

Communicating with victims

Executive Summary

January 2016



Dear <name>

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The majority of victims are likely to find the experience of being involved in the criminal justice system (CJS) both a daunting and intimidating prospect. For most it would be the first time that they would have any experience of the CJS, so it is extremely important that they feel supported. There is a real risk of victims failing to attend court to give evidence if they do not feel supported which in turn could put trials at risk.

Since the current Director of Public Prosecutions took office in November 2013, there has been a drive by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to improve the quality of service it provides to victims and witnesses, including:

- setting up the Victim Liaison Units (VLUs)
- introducing the Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme (VCL) which has replaced the Direct Communication with Victims Scheme (DCV)
- introducing the Victims Right to Review (VRR)
- issuing guidance on speaking with witnesses at court

Inspectors from HMCPSP visited 6 CPS areas over a period of three weeks including two pilot sites for the VLU and conducted interviews with CPS staff and criminal justice partners. They also evaluated over 162 files to assess the quality and timeliness of CPS communications with victims.

The VLUs were set up to provide a dedicated point of contact for victims. Inspectors found that while the concept is sound in principle, VLUs were understaffed with only a few CPS Areas able to reach the recommended staffing levels. This has an impact on the timeliness of correspondence with victims.

Inspectors found that the quality of explanation that the prosecutor provided to the Victim Liaison Officer (VLO) when a charge was dropped or altered was often inadequate, which meant that the quality of correspondence with victims was inconsistent. Also template paragraphs are being used in letters. This meant that although writing the letter may be quicker, the letters lacked empathy and were not victim friendly. Inspectors found that if the CPS decided not to pursue the case, victims were not always told of their right to have a decision reviewed. In almost one fifth of letters sent out to victims there was no reference to the victim's right to review.

Face to face communications with victims at court were also inconsistent. CPS staff cuts and courts listing more than one trial in the same courtroom have put a strain on the ability of prosecutors to meet victims and witnesses before they are called to give evidence. The removal of CPS paralegal officers from the Crown Courts to other work has also had an adverse effect in that previously they assisted the prosecutors at court by carrying out much of the CPS and witness liaison work.

In conclusion the CPS faces a huge challenge in trying to improve the quality of their service to victims. Due to the on-going financial constraints, inspectors recommend that the CPS should be realistic about what is achievable. It is also essential to work closer with criminal justice partners, not just at a strategic level but also operationally to improve the victim's experience of the criminal justice system.