your trial you pleaded guilty to the murder of Jamie Collins, after I withdrew the defence of loss of control from the jury.
2. At the time of his death on 8 April 2026, at the age of 21, Mr Collins was a fellow student of yours in the final year of the robotics degree course at the University of the West of England (“UWE”). He was also a lodger in your house at 7 Cleve Road, Filton, in Bristol.
3. Mr Collins was an idealist who took an interest in the problems of the world and of society. His friends who gave evidence were also unanimous in describing him as an exceptionally kind and considerate person who always had time for them and was always willing to help them to feel comfortable and welcome in a social situation. It was clear that they felt privileged to have known him and heartbroken to have lost him.
4. The victim impact statement on behalf of his family which was provided by Lisa Collins movingly and lucidly conveys the devastating impact which your actions have had on his family and which they feel on a daily basis. It was important that you heard what she had to say and I hope that you will reflect on it. The emotional scars which you have inflicted on them will never be fully healed and, sadly, nothing that this court can say or do will turn the clock back.

5. It has come as a great shock to all who knew Mr Collins that anyone should choose to do what you did to him. As you yourself told the police, he had no enemies. However, the evidence shows that, earlier this year, you made a plan kill him which you then brutally carried out. The Prosecution described this as a cold-blooded execution and I agree.
6. When, precisely, you began to think of killing Mr Collins and then to plan to do so is unclear.
 - a. Sometime before 7 April 2026 you had carried out an internet search about whether it would be lawful to use lethal force to defend yourself from an acid attack which you told the jury you did with Mr Collins in mind. You had also carried out internet searches about weapons and about what a corpse looks like. But the dates of these searches are unclear.
 - b. On 27 March 2026 you had bought a black puffa jacket and shoes from Asda which you had not worn before you carried out the killing. There is a compelling argument that you must have bought them for this purpose but I cannot be sure of this.
 - c. There was CCTV footage of you leaving the house on 3 April 2026 in what appears to have been the same outfit as you were wearing when you left the house on 8 April and with a white Morrisons bag under your arm. In the clip you appear to go into College Way, the camera loses sight of you and the location data evidence suggests that you then doubled back into Cleve Road and were hanging around there for nearly 20 minutes. But, again, although this there is a powerful argument that this was not a coincidence, I cannot be sure that this was a dry run for the plan which you implemented on 8 April.
 - d. In the small hours of 4 April 2026 you dialled 999 and reported to the police that there were black clad, balaclava masked, “roadmen” in the alley at the back of your house, stealing copper from a construction site. You said that one of them had drawn a knife on you. As there is some evidence to support your account, I cannot be sure that what you told the

police on this occasion was untrue, or that your report was made with your plan in mind. What I can be sure of is that I reject your criticisms of the police response to your call. They attended your address and deployed sniffer dogs, but no suspects were found. Their advice to you was that you should get in touch with them if you had any further issues and that is advice which you had no justification for failing to act on.

7. Turning to the events of 8 April, at c2.45pm Mr Collins took his bike out of the garage at the end of the back garden of 7 Cleve Road, left through the back gate and cycled to college. He was only weeks away from graduating with a very good degree and, by all accounts, working hard and looking forward to finishing the course and returning to Wales.
8. When you left the house at c4.31pm, so nearly an hour and three quarters later, you were wearing pale blue jeans and a cream coloured top and you were carrying a white Morrisons bag. On the CCTV installed on the front of the house you are seen to go across the road and into College Way but in fact you doubled back, out of sight of the camera, and walked to the other end of Cleve Road, passing a camera which you told the court you did not know was there.
9. Your own evidence was that before this, you had assembled an outfit comprising a black pair of trainers plus black trousers, puffa jacket, ski mask, beanie style hat and gloves. I am quite sure that you had it in mind to kill Mr Collins at this point and had done for some time before this. Your choice of outfit was so that you would look like one of the roadmen you had described to the police on 4 April and so that you would be unrecognisable as the person who was about to leave the house.
10. All of these items were packed into a white Morrisons bag. You also packed a large kitchen knife which, according to your evidence, you happened to have in your bedroom, rather than taking a knife from the kitchen. You told the jury that you had the knife in your bedroom because you planned to give it as a gift to the other lodger at 7 Cleve Road, Charlie Latimer, but hadn't yet handed it over. I do not believe that, but I do not propose to take the view that you wanted to

avoid taking a knife from the kitchen so as to reduce the risk of detection as this question was not fully explored in the evidence.

