



Northern
Ireland
Office

**DELIVERING A BETTER SERVICE TO
VICTIMS AND WITNESSES OF CRIME
- A NORTHERN IRELAND DRAFT
STRATEGY**

Consultation Document

January 2007

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PART ONE: PURPOSE AND FORM OF CONSULTATION

1. The consultation process

Introduction

- 1.1 Victims and witnesses play a vital role in the effectiveness of the criminal justice process. The criminal justice system relies heavily on the willingness and active participation of victims and witnesses to come forward and give evidence in court to ensure that justice can be served. For many victims and witnesses however, the experience of crime is difficult, and often traumatic, and it is important that the steps taken by each of the agencies responsible at the various stages of the process, does not add to their distress.
- 1.2 Over recent years, criminal justice agencies have placed a greater emphasis on enhancing the victim and witness experience and to working in partnership with other statutory agencies, as well as with the voluntary sector, to ensure that their interests are protected and that service delivery is improved and better co-ordinated. Government has also pledged its support to the various initiatives proposed by agencies and has provided substantial funding to assist a wide range of valuable cross-cutting victim and witness services.
- 1.3 Agencies have however, recognised that more needs to be done at a strategic level to promote accessibility, consistency and the co-ordinated delivery of new and existing services across the criminal justice system and they have responded to this need by developing a cross-cutting strategy (included at Part Two). This new strategy aims to enhance the delivery of services across the criminal justice system and includes a range of proposals which set out how this aim will be achieved across five key areas. The key areas include proposals to provide: easier access to information about the operation of the criminal justice system; specific and timely information on case

progression; a consistently high quality of service across the system; appropriate and focused victim and witness support throughout the process and; a variation of channels through which victims and witnesses' views can be made known.

Purpose

- 1.4 The purpose of this consultation is to seek views from all interested parties on the proposals set out in the draft strategy and its associated action plan. We are particularly seeking views on whether the measures adequately meet the needs of victims and witnesses and represent the best prospect for an effective multi-agency approach to improving existing services being delivered to victims and witnesses of crime. Views are also welcome on the implications of the proposals on equality of opportunity (see below).

Equality responsibilities

- 1.5 As a public authority under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, Government Departments and other public authorities in carrying out all their functions, powers and duties in Northern Ireland, are required to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:
- Between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation;
 - Between men and women generally;
 - Between persons with a disability and persons without; and
 - Between persons with dependants and persons without.
- 1.6 Under the terms of Section 75, public authorities are required to screen every policy – new or existing – in order to determine whether that policy needs to be subjected to an Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA). Equality screening and EQIAs have to be carried out in accordance with guidance published by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland.

- 1.7 This strategy has been the subject of an equality screening exercise which has found that the strategy, as a whole, would have an overall positive impact on equality and opportunity. It aims to enhance service delivery to **all** victims and witnesses who interface with the criminal justice system. However, any equality issues raised during the consultation will be considered, and a further equality screening carried out, before the strategy is published. Additionally, should any new policy or initiatives arise from the specific actions included in the action plan, these will also be the subject of equality screening, and will be assessed where necessary, by the relevant agency concerned, in accordance with the criteria set by the Equality Commissioner for Northern Ireland.

Duration of consultation

- 1.8 The consultation on the proposed strategy and action plan will run for a period of 12 weeks from 29 January 2007. All responses to the consultation should be submitted for receipt by NIO **by 5pm on 23 April 2007**. Comments are welcomed by post, e-mail or text phone and all responses will be acknowledged on receipt.
- 1.9 All queries and responses to this document should be made to:
The Victims and Witnesses Strategy Consultation Coordinator
Criminal Justice Policy Branch
Northern Ireland Office
Room G.33
Massey House
Stoney Road
Belfast
BT4 3SX
e-mail: CJPB.Public@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk
Telephone: 02890 527517
Text phone: 02890 527668
- 1.10 An electronic version of this consultation document is available on the Criminal Justice website (CJSNI): www.cjsni.gov.uk and on the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) website: www.nio.gov.uk. Copies are

also available on the websites of partner agencies involved in the development of this strategy. For ease of reference, website addresses have been included at **Annex C**. Copies of the document in other formats, to accommodate particular needs, can be made available on request. If there is any alternate format which may assist your participation, please let us know and we will do our best to assist you.

