

Department of Justice

Consultation on draft Victims & Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025-30

**Response from the Commissioner Designate
for Victims of Crime for Northern Ireland**

August 2025

1. General Comments

"It is utterly soul-destroying. I can't help but feel as though victims are left to navigate an endless cycle of trauma and injustice, while those responsible seem to have endless opportunities to delay accountability. I just wish with everything in me that victims' voices were truly heard, and that this kind of retraumatisation was not allowed to happen." (Victim of historical child sexual abuse)

- 1.1 The Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime welcomes the publication of the draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025-30 and the opportunity to provide comment. This response should be read in conjunction with our earlier response to the Call for Views on the Strategy, which highlighted the need to focus on using limited budgets to greatest effect for victims, multi-agency collaborative working, fostering a justice culture whereby victims feel they have a place and a voice, and effectively responding to victim needs through meaningful two-way communication and a joined up approach to advocacy and needs assessment.
- 1.2 The Strategy contains many positives, including the commitment to make the justice system and its practices and procedures more trauma informed. The Commissioner Designate warmly welcomes the clear intent within the strategy to recognise and mitigate the harms that the justice process can inflict upon victims of crime.
- 1.3 That said, despite the aspiration outlined in 2.13 that the strategy will deliver a *"comprehensive, system-wide, trauma-informed framework to deliver a criminal justice system that respects all victims and witnesses of crime and meets their needs and rights as they encounter each part of the justice system"*, the Commissioner feels that the substance within the strategy falls short of its headline aspirations and lacks vision to deliver on a transformative agenda for victims over the next 5 years. Whilst the Commissioner Designate does not think it is possible to create a truly victim-centred system without radical change to the adversarial structures underpinning criminal justice, it is nonetheless possible to deliver an ambitious strategic plan to affirm victims as supported, active participants in the justice process with rights that must be upheld and protected throughout.
- 1.4 Ultimately, victims need to feel that this Strategy will succeed in making things better for the victims that come after them. This should be the benchmark by which the Strategy is measured – whether victims feel that the Strategy can deliver on, and enhance, their rights and how they are treated within the system.

- 1.5 It is difficult to assess the value of the Strategy in the absence of actions assigned under each pillar. The Commissioner Designate is aware that action plans are due to follow once the Strategy has been agreed upon. It is not possible, however, to accurately gauge the potential effectiveness of this Strategy without knowing how these aims and objectives will be delivered. Being able to assess concrete measures to meet the strategic aims outlined would also circumvent the risk of 'strategy fatigue' and make the document more meaningful to victims by grounding the Strategy in measurable actions.
- 1.6 With this in mind, the Commissioner Designate has outlined within this response the actions she believes will contribute to delivery of the objectives under each pillar over the Strategy's five-year term. This is not to be considered an exhaustive list.
- 1.7 Given that budget constraints are unlikely to ease significantly within the Strategy's five-year lifespan, the Commissioner would invite the Department to take a more focused approach to delivery of the Strategy by assessing what would yield maximum, positive impact for victims with the limited budget available, and prioritise these actions. Strategic investments in targeted, victim-focused projects could make an immense difference to the experience of victims over the next five years and facilitate meaningful delivery of objectives under every pillar. Targeted investment of this kind would also create a more resilient system where victim confidence, and consequently public confidence, are increased.
- 1.8 On analysis of the priority areas identified under each pillar, it is clear that each one readily fits under the headings of needs assessment, advocacy, service delivery, or victim rights. These four core components encapsulate how the victim experience of the justice system, and their journey more broadly, can be improved.
- 1.9 Whilst advocacy and delivery are largely established and existing services are resourced to an extent to support and advocate for victims, clear gaps remain. In particular, comprehensive access to advocacy for all victims who require it does not yet exist in NI, and the provision of specialised support and advocacy through the ASSIST NI service is limited only to victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence who are assessed as high risk. Notwithstanding the excellent work of support service providers across the statutory and in particular the community & voluntary sector, there also remain gaps in service provision to adequately meet the needs of victims at the time they need it. Advocacy is also inextricably linked to the provision of timely and accurate information, to enable victims and their support providers to advocate for a victim's needs.

