Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
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WITNESS ATTENDANCE IN CRIMINAL COURT PROCEEDINGS

An inspection of the arrangements for witness attendance in the Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts in Northern Ireland.

NOVEMBER 2026

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November 2026

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Note: Electronic links to documents and information sources referenced within this report are correct at the time of publication but may be subject to change where the information is outside CJI's control.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI	Artificial Intelligence
CJI	Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland
CSOLA	Children's Sexual Offences Legal Advisers
CVOCNI Designate	Commissioner for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland Designate
DoJ	Department of Justice
EU	European Union
FSNI	Forensic Science Northern Ireland
IT	Information Technology
NICTS	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
LCJO	Lady Chief Justice's Office
LSANI	Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland
PPS	Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland
PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
REC	Remote Evidence Centre
RI	Registered Intermediary
SOLA	Sexual Offences Legal Advisers
the Charters	Victim Charter 2015 and Witness Charter 2017
the Action Plan	Victim and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2026-32 Two Year Action Plan
Victim Support NI	Victim Support Northern Ireland
VWCU	Victim and Witness Care Unit
YWS	Young Witness Service (operated by NSPCC)

CHIEF INSPECTOR'S FOREWORD

Each year thousands of people in Northern Ireland are required to attend court to provide evidence in criminal cases. For Police Officers, forensic scientists and other experts, it has become a routine part of their job. But for most people, the experience and the environment of an adversarial courtroom, can be unsettling and traumatic, while also impacting their confidence in the wider criminal justice system.

A recurring issue for many victims and witnesses, as detailed in successive inspection reports, has been the inadequate treatment and care for those who need to engage with criminal justice organisations. Our survey of witnesses for this inspection pointed to the continued need to improve communication at the investigation and prosecution stages, better prepare witnesses to present best evidence in court and address concerns around case management and adjournments at the Court stage.

The Victims and Witnesses Care Unit has provided a much-needed focus on witness needs and entitlements but gaps in services have limited its effectiveness and there remains a wider concern around access to justice and entitlements under the Witness Charter. Poor witness care leads to witness absences at court, which in turn contributes to court adjournments and higher rates of ineffective/ cancelled trials.

Large numbers of witnesses attend Court but never give evidence, often because defendants changed their plea at a late stage or evidence was agreed very close to the hearing. For Police Officers and forensic scientists who completed the survey and attended Court, 60% rarely gave evidence and 16% never gave evidence. The Police Service of Northern Ireland needed to better understand the wider resourcing impacts and associated efficiencies for Police Officer availability and deployment.

The use of new technologies such as Remote Evidence Centres have received positive feedback from witnesses including those entitled to Special Measures and efforts to introduce the electronic service of summonses and other Court documents is overdue.

Speeding Up Justice initiatives such as Committal Reform, where witnesses will no longer have to attend the Magistrates' Court, as those cases will be promptly transferred to the Crown Court, is an important step forward.

But there is significant work to be done in terms of better and more consistent case progression and management. Recent new Practice Directions from the Judiciary in England and Wales and in Northern Ireland provide the framework and guidance on minimising the human impact of delay on participants and ensuring fairness in court proceedings.

This inspection shows that investment in witness services can help to deliver improved access to justice, reduce delays, enable greater efficiencies in public expenditure and increase public confidence in the administration of criminal justice.

My thanks to all those who engaged with Inspectors during this Inspection including those working within the Victim and Witnesses Care Unit. A special mention to those who participated in the online survey with victims and witnesses and a separate survey with Police Officers and Forensic Science Northern Ireland staff. I would also like to acknowledge the views of key voluntary and community sector stakeholders, the Judiciary and the Law Society of Northern Ireland.

This Inspection was led by Muireann Bohill and supported by Dr. Claire Feehan, and I am grateful for their work.



James Corrigan
Acting Chief Inspector of
Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland

November 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Witnesses are central to the fair and effective operation of the criminal justice system. Their attendance enables Courts to hear evidence, reach decisions and deliver justice. This inspection examined how effectively the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland supports, manages and facilitates the attendance of witnesses in the Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts. Drawing on work undertaken between January and March 2026, including case file reviews, surveys, interviews and data analysis, Inspectors found that while there were committed staff and examples of good practice, systemic weaknesses continued to undermine witness experience, contribute to avoidable delay, and lead to inefficient use of resources.

Inadequate case readiness, once matters were before the Courts, remained a significant driver of adjournments and ineffective hearings and negatively impacted on witnesses. Many cases did not proceed on the date fixed, often after witnesses had already arranged time off work, childcare, or travel. Although initiatives to speed up justice were in place across the system, the impact for witness attendance was less visible.

Witnesses were not consistently receiving the services to which they were entitled under the Witness Charter 2017. Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI), in its March 2026 Inspection Report on Special Measures[1], highlighted the importance of the criminal justice system ensuring witnesses have access to their entitlements under the Witness Charter.[2]

The Victim and Witness Care Unit within the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland played a crucial role in supporting witnesses. However, staff shortages, late tasking of files, and gaps in information sharing, particularly in the Crown Court, limited its effectiveness. Inspectors heard from witnesses who experienced poor or inconsistent communication, including late notification of cancellations. When hearings were adjourned at short notice, witnesses were often left feeling frustrated, anxious and disengaged from the criminal justice process. Victims and witnesses also spoke about the emotional, practical and financial toll of repeated adjournments and late case resolution. Many described the process as stressful and disempowering, even where cases ultimately resulted in guilty pleas.

1 *CJI, Thematic Inspection of Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts, March 2026,* available at ***https://www.cjini.org/reports/special-measures-in-northern-ireland/***.

2 DoJ, Witness Charter: A Charter for witnesses of crime January 2017 available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/witness-charter.PDF***

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These experiences risked undermining confidence in the criminal justice system and reducing willingness to engage in future proceedings.

Large numbers of witnesses attend Court but never give evidence, often because defendants changed their plea at a late stage or evidence was agreed very close to the hearing. The scale of this inefficiency was not well understood due to limited data collection, but available evidence points to substantial wasted time and cost. This issue was especially stark in relation to Police attendance for hearings that did not proceed, with Officers routinely abstracted from frontline duties. The Police Service of Northern Ireland needed to achieve a strategic grip on Police Officer attendance at Court in order to fully understand the impact on resourcing.

While some improvements had been made in recording adjournment reasons, the organisations lacked comprehensive, shared data on witness attendance, witness attrition, and who actually gave evidence. This limited the ability of organisations to understand performance, identify avoidable delay and target improvements. Investment in new IT systems, Causeway and Themis, offer an opportunity to address these gaps, but clear priorities and joint working will be required.

Improving witness attendance is not solely about encouraging witnesses to attend Court, but about ensuring that cases are ready when they are listed. Strengthening case readiness, access to Witness Charter rights, reducing unnecessary attendance and making better use of data and technology, including electronically summonsing witnesses and defendants, are essential to delivering a more effective, humane and efficient criminal justice system in Northern Ireland.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 1

Within 12 months of publication of this report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland should achieve a strategic grip on Police Officer attendance at Court as witnesses and establish its impact on resourcing through better data collection, analysis and reporting.

Paragraph 3.24

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 2

Within 18 months of publication of this report, the Department of Justice should develop proposals for draft legislation to enable the service of summonses and other Court documents electronically and its incorporation in the Public Prosecution Service Case Management System, *Themis* and the Causeway Programme functionality.

Paragraph 3.43

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 1

Within six months of publication of this report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, in collaboration with the Department of Justice, should scope a methodology to extract and share data on witness evidence at trial/contest to monitor and report on ongoing criminal justice system delivery and inform the development of management information capability, *Themis* and the Causeway Programme.

Paragraph 3.25

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 2

Within six months of publication of this report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should develop and implement an effective process to notify the Police Service of Northern Ireland Operational Planning Department when Police Officers are not required to attend Court.

Paragraph 3.26

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The prosecution of cases listed for trial in the Crown Court and contested hearing in the Magistrates' and Youth Courts, requires the attendance of victims and witnesses[3] to give evidence. The absence of witnesses can lead to adjournments and delay resulting in inefficiencies, increased costs and negative outcomes for victims and witnesses. It can also give rise to an inability to secure a conviction, with implications for the wider community.

1.2 The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Victim and Witness Care Unit (VWCU) within the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) have a shared responsibility to ensure those required, attend Court proceedings to give evidence (Diagram 1). Evidence from Police Officers was critical to securing convictions and the timely progression of cases at the end stage, that often follows a lengthy and resource intensive investigation and prosecution.

Diagram 1: The role of criminal justice organisations in securing witness attendance at Court proceedings.

The PSNI record victim and witness details and this information is then submitted electronically by the PSNI to the PPS.

▼

The PPS Prosecutor takes the decision to prosecute and decides what witnesses are required. The VWCU within the PPS obtain availability for the witnesses (including professional witnesses) and issue witness invitations (in some circumstances a witness summons) when the contest/trial is scheduled.

▼

To set a hearing date, the Judge uses witness availability provided by the PPS and Court availability.

▼

The NICTS provide Court access and facilities/technology to support witness attendance at Court proceedings, whether online by video link or in person.

3 The term witness/es can also include a victim/victims.

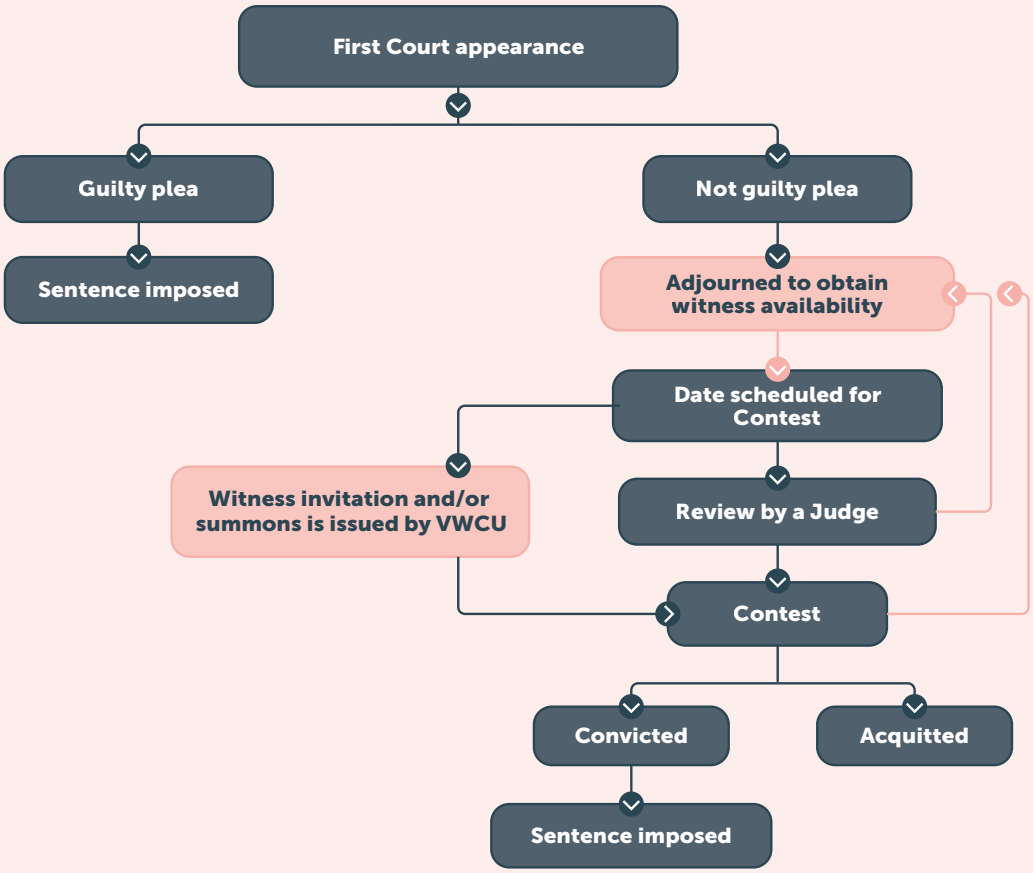
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1.3 For Police Officers attending Court, the VWCU in Crown Court Cases, contact the Police Officer directly to get their availability and in the Magistrates' Court, they obtain this information from the PSNI's Options[4] system. Efforts will be made to accommodate witnesses, however, listing is a judicial matter and the Judge who sets the contest or trial date will have to consider a number of factors in setting a suitable date. Witnesses may be required to attend on a date that isn't suitable. This may be as a result of submissions made by the defence representative or because of the availability of the NICTS facilities or the Judiciary.

1.4 Legal Aid expenditure for defendant representation, including expert witnesses giving evidence on behalf of defendants, is included in Chapter 4 but defence witnesses are not the focus of this Inspection. For clarification, however, the availability of a defence witness is established by the defendant's legal representative who provides this information to the Judge when a date is being set for trial.

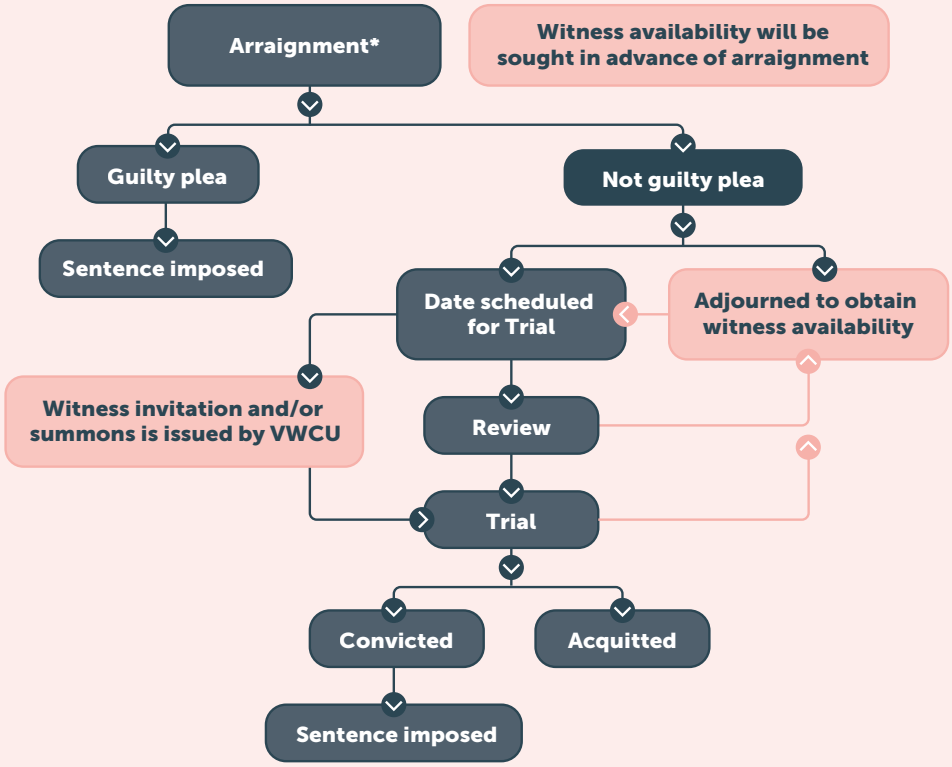
1.5 Case progression through the Courts, including the adjournment of cases to seek witness availability and the issue of witness invitations and summonses, for the Magistrates' and Youth Courts is set out in Diagram 2 and the Crown Court in Diagram 3.

Diagram 2: Case progression through the Magistrates' and Youth Courts



4 The PSNI Options system was a computer system used internally to record and check police officers' availability for operational commitments, particularly court attendance.

Diagram 3: Case progression through the Crown Court



**Arraignment is where the charge(s) on a Bill of Indictment is (are) put to the defendant and they are asked to enter a plea of guilty or not guilty.*

1.6 Judicial case management includes listing cases and fixing hearing dates, issuing case management directions, and determining adjournments. The Judiciary were not within CJI's remit but the preparedness of organisations who were predominantly responsible for case readiness, the PPS and PSNI, was inspected, as well as the NICTS

1.7 The Lady Chief Justice's Office (LCJO) issued Practice Directions to guide effective case management. A new Practice Direction[5] in respect on Magistrates' Court case management was issued in June 2026[6] but at the time of the inspection, the Judiciary were working to the *Protocol on Criminal Case Management in the Magistrates' Court*[7] and *Practice Directions 03/2011*[8] and *05/2011*[9] in the Crown Court, discussed in Chapter 3. Compliance with the Practice Directions was the responsibility of every Judge, Presiding Judges and ultimately, the Lady Chief Justice.