- 1.11 If you have **any concerns about way in which the consultation has been handled**, you should contact the Northern Ireland Office's consultation coordinator whose contact details are provided below:

Miss Donna Knowles
Central Management Unit
Northern Ireland Office
Stormont House
Stormont Estate
BELFAST
BT4 3SH
E-mail: donna.knowles@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk
Telephone: 02890 527015

Confidentiality of responses

- 1.12 The NIO will publish a summary of responses following the completion of the consultation process. Unless individual respondents specifically indicate that they wish their response to be treated in confidence, their name and the nature of their response may be included in any published summary of responses. Respondents should also be aware that the NIO's obligations under the Freedom of Information Act may require that any responses, not subject to specific exemptions in the Act, may be disclosed to other parties on request.

- 1.13 For further information about confidentiality of responses, please contact the Information Commissioner's Office or visit their website: www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.

Next steps

- 1.14 Following the formal consultation period, we will finalise the draft strategy and action plan in preparation for its publication. A summary of consultation responses will be issued to all those who engaged in the public consultation and will be also made available on the NIO and CJSNI websites.

Summary of consultation questions

- 1.15 In addition to any general views and comments you may have, we would like you to consider the following specific questions when considering the proposals set out in the strategy. These questions have also been included at each of the relevant Strategic Objective points within the document:

Key Strategic Objective 1 - Access to information

1. Do the proposals signify the most effective way of improving access for victims and witnesses to appropriate information on the role and responsibilities of the justice system?
2. Are there further opportunities which are not identified, which could help promote better access to, and greater awareness of, the criminal justice system, and what it is doing for victims and witnesses of crime?

Key Strategic Objective 2 - Case progression

1. One of the key proposals included in the strategy is the commitment to develop a more co-ordinated and central approach to how case progress information is relayed/accessed by victims and witnesses across the criminal justice process.
 - Do you feel this would help achieve a more consistent service?
 - If so, what form do you think this should take?
 - Should it be made available as a telephone service only?
 - or

- Should it include a 'drop in' centre?
 - If you think it should include a drop in centre:
 - Where can you see it being geographically placed?
 - Should it be centrally managed e.g. from Belfast perhaps?
2. Do you think that the range of proposals included in the strategy provide sufficient mechanisms through which victims and witnesses can obtain timely and appropriate information concerning their case?

Key Strategic Objective 3 - A Quality Service

1. Codes of Practice set quality standards which agencies must adhere to in the delivery of their service, and these standards are both specific and time bound.
- Do you think that an overarching code will help provide for a more enhanced quality of service across the criminal justice system?
 - What would you like to see included in the Code?
2. Are there other proposals, not addressed in the strategy, which you think would improve co-ordination between agencies or deliver higher quality standards?

Key Strategic Objective 4 - Supporting Victims

1. Do you think that the range of proposals included in the strategy adequately meets the needs of those requiring support from the criminal justice system?

Key Strategic Objective 5 - Listening to Victims

1. Other than the proposals included in the Strategy, what further measures do you think should be considered to ensure that the victims' voice can be heard throughout the criminal justice system?

General

1. Overall, do you think the 5 Strategic Objectives highlighted in the Strategy adequately cover the needs of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system? If not, what further areas do you think should be included?
2. Do you consider there to be any specific equality issues relating to any of the categories listed on para 1.5 above, with regard to the implementation of this Strategy as a whole?

PART TWO – ‘DELIVERING A BETTER SERVICE TO VICTIMS AND WITNESSES OF CRIME

2. The Strategy

Introduction

- 2.1 The Government is committed to putting victims and witnesses of crime at the heart of the criminal justice system and to a process of continuously improving the services offered to them. Each of the criminal justice organisations and voluntary sector partners have worked together to identify what is needed to effectively improve the quality and coordination of service delivery.
- 2.2 The proposed draft Strategy describes how the criminal justice system envisages future service provision and details the work which will be undertaken over a five year period (2007- 2012) to successfully achieve its underpinning aims and objectives. An action plan setting out the key measures proposed to be undertaken over the next 12 months has also been included and this can be found **at Annex A**. The multi-agency Victims, Vulnerable or Intimidated Witnesses Steering Group (VVIW), who were responsible for the development of the Strategy, will also be responsible for monitoring its progress on a regular basis and for the review and development of further annual action plans associated with its implementation. These action plans will be published annually on the new Criminal Justice System for Northern Ireland (CJSNI) website – <http://www.cjsni.gov.uk/>.

Who is the strategy aimed at?

