Courts and Tribunals Judiciary

DISTRICT JUDGE (MAGISTRATES' COURTS) ALLMAN

REX

-v-

RAHEEM SHAQUILLE STERLING

SENTENCING REMARKS

Mr Jones appears for the Crown.
Mr Bartfeld KC appears for the Defendant.

Introduction

1. Mr Sterling, you appear before the court for sentence in respect of three offences. You pleaded guilty on 15 September 2026, the first opportunity to do so, and will therefore receive full credit for your guilty pleas, namely a reduction of one third.

2. You are 31 years of age and a man of previous good character. I accept that your character has been positively exemplary. You enjoyed a highly successful professional football career and were widely regarded as a role model for many young people through your achievements and public profile.

3. The offences to which you pleaded guilty are:

    a. Dangerous driving, contrary to section 2 of the Road Traffic Act 1988.
    b. Failing to provide a specimen of blood for analysis, contrary to section 7(6) of the Road Traffic Act 1988.
    c. Possession of a Class C drug, namely nitrous oxide, with intent to wrongfully inhale it, contrary to section 5(1) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

4. The maximum penalties are:

` a. Dangerous driving: 2 years' imprisonment.

b. Failing to provide a specimen: 6 months' imprisonment.

c. Possession of a Class C drug: 2 years' imprisonment.

Facts

5. The facts are as follows:

   a. At approximately 1:10am on 28 May 2026, you arrived at McDonald's, Mondial Way, Hayes, driving your high-performance and high-powered Lamborghini Urus erratically and at speed. You were inhaling nitrous oxide from a pink balloon. Although this incident of driving does not form part of the dangerous driving charged, it constitutes relevant background material and provides important context to the events that occurred some six and a half hours later.

   b. At 7.45am, having not slept, you made a deliberate and entirely selfish decision, to drive your vehicle without adequate sleep and whilst consuming a class C drug, nitrous oxide, exposing a large number of road users to a significant risk of serious harm by the manner of your driving on two motorways and in peak travel time that morning.

   c. At that time, you were travelling anti-clockwise on the M25 near Watford. Traffic was heavy, subject to a 40mph speed restriction and moving at around 30mph. A witness observed you inflating a balloon from a nitrous oxide canister and inhaling from it whilst driving. Over a period of around 30 minutes, that witness saw you weaving within and across lanes, causing other vehicles to brake or take evasive action. At the M40 junction, whilst in lane 1, you abruptly cut back across the carriageway to remain on the M25, causing five or six vehicles to brake heavily. The witness believed a collision was inevitable.

   d. Approximately an hour later, on the M3 near Fleet, your driving continued in a similar manner. You moved between lanes unpredictably, braked heavily, caused a lorry to brake sharply, and drifted into the central reservation, causing gravel and debris to be thrown into the air.

   e. Another witness described your driving as "absolutely horrendous". In an attempt to avoid the danger you presented, she overtook your vehicle and as she did so,

observed you inhaling from a white balloon so large that she believed it obstructed your view of the road ahead. She feared that you would cause a fatal collision and contacted the police.

f. A further witness observed similar driving, saw you inhaling from a balloon, and sounded his horn when you drove directly into his path. His dashcam footage, which I have viewed, shows you coming very close to colliding with the central reservation barrier.

g. Other motorists activated their hazard warning lights to alert road users to the danger. Four separate police forces received reports concerning your driving.

h. At Junction 4A of the M3, you negotiated the exit slip road too quickly, causing a cloud of dust to be thrown up. You then travelled along the A327 before leaving the carriageway and colliding with roadside infrastructure on Minley Road.

i. Your vehicle sustained substantial damage to the tyres and bodywork and was no longer capable of being driven.

j. Police Constable 27596 Scanlan attended. By that stage you had moved from the driver's seat to the passenger seat. You had two nitrous oxide canisters on your lap. A total of six 670g canisters and a packet of balloons were found in the vehicle. When required under section 172 of the Road Traffic Act 1988 to identify the driver, you confirmed that you had been driving. You were arrested at 9:15am.

k. You complied with preliminary roadside breath and saliva tests. Both proved negative for alcohol, cannabis and cocaine.

l. At Basingstoke Police Station, you disclosed that you had a "problem with nitrous oxide". You failed a preliminary impairment test, indicating impairment through drugs. Officers described you as quiet, withdrawn and lethargic, whilst also displaying fidgety behaviour when not engaged in tasks. You informed the healthcare professional that you had used nitrous oxide the previous evening. By virtue of your guilty plea, you accept that you were also consuming nitrous oxide whilst driving that morning.

m. You were required to provide a specimen of blood for analysis. Police Sergeant 26045 Hall repeatedly and correctly explained that the procedure could not be delayed whilst attempts were made to obtain legal advice. Despite those explanations, your responses in essence remained contingent upon first speaking to a solicitor.

n. During interview, you admitted driving the vehicle, remaining awake throughout the night, and being tired and confused. You maintained that you did not fully understand the explanations given concerning the requirement to provide a specimen.

