



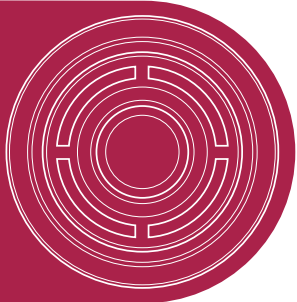
SECURING ATTENDANCE AT COURT

**A follow-up review of inspection
recommendations**

March 2014

Criminal Justice Inspection
Northern Ireland
a better justice system for all





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List of abbreviations

CJI	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
CLT	Community Liaison Team (in PPS)
CMS	Case Management System (in PPS)
IT	Information Technology
NICHE	PSNI Records Management System provided by Niche Technology Inc
NICTS	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
Options	PSNI computerised detailing system
PPS	Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
VSNI	Victim Support Northern Ireland
VWCU	Victim and Witness Care Unit



Chief Inspector's Foreword

The effective and efficient operation of the criminal courts depends on the attendance of both offenders and witnesses and the main responsibilities rest with the police, prosecution and courts service.

This follow-up review to Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's (CJI's) 2011 thematic inspection *Securing Attendance at Court*, acknowledges that the development of Victim and Witness Care Units (VWCUs) has the potential to transform the experience of witnesses as cases progress through the criminal justice process.

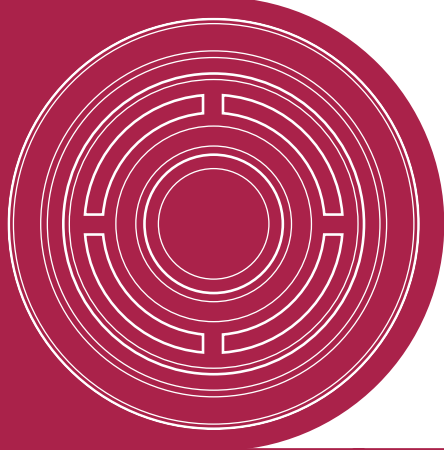
However, Inspectors are concerned that there is still insufficient reliable data and as a result a deficit in our understanding, to explain why so many cracked and ineffective trials are occurring.

Finding the answers to these questions should still be a priority and we have previously referred to this work as an important strand in reducing avoidable delay. I encourage the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) to build on the progress achieved through the previous Derry/Londonderry Court pilot and to extend and improve both the data collection and analysis of trends in court adjournments.

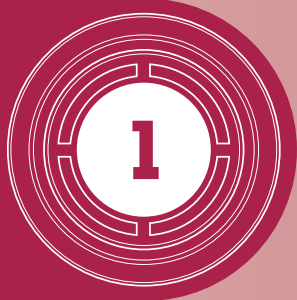
Overall there has been reasonably good progress against the recommendations, albeit with some delayed but welcome recent developments. This review was conducted by Derek Williamson. My sincere thanks to all who contributed to this work.

Brendan McGuigan
Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice
in Northern Ireland

March 2014



Follow-up Review



Introduction

Background to the follow-up review

Cases in the criminal courts cannot progress without all the relevant parties being present, and the absence of witnesses and injured parties can cause adjournments, delay, inefficiency and increase costs.

In June 2011 CJI published an inspection into the attendance at court of the various parties to a criminal case. As we indicated at that time, the attendance of witnesses is vital for the effective and efficient operation of the courts.

The NICTS, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) all have a vital role to play in securing the attendance of witnesses at court. It is important for the system to operate effectively that the three organisations work in a collaborative manner.

At the time of the inspection the overall responsibility for victims and witnesses during the prosecution process was split between the PPS and the PSNI, with some additional functions being fulfilled by Victim Support Northern Ireland's (VSNI's) Witness Service and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC). There were also a number of initiatives underway within the NICTS, the PPS and the PSNI in an attempt to improve and streamline processes.

The CJI inspection also made a number of recommendations aimed at enhancing the arrangements in place at that time and these are reported upon, with an up-dated assessment of progress, in the following chapter of this follow-up review.

