

Criminal Justice Inspection
Northern Ireland
a better justice system for all



Conference Spec 2012

'The future of
victim and
witness care:
from aspiration
to reality'

Welcome from the Chief Inspector



Dr Michael Maguire

I am delighted once again to welcome you to this special edition of *The Spec* dedicated to CJJ's Annual Conference.

One of the key objectives of the Inspectorate is to provide independent scrutiny of the outcomes for and treatment of, users of the justice system. The focus of this year's conference was the care and treatment of victims and witnesses. This was on the back of a major CJJ inspection published in December 2011 into this important area. That report and this conference demonstrates our commitment to putting the needs of victims and witnesses at the centre of our work. The conference contained presentations from the key players within the justice system and I would like to thank the Minister of Justice David Ford MLA, Matt Baggott Chief Constable and George Hamilton Assistant Chief Constable of the PSNI, and Barra McGrory Director of Public

Prosecutions for their support for the Inspectorate and their contributions to the conference.

There is a clear commitment across all organisations to make a difference to the experience of victims and witness as they progress through the different justice organisations. As with many policy areas the challenge is turning this good intent into operational reality. This is all the more complex given the constraints of our adversarial legal system on the experience of victims and witnesses. The discussion groups on the day offered many practical suggestions for improving the service on the ground. I hope the conference provides further momentum to make a difference.

Dr Michael Maguire
Chief Inspector of Criminal
Justice in Northern Ireland

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Dr Michael Maguire addresses the CJI Conference 2012

Victims and witnesses and their needs will not go away says Chief Inspector



'Moving from a criminal justice system to a criminal justice service will provide an important litmus test for the success of devolution.'

Dr Maguire, Chief Inspector, CJI

The Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland Dr Michael Maguire chose to highlight the care of victims and witness care in the Criminal Justice System as "it touches on an extremely vulnerable group who enter into the justice system through no fault of their own and often come out of the experience the worse for wear."

He began by saying that the reality is that despite the best intentions of the justice system many of the difficulties raised by victims and witnesses have remained the same for a number of years. He noted that in the recent CJI Inspection report on this subject the needs of victims were depressingly similar to what had been heard before. The need for:-

- A single point of contact and access to regular information and updates;
- Speedy case progression;
- Access to specialist support services;
- Meaningful information and updates;
- Consistency of service across the justice organisations and indeed within the same organisation on occasion; and
- To have equal rights and status as others in the justice system.

Systematic issues

Dr Maguire pointed out that some of the systematic issues impact on the capacity of the organisations to respond appropriately.

“It seems to me that until and unless we consider this issue from the perspective of the victim or the witness in a meaningful way the problems will continue to be the same.

He stated that “putting the victim at the heart of the justice system” is no longer a reality of the situation and that it should never have been the case....” despite many policies, practices and procedures and initiatives in dealing with victims and witnesses, the goals of the justice organisations do not have – at their core – the effective treatment of victims and witnesses.

“There is, therefore, at the heart of the discussion a core tension that needs to be recognised and acknowledged. Our system of justice ensures that once an offence has been reported to the police and referred to the prosecution service, decision making and the pursuit of a prosecution is taken out of the hands of the victim and placed in the hands of independent prosecutors.”

Managing fragmented nature of accountability

Dr Maguire continued, “It is only by changing front-line behaviours that many of these issues will be addressed.

“From the perspective of the victim the justice system can be a cold and unforgiving place. It is a caution to those who feel that the answers to families of crime lie in the judicial process.”

The Chief Inspector commented that the fragmented nature of accountability within the justice system does not help in achieving a “corporate” and systematic response.

“The Criminal Justice Board is essentially a policy grouping that increasingly finds its agenda consumed with delivery issues over which it has no direct responsibility. As we move further into devolution the delivery of different more positive outcomes will be an increasing requirement. Is persuasion enough to achieve change – I am not sure that it is. We cannot avoid the fractured accountability – but we need to manage it.”

Dr Maguire stated that there was a second challenge for the senior management teams of the different justice organisations.