5 Practice Directions are procedural guidance documents issued to explain and supplement the formal rules of the Court.
6 *Northern Ireland Judiciary Practice Direction 01/2026* available at **https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/2026-06/Practice%20Direction%20No.%201.2026.pdf**
7 *Northern Ireland Judiciary Protocol on Criminal Case Management in The Magistrates' Court* available at **https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/decisions/Protocol%20on%20criminal%20case%20management%20in%20the%20magistrates%20court.pdf**
8 *Northern Ireland Judiciary Practice Direction 03/2011* available at **https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/decisions/Practice%20Direction%20No%203%20of%202011.pdf**
9 *Northern Ireland Judiciary Practice Direction 05/2011* available at **https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/decisions/Practice%20Direction%20No%205%20of%202011.pdf**

WITNESS SUMMONS

1.8 A summons could be issued for service on a witness in accordance with Section 118D of the *Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981*[10] and in the Crown Court under Section 51A of the *Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978*.[11] A summons legally required a witness to attend Court and/or produce documents or exhibits.[12]

1.9 In the Magistrates' (adult) and Youth Court, when advised by the VWCU that a witness would not attend, the PPS Directing Officer determined if a witness summons was required. If so, a hard copy of the summons was prepared by the VWCU and brought to the NICTS for the Lay Magistrates' signature. When signed, the VWCU scanned a copy of the summons and e-mailed the Investigating Officer, to serve a copy on the recipient. Responsibility for VWCU work was divided between the Belfast and Foyle offices and details around the proportion of work attributed to each VWCU office is set out in Chapter 3.

1.10 In the Crown Court, Counsel instructed by the PPS direct if a witness summons should be applied for. An application was made to a Judge in the Crown Court for a summons and once produced by the NICTS, PPS staff contacted the PSNI Investigating Officer to arrange collection of the summons for personal service on the witness.

1.11 The PSNI, on receipt of the summons, attempted service and made a record of whether it was served, the location of service, the date of service/attempted service and the method of service or reason for non-service. If the witness no longer resided at the address on the summons, the Officer had to conduct all relevant checks to try and locate or identify an alternative address. If the witness was residing at another address, the Officer was required to serve the summons at the new address without the summons being re-issued. Unserved summonses were returned to the PPS with the summons log of actions attached.

WITNESS EXPENSES

1.12 The VWCU also processes expense claims submitted by witnesses after they attend Court. When witnesses are invited to attend Court as a PPS witness, they receive a Witness Expenses Claim Form which they bring with them when they attend Court. A PPS staff member or PSNI Officer must sign and certify attendance on the day. The witness then returns the completed form to the PPS Finance Branch for payment. PPS aims to process claims within 30 days of receiving a correctly completed form.

10 *Legislation.gov.uk, the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1981/1675/part/X**.

11 *Legislation.gov.uk, the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1978/23/section/51A**.

12 An exhibit is defined as a document or other item that is shown to a witness, or referred to by a witness in evidence.

1.13 Witnesses eligible to claim PPS expenses include victims of crime, civilian witnesses, professional witnesses and approved supporters of vulnerable witnesses. The PPS may pay the following where attendance has been required by them:

- travel;
- subsistence;
- loss of earnings; and
- other necessary costs.

Depending on the expense being claimed, some attract a set allowance and others are paid at the value of the receipt. The PPS may, in some cases, book travel or accommodation to reduce the financial burden on witnesses.

INSPECTION SCOPE

1.14 The scope of this inspection was focused on how the criminal justice system supported, managed, and facilitated witness attendance at Court proceedings. Early needs assessment of victims and witnesses by the PSNI and the PPS to identify appropriate measures to support them to give their best evidence, which greatly contributes to securing witness attendance, was important. CJI inspected needs assessment processes and the use and operation of special measures in the thematic Inspection Report of *Special Measures in Northern Ireland's criminal Courts* published in March 2026[13]; therefore, this was not a focus of this inspection.

CONTEXT

1.15 Over the last two decades, CJI has identified non-attendance of victims and witnesses at Court as a major cause of case adjournment, slowing the administration of justice and increasing costs across the system. Reasons underpinning non-attendance were poor communication between the PSNI and the PPS and poor quality service to witnesses including appropriate supports not being put in place, repeated adjournments with late cancellations and late notification of hearing dates.

1.16 A number of initiatives have been implemented by the PPS, the PSNI and the NICTS in an attempt to improve and streamline the process of securing witness attendance. One of the most significant changes was the introduction of the VWCU within the PPS which was piloted in Belfast in autumn 2012 and subsequently rolled out in both Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in 2014. Replacing the PPS Community Liaison Team, the VWCU provides victims with a single point of contact from when an investigation or charge file is submitted to the PPS by the PSNI, through to and including the outcome of any Court proceedings. Led by the PPS, VWCUs are staffed by the PSNI and the PPS.

13 *CJI, Thematic Inspection of Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts, March 2026,* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/special-measures-in-northern-ireland/**.

1.17 Another major development followed the issuing of *European Union (EU) Directive 2012/29/EU 2012* on establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime (the EU Directive). It was placed on a statutory footing in Northern Ireland in 2015, through the Victim Charter (Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015) Order 2015[14]. This provided a framework for the enjoyment of the rights protected under the Directive, for all victims of crime. The Department of Justice (DoJ) response to meet its obligations set out in the Directive was the development of the *Victim Charter* in 2015[15], followed by the *Witness Charter* in 2017[16] (the Charters). The Charters cover the range of provisions to be delivered by service providers across the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland including the PPS, the PSNI and the NICTS.

1.18 Avoidable delay in the Northern Ireland criminal justice system was a persistent and well-documented problem. Evidence showed that delay occurred at every stage; investigation, prosecution decision-making, Court progression, and pre-sentencing, and these delays often had profound and harmful consequences for victims.

1.19 The DoJ was leading a wide-ranging programme of *Speeding Up Justice*[17] initiatives designed to reduce avoidable delay, improve efficiency and strengthen outcomes across the criminal justice system. This work was bringing together law reform, modernisation and administrative improvements across key organisations, supported by the Criminal Justice Board's workstreams and targets. Work included increasing the use of proportionate non-Court disposals, legislative reform such as *Direct Committal*[18], early engagement between the PSNI, the PPS and Defence to streamline case progression, strengthening file quality, disclosure and case-progression processes. It also included expanding the use of digital tools and technology-enabled hearings, improving listing and Court administration. In March 2025, the DoJ announced that an additional £20.45 million had been allocated, for specific transformation initiatives, spread across five years to help speed up justice.

1.20 Out of Court disposals removed the requirement for victims and witnesses to attend Court and the first phase of Committal Reform[19] meant that in the most serious cases, victims and witnesses no longer had to attend the Magistrates' Court as those cases were promptly transferred to the Crown Court. The benefits of other system-wide efforts to speed up justice and deliver better experiences and outcomes for victims, witnesses and defendants heavily depended on the processes for engaging with victims and witnesses and securing their attendance at Court being effective.

14 *UK Government (Gov.uk), The Victim Charter (Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2015/370/contents/made**

15 *DoJ, Victim Charter: A Charter for Victims of Crime, September 2015* available at **https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/Victim%20Charter.pdf**.

16 *DoJ, Witness Charter: A Charter for Witnesses of Crime, January 2017* available *at* **https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/witness-charter.PDF**.

17 Speeding up justice involves implementing measures to reduce delays in the criminal justice system, ensuring cases are dealt with appropriately and proportionately and providing swift resolutions to victims and witnesses.

18 In Northern Ireland, 'direct committal' refers to a process where an accused is directly transferred to the Crown Court for trial without going through a traditional committal hearing in the Magistrates' Court.

19 The first phase of Committal Reform came into effect on 17 October 2022, abolishing the use of oral evidence during committal proceedings in new cases.

PREVIOUS INSPECTIONS

1.21 Securing attendance at Court was identified as an issue two decades ago in CJI's 2006 Inspection Report on *'Avoidable Delay in the Criminal Justice System'*.[20] It found witness availability was a significant cause of Court adjournments. This same issue was raised again in the 2010 Inspection Report on *'A thematic inspection of avoidable delay in the processing of criminal cases in Northern Ireland'*.[21] In 2011, CJI identified areas for improvement in the *'Securing Attendance at Court'* Inspection Report and progress against the recommendations made was examined in CJI's 2014 Inspection Report *Securing Attendance at Court: A Follow-Up Review of inspection recommendations.*[22] Of the six recommendations[23] made by CJI in 2011, Inspectors found three were achieved and three were partially achieved: *'The most significant remaining concern in terms of the formal recommendations is the absence of detailed data on the reasons for Court adjournments.'*

THIS INSPECTION

1.22 This inspection looked at the effectiveness of the criminal justice system in securing the attendance of witnesses in Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Court proceedings. It looked at the operational delivery by criminal justice organisations in achieving Witness Charter rights, outcomes for victims and defendants and reducing avoidable delay. It also considered progress against previous recommendations made by CJI (see Terms of Reference in Appendix 2).

20 *CJI, Avoidable Delay in the Criminal Justice System, May 2006* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/avoidable-delay/**.

21 *CJI, A thematic inspection of avoidable delay in the processing of criminal cases in Northern Ireland, June 2010* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/a-thematic-inspection-of-avoidable-delay-in-the-processing-of-criminal-cases-in-northern-ireland/**.

22 *CJI, Securing Attendance at Court: A Follow-Up Review of inspection recommendations, March 2014* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/securing-attendance-at-court-a-follow-up-review-of-inspection-recommendations/**.

23 *CJI, Securing Attendance at Court, June 2011* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/securing-attendance-at-court/**; Recommendations:

- *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;*
- *The CJB [Criminal Justice Board] 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';*
- *The PSNI should consider implementing a system for PPS Community Liaison Teams [now VWCU] 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;*
- *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;*
- *The PPS Community Liaison [VWCU] 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 layout and facilities available for victims and witnesses at court buildings in the relevant PPS region; and*
- *The PPS should review the working practices, accessibility and technology available to the CLTs [VWCU] to maximise their ability to contact victims and witnesses about availability and attendance at court and to issue reminders as the court date approaches.*

1.23 The main organisations inspected were the PSNI, the PPS, and the NICTS. Stakeholder organisations met with Inspectors to help inform the approach to the inspection and to discuss learning from victims' and witnesses' experiences including professional witnesses from Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI). Fieldwork comprising focus groups, one-to-one interviews, and documentary analysis was completed with the PSNI, the PPS and the NICTS and their staff from January to March 2026. Discussions took place with the DoJ and the Judiciary about the effectiveness of the process for securing witness attendance in supporting case progression and reducing delay.

1.24 Inspectors had the privilege of meeting with victims, to hear first-hand, their experience of the criminal justice system. CJI also conducted an online survey with victims and witness and a separate survey with Police Officers and FSNI staff who had attended Court proceedings as a witness through Citizen Space, the Northern Ireland Civil Service preferred surveying tool. Analysis of the responses to both surveys is contained in Chapters 3 and 4. Appendix 4 gives an overview of those who completed witness surveys as part of this inspection.

1.25 Finally, CJI conducted a review of 30 PPS case files, (10 Crown Court and 20 Magistrates' Court), examining witness engagement from when witness availability was first sought by the VWCU, until the conclusion of the case. Appendix 3 provides a summary of the cases that were reviewed by Inspectors as part of this Inspection and analysis of the findings of the file review is included in Chapters 3 and 4. The full inspection methodology can be found at Appendix 1.

CHAPTER 2: STRATEGY AND GOVERNANCE

WITNESS ENTITLEMENTS WITHIN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROCESS

2.1 As previously noted, the rights, support and protection of victims and witnesses in Northern Ireland were underpinned by the *EU Directive 2012/29/EU*, given statutory effect through the Charters.

2.2 There were specific entitlements for victims; receiving clear information at key stages, being told about and referred to support services and submitting Victim Personal Statements, but as a minimum, victims and witnesses were entitled to:

- be treated professionally, respectfully and without discrimination;
- receive practical information about giving evidence and attending Court;
- have their needs assessed, including eligibility for special measures;
- access to witness support services and Court familiarisation;
- receive information about outcomes, expenses, and post-trial support; and
- raise concerns if standards were not met.

2.3 On 28 June 2022, the European Commission adopted its evaluation of the Victims' Rights Directive.[24] The EU Victims' Rights Directive was the impetus for the Charters and, after the United Kingdom's exit from the EU, the findings of the evaluation were worthy of continued consideration by the DoJ and important in the development of any legislation and policy in respect of victims' rights. This was recognised by the DoJ in their *Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2026-32 Two Year Action Plan* (the Action Plan)[25] under Pillar 4 'Rights and confidence'.

2.4 The evaluation showed that the EU Directive had greatly contributed to improving the lives of victims across the EU and reduced the negative impacts of participating in criminal proceedings. The work found however, victims did not always receive adequate information concerning their rights and victims with specific needs did not always benefit from a timely assessment of their individual needs.

24 *European Commission, Evaluation of Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council 2022, June 2022* available at ***https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2022-06/swd_2022_179_evaluation_rep_en.pdf***.

25 *Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy Two Year Action Plan, March 2026* available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/Victims%20and%20Witnesses%20of%20Crime%20Strategy%20-%20Strategy%20Action%20Plan%20-%20Final%20Tagged.pdf***.

On 12 July 2023, the European Commission proposed amendments to the Victims' Rights Directive[26] to address these shortcomings and on 10 December 2025, the European Parliament and the Council reached political agreement on this proposal. The new rules ensure that victims across the EU receive better support, access to information and easier access to justice.

THE PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT AND DOJ CORPORATE PLANS

2.5 The Programme for Government 2024-2027[27] sets out the Northern Ireland Executive's priorities for the current Northern Ireland Assembly mandate and includes nine cross-cutting priorities. The work of the DoJ is particularly aligned to the '*Safer Communities*', '*Ending Violence Against Women and Girls*' and '*Transforming Services*' priorities. Under the *Safer Communities* priority, the DoJ plays a key role in ensuring that the Northern Ireland Executive achieves its target to *'...have progressed a Speeding Up Justice Programme and have an Executive agreed approach to reducing offending and reoffending, contributing to delivering improved outcomes for those who engage with the justice system.'*

2.6 The DoJ Corporate Plan 2025-28 and Business Plan 2025-26[28] set out five strategic priorities. They were:

- *reduce offending;*
- *community safety;*
- *supporting victims of crime;*
- *access to justice;* and
- *empowered people*.

2.7 The objective of *'Supporting Victims of Crime',* priority was: *'to improve the experience of victims of crime including arrangements for practical support.'* The DoJ launched the new *Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2026-32*[29] and the Action Plan on 11 March 2026. The new Strategy is structured around five pillars.

26 *European Commission, Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the European Council amending Directive 2012/29/EU 2023* available at ***https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A52023PC0424***.

27 *Northern Ireland Executive, Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most, Programme for Government 2024-2027, March 2025,* available at ***https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-03/programme-for-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most_1.pdf***.

28 *DoJ, Corporate Plan 2025-28 and Business Plan 2025-26, September 2025* available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/corporate%20business%20plan%20%202025-28%20and%202025-2026.pdf***.

29 *DoJ, Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2026-32, March 2026* available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-03/Victims%20and%20Witnesses%20of%20Crime%20Strategy%20-%20Final%20Tagged.pdf***.

Pillar 1	Pillar 2	Pillar 3	Pillar 4	Pillar 5
Support	Communication and Information	Transparency and Participation	Rights and Confidence	Children and Young People
Tailored, responsive and specialised support is accessible for all victims and witnesses of crime to help them to recover and rebuild their lives.	Ensuring information about the justice system is accessible.	Being open and clear about the stages of the criminal justice system and the decisions made which impact upon victims and witnesses so that they feel more empowered.	Improving public confidence in the justice system and ensuring victim and witness entitlements are met.	The needs of children and young people who are victims and witnesses are taken into account when engaging with the criminal justice system.

