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Vulnerable victims and witnesses are being let down by an inconsistent approach to the management of criminal case files

HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) and HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPPI) have today published a joint inspection report '**Witness for the prosecution: Identifying victim and witness vulnerability in criminal case files**'.

The inspection found that:

- the quality of service was no different whether a vulnerable victim or witness was involved in the case or not;
- the police and CPS must improve their understanding of vulnerability of a victim or witness and how their vulnerability can change as the case progresses through court; and
- the police and CPS must strive to understand better their respective contributions to the criminal justice process and eliminate the 'tick-box' culture. This will improve both the efficiency of the criminal justice system and the service provided to vulnerable victims and witnesses.

HM Inspector of Constabulary Wendy Williams said:

"The quality of criminal case files is a subject that both HMIC and HMCPPI have looked at a number of times in the past. Unfortunately we are still seeing the same mistakes being made, with case files lacking the quality and consistency needed to ensure the best outcome for witnesses and victims.

"Although we found some improvements during this inspection, the approach by police and prosecutors to preparing case files was still not good enough. Insufficient consideration was being given to the needs of vulnerable victims and witnesses.

"Police and prosecutors need to work hand in hand to ensure that the vital information they are sharing is of the highest possible quality and the right steps are taken to support vulnerable victims and witnesses to enable them to give their best evidence in court.

"We have made a number of recommendations for improvements to the systems and processes that will go some way to achieving better quality criminal case files. However, I strongly urge both the police service and the Crown Prosecution Service to improve their understanding of vulnerability, and their respective contributions to the criminal justice process, so that victims and witnesses can receive the best possible service."

Chief Inspector of HMCPPI, Kevin McGinty said:

"Witnesses are the cornerstone of any case, and good quality criminal case files are vital for a successful prosecution. The inspection found that whilst the quality of case files was as good, or slightly better, than earlier reviews had found, those dealing with vulnerable victims and witnesses were of a poorer quality than those that did not. Unless the needs of victims and vulnerable witnesses are identified and provided for in proceedings, the criminal justice system is failing them.

"It is also a matter of concern that in over half of the 459 police case files reviewed by inspectors, the witness care information was often either not included on the CPS electronic case file or could not be read. There seems little point in the police assessing and recording witness needs if this information is not then available to prosecutors."

The inspection examined the effectiveness of the police in:

- providing accurate information about the circumstances of the case;
- identifying the vulnerability of victims and witnesses; and
- assessing and managing risks so that their needs are met effectively.

The inspection also examined how prosecutors used this information to ensure that cases were well-presented and the needs of vulnerable victims and witnesses were met, and took action when the necessary information had not been included.

The inspection looked at 459 case files across the 43 police forces in England and Wales.

Notes

- HMIC is an independent inspectorate, inspecting policing in the public interest, and rigorously examines the efficiency and effectiveness of police forces to tackle crime and terrorism, improve criminal justice and raise confidence. HMIC inspects all 43 police forces in England and Wales, together with other major policing bodies.
- Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPPI) inspects the work carried out by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and other prosecuting agencies. The purpose of our work is to enhance the quality of justice and make an assessment of prosecution services that enables or leads to improvement in their efficiency effectiveness and fairness.
- For further information, HMIC's press office can be contacted during office hours from 8:30am – 5:00pm Monday – Friday on 020 3513 0600.
- HMIC's out-of-hours press office line for urgent media enquiries is 07836 217 729