

Meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice system

An inspection of how well the police,
the Crown Prosecution Service and
the Probation Service support victims
of crime

Contents

Foreword	1
Summary	4
Introduction	9
Victim research	14
National and local oversight arrangements	18
Leadership and governance	18
The investigation stage	23
Crime reporting	23
Investigations	28
The prosecution stage	33
National file standard	33
Communication	36
Court	42
The post-conviction stage	47
The Victim Contact Scheme	47
Annex A: Summary of victims' rights	55
Annex B: Inspections and reports	57
Annex C: Responsibilities of criminal justice bodies	64
Annex D: Reasons for cases not complying with the national file standard	68
Annex E: Victims actively participating in the Victim Contact Scheme	69

Foreword

This inspection aimed to assess how well the criminal justice system meets the needs of victims, from when a victim reports an offence to after the offender has been convicted.

We found that the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Probation Service all recognise how important it is to meet the needs of victims. Officers and staff from the three bodies told us they are committed to improving the quality of service and support to victims. But we found that they couldn't always invest the time and attention needed at every stage of a case. This was often due to a combination of competing demands, high workloads and lack of experience.

We found that, rather than trying to meet the individual needs of victims, the police, the CPS and the Probation Service focused more on whether they were complying with the 12 rights set out in the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) (the Victims' Code).

The Victims' Code was designed to improve the quality of service to victims of crime. It sets out the minimum standard of service that criminal justice bodies and other organisations must provide to victims in England and Wales. We found that the police, the CPS and the Probation Service didn't always meet this standard. The focus on complying with the rights under the Victims' Code has led to an emphasis on process rather than quality of service and has driven some unhelpful behaviours. We found that it doesn't automatically follow that complying with the Victims' Code means the needs of victims are met.

We found that the police, the CPS and the Probation Service had policies, procedures and guidance in place for staff to comply with the Victims' Code. But police officers, prosecutors and witness care officers didn't always understand what they were required to do under the Victims' Code.

We found that all three bodies did, in some cases, meet the requirements of the Victims' Code. But even when they complied with the Victims' Code, they didn't always provide a good service to victims. We found that the police, the CPS and the Probation Service didn't always consider the needs of victims.

We saw some examples of good communication between the three bodies. We also saw some examples of good communication with victims and good victim care. But communication both between the police and the CPS and with victims wasn't consistent. The service they provided often fell short of the minimum standard.

The police, the CPS and the Probation Service face difficulties due to a lack of joined-up digital systems. Joined-up digital systems would allow better information-sharing across the criminal justice system.

The police, the CPS and the Probation Service need to improve how they measure the quality of their work with victims. To do this, all three bodies need to develop clear performance frameworks. These should include assessments of the quality of services and victim satisfaction, which are evidence based and properly tested.

The performance measures the police, the CPS and the Probation Service use are based on whether they comply with the Victims' Code. All three bodies told us that it was difficult to measure some of the rights in the Victims' Code in a meaningful way.

The process of measuring compliance with the Victims' Code can be complex. The victim's right to be given information about the investigation and prosecution is a good example. The right applies at all stages of the investigation and prosecution and cannot be measured easily. We saw some evidence in cases we reviewed that this victim's right had been met. But this was often a 'box-ticking' exercise with no evidence of the quality of the engagement with the victim or whether it met the individual victim's needs.

Improving victims' experience of the criminal justice system is vital. The Government has recognised the need to do this by introducing the [Victims and Prisoners Bill](#). The Bill aims to introduce measures to improve victims' experiences of the criminal justice system.

The proposed legislative measures, while welcome, are not capable of resolving the issues with victims' experiences on their own. Any measures introduced need to work alongside activity to bring about practical changes. Care will need to be taken to implement the measures in the Bill in a way that does not reinforce the current emphasis on process without sufficient regard to quality.

We found the Probation Service [Victim Contact Scheme](#) worked well. For those victims who were allocated a victim liaison officer, they benefited from having one person working with them to keep them informed. Although this applies to only a small number of victims, it helps victims to have their voice heard after the offender has been sentenced.

Finally, we also recommend that the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Attorney General's Office work together to use this inspection as the basis for a broader and fundamental review of the experiences of victims of crime. This should draw on the evidence of this inspection about the quality of the service victims receive from police, prosecutors and probation. But it should also consider how to include information on the much wider system of agencies, support services and other specialist provision (such as charities) working to improve victims' experiences.

We know these organisations (which are outside the remit of our inspection powers) play a critical role in supporting victims. But provision of this support varies considerably across England and Wales, and there is no consistency in roles and responsibilities. We know from other inspections this can lead to gaps in how agencies communicate with victims. We believe a broader review could help to map support services and to determine who, across all the agencies and organisations, is best placed to engage with victims at each stage of the process.

It could also make sure there is better sharing of positive practice between agencies. For instance, we were told about a range of initiatives to improve victim experience (both in England and Wales, and in other parts of the world). Examples included victims' hubs that provide tailored support to victims, and online portals to access information about cases. These initiatives have the potential to improve the experience of all victims, but often they are developed in isolation at a local level.

As the Victims and Prisoners Bill shows, the Government is committed to improving the experience of victims of crime. We share this commitment and believe that, if implemented, the recommendations in this inspection report can contribute to this outcome, build on the measures of the Bill and make sure that quality support for victims is placed at the heart of the criminal justice system.

Summary

This was a joint inspection by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation). In this inspection, we assessed whether the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Probation Service understand what victims need, whether they meet those needs and whether they provide a good quality service.

We found that for many victims this wasn't the case.

The police and the CPS told us they recognised the importance of providing a good service for victims of crime. Officers and staff from the three bodies told us they wanted to improve the quality of service and support provided to victims. But too often high workloads and competing demands meant they couldn't invest the time and attention needed at every stage of a case.

The police, the CPS and the Probation Service all have policies, procedures and guidance in place that have been drafted to comply with the [*Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales*](#) (the Victims' Code). But we found that the police and the CPS didn't always follow them. Too often, we found that officers and staff didn't have the skills and knowledge to give a good service to victims.

We found that instead of trying to meet the needs of victims, the three bodies focused on whether they complied with the 12 rights set out in the Victims' Code. This focus on complying with the letter of the Victims' Code, rather than the victim's individual needs, has resulted in an emphasis on process rather than quality. Compliance with the 12 rights also varied.

We found that a lack of good-quality information and poor communication between criminal justice bodies added to the problems of an already overstretched criminal justice system. Criminal justice bodies need to work more collaboratively and focus on the quality of their contact with victims and not just on the process.

Meeting the needs of victims

None of the three organisations we inspected had an effective way of measuring how well they meet the needs of victims.

The Victims' Code

The Victims' Code sets out [12 rights for victims](#) (see [Annex A](#)).

We found that in some cases each of the criminal justice bodies we inspected was technically complying with the Victims' Code. But they weren't necessarily fulfilling the spirit of the Victims' Code by providing empathetic support or considering individual victim's experiences.

Local criminal justice boards have a role in measuring how well criminal justice bodies comply with the Victims' Code. We found that local criminal justice boards didn't always have access to clear and reliable data from criminal justice bodies. This meant that the boards couldn't accurately assess the quality of services to victims and take action to improve it.

We found the ways of measuring how well criminal justice bodies comply with the Victims' Code were inadequate. Any performance measures developed to support the [Victims and Prisoners Bill](#) need to improve the way they assess and report on the quality of interactions with victims.

National oversight

We found that national oversight of how well criminal justice bodies meet the needs of victims in England wasn't working as it should. For many reasons, there is a lack of accurate data about the service being provided. Some aspects of the services the police, the CPS and the Probation Service provide to victims are process-driven. This process doesn't always result in the best experience for victims.

The lack of clear data is an easy excuse for the lack of national understanding or oversight. All three bodies have targets and measures for compliance with the Victims' Code. But these targets and measures don't provide any measurement or scrutiny of the victim experience. The police, the CPS and the Probation Service need to establish clearer lines of responsibility for measuring the quality of engagement with victims. This would help to improve accountability and oversight.

There was a lack of accurate data from local criminal justice boards to feed into a national picture. We welcome the appointment of the interim Victims' Commissioner, which was announced in October 2023. But we are still concerned that the unfilled role during the last 12 months has compounded the lack of data and led to a loss of scrutiny of the victim experience. To improve scrutiny, it is important that the Victims' Commissioner sits on the [Criminal Justice Board](#).

Investigation

We spoke with many officers and staff who told us high workloads and being taken away from their main duties were having a negative effect on the ability of police forces to investigate the types of crimes we looked at in this inspection. This was compounded by high numbers of inexperienced police officers and a lack of supervision. Police officers told us of their frustration at not being able to provide a good service to victims because of these demands. We did not conduct a full review of whether investigations and prosecutions led to appropriate outcomes. Outcomes are beyond the scope of this report. But it is right to acknowledge that the outcome of any investigation and prosecution is of critical importance to victims as well as the wider public.

Victim needs assessments

We found that the police didn't always complete victim needs assessments for victims. When they were completed, they often lacked important details.

The victim needs assessment should form the bedrock of the police response to victims. If the police don't consider a victim's needs at the start of an investigation, it is more likely that other criminal justice bodies won't consider these needs in the later stages of the investigation and prosecution. An example of this is when the CPS apply for special measures, which a victim may need to give their evidence in court.

Prosecution

We found that the quality of case files the police send to the CPS needed to improve. We also found that in many cases when the file didn't meet the required standard, the prosecutor didn't provide feedback to the police. This meant that opportunities to improve case file quality were lost.

HMCPSI and HMICFRS are carrying out an inspection to examine the impact of the culture and communication between the police and the CPS on building strong prosecution cases. The report is due to be published in early 2024.

After court

Witness care units didn't always refer cases that were eligible for the [Victim Contact Scheme](#) to the Probation Service, as required. Where information was provided, sometimes it was delayed or incomplete.

For those victims who were allocated a victim liaison officer under the Victim Contact Scheme, the quality of the work was good. Overall, victims were kept informed at all stages and were helped to make contributions to licence conditions. Victim liaison officers worked well with other criminal justice bodies and acted as a consistent point of contact for the victim. But we found a lack of knowledge in the Probation Service about the Victim Contact Scheme. More training for probation practitioners about the Victim Contact Scheme is needed. This will improve the quality of information to

victims and make sure that the victim's voice is heard by criminal justice bodies involved in offender management.

Recommendations

The six recommendations we make in this report reflect change that is needed in both the short and long term to address the issues we have identified.

Recommendation 1

By 31 December 2024, the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Attorney General's Office should work together to use this inspection as the basis for a broader and fundamental review of the experience of victims of crime, involving other Government departments and agencies as necessary.

Such a review could draw on evidence from this inspection, and look more broadly at how best to include information on all services available to victims of crime, seeking to improve the availability of access for victims and the consistency of the service they receive. It could also seek to promote better sharing of information about positive practice and initiatives aimed at improving the victim experience.

Recommendation 2

By 30 September 2024, the Ministry of Justice should develop Victims' Code performance metrics and reporting systems. These should include how criminal justice bodies engage with victims and the quality of the engagement. Performance metrics should also include measures of how well criminal justice bodies obtain feedback from victims and how well they use this to assess the quality of engagement and improve the quality of services.

By 31 March 2025, the Ministry of Justice should implement these performance metrics and reporting systems across criminal justice bodies.

Recommendation 3

By 31 December 2024, the College of Policing should work with the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables to develop minimum standards for the completion of victim needs assessments. These should include standards for timeliness of completion and clarity on the information to be recorded.

Recommendation 4

By 30 September 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Crown Prosecution Service should agree minimum standards and consistent processes for how witness care units or functions communicate with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and victims to help effective, agile and timely information-sharing so that victims' needs are met.

Recommendation 5

By 31 December 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council should work with His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to make sure all eligible victims are referred to the Victim Contact Scheme.

Recommendation 6

By 30 September 2024, the Probation Service should provide training on the work of the Victim Contact Scheme to all probation practitioners and those in training.

The learning should include:

- what is involved in the Victim Contact Scheme; and
- how probation practitioners work with victim liaison officers to keep victims safe.

Introduction

Background

Becoming a victim of crime is often a traumatic experience. After reporting a crime, victims may find themselves interacting with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the courts. Some victims of crime will also have contact with the Probation Service. The criminal justice system in which these organisations operate is complex and navigating it can be confusing and frustrating. This can compound the effect of what has already happened to a victim of crime.

Figure 1 sets out the key stages in the criminal justice system journey for a victim who gives evidence at a contested trial. It shows the many handover points from one organisation to the next as a victim of crime moves through the system. For some victims, this picture can be even more complex. This means that to support victims effectively the police, the CPS, the courts and the Probation Service need to work well, both individually and together. This joint inspection examined how well this happens and whether these organisations do enough to meet the needs of victims.

Figure 1: Stages of the victim 'journey'



Source: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

About us

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspects police forces. His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) inspects the CPS. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation) inspects probation services. We all operate throughout England and Wales.

In this report, references to 'us' and 'we' mean these three inspectorates. We are independent bodies that work together through a programme of joint inspections to examine issues involving more than one organisation in the criminal justice system.

Our previous reports

Each of us has separately published reports about the experience of victims through the criminal justice system, and we have published several joint reports. We list these reports in [Annex B](#).

Our commission

This inspection was included in the Criminal Justice Joint Inspection's [Joint Inspection Business Plan 2021–23](#). We aimed to assess:

- whether there is effective leadership and governance to support the needs of victims throughout the criminal justice system;
- the extent to which the police, the CPS and the Probation Service meet the needs of victims as their case progresses;
- how well the police, the CPS and the Probation Service comply with the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) (the Victims' Code);
- how well the police, the CPS and the Probation Service measure and manage victim satisfaction at each stage of the victim's journey through the criminal justice system;
- the effectiveness of police decision-making when investigating reports of crime;
- how effectively the police communicate these decisions to victims;
- how effectively the police identify and manage the vulnerability and risk associated with victims;
- whether the police refer victims appropriately to support services;
- how effectively the police, the CPS and the Probation Service communicate with one another to meet the needs of victims;
- how effectively the police, the CPS and the Probation Service communicate with victims at each stage of the criminal justice system;
- how effectively the police, the CPS and the Probation Service identify areas of concern and plan to implement changes; and
- how well the police, the CPS and the Probation Service identify best practice and lessons learned.