- 2.3 For the purposes of this strategy, the term ‘victim’ is taken to denote any person who is directly subject of a crime and ‘witness’ to denote persons who observe such acts. Although there will be obvious commonalities, it does not specifically relate to ‘Victims of the Troubles’ for which much important and separate work, on tackling the legacy of

that conflict, is being progressed by the Office of the First Minister/Deputy First Minister. However, those Victims or Witnesses of the Troubles whose cases, following review by the Historical Enquiry Team, are brought before the courts can expect to receive the same quality of service currently being provided to all other victims and witnesses, as their case is progressed through the various stages of the justice process.

- 2.4 The strategy also complements the work currently being undertaken in developing and implementing parallel strategies/initiatives targeting specific aspects of crime such as domestic violence, hate crime and sexual violence for which specialised support for victims and witnesses is required. A list of those strategies/initiatives, together with the Government agency responsible for taking them forward, is detailed in **Annex B** of this document.

Definitions

Victim: those people who are directly subject of a crime or are the close family or friends of those for whom crime results in very serious harm, injury or death.

Witness: those people who witness a crime taking place, or can provide information material to the case, and whose evidence may help in apprehending a suspect, or in the progression of court proceedings.

Criminal justice agencies: means the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Public Prosecution Service, the Northern Ireland Court Service, the Northern Ireland Prison Service, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Youth Justice Agency and the Compensation Agency.