Changes since the 2011 inspection

The most significant change since the last inspection has been the introduction of the Victim and Witness Care Units (VWCUs). In May 2012 the Justice Minister formally announced the piloting of the VWCU in Belfast commencing in autumn 2012. At the time of this follow-up review, the roll-out of services was still under-way with anticipated full roll-out by spring 2014. The VWCU is a joint PPS/PSNI unit whose overriding priority is '...to improve the experience of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice process'¹. The VWCUs are intended to subsume and enhance the functions of the existing PPS Community Liaison Teams (CLTs). They are led by the PPS, but staffed on a roughly even split between the PSNI and the PPS.

¹ Evidence given by the PPS to the N.I. Assembly Justice Committee on 27 September 2012. Available at <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Official-Report/Committee-Minutes-of-Evidence/Session-2012-2013/September-2012/Witness-Care-Unit-Project-PSNIPPS-Briefing>.

The follow-up review

The purpose of this review was purely to examine and evaluate the extent to which the criminal justice system agencies had implemented the recommendations made in the original 2011 report. This was achieved through a combination of agency self-assessment and additional fieldwork by Inspectors. The latter incorporated a series of meetings with those in existing CLTs and VWCU staff, as well as with a range of managers at a variety of levels and with stakeholders and partners such as VSNI.



Progress against recommendations

Recommendation 1

The NICTS should consider enhancing the statistics gathered during the Adjournment Reasons pilot, to provide specific details of attendance rates at court by the various parties to a case, so that the scale of non-attendance can be accurately assessed across the various courts, and remedial action taken if trends indicate there is a problem in a particular court area or with a particular group.

Status: Partially achieved

Agency response:

The Adjournment Reasons pilot has continued in Londonderry Courthouse and the NICTS has conducted an analysis of all the adjournment reasons during the Londonderry pilot over the last three years. Essentially, the purpose of this judicial led pilot is to record adjournment reasons at a more 'granular or detailed' level than at other venues. These results have been shared periodically with the Criminal Justice Board and various delay groups operating within the criminal justice system.

Over this period the adjournment reasons recorded against the categories identified [in the pilot²], have remained constant. However, it is also apparent that the 'detailed or granular' adjournment reasons are not routinely being identified by the judiciary, prosecution and defence.

The NICTS is currently in the process of aggregating the Londonderry pilot 'granular or detailed' adjournment reasons against the 'higher level' adjournment reasons recorded at other court venues to compare the two datasets and evaluate what added-value the Londonderry pilot affords.

Depending on the outworking of this analysis, the NICTS will consider if the pilot should be extended, but we will want to be satisfied that we are getting value for the operational and judicial overhead required to record the 'granular or detailed' data.

Inspectors' assessment:

The Derry/Londonderry Court adjournment reasons pilot records the reasons for adjournments as previously information showed only whether the adjournment was due either to prosecution or defence difficulties. The thrust and spirit of the recommendation made was to enhance the available data in order to identify and better understand the reasons for non-attendance and also to compare performance across court areas.

² This text has been amended by CJJ to ensure readability in the context of this report.

It was therefore disappointing that in the significant period since the original inspection in June 2011, substantive progress had not been achieved. The Derry/Londonderry Court adjournment reasons pilot had in fact been continued and the NICTS were, at the time of inspection, still in the process of analysing or 'aggregating' the data which, on the basis of its own evidence, was failing to identify detailed reasons. Inspectors support for the roll-out of the pilot had been made clear in both the CJI report of June 2011³ and also in their *'Avoidable Delay'* report in 2010⁴. It is therefore curious that in spite of the clear recommendation of June 2011, this 'pilot' continued for a further 24 months without meaningful results. It is consequently clear that the level of detail required to make statistics meaningful had not been achieved by the time of fieldwork for this follow-up review.

It remains unambiguous, however, that there persists considerable concern at the levels of adjournments which incorporate both cracked⁵ and ineffective⁶ trials. The most up-to-date relevant data are reflected in the tables below.