“It has often been said that delivery of CJI, and indeed, other recommendations requires more resources – in some cases this is correct. In other cases, however, it is changing the ways in which business is undertaken that will make a difference rather than additional resources.

“For example, current resources can be based on an historical allocation rather than a planned approach to how services should be delivered. In this context, I can understand why additional resources would be called for – but such an argument is not likely to gain much traction. What should be stopped in order to meet a new agenda and a new way of doing business?

“Also, a silo-based approach to decision making can mean there is insufficient space given to alternative perspectives when making decisions. This is why CJI have called for the implementation of “victims champions” at a senior level within organisations to ensure that the perspective of those on the receiving end of services is heard when decisions are being made.

“In addition, many of the problems identified in our work do not relate to what is being done (people are contacted, letters are sent etc...) but HOW it is being done. At a basic level are we treating people in the way in which we would like to be treated?”

Criminal justice service

Dr Maguire acknowledged that success is different for each organisation but challenged them to look at it from the victim's point of view.

He said, "Providing solutions to the problem from the perspective of the victim is difficult because it challenges the way in which business has been done in the past. It challenges the structural barriers to co-operation; it challenges the cultures and behaviours, which can be focused on the needs of organisations rather than those of individuals. It also challenges the allocation of resources within organisations and the extent to which they are focused on the right areas to make a difference.

"This in essence is what we mean when we talk about the need to move from a criminal justice system to a criminal justice service. A service, which understands what victims and witnesses need when they come into contact with it and ensures that its people, processes, structures and behaviours are directed towards trying to meet those needs.

"This means doing things in different ways. The recent inspection highlighted that a more consistent approach was needed, there were issues around the allocation of lead responsibility; communication often lacked empathy, and the most unforgiving concern was in relation to delays.

"There is no easy fix. As the report shows the justice organisations have worked hard to address many of the recommendations in previous reports. We saw many examples of excellent practice across the justice organisations and the feedback from victims and witnesses on this practice was positive. Moreover, as we have seen many of the issues that impact on a victim's experience of the criminal justice system are outside the control of individual justice organisations."

Recommendations

Referring to the inspection report, Dr Maguire listed the six strategic recommendations:

- Statutory time limits and statutory case progression;
- The establishment of Witness Care Units for those who have to go to court – in effect a "one-stop-shop" for those going to court to give evidence;
- The creation of "Victims Champions" who can bring a perspective to senior decision making – they should report directly to the Minister on victims and witness issues;
- That the DoJ further develop victim advocacy services – this is particularly important for those who have difficulty accessing criminal justice services or who need specialist assistance for reasons of vulnerability;
- The amalgamation of all post conviction victim information schemes under the supervision of the Probation Service to avoid the confusion and overlap between the work of prisons and probation and provide economies of scale.

"These recommendations will not address entirely the issues and difficulties raised. They are I believe an important step forward in improving performance.

"Victims and witnesses and their needs will not go away – moving from a criminal justice system to a criminal justice service will provide an important litmus test for the success of devolution," he concluded.



QUOTES OF THE DAY

“Reoffending and the need for early intervention are critical issues that need resources and are critical issues for the First and Deputy First Minister and the Justice Minister.”

Matt Baggott, Chief Constable

“The PPS is committed to ensuring that its policies and practices recognise and prioritise the position of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system thereby bringing about improvements in the services, information and care that they receive.”

Barra McGrory, Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland

“From the perspective of the victim the justice system can be a cold and unforgiving place.”

Dr Maguire, Chief Inspector, CJI

“I want to see a multi-agency programme of work, which I’m determined to oversee, to deliver the changes that will be necessary to achieve a step change in performance.”

David Ford MLA, Minister of Justice

“Through the policing community strategy, individual officers will be held to account for treatment of victims and witnesses.”

George Hamilton, Assistant Chief Constable, Criminal Justice

“This is an unprecedented opportunity now to capitalise on the devolution dividend by working together in partnership to deliver high quality services tailored to our own needs.”

David Ford MLA, Minister of Justice

“Poor service can have a devastating effect - potentially compounding the distress and anxiety of the crime.”