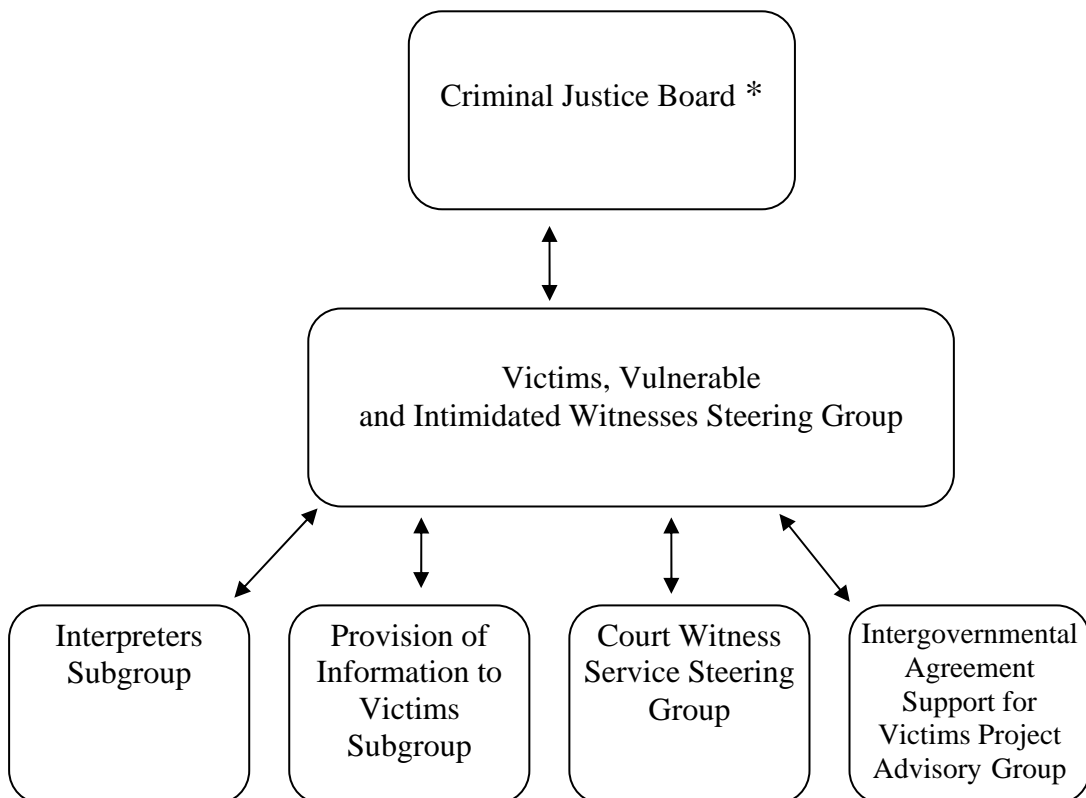
03 – Strategic Development Process

- 3.1 The interests of victims and witnesses are afforded a high priority by all criminal justice agencies who are committed to improving the victim and witness experience at each stage of the justice process. This is demonstrated in their development of specific victims' policies and is reflected in the corporate plans and developing practices of each of their respective organisations.
- 3.2 Responsibility for cross-cutting policy development and implementation lies with the Criminal Justice Board which has assigned a central role in managing cross-agency interests in coordinated service delivery across the criminal justice system to the Victims, Vulnerable or Intimidated Witnesses Steering Group (VVIW). The VVIW Steering Group is chaired by NIO and comprises representatives of the main criminal justice agencies and includes the voluntary organisations Victim Support (NI) and NSPCC (a list of VVIW membership is included at **Annex C**). Representation of the voluntary sector in the work of this group is seen as crucial to the safeguarding of interests of both adult and child victims and witnesses alike and to ensuring that the victims' voice can be heard at the centre of decision making on issues impacting on them.
- 3.3 VVIW provides a forum for the discussion of cross-cutting issues impacting on victims and witnesses across the criminal justice system and, through a network of sub-groups, is responsible for coordinating key areas of service development and delivery. VVIW reports to the Criminal Justice Board on the development of policy initiatives aimed at providing consistent and coordinated delivery of services to victims and witnesses of crime.
- 3.4 Whilst recognising that much important work has been done, the Criminal Justice Board has acknowledged that more needs to be achieved, at a strategic level, to ensure consistency, enhance inter-

connectivity in service delivery and improve the experience of victims and witnesses engaging with the criminal justice system. The Board tasked the VVIW Steering Group with developing an overarching strategy to achieve these objectives.

3.5 This strategic plan implements certain key recommendations made in a thematic report by the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) ¹ highlighting the need for a more strategic approach to cross-cutting policy planning and management. It also reflects the outcome of extensive research into victim and witness needs and the evaluation of pilot projects aimed at improving service delivery and embraces the work progressed by each agency responsible for implementing the recommendations of the Criminal Justice Review.

Diagram 1: Victim and Witness Policy Development Structure



* CJB comprises: Criminal Justice Directorate (Chair) and representatives of PSNI, PPS, NICtS, PBNI, NIPS, YJA and the Attorney General’s Office.

¹ The CJINI was established in accordance with a recommendation of the Criminal Justice Review. Its report into the ‘Provision of Care for Victims and Witnesses in the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland’ was published in July 2005.

04 - Bridging the gap between needs and delivery

- 4.1 We are conscious that victims and witnesses, and organisations that support them or promote their interests, have high expectations of the criminal justice system which are not always realised. The findings of reports, research and surveys in this field consistently indicate that more needs to be done to help improve confidence in the criminal justice system amongst victims and witnesses and the public more widely. Research findings have shown that whilst 56 % of those victims and witnesses who give evidence in a case are more satisfied, than not, with their general treatment in the criminal justice system², only 38% believe that the justice system meets the needs of victims of crime³. It has also shown significant levels of under reporting of crime. The most common concerns of those choosing not to report a crime were that they believed: the crime was too trivial or resulted in no loss (33%)⁴; the police could not have done anything (32%)⁵; or the police would not have been interested (24%)⁶.
- 4.2 Victim and witness satisfaction is currently measured by all criminal justice agencies on an individual basis but within the strategy we propose the introduction of a new dedicated and cross-cutting experiential survey. This will provide for a more streamlined and joined up approach to examining the holistic experience of victims and witnesses throughout the entire process and provide data which will enable their experiences to inform future policy and service delivery decisions.
- 4.3 It is important that all victims and witnesses can expect the same standard of service delivered in a supportive environment, which recognises the different needs of individuals, and responds to them as

² Victims' and Witnesses' Views on their Treatment in the Criminal Justice System – NI Statistics and Research (Northern Ireland Office) February 2004

³ Victims' and Witnesses' Views on their Treatment in the Criminal Justice System – NI Statistics and Research (Northern Ireland Office) February 2004.

⁴ Northern Ireland Crime Survey – NI Statistics and Research Branch – Bulletin 4/2005

⁵ Northern Ireland Crime Survey – NI Statistics and Research Branch – Bulletin 4/2005

⁶ Northern Ireland Crime Survey – NI Statistics and Research Branch – Bulletin 4/2005

effectively as possible within the constraints of an adversarial justice system. We recognise that it will also be important to engage in a public education campaign to: raise awareness of how the justice system works; better signpost the supportive services which are available to help victims and witnesses; and manage expectations to achieve the balance of meeting victims' needs whilst also respecting offenders' rights.

05 - Identifying Victim and Witness Needs

- 5.1 It has long been recognised that individuals have different experiences and needs and that some will require more support than others. It is important that each criminal justice agency dealing with a victim or witness at whichever point in the process recognises and is responsive to their individual needs.
- 5.2 Research has consistently identified a number of common trends with regard to the needs of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system. This has shown that victims and witnesses need:
- To be treated with dignity, fairness and respect by all agencies which interact with them and valued for the fundamental part they play in the process;
 - To receive timely and appropriate information from a central point of contact about the nature of the justice process, what is expected of them and what they can expect in return and specific information about the progress and outcome of their case
 - Practical help including protection from further victimisation and assistance with issues such as applying for compensation for injury, loss or damage; and
 - Information relating to counselling or other independent ongoing support services.
- 5.3 The strategy has been developed in response to these issues, and others identified in a strategy seminar in April 2006 attended by those with victims' interests from across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors: it seeks to establish a framework for bridging the gap between victim and witness needs and current service delivery.

Strategic Mission Statement:

“We are committed to enhancing our responsiveness to the needs of victims and witnesses of crime. We seek to do this by delivering quality services in a coordinated manner, which both improves their experience of engagement with the criminal justice system, and delivers better outcomes for the individual and the justice process”.

06 - Strategic Aim

- 6.1 The strategy’s overarching aim is to improve services to victims and witnesses and to increase overall satisfaction levels with those services, within the wider context of improving public confidence in the criminal justice system. Since the most recently available satisfaction levels were published, much good work has already been undertaken by agencies, as part of the process of continuous service improvement, and this has provided a sound basis from which agencies can continue to build in order to achieve the objectives of this strategy.
- 6.2 The strategy focuses on improvement objectives, designed to more effectively meet the needs of all victims and witnesses who come into contact with the criminal justice system, through the development of enhanced services in 5 key areas.
- 6.3 Through the strategy, the criminal justice system makes commitments to:-
- (i) Provide victims and witnesses with easier access to information about the operation of the criminal justice system and sources of appropriate advice and support within it. With this knowledge, they will be encouraged to have confidence in reporting crimes and maintaining a positive engagement with the criminal justice system;

- (ii) Ensure that specific and timely information is provided to victims and witnesses in relation to their individual case as it progresses through the criminal justice process;
- (iii) Continue to work together, in a coherent and coordinated manner and in partnership with relevant voluntary agencies, to ensure that victims and witnesses are afforded a consistently high standard of service from all providers;
- (iv) Recognise, and be responsive to, victims and witnesses individual needs to ensure that the most appropriate level of support can be provided before, during and after court proceedings; and
- (v) Afford victims and witnesses the opportunity to make their views known to those in the criminal justice system responsible for making decisions which impact on them and to contribute to the decision-making process, where this is appropriate.

Strategic Values

6.4 Underpinning the strategy is a series of values to which all those involved in supporting and delivering the strategy have subscribed.

All actions taken will be:

People centred: victims and witnesses will be afforded dignity and respect and treated sensitively and fairly, with recognition given to their individual circumstances;

Equitable: all victims and witnesses, or their nominated intermediaries, will have equality of opportunity in relation to access to, participation in and benefit from, the services delivered;

Focused: service delivery will be clearly focused on achieving specific results in a targeted manner using human, financial and technological resources to the best effect;

Integrated: services will be delivered in a coordinated, consistent and effective manner using partnership arrangements with other relevant statutory, community and voluntary organisations, as appropriate;

Professional: the highest standards of professionalism will be maintained in our dealings with victims and witnesses and with each other.

Strategic Objective 1: Access to Information

“Providing victims and witnesses with easier access to information about the operation of the criminal justice system and sources of appropriate advice and support within it. With this knowledge, they will be encouraged to have confidence in reporting crimes and maintaining a positive engagement with the criminal justice system”

Recent developments in provision of information:

- The development of information leaflets/documents and packs, to help raise awareness of the role of each respective criminal justice organisation and how they are able to support victims/witnesses.
- The creation of two victim information schemes which provide vital information to victims post sentence and are managed by the Northern Ireland Prison Service and the Probation Board NI. The NIPS Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme provides information to victims on the release and temporary release of prisoners and the Probation Board Scheme provides information to victims in cases involving supervised sentences.
- The development of an interactive Victims Walkthrough website to raise awareness of the criminal justice system. The walkthrough guides a victim through the criminal justice system step by step explaining what they might expect at the various key stages and signposts and directs them to additional sources of information and support.

7.1 Information flow is a two way process and conveying appropriate and timely information is a key indicator of an effective justice process. The system cannot function without the vital information given by victims and witnesses to underpin the investigation of crime. Criminal justice agencies also need to recognise the needs of victims and witnesses to access information about the justice process and their role in it and the services available to assist and support them.

7.2 Much has been achieved in recent years to improve lines of communications with victims and witnesses. Agencies have signposted their services and cross-promoted those of other agencies and

information schemes have been set up to provide victims, with vital information on sentencing and release of offenders.

- 7.3 It is intended to build on these solid foundations to further enhance victim and witness awareness of the justice process and their role within it; and better promote service accessibility through all available means of communication including maximising technological capability, media promotion opportunities and partnership working.

Specifically, we shall develop:

- A dedicated witness interactive website and an associated victim and witness walkthrough handbook to further raise awareness of the criminal justice system and the roles and responsibilities of those working within it.
- An overarching public awareness strategy to heighten awareness of current and future victim and witness initiatives through: the continued development of IT opportunities; effective cross promotion of services in criminal justice agencies' information literature; and, where appropriate, media campaigning and advertising.
- An outreach strategy to promote services through victims' groups and wider partnership working with the voluntary and community sector.

Question:

1. Do the proposals signify the most effective way of improving access for victims and witnesses to appropriate information on the role and responsibilities of the justice system?

2. Are there further opportunities which are not identified, which could help promote better access to, and greater awareness of, the criminal justice system, and what it is doing for victims and witnesses of crime?

Strategic Objective 2: Case Progression

“Ensure that specific and timely information is provided to victims and witnesses in relation to their individual case as it progresses through the criminal justice process”.

Recent developments in case progression:

- The introduction of Public Prosecution Service Community Liaison Teams whose specially trained staff offer a range of services to both victims and witnesses in magistrates’ and youth courts such as providing key information on the progress of a case, organising consultation facilities, ascertaining witness’ availability for court and referral to areas of specialist support where necessary.
- The provision of a dedicated Court Service Information Centre based in Belfast and dedicated customer service officers at each court venue as a central point of contact to those victims/witnesses wishing to obtain information about their court case.
- The provision of a central point of contact within the police service – through providing relevant contact details of the investigating officer dealing with the case to each victim in writing, shortly after the crime has been reported.

7.4 More precise and timely information in respect of the progression of the victim’s individual case is important and a person’s perception, or indeed confidence in the whole of the system, can rely upon how well they feel they have been kept informed by individual criminal justice agencies. Given the variety of organisations involved in the justice process, it is equally important that there should be no ambiguity around which agency is responsible for providing the information at different stages in the process.

7.5 Victims and witnesses need for information can differ according to their specific role in the process. All victims and witnesses should be provided with timely information relevant to any key decisions made in the case and information relating to the requirement to attend court. For many victims or witnesses, knowing what is happening at the key stages in the process, can help to alleviate some of the anxiety they may be experiencing.

7.6 Agencies have made significant improvements in this area in recent times. The Public Prosecution Service have established innovative and centralised teams who interact with witnesses on all aspects of cases coming before the courts and the Court Service have established a central point of contact to ensure the provision of accurate and up-to-date information relevant to the court case.

7.7 This strategy seeks to build upon the success of existing services and also to establish new mechanisms to further improve access to case progression information.

Specifically we shall:

- Ensure timely information is provided by the relevant criminal justice agency responsible at each key stage of the criminal justice process.
- Review the current Public Prosecution Service Community Liaison Team processes to help ensure that the best possible level of service is being provided to those prosecution victims and witnesses with whom they deal.
- Develop a co-ordinated approach to establish a 'one-stop-shop' to provide a direct source of information and support for victims and witnesses of crime in relation to their case.
- Create better on-line access to IT systems – through which victims can obtain relevant updated case progression information.

Questions:

1. One of the key proposals included in the strategy is the commitment to develop a more co-ordinated and central approach to how case progress information is relayed/accessed by victims and witnesses across the criminal justice process.

- Do you feel this would help achieve a more consistent service?
- If so, what form do you think this should take?
 - Should it be made available as a telephone service only? or
 - Should it include a 'drop in' centre?
- If you think it should include a drop in centre:
 - Where can you see it being geographically placed?
 - Should it be centrally managed e.g. from Belfast perhaps?

2. Do you think that the range of proposals included in the strategy provide sufficient mechanisms through which victims and witnesses can obtain timely and appropriate information concerning their case?

Strategic Objective 3: A Quality Service

“Continue to work together, in a coherent and coordinated manner, and in partnership with relevant voluntary agencies, to ensure that victims and witnesses are afforded a consistently high standard of service from all criminal justice agencies”.

Recent developments in creation of standards

- The introduction of victims and witnesses policies by each criminal justice agency, which set high standards of service delivery across the criminal justice system.
- The development of a ‘Code for Prosecutors’ which explains the standards expected of the Public Prosecutor.
- The establishment of complaints procedure mechanisms by individual organisations through which a victim or witness may channel any dissatisfaction with the service received and the development of supporting information leaflets/documents which clearly set out the relevant steps to be taken to make a formal complaint.
- The development of various working protocols between the statutory and voluntary sector to secure partnership working and ensure a consistent and enhanced service delivery in key areas.

7.8 Partnership working is essential to ensuring that a consistent and coordinated approach is taken by those agencies delivering services to victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system. The achievement of high standards by all agencies is important not only for ensuring a high quality service is provided to those engaging in the process, but also for promoting higher levels of satisfaction and confidence in the criminal justice system as a whole.

7.9 Agencies have demonstrated their ongoing commitment to raising standards and have each developed specific victim and witness policies which are supported by the development of dedicated staff training. Over the next 5 year period agencies will work to establish challenging standards which will deliver a consistently high standard of service.

Specifically we shall:

- Develop an overarching Victims' Code of Practice which will promote accountability by identifying standards of service for all agencies interacting with victims and witnesses. It will also provide a complaint mechanism where victims may seek redress in cases where the established standard is not met.
- Achieve a common standard of staff training across criminal justice agencies.
- Develop high level targets to promote corporate accountability of all agencies working to improve the experience of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system.
- Monitor the progress of strategic objectives to ensure future developments across the criminal justice system are consistent with achieving a more coordinated and seamless service to victims and witnesses.
- Develop information-sharing protocols between criminal justice agencies to enable follow-on services to be delivered to victims and witnesses more effectively.
- Improve the use of shared technology: to minimise duplication of effort across agencies; to help improve information accessibility and to provide for a more coordinated and streamlined service.
- Continue to monitor the quality and standard of service delivery in other jurisdictions.

Questions:

1. Codes of Practice set quality standards which agencies must adhere to in the delivery of their service, and these standards are both specific and time bound.

- Do you think that an overarching code will help provide for a more enhanced quality of service across the criminal justice system?
 - What would you like to see included in the Code?

2. Are there other proposals, not addressed in the strategy, which you think would improve co-ordination between agencies or deliver higher quality standards?

Strategic Objective 4: Supporting Victims and Witnesses

“Recognise, and be responsive to, victims and witnesses individual need to ensure that the most appropriate level of support can be provided before, during and after court proceedings”.

Recent developments in provision of support:

- The appointment of specialist police officers: Family Liaison Officers in all cases of serious crime; Domestic Violence Officers to assist victims of domestic violence; and Minority Liaison Officers to assist victims of hate/race crime.
- The introduction of legislation, (‘special measures’ provisions) to assist vulnerable or intimidated witnesses to give their best evidence. Such measures include: a screen around the witness box; evidence by live link; evidence given in private; removal of wigs and gowns by judges and barristers in the Crown Court; video-recorded evidence in chief; aids to communication and reporting restrictions.
- The creation of publicly funded witness services in Crown Courts and some magistrates’ courts to support witnesses before, during and after the trial. The Witness Service and the Young Witness Service is run by Victim Support and NSPCC respectively.
- The provision of separate waiting areas for prosecution victims and witnesses and vulnerable or intimidated witnesses.
- Pre-trial familiarisation visits provides victims and witnesses with the opportunity to look around the courtroom ahead of the trial date;
- In addition to the many voluntary support services currently available in Northern Ireland, the first NI SAMM (Support after Murder and Manslaughter) self help group has recently been established.

7.10 Providing appropriate support to victims and witnesses before, during and after the trial is of paramount importance and it is equally important that it should correspond with the precise service or support needed at any particular time. Support can be demonstrated in a variety of ways. For some, the provision of literature and information may be all that is needed, whilst other victims or witnesses may require specialist or more emotional, practical or financial assistance.

7.11 Positive steps have already been taken in identifying specific needs and establishing arrangements which ensure that services are provided by those best equipped to do so. The provision of specialist Family Liaison, Domestic Violence, Minority Liaison and Care Officers by PSNI

are good examples of more focused service delivery. Other examples include the introduction of 'special measures' legislation providing additional measures for vulnerable or intimidated witnesses at court so that they are able to give their best evidence and the introduction of the Witness Service and Young Witness Service which provide direct and practical support to victims and witnesses, their friends and family whilst at court.