Methodology

We inspected the police, the CPS and the Probation Service in Cambridgeshire, Cheshire, Dyfed-Powys, Dorset and West Yorkshire. We visited the CPS Areas in which these forces operate: CPS East of England; CPS Mersey Cheshire; CPS Wales; CPS Wessex; and CPS Yorkshire and Humberside.

Our inspection included:

- document reviews, interviews, focus groups and court observations in all five CPS Areas;
- interviews with lead personnel from the police, the CPS and the Probation Service;
- interviews with the co-ordinators of [multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\)](#);
- interviews with HM Courts & Tribunal Service staff;
- interviews with independent victim support service staff; and
- reviews of case files held by the police, the CPS and the Probation Service.

Case file reviews

We reviewed 785 case files, some as individual inspectorates and others jointly. In the joint cases, we examined events from the report of the crime to the offender being sentenced and released. We reviewed these cases to find out how well the police, the CPS and the Probation Service complied with the Victims' Code and met the needs of victims.

Case files reviewed jointly by all three inspectorates

We reviewed 25 cases of violence against the person.

In all 25 cases, the offender had been sentenced to more than 12 months in prison. We examined these cases end-to-end, from the report of the crime to sentence and release, allowing us to assess the police, the CPS and the Probation Service.

Case files reviewed jointly by two inspectorates (HMICFRS and HMCPsi)

We reviewed 50 cases of violence against the person or serious acquisitive crime.

These included burglary, personal robbery, theft from a person and theft of, and from, a motor vehicle. These were more recent cases to assess what service the police and the CPS were providing. These cases hadn't reached the stage post-sentence where we could assess the Probation Service in respect of the [Victim Contact Scheme](#).

Case files reviewed by single inspectorates

HMICFRS reviewed a further 57 cases of serious acquisitive crime that resulted in a police decision to take no further action. This type of crime includes domestic burglary, personal robbery, theft from a person and theft of and from a motor vehicle. These didn't involve the victim engaging with either the CPS or the Probation Service.

HMI Probation reviewed a further 50 cases (18 violence against the person and 32 violent sexual offences) to assess the quality of the service from probation in respect of the Victim Contact Scheme. In all 50 cases, the victim participated in the Victim Contact Scheme. In 35 of these cases, the offender was sentenced after 2019.

HMI Probation also examined a further 603 cases that were eligible to be referred to the Victim Contact Scheme to check whether they had been referred to the scheme as they should have been.

Independent research

We also commissioned research from an independent organisation, [Crest Advisory](#), to help us understand the experience of victims in the criminal justice system. It published its findings in its report [An Evaluation of Victims' Needs in the Criminal Justice System](#).

The context in which our inspection took place

The criminal justice system is under immense strain, partly because it is still recovering from the impact of the pandemic. People working in the criminal justice system often can't provide the level of service they would wish. This is because of a large backlog of cases awaiting Crown Court trial, limited resources and experience, and conflicting priorities. This has a negative effect not just on victims but also on criminal justice system personnel. Furthermore, shortcomings in any of the three bodies we inspected often have a knock-on effect on the other bodies, and on the court process.

The perilous state of the criminal justice system is well documented. At the time of our inspection, there were several important initiatives already underway that could create much-needed improvements. We outline these below.

Victims and Prisoners Bill

In 2022, the Government introduced the draft Victims Bill. At the time our inspection ended, Parliament was debating its latest draft, the [Victims and Prisoners Bill](#).

The aim of the Bill is to improve support to victims by:

- setting out the principles of the Victims' Code in primary legislation;
- introducing a duty for criminal justice bodies to collaborate in the way they support victims of sexual violence, serious violence and domestic abuse;

- improving local oversight of the Victims' Code through better data collection;
- strengthening the role of police and crime commissioners; and
- introducing a duty for criminal justice bodies to collect data and keep their compliance with the Victims' Code under review.

The Bill also contains clauses that would give the Home Secretary, the Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General powers to direct our inspectorates to carry out inspections of victim-related matters.

The Victims Funding Strategy

The Government's [Victims Funding Strategy](#) (published in May 2022) sets out a vision for funding the victim support sector more sustainably and making sure victims and survivors can get the support they need. The strategy has three aims:

- to simplify how the victim support sector is funded;
- to remove barriers to access; and
- to implement clear and consistent outcomes for services that receive government funding.

We say more about this below, in the section '[Funding arrangements for victim support services](#)'.

The CPS victim transformation programme

In June 2022, the CPS published [Transforming our service to victims at the CPS](#), setting out a programme to improve its service to victims. The programme is based on independent research that the CPS commissioned to understand what victims want and expect of the CPS. This is a long-term, ongoing programme of work.

A baseline inspection report

The national-level changes outlined above have the potential to significantly improve the provision of services to victims. This report aims to serve as a baseline from which to measure planned improvements in services for victims. As a result, we haven't included recommendations in our report that would just repeat those made elsewhere or relate to work that is already in progress.

We will consider a follow-up inspection in due course, no earlier than two years after publication of this report unless otherwise directed under the new Act.

Victim research

Our work was supported by [Crest Advisory](#), which gathered the views of victims in 16 semi-structured interviews and 5 workshops between November 2022 and January 2023. Overall, 16 victims were interviewed and 12 took part in the workshops (10 of whom were also in the group of victims interviewed). Crest Advisory published its findings in [An Evaluation of Victims' Needs in the Criminal Justice System](#).

The report found that the experiences of victims in the criminal justice system can vary significantly. Although some people had a positive experience, most participants in the research had a negative experience. This can be seen from the quotes and report findings, detailed below.

“We’re lost in the woods. We don’t know. I mean, we have to look up how to start the process off in the first place. You know, we’re totally oblivious about how the system works.”

Quote from victim

“In January there was another hearing and I found out about that hearing through Facebook, and was really quite taken aback ... This is not the way a victim of violent crime should find things out.”

Quote from victim

“The only support I received was from a self-referral. This lack of support severely impacted me.”

Quote from victim

“When I had a question, I had nowhere to go. No one to contact. So I wanted to ask them things, but I couldn’t contact them.”

Quote from victim

But when officers were engaged and empathetic, participants felt they had been listened to:

“I was passed on to the community police officer. She, in fact, was very good. We chatted on a number of occasions. She took a lot of interest. Probably every other week or so because she’d come around on patrol, and email most of the time.”

Quote from victim

“The officers that came to take my statement, I can’t fault them, they were really nice, really empathetic. They took their time and sat down.”

Quote from victim

Some of the participants told us that criminal justice bodies weren’t sharing and managing information effectively.

One participant described how the police failed to share her victim personal statement (VPS) with the Crime Prosecution Service (CPS) ahead of a court hearing. She had spent a day writing out her personal statement explaining the impact of the crime. This was an emotional experience, but she said it felt important that the offender should know the impact that the crime had on her. She was expecting the VPS to be read in the courtroom. But during the hearing it was revealed that the police hadn’t passed on her VPS to the CPS or the court:

“My VPS was not on file for the sentencing. I came and delivered it to [redacted] police station and said, ‘Can you give this to the prosecution team dealing with my case?’ and I was assured that it would be dealt with. And this was two days before the sentencing. And when I went to the sentencing, the judge asked the prosecuting barrister, ‘do we have a VPS?’ and the barrister said no. And I was furious. I was so angry and disappointed. It turned out that my beautifully written, signed VPS was still on somebody’s desk and it had never been sent to the CPS.”

Quote from victim

Clear and tailored communication between criminal justice bodies and victims can affect victims’ perceptions of how seriously these bodies are taking their case. When criminal justice bodies take the time to tailor communication, victim satisfaction with the justice process tends to improve. This can be as simple as asking victims what time of day suits them for a phone call, and making sure that any letters or texts don’t contain jargon.

Participants told us how important it was to be asked about their communication preferences and needs. One participant explained that the police didn't ask him how he preferred to be contacted. He was dissatisfied that he was called "out of the blue" from withheld numbers, which he felt "wary" of answering. Following these calls, he would then receive an email saying the police had tried to contact him. Another participant asked the police not to send him any information online due to his disability, but this request wasn't followed:

"I pointed out, I said I have a visual impairment, I'm very short sighted. So please don't send a document that can only be viewed on a laptop ... and they said they would send me something in the post to complete, but they didn't ... it's as if I have been bothering them."

Quote from victim

Another participant described how she had asked to be contacted by phone. She was grateful when the police did this, as it meant she received the information in a format she preferred. It also meant she received the information much more quickly than if the police had written to her.

Participants told us they didn't always understand the role of each criminal justice body or how they worked together. They didn't always understand what was expected of them or who they should contact at each stage. They also told us they didn't always understand the process, or what the 'next step' was. For example, some participants expected the CPS or the court to send them updates. They didn't know that the witness care unit should update them about court dates.

A recurring theme from participants was the poor communication they received from criminal justice bodies. Participants told us this was a particular theme in their experiences with the police.

"Having no communication with the police, when you think that they're there to serve and protect, you just feel totally isolated because nobody's communicating with you."

Quote from victim

Participants had less to say about the quality of communication with the CPS. This was partly because they had less frequent communication with the CPS.

But one participant said their experience of the CPS was improved by speaking to a "CPS lawyer" who was "well-informed" and knowledgeable about the participant's case and witness statement. Another participant told us they weren't happy that a CPS lawyer they talked with was "uninformed".

Only one participant had experience of parole and probation as a victim. This wasn't a positive experience. She told us she was only made aware that the offender had been released early after this had happened. She felt very upset and disappointed that nobody had told her in advance.

In evaluating the observations made by victims, we kept in mind that the total number of participants was small. This was despite the extensive efforts Crest Advisory had made to recruit people with experience of working with victims in the criminal justice system. The majority of participants had only interacted with the police. And we also considered that victims with negative experiences may have been keener to share them to help improve the system for others. We didn't draw conclusions about how well any organisation supports the victims of crime in general from these observations in isolation. But there were clear themes that were similar to the evidence we found in our inspection.

National and local oversight arrangements

Leadership and governance

Arrangements in England and Wales

We assessed whether there was effective leadership and governance to support the needs of victims through the criminal justice system.

There are national arrangements in place in England and Wales that are designed to measure how well criminal justice bodies support victims through the criminal justice system.

In England, there is a [Criminal Justice Board](#) (see [Annex C](#)), which “brings together criminal justice leaders to maintain oversight of the system and promote a collaborative approach to addressing its challenges”. But for reasons we couldn’t establish, this board didn’t meet between August 2021 and June 2023. Even if it had met during this time, there hasn’t been a Victims’ Commissioner since 2022, so an independent victim voice at the board has been missing. The recent appointment of the interim Victims’ Commissioner has been a welcome development.

We would have expected this board to have clear performance measures, drawing on data supplied by local criminal justice boards (described below). In our view, this data should include measures showing how well criminal justice bodies are complying with the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) (the Victims’ Code).

We reviewed the minutes of the most recent meeting in July 2023. It was clear that the Criminal Justice Board doesn’t have access to the data it needs to monitor compliance with the Victims’ Code. It also doesn’t have access to data on the quality of criminal justice bodies’ interactions with victims.

We were encouraged to see that the Criminal Justice Board recognises this and has started to develop a performance framework and improved access to data for the wider criminal justice system.

In Wales, there is an equivalent board, the [Criminal Justice Board for Wales](#), which meets regularly and publishes some data on the performance of criminal justice bodies. This is some improvement over the Criminal Justice Board, but both boards have limited data on victims and don’t have full oversight of the quality of the work with victims.

There is much more to be done at government level to review the effectiveness of the Victims' Code in its current form. We are aware proposals are being developed by the Ministry of Justice on a national victims' forum that is likely to have a criminal justice system-wide focus. We welcome this focused national scrutiny of the victim experience to provide governance and accountability for improving communication with and support to victims.

Local criminal justice boards

The [Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011](#) sets out in law the reciprocal duty on police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and other criminal justice bodies to work together. The PCCs and criminal justice bodies work together through local criminal justice boards.

We interviewed local criminal justice board chairs in all five areas we inspected in England and Wales. In all five areas, the PCC (including the mayoral equivalent in one case) chaired the local criminal justice board.

Local criminal justice board powers

All five local criminal justice board chairs told us it is difficult to take a consistent approach to making improvements where needed. There were problems getting all the organisations responsible for implementing the Victims' Code to regularly attend meetings or share data and information about their performance.

We were pleased to see a proposal in the [Victims and Prisoners Bill](#) that would give PCCs a greater role in monitoring local compliance with the Victims' Code. This should strengthen the focus on the service to victims in local criminal justice boards across England and Wales. At the very least, we think it would be helpful for local criminal justice boards to routinely supply the Criminal Justice Boards in England and Wales with data on compliance.

The Bill states:

“7(1) The elected local policing body for a police area must keep under review how criminal justice bodies which provide services in the police area provide those services in accordance with the Victims' Code.

7(2) The elected local policing body for a police area must, in particular, undertake the following activities in such manner as may be prescribed –

- (a) provide the Secretary of State with information shared with it under section 6(2)(b), or such of that information as may be prescribed;
- (b) participate in any review under section 6(2)(c);
- (c) provide the Secretary of State with such reports, on such matters in connection with a review under section 6(2)(c), as may be prescribed.”