2.8 To achieve the intended outcomes for victims and witnesses, actions under each priority needed to be addressed but, particular to this Inspection and securing witness attendance at Court, were the objectives under Pillars 2-5:

- *Victims and witnesses are provided with the information they need at all stages of the criminal justice system in a way which clearly explains their part in the process and what to expect;*
- *Victims and witnesses are empowered to remain engaged throughout the criminal justice system due to transparent and clear processes being in place; and*
- *Criminal justice organisations comply with their Charter obligations; encourage best practice; and promote positive developments to meet the needs and interests of victims and witnesses.*

Case progression

2.9 Securing the attendance of victims and witnesses at Court depended not only on providing the right support at the right time, but on the existence of effective processes that enabled swift and consistent case progression and readiness of cases to proceed at Court. Work undertaken through the *Speeding Up Justice* Programme sought to address delay through early engagement between key justice partners, with the aim of reducing avoidable duplication of work and enabling earlier, higher-quality decision-making. In parallel, the Magistrates' Courts workstream focused on improving throughput in summary cases and those triable either in the Magistrates' Court or the Crown Court, recognising that these cases exert a disproportionate impact on overall system timeliness. While these initiatives were intended to deliver meaningful improvements, they did not encompass case progression once a case was listed at Court.

2.10 The pace of case progression in Courts had long been recognised as a significant factor contributing to delay in the criminal justice system. In 2019, the role of Case Progression Officer, first recommended by CJI in 2006, was introduced by the NICTS as a pilot. Case Progression Officers were responsible for supporting the progression of all Crown Court cases at each Crown Court venue. They worked closely with criminal justice partners to ensure all necessary arrangements were in place, to best ensure that cases could proceed as planned. This included identifying high-profile cases, advising the Judge on delays and ensuring the availability of technology and interpreter facilities. They were responsible for monitoring cases, identifying trends and reporting on potential issues. At the time of Inspection fieldwork, a pilot evaluation had been completed and the draft report produced. Inspectors were advised that the findings were reported as positive, with a recommendation that the role move to business-as-usual arrangements.

INITIATIVES TO SUPPORT THE ATTENDANCE OF WITNESSES AT COURT

2.11 There were a number of roles and initiatives in place to advocate for and support witnesses before, during and after their attendance at Court.

Commissioner for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland Designate (CVOCNI Designate)

2.12 In March 2022 the Minister of Justice appointed a CVOCNI Designate. Initially a three year appointment, it was extended for a further two years in June 2025 and a competition to appoint a substantive CVOCNI was underway at the time of inspection fieldwork. The role of the CVOCNI Designate was established to:

- provide a voice for all victims of crime;
- identify, promote, encourage and issue guidance on good practice;
- review the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice;
- review the operation and delivery of Victim Charter entitlements and promotion of the Victim Charter;
- direct complaints and monitor outcomes;
- advise and make recommendations; and
- undertake or commission research.

2.13 The CVOCNI Designate published a three-year strategy[30] in February 2023 which identified three key areas of focus. These were: Delay (the need for timely justice so that the trauma experienced by victims is not prolonged and the risk of undermining the willingness and confidence of victims and wider society to report a crime in future is mitigated); Disclosure of victims' personal details (the need to strengthen the protections of victims and reduce the volume of detail being sought for victims' personal data); and Data (the need for the system to collect and share meaningful data).

30 *CVOCNI Designate, Commissioner for Victims of Crime Strategy 2022-2025, February 2023* available at ***https://www.cvocni.org/files/cvocni/2023-02/CVOC-Strategy-22-25.pdf***.

2.14 CJI, across a number of inspection reports, has highlighted the need for system-wide meaningful data capture and monitoring of performance in relation to victims' and witnesses' access to Charter entitlements. The DoJ, in the Action Plan, under Pillar 1: Support, included the following action for completion within two years:

'Establish comprehensive and effective systems to gather data and evidence in order to monitor, evaluate and respond to victim and witness experiences of the justice system.'

Also, within the two-year period, under Pillar 4: Rights and Confidence, the DoJ undertook to:

'In advance of new legislation [the Victim and Witnesses of Crime Bill] being in place, identify, agree and publish existing data showing compliance with the Charters, on a regular basis, and identify ways in which wider victim metrics can be captured. Data and metrics will be sourced from the criminal justice system.'

2.15 Aimed for introduction in 2026, the proposed Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill is intended to introduce a range of reforms, including:

- establishing a Statutory Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime with legal powers;
- strengthening protections around disclosure of complainants' private information in serious sexual offence cases;
- providing for pre-trial Third-Party representation for complainants in serious sexual offence cases;
- introducing hate crime measures, including extended special measures and prohibitions on direct cross-examination by defendants; and
- requiring mandatory publication of victim and witness related statistics (including compliance with the Charters) to improve transparency and accountability. The Statutory Commissioner would then be required to monitor compliance with the Charters.

2.16 The CVOCNI Designate annual survey was the sole means of capturing the experiences of victims of all types of crime in Northern Ireland of the criminal justice system. The third annual survey closed on 22 December 2025 and the Inspectors were advised that over 500 responses had been received from victims and witnesses.[31]

2.17 A working group, established by the CVOCNI Designate's Office on behalf of the DoJ, continued to explore a mechanism to collect feedback about the victim experience in the criminal justice system. The use of an 'exit survey' for victims at each stage of the justice system was being developed. A sub-group had been established to consider the 'exit' questions which could be asked at each stage of the victim and witness journey. Initially the focus was on the PSNI/PPS/NICTS stages of the system.

31 The survey was subsequently published in October 2026 and can be found at CVOCNI, Victim Survey Report 2026 (including results of the victim survey carried out between September 2025 and December 2025), October 2026 available at ***https://www.cvocni.org/files/cvocni/2026-10/RPT-CVOC-Victim-Survey-Report-2025.pdf***

2.18 The DoJ's Analytical Services Group has a key role in collating findings from all surveys and producing a report on a regular basis. Issues around gathering feedback from those excluded from the previous Northern Ireland Victim and Witness Survey and from children were under consideration.

WITNESS SUPPORT SERVICES

2.19 The DoJ provided core grant funding to Victim Support Northern Ireland (Victim Support NI) which included the delivery of the Court Witness Service for adult prosecution witnesses called to give evidence at Court or a Remote Evidence Centre (REC).[32] In 2025-26 core grant funding of £528,000 was allocated to the Witness Service. The DoJ also provided grant funding, £511,000 in 2025-26, to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Young Witness Service (YWS) which supported young prosecution witnesses.

2.20 The DoJ annually agreed a Conditions of Grant with both Victim Support NI and the NSPCC YWS which set out the services to be delivered, the arrangements for monitoring delivery and the process for agreeing performance measures. It also required Witness Service providers to comply with the Witness Charter standards and entitlements. Bilateral meetings between the DoJ and the organisations took place every six months to discuss performance, finance, service delivery and other relevant issues.

SEXUAL OFFENCES LEGAL ADVISERS (SOLA)

2.21 The SOLA and Children's SOLA (CSOLA) pilot services provided free, independent legal advice and support to all complainants in serious sexual offence cases up to the point the trial begins. The services were funded by the DoJ and run by Victim Support NI who, at the time of inspection fieldwork, employed four full-time solicitors. Commencing in April 2021 the SOLA pilot was extended until March 2027; the CSOLA service launched in February 2025.

2.22 Annual grant funding of approximately £190,000 was provided by the DoJ for the SOLA service and £121,000 for the CSOLA service. The quarterly drawdowns were checked and authorised for payment by the DoJ. There were also quarterly meetings between the DoJ and Victim Support NI to monitor performance and ensure funding was being used appropriately and efficiently. Ongoing oversight and monitoring of both services was also carried out by the C/SOLA Monitoring and Evaluation Group which met quarterly to analyse the data collected by criminal justice partners.

32 RECs are buildings entirely separate from Court buildings from where victims and witnesses can give their evidence remotely to the Court.

2.23 At the end of September 2025, 2,082 adults had engaged with the SOLA service since 2021 and 198 children and young people and their families with the CSOLA service. One of the objectives set for the services was that 80% of complainants referred to the services should engage with it. Engagement fell to 65% in 2024-25 and the number of referrals from the PSNI also reduced. The DoJ advised that criminal justice partners were trying to determine the reasons for this so that agreed measures could be put in place to address the issues and support victims of serious sexual offences to remain in the criminal justice process.

REMOTE EVIDENCE CENTRES (RECS)

2.24 The DoJ established two RECs in Belfast and Craigavon in 2021, in addition to an existing NSPCC-led facility in Derry/Londonderry which had been in operation since 2008. Women's Aid in Enniskillen had also been operating a REC for adult victims of domestic abuse since spring 2024 which had produced good outcomes for victims of domestic violence and abuse. RECs were intended to reduce the risk of complainants being re-traumatised by removing any chance of encountering the defendant and/or the defendant's family and supporters in or around the Court building.

2.25 Since opening, the Belfast and Craigavon RECs had been relocated and the overall number of REC bookings had increased significantly. From 1 January 2025 to 30 June 2025, there was a 90% increase in overall bookings compared with the equivalent period in 2024. The feedback from victims and witnesses who had had the opportunity to give evidence from the RECs was overwhelmingly positive. It was so important for this special measure to become readily available to all victims and witnesses who needed it.

2.26 At the time of inspection fieldwork, a DoJ evaluation of the existing REC facilities including recommendations for new potential REC locations had just been completed and was being quality assured.

REGISTERED INTERMEDIARIES (RIS)

2.27 The RI Scheme pilot was launched by the DoJ on 13 May 2013. RIs are communication specialists who assist vulnerable victims, witnesses, suspects and defendants with significant communication deficits to communicate their answers more effectively during police interview and when giving evidence at trial. Originally piloted in Crown Courts and associated committal proceedings in Magistrates' Courts for the most serious offences, in April 2017 the RI Scheme was rolled out to Magistrates' and Youth Courts. Most RI requests were made by the PSNI (82% in 2024-25) but RIs could also be requested by the PPS or defence solicitors to assist witnesses giving evidence in Court.

VICTIM AND WITNESS NEEDS ASSESSMENT SERVICE

2.28 The development of a new service model to include a Victim and Witness Needs Assessment Service within the VWCU was a CJI Strategic Recommendation in the July 2020 Victims and Witnesses Inspection Report.[33] In August 2021, a scoping paper, prepared by the PPS, the PSNI and Victim Support NI setting out their recommended service model, was approved by the Criminal Justice Board. This had not been implemented and CJI made a further Strategic Recommendation to secure victim and witness entitlements under the Charters in the March 2026 Inspection Report on Special Measures:[34]

'Within 12 months of publication of this report, the Department of Justice in partnership with the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Police Service of Northern Ireland should ensure all victims and witnesses have access to their Victim and Witness Charter rights through the implementation of an enhanced needs assessment service to include a Victim and Witness Needs Assessment Service within the Victim Witness Care Unit.'

PSNI

2.29 The *Northern Ireland Policing Plan 2025-30* and *Annual Performance Plan 2025-26*[35] outlines three outcomes that they aim to deliver. Relevant to this inspection is Outcome 1: PSNI is victim focused: *'Victims of crime will be treated with compassion and respect and kept informed in line with the principles of the Victim Charter for Northern Ireland and a trauma informed approach. The PSNI will target resources to protect the most vulnerable victims of crime, including repeat victims.'*

2.30 One of the indicators developed to inform the PSNI if it had made progress towards achieving a victim focused PSNI was Indicator 1.5: Providing a high-quality service to victims. The Northern Ireland Policing Board had undertaken to *'monitor compliance with the Victim Charter to ensure the PSNI is providing a high-quality service to all victims of crime and reinforce it as an essential factor in maintaining and building confidence in policing.'*

2.31 There was no organisational oversight of the effectiveness of the process whereby Police Officers were attending Court to give evidence, and this impacted resource management and costs (see Chapter 3), with Officers diverted from priority tasks. Improved oversight would help the PSNI *'target resources to protect the most vulnerable'*.

33 *CJI, Victims and Witnesses: The Care and Treatment of Victims and Witnesses by the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland, July 2020* available at **http://cjini.org/getattachment/5193b4b4-6351-4987-bdfb-03bace145c7e/report.aspx**.

34 *CJI, Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts: An Inspection of their Use and Operation, March 2026,* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/special-measures-in-northern-ireland/**

35 *PSNI and Northern Ireland Policing Board, Northern Ireland Policing Plan 2025-30 and Annual Performance Plan 2025-26, April 2025* available at **https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/files/nipolicingboard/2025-04/Policing%20Plan%202025-30%20and%20Annual%20Performance%20Plan%2025-26.pdf**.

2.32 Section 32(1)(d) of the *Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000*[36] placed a duty on Police Officers, where an offence had been committed, to take measures to bring the offender to justice. Giving evidence in Court was central to this obligation. Attendance at Court was usually secured administratively with the VWCU inviting Police Officers to attend Court but a summons could also be issued to compel their attendance.

2.33 Across different areas of policing, Inspectors were told about a lack of systematic data collection on Police Officer attendance at Court. Attendance at Court was viewed as a 'core part of the job', so the absence of evidence was not questioned. However, a lack of meaningful service-wide data being captured or analysed by the PSNI prevented them from evidencing inefficiencies or influencing system partners. It also hampered resource planning.

PPS

2.34 The PPS Strategic Vision, *PPS 2030*[37], sets out a programme of work over the five years to 2030 to deliver a more efficient Public Prosecution Service, that will target its resources to those areas of greatest priority and where greatest value can be added. Delivery of *PPS 2030* will be through the identification of a portfolio of projects based around four objectives:

- *redesign and optimise [the] service delivery model and processes to deliver our [PPS] business more effectively;*
- *develop arrangements to allow cases to be dealt with proportionately and contribute to the reduction of avoidable delay;*
- *support staff and key stakeholders to work in a changing environment; and*
- *achieve a sustainable financial operating model for the PPS in the longer-term.*

CJI's 2025 Inspection report on the Management of Organisational Performance in the PPS[38] *identified the need for the organisation to progress more effective long-term planning, including best use of resources and proportionality.*

2.35 The PPS Business Plan 2025-26[39] had four corporate priorities, one of which was 'External Impact' and included '*the development of mechanisms to monitor how well we are delivering the rights and entitlements as laid out in the Victim and Witness Charters*.' CJI's 2026 Inspection Report on *Special Measures in*

36 *Legislation.gov.uk, Police (Northern Ireland) Act 2000* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2000/32/section/32**.
37 *PPS, PPS 2030 A strategic vision for the future of the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland, November 2025* available at **https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/files/ppsni/2025-11/PPS2030.pdf**.
38 *CJI, The Management of Organisational Performance in the PPS, November 2025,* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/the-management-of-organisational-performance-in-the-public-prosecution-service-for-northern-ireland/**
39 *PPS, Business Plan 2025-26, June 2025* available at **https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/files/ppsni/2025-06/PPS%20Annual%20Business%20Plan%202025-26.pdf**.

Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts[40] identified the need for the PPS to prioritise the development of mechanisms to assess their level of compliance with their Charter obligations to inform further actions to support delivery. The recommendations arising from this report were referenced in the *PPS Business Plan 2026-27*[41], published May 2026 when inspection fieldwork had concluded.

2.36 The PPS *Victim and Witness Policy 2017*[42] set out the standards of service that victims and witnesses could expect from the PPS and its commitments at every stage of the process, including: *'ensuring that every effort is made to identify any specific needs and to ensure that appropriate actions are taken to meet these.'* The *Victim and Witness Policy* reflected all the PPS's Charter requirements. At the time of inspection fieldwork, this Policy was being reviewed to reflect the most up-to-date Special Measures policy and practice and ensure that processes and procedures aligned with Trauma Informed Practice principles.

2.37 The VWCU was designed to assist victims and witnesses from when a file is submitted to the PPS until the conclusion of Court proceedings. Each victim and witness was assigned a dedicated VWCU Case Officer to keep them informed about the progress of their case and provide updates on developments. The VWCU could offer a direct referral to Victim Support NI who had a representative co-located permanently within the Unit. They could also refer victims and witnesses to additional support services.