1.10 The Northern Irish system continues to operate without a dedicated needs assessment service for victims which is comprehensive, spans all aspects of the victim journey, and ensures victim needs are adequately met at all stages of the process and beyond. This was the recommendation of CJINI in its 2020 and follow up 2023 reports and, while these recommendations have been accepted, they have yet to be implemented. Solutions have already been identified as to how to implement the CJINI recommendations in a manner that is feasible – it is now time to put those solutions in place.

1.11 Whilst the introduction of the Victim and Witness Charters in 2015 were a welcome step towards realising the rights of victims of crime, these have not as yet been accompanied by effective compliance monitoring mechanisms, they lack redress and enforceability mechanisms, and they remain limited in the rights they actually confer in law.

1.12 **The Commissioner Designate strongly believes that maximum positive impact for victims would be achieved through utilising budget to deliver on four target areas for victims:**

- i. **The delivery of a dedicated needs assessment service for victims spanning the whole life cycle of a victim's engagement with justice processes;**
- ii. **Development of an integrated, best-practice led advocacy model for victims;**
- iii. **Continued improvement of support services to ensure all victims can avail of the right services at the right time; and**
- iv. **A review of the Victim Charter to enhance victim rights within the justice process along with a dedicated process of redress should those rights not be met.**

1.13 There is also significant potential for low or no-cost improvements to be made to the system to enhance victim experience. A focus on getting the basics right, by building a compassionate approach into the culture of every justice agency and resolving inconsistencies in victims' experience of justice agencies, would go a long way towards meeting victim need. Victims continue to report inconsistencies in their experience of justice agencies, both positive and negative. Those positive experiences, and the impact they have on victims, show that it is possible to meet the needs of victims and for them to feel that they have been listened to even if they do not get a verdict or outcome they were hoping for. The challenge is making this positive victim experience the norm across all

agencies, as opposed to only being felt by victims who interact with certain motivated, trauma-informed staff or volunteers within those agencies.

2. A Needs Assessment Service for Victims of Crime in NI

- 2.1 A dedicated needs assessment service for victims of crime engaging with the justice system has been a standing recommendation by CJINI in sequential reports on the care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the criminal justice system in NI¹. Whilst the recommendation was accepted by the Criminal Justice Board and work completed to scope out the model as per the recommendation, it is yet to be delivered. It is now time to deliver this service for victims.
- 2.2 The Commissioner Designate appreciates that the broader justice system has seen a raft of changes since the needs assessment model was agreed by agencies. This is not a valid reason, however, to scrap the significant work that has already been done and go back to the drawing board on needs assessment. Rather, it is an opportunity to be agile in approach and update the existing model to incorporate those changes, such as the new formulation of ASSIST NI, and deliver a needs assessment services for victims as promised.
- 2.3 As envisaged by the agencies involved in its development, the needs assessment model should be activated from the moment a victim reports a crime to police until that victim concludes their engagement with the criminal justice system, as part of a reimagined Victim & Witness Care Unit. The service should be grounded in trauma-informed practice and focus on the 'care' element of Victim Witness Care Unit, which has until this point been largely driven by administrative priorities.
- 2.4 Core to the dedicated needs assessment service would be a single point of contact (SPOC) for victims to contact throughout their justice journey who is focused on their needs; and a living needs assessment document which would travel through the justice system with victims and be accessible to all agencies in contact with the victim so their needs are easily understood and efficiently addressed. The reform of the SPOC role will be key to unlocking the value of a needs assessment service. The VWCU and SPOCs located

¹ See [The care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the Criminal Justice System in N.I. - CJI NI](#) and [The care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. A Follow-Up Review of recommendation implementation - CJI NI](#)

within it are currently one of the most frequently criticised services in the justice process by victims who reach out to the Commissioner Designate. This is an opportunity to address that criticism and provide a service that is more truly aligned to victim needs.