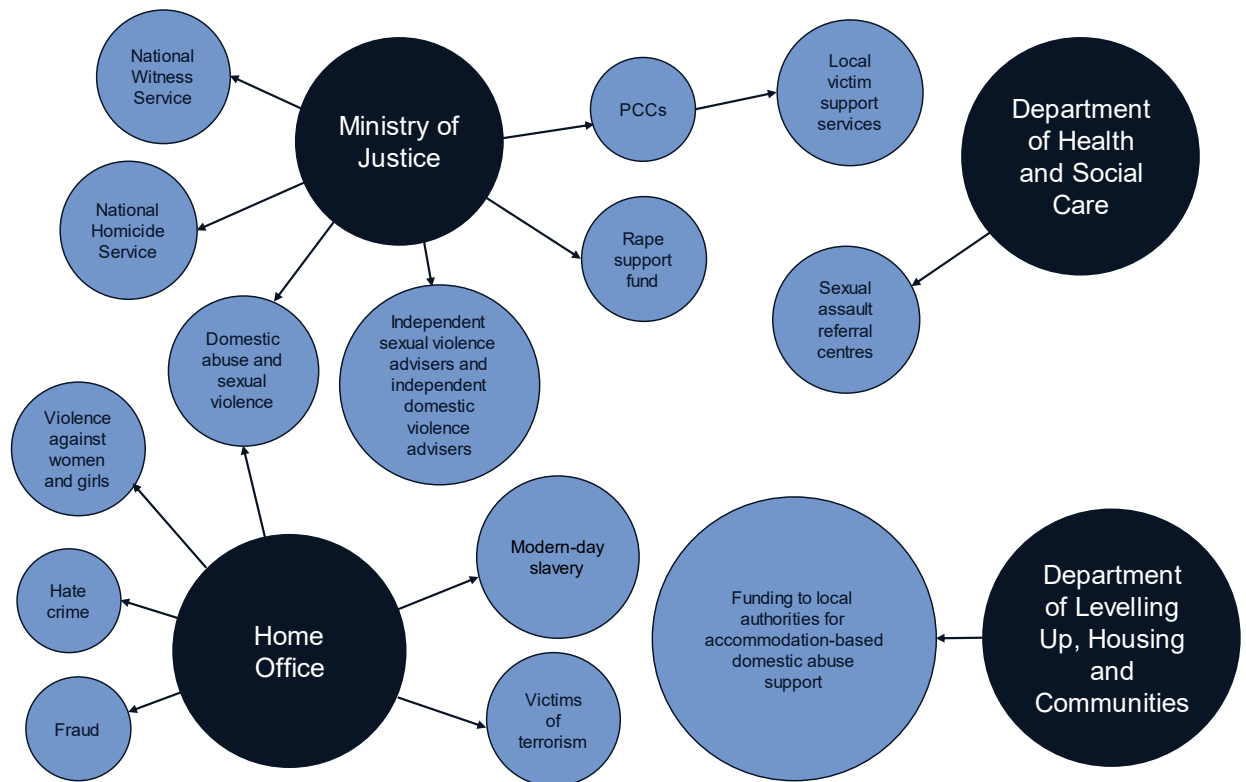
The Ministry of Justice told us that it is developing measures to improve how criminal justice bodies assess their individual compliance with the Victims' Code. Its aim is that these measures will help PCCs to hold local criminal justice bodies to account. But we think there needs to be a broader assessment of the victim's experience of the entire criminal justice process. This would help to make sure that if someone becomes a victim of crime they are well supported through the whole process.

Funding arrangements for victim support services

The Ministry of Justice provided grant funding of £136m to PCCs to commission local victim support services in England and Wales in 2022/23. This funding is for specialist support for victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence and general support for victims of other crimes. But there is no published data available on how many victims this funding has supported.

In addition to Ministry of Justice funding, there are many other sources of funding for support for victims (see Figure 2). This funding landscape is complex. Many sources of funding are for victims of specific types of offences. For some offences, such as domestic abuse and sexual violence, there are additional sources of funding.

Figure 2: Funding map for support for victims of crime



Source: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

The multiple sources of funding create a complex picture, making it very difficult for victims, support providers and commissioners to understand what services are available in a particular area. This can lead to services being duplicated, differences in the services available in different geographic areas and confusion for victims about

where to go for help. The Government acknowledges these challenges. In October 2022, the Government updated the [Victims Funding Strategy](#) to improve the funding and commissioning of support services for victims.

Criminal justice bodies and commissioners should have a good understanding of how well they are meeting the needs of all victims. In most of the cases we examined, we found that they don't. We recognise that some PCCs are starting to develop joint commissioning arrangements with other statutory bodies, such as health services. This should lead to a more joined-up approach to service provision and promote more efficient use of resources.

The increased focus on funding and improved commissioning is encouraging. But we think there is a need for more urgency in efforts to address the challenges of supporting victims in the criminal justice system.

During our inspection, we consulted several interested parties, including the Victims' Commissioner for London. We were told about an independent network of [Crime Victim Assistance Centres](#) in Quebec, Canada. We think that this model merits further investigation.

Overall, we found a patchwork of services, initiatives, funding and approaches to supporting victims of crime across England and Wales. Responsibility for these services is spread over a wide range of government departments, agencies, organisations and charities – most of which were beyond the remit of this inspection (and of our inspection powers). HMICFRS doesn't inspect the victim services commissioned by PCCs, for instance. To improve the experience of victims, we believe there needs to be a fundamental review of this broader system of support and agencies. Determining the scope of this review will require joint work across a range of government departments to fully identify the current funding and accountability issues affecting victim services provision.

Recommendation 1

By 31 December 2024, the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Attorney General's Office should work together to use this inspection as the basis for a broader and fundamental review of the experience of victims of crime, involving other Government departments and agencies as necessary.

Such a review could draw on evidence from this inspection, and look more broadly at how best to include information on all services available to victims of crime, seeking to improve the availability of access for victims and the consistency of the service they receive. It could also seek to promote better sharing of information about positive practice and initiatives aimed at improving the victim experience.

Recommendation 2

By 30 September 2024, the Ministry of Justice should develop Victims' Code performance metrics and reporting systems. These should include how criminal justice bodies engage with victims and the quality of the engagement.

Performance metrics should also include measures of how well criminal justice bodies obtain feedback from victims and how well they use this to assess the quality of engagement and improve the quality of services.

By 31 March 2025, the Ministry of Justice should implement these performance metrics and reporting systems across criminal justice bodies.

The investigation stage

A victim's experience of the criminal justice system begins when they report a crime to the police.

Crime reporting

As part of its [PEEL \(police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy\) programme of inspections](#), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) carries out victim service assessments (VSAs). A VSA assesses the quality of service victims receive from a police force, from the point of reporting a crime to the end result of the criminal justice process.

In the VSAs carried out for all 43 police forces between October 2020 and December 2022, HMICFRS found evidence that the needs of victims weren't always met and that the police didn't always comply with the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) (the Victims' Code). Many of the findings in the VSAs are also mirrored in our inspection report.

HMICFRS found that the police don't always carry out a risk assessment or victim needs assessment. When they do, it is often not detailed enough. Victims aren't always updated regularly at important points in the investigation.

Risk assessments

When someone reports a crime to the police, the officer or police staff member taking the report should carry out a risk assessment to decide what priority the incident should have. The police use this assessment to decide whether they need to attend, and if so, who should attend and how quickly.

HMICFRS investigated how well the police carried out a risk assessment in 57 cases of serious acquisitive crime that resulted in a police decision to take no further action. In 45 out of 57 cases, the police had completed this risk assessment. But in some cases the risk assessment was based on the crime type alone and didn't always fully consider the threat, risk and harm to the victim.

For example, in some burglary cases HMICFRS reviewed, the threat and risk were recorded on the system simply as "property has been stolen". The assessment didn't consider any further threat or risk to the victim.

Victim needs assessments

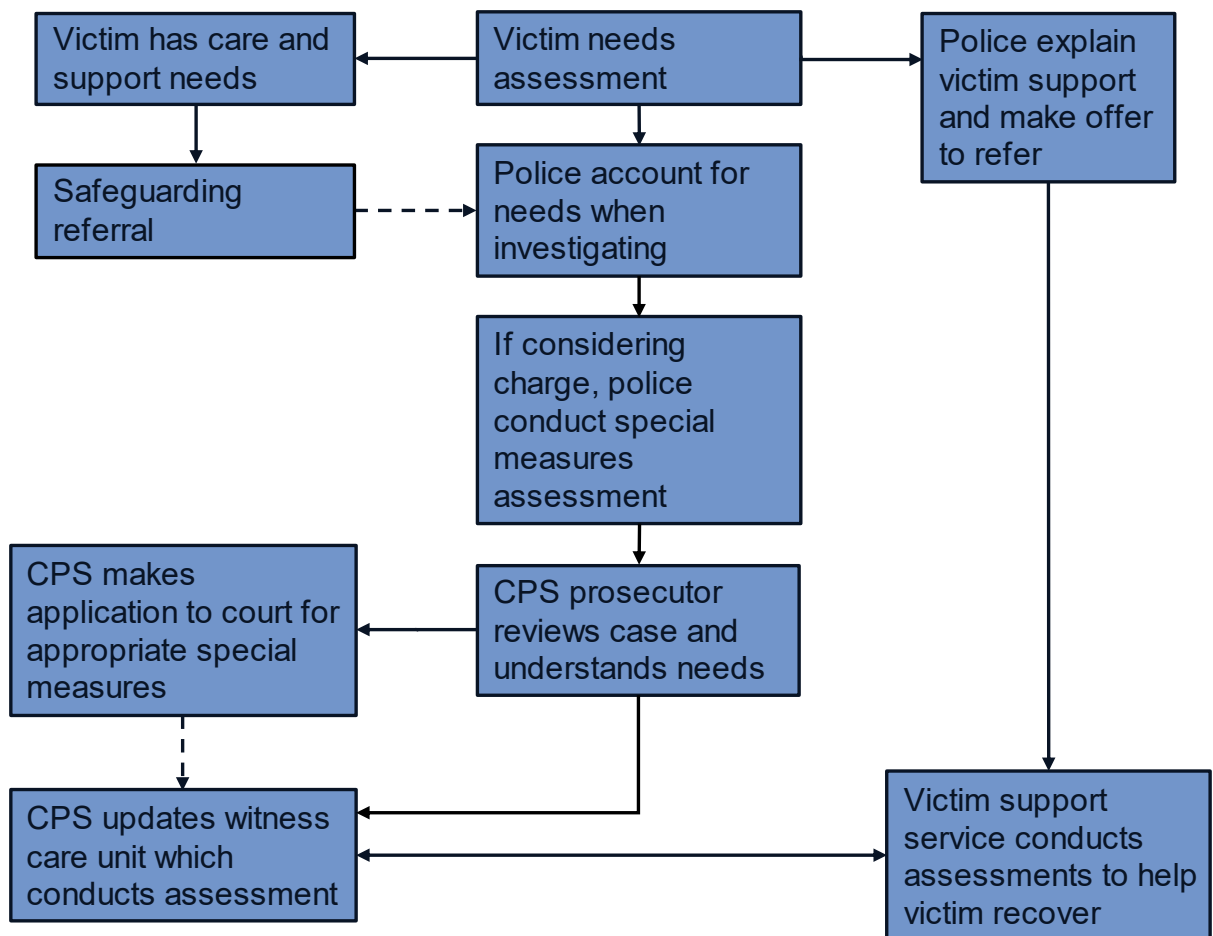
Victim needs assessments are important tools for the police to understand how best to serve victims of crime. Police should complete them for victims of all types of crime.

Right 4 in the Victims' Code states that victims have the right to be referred to support services and to have their needs assessed so that services and support can be tailored to their needs.

To assess what support victims need, the police should carry out a victim needs assessment. For some victims who are vulnerable or intimidated, the assessment should consider whether they are entitled to [Enhanced Rights under the Victims' Code](#).

The quality of the assessment is important. The police can't understand what support services a victim might require if they don't have an accurate understanding of the victim's needs. For example, without this information, the police can't assess what special measures might be needed. The benefit of carrying out a victim needs assessment is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: The benefit of the victim needs assessment



Source: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Throughout an investigation and prosecution, the police and support services should give the victim the opportunity to have their needs re-assessed, if these have changed.

If the victim goes to court to give evidence, they should also be offered a separate needs assessment by the witness care unit. Witness care units are staffed by police who provide information and support to victims and witnesses in cases progressing through the criminal justice system. The needs assessment aims to make sure that a victim has the right help and support before the trial and at the court.

In the 132 cases HMICFRS reviewed, we found the police had completed a victim needs assessment in 77 cases. The police should have completed one in every case. The assessment was of good quality in only 42 out of the 77 cases with a completed victim needs assessment.

In interviews with police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) personnel, we were told that for some types of offence, such as those involving domestic abuse, officers and staff had a better focus on understanding the victim's needs. But they said there is often less focus on understanding victims' needs for crimes such as burglary or theft. This isn't acceptable. For example, a victim of burglary or robbery might be traumatised and feel afraid to leave their home. If the police don't ask the right questions and assess victims' needs properly, victims won't always get the support they need and may become more likely to disengage from the criminal justice process.

HMICFRS has made a previous recommendation to the police about this, in its report on [how the police and the CPS respond to the needs of older people](#).

In the most recent VSA carried out by HMICFRS, it found that in many forces the police don't always assess victims' needs.

We are concerned that this HMICFRS recommendation hasn't been addressed and it is still the case that the police don't give enough attention to assessing victims' needs properly.

Recommendation 3

By 31 December 2024, the College of Policing should work with the National Police Chiefs' Council and chief constables to develop minimum standards for the completion of victim needs assessments. These should include standards for timeliness of completion and clarity on the information to be recorded.

Victim personal statements

Right 7 of the Victims' Code states that victims of crime have the right to make a victim personal statement (VPS). This statement explains in a victim's own words how a crime has affected them. The VPS is important. Judges and magistrates consider the VPS when they decide what sentence to impose. It also allows the victim's voice to be heard directly in the case.