2.38 The following services and information were provided to witnesses in line with the PPS obligations under the Charters:

- whether he/she will be required to give evidence;
- the location, dates and times of relevant Court hearings;
- the facilities available at all Court locations;
- claiming for expenses he/she may incur in attending Court;
- a needs assessment to help provide the witness with the specific support and guidance he/she needs;
- for vulnerable and/or intimidated witnesses, special measures available to assist them in giving evidence;
- arrange for an interpreter to be present at Court, if English is not his/her first language; and
- arrange travel and accommodation on behalf of witnesses to avoid them having to incur the costs and reclaim them.

40 *CJI, Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts: An Inspection of their Use and Operation, March 2026,* available at ***https://www.cjini.org/reports/special-measures-in-northern-ireland/***.

41 *PPS, Business Plan 2026-27, May 2026* available at ***https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/files/ppsni/2026-05/PPS%20Annual%20Business%20Plan%202026-27.pdf***

42 *PPS, Victim and Witness Policy, June 2017* available at ***https://www.ppsni.gov.uk/files/ppsni/publications/PPS%20Victim%20and%20Witness%20Policy%20%28June%202017%29.pdf***.

2.39 Under the Action Plan the DoJ and PPS planned to '*conduct a review to establish how financial supports might be made available for victims and witnesses to support their engagement with the criminal justice system including attendance at court.*'

2.40 Following the publication of CJI's Inspection of Special Measures[43], the PPS was in the process of reviewing and improving their needs assessment process including early identification of victims and witnesses eligible to apply for Special Measures.

PPS Policies

2.41 A number of PPS policies were relevant to securing witness attendance at Court; *'Use of Special Measures', 'Use of RI's', 'Phase 2 of the REC Pilot'* and policies around Police Officer's giving evidence remotely. The PPS also had a Staff Instruction (No. 19 of 2021) on the '*Management of Witness Attrition'* setting out where the PPS could have a direct influence to mitigate the likelihood and impact of witness attrition.

2.42 Recognising the limited information available to management in respect of witness attrition, the initial focus was on using existing methods of recording that were capable of being adapted for this purpose. The intention was not to capture all instances of witness attrition from the outset, rather to provide data at defined points that would act as a 'red flag' to identify any trends and allow suitable remedial action to be considered. In the longer term the Policy and Information Unit would continue to engage with other sections, including the VWCU, with a view to developing proposals for a more complete recording mechanism. Consideration was also being given to further IT [Information Technology] development that would help to refine the overall recording of attrition on the case management system.

2.43 In March 2026 PPS advised '*we are not currently collating the returns to provide an attrition figure as this requires a manual exercise.'* This went against its corporate priority to '*monitor how well we are delivering the rights and entitlements as laid out in the Victim and Witness Charters*' and needed to be addressed to ensure compliance with the Charters and feed into the Action Plan to *'identify, agree and publish existing data showing compliance with the Charters, on a regular basis, and identify ways in which wider victim metrics can be captured'.*

NICTS

2.44 The role of the NICTS included the provision of administrative support for Northern Ireland's Courts and tribunals and supporting an independent Judiciary. This involved case processing, preparation of cases for Court, allocation of resources to support criminal Court hearings and the Judiciary, pre, in and post Court administration including recording and communicating Court decisions and the provision of facilities and equipment for hearings.

43 *CJI, Inspection of Special Measures in Northern Ireland's Criminal Courts, March 2026* available at ***https://www.cjini.org/reports/special-measures-in-northern-ireland/***

2.45 Listing cases in Court was a judicial function. The Lady Chief Justice and the Judiciary had responsibility for the distribution of criminal Court business. There was discussion with NICTS administrators on Court calendars and sitting days when additional days/Courts were needed. Court staff then carried out day-to-day scheduling and facilitated Courts in line with those judicial directions, providing they had sufficient resource.

The NICTS strategies

2.46 In support of the DoJ's mission of '*working in partnership to create a fair, just and safe community where we respect the law and each other*', the NICTS, in its 2025-26 *Business Plan*[44] set out four strategic objectives:

- working in partnership, deliver efficient and effective Court, tribunal and enforcement services and support an independent Judiciary;
- develop and lead our people to achieve our business objectives;
- modernise Court, tribunal and enforcement services that meet the needs of our stakeholders; and
- deliver effective corporate governance, finance and procurement arrangements.

2.47 The NICTS Digital Strategy 2021-26[45] was published on 17 January 2022. In line with the DoJ Digital Strategy[46] the NICTS aimed to:

- reduce the number of physical hearings and transactions;
- increase the use of digital solutions to support physical hearings where they remain appropriate; and
- maximise the access to and delivery of services in the Virtual Environment.

2.48 Key to the delivery of modernised services was the development of Themis, a new operating model, digital solution and web portal which was being phased in over five years, due for implementation with criminal business in 2029. The target for launch of the first civil business phase of Themis was not met and the impact on criminal business implementation was unknown.

2.49 In September 2025 the NICTS rolled out Justice Video Platform (also known as JVP) that enables participants to connect to a Court hearing remotely, replacing Sightlink. By the end of November 2025 all Courts across Northern Ireland were using this new platform.

44 *NICTS, Business Plan 2025-26, September 2025 available at* ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-09/nicts-business-plan-2025-to-26_0.pdf***

45 *The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Digital Strategy 2021-2026, published January 2022,* available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/nicts-digital-strategy-2021-2026.pdf***

46 *DoJ, Digital Justice Strategy 2020-25, published July* 2020, available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/digital-justice-strategy-2020-2025.PDF***

2.50 The NICTS published its Estates Strategy '*Making the Place for Justice*' 2023-2030 on 4 December 2023 and it set out four Improvement Aims of:

- Improved user experience;
- Improved resilience;
- Improved value for money; and
- Improved sustainability.

2.51 In January 2026 the NICTS published their Sustainability Delivery Plan 2026[47] setting out their strategic ambitions for sustainability between 2026-32. At the time of inspection fieldwork in March 2026, the NICTS were continuing to progress three major capital projects: the modernisation of the Royal Courts of Justice; the Old Town Hall in Belfast; and Bishop Street Courthouse in Derry/Londonderry. A more user-focused environment, with dedicated waiting and separate circulation areas would encourage witness participation by reducing fear of intimidation or re-traumatisation; case progression would be supported by more resilient and efficient court facilities and digital upgrades and clearer processes would make it easier for witnesses to engage, particularly those with vulnerabilities, accessibility needs, or travel constraints.

THE NICTS GUIDANCE AND WIDER VICTIM AND WITNESS ROLE

2.52 The '*NICTS Victim and Witness Guidance*', available on the NICS intranet sets out the protocol for dealing with victims and witnesses including their obligations under the Charters.

2.53 Normally when a vulnerable witness was giving evidence support would be arranged through one of the voluntary agencies such as Victim Support NI, NSPCC's YWS or from Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland. In the event that a supporter was not available from one of the voluntary agencies, this role would fall to the NICTS.

2.54 Being represented on the Victims and Witness Data Group, Victim and Witness Steering Group and having an appointed Victims Champion enables the NICTS to contribute to strategic discussions with criminal justice partners on the criminal justice system response to victims and witnesses attending Court.

47 *NICTS, Sustainability Delivery Plan 2026, published January 2026* available at ***https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2026-01/nicts-sustainability-delivery-plan-2026_0.pdf***

CHAPTER 3: DELIVERY

VWCU RESOURCING AND OPERATIONS

3.1 The VWCU role, which included obtaining witness availability prior to hearing dates being fixed was important in accommodating and supporting witnesses to attend Court and key to progressing cases and reducing delay.

3.2 The PPS were working to a three-region model:

- Belfast Region;
- Northern and Western Region;
- Southern and Eastern Region.

The caseload for the three regions was covered by two VWCU offices in Belfast and Foyle. The VWCU regional responsibilities and the proportion of their caseload are set out in Table 1. The highest proportion of work was in Belfast, but the caseload was spread almost equally between both VWCU offices.

Table 1: VWCU regional responsibilities and the proportion of their caseload

VWCU Office	PPS Region	Proportion of Caseload
Belfast	Belfast	32%
	Eastern	19%
Foyle	Northern	9%
	Western	26%
	Southern	14%

Source:PPS

3.3 A PPS Business Improvement Team Review in 2017 recommended a capacity model of 42 Case Officers. This number of staff was split equally between the two VWCU offices. A ratio of 2:1 (PPS: PSNI) for Case Officers was agreed; with PPS staffing 28 Case Officers and the PSNI 14. Both organisations provided one Team Manager for each VWCU office.

3.4 In March 2026, Belfast VWCU had 13 staff instead of the required 21; two PPS and six PSNI posts (5.4 Full Time Equivalent) were vacant. The PPS were confident that its two posts would soon be filled from a recent recruitment list. The PSNI, however, had been unable to provide the agreed number of staff for Belfast with only one full-time police staff member in post.

This had been escalated to senior management within both organisations but hadn't been resolved. This capacity gap meant that PPS staff in Belfast VWCU were overburdened and the service provided to witnesses was negatively impacted.

3.5 Police Officer availability for Court attendance was obtained through the PSNI *Options* system which was updated by Officers as leave and other commitments arose. More than half of the VWCU staff in Belfast did not have clearance to access *Options* and were unable to check Officer availability for the cases assigned, resulting in staff with clearance having to complete this work on behalf of their colleagues. Some staff had been waiting for access for more than two years. This was very problematic as evidenced during inspection fieldwork when the PPS were given short notice by the PSNI that *Options* was being taken offline for maintenance for approximately one week. With so few staff able to access *Options*, cases had to be adjourned for a further week to enable VWCU to get Officer availability. The PSNI and the PPS had been communicating regarding this issue for some time. There appeared to be misunderstanding as to what was required from each organisation to secure access for PPS staff to the *Options* system. There was a clear willingness to resolve this matter and in April 2026 the PSNI had organised training and mentoring for PPS staff who were then granted access. They had also simplified the process for future applications.

3.6 When VWCU staff called some victims and witnesses from their work telephone, the number displayed on the telephone appeared as 'SPAM' or was not the caseworker's telephone number. PPS investigations concluded that it was the settings of the recipient's phone that determined if this happened. The PPS needed to mitigate against the risk of being unable to communicate with witnesses. For example, for witnesses who were not responding to VWCU phone calls, the caseworker could send a text message in advance to advise that they would be ringing them at a certain time and why.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN THE VWCU AND THE WIDER PPS

3.7 Delays in files being tasked to the VWCU to obtain witness availability by PPS Court Clerks and Prosecutors prevented the VWCU caseworkers obtaining witness availability for the Court date. Courts usually allowed two weeks for the VWCU to obtain witness availability before fixing a hearing date. The VWCU were working to three performance indicators that were directly linked to the PPS obligations under the Witness Charter. They were:

- completion of witness availability (two days before Court date);
- notification of witness attendance (seven days before Court date); and
- confirmation of witness attendance (two days before Court date).

3.8 Not all files were tasked to the VWCU after Court, with some being sent as late as the morning of the Court date that availability was required for. Inspectors saw evidence of more than 150 files being tasked to the VWCU in Belfast at the last minute, over an 11-month period. For most of the cases, the requests were triggered by Prosecutors or PPS Court Clerks, at the last minute, realising they had failed to request availability. There was evidence that the VWCU did try to fulfil these late requests, but it was not always possible given the lateness of the request and the number of witnesses involved in the cases.

3.9 Crown Court outcomes were not consistently entered on the PPS Case Management System by the PPS Crown Court Team. The PPS Crown Court Clerks made detailed handwritten notes of what happened at Court, including the reasons for adjournment, and these notes were placed on a hard copy file retained by the PPS Crown Court Team. The VWCU caseworkers did not have access to this information when they were contacted by witnesses with queries about what happened in their case. They had to contact the Court Clerk involved, who may have been in Court, and wait for them to get back to them before updating the witness. Inspectors experienced the frustration of accessing Crown Court case information during the PPS file review, having to access the hard copy files to fill gaps in information held on the case management system. The delay in information provision had the potential to impact public confidence in the service provided by the VWCU and exacerbate anxiety felt by witnesses. Inspectors were advised that the Prosecution Quality Committee and Assistant Directors of the Regions were liaising with Business Managers on how this could be resolved.

3.10 Most communication with witnesses was through the VWCU, but there were occasions where the witness query could not be dealt with by the VWCU and needed the Prosecutor involved in the case. In most instances, the VWCU caseworker raised the query or request with the Prosecutor and relayed the response to the witness. However, there were occasions where it would have been more appropriate for the Prosecutor to speak directly with the witness; and where the Prosecutor's response to the VWCU was difficult to understand without legal training, making it impossible for the VWCU to explain it to witnesses or answer any further questions they had. There was however a reluctance by some Prosecutors to speak with witnesses, citing their heavy workload and lack of time.

COMMUNICATION WITHIN THE WIDER CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

3.11 Inspectors recognised the importance of victim focused communication from the outset in supporting witnesses and securing attendance at Court. CJI's 2026 Inspection of Special Measures highlighted the ineffective Initial Needs Assessment process, and the lack of victim-led communication as a strategic issue around the early identification of victim and witness needs by the PPS. The Inspection Report made recommendations for improvement.

3.12 Inspectors heard examples from service users of poor, inconsistent or absent communication from the PSNI, the PPS and the NICTS resulting in anxiety, re-traumatisation and loss of trust in the criminal justice system. In the main, the evidence collated from the CJI witness survey showed communication with civilian witnesses around attendance at Court to be acceptable.

3.13 While a small sample, of the nine civilian witness survey responses received, the majority (78%) were victims of crime. Regarding the content of the invitation/summons all or most:

- understood what the invitation/summons related to (100%);
- confirmed their details and information on the invitation/summons were correct (100%);
- found the invitation/summons easy to understand (89%); and
- received their witness invitation/summons more than two weeks before the hearing date (100%) and in the majority of cases more than four weeks before the hearing date (78%).

3.14 The VWCU offered to communicate with witnesses using their preferred means of contact. Respondents to the witness survey advised they received their witness invitations from the VWCU by post, email and telephone.

3.15 Inspectors' assessment of PPS engagement with 188 witnesses across the 30 files reviewed was good in 3% of cases, satisfactory in 81% and poor in 15%.[48] PPS engagement with witnesses, particularly victims, who withdrew their support before the conclusion of the case, required improvement. Of the files reviewed, 11% of witnesses disengaged and no efforts were made by the PPS to re-engage the witness. There was more of a focus on getting a withdrawal statement. The PSNI made efforts in 22% of the cases to contact the witness to identify why they had withdrawn support.

3.16 Lack of early review of contested cases and communication with Officers by the PPS contributed to wasted Police Officer time and delays. Inspectors were told of Prosecutors reviewing cases as late as the day before hearing and issuing requests to Investigating Officers for further information. This was also the common practice of Counsel prosecuting on behalf of the PPS, receiving the files the evening before Court and then raising queries with Police Officers on the morning of hearing. Added to this was the fact that conversations were not taking place with defence representatives until the last minute to resolve evidential/disclosure issues. A timely, structured, pre-contest review, with clear ownership of disclosure and early communication between the PPS, defence representation and Police Officers would reduce unnecessary attendance at Court.

48 Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

3.17 The FSNI spoke of similar systemic communication failures, spanning the PPS, the PSNI and the NICTS. The lack of a single accountable point of contact for FSNI staff created inefficiency, increased witness anxiety and wasted public time and money. Several scientists said they would value pre-trial discussions with Prosecutors as this would improve clarity for all parties, case readiness and avoid Scientific Officers being detailed to Court unnecessarily.

3.18 Of the 490 survey responses from the PSNI and the FSNI[49] in the survey conducted by CJI, 86% of respondents felt they were called to Court unnecessarily. When asked how often they actually gave evidence when they attended Court, 60% said they 'rarely' gave evidence and 16% said 'never' (Table 2).

Table 2: How often PSNI and FSNI Officers gave evidence when they attended Court

How often PSNI and FSNI Officers gave evidence	Total responses	Percentage
Every time	12	2%
Most of the time	33	7%
About half of the time	66	13%
Rarely	293	60%
Never	79	16%
N/A	6	1%

Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

STANDBY ARRANGEMENTS AND POLICE RECS

3.19 Some Police Officers, who had been invited to Court, were permitted to be on standby at a police station close to the Court building so they could work on their investigation files or do light duties as they waited for confirmation they were required. This arrangement was not consistent across Northern Ireland, but in Belfast it was standard practice for the Contest Liaison Officer to co-ordinate with the Prosecutor and inform Police Officers when they were stood down or needed to go to the Court building to give evidence. In the PSNI and FSNI witness survey, 43% of respondents had been given the opportunity to be on standby while waiting to give their evidence.