6. I ordered a pre-sentence report because of your lack of previous convictions, cautions or warnings to properly assess your risk of reoffending, motivations behind your offending and the concerns regarding your use of controlled substances.

7. The Crown indicated that whilst the starting point was 18 months' custody for the dangerous driving, the matter could be sentenced in the Magistrates' Court. Your counsel submitted that my powers were sufficient. I indicated that these offences were so serious that I may commit you to the Crown Court for sentence if upon reading the pre-sentence report I was unpersuaded that my powers were sufficient to sentence you at this court.

8. In addition to the helpful submissions of counsel, I have considered the pre-sentence report, character references from your partner, Paige Lee-Hansel, and Alistair Abrahams who has known you since childhood, Adbi Farah who speaks of your commitment and dedication to the RS7 academy which helps talented young football players to maximise their potential, a personal reference from Chris Bird together with a letter on behalf of the Board of Trustees of the Raheem Sterling Foundation and two letters from Banbury Lodge Addiction Treatment Centre.

    a. The report assesses you as presenting a low risk of general reoffending, a low risk of committing a seriously harmful offence, and a low risk to the public. The risk is likely to be greatest when you do not comply with your disqualification from driving, when you are experiencing a decline in mental health and when you are using illicit drugs.

Legal Framework

9. In sentencing you, I must have regard to the statutory purposes of sentencing and to all relevant Sentencing Council guidelines.

10. I have considered the offence-specific guidelines for dangerous driving, failing to provide a specimen for analysis and possession of a controlled drug, together with the general guidelines: overarching principles; imposition of community and custodial sentences, totality and reduction in sentence for a guilty plea.

11. I now determine culpability and harm in accordance with those guidelines.

Dangerous Driving

12. I agree with the parties that this offence falls within Culpability A.

13. You made a deliberate decision to drive whilst impaired by nitrous oxide. I reject the submission that your addiction deprived you of meaningful choice. You obtained the nitrous oxide canisters and balloons in advance and chose to drive whilst using them. The pre-sentence report makes clear that you would ordinarily arrange alternative transport where substance use was anticipated. In the past, you have made the decision not to drive whilst impaired. This offending therefore involved a conscious disregard for the safety of other road users.

14. The driving was prolonged and persistent and a deliberate course of dangerous driving. It continued over a considerable distance and for more than an hour. Numerous members of the public contacted the police because of the danger you presented. The driving involved obviously highly dangerous manoeuvres, you repeatedly drifted across lanes, undertook vehicles, made abrupt lane changes, caused motorists to brake heavily and came close to colliding with the central reservation. The driving was significantly impaired by the consumption of drugs.

15. I am not satisfied that the prosecution's additional suggested culpability factors are present. This was not a case involving prolonged use of a mobile phone or electronic device, and I do not find that the use of the cannisters are akin to such. Nor am I satisfied that the evidence demonstrates excessive or highly inappropriate speed or a distinct period of prolonged inattention separate from the impairment itself.

16. In terms of harm, again the parties agree, as do I, that this is a category 1 case, as damage has been caused to vehicles or property. Significant damage was caused to your black Lamborghini, namely significant damage to the tyres and bodywork.

17. The guideline identifies a starting point of 1 year and 6 months' custody, with a range between 1 year and 2 years' custody. The number and seriousness of the Culpability A factors justify an upward adjustment from that starting point.

18. The Prosecution do not submit that your movement from the driver's seat to the passenger seat was an attempt to avoid identification as the driver. I accept that, when a lawful request was made of you, you immediately confirmed that you had been driving the vehicle. I therefore do not treat your movement within the vehicle as an aggravating factor. Accordingly, I am satisfied that there are no aggravating factors present beyond those already reflected in my assessment of culpability and harm.

19. In mitigation, you have no previous convictions, a clean driving licence, have expressed genuine regret, and acknowledge the potentially catastrophic consequences of your actions.

20. I also attach substantial weight to your personal mitigation. You were awarded an MBE in the 2021 Queen's Birthday Honours for services to racial equality in sport. You established the Raheem Sterling Foundation and the RS7 academy and have contributed significantly to charitable and educational causes. I further accept that nitrous oxide became a maladaptive coping mechanism during a difficult period in your career. Importantly, shortly after your arrest and entirely voluntarily, you engaged with addiction services. You contacted UK Addiction Treatment on 15 June 2026 and entered residential treatment the following day, remaining there for 12 days. The evidence before me demonstrates genuine engagement and meaningful progress.

