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'No other family should suffer like McIlveens'

By Maeve Connolly

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CROSS-community work taking place in Ballymena must continue to be built upon to ensure no other family suffers like the McIlveens, political figures have said.

Three young men from the Co Antrim town were this week convicted of the 2006 sectarian murder of Michael McIlveen.

They will be sentenced in coming weeks along with a fourth man who had already admitted his part in the violent attack on the Catholic teenager in an alleyway.

Jeff Colin Lewis (19) of Rossdale, Christopher Francis Kerr (22) from Carnduff Drive, and Aaron Cavana Wallace (20) of Moat Road face life sentences and will find out in April the minimum tariff they must serve before being considered for release.

Mervyn Wilson Moon (20) from Douglas Terrace had pleaded guilty to murder earlier in the trial, while the jury at Antrim Crown Court on Tuesday found 18-year-old Christopher Andrew McLeister from Knockeen Crescent guilty of manslaughter and Paul Edward David Henson (18) from Condiere Avenue guilty of affray and

criminal damage.

The judge will take a number of factors into account in sentencing, such as an individual's age at the time of the offence, previous criminal record and whether or not they entered a guilty plea.

New legislation passed in recent years provides for increased penalties for offences motivated by hostility towards a person's race, religion, sexual orientation or disability. It is not known what impact this may have on sentencing.

SDLP North Antrim assembly member Declan O'Loan last night said the "strong" and clear verdicts would help heal wounds and allow people to get on with their lives.

"Three murder convictions, one manslaughter conviction and one confession add up to a strong, clear outcome" and "should bring some comfort to Michael's mother Gina and the wider family", he said.

"The verdicts make it very clear that this was a vicious sectarian murder, yet we all remember the widespread revulsion shared by the whole community at the time of Michael's death. It is in part due to that revulsion that Ballymena is now a quieter, less tense place."

The families of those convicted have also been "devastated" and "need and deserve the support of the community", Mr O'Loan said.

North Antrim Sinn Fein assembly member Daithi McKay said the McIlveen family had "conducted themselves in a very dignified manner".

“This murder not only had a devastating impact on Michael McIlveen’s friends and family but an entire community and it is vitally important that justice is seen to be done.

“Sectarianism is a terrible scourge on our society. In the immediate aftermath of the murder schools from different backgrounds in the area came together and many people became involved in work to try and tackle sectarianism in Ballymena.

“This work should continue and be built upon to ensure that such a terrible crime never takes place here again.”

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