3.20 In June 2021, the PSNI Transformation Branch implemented a Police REC pilot in Laganside Courthouse, Belfast where Police Officers could give their evidence by video link from their local PSNI station. An evaluation of the pilot in 2024 stated:

49 The questions in this survey were not mandatory, so every question was not answered by every participant. As such the baseline numbers for each question may differ. Of the 490 survey responses one person did not complete this question.

'What was clear was that the four hours allotted for Court attendance did not accurately reflect the actual extraction time…Officers tasked to Court were actually being written off for their entire shift, as it could not be accurately determined how long the Officer would be required at Court. Added to this was that in many cases an Officer is being brought in to backfill for the extracted Officer, and that Officer would be scheduled for the entire shift. This meant that in many cases we studied, the full cost of Officers going to Court was much more than a four-hour extraction time and involved back fill and in some cases overtime.'

3.21 In the Pilot testing phase, there were 46 requests for Officers to attend Laganside Court in which the Police RECs were employed. It was estimated this saved approximately £7,360. If the Police REC pilot was rolled out across Northern Ireland it was estimated that there was the potential of real savings of £1.8 million in Year One, with potential savings of £10 million over a five-year period. With 26 fully functioning Police RECs installed across the PSNI estate, this allowed for *'a 100% uptake of Remote Evidence, where it is allowable and required.'*

3.22 In February 2026 a Police Remote Evidence Pilot commenced in Antrim and Downpatrick Magistrates' Court. Unlike the previous Police REC Pilot which relied on Contest Liaison Officers, who were specific to Belfast, to help manage the contest and remote attendance of colleagues, only the Investigating Officer was required to attend the contested hearing in person. Where the PPS agreed the evidence of a Police Officer was suitable to be heard remotely, the PPS would make an oral application to the Court for police remote attendance when a not guilty plea was entered. This Police Remote Evidence pilot was to run initially for three months for contested cases only.

3.23 The PSNI recognised that efficiencies could be made through the use of digital evidence. There was no collection or analysis of data however, to understand the scale of Police Officers being called to Court versus the number of Officers who actually got into the witness box to give evidence and the timeliness of Police Officers' evidence being agreed.[50] Inspectors heard numerous examples of Officers cancelling leave or coming off rest days to attend Court, only to have their evidence agreed very close to the hearing date or attending Court on the day of hearing and being told they were no longer required.

3.24 Work carried out, in response to a Freedom of Information request, by a PSNI Contest Liaison Officer based in Laganside Courts, Belfast captured Police Officers Court attendance in Belfast Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts from 1 September to 30 November 2025. Of the 687 Police Officers detailed[51] to attend Court to give evidence, only 11% gave evidence, with 88% agreed/stood down in advance of the hearing and therefore not required to attend Court. There was no information regarding how far in advance of the hearing the Police Officers' evidence was agreed.

50 When a witness's evidence is agreed it means that the defence and prosecution have accepted the contents of their statement and the statement can be read as oral evidence without the witness having to attend Court.

51 On receipt of an invitation to attend a hearing from VWCU, PSNI Operational Planning logged this commitment on the Police Officer's schedule.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 1

Within 12 months of publication of this report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland should achieve a strategic grip on Police Officer attendance at Court as witnesses and establish its impact on resourcing through better data collection, analysis and reporting.

3.25 Some of the data necessary to provide a fuller picture of the efficiency of the process required the PSNI to work with criminal justice partners. The NICTS Court Clerks in both Magistrates' and Crown Court were required to record the names of all witnesses sworn or affirmed at hearing and this information should appear on the NICTS Integrated Court Operating System case records. In the Crown Court, the time witness gave their evidence should also be included. However, the Integrated Court Operating System was not capable of supporting evidence-based improvement as this information could not be drawn out. The availability of this functionality was something that should be considered when developing *Themis*[52] and with the modernisation of Causeway.[53] In the interim the PSNI needed to work with the NICTS and the PPS (who could also use this data to inform decisions) to determine how best to draw out and share this information.

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 1

Within six months of publication of this report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service, in collaboration with the Department of Justice, should scope a methodology to extract and share data on witness evidence at trial/contest to monitor and report on ongoing criminal justice system delivery and inform the development of management information capability, *Themis* and the Causeway Programme.

3.26 A further issue flagged by the PSNI was that the organisation did not have a grip on whether Police Officers' evidence was agreed prior to hearing. The PPS rarely notified the Operational Planning Department when an Officer's evidence was agreed as they dealt directly with the Officers themselves. Those working in the Operational Planning Department and Police Officers who attended Court told Inspectors that Officers did not often communicate with the Operational Planning Department when PPS advised them that they were no longer required to attend Court. To address this the PSNI and PPS needed to work together to establish a process whereby the Operational Planning Department were notified when a Police Officer was no longer required to attend Court and to ensure that Supervising Officers were assured of Police Officers' compliance with the PSNI Code of Ethics 2008.[54]

52 The NICTS business transformation and digital modernisation programme to be delivered by 2030.

53 Causeway is Northern Ireland's core criminal justice information-sharing system, operational since 2004, enabling secure electronic exchange of case data between the PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS, FSNI and the Northern Ireland Prison Service. The Department of Justice had initiated procurement for a full Causeway replacement, with a planned contract start date of January 2027, ensuring continuity while supporting future digital justice reform.

54 *The Northern Ireland Policing Board, PSNI Code of Ethics 2008* available at ***https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/files/nipolicingboard/publications/code-of-ethics.pdf***

OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATION 2

Within six months of publication of this report, the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland should develop and implement an effective process to notify the Police Service of Northern Ireland Operational Planning Department when Police Officers are not required to attend Court.

AGREEMENT OF WITNESSES

3.27 The absence of early, structured agreement on witness requirements was driving inefficiencies and undermining witness confidence. The then Lord Chief Justice's *Practice Direction 3/2011*[55] was introduced to:

- *ensure that both the prosecution and the defence take adequate and prompt steps to check witness availability so as to ensure that avoidable adjournments, and hence avoidable delay, can be prevented;*
- *improve arrangements for the notification of witnesses and checking witness availability in order to avoid witnesses being notified unnecessarily that they will be required to give evidence; and*
- *ensure the early agreement of non-essential witnesses whose evidence may be read at trial.*

3.28 The PPS, in advance of the arraignment date, were required to send the defence a list of witnesses whose evidence it was suggested could be agreed. If a defendant then entered a not guilty plea at arraignment, the Judge asked the defence which witnesses, from the list which they had already received from the PPS or otherwise, could be agreed. Evidence showed that this Practice Direction was not always being complied with.

3.29 In the Magistrates' Court the defence representative, when a not guilty plea was entered, had to advise the Court what, if any, witnesses could be agreed, in accordance with the *Protocol on Criminal Case Management in The Magistrates' Court.*[56]

3.30 There was evidence in 50% of the Crown Court cases reviewed that the PPS had sent the letter to the defendant's representative with the names of the proposed witnesses whose evidence could be agreed. In none of these cases did the defence agree to any witnesses prior to or at arraignment. Across these cases, the VWCU sought availability for 37 witnesses and only five (approximately 14%) gave evidence at trial.

55 Judiciary NI, Practice Direction No 03/2011 - Listing of Trials, Agreement of non-essential witnesses and obtaining of witness availability available at ***https://www.judiciaryni.uk/judicial-decisions/practice-direction-no-032011-listing-trials-agreement-non-essential-witnesses***

56 Judiciary NI, Protocol on Criminal Case Management in the Magistrates' Court available at ***https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/decisions/Protocol%20on%20criminal%20case%20management%20in%20the%20magistrates%20court.pdf***

3.31 Availability was sought for 64 witnesses in the Magistrates' Court cases and 18 witnesses gave evidence (approximately 28%). The non-agreement of witnesses early in the process resulted in the VWCU needlessly seeking availability for witnesses, issuing witness invitations, contacting the witnesses to confirm attendance prior to trial and for some witnesses organising, and paying for, travel and accommodation; this would have to be done each time the trial did not proceed and a new date fixed. This was particularly arduous where there were a large number of witnesses in a case and also had significant implications for witnesses who had to prepare themselves to attend Court each time.

3.32 In the 30 cases reviewed (Magistrates' and Crown Court cases), there were 188 witnesses. Table 3 shows the percentage of witnesses who gave evidence at hearing. The number of witnesses totalled 163 as those who were agreed in advance of the hearing or cancelled due to the defendant changing their plea to guilty in advance of the hearing were excluded.

Table 3: The percentage of witnesses in the case file reviews who gave evidence at hearing

Did the witnesses give evidence?	Number of witnesses	Percentage of witnesses
Yes	26	16%
No	125	77%
Not known	12	7%

Witness availability

3.33 Witness availability was sought in the majority of cases reviewed (77%, 145 witnesses). The remaining 23% of witnesses who were not required as a Prosecution witness, had their evidence agreed or the VWCU had no contact details to enable them to seek availability. In those circumstances, they contacted the Investigating Officer seeking contact information or asking them to try to make contact with the witness directly. Inspectors were told of instances however, where despite providing availability, hearings were fixed on dates that did not suit the victim, and they saw an example of this during the file review. In this particular case, the contest was fixed on a date that was known not to suit the victim, who was vulnerable. The case proceeded to contest and when the victim did not attend Court on the day of contest only then was the case adjourned to fix another contest date.

3.34 In some Crown Court areas Case Progression Officers fixed provisional Crown Court trial dates before witness availability was sought. This was not compliant with the 3/2011 Crown Court Practice Direction[57] and was not in keeping with a victim-led approach. Inspectors were advised that this matter was being discussed at the recently formed, quarterly, Case Progression Officers meeting with a view to establishing consistent practice across all Crown Court business.

57 Judiciary NI, Practice Direction No 03/2011 - Listing of Trials, Agreement of non-essential witnesses and obtaining of witness availability available at ***https://www.judiciaryni.uk/files/judiciaryni/decisions/Practice%20Direction%20No%203%20of%202011.pdf***

3.35 VWCU staff were required to obtain witness availability in advance of the Crown Court arraignment to enable a trial date to be fixed where a not guilty plea was entered. However, in 2025, of the 1,514 defendants arraigned, 44% either entered a guilty plea (37%) or did not enter a plea at arraignment. In those cases, the VWCU resources used to establish witness availability were unnecessary and did not contribute to case progression.

Witness expenses

3.36 Providing a Witness Expenses Claim Form was a fundamental part of supporting witnesses to attend Court and ensuring the effective administration of justice. The provision of the form however did not always remove the financial barrier to attending Court as some witnesses may not have been in a position to pay Court expenses upfront and claim it back later. The PPS could, in some cases, pre-book travel or accommodation to reduce the financial burden on witnesses. Table 4 shows the number of bookings made by the VWCU during 2025, some of which may have been booked multiple times for a witness in the same case.

Table 4: The number of bookings made by the VWCU on behalf of witnesses during 2025

Expense	Total number of bookings
Flights	46
Ferry	22
Accommodation	6
Taxi	8

Source: PPS

PPS

3.37 The DoJ, under the Action Plan, undertook within the first two years to:

'Conduct a review to establish how financial supports might be made available for victims and witnesses to support their engagement with the criminal justice system including attendance at Court.'

3.38 Inspectors heard from some victims when asked if they claimed expenses that for them, claiming expenses was not what mattered to them, rather it was having the defendant held accountable for their behaviour. In the victim and witness survey, 56% of witnesses did not claim expenses, 11% did claim and 33% did not answer. It was important that the option was available for those who wished to/needed to use it. In one of the cases reviewed, a witness who had moved to England had to book flights on a number of occasions and due to the late notification on each occasion that the trial was not going ahead, the witness did not get their money refunded and had to claim back their expenses from the PPS.

3.39 This case was an example of when consideration should have been given from the outset to making a special measures application for the witness to give her evidence by live link from England. A live link could be used as a special measure under Section 24 of the *Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999*.[58] Even when not used as a special measure, the Court could allow a witness to give evidence by live link where it is in the interests of justice (for example to save a witness from a long journey to Court where all parties agree the evidence can be given remotely, or to allow a medical expert witness (or any other witness) to give evidence without having to take the entire day off work. More effective use of live links would reduce the likelihood of witnesses being unable to attend Court for hearing and would also be more economical.

WITNESS SUMMONSES

3.40 In the Magistrates' Court, witness summonses could be served personally by a summons server, any person who had permission from a District Judge and if the District Judge was satisfied that it was not reasonably practicable to serve a summons personally, they could permit service of the summons by post.[59] In the Crown Court witnesses summons could be served personally or sent by post to the recipient or their solicitor.[60] In practice, for all Courts, witness summonses were served personally by Police Officers.

3.41 In England and Wales, a witness summons was served by:

- handing it in person to the individual;
- addressing it to the individual to be served and leaving it at the appropriate address; or
- sending it by First Class post, or equivalent method, to the individual at the appropriate address.

The appropriate address for service or post was an address where you reasonably believed the individual would receive it[61].

3.42 In Scotland, a citation (witness summons) could be sent to the recipient by post or to police, for them to serve on the witness, but unlike the rest of the UK, a citation could also be sent electronically to the home or business email address of the

58 *UK Government (gov.uk), Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999* available at ***https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/23/contents***
59 *Legislation.gov.uk, the Magistrates' Court Rules (Northern Ireland) 1984* available at ***https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/1984/225/rule/11/made***
60 *Legislation.gov.uk, the Crown Court Rules (Northern Ireland) 1979* available at ***https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/1979/90/rule/47/made***
61 *Gov.uk, Criminal investigation guidance for witness summons, updated September 2025* available at ***https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68d552dfe65dc716bfb1ddd9/Criminal+investigation+guidance+for+witness+summons.pdf***

recipient.[62] In 2007[63] this was extended to citation by 'electronic means' and this could include smartphone text and application-based methods. In 2025 legislation provided for electronic signatures and alternative methods of sending documents, including the sender uploading a document to an electronic storage system from which the recipient was able to download the document[64]. The March 2026 joint Inspection Report of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland on *Citing witnesses in the sheriff court*[65] found that to date, electronic communication had only been used to summons Police Scotland Officers.

3.43 In Northern Ireland the legislation had not kept pace with developments in technology. With the development of *Themis* and the replacement of the Causeway Programme, the PPS and justice partners should consider the inclusion of electronic and digital means of summonsing witnesses and defendants. As part of this process it is important to work with witness support services to understand the needs of witnesses and the impact digital summonses could have, including digital poverty.[66] Learning from other jurisdictions should also be considered.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION 2

Within 18 months of publication of this report the Department of Justice should develop proposals for draft legislation to enable the service of summonses and other Court documents electronically and its incorporation in the Public Prosecution Service Case Management System, *Themis* and the Causeway Programme functionality.

3.44 There was limited information available around witness summonses, with the PPS being the only organisation to provide data and which for the Magistrates' Court only. The PPS didn't record Crown Court summonses on their Case Management System in a way they could report on, primarily because, unlike the Magistrates' Court, Crown Court witness summonses were issued by the NICTS. The NICTS and PSNI were unable to provide any data. This was another area where the PSNI resource and effectiveness of process was unknown and action was required to address this. The PSNI would benefit from working collaboratively with the NICTS and the PPS to determine how best to capture and report the data for service of witness summonses to inform improvements (see Strategic Recommendation 2).

62 *Legislation.gov.uk, Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/46/section/141**

63 *Legislation.gov.uk, The Criminal Proceedings etc. (Reform) (Scotland) Act 2007* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2007/6/notes/division/1/2/2**

64 *Legislation.gov.uk, The Criminal Justice Modernisation and Abusive Domestic Behaviour Reviews (Scotland) Act 2025* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2025/14/section/1**

65 *His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland, Citing witnesses in the sheriff court, March 2026, available at* **https://www.hmics.scot/media/fpnbkxox/hmics-and-ips-citing-witnesses-in-the-sheriff-court.pdf**

66 Digital poverty is defined as the inability to interact with the online world fully, when where and how an individual needs to.