In 92 out of 132 cases HMICFRS reviewed, we found that police officers didn't offer victims an opportunity to make a VPS. There are sometimes good reasons why a VPS may not be offered in the early stages of an investigation. But the police can and should give victims an opportunity to write a VPS at appropriate stages of the investigation.

Referrals to victim support services

Right 4 in the Victims' Code states that victims have the right to be referred to support services and to have their needs assessed so that services and support can be tailored to their needs. The police should know what services are available for victims. The police should refer victims to a support service that meets their needs within two working days of the victim reporting a crime.

In 68 out of 132 cases HMICFRS reviewed, we found no record that the police had referred the victim to support services.

In some forces, there were delays in the police referring victims. It is important that a victim who needs support has access to this at the earliest opportunity. Delays in referring victims for support may increase the risk that they will withdraw their support for their case (a common cause of cases failing).

Police understanding of victim support services

In our focus groups and interviews, we were told that many police officers and investigators didn't fully understand the role of victim support services. Officers and staff said that some services provide training for the police, including to new officers. This training covers the role of the support service and what they can offer victims. Police officers and staff who received this training found it helpful. But few staff and police officers had received any training on victim support services.

Arrangements for providing support to victims

We found there were differences in how each police force we inspected provided support for victims. In some police forces, support services for victims are provided by independent, commissioned service providers. In other police forces, we found PCCs had used Ministry of Justice funding to allow the police force to provide support services to victims. In both circumstances, we think that commissioners should have rigorous scrutiny and monitoring in place to make sure services are meeting the needs of victims. We may examine this in more detail in a future inspection.

The role of the witness care unit is to support victims, after an offender has been charged, to attend court and give their [best evidence](#). We outline their role in more detail in '[The prosecution stage](#)'. Although all forces provide this function, it isn't always called the witness care unit. In some forces the witness care unit may be called the prosecution hub or victims' hub. In this report we will refer to this function as the witness care unit.

Some police forces have joined the victim support service with the witness care unit. In these forces, the staff working in these teams provide support to victims during the investigation and updates on their cases at court. In focus groups, staff in these teams told us that time-sensitive cases take priority. The Victims' Code requires that they must prioritise those cases going to court. But this means they don't always have enough time to provide updates and support to victims in other cases.

Information-sharing between support services and police

In some cases, victim support services can access some limited information about victims held on police force IT systems. Staff from support services and the police told us this is helpful because it means the services can contact the victim directly and offer support. In focus groups, support service personnel said that when they contacted victims, the victim sometimes said the police hadn't told them they would be referred to support services. This sometimes led to unwanted contact. The police should consider how they communicate with victims about how victims' data is used and shared.

Support service capacity and availability

In all five police forces we inspected (Cambridgeshire Constabulary, Cheshire Constabulary, Dyfed-Powys Police, Dorset Police and West Yorkshire Police), once they receive a referral, the support services contact the victim and complete a new victim needs assessment. In focus groups and interviews, we were told that for some specialist services such as mental health support there are very few services available. Where there are specialist services, they often have long waiting lists.

Even for more general support services, we found differences between areas in England and Wales in how long victims had to wait to speak to someone.

It is especially important that specialist support services are available. They provide tailored support to victims who have experienced trauma such as domestic abuse and sexual violence. But it is concerning that, for victims of other crimes, the police often assess the need for support based on the crime type, rather than on the victim's needs. This means that some victims who should have access to support services aren't referred.

All support services we spoke with had high workloads. They told us this is partly because it now takes longer to finalise a case at court, meaning some victims need support for much longer. This adds further pressure to support services and has led to delays in them contacting victims.

In focus groups and interviews, service providers told us that often they couldn't contact victims for several days, and in some instances weeks, due to lack of resources and increased workloads.

Investigations

Crime allocation

The five forces we inspected all had policies to direct crime investigation and decide what resources they needed to deploy. But we found that in some forces the process of allocating crimes to investigators often caused more delay to the investigation, affecting the victim.

When the police decide who is going to investigate a crime, crimes of a more serious or complex nature should be allocated to specialist investigators. For the crime types we examined, such as burglary and theft, we found that these are often allocated to officers who don't have the right skills or training. In some cases, officers didn't have the time to do the job well because of the demands of their role.

In one force, senior police managers told us the force is better at dealing with victims of serious crime than victims of crimes such as burglary and theft.

In another force, police supervisors said the control room sent all reports of crime to a shared email inbox. From this inbox, a team of police staff then allocated crimes to investigators. But we were told once the cases were allocated supervisors often then argued about which team should take the case. This had resulted in delays to some investigations.

In the 132 cases HMICFRS reviewed for force processes for allocating crimes to investigators, we found it took on average three days from the time the crime was reported for the officer investigating the case to make first contact with the victim.

Resources and workloads

Many times, police officers and supervisors in interviews and focus groups told us workloads were too high and there weren't enough officers. Police officers also said the standard of investigation had suffered because of high demand. We were told that, on some occasions, victims had been asked to carry out their own enquiries when reporting crimes, such as asking neighbours whether there were witnesses to the incident or if they had CCTV evidence from home security cameras.

In some teams this is made worse because of staff absences due to sickness and staff being taken away from their main duties. One supervisor said that half of the

team were absent because of stress. The supervisor had tried to ease the pressure on the team by taking some investigations himself, but this reduced the quality of supervision he could give to officers.

When workloads are too high it can lead to some areas of work being de-prioritised. Police officers said that, in these circumstances, they can't always find time to update victims as well as they would like.

The recent [Police Uplift Programme](#) has increased resources. But new and inexperienced police officers will need time to become effective in their role. The increase in new officers also places greater demands on supervisors and more experienced officers who tutor and mentor new recruits.

Police communication with victims

When a victim reports a crime, the police should ask them how they prefer to be contacted about their case and how often.

Under the Victims' Code, victims have the right to be given updates on their case and to be told when important decisions are taken. Measuring how often victims are contacted is one way the police show they are complying with the Victims' Code.

In our case file reviews, HMICFRS found that the investigating officer had asked the victim how and when they would like the police to update them in only 57 out of 132 cases. In 48 out of those 57 cases, the investigating officer had updated the victim in line with their wishes.

Timeliness of updates

After someone reports a crime, victims are often contacted by a range of people as part of the investigation and support. This can include the police responders, investigators, scenes of crime examiners, victim support services and crime prevention advisers.

We found that in many cases the initial contact with victims was timely. But as an investigation progressed, we found that police communication with victims didn't always comply with the victim's wishes.

Quality of updates

Those updates to victims that the police recorded were sometimes of poor quality. Many of the updates we assessed merely stated that a victim update had been provided. To be compliant with the Victims' Code requires much more than a tick in a box to say something has happened. Without the required level of detail, we couldn't assess whether the police had provided victims with the right information at the right time. More importantly, there was no evidence that the victim had fully understood the update.

Mode of contact

One force out of the five we inspected updated victims routinely by text message. Police officers told us that this was to reduce the time they spent on the phone with victims. In this respect, it is undoubtedly an efficient approach. And some victims may prefer it to a phone call or letter. But, for others, it may not be their preferred method of contact. This means that not all victims have the same opportunity to respond. The right to understand and be understood is the first right in the Victims' Code.

Quality of record keeping

The police didn't always record regular updates to victims as investigations progressed.

In the files we reviewed, there were some examples of good communication between the police and the victim. But in many records the meaning wasn't clear and didn't have any details on the outcome of the contact. Some entries simply read "emailed victim".

In focus groups with police officers, some said that, due to other demands on them, they had little time to complete victim updates.

All five forces measured how often they contacted victims. The police usually recorded this on the force IT system. Some systems had automatic prompts to the officer to do this within specific time frames. These prompts are useful for police officers to remind them to update victims.

Supervisory reviews

In 33 out of 132 cases HMICFRS reviewed, we found no evidence that a police supervisor had reviewed the investigation. In these 33 cases, there was no evidence of guidance and direction to support investigators. Lack of supervisory oversight can result in investigations 'drifting'. It can also cause unnecessary delay for victims and have a negative effect on the quality of the investigation and prosecution.

During the VSAs carried out for all 43 police forces between October 2020 and December 2022, HMICFRS found a similar picture. In 675 of 3,030 cases that HMICFRS reviewed, supervisory reviews didn't provide the investigator with effective direction and oversight.

Police understanding and application of special measures

Some police officers and staff understand the special measures available for victims. But many officers didn't fully understand what special measures are available or how they worked at court. As a result, the police don't always fully explain special measures to victims or ask victims at the earliest opportunity what they may need.

In more than a third (48 out of 132) of the cases HMICFRS reviewed, the police should have made the victim aware of special measures. We found no evidence that they had done this. In 20 of those cases, the police should have discussed what special measures were available and how they could help the victim. In all 20 cases we found no record that special measures had been discussed with the victim.

One of the special measures available to vulnerable victims who need help to communicate effectively is to have an independent person to help them understand and be understood throughout an investigation and at court. These people are called intermediaries.

We found that some police officers don't understand when they should consider requesting an intermediary for a victim. As a result, the police don't always provide the CPS with the information needed. This early information would enable the prosecutor to consider the issue properly and allow more timely applications to the court for an intermediary to be appointed.

When requesting special measures, the police should send the information electronically to the CPS. This should include advising the CPS of the potential need for special measures for a witness and the relevant information to support an application. We are concerned that some police officers told us they are often too busy to complete and send this information. In many of our focus groups, officers told us that, to save time, they simply record that special measures aren't required.

Prosecutors told us the police don't always send the information electronically without a prompt from the prosecutor to do so. Prosecutors often need to request information on special measures in their action plans to the police.

Police officers were often unclear about how to identify and apply for special measures. In more than half of 75 cases HMICFRS and HMCPSI reviewed (39 cases), there wasn't enough detail about special measures in the information the police sent to the CPS. Basic details the prosecutor needed were often missing. These included the reasons why a victim was eligible for special measures or how the specific measure requested would help the quality of the victim's evidence at court.

Prosecutors told us police officers sometimes request special measures as a 'wish list', even when the request isn't relevant or appropriate. This was seen in several of the cases we reviewed. For example, a police officer asked for wigs and gowns to be removed in a magistrates' court case. Wigs and gowns are only used at the Crown Court and not in magistrates' courts. In a focus group, one police officer said: "I just tick everything to cover all bases."

Pre-charge communication between the police and the CPS

Both the police and the CPS said that communication between them isn't always as good as it should be.

In focus groups, police officers said they rarely speak to prosecutors on the phone and don't usually have contact telephone numbers for them. But for officers in specialist teams, such as those dealing with rape and serious sexual offences, better communication processes were in place. This meant it was easier for those officers to contact prosecutors, who also work in specialist teams, directly. This process isn't in place for those officers investigating crimes such as burglary and theft.

When police officers can't have a direct conversation with a prosecutor, it can cause delay. Officers said that, at times, they weren't sure what the CPS action plan was asking them to do. They would have preferred to phone a prosecutor and ask them.

In the cases we reviewed, we found little evidence of either face-to-face or telephone contact between investigating officers and prosecutors.

In September 2022, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and the CPS developed a new process for charging. The new model was piloted in two CPS Areas (CPS Mersey Cheshire and CPS Cymru Wales) and the police forces for the corresponding CPS Areas (Merseyside, Cheshire, Gwent, South Wales, Dyfed Powys and North Wales).

The National Police Chiefs' Council and the CPS have reported that this has promoted better communication and made the whole charging process more efficient. The approach is now being expanded across remaining CPS Areas and police forces and is expected to be completed by spring 2024.

At the time of this inspection, HMICFRS and HMCPSI were also carrying out a joint inspection into prosecution team case building. That inspection was examining how well the police and the CPS communicate and work together on prosecution cases, including the new process for charging. The report is due to be published in spring 2024.

The prosecution stage

National file standard

When the police are satisfied that they have enough evidence in a case, and there is likely to be a trial or the case is likely to be dealt with in the Crown Court, they must send it to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The CPS then considers whether the evidence meets the threshold for it to charge the suspect. In some cases, specified in the [6th edition of *Director's Guidance on Charging \(2020\)*](#), the police can charge the suspect before passing the case to the CPS for prosecution at court.

The [national file standard](#) sets out the evidence or information the police must pass to the CPS to charge a suspect and prepare a case for court.

Quality of case files

If police send files to the CPS without the right evidence and information, the CPS must ask the police for more information. This can cause delays to the investigation and the charging process.

In focus groups, CPS prosecutors told us about some poor-quality police case files. They said that some police officers didn't know about the national file standard and didn't always provide enough information for the CPS to make a charging decision.

We reviewed 75 cases involving the police and the CPS. We found that in 43 of those cases, the police file didn't meet the national file standard. [Annex D](#) shows the reasons for these failures.

CPS review of police case file quality

CPS prosecutors review the quality of case files against the national file standard and record if any information is missing. The tool for reviewing the quality of case files, the Director's Guidance Assessment Tool (DGA), was agreed by the CPS and the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#).

The police and the CPS then hold regular joint operational improvement meetings at a local level to discuss the cases that CPS prosecutors have reviewed. The purpose of these meetings is to jointly improve the quality of casework. This includes the quality of case files provided by the police and the quality of prosecutor reviews and action plans.

Feedback to police

Prosecutors should complete a DGA at pre-charge decision stage where they are applying the Full Code Test in accordance with [The Code for Crown Prosecutors](#) in cases where there is an anticipated not guilty plea.

Prosecutors should also complete a DGA in other circumstances where they apply the Full Code Test for the first time. These are when:

- the police charged a case where there is likely to be a not guilty plea, or
- a not guilty plea was entered unexpectedly (the case having been prepared on the basis of it being a likely guilty plea), or
- the Full Code Test file is submitted by the police following the entry of a not guilty plea in a case charged on the threshold test, or
- a defendant was remanded overnight in both magistrates' court and Crown Court cases.