11. It is also telling that you put an Asda bag into the Morrisons bag. I am quite sure that you did so with a view to switching the bags after you had been seen, on CCTV or otherwise, leaving the house in the pale outfit with the Morrisons bag, so that the black clad person who was later seen fleeing the scene on Mr Collins' bicycle was carrying an Asda bag which would not be connected to you.
12. Having got to the other end of Cleve Road you then went into an alleyway which runs along the back of the houses and changed into the full black outfit, including mask and gloves. You then put the clothes and shoes which you had been wearing when you left the house in a bag, which you deposited close to the back gate to number 7 in anticipation of Mr Collins' return. You also left the knife in the bag so that it was close at hand for the purposes of your intended attack, and it is plain that you planned to take your original clothes with you after the attack so that you could change back into them. The bag was therefore positioned so that you could make a rapid getaway.
13. After you had deposited the bag you walked back along the alleyway and then round and back along Cleve Road in the direction of number 7, past number 7 and into the other end of the alleyway where the back gate to number 7 was. I am sure that your reason doing this was that you intended a black clad figure to be seen and/or picked up by CCTV shortly before the same figure carried out the attack on Mr Collins. But even if the figure wasn't spotted, you had ensured that you were unrecognisable when you carried out the attack.
14. Around 23 minutes then elapsed before Mr Collins did return home and there is no plausible evidence that you left the alleyway during this period. By the time Mr Collins returned you were lying in wait for him in the alleyway and concealed so that he did not see you. You had taken the knife out of the bag and were fully ready to ambush him. You saw Mr Collins approaching but did not attack him until he began to open the gate to the back garden, activating the CCTV which you had installed some months earlier. At this point Mr Collins had his back to

the alleyway and his other hand on the bicycle. He was caught totally unawares by you and was utterly defenceless.

15. Your first blow with the knife was aimed at Mr Collins' neck, and he soon went to the ground. The attack continued. You inflicted a total of approximately 30 stab wounds to the back of the neck, the left side of the back, the left side of the neck, the front of the neck, the right side of the neck, the left upper chest, the right side of the chest, the right chest and the left upper arm. The location of the stab wounds was entirely consistent with your intention to kill him and there were wounds to the left arm which appeared to have been sustained as Mr Collins made forlorn attempts to defend himself. The injuries which you inflicted were unsurvivable and, perhaps mercifully, it would not have taken long for Mr Collins to die.
16. Your own evidence was that you then switched your previous outfit from the Morrisons bag to the Asda bag. You claimed that this was because there was a rip in the Morrisons bag but this was another lie given that you had originally included the Asda bag with this switch in mind, and given that it is apparent from what happened subsequently that the Morrisons bag was perfectly serviceable. You then also put the Morrisons bag into the Asda bag for the purposes of the next stage of your plan and you cycled away on Mr Collins' bike in order to provide an apparent motive for the attack by the supposed black clad stranger.
17. A little over 5 minutes' cycle ride away, you dumped the bike at the end of a cul de sac. You then climbed into some thick undergrowth where you changed into your original outfit. You chose not to discard the black outfit or the Asda bag. Instead, everything including the Asda bag was now packed into the Morrisons bag. You then climbed through the undergrowth and over a railway embankment before arriving near SGS college campus and being picked up on CCTV at c6.25pm.
18. Whether or not the Asda bag did have a tear, I do not accept that you switched the bags again for that reason. What you did was part of your plan to avoid a possible connection with the black clad stranger through the bag he was carrying.