3.45 From 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2025 the total number of witness summonses issued in the Magistrates' Court was 298 which equated to 1% of all witnesses invited to Court. Summonses were confirmed as served in 55% of cases. The reason for 44% of witness summonses not being served was unknown.

HEARING LISTING TIMES

3.46 In most Courts, the list of business was made up of those recently charged with an offence, cases where a defendant received a summons, cases requiring updates, applications to fix hearing dates or for sentencing, with contested cases commencing thereafter. In the Magistrates' Court, there were also Special Contest Courts, including the Domestic Abuse Contest Court that dealt solely with contested cases. Of the 30 files reviewed, in 80% the witnesses were told to be at Court at times between 9.30am or 10.30am. Unless the case had been listed in a Special Contest Court, or the jury had already been sworn in, the hearing was not likely to commence until the afternoon. The impact was that witnesses had to wait in Court facilities that were not always victim/witness friendly, potentially encountering the defendant or their supporters. This is discussed later in this chapter.

3.47 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the timing of contests and when witnesses were invited to attend Court were staggered to reduce contact between parties. This reduced the stress and anxiety experienced by witnesses and supported better Court efficiency. Of the files reviewed, all of which were disposed of in 2025, in only 20% of cases were witnesses being invited to attend Court late morning or early afternoon.

CASE PROGRESSION

3.48 While listing is a judicial matter, adjournment applications are made by prosecution or defence or agreed by both. However, this case file review revealed that Court or Judge availability was a significant factor.

3.49 Case management practice varied across Court Districts and Court tier. Most Judges scheduled a review prior to hearings whereas others preferred not to review before the fixed hearing date. Of the files reviewed, 60% included a review hearing. Of these, issues that were likely to impact the hearing going ahead were raised in 35% and 43% were cancelled before the contest date. Of the 12 cases where the hearing was cancelled, 33% were as a result of Prosecution witnesses being unavailable (in one of the cases the date was fixed despite the Court being made aware that the victim could not attend on that date). Lack of Court/Judge availability was the reason for 33% of adjournments. There was a further 8% where the Court, with one day notice, brought the original hearing date forward by one week as there was Court availability but the victim could not attend.

3.50 The remaining case hearings were cancelled because the defendant was going to plead guilty; Counsel was unavailable due to Strike action by Barristers and the defence requested further disclosure from the PPS within days of the Trial date.

3.51 In the majority of cases that were cancelled (55%), witnesses were given three to seven days notification of the cancellation; 9% were given one to three days and 9% just 12-24 hours notice. In addition to the emotional and psychological impact on witnesses, they may have already taken annual leave or unpaid leave, arranged cover for caring responsibilities including children, adult children/relatives with special needs or older relatives, organised travel and accommodation or re-planned work shifts. The shorter the notice, the less chance witnesses had to recover costs or rearrange responsibilities.

3.52 Of the 30 files reviewed, the hearing went ahead on the date fixed in only 34% of cases. The reasons given were that the accused pleaded guilty, prosecution witnesses were not available, a lack of Court time or availability of Judiciary, defence counsel was not available, the defendant sacked their legal representative or was self-represented and needed time to prepare. Victims and witnesses spoke with Inspectors about the negative impact repeated adjournments had on them and their families, with one witness describing the justice process as *'soul destroying'*. The NICTS captured data around cracked and ineffective trials[67] and contests in the Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Court and these are explored in Chapter 4.

3.53 The cases that were cancelled or adjourned due to lack of Court time/Judge availability involved the Judges having training obligations, trials/contests running on longer than expected, delaying the commencement of other scheduled trial/contests and the trial/contest not being reached because of the volume of business listed on the day of the scheduled hearing.

3.54 There were instances where additional sittings of Court were proposed or organised. Across Northern Ireland the NICTS had capacity for 15 Crown Courts to sit on any given day. However, if asked by the Judiciary to open an additional Crown Court this was a significant resource and not always possible. As with all Crown Courts, the NICTS had to staff a Court Clerk and Tip Staff[68], ask the PPS to get a prosecutor, get security for the Court and notify witness support services of the additional Court.

67 A cracked trial occurs on a trial date where a defendant offers an acceptable plea(s) or the prosecution offers no evidence. A cracked trial requires no further trial time, but as a consequence the time allocated has been wasted, and witnesses have been unnecessarily inconvenienced thus impacting confidence in the system. An ineffective trial on the trial date is a trial that 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.

68 A Tip Staff is a Court Officer who assists Judges, maintains Courtroom order and supports the administration of Court proceedings.

3.55 According to the *Judicial Statistics 2024*[69], the average sitting time of Crown Courts was approximately two hours and the Magistrates' Court was three hours and 15 minutes.

3.56 As set out in Chapter 2 the role of Case Progression Officer was to progress cases before the Court. An evaluation report of the pilot, in draft form at the time of Inspection fieldwork, was positive. However, between 2023-25 a significant number of hearings in both the Crown Court and Magistrates' Court did not proceed on the date scheduled, with negative impacts on the use of Court resources.

3.57 CJI inspection reports consistently identified ineffective case progression arrangements as central contributors to avoidable delay, ineffective hearings and poor outcomes in Northern Ireland Courts. While delay was recognised as a system-wide issue, CJI has repeatedly emphasised the need for stronger, consistent Court-based case readiness at Court stage, clearer accountability for progression, improved readiness-to-proceed controls and better use of NICTS management information.

3.58 The absence of a clear focus on case readiness when cases were at Court limited the extent to which wider efforts to improve timeliness could support sustained witness attendance.

Adjournment reasons

3.59 Following the recommendations of CJI, initially in the 2006 Inspection Report on *Avoidable* Delay and in subsequent reports and the 2021 Public Accounts Committee Report on Speeding up the Justice System[70]: *'...the Department [of Justice] and justice organisations establish a robust system to record and report adjournments and their causes and to identify the extent to which adjournments are avoidable',* the LCJO led a judicial pilot, firstly in Craigavon Crown Court and then including Antrim and Coleraine Crown Court, to examine the reasons for adjournments, from October 2022 to March 2023. As part of the pilot, adjournment reasons had to be pronounced in open Court by the Judge following consultation with prosecution and defence legal representatives. During the pilot, the NICTS Operational Support Branch carried out an audit of adjournments recorded over one week in all Crown Court venues between 23 and 30 October 2023 and again between 10 and 14 June 2024. These were one-off exercises conducted to ensure compliance with guidance and to identify areas of concern for Business Managers.

69 *NICTS, Judicial Statistics 2024, June 2025,* available at **https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/judicial-statistics-2024_0.pdf.**

70 *Public Accounts Committee, Report on Speeding up the Justice System 2012* available at **https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2017-2022/pac/reports/speeding-up-justice/report-on-speeding-up-the-justice-system.pdf**.

3.60 At the conclusion of the pilot NICTS Crown Court staff were provided with a revised list of adjournment reasons to capture, accurately, the reason a trial was not proceeding. Responsibility remained with the Judge to state clearly in open Court and for the record, the reason a trial could not proceed on the date listed and who was responsible for moving the adjournment request.

3.61 Adjournment reasons available for selection by Court Clerks varied depending on which of the three stages proceedings were at. They included:

- Case Progression – between first appearance and case being ready to proceed;
- Hearing – the case has been allocated a trial/contest date; and
- Post Conviction – plea of guilty/conviction until disposal.

The findings from this data are discussed in Chapter 4.

3.62 Some staff that Inspectors spoke with welcomed the simplifying of available reasons as it reduced the possibility of human error. Others however were frustrated by issues with some of the functionality. For example, the correct codes were not available for selection within the stages, with Court Clerks having to use workarounds, particularly around contest dates, which involved inputting incorrect information temporarily before having to go back in and select the correct code. There was the potential for mistakes to be made. The NICTS had raised this issue for correction with the LCJO, as they were the project owners.

3.63 A new IT dashboard had been created which set out the adjournments according to the stage of the proceedings, who adjourned the case and the reason behind the adjournment, with quarterly reports being furnished to the Criminal Justice Board. More recently, the NICTS used this information to extract an internal Validations Report for Business Managers to identify anomalies in adjournment reports so that errors could be referred to Court Clerks for correction and/or further training. It would be beneficial for the NICTS to build on this Validations Report to draw out data around compliance and identify trends to help inform improvements.

3.64 It was also important to develop the knowledge around adjournments and understand the impact on delay as well as witnesses.

FACILITATING WITNESSES AT COURT

3.65 The limitations of the NICTS's ageing Court estate, with victims encountering defendants and their supporters in entrances, corridors, toilets and waiting areas and the lack of privacy in witness rooms has been raised by CJI in numerous inspection reports and was the impetus behind the development of the highly successful RECs.

3.66 During the development of the Estate Strategy, the NICTS established an Estate Strategy Advisory Group, comprising senior stakeholders, partners and user group representatives, including Victim Support NI and the NSPCC. This group continued to meet periodically to discuss delivery of the Estate Strategy, including improved user experience and the three projects being progressed under the Estates Strategy were intended to have accommodation for victims and witnesses.

3.67 There was evidence of collaborative working between the NICTS and witness service providers to address limitations within the NICTS estate that could affect witnesses attending Court. In Antrim, bespoke access arrangements were implemented for young witnesses. At Laganside Court, Belfast, the NICTS introduced alternative arrangements to ensure victims and witnesses continued to receive support from witness services.

3.68 Inspectors heard of instances where requests for support for witnesses were made for alternative access points to avoid contact with the defendant or their supporters or where the defendant or their supporters were outside the toilet facilities, making it difficult for the witness to use the facilities. However, on some of these occasions, the requests were not granted. The NICTS accepted that while there were structures in place to support witnesses, the high turnover of staff and lack of awareness of practice contributed to inconsistencies in how well witnesses were supported. The NICTS advised that they could be more creative in how to support witnesses with advance notice of the request.

3.69 The NICTS undertook a User Experience Survey in autumn 2025 to gather feedback about Court and tribunal buildings. Some Courts had poor facilities for Court users. Survey responses were received from 1,037 service users including Court attendees, the Judiciary, defence practitioners, NICTS staff and justice sector partners: Victim Support NI, the NSPCC and the PPS. Survey results were in draft, but NICTS advised that overall results were positive, with a 78% satisfaction rate across the Court estate. The results will be used to identify and prioritise improvements, which will be included in investment delivery plans, subject to affordability.

3.70 While the VWCU played an important role in supporting witnesses once engaged, its impact was limited by systemic failures across the PPS, the PSNI, the NICTS and defence practices, outdated processes and gaps in data and accountability. Without earlier, more structured case progression, timely agreement of witnesses, effective information sharing and modernised use of technology, witnesses would have to prepare themselves for future hearings and attending Court unnecessarily, with damaging consequences for confidence in the justice system and the effective use of public resources.

CHAPTER 4: OUTCOMES

4.1 Effective case readiness for Court proceedings is important in instilling confidence in the criminal justice system and thus securing witness attendance at Court. This inspection, which focused on the preparedness of cases when they were being fixed for hearing and thereafter, found, a lack of case progression was contributing to significant delays, negatively impacting witnesses and wasting, already stretched, resources.

CRACKED AND INEFFECTIVE TRIALS/CONTESTS

4.2 The NICTS captured data on cracked and ineffective trials and contests and the reasons they did not proceed. Tables 5, 6 and 7 show the number of cracked trials and contests and Tables 8, 9 and 10 the ineffective trials in the Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts from 2022-2024.

4.3 In 2024, trials/contests that were cracked or ineffective accounted for more than a quarter of trials in the Crown Court (approximately 26%), approximately half of Magistrates' Court contests and approximately 80% of Youth Court contests.

Table 5: Cracked trials in the Crown Court from 2022-2024

	Number of defendants listed for trial	Number of cracked trials	Percentage of total cracked trials
2022	1,003	244	24.3%
2023	1,061	259	24.4%
2024	1,058	199	18.8%

Source: NICTS

4.4 The PPS provided Inspectors with data on the number of witnesses invited to Court. In 2024, 11,926 witnesses were invited to attend the Magistrates' Court and Youth Court to give evidence across 7,204 cases listed for Contest. Approximately 51% of the listed contests in the Magistrates' and Youth did not proceed due to cracked or ineffective trials. In the same year, in the Crown Court 5,338 witnesses were invited to Court to give evidence across 1,085 trials; 26% of trials did not proceed.

Table 6: Cracked contests in the Magistrates' Court from 2022-2024

	Number of defendants listed for trial	Number of cracked trials	Percentage of total cracked trials
2022	7,179	2,014	28.1%
2023	7,490	2,054	27.4%
2024	6,889	1,798	26.1%

Source: NICTS

Table 7: Cracked contests in the Youth Court from 2022-2024

	Number of defendants listed for trial	Number of cracked trials	Percentage of total cracked trials
2022	186	66	35.5%
2023	252	102	40.5%
2024	315	140	44.4%

Source: NICTS

4.5 In 2024, the primary cause of cracked trials was the defendant entering a guilty plea on the day of trial: 98% in the Crown Court and 58% in the Magistrates' Court.

4.6 The percentage of ineffective trials and contests showed a downward trend in both the Crown and Magistrates' Courts, but they remained a frequent feature, particularly in the Magistrates' Court where nearly one quarter (23.5%, see Table 9) of listed contests did not proceed in 2024 and in the Youth Court more than one third (34.9%, see Table 10).

Table 8: Ineffective trials in the Crown Court from 2022-2024

				Reason for ineffective trial					
	Number of defendants listed for trial	Ineffective trials	% ineffective trials	Prosecution Reasons	% of all ineffective trials	Defence Reasons	% of all ineffective trials	Court Reasons	% of all ineffective trials
2022	1,003	92	9.2%	31	33.7%	40	43.5%	21	22.8%
2023	1,061	86	8.1%	33	38.4%	39	45.3%	14	16.3%
2024	1,058	77	7.3%	32	41.6%	25	32.5%	20	26%

Source: NICTS

4.7 In both the Magistrates' and Youth Courts, prosecution related issues were the primary drivers, (55% in both Courts in 2024) though their proportion declined slightly over time, with a corresponding rise in defence related causes. In the Crown Court, defence related issues were the main reason recorded in 2022 and 2023 (43.5% and 45.3% respectively) but this changed in 2024 where this reduced to 32.5% with a slight increase attributed to prosecution reasons (41.6%, see Table 8).

