



# VICTIMS AND WITNESSES - THE CARE AND TREATMENT OF VICTIMS AND WITNESSES BY THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

JULY 2020

## WHAT WAS THIS INSPECTION ABOUT?

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- ▶ What the criminal justice system does to support victims and witnesses and how well it has implemented the Victim Charter and Witness Charter (the Charters).

## WHO DID YOU INSPECT?

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- ▶ Mainly the services provided by the PSNI and the PPS including the PPS-managed Victim and Witness Care Unit (VWCU). Inspectors also examined services provided by the NI Courts and Tribunals Service, Probation Board, Prison Service and Youth Justice Agency.

## WHAT ARE THE CHARTERS?

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- ▶ Documents which set out the rights (entitlements) that victims and witnesses have to receive appropriate information, support and protection to enable them to participate in criminal proceedings.
- ▶ More needed to be done to raise awareness about the Charters, as few knew about them and the rights they contained.

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THE VICTIM OR WITNESSES' JOURNEY?

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- ▶ From the time a crime was committed until a victim or witness no longer wanted support even if a crime wasn't prosecuted in court or if there was no conviction.

## WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS AND WITNESSES?

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- ▶ Identifying the needs of victims and witnesses as early as possible and recognising that an individual's needs can change at different stages of their journey.
- ▶ Providing appropriate and prompt, easily understood information, support and protection throughout their journey so they are able to participate in criminal proceedings.

## WHAT DID YOU FIND?

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- ▶ Some police officers, prosecutors and VWCU staff did a great job. They took the time to provide victims, witnesses and their families with the information, care and support they needed to give their evidence, and stay engaged despite long delays to support a prosecution.
- ▶ Frustration among police officers and other staff that a focus on compliance with process and meeting targets was leading to less meaningful engagement with victims and reduced emphasis on the impact their journey had on them and their families.



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## THE VICTIM AND WITNESS CARE UNIT (VWCU) NEEDED:

- ▶ role specific training and confident staff with good communication skills to help victims and witnesses;
- ▶ greater focus on supporting victims and witnesses with what they needed, when they needed it;
- ▶ more capacity to speak and listen to victims and witnesses and identify their needs; and
- ▶ to move from measuring timeframes for processing letters sent to victims and witnesses to meaningful people engagement.

## WHAT DID YOU RECOMMEND?

Four strategic and 12 operational recommendations aimed at delivering better services and outcomes including:

### At leadership level (strategic level):

- ✓ The DoJ should deliver an effective communications strategy to raise community awareness of the Victim and Witness Charters & how victim and witness services can be accessed easily.
- ✓ Senior leaders across the criminal justice system need to be active members of the Victim and Witness Steering Group and be Victims Champions for their organisations.

### On the ground (operational level):

- ✓ Better training for PSNI student officers, officers and VWCU staff.
- ✓ Review when investigation updates were provided and standard letters issued to victims and witnesses.
- ✓ Better partnerships between the criminal justice system and Victim Support Northern Ireland including how police first responders provide victims with information & a review of the victim needs assessment process.