Barra McGrory, Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland

“We have to hold people properly to account, but it’s also about people caring about what they do and making personal and professional policing a reality.”

George Hamilton, Assistant Chief Constable, Criminal Justice

“Victims and witnesses and their needs will not go away.”

Dr Maguire, Chief Inspector, CJI

David Ford,
MLA, Minister
of Justice

The Minister of Justice, David Ford MLA, took the opportunity to discuss the issue of victim and witness care in the Criminal Justice System and the way that his Department was approaching this.

He noted that since the devolution of justice; “We’ve an unprecedented opportunity to work together in a different way across sectors and even across political divides to take a fundamental look at the way in which we treat victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system as a whole.

“It is a devolution dividend, as never before have we been able to give such a shared and sustained focus across the organisations.”

He welcomed the involvement of the Justice Committee in devoting considerable amounts of time, in the current session, into an inquiry into the services for victims and witnesses of crime. He stated, “this is helping us shape a new five year strategy for victims and witnesses, which I plan to publish later this year.

“This is a genuine example of partnership and the work already completed by the department has helped guide the committee on their deliberations and will feed back into the department.”

The Minister noted that the recent thematic inspection report by CJI would have substantial influence on how this important agenda should be taken forward.

Mr Ford also took the opportunity to highlight the significant partnership with colleagues in the voluntary sector who have forwarded a range of views of how improvements can be made and how, by working collaboratively, the views of victims can be heard.

Minister highlights the need for reform

“The report published by CJI makes clear that the time has come for radical thinking and more fundamental reform.”

David Ford MLA, Minister of Justice



The Minister said there were a number of clear themes emerging:

- the need to communicate better with victims and ensure they get the information they need;
- ensuring additional support for those who need it and identify those needs earlier and at the appropriate time;
- that those victims and communities who have been impacted by crime have the opportunity to have their voices heard;
- the need to speed up the entire criminal justice process so that victims are not left feeling that their life is somehow on hold waiting on the legal process to work through.

Delay

The Minister recognised that the issue of delay is closely connected to the work done to improve the experience of victims and witnesses.

“When I became Justice Minister, I said I was determined to speed up the justice system in Northern Ireland by tackling the issue of delay. It has a harmful impact on the system and most particularly on the people who come into contact with it involuntarily.

“It increases the burden on victims and witnesses, it wastes system resources and it reduces the community confidence in the system; that’s why tackling delay is a top priority.”

The Minister noted that this was a hugely complex issue and appreciated there was no easy answer.

Certainly there was some progress, but overall he was disappointed that the real step change that was needed had not taken place.

Statutory time limits

“The report published by CJI makes clear that the time has come for radical thinking and more fundamental reform. I agree with that assessment and note that the report concludes statutory time limits will provide the necessary framework for this reform.

“I will be looking at how we make progress in this area. It would certainly be radical and I’m under no illusion about the impact this will have. It may be the case that the statutory time limits are necessary in order to ensure there is sufficient focus on progressing cases through the process quickly.”

Regardless of this, the Minister noted that they still had to deal with the structural and systematic reforms, which are necessary to improve performance.

“I want to see a multi-agency programme of work, which I’m determined to oversee, to deliver the changes that will be necessary to achieve a step change in performance. “

The Minister emphasised the tremendous efforts made by many of the agencies who were present and that they should be proud of the achievements that have been made, particularly around charge cases as well as a number of useful initiatives which have been delivered:

- streamlined files for low level criminal cases;
- new guidance on building prosecution files;
- central teams to provide free charge advice;
- out-of-hours phone lines providing prosecutorial advice;
- gatekeeper service to scrutinise all files prior to submission to PPS;
- development of four multi-agency regional performance improvement teams.



“It may be the case that the statutory time limits are necessary in order to ensure there is sufficient focus on progressing cases through the process quickly.”

David Ford MLA, Minister of Justice

Underlying causes of delay

The Minister took the opportunity to set out his approach to the second phase of the programme, which will focus on the underlying causes of delay.