Table 9: Ineffective contests in the Magistrates' Court from 2022-2024

				Reason for ineffective trial					
	Number of defendants listed for trial	Ineffective trials	% ineffective trials	Prosecution Reasons	% of all ineffective trials	Defence Reasons	% of all ineffective trials	Court Reasons	% of all ineffective trials
2022	7,179	2,003	27.9%	1,224	61%	688	34.3%	91	4.5%
2023	7,490	1,958	25.1%	1,129	57.7%	738	37.7%	91	4.6%
2024	6,889	1,617	23.5%	885	54.7%	659	40.8%	73	4.5%

Source:NICTS

Table 10: Ineffective contests in the Youth Court from 2022-2024

				Reason for ineffective trial					
	Number of defendants listed for trial	Ineffective trials	% ineffective trials	Prosecution Reasons	% of all ineffective trials	Defence Reasons	% of all ineffective trials	Court Reasons	% of all ineffective trials
2022	186	62	33.3%	38	61.3%	22	35.5%	2	3.2%
2023	252	71	28.2%	39	54.9%	28	39.4%	4	5.6%
2024	315	110	34.9%	60	54.5%	46	41.8%	4	3.6%

Source: NICTS

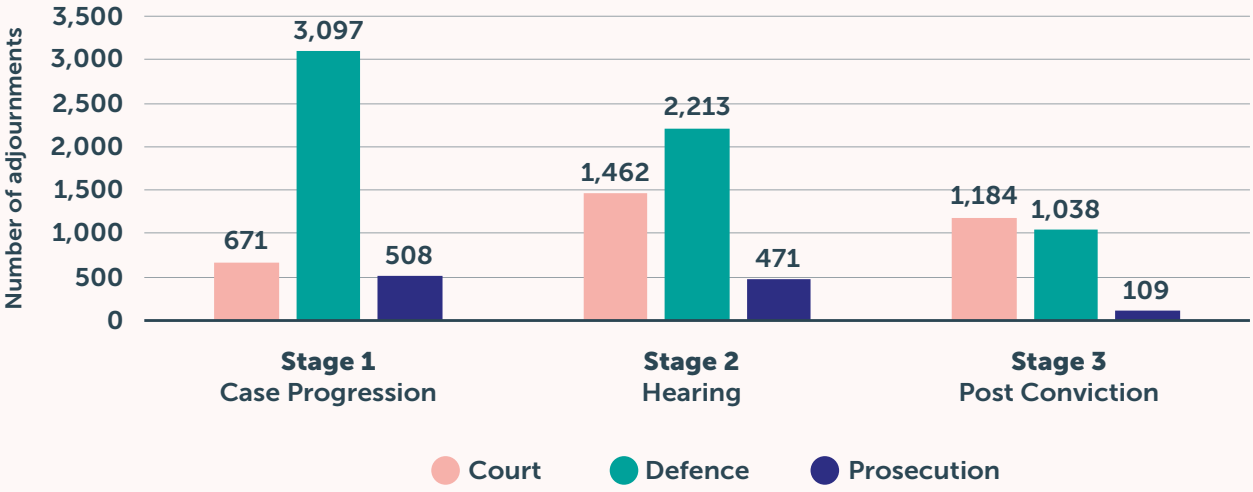
4.8 There was an underlying assumption that victims and witnesses would welcome a guilty plea, as it removed the need for them to give evidence and this was true in part, particularly when an early guilty plea was entered. While some witnesses expressed relief at not having to attend Court, this did not negate the anxiety and stress they had experienced in the weeks and months leading up to the hearing, sometimes repeatedly, where proceedings had been adjourned. There were also some victims not present when the defendant entered a guilty plea and therefore missed the opportunity to hear the defendant acknowledge their culpability. For victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault in particular, this was perceived as a further example of the defendant exerting control over the process. One victim, describing her experience to the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, stated:

> ***"At no point was my voice ever heard."***

ADJOURNMENT REASONS

4.9 Between 1 October 2025 and 31 March 2026, the NICTS recorded a total of 10,753 adjournments across all Crown Court cases (Figure 1).

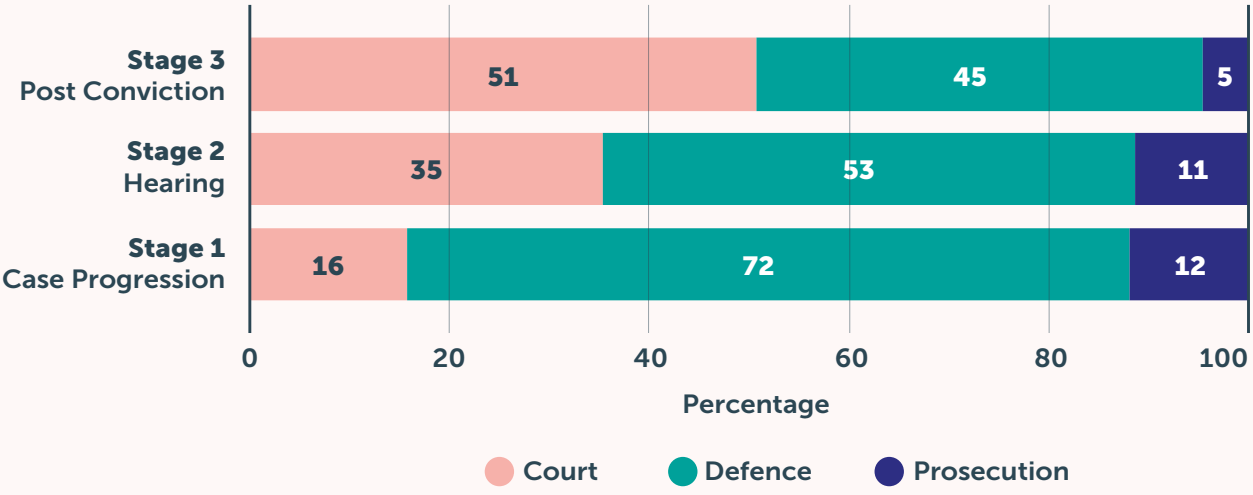
Figure 1: Total adjournments across all Crown Courts from October 2025 – March 2026 including who made the application



Source: NICTS (management information, unpublished)

4.10 Of all adjournments recorded, 4,276 (39%) occurred at Stage 1 (Case Progression), 4,146 (38%) at Stage 2 (Hearing) and 2,331 (21%) at Stage 3 (Post-conviction). The majority of adjournment applications were made by the defence, accounting for 59% of the total. Decisions to adjourn attributed to the Court represented 30%, while the PPS was responsible for only 10% of adjournment requests (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentages of adjournments across all Crown Courts from October 2025 – March 2026 including the application stage and who made the application



Source: NICTS (management information, unpublished). Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

4.11 Management information provided by the NICTS setting out the reasons recorded for adjournments showed defence applications citing *not ready – general* accounted for 1,537 (14%) of all adjournments, including 753 arising from the withdrawal of legal services by barristers due to industrial action. The second most common reason for defence-led adjournments was the absence of the defendant, accounting for 1,278 (11%) of all adjournments. In addition, there were 286 adjournment applications owing to the non-attendance of the defendant's solicitor, and a further 57 where defence counsel was unable to attend the trial.

4.12 The most common adjournment reason attributed to the Court was *reserved judgement/sentence* for which 775 (7%) applications were made, with the second most common reason, requesting pre-sentence reports, totalling 517 (4%). For the Prosecution, the two most common adjournment application reasons were *not ready – general* (516 (4%)) and pre-trial/contest review (229 (2%)).

4.13 Where trials or contested hearings were adjourned on the day of the hearing without resolution, victims and witnesses were required to restart the process, including providing availability, preparing to give evidence, and making arrangements for childcare, work, or other commitments, where applicable. The cumulative effect of these adjournments prolonged uncertainty and disruption for those affected.

4.14 Tables 11 and 12 present summary statistics on the number of days between the first trial/contest date and the final disposal date across the Crown Court, Magistrates' Court (including Youth Court) in Northern Ireland, using a range of measures to show both the typical case duration and the extent of variation across cases.[71] The data indicates that the median time to disposal in the Magistrates' Court (including Youth Court) was relatively short (between four and seven days), indicating that most cases concluded quickly. However, the mean was higher (54-70 days), showing that a small number of longer-running cases increased the overall average. The interquartile range supported this, with half of cases completed between 0 and 56-63 days, and at least 25% disposed of on the same day as the first hearing.

4.15 In contrast, the Crown Court showed consistently longer timescales. The median ranged from 81-107 days, with the mean between 167 and 189 days, indicating both longer typical durations and a continued influence of extended cases. The interquartile range (approximately 138-175 days) showed that even the middle 50% of cases took several months to complete.

71 The minimum and maximum was reported alongside the mean to show the presence of extreme values. As the range and mean are both sensitive to outliers, the median and the interquartile range were also examined to give a more reliable picture of distribution.

Table 11: Statistics on the number of days between the first trial date and the final disposal date across the Crown Court in Northern Ireland from 2023-2025

	Number of cases	Number of cases with no first sitting adjournment flag	Median number of days	Mean number of days	25%	75%	Interquartile range	Min	Max
2023	1,157	770	90	177	42	209	167	0	2,194
2024	1,185	750	81	167	35	173	138	0	4,101
2025	1,133	742	107	189	50	225	175	0	2,293

Source: PPS (unpublished statistics provided for this inspection)

Table 12: Statistics on the number of days between the first contest date and the final disposal date across the Magistrates' Court (including Youth Court) in Northern Ireland from 2023-2025

	Number of cases	Number of cases with no first sitting adjournment flag	Median number of days	Mean number of days	25%	75%	Interquartile range	Min	Max
2023	7,694	4,170	7	56	0	63	63	0	5,331
2024	7,100	3,966	4	70	0	62	62	0	6,317
2025	6,586	3,643	7	54	0	56	56	0	6,655

Source: PPS (unpublished statistics provided for this inspection)

WITNESS IMPACT

4.16 For those witnesses who completed the survey, of which seven were victims, they had to prepare themselves to attend Court and give evidence. More than half the witnesses who attended Court did not give evidence (Table 13).

Table 13: Witness survey responses when asked if they gave evidence when they attended Court

Did the witness give evidence?	Total	Percentage
Yes	**4**	**44%**
No – the accused/defendant pleaded guilty	**3**	**33%**
No – the trial did not go ahead for another reason	**2**	**22%**

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

4.17 When asked how they had been impacted by attending Court, witnesses responded as set out in Table 14. Almost 90% of respondents noted at least one negative impact, including 67% who referenced the impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

Table 14: Witness survey responses when asked how they were impacted by attending Court

Impact	Percentage of responses
I had to miss work or education	56%
I had to find childcare	11%
I experienced a financial loss/expense	11%
It negatively impacted my mental health and wellbeing	67%
No impact	11%

Respondents were permitted to select all options that applied to them so the percentages will not add up to 100

4.18 The majority of witnesses who completed the survey were either satisfied or very satisfied (66%) with their experience of being invited/summonsed to attend Court (Table 15).

Table 15: Witness survey responses when asked how satisfied they were with their experience of being invited/summonsed to Court

Satisfaction with experience of being invited/summonsed to give evidence?	Total	Percent
Very satisfied	2	22%
Satisfied	4	44%
Dissatisfied	1	11%
Very dissatisfied	2	22%

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

4.19 For PSNI and FSNI officers who completed the survey and attended Court, 76% 'rarely' (60%) or 'never' (16%) gave evidence (Table 2). For those officers, more than one third (35%) had to make childcare arrangements to attend Court, almost one third (32%) lost out financially by attending Court and 45% cancelled plans, such as a holiday or a hospital appointment.

4.20 When asked how effectively they felt the witness attendance process was managed the majority of PSNI and FSNI Officers responded 'not effectively at all' (Table 16).

Table 16: PSNI and FSNI Officer survey responses when asked how effectively they felt the witness attendance process was managed

Option	Total	Percent
Very effectively	22	5%
Moderately effectively	229	47%
Not at all effectively	236	48%
Not Answered	3	1%

Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

COST OF WITNESS ATTENDANCE AT COURT

4.21 The cost of witness attendance at Court was distributed across several criminal justice organisations and represented a significant draw on public resources. Expenditure extended beyond direct payments to civilian and expert witnesses and included substantial, and partly unquantified, opportunity costs for statutory agencies and the wider economy.

PSNI

4.22 Police Officer attendance at Court represented a further significant cost. Each time a Police Officer attended Court as a witness, there was an extraction cost for their district or department. That cost was a combination of the time spent at Court and the cost per hour per Police Officer, including overtime payments where applicable. The figure of four hours per attendance was the figure used by PSNI Operational Planning Department when detailing an Officer to Court. Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, the total number of hours attributed to Police Officer attendance at Court was 147,860.05 and using the 2024-25 payment scale CJI calculated the cost at £4,133,748.75. This figure did not include the additional cost of backfilling Officers to maintain minimum operational strength, meaning that the true cost to policing was likely to be considerably higher.

4.23 In addition to the large percentage of Officers not needing to give evidence when attending Court, as set out in paragraph 4.19, there was also the impact of routine abstraction of Officers from core neighbourhood duties to back fill response Officers. CJI's 2024 Inspection report on *Community Safety and Local Policing arrangements*[72] found that it undermined visibility, disrupted trusted relationships, and reduced preventative capacity.

PPS

4.24 In 2025, the PPS incurred £136,489 in witness expenses for civilian and prosecution expert witnesses (Table 17). The majority of this expenditure related to professional and expert witnesses (£89,633), with civilian witness expenses accounting for £46,856. Although modest in comparison to other elements of the system, this spending reflected the ongoing necessity for expert evidence in prosecutions and the associated cost pressures.

Table 17: Prosecution witness expenses paid by the PPS during 2025 for civilian and expert witnesses

Expenses	2025
Client/Witness Expenses	£46,855.85
Professional/Expert Witness Expenses	£89,633.34
Total	**£136,489.19**

Source: PPS

72 *CJI, Community Safety and Local Policing arrangements, March 2024*, available at ***https://www.cjini.org/reports/community-safety-and-local-policing-arrangements-in-northern-ireland/***

Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland (LSANI)

4.25 A significantly larger cost arose in relation to defence expert witnesses for legally aided defendants, which was met by the LSANI. In the 2024-25 business year, the LSANI paid £2.67 million in expert witness fees (Table 18). The largest areas of spend were mental health experts (c.£1.03 million), medical experts (£416,545), forensic science (£365,337), engineers (£271,570), and financial experts (£260,705). Together, these categories accounted for the overwhelming majority of expenditure and reflected the increasing complexity of cases coming before the Courts.

Table 18: Defence witness expenses paid by the LSANI for the 2024-25 business year

Expert Type	2024-25
Criminal	£450
Engineer	£271,570
Environmental	£95,743
Expert other/undetermined	£213,303
Finance	£260,705
Forensic Science	£365,337
Interpreter	£52,348
Mediation	£44
Medical	£416,545
Mental Health	£1,028,542
Private Investigator	£2,946
Social worker/Family Therapy	£14,735
Total	**£2,669,922**

Source: LSANI

4.26 Criminal legal aid expenditure for 2024-25 was £60,957,531[73]. The effectiveness of arrangements to secure witness attendance and support case progression had a direct impact on the cost to the public purse. Inefficiencies in these processes contributed to defence representatives being funded to attend Court, only for cases to be adjourned due to cracked or ineffective trials/ contest or witnesses being brought to Court and not giving evidence, resulting in avoidable expenditure and reduced value for money within the criminal justice system. Overall, the analysis demonstrated that witness attendance at Court generated substantial direct costs, particularly in relation to expert evidence and Police Officer time. However, the findings must also be understood in the wider context of systemic inefficiencies with case readiness.

73 *LSANI, Legal Aid in Northern Ireland: Headline Statistics 2024-25, May 2025* available at ***https://datavis.nisra.gov.uk/LSANI/Headline-Statistics-2024-25.html***

These included the need for earlier guilty pleas, persistent issues with lack of case readiness, and the prevalence of ineffective and 'cracked' trials, all of which contributed to avoidable witness attendance and associated costs. In addition, the continued use of archaic summons service processes, alongside instances of non-adherence to Witness Charter commitments and Court Practice Directions, further undermined effective scheduling and attendance.

4.27 The fact that these costs were spread across multiple organisations reduced the visibility of the cumulative financial impact on the criminal justice system as a whole. Taken together, the findings highlighted the importance of continued efforts to improve early case resolution, strengthen case preparation and readiness, modernise administrative processes, and ensure compliance with existing standards. There remains a clear need to reduce unnecessary Court attendance and maximise the effective use of remote evidence where appropriate, in order to contain costs while maintaining fairness and evidential quality.

APPENDIX 1: METHODOLOGY

Scoping meetings

Inspectors met with the PSNI and the VWCU to determine the scope of the Inspection and begin initial discussions about fieldwork planning.

Desktop research and documentary review

Reports, research and other documents and data (including previous inspection reports) relevant to witness attendance and case progression were reviewed. This work was used to inform the development of Terms of Reference for the inspection and to assist with fieldwork planning. The Terms of Reference were shared with the inspected organisations and published on the CJI website.

Self-assessment

The DoJ, the NICTS, the PPS and the PSNI were asked to complete a self-assessment against the CJI Inspection Framework areas of Strategy and Governance, Delivery and Outcomes. Where appropriate each organisation supplied documentation as evidence to support their self-assessment, and where this was not provided, it was requested by Inspectors. This material was reviewed by the Inspectors and used to inform the fieldwork plan and interview question sets.

Stakeholder consultation

Inspectors met with a range of stakeholder organisations to gauge their views of witness attendance at Northern Ireland's criminal Courts. These included:

- CVOCNI Designate;
- Law Society of Northern Ireland;
- Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland;
- NSPCC;
- Victim Support NI; and
- Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland.

Inspectors were grateful for the time taken by each stakeholder group to participate in this Inspection, with particular thanks to those who assisted Inspectors in hearing vital first-hand accounts from victims and in assisting with survey distribution.

Fieldwork

One-to-one interviews and focus groups were completed within FSNI, the NICTS, the PPS and the PSNI. These included:

FSNI
- Acting Director of Reporting Services; and
- Forensic Officers – Drugs, Alcohol and Toxicology and Biology.