Table 1: Cracked trials⁷

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Percentage of cracked trials - Crown Courts	39.1%	37.8%	36.3%
Percentage of cracked trials – Magistrates' Courts	39.5%	39.4%	37.9%
Percentage of cracked trials - Youth Courts	45.2%	44.6%	46.1%

Table 2: Ineffective trials⁸

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13
Percentage of ineffective trials - Crown Courts	17.6%	16.2%	19.2%
Percentage of ineffective trials – Magistrates' Courts	22.0%	22.2%	21.0%
Percentage of ineffective trials - Youth Courts	23.6%	24.2%	21.6%

Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that cracked and ineffective trials represent noteworthy proportions of all cases in the courts. The effect of this on victims and witnesses will often be stark. Inspectors also heard clearly from staff in the CLTs and the VWCU of the additional work and inefficiencies resulting, but it is the consequences for victims and witnesses which cause most concern. The inefficiencies have wider effects too on other areas of the criminal justice system and in the effectiveness of the courts themselves. These were matters also highlighted in a previous inspection by CJI in December 2011⁹.

3 Securing Attendance at Court, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, June 2011.

4 Avoidable Delay, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, June 2010.

5 For statistical purposes, the NICTS refers to court cases that do not proceed to trial as a 'cracked trial'. A cracked trial is defined as a trial that on the trial date does not go ahead and as no further trial time is required, the case is closed. This may be because the defendant offers an acceptable plea or pleas or the prosecution offers no evidence.

6 For statistical purposes the NICTS refer to trials that have been delayed as 'ineffective trials'. An ineffective trial is defined as a trial that on the date it is scheduled to begin, does not go ahead due to action or inaction by one or more of the prosecution, the defence or the court and a further listing for trial is required.

7 Data supplied by NICTS.

8 Ibid.

9 The care and treatment of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland, Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland, December 2011.

Additional data demonstrates the average number of adjournments per defendant disposed of in the Adult and Youth Magistrates' Courts between 2010 and 2012¹⁰.

Table 3: Average number of adjournment per defendant in the Adult and Youth Magistrates' Courts

	2010	2011	2012
Adult	3.60	3.59	3.59
Youth	4.47	4.63	4.41

The Derry/Londonderry Court adjournment reasons pilot data obtained by Inspectors indicates the top three reasons for Court, Defence and Prosecution adjournments as follows:

Table 4: Derry/Londonderry adjournment reasons 2012-13¹¹

Court Adjournments	Defence Adjournments	Prosecution Adjournments
Pre-sentence reports	Not ready	Not ready/To determine availability
Case management	Requests for further information	To determine availability of Legal Representatives/Witness/Victim
Youth Conference	Defendant/Solicitor failed to appear	Decision Information Request ¹² (DIR) not responded to

The data quoted in Table 4 has been derived from statistics provided by the NICTS. However, this is an illustrative snapshot only and Inspectors wish to acknowledge that the data provides further additional detail, for example, in terms of the broad reasons for adjournments. It nonetheless demonstrates that there is a need for the categories of reason to be revised as, for example, the broad category of 'applications' or 'not ready' will mask a range of matters. It also demonstrates the need to concentrate on unnecessary adjournments such as those in the category of 'to determine availability' as these are matters, Inspectors suggest, could to a large extent have been previously addressed. This includes parties treating the first court appearance as the end of the process, rather than the beginning.

The absence of detailed data on the reasons for adjournments means that proportionate corrective action cannot be focused on the areas of concern. In the absence of clear data any remedial action would risk squandering resources and be akin to adopting a 'scatter gun' approach. Inspectors remain clear in their view that the overhead of obtaining this data requires to be considered within the broad context of the cost and level of cracked and ineffective trials and the significant inefficiencies and delays caused across the criminal justice system as a whole, including in the courts. Given this context, Inspectors would have liked to have seen further progress over the considerable timescale of the Derry/Londonderry pilot. The NICTS acknowledge they have been slow to respond to the weaknesses of the Derry/Londonderry pilot.

¹⁰ Data supplied by the NICTS.

¹¹ Derived from data supplied by the NICTS.

¹² DIR's are issued by the Public Prosecution Service where additional information is sought from the agency submitting a prosecution file.