“I have launched consultations on measures on early guilty pleas and on reform of committal. Early guilty pleas have the potential to speed up processing times. They have the potential to spare victims the ordeal of preparing for trial and potentially face the defendant in court and reduce the burden on scarce justice resources and incentivisation through sentencing policy.

“I’d like to remove the right to cross examine witnesses on committal. This must be a terrible experience especially as a first run and it’s only right to propose its removal.”

The Minister is seeking other views on how to reform committal, for instance, the direct transfer of indictable cases to the crown court.

Looking ahead, he noted that he would be reviewing how criminal cases are initiated, that there would be greater use of video-link technology and that he will continue to look for ways to deliver further improvements.

Long-term commitment to reform

The Minister reiterated that there is no quick fix solution but there is a need for a long commitment to reform right across the criminal justice system.

“Delay is an issue which cuts across all organisational boundaries. We all need to work together closely and in partnership to achieve the improvements we need. Other jurisdictions have made progress as a result of interconnected multi-agency approaches, supporting comprehensive systematic reforms.

“Working together I’m confident that we can achieve this.”

The Minister noted other work he had commissioned to improve the victim’s journey through the criminal justice system:

“The Minister recognised that the issue of delay is closely connected to the work done to improve the experience of victims and witnesses.”

David Ford MLA, Minister of Justice



- consultation on how to improve the use of victim impact statements and victim impact reports
- published feasibility study on the introduction of community impact statements

In response to a number of CJJ recommendations he noted that:

- victims’ champions had been appointed across the criminal justice organisations and that he will be meeting with them shortly to discuss ‘their role and weaving the needs of victims and witnesses into the fabric of their organisation’;
- the establishment of witness care units and that work had already commenced and been taken forward by PSNI and the PPS;
- the new witness intermediary scheme plan, which was to be introduced in the coming months to allow vulnerable witnesses to give their best evidence with suitable support.

The Minister also made mention of the planning for the introduction of the forthcoming EU directive on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime.

“All of this work will lay a strong foundation for a new strategy.

“This is an unprecedented opportunity now to capitalise on the devolution dividend by working together in partnership to deliver high quality services tailored to our own needs.

“I look forward to continuing to work closely as we continue to progress in the direction we all wish to go,” concluded the Justice Minister.



Barra McGrory, Director of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland



“Close interagency work will help to improve policy and through joined-up training and information sharing we can improve policy making and evaluation of the effectiveness of our work.”

Barra McGrory, Director of Public Prosecutions

A balancing act

Barra McGrory, Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland outlined how the PPS is working to balance the needs of victims and witnesses and the public interest.

Mr McGrory began by thanking CJI for the invitation to address the conference in his first public event since he came to the post. He expressed his delight at the appointment to the position of Director of the PPS at this important time of change.

“Accurate decision-making must remain the essence of what we as prosecutors do, but we also assume other important duties and responsibilities. It is critical that we maintain a similar high quality of service in all the interactions we have with victims and witnesses and that we ensure that the wider public has confidence in the work we do.”

Recognising victims

Mr McGrory outlined the PPS’ commitment to meeting the needs and expectations of victims and witnesses, not just because it is the right thing to do but also comes from the understanding that many victims are also witnesses and without witnesses, there is no evidence and without evidence there can be no prosecution.

“There is a high level of awareness across the criminal justice system of the impact of crime upon the victim having to engage with criminal justice system. We as

prosecutors recognise how traumatic an experience that involvement in a crime can bring for many people and we do realise that the way in which those involved in the criminal justice system treat victims can have a profound effect on how those people will cope with the experience of crime.

Balancing act

Mr McGrory illustrated the difficulty for prosecutors balancing often competing rights in the greater public interest and the importance of a clear understanding of the role of prosecutors in the criminal justice system.

“It is important that the role of the prosecutor as a minister for justice and the consequent constraints placed upon us are properly understood to ensure that sometimes unrealistic expectations are not created and that misunderstandings are avoided.