NICTS
- Director of Operations;
- Head of Operational Support Branch;
- Head of Security;
- Belfast Business Manager;
- Regional Business Manager;
- Court Clerks – Belfast, Dungannon, Newry and Downpatrick;
- Statisticians; and
- Court Administrator.

PPS
- Senior Assistant Director;
- Public Prosecutors;
- Crown Court Business Managers;
- VWCU Manager;
- VWCU staff Belfast and Foyle (Derry/Londonderry).

PSNI
- Assistant Chief Constable for Justice Department;
- Chief Inspector – Criminal Justice Branch;
- Court Liaison Officer;
- Neighbourhood Police Officers – urban and rural;
- Local Police Team Officers – urban and rural;
- Operational Planning Department – Constables, Sergeants and Inspector; and
- Volume Crime Support Team and Case Progression Team Officers.

Inspectors also met with a representative of the DoJ and the Presiding District Judge (Magistrates' Court).

Witness surveys
CJI conducted an online survey with victims and witnesses and a separate survey with Police Officers and FSNI staff who had attended Court proceedings as a witness through Citizen Space, the NICS preferred surveying tool.

Case file reviews
Inspectors reviewed 30 prosecution case files (10 Crown Court and 20 Magistrates' Court (including Youth Court)) using a case file review template developed for this inspection. The PPS provided Inspectors with a list of all the cases disposed of in the Crown Court, Magistrates' Court and Youth Court in Northern Ireland between 1 September 2025 and 12 January 2026, including details of the primary offence type.

Supported by the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland, Inspectors had the privilege of meeting with victims, to hear first-hand, their experience of the criminal justice system.

Analysis and drafting

This Inspection was assisted by the use of Microsoft Copilot, an Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered tool, guided and reviewed by CJI Inspectors, in line with UK Government AI policy and CJI's interim AI policy.

APPENDIX 2: TERMS OF REFERENCE

Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJI) proposes to undertake an inspection of the arrangements for witness attendance in criminal Court proceedings, focusing on Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Courts. The inspection will assess how the criminal justice system supports, manages, and facilitates witness attendance at Court proceedings.

The key organisations involved in this inspection are the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) and the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS). Inspectors will meet with Department of Justice (DoJ) officials and speak with Forensic Science Northern Ireland (FSNI) staff who regularly attend Court proceedings to give evidence in a professional capacity in criminal cases. CJI do not inspect the Judiciary but as a key stakeholder, who has responsibility for fixing the dates for contested hearings (in the Magistrates' and Youth Courts), trials in the Crown Court and case management (in all Courts), their views will be sought during fieldwork.

Representatives from voluntary and community sector organisations who provide support to victims and witnesses, in particular, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) Young Witness Service (YWS) and Victim Support Northern Ireland (Victim Support NI), who provide support to victims and witnesses at Court will be invited to take part to inform the inspection.

The Police Federation for Northern Ireland, who advocate, support and represent the rights of serving Police Officers will also be invited to take part.

The presence of witnesses is essential to the fair and timely administration of justice. They provide evidence to establish facts and support or challenge the prosecution's claims and help the Court determine guilt or innocence. Giving evidence can be a daunting experience for victims and witnesses and it is important that the process of securing their attendance does not cause further trauma. The criminal justice system has also been focused on reducing delay and witness attendance at Court proceedings is an integral part of this. The aim of this inspection is to assess the effectiveness and efficiency of the process whereby prosecution witnesses attend Court proceedings to give evidence.

The minimum entitlements of witnesses to information and support from the PSNI, the PPS and the NICTS in preparation for and when attending Court to give evidence is set out in the Witness Charter 2017[1] under the following Standards:

- 8.1: Information provision about attending Court;
- 8.2: Setting a Court date;
- 8.3: Support to give evidence;
- 8.4: Court familiarisation and going to Court;
- 9.1: Support available at Court;
- 9.2: Your time at Court; and
- 9.3: Safety at Court.

There are also additional entitlements specific to victims under the Victim Charter 2015[2].

Early needs assessment of victims and witnesses by the PSNI and the PPS to identify appropriate measures to support them to give their best evidence, which greatly contributes to securing witness attendance is important. CJI inspected the use and operation of special measures in Northern Ireland's criminal Courts (published March 2026) with the Inspection Report due for publication in early 2026; therefore this will not be included in this inspection.

Context

When a decision is taken by the PPS to prosecute a criminal offence, they determine the witnesses that are required to give evidence. If there is a 'not guilty' plea, the case is adjourned to establish the availability of witnesses required to attend Court proceedings and give evidence.

To illustrate the quantum of criminal cases, while not the exact number of cases in which witnesses were required, the DoJ Judicial Statistics for 2024[3] show that, in the Crown Court that year 1,187 defendants pleaded not guilty to at least one charge and were found guilty on at least one charge and 231 defendants pleaded not guilty to all charges and were acquitted on all charges. The figures for the Magistrates' Court are 10,068 and 1,949 respectively and in the Youth Court 175 and 79 respectively.

The PPS Victim and Witness Care Unit (VWCU) contacts witnesses, including professional witnesses, and asks for dates they are unavailable to attend Court proceedings over the next few months. The VWCU sends witnesses information about the Court process and carries out an Enhanced Needs Assessment to answer any queries or concerns a witness may have and to help them apply for additional support services that can make giving evidence more comfortable. If a witness does not respond to contact from the VWCU, a summons may be issued for service on a witness in accordance with Section 118D of the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981[4]and in the Crown Court under Section 51A of the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978.[5] A summons legally requires the recipient to attend Court. The VWCU also processes expense claims submitted by witnesses after they attend Court.

For Police Officers attending Court, the VWCU will contact the PSNI's Operational Planning and ask for dates they are unavailable to attend Court over the next few months. Operational Planning will then provide the VWCU with police availability prior to the hearing date being fixed. Once the contest or trial date has been set, the PPS will notify Operational Planning who will then task the Police Officers to attend Court. Efforts will be made to accommodate witnesses, however, the Judge sets the contest or trial date, so witnesses may be required to attend on a date that isn't suitable.

Defence witnesses are not within the scope of this Inspection but the availability of a defence witness is established by the defendant's legal representative who gives this information to the Judge when a date is being set for trial.

In 2025, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland (HMIPS) published terms of reference[6] for their joint inspection '*Citing witnesses in the Sheriff Court*[7]' with the aim of *'assessing how effectively and efficiently prosecution witnesses are cited to give evidence at court*.' It was anticipated by the Inspectorates that their inspection report would be published towards the end of 2025.[74]

Also in 2025, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)[8] inspection report on the PSNI provided insights into Neighbourhood Policing Team Officers being abstracted (taken away) from their core duties to cover other roles, including Court attendance. This issue, and the need for more information on the scale and impact of this practice, had previously been raised by CJI in the 2024 Inspection Report on '*Community Safety and Local Policing Arrangements in Northern Ireland*'[9]. The HMICFRS report did not include specific Court attendance rate data but did advise that the PSNI was developing an application for Police Officers to record when they were abstracted from their normal duties, including for Court attendance, with a view to providing quantitative data on how often officers were diverted from their primary roles. Progression around the development of this application will be considered as part of this Inspection.

Previous inspections

Securing attendance at Court was identified by CJI as an issue in the 2006 Inspection Report on '*Avoidable Delay in the Criminal Justice System*'. It found witness availability was a significant cause of Court adjournments and was caused, in part, by poor communication between the PSNI and the PPS. This same issue was raised again in its 2010 Inspection Report on '*A thematic inspection of avoidable delay in the processing of criminal cases in Northern Ireland*'[10]. In 2011, CJI identified areas for improvement in its '*Securing Attendance at Court*'[11] Inspection Report[12], and progress against recommendations made was examined in CJI's 2014 Inspection Report '*Securing Attendance at Court: A Follow-Up Review of inspection recommendations*'.[13]

74 The report was subsequently published on 3 March 2026 and can be found at ***https://www.hmics.scot/publications/citing-witnesses-in-the-sheriff-court/***

Aims of the Inspection

The broad aims of this inspection are to:

- examine the strategic and policy framework for witness attendance in the Crown, Magistrates' and Youth Court proceedings and the strategic accountability mechanisms in place for their use and evaluation;
- review the effectiveness of the governance arrangements in place for witness attendance including recording, quality assurance and performance management;
- examine the efficiency and effectiveness of the operational delivery of witness attendance by criminal justice organisations in achieving Witness Charter rights, outcomes for victims and defendants and reducing avoidable delay;
- review the use of remote evidence and standby arrangements by the criminal justice system to support witness attendance and effective use of resources;
- assess how the effectiveness of witness attendance processes is benchmarked against good practice elsewhere; and
- any other matters arising during the inspection if considered appropriate by CJI may be included.

Methodology

The review will be based on the CJI Inspection Framework, the three main elements of the inspection framework are:

- Strategy and governance;
- Delivery; and
- Outcomes.

Design and Planning

Preliminary research

Data and initial information have been researched online to inform the scope of this inspection.

Scoping

Consultation has taken place with PSNI and the PPS to determine the scope of the inspection.

Benchmarking, research and data collection

Collection of benchmarking information and data and review of inspection and research reports will be undertaken.

Contact with organisations

Terms of reference will be shared with the DoJ, the PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and other bodies as appropriate. Liaison officers from the relevant organisations should be nominated for the purposes of the inspection.

Policies and procedures, management information, minutes of meetings and related documentation from the organisations will be requested and examined.

Stakeholder consultation

The following stakeholder organisations and individuals will be consulted:

- FSNI;
- Legal Services Agency Northern Ireland;
- NSPCC YWS;
- The Bar Council of Northern Ireland;
- The Judiciary;
- The Law Society of Northern Ireland;
- The Police Federation for Northern Ireland;
- Victim of Crime Commissioner Designate;
- Victim Support NI

Other stakeholders and organisations may be consulted as required.

Self-assessment

The PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and the DoJ will be asked to undertake a self-assessment, which will be reviewed by CJI during this inspection.

Fieldwork plan

Interviews and focus groups will be conducted with the DoJ, PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and other criminal justice agency staff, and relevant stakeholders to give an insight into any issues affecting how the criminal justice system supports, manages, and facilitates witness attendance at Court. Inspectors will scope methods to obtain feedback from witnesses who have been called to attend Court proceedings as a witness for the PPS.

Initial feedback to agencies

On conclusion of the fieldwork the evidence will be collated, triangulated and analysed and emerging findings will be developed. CJI will then present the emerging findings to the PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and the DoJ.

Drafting of report

Following completion of the fieldwork and analysis of data, a draft report will be shared with the PSNI, the PPS, the NICTS and the DoJ and any other relevant stakeholders for factual accuracy check within four weeks. The Chief Inspector will invite the organisations, where appropriate, to complete an action plan within a further two weeks to address the recommendations and if the plan has been agreed and is available, it will be published at the same time/alongside the final inspection report. The inspection report will be shared, under embargo, in advance of the publication date with relevant bodies.

Publication and Closure

A report will be sent to the Minister of Justice for permission to publish. When permission is received the report will be finalised for publication. A press release will be drafted and shared with the PSNI, the PPS and the NICTS and the DoJ and any other relevant stakeholders prior to publication and release. A publication date will be agreed and the report will be issued.

Indicative Timetable

Scoping, research and self-assessment:	November 2025-January 2026
Fieldwork, analysis and report drafting	January - May 2026
Draft report to organisations for factual accuracy:	June 2026
Publication (subject to permission to publish):	September 2026

The above timetable may be impacted by factors outside CJI's control. Organisations will be kept advised of any significant changes to the indicative timetable.

APPENDIX 3: CASE FILE REVIEW DATA

This appendix provides a summary of the cases that were reviewed by Inspectors as part of this Inspection. A total of 30 files were reviewed, incorporating 188 witnesses.

Court tier

	Percentage	Number
Crown Court	33%	10
Magistrates' Court (including Youth Court)	67%	20
TOTAL	**100%**	**30**

Primary offence type

	Percentage	Number
Sexual offence	7%	2
Violence against the person	80%	24
Dishonesty offence	10%	3
Drugs offence	-	0
Telecommunication offence	-	0
Other	3%	1
TOTAL	**100%**	**30**

Category of witness

	Percentage	Number
Victim and witness	15%	29
Civilian witness	11%	21
Police witness	67%	126
Professional witness	6%	12
TOTAL	**100%**	**188**

Gender

	Percentage	Number
Male	55%	104
Female	45%	84
TOTAL	**100%**	**188**

APPENDIX 4: WITNESS SURVEY DATA

This appendix presents an overview of those who completed the witness surveys conducted as part of this inspection. The first survey was distributed to PSNI Officers and FSNI staff, resulting in 490 completed responses. The second survey, which was available publicly, was designed for completion by civilian witnesses and received nine completed responses. To ensure respondent anonymity, no socio-demographic data was requested, and so only data from the PSNI/FSNI survey is shown below.

Invited to attend Court as a:

	Percentage	Number
Police Officer	87%	427
Member of Police staff	9%	45
Member of FSNI	3%	13
Not answered	1%	5
TOTAL	**100%**	**490**

Rank*

	Percentage	Number
Constable	71%	302
Sergeant	22%	94
Inspector and above**	7%	31
TOTAL	**100%**	**427**

Gender

	Percentage	Number
Male	61%	297
Female	34%	168
Prefer not to say/not answered	5%	25
TOTAL	**100%**	**490**

* Rank applies to Police Officer respondents only.

** Due to the presence of small and potentially disclosive numbers, the number of respondents at the rank of Inspector, Chief Inspector, Superintendent and Chief Superintendent have been amalgamated.

ENDNOTES

1 *DoJ, Witness Charter: A Charter for witnesses of crime January 2017* available at **https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/witness-charter.PDF**
2 *DoJ, Victim Charter: A Charter for victims of crime September 2015* available at **https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/Victim%20Charter.pdf**
3 *NICTS, Judicial Statistics 2024* available at **https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2025-06/judicial-statistics-2024_0.pdf**
4 *Legislation.gov.uk, the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1981/1675/part/X**
5 *Legislation.gov.uk, the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978* available at **https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1978/23/section/51A**
6 *IPS and HMICS, Citing witnesses in the Sheriff Court Terms of Reference 2025* available at ***https://www.hmics.scot/publications/ips-and-hmics-citing-witnesses-in-the-sheriff-court-terms-of-reference/***
7 A sheriff court is a local court in Scotland that handles the majority of civil and criminal cases. These courts deal with crimes not serious enough for the High Court and civil disputes like debt, divorce, and personal injury claims. Criminal cases are heard by a sheriff with or without a jury, while civil cases are heard by a sheriff alone.
8 *HMICFRS, The Police Service of Northern Ireland: An inspection of police effectiveness and efficiency* 2025 available at **https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publication-html/psni-inspection-of-police-effectiveness-and-efficiency-2025/**
9 *CJI, Community Safety and Local Policing Arrangements in Northern Ireland 2024* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/community-safety-and-local-policing-arrangements-in-northern-ireland/#abstraction-of-neighbourhood-police-officers**
10 *CJI, A thematic inspection of avoidable delay in the processing of criminal cases in Northern Ireland 2010* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/a-thematic-inspection-of-avoidable-delay-in-the-processing-of-criminal-cases-in-northern-ireland/**
11 *CJI, Securing Attendance at Court 2011* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/securing-attendance-at-court/**
12 *CJI, Securing Attendance at Court 2011* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/securing-attendance-at-court/;** Recommendations
- *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;*
- *The 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';*
- *The PSNI should consider implementing a system for PPS Community Liaison Teams [now VWCU] 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;*
- *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;*
- *The PPS Community Liaison [VWCU] 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 layout and facilities available for victims and witnesses at court buildings in the relevant PPS region; and*
- *The PPS should review the working practices, accessibility and technology available to the CLTs [VWCU] to maximise their ability to contact victims and witnesses about availability and attendance at court and to issue reminders as the court date approaches.*

13 *CJI, Securing Attendance at Court: A Follow-Up Review of inspection recommendations 2014* available at **https://www.cjini.org/reports/securing-attendance-at-court-a-follow-up-review-of-inspection-recommendations/**

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