In further discussion with the NICTS, Inspectors now understand that some changes and further focus will be applied to the adjournment reasons work. Inspectors were advised that the NICTS had recently taken the decision to cease the Derry/Londonderry pilot and adopt a revised list of adjournment reasons extending across all courts. It is the hope of the NICTS that this will enhance the data available to better understand reasons for delay and enable the comparison of data across all courts. Inspectors share this view and while some concerns remain at the extent of data collection, its quality and the nature of some of the revised reasons categories, it is encouraging that additional action has been initiated. Nonetheless, it remains the view of Inspectors that the issues of attendance at court and the closely linked issues of efficiency and effectiveness will not be improved until unambiguous data sets which can precipitate effective management action are fully embedded. This will clearly take a further period of time. Despite the more recent progress, it is for these reasons that Inspectors assess this recommendation as partially achieved.

Recommendation 2

The Criminal Justice Board (CJB) should take the necessary steps to achieve its target of 'improving Public Prosecution Service access to the PSNI detailing system with each regional office to have direct access by April 2011'.

Status: Partially achieved

Agency response:

While the recommendation of Inspectors was clearly directed to the CJB in effect, delivery of this recommendation was within the control of the PSNI. The PSNI response was:

PPS staff were given access to the PSNI duty roster system (Options) in June 2011, and since then Options has been made available to the PPS offices in Lisburn and Ballymena.

Work to give staff access to Options in the remaining PPS regional offices in Newry, Foyle and Omagh is now being taken forward as part of the VWCUs project. It is anticipated that this work will be complete by December 2013.

Inspectors' assessment:

It is clear from the response and from additional fieldwork arising from this follow-up inspection that the availability of Options had not been progressed for all PPS staff in their CLTs at the time of the follow-up review. However, bearing in mind that there is an ongoing period of transition to VWCUs where staff will be co-located with other partners, it is likely that the issues which were the driver for this particular recommendation, will be addressed in due course. The PPS anticipate that full access to all staff will be achieved by December 2013 but the full roll-out of VWCUs is not anticipated/planned until spring 2014. It is the expectation of Inspectors that the core issue of ready access to the availability of police witnesses will be fully addressed relatively soon. It was a marked feature during fieldwork for this follow-up review that staff mainly reported very good working relationships with PSNI Operational Planning staff who were responsible for ensuring police witnesses were notified of the requirement to attend court. PSNI Operational Planning staff were also generally regarded as responsive. Thus, the findings of the earlier inspection in this regard were further underpinned and this positive working relationship was adequately able to address the interim arrangements.

The recommendation is accorded the status as 'partially achieved' in view of the fact that the recommendation was made in May 2011 and, at the time of reporting, not all staff had access to the Options system (albeit that this was intended to be achieved as part of the move to VWCUs. The second stage of roll out of the latter was planned to commence in December 2013 when all VWCUs Case Officers should have access to the Options system).

Recommendation 3

The PSNI should consider implementing a system for PPS CLTs to access the duties of all police officers and police staff through Options. If this is not practical, there should be a single point of contact at either district or regional level to provide the PPS with police officer and police staff duty details and court availability.

Status: Achieved

Agency response:

The Police Service has deployed IT assets within PPS regional offices located in Belfast, Lisburn and Ballymena providing PPS staff with direct access to the PSNI Options duty roster system. Deployment of PSNI IT to service the remaining PPS offices in Newry, Foyle and Omagh is now being taken forward as part of the VWCU project; this work will be complete by December 2013 and will result in provision of access to the police Options duty roster to all VWCU case officers.

PSNI officer and staff availability enquiries within PSNI Departments are currently managed through specific contacts within respective Departments.

Inspectors' assessment:

This recommendation is clearly linked to Recommendation 2 and hence analogous commentary could generally be applied. However, one additional issue which could otherwise be hidden by the availability of the Options system is that there remains a number of PSNI staff who are not connected to the Options system. This means that PPS staff have relied on single points of contact in these areas. The evidence provided to Inspectors was that this was working reasonably well and no significant difficulties were apparent. In fact, the vast majority of Magistrates' Court business concerns police witnesses whose availability is accessible on Options; hence no significant impact would be anticipated. However, as the VWCUs move to incorporate all Crown Court business, the real test of the system of single points of contact will become apparent. Inspectors also learned that for some other witness availability, there was a reliance on third party contacts (for example, for military witness availability). Inspectors suggest that the new VWCUs should establish direct contacts for all areas of witness availability and develop their own expertise as far as possible.

The recommendation is accorded the status of achieved in view of the fact that the PSNI have either made Options available or alternatively provided single points of contact in conformity with the recommendation.