The DGA data is used to provide feedback to the police at the joint operational improvement meetings.

In 26 out of the 43 cases that didn't meet the national file standard, we found that the prosecutor didn't provide feedback to police through the DGA. This means that opportunities for police officers to learn and improve case file quality were lost.

His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate's (HMCPSP's) recent Area Inspection Programme (reports published in all 14 CPS Areas between October 2021 and November 2022) also highlighted this issue. HMCPSP will review progress in the follow-up Area Inspection Programme planned for 2024/25.

Use of bail

The use of bail conditions is an important tool in helping to keep victims and communities safe.

The CPS should consider how bail is used throughout a case.

When they authorise charges, prosecutors should consider:

- the nature and seriousness of the alleged offence;
- the defendant's record of previous convictions;
- any history of committing offences while on bail or failing to surrender;
- any breaches of court orders; and
- whether there is any evidence of violence or threats towards the victim or other vulnerable witnesses.

Before a trial, prosecutors should give instructions to specially trained prosecutors called court advocates on whether:

- to oppose bail, and on what grounds;
- an appeal against the granting of bail is appropriate;
- to make an application to impose or continue conditions of bail; or
- unconditional bail is appropriate.

We found some examples where prosecutors did this well. But we found that this wasn't always the case.

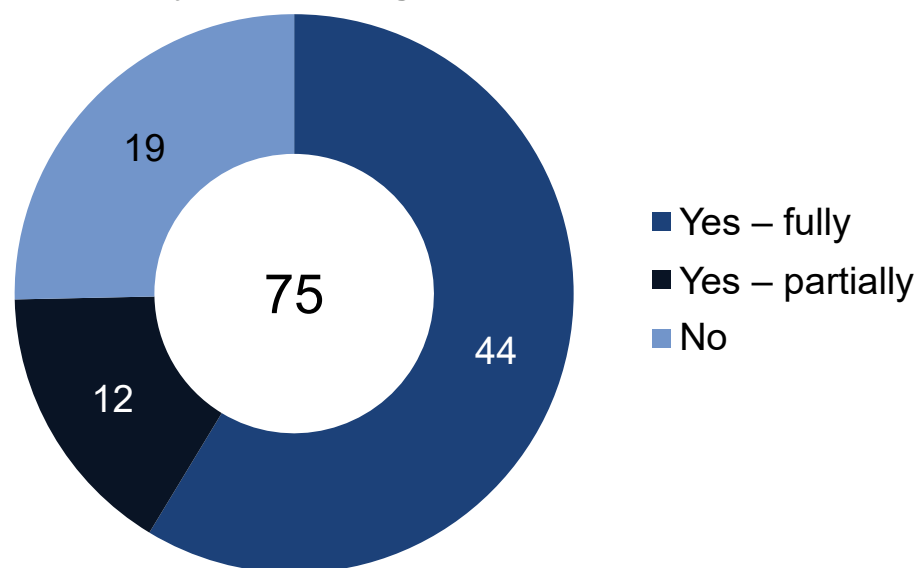
Prosecutors didn't always set out their considerations on bail in the pre-charge review as they should. This means in many cases the court advocates had no instructions about bail.

When there are no instructions, the prosecution advocate must read the case again, at pace, to decide whether to make an application for specific conditions to be attached to bail or for a remand in custody. This can sometimes lead to the prosecution advocate not applying for bail conditions or a remand into custody when they should have.

In the 75 cases His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and HMCPSP reviewed together, we found that court advocates didn't always record what applications, if any, had been made to the court about bail or remand. In 19 of the cases we reviewed, the CPS hadn't made appropriate and timely decisions about bail and custody. The most significant factor in those 19 cases was the lack of court advocate records on the applications.

Figure 4 illustrates the findings of our review.

Figure 4: Cases reviewed to determine whether the CPS made appropriate and timely decisions about custody and bail throughout the life of the case



Source: His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services

Communication

The role of the witness care unit

Witness care units are staffed by police witness care officers. They support victims and witnesses in cases where a defendant has been charged and the case goes to court. Each case is allocated to a named witness care officer, who is the single point of contact for victims and witnesses in that case. The witness care officer provides updates after each hearing, as the case they are involved in progresses through the court. If a victim or witness is required to attend court to give evidence, the witness care officer will provide practical help with attendance, including access to any other support.

Information-sharing between the CPS and the witness care unit is crucial because witness care officers have direct contact with victims and witnesses and will often need to provide new or updated information about dates or a need for additional support (either practically or throughout special measures). They may also need to pass on a query from a victim or witness. Often this will need to be done urgently because issues can arise at any time, including on the day of trial. Information about the need for special measures can result in the prosecutor having to make an application to the court for the measure to be granted. Or, if there is an issue with a victim or witness not being able to attend court, the prosecutor will need detailed information about the reason to be able to review the case and decide how to proceed. Similarly, if there is a late change to a listing or plea, the prosecutor may need to get information to the victim or witness quickly. This will need to be done through the designated witness care officer.

Once someone has been charged, the witness care unit becomes responsible for contacting the victim.

Witness care units were set up in 2004 and were originally joint teams with officers and staff from the police and CPS. They are now resourced by the police only. Their role is to:

- inform a victim or witness of trial dates;
- monitor dates that victims and witnesses cannot attend court;
- carry out a needs assessment to identify the support needed for victims to attend court and to give their [best evidence](#); and
- manage any need for special measures for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses.

Within the witness care unit, the role of the witness care officer is to provide a link between prosecutors, the court and victims. If the victim needs help on the day of the trial, for example, with transport to the court, the witness care officer should usually help them with these arrangements. Witness care officers should also tell the victim of the outcome of any application for special measures once the court notifies them. When the trial has finished, the witness care officer should also let victims and witnesses know the outcome. Under the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) (the Victims' Code), they should do this within one working day of them receiving the information from the court, which should be within five working days of the outcome of the case. In today's connected world, we question whether these timescales are unnecessarily long.

For victims or witnesses in some serious cases, such as rape, domestic violence and those involving crimes against children, a specially trained police officer may be assigned as the point of contact and carry out a similar role to the witness care officer.

Good communication between witness care units and the CPS is important for victims. If not done well, it can result in poor outcomes, such as a victim withdrawing from the criminal justice process.

Witness care units are also an important link for eligible victims to access the [Victim Contact Scheme](#). But we found in our case file reviews that, too often, witness care units didn't always make referrals to the scheme. When they did, there were often delays. This means that the Probation Service can't always contact victims and tell them about the scheme in a timely way.

Quality of communication between the witness care unit and the CPS

In all five areas we inspected, there were good governance and meeting structures in place. In focus groups and interviews, we were told that communication between the witness care unit and the CPS at a strategic level was good.

But in some areas, meetings to discuss operational issues weren't always effective. In one area, staff and officers said that, in meetings between the witness care unit and the CPS, no one took minutes or recorded what attendees had agreed to do. This meant that there was no record of what the meeting had agreed, no mechanism to hold either body to account, and no structured or consistent use of this forum to improve the quality of services to victims.

In focus groups and interviews, we were told about examples of effective communication between the witness care unit and the CPS, such as sharing contact details. But we found the quality of communication between the CPS and witness care units varied between areas.

In some areas, we were told that both the witness care unit and the CPS had difficulties contacting one another because of limited sharing of direct telephone numbers. Even when the witness care unit or the CPS shared contact telephone numbers, staff and officers said that calls often went unanswered. Sometimes these calls were urgent and needed an immediate answer. In focus groups, we were told about examples such as when a court date had been changed, or the CPS needed to contact the witness care unit urgently from court on the day of trial.

Witness care unit staff in one force said the CPS had told them not to contact it by phone. In this force the only contact the witness care unit had with the CPS was through email.

Access to systems

Witness care units have access to CPS information through a system called the witness management system. This system links directly to the CPS's case management system. Access to the case management system isn't limited but there is a data sharing protocol in place, which sets out approved and expected use of the system and the data held on it. This is done to reduce the risk of data breaches occurring. We were told by some witness care officers that they only had limited access to CPS information. This needs to be addressed as part of the improvement of communication between witness care units and the CPS.

Witness care unit staff told us they don't always have access to all the information they need to provide a good service to victims, as this information can be held on different systems.

Timeliness of communication

Even when the witness care unit sends the CPS the correct information at the right time, there are often delays in the information reaching the relevant person. In one CPS Area, emails for Crown Court cases from the witness care unit go into a general inbox. In focus groups, witness care unit staff said that there were often backlogs in the CPS in responding to these emails, and sometimes delays from the CPS sending information to the witness care unit.

We assessed this as part of our review of 75 cases from the police and the CPS. Our findings contrasted with the accounts we were given. Witness care units told us delays were common, but we didn't find this in our review. In 34 of the 41 cases where the witness care officer (or investigating officer if pre-charge) sent correspondence to the CPS about the victim, the CPS took effective actions. In 31 of those 34 cases, the action the CPS took was timely.

There is room for improvement. The difference between the accounts we heard and the evidence from our file examination shows the collaborative relationships needed to meet victims' needs are not good enough.

Quality of information shared

In focus groups with prosecutors and paralegal officers, we were told that the witness care unit didn't always give the CPS the right information about victims. In these cases, the CPS had to ask for further details. Paralegal officers said that when they were arranging the dates for trials, the witness care unit didn't always tell the CPS about any dates when the victims couldn't attend. In some cases, the witness care unit didn't give the CPS the reason a victim couldn't attend. This sometimes meant that a trial couldn't go ahead. In many such cases, the CPS had to request further information from the witness care unit so that it could deal with the case.

One CPS paralegal officer said that the witness care unit sometimes sends them an email saying only "Victim doesn't want to come, please advise." If the CPS doesn't know why the victim doesn't want to come to court, it must contact the witness care unit to get more information. This shows that some witness care officers didn't understand what information the CPS needs from them and why.

Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme

The CPS introduced guidance through its [Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme](#). Each CPS Area has a team called the Victim Liaison Unit (VLU). The VLU is responsible for managing the Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme. In some CPS Areas, the unit is also responsible for managing the local resolution stage of the [Victims' Right to Review Scheme](#).

This is covered in Right 6 of the Victims' Code: the right to be given information about the investigation and prosecution.

If the police or the CPS decide not to prosecute the suspect, or there are substantial changes to the charge, victims have the right to be told about this. We assessed the quality of this information in relation to the CPS.

The CPS should write to a victim when a charge has been dropped or substantially changed. Under the Victims' Code, they should do this within five working days (one working day under [Enhanced Rights](#)).

The CPS should write a letter explaining:

- the reasons for the decision;
- how the victim can get further information;
- how to ask for a review under the Victims' Right to Review Scheme; and
- how to be referred to a support service.

The CPS Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme includes guidance to help staff to write good quality letters. The CPS should write in plain English or translate it into the language the victim used in their statement. Letters should also show empathy towards the victim and be easy to understand.

We examined 20 cases where a letter should have been sent to the victim. No letter was sent in 10 out of 20 cases. This means that, in those cases, the victim didn't receive an explanation about why the case had been dropped or the charge(s) had been substantially altered.

Of the ten cases where the CPS sent a letter to the victim:

- in six cases, the letter wasn't sent within the timeframe set out in the Victims' Code; and
- in six cases, the letter didn't explain the reasons for the decision well enough or didn't show empathy.

In one case, the CPS sent a letter under the Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme to a female victim of stabbing. Instead of showing any understanding or empathy with the victim's experience, the letter was impersonal and referred to "the case you were involved in".

In most cases, the prosecutor should provide an explanation for their decision to the CPS Area VLU. The VLU then writes the letter to the victim. But some prosecutors and paralegal officers didn't understand that a letter should still be sent even when the prosecutor has spoken about it with the victim at court – unless the victim expressly asks that they don't.

In interviews and focus groups, we were told that the CPS has redesigned its letter templates as part of its victim transformation programme to make it easier to write clear and empathetic letters. These provide some consistency.

The letter should include a clear explanation of the decision. It should also include a referral to the Victims' Right to Review Scheme, when appropriate. This scheme allows a victim to ask the prosecution to reconsider a decision to drop or substantially alter a case.

Although the letter is sent out in the prosecutor's name, we were told that the prosecutor rarely sees the final version of the letter sent to the victim.

VLU managers said that the CPS monitors the timeliness of letters and produces data about this. During interviews and focus groups, we were told that the need for a letter wasn't always flagged to the VLU by the prosecutor making the decision. This meant victims weren't always getting the explanation they should and weren't being made aware of the Victims' Right to Review Scheme.

The CPS collects data about the timeliness of letters sent by the victim communication and liaison team to victims. But it doesn't collect data about whether the letters were of a good standard. VLU managers or their teams should review letters to make sure that the explanation provided by the prosecutor is understandable and empathetic, and the letter contains information about the Victims' Right to Review. In some CPS Areas, HMCPSI was told of a second check by another member of the VLU. If the explanation for the legal decision needed to be amended, the draft should be returned

to the prosecutor for this to be done. Quality checking and scrutiny panels also exist in some CPS Areas. Despite these quality assurance measures, we assessed only four of the ten letters we reviewed as being of good quality. This echoes the findings of HMCPSP's recent Area Inspection Programme and the findings around victim communication and liaison in HMCPSP's two thematic reports on letters to victims ([2018](#) and [2020](#)).

The 2020 report suggested that the CPS review whether the arrangements it had in place were the right ones "to deliver its commitment to victims". The CPS has acted on this by commissioning independent research and beginning a programme to transform its service to victims. This is a long-term programme. But in the meantime, more needs to be done to make sure that victims get the explanations they are entitled to under the Victims' Code.