It seems likely that you were deliberately walking in an area of the College which had CCTV and displaying the Morrisons bag so as to reinforce what would subsequently be your alibi, but I cannot be sure of this. However, it is clear that the change out of the black outfit and into what you had previously been wearing was part of your plan, so that you were not recognisable as the attacker.

19. Thereafter you took various other steps to cover your traces and dispose of the evidence:

- a. A little before 7pm you went to Sainsbury's to buy another outfit. You did this because, as you realised at some point after you had dumped Mr Collins' bike, you had cut your hand in the course of the attack and, as Ms Comley pointed out to you, you had bled on your clothes.
- b. You then changed into this outfit and headed to a secluded duckpond some distance away from Cleve Road where, between a little after 8pm and 8.24pm, you deposited the black puffer jacket, the Morrisons bag with the Asda bag inside it and a Sainsbury's bag together containing the clothing and footwear which you wore when you left home and then during the attack. You weighed the evidence down with bricks with the intention that it would not be discovered.
- c. While you were doing this, at a little after 8pm you messaged your friends to say that you would be late for a pre-existing arrangement to play computer games as you were still in Stoke Park climbing trees and needed to get some food before going home. You then went to Morrisons on the UWE campus to buy food and you had a conversation with an acquaintance who worked there in which you told her that you had injured your hand whilst climbing trees. Again, you were building your alibi.
- d. You then headed home after depositing further items of clothing in the bins on the UWE campus. When you arrived at c9.10pm you calmly made yourself a pizza and played computer games with your friends who were blissfully unaware of what you had done.

- e. It was not until a little after 2am that you went out to the back garden and pretended, in a way which you wanted to be seen on the CCTV, to discover Mr Collins' body. It was then that you finally dialled 999, having been the house for nearly 5 hours whilst his body lay where you had left him.
20. Your callous behaviour continued as you then lied to the police and your friends in a calculating, cynical and manipulative way.
21. In the 999 call you are heard sobbing continuously, giving the impression that you had just suffered the shock of finding the body of a dear friend who had been stabbed by an unknown assailant.
22. In the body worn footage worn by the officers who came to the scene, you are initially seen crouching on the ground in an apparently very distraught state. You gave the police a false account of your movements that day and of how you had come to discover Mr Collins' body. You also offered to look to see whether you had any CCTV footage of the incident on the app on your phone and you showed the officer the footage of the attack and told her that you were watching it for the first time with her. That was another lie: in fact you had watched it at least once at 8.09pm that evening. You were cementing your alibi. As you had planned, you linked the incident to the report to the police which you made on 4 April of men in the alleyway wearing black balaclavas and carrying knives all the time knowing that you were the killer. The police were evidently taken in by your performance and were highly solicitous towards you. Despite this you then accused one of the female officers of being emotionally cold about the death of Mr Collins when you knew perfectly well that it was you who were being icily calculating.
23. This performance continued on the night of 9 April 2026, when you were interviewed as a witness. During that interview, which lasted nearly 2 hours, you spoke in a low voice and appeared low and distressed as if you were bereaved. You gave a more detailed account of being out at all material times and you were

keen to give another account of the incident on 4 April, again suggesting that there was a link to what had happened to Mr Collins.

24. You also lied to your friends along similar lines, presenting yourself as grieving about what had happened, talking about organising a memorial, linking what had happened to the 4 April incident and generally abusing the kindness which they showed you.
25. Before long, however, the police found evidence which led them to suspect you. You were therefore interviewed as a suspect on 12 and 13 April. At the first interview you said that you had already given your account and you declined to answer questions. You adopted the same approach in your second and third interviews.
26. It was not until 26 August that that you formally admitted that you had carried out the attack. In truth you had no option other than to do so given the overwhelming evidence of this. On this basis you were also able to put forward the defence of loss of control. This involved you giving evidence to the jury which was obviously untrue in a number of respects. Somewhat disturbingly, in the course of your evidence you also gave the strong impression that you think of yourself as a victim of what has happened and that you continue to believe that you had no other choice than to do what you did.
27. We will never know precisely why you killed Mr Collins. Although you were examined by a psychiatrist, no psychiatric evidence has been put before the court. Nor, in the event, has any psychological evidence been deployed in evidence although a report from a psychologist has been served.
28. You gave an account of tensions over rent, but these had been resolved by the end of 2025 when you stopped charging Mr Collins and Mr Latimer rent. You gave an account of conversations with Mr Collins about politics. He was critical of wealthy elites, multinational corporations and those who run them, and of the dynamics of the property market, the unaffordability of housing for young people and “greedy landlords”. But that was hardly unusual for a 21 year old student and you yourself told the jury that you agreed with a lot of what he said, although you thought that his views were too simplistic.

29. You said that in conversations about politics in the last month or so before you killed him you felt that Mr Collins steered the conversation round to you and that you felt that he was implying that you were a greedy landlord or a member of the wealthy elite. But you accepted that, before the alleged conversations on 7 and 8 April, he had never made any direct threat to you. I am afraid that I did not believe your evidence that he made remarks about wanting to be violent to Elon Musk or any other well known figure which you regarded as serious or disturbing. You did not tell any of his friends about these remarks or suggest that you were disturbed by remarks which he had made, and your evidence about these remarks was totally at odds with what they knew and thought of him despite knowing him very well. You yourself told the police on 9 April that he was left wing, but you said nothing about him holding disturbing conversations or views: you said quite the opposite about him then.

30. I am prepared to assume that you had dealings with Mr Collins, including the alleged conversations on 7 and 8 April 2026, which upset you. But I do not accept your evidence that he said or did anything which led you genuinely to believe that he would be violent towards you in any way, still less to try to kill you as you told the jury. Again, your evidence about these conversations was at odds with the other evidence about Mr Collins and, indeed, your own descriptions of his character to the police on 9 April 2026. The evidence was that he was a gentle soul who was averse to personal conflict and confrontation, so much so that he did not raise the issues in relation to rent for months. There was no suggestion in the evidence that Mr Collins had ever used violence in the past, nor that he did so towards you at any point up to and including when he was attacked by you.

31. Even on your own account, which I do not accept, Mr Collins made no attempt to use violence against you in the conversation in the kitchen on 7 April. Although you claimed that he was holding a knife at the time, you did not suggest that he actually threatened you with it. Although you were in the house together for the best part of a day after that he made no contact with you, still less showed any aggression towards you. When, on your account, you spoke shortly before he left, it was you who raised the issue and Mr Collins did not

even raise his voice when he responded, let alone threaten or use immediate violence. What came across from your evidence as a whole was that over time you had become deeply upset by a realisation that Mr Collins disliked you, and perhaps you believed that he hated you as you told the jury. You also had a strong sense that Mr Collins was ungrateful after all that you felt you had done for him.

32. A life sentence is mandatory in the case of murder. This is not a whole life case and I am therefore also required to set the minimum term of imprisonment which you will serve as part of that sentence.

33. The minimum term which I will specify is not a fixed term after which you will automatically be released. It is the term that must be served before the Parole Board can undertake their first review of the case. They will review the risk that you present at that stage and will consider whether you can properly be released from custody and, if so, on what terms. Unless and until the Parole Board consider that your release is appropriate, you will remain in custody. And if you are released you will be subject to licence for the rest of your life and liable to recall to prison to serve the rest of the life sentence if you breach the terms of your licence.

34. Paragraph 4 of Schedule 21 to the Sentencing Act 2020 provides that the starting point for the minimum term will be 25 years where the offender took a knife or other weapon to the scene intending to commit any offence or to have it available to use as a weapon, and used it in committing the murder. There is no dispute that this starting point applies in your case and I agree.

35. I also agree with the Prosecution that your offending is aggravated by the following factors:

- a. A significant degree of planning or premeditation. Whilst I cannot be sure that you packed the Morrisons bag long before you left 7 Cleve Road on 8 April, I am sure that you had been thinking about how you would go about killing Mr Collins for some time. You did not just devise the plan

which you carried out, including the bag switching and the disposal of the evidence, on the spur of the moment after 2.45pm that day.

- b. The use of excessive violence. Whether or not the attack is classified as “sustained” for the purposes of the statutory aggravating factor it continued after Mr Collins had gone to the ground.
- c. The steps which you took to cover your traces, to conceal the evidence of what you had done and to support your intended alibi.

36. As far as mitigation is concerned:

- a. There is some evidence that there were periods in your childhood which were difficult, although it is also apparent from the evidence that you are from a well-off family and have had a comfortable upbringing.
- b. You have no previous convictions and were well thought of in your friendship group.
- c. You are 23 years of age, and I take that into account. Mr Pawson-Pounds KC has rightly and helpfully reminded me of the Sentencing Guideline on sentencing children and young adults and of the guidance in the authorities including *R v ZA* [2023] EWCA Crim 596 and *R v Thomas* [2025] EWCA Crim 718. He has submitted that your immaturity should be given particular weight but there is no evidence that you were at the material time less mature than would be expected for your chronological age. On the contrary, the evidence of at least one of the witnesses was that you were the most mature member of the friendship group and a leader of the group. You were a property owner and, although intelligence is not necessarily the same thing as maturity, it was very much part of your case on loss of control that you were said to be highly intelligent. You told the court of your interest in philosophy and etymology. Having observed you at trial I do not consider that a lack of maturity beyond what may be inherent in your age significantly contributed to your actions on 8 April.

- d. I am told and I accept that your conduct in custody has been exemplary. I am also pleased to have read this about you, and I hope that you will use your time in custody to reflect on and address what it is about you which led you to commit this offence.
 - e. I have read your letter of apology to the family. It will be for them to consider what they make of it. I view it in the light of what I saw of you during the trial, on which I have already commented.
 - f. Mr Pawson-Pounds has submitted that you are remorseful but, in the light of what I have seen of you in the trial, I am afraid that I have formed the view your regret was and is primarily the result of the situation in which you now find yourself.
37. Your guilty plea came on the seventh day of the trial at a point when it was inevitable that you would be convicted, and after Mr Collins family and friends had been put through the ordeal of revisiting the traumatic events of April this year and witnessing the spectacle of you trying to justify your actions. It has not been suggested by Mr Pawson-Pounds that I should make any reduction in your sentence and I am not willing to do so in any event.
38. Adjusting the starting point for the aggravating and mitigating features of the case I have concluded that the minimum term will be 28 years.
39. Please stand.
40. Zack Coughlan, for the murder of Jamie Collins I therefore sentence you to life imprisonment with a minimum term of 28 years. The time which you have spent on remand, 190 days, will be taken into account. This means that the minimum term which you will serve will be 27 years and 175 days.
41. Take him downstairs please.
42. The victim surcharge applies in this case.

43. I would also like to commend the following police officers for their exemplary work in investigating this case and preparing and presenting the evidence.

- a. **DCI Lucy Edgeworth – Senior Investigating Officer**
- b. **DC Matt Cron - Officer in the Case**
- c. **Rachel Walls - Case Manager**
- d. **Helen Bartlett - CCTV Lead** – for the meticulous review and reconstruction of Mr Coughlan’s movements before and after the murder which helped establish the Timeline relied upon throughout the investigation and trial.
- e. **Megan Lewis - Digital Evidence and Phone Data Analysis** – who was involved in the analysis of mobile phone data and digital material which helped corroborate the Timeline and strengthen the overall evidential picture.
- f. **Ben Taylour:** whose examination of Mr Coughlan's phone and digital material uncovered and evidenced key findings relied upon throughout the investigation and prosecution.

Mr Justice Linden
21 October 2026