Recommendation 4

The PSNI should remind officers, through the internal communication process and in training, of the need to ensure that they obtain and maintain sufficient information about victims and witnesses (including work, home and mobile telephone numbers, email addresses etc.) to allow the PPS to contact them about the case.

Status: Achieved

Agency response:

Police Service provision of full, accurate and current contact information regarding victims and/or witnesses is central to VWCU procedures. By December 2013 the majority of contact with victims and witnesses, post case submission, will be carried out by VWCU case officers who will rely on contact information provided by investigating police.

To underpin and support VWCU processes, the Police Service will issue a Victim and Witness Care Unit Procedure and within reference the requirements of investigating police to review, and where appropriate update, contact information prior to the investigation file being submitted to the PPS.

Inspectors' assessment:

It was clear to Inspectors that the PSNI had expended considerable effort and had put great store in the VWCU project and linked this with other positive work, for example on the 10 policing commitments first issued in April 2011¹³. However, this left an equally clear gap specific to the recommendation which was to remind officers through communication and training of the need to ensure witness details were kept up-to-date. In the course of fieldwork, the PSNI initially indicated to Inspectors that there had been no such formal communication and were, at the time of this follow-up review, about to issue a service instruction on VWCUs which would incorporate the need to ensure witness details were maintained. Inspectors were therefore disappointed that a straight-forward recommendation which would have been relatively simple to implement, had not been achieved in full. It seemed to Inspectors that due to a concentration on the roll-out of VWCUs this had taken a lesser significance. However, more recently Inspectors have been advised that such an instruction has now been issued and that this is being followed up with District Training on the role of the VWCUs, together with some other initiatives to embed the instruction.

Inspectors found there was mixed evidence of the difficulties encountered by CLTs and VWCU staff on the scale of the problems in respect of witness contact details. Some staff in CLTs advised that the situation had improved, albeit that some difficulties with witness details were still being encountered. However, these were stated not to be routine. Others, primarily in the VWCU, advised that this was the single most significant impediment to their work. The evidence was nonetheless clear that there is considerable scope for improvement and it will be important to see this being sustained in the PSNI and through the work of the VWCUs. Inspectors are satisfied that, albeit belatedly, the recommendation has now been met.

Recommendation 5

The PPS Community Liaison staff receive training in telephone techniques and dealing with people on the telephone, together with familiarisation training on the prosecution and court process and the lay-out and facilities available for victims and witnesses at court buildings in the relevant PPS region.

Status: Achieved

Agency response:

Subsequent to the inspection on Securing Attendance at Court the PPS have piloted a VWCU in the Belfast Region. The pilot commenced in October 2012. From its commencement until April 2013, the pilot dealt with cases that were progressing through the Magistrates' Court only however in April 2013 it expanded to deal with Belfast Crown Court cases also.

A full evaluation of the pilot will be completed prior to the roll out of VWCUs across all regions.

CLTs continue to operate in the other regional offices. It is anticipated that the VWCU will roll out to cover all PPS regions by end 2013.

¹³ Available at http://www.psnipolice.uk/psni_commitments_mailer.pdf

All VWCU staff were required to undertake an intensive training course prior to the commencement of the pilot. This training included effective communication, telephone techniques, customer service and soft skills. Staff also received training on the prosecution and court processes, including special measures. VWCU staff were also provided with training on domestic violence which included; the PPS Policy on Domestic Violence, specific issues to consider when dealing with a victim of domestic violence and the Domestic Abuse, Stalking and Harassment (DASH) risk assessment and Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) processes. A visit to Laganside Court was also facilitated.

Further training for VWCU staff is anticipated including training to be provided by VSNI in July 2013 on communicating and providing a service to people who are distressed and/or in crises. All staff who will be working in the rolled out service will receive training on appointment.

Staff who currently continue to work in regional CLTs have received telephone techniques training. This training was tailored to the identified needs of the PPS including training staff to enable them to deal with complex or difficult situations over the telephone.

Additionally all CLT staff have been provided with training on special measures.

Victim awareness training has been provided to staff by VSNI. Some CLT staff have visited their relevant court building and have received training in court processes however this has not been provided in every region.