“Our system of criminal justice requires that the PPS acts on behalf of the public and in the public interest representing views of society as a whole and not just on behalf of the individual victim. Therefore, the prosecutor cannot be the victims legal representative in a way that a defendant is represented, usually by a solicitor and sometimes controversially by two barristers.

“I focus on this because I believe all agencies, which represent and support the interests of victims and

witnesses have a responsibility to support our work and to ensure that the proper role of the prosecutor is explained to victims and witness where opportunity arises.

“I also caution them not to raise expectations of victims and witnesses to a level that cannot be met either by prosecutors or the current system of criminal justice.”

Maintain high standards

Of course the limitations placed on the role of the prosecutor do not mean that victims should not receive a proper standard of service and Mr McGrory explained how the PPS ensure high standards are maintained.

“It is clear that good standards of service and information provision can assist a person in their engagement with the criminal justice system, while poor service can have a devastating effect - potentially compounding the distress and anxiety of the crime.

“The establishment of Community Liaison Teams were perhaps the most demonstrable change in the service since the setting up of the PPS in 2005. These teams were developed to meet the needs of victims and witnesses in magistrates’ courts and the benefits of local staff from the victims and witnesses own community have been manifold.

“It is important that the role of the prosecutor as a minister for justice and the consequent constraints placed upon us are properly understood to ensure that sometimes unrealistic expectations are not created and that misunderstandings are avoided.”

Barra McGrory, Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland



“The PPS is committed to ensuring that victims are kept informed in relation to the progress of a case in which they are involved and in addition to providing case progression information. The PPS recently conducted a review of the 8000 letters of correspondence it sends each month. This project aims to improve communication with victims and witnesses and has almost concluded.”

Mr McGrory went on to detail further measures the PPS has taken which minimise difficulties experienced by victims and witnesses. These include the use of IT to improve the delivery of information, the development of policy and increased training to ensure that service delivery remains effective and relevant to needs of victims.

“Close interagency work will help to improve policy and through joined-up training and information sharing we can improve policy making and evaluation of the effectiveness of our work.”

Proactive approach

Mr McGrory concluded by stating that the PPS would continue to be proactive in developing a way forward to address the needs of victims and witnesses, reflecting on the importance of the recent appointment of a victims’ champion, which he said, “will serve as a further public statement of my commitment and will further enhance public confidence in our work.

“In my first couple of months as Director of the PPS, I have seen firsthand the expertise, care and professionalism that my colleagues bring to their work. We don’t work in isolation and we have, to date, and will continue to work with partner agencies to establish the best possible local solution taking account of experience in other jurisdictions.

“The PPS is committed to ensuring that its policies and practices recognise and prioritise the position of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system thereby bringing about improvements in the services, information and care that they receive.

“This is becoming more difficult in context of increasing workloads and decreasing budgets, but it is a challenge that I am personally determined to meet.”

Practical steps to be taken

Chief Constable Matt Baggott gave attendees at the CJJ Conference an overview of the progress to date and the challenges facing the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

Relentless optimism

“When asked what the key attribute is for any leader in Northern Ireland, I have to say relentless optimism. Actually, we have a right to be relentlessly optimistic rather than frustrated.

“A few years ago most of us felt frustrated by the size and scale of the task facing us. But in the past two years, and especially in the last 12 months we have proved that increased confidence and value for money are not incompatible.”

The Chief Constable highlighted the work undertaken together with the Public Prosecution



Matt Baggott, Chief Constable

Service, the use of telephone cautioning and the streamlining of case files, which have resulted in the biggest increase in confidence that the Service has ever had. This he said was due to the fact the people now perceived the Service to be dealing with things that mattered in a more radical manner.

Increasing efficiency

“We have grasped the recession and the resulting budget reductions as an opportunity to improve and become more efficient. If we don’t get more efficient we won’t have the money to spend on quality.



The critical institutions in the criminal justice system will not survive if fine tuning just rejiggs the model.

Matt Baggott, Chief Constable

“We’ve done a huge amount of work on our core management system, streamlining it through a root and branch overhaul, which has enabled us to answer 500 more calls every month. That’s 500 more people who have experience of quality as the system becomes more efficient.

“We need to have another root and branch look at the structures so that we don’t get stuck on traditional ideas of independence and thus compromise quality and the more personal approach.”

Future challenges

The Chief Constable outlined how for the first time the PSNI has a proper business model that deals with long term issues rather than the here and now. He detailed the challenges facing the organisation over the next two to three years.

“The challenge for us is three-fold. Firstly, there is a cultural challenge. We are not involved in vested interests but in risk aversion. We have taken tentative and very meaningful steps, but our organisations are naturally risk averse.

“But we are in competition with people who want to take us back to the past and the only way forward is to have confidence in the institutions that matter. The critical institutions in the criminal justice system will not survive if fine tuning just rejigs the model. I’d rather be redesigning the model, but we have to be realistic and question ourselves around the culture of risk aversion.

“We can rejig the system, provide better information and incentivise, but we are still feeding the system with too many victims.

“The importance of social justice is vital when you map where victims come from. It is the areas of high deprivation, disadvantage and social inequality. We now have a way under Community Safety Partnerships to address why the system creaks in the first place, but we cannot do this in

isolation of the big issues. Reoffending and the need for early intervention are critical issues that need resources and are critical issues for the First and Deputy First Minister and the Justice Minister.”

Speaking about the PSNI’s approach going forward the Chief Constable talked about how it should take practical and necessary steps. Putting victims first he said was practical and necessary. In addition, he called for a streamlined, proportionate approach that saw serious issues dealt with seriously, while other issues could be handled in a community context by trusted people without bringing it into the system.

He concluded by thanking CJI for the opportunity to speak and welcomed the encouraging rise in confidence that showed that they were doing the things that really matter.



“In the past two years, and especially in the last 12 months we have proved that increased confidence and value for money are not incompatible.”

Matt Baggott, Chief Constable

The real challenge



ACC George Hamilton

Having recently returned from Strathclyde Police, Assistant Chief Constable George Hamilton shared his perspectives on the changes the Service has made to address the needs of victim and witness treatment.

“The fundamental role of the Police in the criminal justice system is not difficult to explain. It is to preserve life, prevent harm, deter crime and bring to justice the perpetrators of harm. The real challenge is how we do that.”

Aspiration to reality

Mr Hamilton described the need for a human rights approach that was in the DNA of the criminal justice system and was intrinsic to how all work was done.

“The lesson that we have learnt in the PSNI over the past 10 years is that we need the Human Rights Act and principles as the operating framework in which to act. The challenge is to balance the convention rights and also how we interact with victims and witnesses in a way that is proportionate and legitimate.

“We are the first point of contact in the criminal justice system for victims and getting this contact right is crucial as it sets the tone for ongoing engagement with the police and the wider system.

“Investment in the right people and local contact centre hubs as well as upgrading the IT systems has helped. We are working to better address the needs of individual victims within the wider criminal justice system – recognising that a one size fits all approach doesn’t fit.”

Mr Hamilton highlighted the tension between needing to standardise and rationalise processes and systems and being flexible enough to keep a personal approach. There is still a need to recognise individual needs and to have interventions that are appropriate to individual victims.

“There is already tangible evidence of the progress made with the telephone diversion scheme which sees an officer dealing with incidence there and then rather than getting bogged down in the system. This radical thinking has resulted in 96% of victims stating that they were satisfied or very satisfied with this scheme tailored to meet the needs of victims.”

Scottish perspective

While discussions in Northern Ireland have been ongoing about reductions on statutory time limits, the Scottish system has already implemented tight time limits.



The panel of speakers

“These limits create a discipline and innovation around police and prosecutions by reducing delays and could be significant in moving us from aspiration to reality.

“I have come back from Scotland to an organisation that has changed massively. The progress made especially in the last 18 months is hugely significant across the criminal justice system and especially in the working relationship with the PPS.”

Holding to account

Moving onto the next level, said Mr Hamilton is about leadership and the clarification of priorities across the organisation.

“We have to hold people properly to account, but it’s also about people caring about what they do and making personal and professional policing a reality.

“Through the Policing Community Strategy, individual officers will be held to account for treatment of victims and witnesses. The CJJ report in relation to care and treatment of victims and witnesses reinforced the need to ensure they are the centre of our focus as we take people through their journey in the criminal justice system.



“The fundamental role of the police in the criminal justice system is not difficult to explain. It is to preserve life, prevent harm, deter crime and bring to justice the perpetrators of harm. The real challenge is how we do that.”

**Assistant Chief Constable, Criminal Justice
– George Hamilton**

“The PSNI and I are committed to working together with the criminal justice family, Non-Governmental Organisations and community organisations to develop and improve our services.

“Much work has been done, but much remains to ensure speedy, visible and proportionate justice.”

Discussion and Feedback

As part of the 2012 Conference CJI wanted to remind those present what the experience of a victim can be like. Mr Brendan McGuigan took the opportunity to show several small videos of those who had been affected in the recent years. He then read several comments, which the CJI had heard from the victims. This had helped them shape the final report.

Susan Reid, Chief Executive of Victims Support NI managed a discussion and feedback session, which was used to identify practical applications to take forward in improving the experience of victims and witnesses.

Outlined below are some of the comments noted.

What we need to do is minimise the negative impacts. This is about delivering an experience that people know about, someone to hold their hand throughout the process with a single source and point of contact. The Witness Care Units might not be the be all and end all but they are a good starting point and something that can be further developed.

The role of community and voluntary sector and ensuring it is coordinated and broadened where necessary. There needs to be a planned approach to ensure that these vital groups support the criminal justice system in what they are trying to deliver, while also ensuring that quality assurance and benchmarks for the services from statutory agencies and also voluntary agencies are implemented.

It's about breaking the cycle of what's being done at the moment and thinking outside box. Thinking about the perspective of victims and what they want to see rather than trying to fix what's already there.

The key theme is the human contact. While witness care units are not a panacea we would hope that when built upon they would create a system that victims really want.

The other danger, we identified are the skills and abilities of staff dealing with victims. This has to be top notch and doesn't fall to just a small group of people. More people in organisations need to have these skills. We need to ensure that staff in all organisations that have dealings with victims and witness have their skills and abilities are honed to a very high standard.

There is a need to speed up the system and a need for realism regarding the changes needed to do that. We addressed the adversarial system and how to reconcile the core tension at the heart of the need to treat victims sensitively. What is needed to deal with the adversarial system is for victims to be spoken to properly and sensitively and for the information to be there. It isn't just about having someone who is sympathetic but having the right content there as well.



Susan Reid Chief Executive Victim Support Northern Ireland

Also, if something goes wrong, there needs to be a proper system to deal with the person that is aggrieved so that the person feels they have been properly dealt with even if they aren't happy with the outcome.

There is a need for collaborative working, especially as evidenced today which is working well between the Police and PPS. We felt there is a need for the judiciary to be involved as well.



Michael Fuller, Chief Inspector, HMCPST

There would be a benefit in public education in the role of the PPS that would address the complexities and the realism of expectations of what the PPS can and cannot do.

Victims complained bitterly about delay and within that delay procedure what the communications was. Witness care units are one proposal to improve that but also giving victims greater updates and the PSNI proposal of regular updates and officers flagged when updates are due.

The use of special measures, for instance video links and whether it could reduce the burden on the victims. There were issues as the defense has raised the issue of video as not being as pertinent as having a witness in court.

It is essential that all victims' advocates should have some form of direct channel of communication with victims – very important. They should develop an internal communications group for their organisations in terms of a case for change so that there is consensus built up in organisations and agencies as to why we are doing this rather than it being an imperative or directive-based approach.

Victims are not a homogenous group – they are unique, diverse and we need to have enough agility within our treatment of victims to make sure that is respected.

Susan Reid concluded by stating that all agencies must, “maintain ways to continually view the system through the perspective of the victims and witnesses as a test of what its like and how many interventions are coming at you.

“There is an absolute risk that we all design from our organisations out rather than looking at the system or service from the point of view of the victim or witness.”





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