Communication with victims after charge

We found that each police force we inspected had different arrangements and structures in place for contacting victims after charge. In some forces, after a suspect has been charged, the witness care unit provides all the ongoing contact with a victim. In others, the officer in the case continues to update the victim, although the witness care unit also has a role. The differing arrangements can cause confusion. We were told in our police interviews and focus groups that there was often confusion about who should update victims after the suspect had been charged.

In some forces, the police IT systems prompt the officer in the case to contact a victim. This is a positive. But we were told that, in some cases, when police officers spoke with the victim, the witness care unit had already contacted the victim to update them because it is their role to update the victim following a court hearing or at specific stages linked to the prosecution. Witness care officers get this information from a separate system called the witness management system, which is linked to the CPS's case management system. When communication between the different organisations breaks down in this way, victims may lose confidence in the ability of criminal justice system organisations to work together effectively.

Staff in witness care units often have a difficult job. They don't always have the information they need to give victims a clear explanation about decisions that the police or prosecutors have made. We were pleased to see that some police forces provide training to witness care unit staff about how to manage difficult conversations.

Training about the effects of trauma can be useful for all those who work with victims. It helps them to understand how trauma affects victims' behaviour and can help dispel myths about victims.

Some forces are beginning to implement training to improve understanding. In West Yorkshire Police, we were told that witness care unit staff are given training on the effects of trauma on victims. The training includes topics such as suicide and mental health awareness.

Resources and capacity

In every force we inspected, workloads within witness care units were high. This affects the quality and timeliness of witness care unit contact with victims.

Workloads are also high in CPS Areas. Caseloads are still substantially higher than pre-pandemic levels. There has also been an increase in the court listings as HM Courts & Tribunals Service works to reduce the backlog.

We saw some examples of good communication between the police, prosecutors and victims. But in many of the cases we reviewed, communication with victims was poor and often lacked evidence of victim care.

At the time of writing this report, the National Police Chiefs' Council was carrying out a review of witness care units. Clear, consistent standards and expectations need to be set around how witness care units operate. These should establish how witness care units communicate with the police, the CPS and victims to allow effective, agile and timely information-sharing so that victims' needs are met.

Recommendation 4

By 30 September 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council and the Crown Prosecution Service should agree minimum standards and consistent processes for how witness care units or functions communicate with the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and victims to help effective, agile and timely information-sharing so that victims' needs are met.

Court

Support for victims at court

We visited five Crown Courts and four magistrates' courts during our inspection fieldwork. We viewed their facilities and spoke with court staff.

Under Right 8 of the Victims' Code, victims have a right to be given information about the trial, the trial process and their role as a witness. Under this right, victims who must give evidence in court have the right to be offered a referral to a witness support service.

Prosecutors and witness care unit staff in all five areas we inspected told us that the witness support service provides a good service to victims. Many of the staff are volunteers, giving their time to support victims and witnesses.

Witness support service staff usually meet the victim when they arrive at court. They speak to victims to identify issues or concerns and provide reassurance, both on pre-trial court visits and also on the day of trial.

If the victim hasn't had a pre-trial court visit, witness support service staff can sometimes show the victim the courtroom before the trial starts to help them to feel more comfortable.

We were told that in some courts the witness support service may go with the victim into the live link room when they give their evidence or sit near to them in court. This support is important for some victims and witnesses to help them feel less anxious and help them give their best evidence. But this isn't allowed in all courts.

Pre-trial court visits

Every criminal court has a witness service to give information and support to victims, and to help them get ready to give evidence, including showing victims the court before they come to give evidence at trial. This can make a real difference to victims who are often not familiar with the courts and can feel daunted by the prospect of giving evidence. This is called a pre-trial visit. The visit can help the victim find their way around the court building and see where they will sit while they are waiting to give evidence, or where they and other people will sit in the courtroom. It also gives them an opportunity to ask questions about what will happen on the day.

At the visit, victims can also get a chance to see how the special measures work. We were told about an example where a victim had asked for a live link, but when they visited the court and saw that the defendant would see the television monitor, they asked to use screens in the court instead. This example underlines the importance for victims of understanding what special measures are and what it means for them in court.

There is a lack of consistency in how victims are made aware of pre-trial court visits and in how the referrals for the visits are made. This may contribute to why such low numbers of pre-trial court visits take place. In one area we visited, we were told that only a third of victims had visited the court before trial.

In one force, we were concerned to hear from witness care unit staff that none of the team had ever visited the courts. They told us that visiting the court would be useful learning for them. It would help them to give more accurate advice to victims about how the court works and, in particular, about special measures. The National Police Chiefs' Council should consider this as part of the approach to making sure witness care units provide a more consistent, high-quality service to victims.

Promising practice: support for vulnerable victims and witnesses

Dorset Witness Services offers an outreach service to vulnerable or intimidated witnesses and victims. A volunteer from the service will make a personal visit to the victim or witness to talk through what support they may need at court and explain what will happen. This increased level of support aims to provide support for victims and help them to give their best evidence.

We commissioned the independent organisation [Crest Advisory](#) to carry out research on the experience of victims in the criminal justice system. Most participants said that someone at the court asked about their needs. One participant said they were pleased that the court usher and a judge asked, at court, whether there was anything else they needed help with either during or after the trial.

Speaking to witnesses at court

The CPS guidance [Speaking to Witnesses at Court \(STWAC\)](#) describes how prosecutors can make sure victims and witnesses can give their best evidence at court.

During interviews and focus groups, HMCPSI found that magistrates' and Crown Court advocates saw this as an important part of their role at court.

In all the courts, we were told by court and witness service staff that they had good working relationships with prosecutors. They spoke positively about how prosecutors at the court interacted with victims and witnesses. This included visiting the rooms provided for victims to talk to victims and witnesses prior to the hearing to explain what was going to happen.

A member of the witness service said:

“At the moment I don't think we have a bad prosecutor, generally they are very good. They know how to talk to people. If a case is not going ahead due to time restraints it is the prosecutor who updates witnesses, and sometimes the magistrate will call them into court and apologise.”

But magistrates' court CPS advocates told us that speaking to victims and witnesses can be a challenge. They often deal with more than one trial listed each day. They said that there is sometimes not enough time to give victims what they need, usually due to the listing of court hearings. They said that often four or five trials were listed each day. This meant that they didn't always have enough time to speak to all the victims before the court started and couldn't always speak to them after they had given their evidence. In the Crown Court, we were told that advocates had more time to speak to victims.

CPS paralegal officers usually complete STWAC forms or hearing record sheets at the Crown Court. These forms should record what was discussed at the hearing and any issues raised.

In our case file review, we found some well-recorded and good-quality discussions with victims at court. This reflects similar findings in HMCPSI's Area inspections where it found the CPS complied well with the Speaking to Witnesses at Court guidance.

Court facilities

We visited nine court buildings during our fieldwork to view facilities and speak to court staff. We didn't speak to members of the judiciary. All these court buildings had separate entrances for victims to use, away from where the defendant and members of the public enter. Some courts take victims through the judge's corridors and clear the court before they go in. All the courts we visited had secure areas where victims had access to toilet facilities, which couldn't be accessed by members of the public. Some, but not all, courts provided limited refreshments. But none offered any refreshment facilities that were secure or away from public areas.

HM Courts & Tribunals Service told us that because some court buildings are older, there are limitations or restrictions on the facilities they can provide.

Court delays

Often the courts list many more cases than can be heard in a day, particularly in magistrates' courts. This means that when victims go to court there is a strong chance that they will be told there isn't enough time to hear their case. This can cause considerable difficulty and distress for victims.

Because of backlogs, Crown Court cases can take many months, and sometimes years, to be heard. These backlogs are continuing to increase which significantly affects victims and witnesses as they wait for cases to be listed for trial. Such delays mean that criminal justice bodies need to continue to update and support victims for much longer, increasing caseloads and affecting resources as new cases continue to come into the system.

In most CPS Areas, CPS managers have regular meetings with HM Courts & Tribunals Service to identify victim and witness-related issues for the next week's list of court cases. This helps to plan for when victims and witnesses should be told about their court date or clarify special measures issues.

However, the difficulties in allocating court time, trials cancelled at short notice and over listing of trials, means that the needs of victims can't always be met.

Probation Service advice to court: pre-sentence reports

The Probation Service provides pre-sentence reports to the courts to help the judges and magistrates when they are sentencing offenders. A pre-sentence report gives the sentencing court some background to help them to understand the reasons an individual committed an offence. It also includes details of the offender's background, family and work circumstances. The report should also consider the victim's views and the effect of the crime on them.

We reviewed 18 pre-sentence reports.

We found that:

- in 12 cases the reports contained enough detail for the sentencing court;
- in 17 cases the probation practitioner had considered the risk of harm from the offender to the victim; and
- in 15 cases the report included appropriate sentencing proposals to the court to minimise the risk to victims.

Where there is any indication that the person on probation is a perpetrator or victim of domestic abuse, probation services should make enquiries with the police domestic abuse unit. In 16 out of 18 cases we reviewed, this should have been done. We found that these enquiries had been completed in only 6 out of the 16 cases.

In the six cases where probation services had made enquiries with the police domestic abuse unit, the police responded before the court date. But in ten cases probation services didn't make enquiries with the police when they should have. This means that there may have been risks that weren't identified or considered when sentencing in the remaining ten cases.

Where there is an indication that there might be child protection or child safeguarding concerns, probation services should make enquiries with relevant children's services. Probation services should have made these enquiries in 13 out of 18 cases. We found that this was done in only six cases. In the six cases where enquiries were made, children's services responded in four cases before the report was presented to the court. This means that risks may not have been fully considered before the offender was sentenced in 9 cases out of 13.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation has previously made recommendations to improve practice in probation services as part of its core inspection programme.

The post-conviction stage

The Victim Contact Scheme

Under the [*Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales*](#) (the Victims' Code), the victims of some crimes have a right to be given information about the offender following conviction. This is called the [Victim Contact Scheme](#).

Victims can join the Victim Contact Scheme if:

- they are the victim of a violent or sexual crime; and
- the offender is sentenced to 12 months or more.

Those victims who qualify are referred to as eligible victims. Most victims aren't eligible for the Victim Contact Scheme. There is no mechanism for most victims to get information about an offender after they are convicted. This means that the system focuses on the crime type rather than the victim's needs.

[Annex E](#) shows the number of victims actively participating in the Victim Contact Scheme, as at 16 January 2023.

The role of the victim liaison officer

Under Right 11 of the Victims' Code, eligible victims are entitled to know about the sentence an offender receives.

The Probation Service has victim liaison officers to help victims to understand their rights under the Victim Contact Scheme. When the Probation Service receives a referral for an eligible victim, it should allocate a victim liaison officer to the victim.

Victim liaison officers are responsible for:

- keeping in contact with victims during the offender's sentence;
- answering any questions the victim may have; and
- giving victims information about how the justice system works.

The role of the victim liaison officer is set out in guidance on the Victim Contact Scheme. But in focus groups and interviews we were told that victim liaison officers often provide additional support to victims beyond their role, such as advocacy and counselling. This is of concern, as victim liaison officers don't receive training for this.

Multi-agency public protection arrangements and the victim liaison officer

The Probation Service works with many individuals who are managed through [multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\)](#) in each of the 42 criminal justice areas in England and Wales. These are designed to protect the public, including previous victims of crime, from serious harm by sexual and violent offenders. They require local criminal justice bodies and other organisations dealing with offenders to work together to reduce the offending behaviour.

Victim liaison officers should attend or provide a report to MAPPA level 2 and 3 meetings where they are actively engaged with a victim or their family under the Victim Contact Scheme.

We assessed ten cases that needed a MAPPA meeting. We found that in all ten cases the victim liaison officer attended this meeting. We spoke to MAPPA co-ordinators who told us that victim liaison officers were essential in providing the voice of the victims at these meetings.

Referrals from the witness care unit to the Probation Service

After an offender has been sentenced at court, and if the victim is eligible for the Victim Contact Scheme, witness care units should refer the case to the Probation Service. Under the Victims' Code, the witness care unit should do this within ten working days.

We found that there were often delays in sending these referrals. In one force, referrals from the witness care unit could take up to 40 working days to reach the Probation Service.

From the five areas we inspected, we reviewed 75 cases that should have been referred to the Victim Contact Scheme. In five of these cases the witness care unit hadn't referred the case to the Victim Contact Scheme when it should have.

In addition to these 75 cases, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation examined a further 603 cases across England and Wales which should have been referred to the Victim Contact Scheme and found that 64 cases (more than one in ten) hadn't been referred.

In interviews and focus groups, witness care unit leads told us that they were aware that some cases weren't referred when they should have been. But they didn't understand why or how this had happened. Staff from the witness care units said that sometimes the details provided from the courts weren't clear and that this made it difficult to identify eligible victims.

In all the probation areas we inspected, there were processes in place that are intended to make sure all relevant cases were received from the witness care unit. But probation staff told us they were doing work that the witness care unit should have done. Despite this safety net, cases are still being missed.

Case study: referrals to the Victim Contact Scheme

The victim was vulnerable and had severe breathing problems. The offender attacked the victim, causing a bleed to his brain, which needed emergency surgery. Following the surgery, the victim suffered with longer term problems, including epilepsy. He was also unable to speak clearly. At the trial, the offender was convicted and sentenced to four years' imprisonment. The court granted a restraining order for ten years.

We found that the witness care unit hadn't informed the Probation Service of the sentence. As a result, the victim hadn't been told about the Victim Contact Scheme. His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation highlighted this case and, as a result, the Probation Service has now contacted the victim. But this was eight months after the conviction.

Recommendation 5

By 31 December 2024, the National Police Chiefs' Council should work with His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service to make sure all eligible victims are referred to the Victim Contact Scheme.

The quality of referrals

When the witness care unit did refer victims to the Probation Service, staff didn't always include correct details for the victim. Victim liaison officers said that sometimes the referrals didn't include critical information such as the victim's address. In one case we reviewed, a Polish national who didn't speak English hadn't replied to an offer to join the Victim Contact Scheme. The letter had been written in English.