Failing to Provide a Specimen

21. The Crown submits that this is a higher culpability case because the refusal was deliberate. The defence submits that it falls into lower culpability as the failure falls just short of reasonable excuse as a result of unnecessary and confusing words used by the officer regarding your right to consult with a solicitor.

22. Having viewed the body-worn video footage, I reject the defence submission. The officer accurately explained the law and repeated those explanations several times. You had no solicitor instructed at the time and were attempting to have one located through your girlfriend. The officer correctly informed you that the procedure could not be delayed on that basis. Whilst, you consented to providing a blood specimen at one point, when asked to confirm your consent, it became contingent on speaking with a solicitor and you didn't provide that consent required.

23. You had already provided other samples and knew that you had been consuming nitrous oxide. I am satisfied that this was a deliberate refusal and therefore a case of high culpability.

24. The offence involves greater harm. The extent of the impairment demonstrated by your driving and the failed impairment tests was significant.

25. The offence therefore falls within Category 1, carrying a starting point of 12 weeks' custody and a range from a high-level community order to 26 weeks' custody.

26. Whilst the poor standard of driving, collision and traffic conditions are aggravating features of this offence, they have already been reflected in my sentence for Dangerous Driving and I avoid double counting them.

27. The mitigation is as previously identified.

Possession of a class C drug

28. This offence falls within Category 3. The starting point is a Band A fine with a range from a conditional discharge to a medium-level community order.

29. Having watched the body worn footage of your arrest, I am not at all satisfied that you attempted to conceal the canisters from police and therefore find no aggravating factors. The mitigation is as already outlined.

Sentence

30. These offences are so serious that neither a fine nor a community order can be justified. The custodial threshold is clearly crossed, and custody is unavoidable.

31. For the offence of dangerous driving, the number and seriousness of the Culpability A factors justify an upward adjustment from the 18 month starting point. However, that is tempered by the fact that the only damage which was caused was to your own vehicle. I also bear in mind that there are no other aggravating factors and that you have substantial mitigation.

32. Applying the totality guidelines, I am satisfied in your case that concurrent sentences are appropriate. As such, I treat the dangerous driving as the lead offence and I make an upward adjustment from the notional sentence that would apply were I sentencing you only for that matter, to reflect the additional criminality disclosed by the other offences.

33. However, in your case there is significant and substantial mitigation. That, in my judgment applies significant downward pressure on the sentence which otherwise would have been appropriate. Balancing the aggravating and mitigating factors the shortest sentence this court could have properly imposed in this case in respect of the dangerous driving charge had there been a trial would have been 18 months' imprisonment. Affording you full credit for your guilty plea, the sentence is reduced to 12 months' imprisonment.

34. For failing to provide a specimen of blood, the appropriate sentence following a trial would have been 3 months' imprisonment. After allowing full credit for your early guilty plea, that becomes 2 months' imprisonment, which will run concurrently.

35. I impose no separate penalty for the possession of nitrous oxide. That offending has been fully reflected in the sentence for dangerous driving.

36. Section 277A of the Sentencing Act 2020 requires me to suspend a sentence of not more than 12 months' imprisonment unless one of the statutory exceptions applies. I am satisfied that no exception applies in your case.

37. Accordingly, I suspend the sentence of 12 months' imprisonment for a period of 18 months.

38. The lead therapist at Banbury Lodge considers that ongoing therapeutic intervention would be beneficial. However, the Probation Service assesses that you have addressed the principal risk factors and do not require further rehabilitative intervention through probation.

39. I therefore impose a single requirement for the purposes of punishment, adjusted to reflect the custodial sentence already imposed. You must complete 100 hours of unpaid work under the supervision of the Probation Service.

40. If you fail to comply with the requirements of this order, or commit a further offence during the operational period, you may be returned to court, and the suspended sentence must be activated unless it would be unjust to do so.

Disqualification and ancillary orders

41. I must disqualify you from driving. I have considered both the offence-specific guidelines and the Driving Disqualification guideline.

42. Having balanced the seriousness of the offending and the need to protect the public, against your previous good driving history, the favourable probation assessment, the period during which you were prevented from driving as a condition of bail, and the impact of disqualification upon your rehabilitation, I conclude that a period of disqualification of 24 months is fair and proportionate and will be imposed concurrently for both driving offences.

43. Dangerous driving attracts a mandatory extended re-test. You will remain disqualified until you have successfully undertaken that test. If you drive on a road whilst disqualified, you will commit a further imprisonable offence.

44. As a consequence of your conviction for failing to provide a specimen, you are deemed a high-risk offender and must also satisfy the DVLA that you are medically fit to drive before your licence can be restored.

45. Finally, the nitrous oxide canisters shall be forfeited and destroyed, and I order you to pay a victim surcharge of £187 and prosecution costs of £85. A collection order will be made. Payment is to be made in full by 16 December 2026.

25th November 2026