Prior to the regional roll out of the VWCUs, all relevant staff will undertake the intensive training course.

Inspectors' assessment:

During fieldwork for this follow-up review, Inspectors visited two CLTs as well as the VWCU in Belfast. This confirmed the fact that training in 'soft skills' had been provided and that experience, on the job training and working with staff from other partner agencies and organisations, was helping to address the issues which induced the recommendation. For some, this had also been supplemented by presentations from interest groups such as Women's Aid. Staff told Inspectors that this training was well regarded and helpful in dealing with sometimes anxious and/or distressed witnesses. However, for the majority of CLT staff seen, the training was delivered over 18 months ago. For VWCU staff there was a clear undercurrent that the training provided did not adequately address their needs and the sample of staff spoken to struggled to describe clearly the nature of the some key aspects of training such as witness needs assessments. Staff indicated that needs assessments were seldom used and that no adequate training had been provided. It was also a common criticism from these staff that they did not have any manual of guidance or aide memoires to assist in underpinning their core work. Inspectors would encourage responsible managers to ensure that the latter are provided expeditiously and that training and/or continuous development is repeated at appropriate intervals. This could take the form of short internal learning forums led by experienced staff and/or external partners.

Part of the recommendation made by Inspectors was to ensure that staff were familiar with the court buildings and this was an area where some staff felt there continued to be problems. Difficulties cited included that the move to more centralised VWCUs would mean that staff had less knowledge of local courts and facilities. Some staff also indicated that they had never been to court to either familiarise themselves with the geography and facilities or indeed the court processes. A key example of the latter, and which was of particular concern to Inspectors, was the absence of any practical familiarity with special measures applications or protocols. This finding was despite clear evidence that training had been provided. However, Inspectors considered that this matter could be addressed adequately by a rolling programme of familiarisation visits and timely reminders and internal staff briefings.

While these issues are purely illustrative, Inspectors found that there were a range of issues concerning the establishment of VWCUs. These could be broadly characterised as staffing issues and secondly operational issues. These were discussed by Inspectors with PPS senior management and it was apparent firstly that the issues had been recognised and, secondly, that plans were in place to address them. Inspectors encourage the Senior Responsible Owner of the project to maintain focus on those areas already highlighted by management as these are essential to the delivery of effective customer service.

Recommendation 6

The PPS should review the working practices, accessibility and technology available to the CLTs to maximise their ability to contact victims and witnesses about availability and attendance at court and to issue reminders as the court date approaches.

Status: Partially achieved

Agency response:

Prior to the establishment of the VWCU pilot in October 2012 a review was carried out of how the existing CLTs were operating. This review included looking at the working practices, accessibility and technology available to the CLTs and any issues that staff were experiencing in relation to contacting victims and witnesses. Consideration was also given to how procedures and technology could be improved to facilitate the VWCU and enhance the service.

Staff in the VWCU have access to both the PPS CMS system and police NICHE system which enables them to access up-to-date contact details (if they are entered by the Officer in Charge on NICHE) to enable them to contact victims and witnesses about availability and attendance at court and to issue reminders as the court date approaches.

VWCU staff also have access to the police Options system and are therefore able to obtain availability for police officers directly. This allows the access to required information immediately and alleviates workload with PSNI Operations Planning.

The provision of a dedicated case worker and point of contact for each case will also assist in ensuring that witnesses are aware of who to inform should their contact details change.

The VWCU also conduct a three tier needs assessment for each victim/witness at key stages of the process to ensure that the particular needs of victims and witnesses are met as far as possible, and to identify as soon as possible, whether a victim or witness may require assistance. The victims preferred means of communication and preferred time to contact is also ascertained, for example telephone, e-mail, written correspondence.

VWCU staff have also been provided with an office mobile phone which is used to contact victims/witnesses who do not respond to 'unknown numbers'. The mobile can be used for communicating by text message with a victim/witness however this can cause confusion if the victim/witness replies by text (as their contact name is not stored in the mobile phone). The provision of texting software is currently under consideration.

In August 2011 the Business Improvement Team was tasked by the PPS to carry out a review of CLTs. The purpose of the review was to provide the PPS Community Liaison function and the PPS with advice on: (i) the optimum number and appropriate grading of Grade D posts; and (ii) the appropriate and consistent management of processing within Community Liaison.

Community Liaison staff were also provided with access to the PSNI Options system via the PPS Police Liaison office.

All CLTs routinely follow up witness requirements to attend court and will make every effort to contact witnesses who have not replied to the formal requirement letter thus ensuring that witnesses are aware of their requirement to attend and also enabling appropriate steps to be taken to secure attendance, for example witness summons.

The PPS are exploring options for a 'Victim Information Portal.' This will be a web based information system where victims will be provided with a username and password to log onto the system. They will then be able to track their case from its receipt in the PPS to its conclusion to include court dates and results of hearings.

In addition the portal will send a notification text message to victims advising them when an update was available on their case on the Victim Information Portal website. The recipient would then log on with their personal log on details, password etc to the website to read the update.

The PPS have identified a potential solution and are currently working on the business process analysis and required design.

Inspectors' assessment:

It was clear to Inspectors that the significant and positive move to VWCUs had the effect of creating both opportunities and gaps in the system of witness contact. In the transition phase of moving from CLTs to VWCUs there are some inevitable teething problems and this was manifest for Inspectors when staff were consulted. It was apparent to Inspectors that staff were not well informed regarding the planned developments such as the Victim Information Portal. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for their own motivation, the benefits of the move to VWCUs were not well understood or accepted. There is therefore room for some additional management action with specific regard to staff communication and briefing, including on the plans to address matters set out earlier by Inspectors (staffing and operational issues).

Overall, there seemed to Inspectors to be an over-reliance on planned developments such as the Victim Information Portal which was, at the time of inspection, an aspiration and left some questions around what had been achieved in the intervening two years. Nonetheless, it was simultaneously encouraging to see the move to VWCUs which were beginning to 'bed down', albeit with some initial project difficulties (where they had been rolled out). It was also concurrently encouraging to see that the PPS were exploring options for the Victim Information Portal. These plans will need to see incremental gains and ultimate delivery within reasonable timescales, while also bearing in mind the significant financial savings which are required to be made across the public sector.

By way of example of the operational difficulties experienced by VWCU staff, Inspectors highlight problems concerning the understanding of court results. This had importance when VWCU case officers were communicating with individual victims. VWCU staff had difficulty in interpreting the ordinary everyday meaning of these court results and were fearful of interpreting these in any alternative way, but at the same time, felt that users would not understand these results. Inspectors would encourage the NICTS and the PPS to work together to resolve these difficulties with the ultimate goal of ensuring that victims can readily understand all correspondence.



Conclusion

Of the six recommendations made by CJI in 2011, Inspectors found three to have been achieved and three partially achieved. This represents a mixed outcome, particularly when considered against the backdrop of only relatively recent developments for some recommendations. However, on a more positive note, all of the recommendations could now be regarded as being achieved or progressed. The most significant remaining concern in terms of the formal recommendations is the absence of detailed data on the reasons for court adjournments, albeit that some advancements have now been made in this regard. As we observe in the previous chapter, until the recently agreed progress on adjournment reasons beds in, this will inevitably mean that noteworthy interventions cannot be fashioned and that the problem of adjournments are likely to continue, at least in the short term. Inspectors suggest this requires a renewed focus at all levels with potential oversight from the Department of Justice's Criminal Justice Delivery Group to ensure visibility and focus in this area.

Otherwise, while some significant progress has been made and some further developments were clearly planned, it was apparent to Inspectors that the transition to VWCUs was creating some challenges. While this follow-up review did not of itself set out to review the implementation of VWCUs, Inspectors considered this of fundamental importance to the delivery of all witness attendance and satisfaction. Inspectors acknowledge that any major change programme of the magnitude of the transformation to VWCUs will inevitably generate some difficulties. Notwithstanding, it is clear that the project sponsor and project manager need to keep abreast of obstacles and address these effectively if optimum performance and customer satisfaction is to be achieved. The issues identified have the potential to destabilise the good progress to date and to adversely affect user satisfaction and confidence. They must therefore be tackled effectively. It was reassuring to find that work commissioned by the PPS in respect of the VWCU project had identified shortcomings and had also put in place plans to address these.



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