Probation Service initial letter to victims

When the Probation Service receives a referral from the witness care unit about an eligible victim, it should send the victim a letter inviting them to join the Victim Contact Scheme. The Victims' Code states it should do this within 20 working days of receiving the referral.

The letter should be personal to the victim and contain enough information about the scheme to help victims decide whether to join. The letter should also tell victims that they can join the scheme later if they wish.

We reviewed 60 cases where victims were eligible to be referred to the Victim Contact Scheme and the offender had been sentenced after 2019.

We found that in 55 out of these 60 cases, the letters were sent within the timescales set out in the Victims' Code and they contained enough information for the victim to decide whether to join the scheme.

But we found that in 10 out of 60 cases, the letters weren't personal enough to the victim.

If the victim doesn't respond to the initial letter, the Probation Service should follow up with a further invite. We found that it did this in all the cases we reviewed.

Victims who don't want to join the Victim Contact Scheme are told that they can do so at any future point. But those who choose not to join the scheme aren't contacted again by the Probation Service, including in the run up to the release of offenders. For many victims, this may be appropriate and in line with their wishes. But victims who aren't in the scheme can't contribute to decisions when licence conditions, exclusions zones and release plans are made.

In October 2022, at the time of our inspection, the Probation Service had introduced a process to contact victims who haven't chosen to join the scheme, six months after sentencing. This is a welcome development. But it is too early to assess whether this is working well.

Advice to victims about unwanted contact

There are measures in place for the victim to alert the authorities if an offender tries to contact them against their wishes. His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) has a telephone helpline (available during office hours) for victims who are concerned about unwanted contact. The helpline also provides advice to victims who may be worried about someone being released from prison. In an emergency, victims are usually advised to contact the police if the prisoner tries to make unwanted contact with them.

In 58 out of 60 cases, the Probation Service should have included information in its letter to the victim about this. In 37 out of these 58 eligible cases, the Probation Service hadn't included this information in the letter.

Probation Service IT systems

The Probation Service records all victim contact details on the victim case management system. The victim case management system is a separate system from that used to manage the cases of people in prison and people on probation.

The system used to manage the cases of people in prison and on probation includes a flag to highlight that there is a victim involved in a case. The flag is important as it notifies the probation practitioner that there is Victim Contact Scheme involvement in the case and that they need to liaise with the victim liaison officer. We found this flag wasn't used in all cases.

Offender risk assessments

The Probation Service assesses the risks of harm and reoffending presented by a person on probation.

We reviewed 50 cases to assess the quality of work the Probation Service does with the offender. In 17 of the 50 cases, we found that the Probation Service assessment hadn't been done well. We found that the Probation Service hadn't always considered the needs, views and experiences of victims.

In managing offenders' behaviour, the Probation Service should develop plans to address individuals' offending behaviour.

We found that in nine cases this hadn't been done well.

When the Probation Service assess the risk that offenders present, it should contact other bodies such as the police and social services to make checks relating to matters such as child safeguarding and domestic abuse. We found that these checks didn't always take place.

Pre-release work with victims on the Victim Contact Scheme

Before an offender is released from prison (pre-release), the Probation Service puts licence conditions in place to help in the management of the offender's release into the community. Licences include standard conditions that will apply to all prisoners released on licence.

In addition, an exclusion zone can be included as a licence condition for those released from custody, where it is considered appropriate. For example, where contact with a prisoner on release could cause distress to a victim.

In these circumstances, the Probation Service will usually consider imposing an exclusion zone to limit such contact. There doesn't need to be a suggestion that a person would seek to cause harm if there was contact, only that contact would cause distress to the victim.

In our case reviews, the victim liaison officer had contacted the victim before the offender was released from prison. In 49 out of 54 cases where it was required, the victim liaison officer had supported the victim to have a say in the offender's licence conditions.

We found in all cases that victim liaison officer contact with the victim was in a way that met the victim's needs. For example, during a home visit or on the telephone.

Post-release work with victims on the Victim Contact Scheme

When prisoners are released from custody before the end of their sentence, they are normally released on licence. This is a period of the sentence served in the community.

In 29 of the 75 cases we reviewed, the individual had been released from prison.

Communication between probation practitioners and victim liaison officers is important to make sure that victims have the information they need.

In one case, we were told that the Probation Service hadn't notified the victim liaison officer that the person on probation had died. It was only when the victim had discovered this through a friend that the victim liaison officer became aware. In focus groups and interviews, victim liaison officers told us that the negotiation and management of exclusion zones were often a point of tension between them and probation practitioners. They described their role as representing the wishes of victims but that it was sometimes a battle to get the victim's voice heard. Victim liaison officers told us they thought that the needs of those on probation were sometimes prioritised rather than the needs of victims.

We were concerned to hear that probation practitioners didn't always tell victim liaison officers if someone on probation had been allowed to enter an exclusion zone. This can be allowed for short periods for visiting a family member or other special circumstances. Probation practitioners should inform victim liaison officers when this has been allowed.

In all but one applicable case, the right licence conditions had been put in place to protect the victim.

Victims should be contacted within 24 hours of the individual being released from custody. This hadn't happened in eight cases. All but one victim was later contacted by the victim liaison officer.

We also found that in 25 of the 29 post-release cases we reviewed, clear information was given to the victim about what they could expect when the offender was released from prison.

In 13 of 29 post-release cases we reviewed, victim liaison officers had referred victims to other support agencies or services, or had given them information about available sources of help and support after the release of the offender. This may be due to the lack of local services in some areas, or long waiting lists for services that are available.

Victim Contact Scheme resources

In the Probation Service, there are fewer vacancies for the victim liaison officer role than for sentence management staff. But resourcing is an issue for some regions that cover a large area.

Unlike probation sentence management, there is no workload measurement tool for victim liaison officer work. While it is recognised that cases need different levels of intervention as they progress through the criminal justice system, 13 of the 22 victim liaison officers interviewed told us that they have between 200 and 300 cases. Although there was an ambition to reduce these case numbers to a more manageable 180, the Probation Service had no understanding of whether this figure was appropriate.

In 2014, the Government created the [Transforming Rehabilitation](#) programme, bringing together the National Probation Service and Community Rehabilitation Company to manage offenders. At the time of this change, victim liaison officers worked within the National Probation Service and not Community Rehabilitation Companies. The grade for the victim liaison officer role varied across probation trusts. In 2020, [HMI Probation recommended that the grading of the victim liaison officer role should be reviewed](#).

This review has not yet been completed. It may be the case that the role grading is found to be appropriate. But for some staff, the delay in the review has added to a sense of feeling undervalued by the organisation.

Some victim liaison officers have been in the role for many years. There are limited progression routes for victim liaison officers, unless they want to move into sentence management work.

Victim liaison officers have access to workplace support if they ask for it. But many said they didn't use it and instead get their support from other colleagues. The most common reason for not accessing workplace-based support was that it was provided by individuals who victim liaison officers felt didn't understand the nature and stresses of their role.

Learning and development

The Probation Service has recently introduced new training packages about the role of the victim liaison officer for probation staff who work in sentence management. Where these packages were used, staff said that this was positive.

Victim liaison officers who work with victims of unrestricted mentally disordered offenders (who are kept in hospital for treatment, rather than prison) haven't had training to do this work.

We found that many staff in the Probation Service don't understand the role of the victim liaison officer. Some trainee and newly qualified probation officers said that their training hadn't equipped them to understand their responsibilities when working with victim liaison officers to keep victims safe.

Recommendation 6

By 30 September 2024, the Probation Service should provide training on the work of the Victim Contact Scheme to all probation practitioners and those in training.

The learning should include:

- what is involved in the Victim Contact Scheme; and
- how probation practitioners work with victim liaison officers to keep victims safe.

Annex A: Summary of victims' rights

The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales (the Victims' Code): Summary of Victims' Rights

1. To be able to understand and to be understood

You have the Right to be given information in a way that is easy to understand and to be provided with help to be understood, including, where necessary, access to interpretation and translation services.

2. To have the details of the crime recorded without unjustified delay

You have the Right to have details of the crime recorded by the police as soon as possible after the incident. If you are required to provide a witness statement or be interviewed, you have the Right to be provided with additional support to assist you through this process.

3. To be provided with information when reporting the crime

You have the Right to receive written confirmation when reporting a crime, to be provided with information about the criminal justice process and to be told about programmes or services for victims. This might include services where you can meet with the suspect or offender, which is known as Restorative Justice.

4. To be referred to services that support victims and have services and support tailored to your needs

You have the Right to be referred to services that support victims, which includes the Right to contact them directly, and to have your needs assessed so services and support can be tailored to meet your needs. If eligible, you have the Right to be offered a referral to specialist support services and to be told about additional support available at court, for example special measures.

5. To be provided with information about compensation

Where eligible, you have the Right to be told about how to claim compensation for any loss, damage or injury caused as a result of crime.

6. To be provided with information about the investigation and prosecution

You have the Right to be provided with updates on your case and to be told when important decisions are taken. You also have the Right, at certain stages of the justice process, to ask for decisions to be looked at again by the relevant service provider.

7. To make a Victim Personal Statement

You have the Right to make a Victim Personal Statement, which tells the court how the crime has affected you and is considered when sentencing the offender. You will be given information about the process.

8. To be given information about the trial, trial process and your role as a witness

If your case goes to court, you have the Right to be told the time, date and location of any hearing and the outcome of those hearings in a timely way. If you are required to give evidence, you have the Right to be offered appropriate help before the trial and, where possible, if the court allows, to meet with the prosecutor before giving evidence.

9. To be given information about the outcome of the case and any appeals

You have the Right to be told the outcome of the case and, if the defendant is convicted, to be given an explanation of the sentence. If the offender appeals against their conviction or sentence, you have the Right to be told about the appeal and its outcome.

10. To be paid expenses and have property returned

If you are required to attend court and give evidence, you have the Right to claim certain expenses. If any of your property was taken as evidence, you have the Right to get it back as soon as possible.

11. To be given information about the offender following a conviction

Where eligible, you have the Right to be automatically referred to the Victim Contact Scheme, which will provide you with information about the offender and their progress in prison, and if/when they become eligible for consideration of parole or release. Where applicable, you also have the Right to make a new Victim Personal Statement, in which you can say how the crime continues to affect you.

12. To make a complaint about your Rights not being met

If you believe that you have not received your Rights, you have the Right to make a complaint to the relevant service provider. If you remain unhappy, you can contact the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman.

Annex B: Inspections and reports

Inspections and published reports focusing on victim experience (2018–23)

Joint inspections and published reports

[*Evidence led domestic abuse prosecutions*](#) (Published 23 January 2020)

The report covers the extent to which the police and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) prepared and built cases with a view to proceeding without the victim, if necessary, such as when the victim had declined to take part. The report includes findings on the use of special measures to support victims and witnesses, the level of support provided to victims and the management of the risk to their safety.

[*Pre-charge bail and released under investigation*](#) (Published 8 December 2020)

This report was published alongside a research report exploring victims' and suspects' experiences of the changes to bail and remand under investigation. The section on looking after victims includes findings on risk, recording reasons for decisions and the use of victim personal statements. The report also includes judgments on the effect of delays on victims.

[*Impact of the pandemic on the Criminal Justice System*](#) (Published 19 January 2021)

The report drew on individual inspections carried out by the four criminal justice inspectorates on the impact of the pandemic on the criminal justice system. It includes a section on the effect on the service user, for example someone reporting a crime, and on prosecutions.

[*A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape \(phase one\)*](#) (Published 16 July 2021)

This inspection assessed what happened up to the point of a decision to take no further action in rape cases. The report was published together with a research report evaluating rape survivors' experience of the police and other criminal justice bodies. The report included specific sections on:

- the response to victims when they report a rape;
- communication with the victim on the progress of investigations and on decisions to take no further action; and

- victim appeals of the police and CPS decisions to take no further action (the Victims' Right to Review Scheme).

[*A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape \(phase two\)*](#) (Published 25 February 2022)

The joint rape inspection (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI)) examined rape cases from the point of charge to their conclusion.

[*The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the criminal justice system – a progress report*](#) (Published 17 May 2022)

This report followed on from HMICFRS's 2021 publication on the impact of the pandemic on the criminal justice system. It included a focus on how this was continuing to affect victims and witnesses, for example because of longer court delays caused by court backlogs, which had been worsened by the pandemic.

[*Twenty years on, is MAPPA achieving its objectives?*](#) (Published 14 July 2022)

A joint inspection (HMI Probation, HMI Prisons and HMICFRS) on the effectiveness of [multi-agency public protection arrangements](#) (MAPPA).

HMICFRS inspections and published reports

The PEEL inspection programme is an assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy of police forces in England and Wales. It is structured around 12 core questions, the first one being: 'How good is the force's service for victims of crime?' The response to victims is also a main feature of most of the other questions. Force-level reports are published throughout the year.

In 2021, HMICFRS also introduced to PEEL an assessment focused on the experience of the service provided by forces to victims of crime. This is called a victim service assessment (VSA).

The VSA considers the force's:

- call handling standards;
- initial response to victims;
- crime allocation arrangements;
- investigation standards; and
- suitability of the outcome of its investigations.

HMICFRS thematic inspections

[*National Child Protection Inspections: 2019 thematic report*](#) (Published 27 February 2020)

In early 2014, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (as it was then called) began a national programme of child protection inspections. These inspections examine the effectiveness of the decisions made by the police at each stage of their interactions with or for children, from initial contact through to the investigation of offences against them.

In addition, in 2020 and 2021 HMICFRS published 16 force-level national child protection inspection programme reports.

[*A call for help: police contact management through call handling and control rooms in 2018/19*](#) (Published 9 July 2020)

A report on the challenges that the police service face in handling calls with smaller budgets and fewer people.