- 2.5 The service should remain with victims throughout their justice journey, intervening at appropriate touch points to ensure adequate information and updates are supplied to victims, and that opportunities for meaningful victim participation are capitalised upon. The service should have adequate access to all information that a victim might wish to avail of and powers to advocate and seek relevant information from justice agencies.
- 2.6 As far as possible, the same SPOC should remain with an individual victim throughout their justice journey from initial report through to disposal. It may also be valuable to consider whether the Victim Information Schemes run by Probation Board NI might benefit from being co-located in an enhanced Victim Witness Care Unit.
- 2.7 To fulfil the objectives under Pillar 5, the operation of the NAS should be formulated to meet the needs of children and young people as well as adult victims. Young victims require a service that ensures their best interests are met, including via needs assessment which takes account of their age and maturity, child-friendly communication, recognition of the role of parents and caregivers in supporting the child, and ensuring that children's voices and views are heard and understood.
- 2.8 The introduction of such a needs assessment service would fulfil objectives under all pillars of this strategy. It would also yield an additional benefit, in that the service could be used to monitor and scope out what gaps exist within the justice process for both adult and young victims in terms of support, communication and information, transparency and participation, rights and confidence in justice.

3. An advocacy model for all victims in NI

- 3.1 The Commissioner Designate is strongly of the view that there is a pressing need to begin work to conceptualise what an advocacy service for all victims of crime in Northern Ireland might look like and develop a suitable model over the next 5-year strategic period.

- 3.2 Northern Ireland does not currently have a dedicated advocacy model which caters to all victims of crime. Yet victims tell this office regularly how they wish they had someone ‘in their corner’ throughout their justice journey to speak up for them and their needs and rights. In this way, advocacy goes hand in hand with needs assessment in that it is the articulation of a victim’s needs within a system which often forgets or ignores that victims are a key part of its machinations.
- 3.3 The Commissioner Designate recognises that, unlike the needs assessment service piece, the same amount of groundwork has not yet been carried out to explore what an advocacy service for all victims of crime might look like. It is therefore understandable that such a model might not be fully deliverable within the strategic period. However, without a commitment to develop the model over the next five years, victims are relegated to potentially waiting a decade before such a key service is available to them. Given the Department’s vision is “increasing confidence in the justice system by empowering and supporting all victims and witnesses with a trauma informed approach”, it is simply essential that this vital scoping work commences over the strategic period to move NI in the right direction on creating the type of justice system we wish to see for victims of crime here.
- 3.4 The Commissioner Designate recommends that a starting point may be to examine the Crime Victims Assistance Centre (CAVAC) model in Canada², which provides a range of support and advocacy services for victims of crime, run by multidisciplinary teams and guided by the principle of ensuring that best practices are always applied to the different services offered to crime victims, witnesses and their immediate families. The operation of CAVACs are mapped to Canada’s equivalent of our Victim Charter, the Act Respecting Assistance For Victims of Crime.³ A similar approach to a dedicated advocacy model, mapped to victim entitlements under the Victim and Witness Charters, would ensure the service is guided by good practice and provide a tool for gauging how well the system is meeting its obligation to victims under the Charters.

² [dépliant_CAVAC_anglais](#)

³ [A-13.2 - Act respecting assistance for victims of crime](#)

4. Service provision for all victims of crime

- 4.1 Provision of support services to aid recovery from crime will always be a core need for victims. The Commissioner Designate therefore warmly welcomes that Pillar 1 in the Strategy focuses on support, and the commitment to continue evolving our support offerings for victims and respond with *“efficiency, professionalism, compassion, and fairness”*.
- 4.2 The commitment to *“secure sufficient funding to ensure support organisations are adequately resourced”* is particularly welcome. As the Strategy notes, Northern Ireland already has a network of expert victim support agencies who continue to provide support for victims in what is an extremely challenging funding environment. Support organisations report that increasing complexity of need combined with unfavourable economic conditions caused by inflation, soaring cost of living, the negative impact of years without government and adherence to one-year budget cycles, has made it increasingly difficult to deliver the high-quality services that victims sorely need. The commitment to adequate funding levels in the Strategy provides some reassurance that the Department of Justice and the wider Executive recognise the positive impact and value for money that support organisations offer, and that safeguarding those services is vital for victims and good for public confidence in justice.

5. A rights-based approach to victim experience of justice

- 5.1 It is the view of the Commissioner Designate that, ten years on from its introduction, the time is right to review the Victim Charter.
- 5.2 Many victims who have engaged with the Commission have expressed frustration with the limitations of the Victims Charter and the lack of accountability for organisations that fail to deliver on their obligations. Victims tell us that the Victim Charter in its current form is *‘not fit for purpose’* and *‘reads like a fairytale’* and should be reformed to codify stronger victim rights and apply to all government departments, bodies, and agencies. They have also critiqued the lack of overarching accountability mechanism for victims to utilise when their rights are not upheld. Victims have expressed frustration that they are required to engage with separate complaints processes for each justice agency at a time when they are already exhausted and demoralised by the justice process. That frustration is compounded by the fact that complaints processes are often not mapped to Victim Charter entitlements and that, for many victims, complaints processes feel

predetermined and not a genuine investigation into what might have gone wrong and could be improved. Some victims have expressed scepticism that existing complaints mechanisms were capable of providing independent oversight and equated them to agencies 'marking their own homework'. Such feedback is a litmus test of how victims view the justice system and the value they are assigned within it.

- 5.3 The Commissioner Designate therefore recommends that the Department strengthens the Rights and Confidence pillar by committing to reviewing the Victim Charter over the next five years. This review should examine both the current operation of the Charter and whether existing victim rights are being upheld by agencies, as well as a substantive review of the Charter's content with a view to strengthening the rights of victims in law.
- 5.4 The Commissioner Designate recommends that the strengthening of victim rights should include more robust positive obligations on agencies to deliver on victim rights (a duty to provide as opposed to an entitlement for victims to ask), and a right to redress so that victims may seek enforceable redress in the event that any agency falls short of delivering on their Charter obligations. The right to redress should include clear and easily accessible pathways to seeking and getting redress. Other key areas in which victim rights could be enhanced include explicitly recognising victim Article 8 rights within the Charter, notwithstanding the Article 6 rights of the accused to a fair trial. Other key right that could be enhanced include the right to participation and an obligation to have victims' voices and views heard and considered.
- 5.5 Mechanisms for consulting victims at key stages of the justice process, as well as establishing more concrete means of seeking victims' views about reform of justice processes and incorporating them into future law and policy reform, should be considered. Victims often tell us that they are grateful to be able to share their experiences with the Commissioner, departmental officials and the Justice Minister; however this sharing is not an end in and of itself, and can quickly become a means of retraumatisation if victims are not able to see that their words are heard, understood, and action taken to improve areas where they have demonstrated gaps or insufficiencies. This office recognises that change is often slower than victims would like, and that not all victim views will automatically result in law or policy change. That said, a commitment under Pillar 4 to an iterative consultation model, which demonstrates to victims that their views have been taken on board and positive reform has happened, would help victims see that there is worth in them sharing their experiences knowing they will be listened to and taken seriously. It would also meet the commitment under this Strategy to be

“informed by victims and witnesses” at 4.2. A ‘you said we did’ model along the lines of the PSNI’s REAL events may be a valuable approach to consider.

6. Strategic vision, mission and underpinning principles

- 6.1 The strategy puts forward a positive vision and mission, underpinned by robust, relevant principles.
- 6.2 As already noted, ultimately the question of whether the strategic vision, aims and objectives are delivered upon will be answered by the detail of how the Strategy is brought to life, through the actions and commitments of not only the Department of Justice but also other agencies who come in contact with victims of crime.
- 6.3 The commitment to a partnership approach at 4.3, reflected by the *“Working collaboratively across criminal justice organisations”* objective under Pillar 1, is very welcome. Collaborative working should be reflected across all pillars, as siloed working is one of the main ways in which victim needs and rights are forgotten and victim priorities and issues dropped. Disjointed systems between agencies and departments confuse victims and gives them more work to do to try and navigate their way through a system that isn’t intuitive or designed to be navigable. The Commissioner Designate was disappointed to note that the follow up review undertaken by CJINI in 2023 into the care and treatment of victims and witnesses found the ongoing prevalence of a silo mentality where agencies had moved forward alone in respect of certain recommendations. There is therefore an urgent need for all relevant agencies, within and beyond Justice, to work collaboratively together in order to deliver on all the Pillars within the strategy. It is the Commissioner Designate’s hope that the vision for the criminal justice system, as recommended by CJINI’s Transforming the Justice System report, will help support a collaborative and co-ordinated system approach needed to ensure maximum benefits for victims. It is essential that this Strategy has a clear line of sight to that transformation piece, to help ensure that the associated delivery plans are developed in a holistic, multi-agency manner with those engaging with the system in mind.
- 6.4 In particular, the objective under Pillar 1 to help victims *“recover and rebuild their lives”*, will necessitate collaboration with, and buy in from, the

Departments of Health and Communities to ensure that the health, social care and housing needs of victims are met. Without a clear plan for how joined up working will be achieved, the strategy's aim under 4.3 to establish a 'partnership framework' will not be deliverable. To that end, a specific action to forge pathways between Justice and relevant services across departments would be welcome.

- 6.5 Specifically, action plans should identify gaps in provision for victims and strategize a cross-departmental action to tackle those issues, identify friction points both between agencies within justice and between justice and other departments, and map out how meaningful improvements can be made.

Gaps currently include but are not limited to:

- mental health service provision to adequately support victims of abuse
- adequate support and removal of barriers to help-seeking for male victims of intimate partner violence and domestic and sexual abuse
- broader preventative services to help lower the commission of crime by those with mental ill-health and therefore enhance community safety
- mental health crisis response services to negate the need for a police-led response which is onerous on the public purse and rarely results in satisfactory outcomes for those in crisis
- appropriate housing provision for victims of domestic abuse, hate crime, and other crimes where victims are forced to relocate for their own safety and that of their family

7. The Five Pillars

- 7.1 The pillars identified are a helpful breakdown of the different components of victim needs. As already pointed out, the action to successfully deliver on each of the pillars could be said to fall under the broad categories of needs assessment, advocacy, service delivery, and victim rights.

- 7.2 As stated in the Strategy, many of the pillars overlap and are interrelated, so it is difficult to assess each one in isolation. That said, in their current form, the objectives and priority areas can often read as a one-way endeavour, whereby things are done onto victims rather than victims being recognised as participants with agency and rights at all stages of the process. For example, the objective under Pillar 2 which states "*Victims and witnesses...understand their role in the criminal justice system and what is expected of them*" fails to

reflect the equally important flipside of the coin – what is expected of justice agencies when engaging with victims and the need for agencies to communicate effectively with each other to avoid further harm or stress to victims. In a system where victims already feel that they are an afterthought without a place or voice, this objective is tonally jarring and unhelpful. The Commissioner Designate recommends that the wording of the Strategy is reviewed to ensure that the victim's rights, expectations and agency are reflected across all pillars and throughout the document.

- 7.3 The commitment under Pillar 3 to *“creating a criminal justice system portal to provide easily accessible information for victims and witnesses”* is welcome. For such a portal to fulfil the aims of both transparency and participation, it is vital that it is tailored to each individual user and is functionally able to facilitate two-way communication. It is also important that it is accessible, user-friendly and actively helps victims to navigate the criminal justice process. Members of the public, including victims, who have never interacted with the justice system before, tend to see justice as one system. This makes the realisation that police, prosecutors and courts do not jointly hold information or communicate as one all the more confusing and stressful. The key benefit of a portal for victims would be to overcome this limitation of our related but disjointed system, by ensuring continuity of communication and information for victims via a customised online service. It is the Commissioner Designate's understanding that the PSNI has already undertaken work to create a portal for officers to communicate effectively with victims, and that its launch is imminent. This may provide a basis for an integrated, system-wide portal to be developed between all relevant agencies which effectively meets victim need for the duration of their justice journey, with the portal being accessible to the victim's SPOC so they are also kept abreast of case updates. This would be the Commissioner Designate's preferred approach. At the very least, it would be expected that should separate portals be developed for each service, efforts would be made to minimise any potentially unwieldy functionality so that victims do not feel that they are having to jump between multiple apps or portals for every agency they are engaged with, where each one only provides information limited to one part of the process. A more user-friendly solution could be to enable linkage between each service – for example, if a victim was using a PSNI portal to stay linked in with the investigation, they may be 'handed over' to a PPS portal in the event that a file is passed to the PPS.

- 7.4 The objective under Pillar 3 – “*Alternatives to prosecution are considered where appropriate*” – is not a victim-focused objective. The consideration of alternatives to prosecution are driven by offender rehabilitation, recidivism and delay agendas, not victim participation, and it may be considered insulting to victims to characterise it as such. The Commissioner Designate recommends that this objective is either removed or more clearly worded to outline the intended benefits to be realised for victims.
- 7.5 Under Pillar 5, it is recommended that the objective relating to Barnahus is strengthened to commit to delivery of a Barnahus-style system for Northern Ireland. Given the substantial time and effort that has gone into examining this issue already, it is not acceptable that this would not be delivered within the next 5 years.
- 7.6 It is also recommended that a key action under Pillar 5 should be to develop an alternative model of justice for all child victims, based on the Barnahus principles (excepting the forensic element which is primarily relevant to child sexual abuse victims). This would include ensuring child victims can always give evidence in a child-friendly remote environment, pre-recorded cross-examination with trauma-informed ground rules as standard, a multidisciplinary support model which includes long and short term therapeutic and practical support for child victims and their caregivers, and a needs assessment process which is tailored to child victims and their caregivers. Consideration should also be given to also extending this child-focused justice model based on Barnahus principles to child witnesses engaging with the justice process.

8. Delivery & Monitoring

- 8.1 In her Strategy for 2022-25, the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime noted:

“The system is failing to deliver what is promised to victims and what they, as the individual most greatly impacted by the crime, should rightly expect. Far too often, the needs of victims are an afterthought, and rather than being seen as an obligation enshrined in law, often fall to the bottom of the list of priorities which may or may not happen.”

- 8.2 Ensuring that victims are prioritised, and that this strategy is a success, requires monitoring and measurement how victims perceive justice and their

experience of it, and how actions under this five-year Strategy do or do not make the improvements they intend to.

- 8.3 More detail is therefore required, mapped to actions under each pillar, of how success will be measured against outcomes. This must include meaningful Victim Charter compliance data.

9. Concluding comments

- 9.1 The Commissioner Designate recognises that staff and agencies in justice and beyond are working extremely hard within an underfunded system and that there is genuine desire to improve the experience of victims of crime as they navigate both justice and recovery processes. The Commissioner is confident that a commitment to cross-agency collaboration with a clear focus on the needs of victims can result in improvements over next five years, as well as laying the groundwork for even further improvements in the years to come.

If you would like to discuss any of these points in further detail, please contact the office via:

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