



Northern
Ireland
Office

'DELIVERING A BETTER SERVICE TO VICTIMS AND WITNESSES OF CRIME'

SUMMARY OF RESPONSES TO A CONSULTATION PAPER

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Introduction

1. In January this year, the Northern Ireland Office undertook a public consultation on a draft victim and witness 5 year strategy and its initial action plan proposals for 2007/08. . The draft strategy set out a number of proposals aimed at enhancing the delivery of services for victims and witnesses of crime across the criminal justice system.

2. The strategy proposals targeted 5 key objective areas and questions were asked and comments sought on specific issues relating to those areas. Views were also welcomed more generally on the overall strategic approach and on issues concerning equality of opportunity. Key objective areas included:

- Access to easier information about the operation of the criminal justice system;
- The provision of specific and timely information on case progression;
- The establishment of a consistently high quality of service across the system;
- The delivery of victim and witness support throughout the process and;
- The creation of a variety of channels through which victims and witnesses' views can be made known to decision makers.

3. The consultation document was sent to 143 stakeholders, individuals and organisations representative of victims' and witnesses' interests. The consultation document was also made available on the NIO and CJSNI websites and on the websites of partner organisations – PSNI, PPS (NI), NICtS, NIPS, PBNI, YJA, Victim Support NI and NSPCC.

4. This period of public consultation followed earlier engagement with interested parties in the form of a victim and witness strategy development seminar held in April 2006. The seminar, and its workshops, was attended by approximately 80 delegates representing the interests of victims and witnesses from across the statutory and voluntary sector. It provided valuable

information which was used to inform the development of the draft strategy, and its accompanying initial action plan, which were the subject of this consultation exercise.

5. The consultation period ended on 23 April and a total of 9 responses were received. A full list of respondents is provided at Annex A. Comments detailed in the summary of responses have not been attributed to any organisation, stakeholder or individual.

6. We are grateful for all responses received. This paper attempts to reflect the range of views offered, but does not describe all the responses in detail.

7. You can obtain copies of this report and the consultation document from www.cjsni.gov.uk or www.nio.gov.uk or from:

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Points raised

Overarching Issues

All of those responding welcomed the development of a strategic approach and were supportive of the positive steps being taken by criminal justice agencies to help improve the victim and witness experience. Respondents recognised the importance of close partnership working to enable a consistent and co-ordinated approach to delivering on strategy proposals. They also advocated promoting greater awareness of the initiatives being undertaken by agencies including those operating outside the criminal justice system. A number of respondents provided valuable information and advice on the practical issues to be considered in the development of individual policy proposals - such as the cross-cutting code of practice and the centralised one-stop-shop facility – which shall be considered as those particular strategic strands are taken forward..

Strategic Objective 1: Access to Information

Respondents were welcoming of the proposals in this area. It was generally felt that information about the criminal justice system should be clear, easy to understand, consistent with individual need and accessible to all, 5 respondents expressed views on the importance of accessibility of information to more vulnerable groups, such as those with hearing difficulties or learning disabilities, children, young people, and those without IT access. They advocated the deployment of more effective outreach measures to capture the views of all sections of the community and in particular young people. Respondents felt this would promote a better understanding of the criminal justice system and how it operates, and may have a positive impact on under reporting by young people. Although welcoming the development of IT based solutions, 1 respondent highlighted the need to also maintain personal contact with victims and witnesses.

Strategic Objective 2: Case progression

Respondents concurred with the view that case progression information should be timely, appropriate and accessible, and highlighted the importance of having clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and points of contact, for all those in the criminal justice system engaging with victims and witnesses.

There was common support from respondents for a centralised service to improve the consistency and co-ordination of information and support for victims and witnesses across the criminal justice system but some conflicting views on how this might best be achieved. The majority of issues raised in this objective area, relate to the operation of a centralised one-stop-shop facility. Some respondents advocated offering options for telephone and face to face contact to all clients, whilst others favoured a telephony service (which offered one-to-one meetings where appropriate) or a confidential telephone service supported by a liaison officer (for child witnesses). There was some concern about where a physical drop-in facility might be suitably located and how this might impact on service delivery across Northern Ireland.. There was a general view that any proposal for a one-stop-shop facility should be subject to further consultation (with service users) once proposals are more fully developed and that its existence, once implemented, should be widely promoted.

Strategic Objective 3: A Quality Service

There was support for enhancing the quality of service delivered to victims and witnesses with respondents identifying that this would be assisted by each individual agency being aware of their respective roles and having clear channels of communication and effective information sharing mechanisms in place. The proposal for a cross-cutting code of practice was particularly welcomed with monitoring, oversight and feedback mechanisms being identified as important elements to be included in the code. Only 2 respondents commented on the setting of standards: one respondent commented that any code should strive for consistent standards of service in

certain basic elements; whilst the other favoured the adoption of an approach setting maximum timescales for service delivery, particularly with regard to support service referral. 1 respondent also suggested that the code should be placed on a statutory footing as it is in England and Wales.

Issues were also raised regarding the provision of adequate and relevant training, particularly for those engaging with vulnerable victims and witnesses, such as children, throughout the justice process. The need for awareness training was identified, particularly in respect of victim and witness needs and the availability of relevant support services. Partnership protocols were also considered crucial to the effective delivery of services. Some concerns were raised about the accessibility of complaints mechanisms, particularly for more vulnerable groups such as children, highlighting the need for clear information and guidance on complaints procedures. 1 respondent highlighted difficulties created by delay within the criminal justice system, suggesting the introduction of fast track systems and specialist court hearings in sensitive cases.

Strategic objective 4: Listening to victims and witnesses

There was widespread support for the proposals included in this strategic objective area, particularly with regard to a victims' advisory panel, restorative and reparative processes and the Witness and Victim Experiential Survey (WAVES). It was advocated that customer satisfaction surveys should be made accessible to all, including child victims and witnesses, and consideration should be given to providing additional post trial support for child witnesses. 2 respondents favoured the introduction of victim impact statements, which would have a positive impact on the victim and witness experience, thus building their confidence in the criminal justice system

Strategic objective 5: Supporting victims and witnesses

Respondents welcomed proposals: to introduce a victim information scheme for mentally disordered offenders; to carry out a formal evaluation of special measures provisions and the PBNI victim information scheme, for the introduction of specialist officers by PSNI; for the introduction of remote TV link facilities; and for plans to reduce court waiting times. 1 respondent favoured the development of a needs assessment tool to allow for the tailoring of services according to individual need. 2 respondents highlighted the need for post-trial support: one seeking clarification on whether post-trial support will be made available; and the other highlighting the importance of consistent post-abuse treatment services for children and young people. The importance of ensuring greater connectivity with agencies in the Republic of Ireland concerning cases with a cross-border service delivery dimension, was also highlighted.

Equality Issues

The draft strategy had been the subject of an equality screening assessment prior to being issued for consultation in which NIO identified that it did not believe the broad strategic commitments outlined in the strategy document would have a negative impact on equality of opportunity for those categories defined in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The consultation document highlighted that individual proposals would of course be subject to equality screening as the policy initiatives underpinning the strategic objective were being developed over the lifetime of the strategy. The views of respondents were sought on this approach.

3 respondents made comments on issues relating to equality of opportunity... 1 respondent did not foresee any specific equality issues arising from the proposals whilst 2 others highlighted the need to carry out a full equality impact assessment (EQIA). Those who identified the need for a full EQIA, considered that the strategic proposals had the potential to adversely impact upon people with disabilities and children and young people.

Annex A

Those who responded to the consultation:

1. The Probation Board for Northern Ireland
2. The Lord Chief Justice's Office
3. Disability Action
4. The Police Service of Northern Ireland (2 responses)
5. Victim Support Northern Ireland
6. Federation of Small Businesses
7. Northern Ireland Commissioner for children and young people
8. NSPCC