[*Policing in the pandemic: the police response to the coronavirus pandemic during 2020*](#) (Published 20 April 2021)

A report on an inspection that took a snapshot of policing and assessed what happened during the pandemic from March to November 2020.

[*Review of policing domestic abuse during the pandemic: 2021*](#) (Published 23 June 2021)

A report on how the police responded to the impact of the pandemic on preventing and responding to domestic abuse.

[*Interim report: inspection into how effectively the police engage with women and girls*](#) (Published 7 July 2021)

An interim report setting out findings and recommendations on how effectively the police respond to violence against women and girls offences, such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and female genital mutilation.

[*A review of 'Fraud: Time to Choose'*](#) (Published 5 August 2021)

A report on how the police service has responded to HMICFRS's recommendations and areas for improvement in its 2019 report, [*Fraud: Time to choose – An inspection of the police response to fraud*](#).

[*Police response to violence against women and girls: final inspection report*](#) (Published 17 September 2021)

This report sets out findings from an inspection of how effectively the police respond to violence against women and girls offences.

[*An inspection of how well the police and National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children*](#) (Published 5 April 2023)

This inspection examined how effective police forces, the National Crime Agency and regional organised crime units are at identifying and safeguarding children affected by online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Super-complaints

HMICFRS, the College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct are responsible for assessing, investigating and reporting on police super-complaints. This includes collaborating on the investigation and on drawing conclusions, raising complex concerns that may not otherwise have been a focus of combined work.

[*Safe to Share? Report on Liberty and Southall Black Sisters' super-complaint on policing and immigration status*](#) (Published 17 December 2020)

On 18 December 2018, Liberty and Southall Black Sisters made a super-complaint to HMICFRS. This super-complaint is about the treatment of victims of crime and witnesses with insecure immigration status. It focuses on how information about them is passed to the Home Office for immigration enforcement.

[*The hidden victims: Report on Hestia's super-complaint on the police response to victims of modern slavery*](#) (Published 26 May 2021)

On 31 May 2019, Hestia made a super-complaint to HMICFRS. This super-complaint is about the policies and practices of all police forces in England and Wales with respect to the standard of support that victims of modern slavery receive.

[*A duty to protect: police use of protective measures in cases involving violence against women and girls*](#) (Published 24 August 2021)

On 19 March 2019, the Centre for Women's Justice made a super-complaint to HMICFRS. This super-complaint is about the police's alleged failure to use protective measures to safeguard women and girls. It sets out concerns about four tools the police can use or are involved with:

- pre-charge bail;
- non-molestation orders;
- Domestic Violence Protection Notices; and
- restraining orders.

[*Police perpetrated domestic abuse: Report on the Centre for Women's Justice's super-complaint on police perpetrated domestic abuse*](#) (Published 30 June 2022)

On 6 March 2020, the [Centre for Women's Justice](#) made a super-complaint to HMICFRS. The super-complaint raised concerns about how police forces in

England and Wales respond when police officers and [police staff](#) are accused of [domestic abuse](#).

HMCPST inspections and published reports

Area Inspection Programme 2021–23

The Area Inspection Programme examines in detail the standard of CPS legal decision-making in volume casework (case files of crimes such as burglary, theft and robbery). The programme assesses five elements: quality casework, people, digital capability, strategic partnerships and public confidence. The casework sections dealt specifically with the extent to which the Area addresses victim and witness issues appropriately throughout its casework, and the separate chapter on public confidence included an assessment of services to victims.

[*Area Inspection Programme Composite Report of the baseline assessments of the 14 Crown Prosecution Service Areas in England and Wales*](#) (Published 21 September 2023)

Thematic inspections of the Crown Prosecution Service and Serious Fraud Office

The experience of victims has been addressed in many HMCPST thematic reports. The more recent reports (2020 onwards) are:

[*Disclosure of unused material in the Crown Court*](#) (Published 9 January 2020)

[*Disclosure of unused material in the Crown Court: a follow-up*](#) (Published 1 December 2020)

Both these reports specifically referenced the service to victims and witnesses, including compliance with [*The Code for Crown Prosecutors*](#), and disclosure of previous convictions and communications between the victim and defendant or others.

[*Serious youth crime*](#) (Published 5 March 2020)

This report focused on the quality of consultation and communication with victims, and the use of custody and bail conditions to protect them. It also considered the dual position of some young people as suspects and victims, particularly trafficked children in [county lines](#) drugs operations.

[*2020 Charging inspection*](#) (Published 29 September 2020)

This report contained judgments on the quality of the service provided to victims (complainants), witnesses and the public. These included the quality and timeliness of decisions, compliance with policies on, for example, hate crime and elder abuse, special measures, and communication with victims.

[*Victim communication and liaison scheme: letters to victims*](#) (Published 22 October 2020)

A review of communications with victims, which followed up on a 2018 inspection. The inspection looked at the quality and timeliness of letters, and at the processes in place to support compliance with the scheme.

[*Inspection of CPS information management*](#) (Published 12 November 2020)

This report looked at the controls in place in the CPS to make sure that case information is managed securely and appropriately. This included whether, for example, personal information in victim statements had been properly redacted before they were served on the defence.

[*CPS response to COVID-19: 16 March to 8 May 2020*](#) (Published 30 June 2020)

[*CPS response to COVID-19: dealing with backlogs*](#) (Published 9 March 2021)

Both reports contain a chapter on the impact of COVID-19 on victims and witnesses.

[*SFO handling of complaints*](#) (Published 25 February 2021)

Report into the handling of complaints by the Serious Fraud Office. The inspection reviewed 14 complaints, four of which were from victims, and reached judgments on how easy it was to make a complaint, how the complaint was progressed and the quality of responses to complainants.

[*The CPS's handling of police witness care correspondence*](#) (Published 25 March 2021)

This inspection reported on the CPS's handling of correspondence from the police witness care units. This covered a range of issues raised by witness care units, including the special measures and other support needed by victims and witnesses, and how effectively the CPS progressed and resolved them.

[*The service from the CPS to victims of domestic abuse*](#) (Published 30 March 2023)

[*CPS Handling of complaints*](#) (Published 23 August 2023)

[*CPS Induction processes*](#) (Published 1 November 2023)

[*CPS Handling of custody time limits follow-up inspection*](#) (Published 30 November 2023)

HMI Probation

HMI Probation's core programme of the Probation Service inspection includes a specific standard to measure the quality of statutory victim work.

Serious Further Offence reviews

From April 2021, HMI Probation has been responsible for examining and rating the quality of a sample of 20 percent of all [Serious Further Offence reviews](#) carried out by the Probation Service in England and Wales. In September 2022, HMI Probation published an update of this work: [Annual report: Serious Further Offences](#).

Previous HMI Probation thematic inspections with a focus on victims and specific recommendations on the protection of victims and children include:

- [A thematic inspection of work undertaken, and progress made, by the Probation Service to reduce the incidence of domestic abuse and protect victims](#) (Published 4 July 2023)
- [Management and supervision of men convicted of sexual offences](#) (Published 24 January 2019)

Annex C: Responsibilities of criminal justice bodies

The police

The police are responsible for gathering evidence during the investigation stage. They should follow all reasonable lines of enquiry and assess whether there is enough evidence to arrest or charge someone and whether this is in the public interest. This is called the evidential test. If there is enough evidence, the police should usually refer the case to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for a charging decision. In some specified cases ([Director's Guidance on Charging, 2020](#)), the police can charge the suspect before referring to the CPS.

The police have many responsibilities under the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) (the Victims' Code). These include:

- keeping victims updated with information throughout their case;
- helping victims understand what is happening and to be understood;
- recording the details of the crime as soon as possible;
- explaining to victims that making a witness statement may result in them giving evidence in court;
- taking steps to make sure there is no unnecessary contact between victim and offender;
- considering whether an interpreter or a registered intermediary is needed;
- providing victims of violence against women and girls offences with a police officer of the gender of their choice;
- providing a written confirmation of the crime allegation;
- explaining where victims can get information about the criminal justice system and their rights;
- explaining how victims can get compensation;
- providing information on [restorative justice](#);
- carrying out a needs assessment;
- referring victims to victims' services;
- providing information about compensation; and

- providing information about the victim personal statement process.

The Crown Prosecution Service

The CPS prosecutes criminal cases that have been investigated by the police and other investigative organisations in England and Wales. It is independent and makes decisions independently of the police and government.

The CPS has a duty to make sure that the right person is prosecuted for the right offence, and to bring offenders to justice wherever possible.

The CPS:

- decides which cases should be prosecuted;
- determines the appropriate charges in more serious or complex cases;
- advises the police during the early stages of investigations; and
- prepares cases and presents them at court.

[The Code for Crown Prosecutors](#) sets out the basic principles to be followed by Crown Prosecutors when they make case decisions. The decision on whether or not to charge a case against a suspect is based on the Full Code Test, as outlined in the Code. The Full Code Test has two stages, the evidential stage and the public interest stage.

The CPS provides information, assistance and support to victims and prosecution witnesses. It has a responsibility under the Victims' Code to ask the victim for their views when it is considering an [out-of-court disposal](#) or when it is considering dropping or substantially changing a case after charge. When asking the victim for their views isn't practicable, the CPS has a responsibility to explain the reasons for this to the victim.

The CPS also has responsibility to liaise with the witness care unit to make sure it has the correct information to keep victims updated throughout their case.

CPS Victim Liaison Unit

Every CPS Area has a specialist team called the Victim Liaison Unit (VLU). When the CPS drops or substantially changes the charge in a case, the VLU is responsible for sending the victim a letter explaining the reasons for this.

Witness care units

Once someone has been charged with a crime, witness care units are responsible for providing information and support to victims, witnesses and the courts.

This responsibility continues until the case is completed.

If the offence is a serious sexual or violent offence for which an offender receives a custodial sentence of 12 months or more, the victim is entitled to more information about the offender and their sentence. In these cases, the witness care unit contacts the victim and gives them information about the Probation Service's [Victim Contact Scheme](#). It also refers the victim's details to the local probation service within a set timescale.

HM Courts & Tribunals Service

HM Courts & Tribunals Service is responsible for the administration of criminal, civil, and family courts and tribunals in England and Wales.

The Probation Service

The Probation Service is a statutory criminal justice service that supervises offenders released into the community.

The Probation Service:

- supervises individuals subject to prison sentences, during the period following their release while on licence in the community;
- provides reports for courts to help those who sentence offenders to decide the most suitable method of dealing with them – these are called pre-sentence reports;
- supervises individuals on court orders in the community; and
- administers the [Victim Contact Scheme](#) for victims of certain violent and sexual offence types where a custodial sentence in excess of 12 months has been imposed by the courts.

The Criminal Justice Board

The [Criminal Justice Board](#) in England brings together senior leaders from across the criminal justice system responsible for representing their own bodies. The purpose of the Criminal Justice Board is to maintain oversight of the system and promote a collaborative approach to addressing its challenges.

The senior leaders are:

- Lord Chancellor, Secretary of State for Justice and Deputy Prime Minister
- Secretary of State for the Home Department
- Attorney General
- Minister of State for the Home Department and Minister of Justice
- President of the King's Bench Division
- Senior Presiding Judge
- Director of Public Prosecutions
- Commissioner, Metropolitan Police

- Chair, National Police Chiefs' Council
- CEO, HM Courts & Tribunals Service
- CEO, HM Prison & Probation Service
- Victims' Commissioner
- Chair, Youth Justice Board
- Police and Crime Commissioner Representative
- Director General of the National Crime Agency.

The Criminal Justice Board for Wales

The Criminal Justice Board for Wales brings together criminal justice bodies:

- His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service
- His Majesty's Courts & Tribunal Service
- Youth Justice Board
- Police services in Wales
- chief constables in Wales
- police and crime commissioners in Wales
- Crown Prosecution Service
- Public Health Wales
- Welsh Government
- Welsh Local Government Association
- voluntary sector bodies
- Victims' Commissioner.

The purpose of the Criminal Justice Board is to reduce crime and make communities safer.

Local criminal justice boards

The Government set up local criminal justice boards in all 43 force areas in 2003. Local criminal justice boards bring together criminal justice bodies at police force area level to support joint working and improve services. The purpose of local criminal justice boards is to reduce crime, harm and risk by increasing the efficiency and credibility of the criminal justice system.

Local criminal justice boards are usually organised around police force areas. The local police and crime commissioner or chief constable usually chairs these meetings.

Annex D: Reasons for cases not complying with the national file standard

Figure 5: Reasons for cases we reviewed not complying with the national file standard

Missing or inadequate information	Number of cases (out of 75 cases reviewed)
Victim personal statement	15
Form MG02 (witness assessment for special measures)	5
Form MG13 (information used when drafting restraining orders)	4
Form MG19 (application for compensation)	4
Form MG11 (victim witness statement)	2
Form MG2 (witness assessment for special measures) and MG19 (application for compensation)	1
Form MG2 (witness assessment for special measures) and victim personal statement	1
Information from the Police National Computer	1
Stalking risk assessment	1
Form MG6 (case file evidence and information)	1
Victim personal statement, form MG3 (report to CPS for a charging decision) and SDC (streamlined disclosure certificate – details unused material for magistrates' court cases)	1
Contact details for the (police) officer in the case	1
CCTV	1
Other information	5
All reasons	32

Source: His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate

Annex E: Victims actively participating in the Victim Contact Scheme

Figure 6: Number of victims actively participating in the Victim Contact Scheme, by region, 16 January 2023

Region	Number of victims actively participating in the Victim Contact Scheme
East England	4,127
East Midlands	2,749
Greater Manchester	3,241
Kent, Surrey and Sussex	3,123
London	4,957
North East	2,589
North West	4,158
South Central	2,454
South West	3,748
Wales	2,635
West Midlands	4,532
Yorkshire and The Humber	4,761
England and Wales total	43,074

Source: His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service

December 2023 | © HMICFRS 2023

hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk