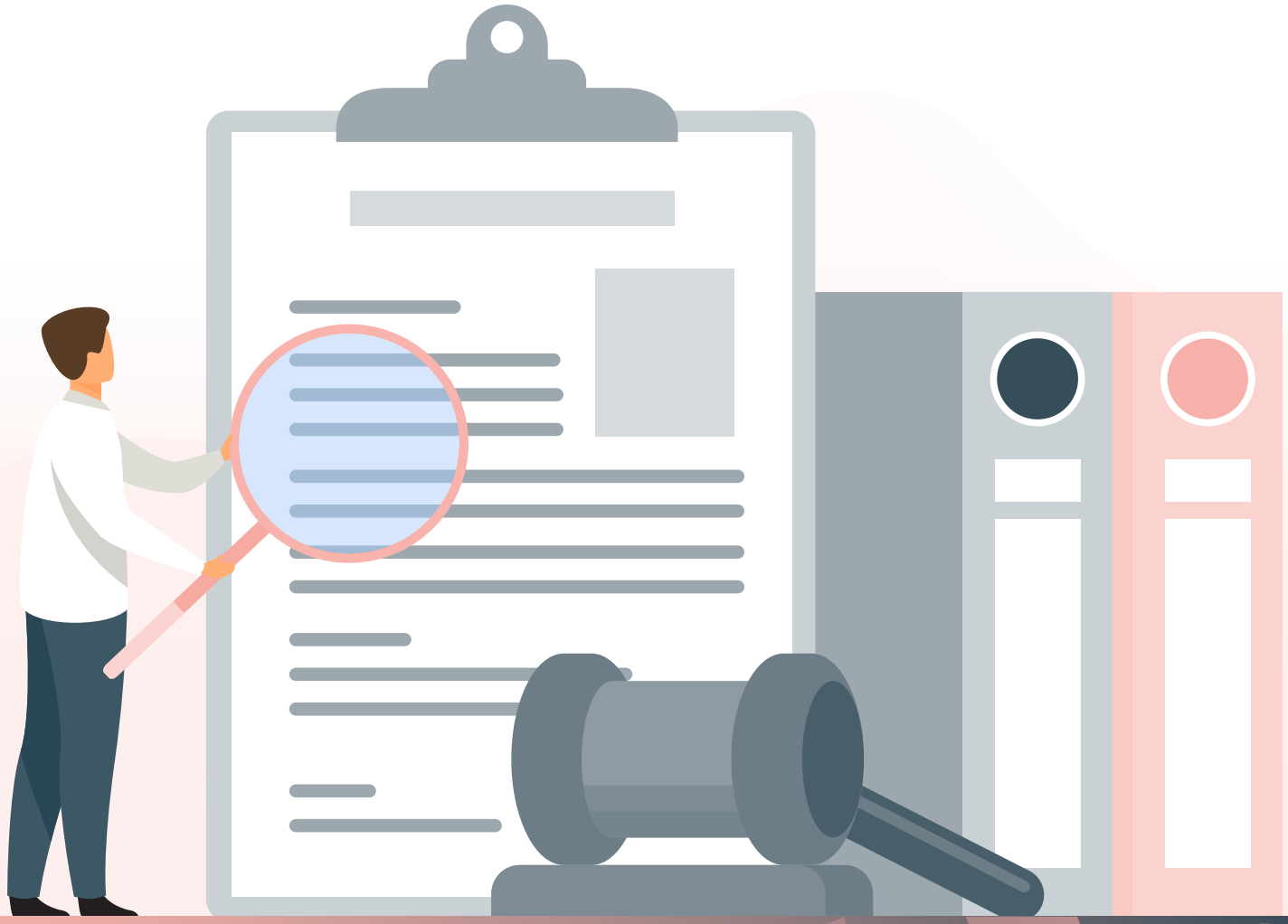
Criminal Justice Inspection
Northern Ireland
a better justice system for all



KEY FACTS

AN INSPECTION OF

WITNESS ATTENDANCE IN CRIMINAL COURT PROCEEDINGS

NOVEMBER 2026

WHAT WAS THIS INSPECTION ABOUT?

- This inspection examined how effectively the criminal justice system supported, managed and facilitated witness attendance at Court.
- It focused on the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS), the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) and their shared responsibility for securing attendance.
- Witness attendance is critical to enabling Courts to hear evidence, reach decisions and deliver justice.



WHAT DID WE LOOK AT?

- Inspectors examined the arrangements in place in criminal justice organisations to achieve Witness Charter entitlements, support case progression, reduce avoidable delay and secure outcomes for victims and defendants.
- We looked at the use of remote evidence and standby arrangements by the criminal justice system to support witness attendance.
- We assessed the strategic, governance and policy framework for witness attendance, including how information was recorded, reviewed and used to monitor performance.
- Inspectors also looked at how effectively resources were used and how effective witness attendance processes in Northern Ireland were compared against good practice in other jurisdictions.

HOW DID WE CARRY OUT THE INSPECTION?

- Inspectors reviewed policies, data and case files.
- We conducted interviews and focus groups with Police Officers, Prosecutors and Court Service staff and other stakeholders including legal bodies, victims and children's representatives and the Judiciary.
- We surveyed victims and witnesses, Police Officers and Forensic Science Northern Ireland staff, who had attended Court as witnesses and analysed their responses.
- We spoke directly with victims and witnesses about their experience.

WHAT DID INSPECTORS FIND?

- We found committed staff and examples of good practice, particularly within the Victim and Witness Care Unit (VWCU).
- Case progression at Court was often weak and inconsistent, leading to adjournments and ineffective hearings.
- Large numbers of witnesses attended Court but did not give evidence due to late guilty pleas from defendants or agreed evidence.
- Communication with witnesses was inconsistent, including late notification of cancellations of Court appearances.
- Administrative processes needed more modern technology to facilitate witness engagement.
- Data on witness attendance, attrition rates and outcomes was limited.
- Police Officers were frequently required to attend Court unnecessarily. This affected frontline policing and incurred significant costs.
- Witnesses experienced emotional, practical and financial cost impacts due to delay and repeated adjournments. This negatively effected public confidence in the justice system and the effective use of public money and staff resources.





WHAT NEEDS TO BE BETTER?

At a Strategic (leadership) level:

- Stronger focus on case progression once cases come before the Courts.
- A system-wide approach to reducing unnecessary witness attendance at Court.
- Development of proposals for draft legislation to enable electronic service of summonses and Court documents.
- Improved data collection and sharing across criminal justice organisations.

At an Operational (on-the-ground) level:

- Earlier agreement of witness requirements.
- Timely and consistent communication with witnesses.
- Improved processes to release Police Officers from attending Court when they are not required.
- Greater use of remote evidence and modern technology.
- More consistent recording of outcomes and case adjournment reasons.



WHAT DO INSPECTORS WANT TO SEE HAPPEN NOW?

Inspectors want the PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and Department of Justice to deliver more structured case progression and timely agreement of witness attendance. There needs to be more effective information sharing and better use of modern technology to reduce delay and minimise unnecessary Court attendance. Witness Charter entitlements also need to be consistently delivered.

If you would like to know anything more about us or this inspection please get in touch with:

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
Block 1, Knockview Buildings
Belfast BT4 3SJ

www.cjini.org
info@cjini.org
028 90 765764
Criminal Justice Inspection NI
CJINI
Criminal Justice Inspection Unpacked
@CJININews

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