7.12 The strategy sets out a number of ways in which we shall improve existing levels of support to victims and witnesses.

Specifically we shall:

Pre-trial and during the trial

- Progressively extend the availability of the Witness Service and Young Witness Service into **all** magistrates', youth and county courts across Northern Ireland.
- Provide an accredited Interpreters Service which establishes minimum quality assurance standards.
- Develop an accredited Intermediaries Service to provide specialist assistance to those victims or witnesses with speech and/or learning difficulties to enable them to give their best evidence.
- Formally evaluate the effectiveness of 'special measures' provisions and explore other opportunities for improving services to vulnerable or intimidated victims and witnesses.
- Implement statutory provisions which enable more witnesses to give evidence by live link where this would reduce their anxiety and enable them to give better evidence.
- Implement measures to reduce court waiting times for victims and witnesses on the day of the hearing.

Post trial

- Undertake an evaluation of the effectiveness of the PBNI Victim Information Scheme.
- Develop a dedicated Victim Information Scheme which will provide information and support to victims of mentally disordered offenders.
- Introduce legislation to prevent convicted criminals from profiting from the published accounts of their crimes.

Question:

Do you think that the range of proposals included in the strategy adequately meets the needs of those requiring support from the criminal justice system?

Strategic Objective 5: Listening to Victims and Witnesses

“Afford victims and witnesses the opportunity to make their views known to those in the criminal justice system responsible for making decisions which impact upon them and to contribute to the decision-making process, where this is appropriate”.

Recent developments in listening to victims:

- Inclusion of NSPCC on VVIW Steering Group to represent and safeguard the interests of child victims and witnesses.
- Customer satisfaction surveys are conducted by individual agencies on a regular basis to help identify service delivery improvement objectives.
- Establishment of a Northern Ireland Court Service Victim Advisory Panel which works in partnership with Victim Support NI and NSPCC to consider and address specific victim and witness needs.
- Each criminal justice agency has relevant complaints mechanisms in place.
- Establishment of the Youth Conference Service, a restorative and reparative method which allows the victim to fully participate in conference proceedings, should they wish it. Amongst other things, the victim can meet face to face with the perpetrator and will have the opportunity to explain the effects and impact the crime has had on them. They can also expect reparation to be made by the young offender.

7.13 Listening to the experience of victims and witnesses is essential if agencies are to fully understand the impact which their actions have on those individuals. Customer satisfaction surveys help to identify any gaps in the system or areas where improvements can be made but we are also committed to exploring other ways of ensuring that their voice is heard. Very positive feedback has been received from victims concerning their involvement in the restorative conferencing approach adopted in dealing with youth crime. The Youth Conference Service provides a victim with the opportunity to meet with their perpetrator face-to-face and to tell them how the crime has impacted on them and to have a say on how the harm the offender has caused them can be repaired.

7.14 This strategy aims to develop more active listening opportunities which allow victims views to be heard at the centre of decision making.

Specifically we shall:

- Develop a cross-cutting victims and witness satisfaction survey to capture the views of victims and witnesses across the wider criminal justice process. This will help inform improvements to service delivery and future policy developments.
- Consider alternative methods by which the impact of the crime on a victim can be conveyed to the court.
- Promote the introduction of a Victims Advisory Panel to provide the opportunity for victims' views to be obtained on initiatives which are still at the development stage and ahead of any formal decisions being taken.
- Explore the potential for introducing restorative interventions and reparative processes with adult offenders, which can directly involve the victim where they so wish.

Question:

Other than the proposals included in the Strategy, what further measures do you think should be considered to ensure that the victims' voice can be heard throughout the criminal justice system?

In addition to the questions set out at each of the relevant points above, we would like you to take into account the following overarching questions when considering the proposals set out in the strategy:

General Questions:

1. Overall, do you think the 5 Strategic Objectives highlighted in the Strategy adequately cover the needs of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system? If not, what further areas do you think should be included?

2. Do you consider there to be any specific equality issues relating to any of the categories listed on para 1.5 above, with regard to the implementation of this Strategy as a whole?

08 - Resourcing Issues

8.1 Each of the criminal justice agencies has invested resources – both physical and financial – in delivering its services to victims and witnesses of crime. The largest individual investment is from the Compensation Agency, which has paid a total of almost £48m during 2005-06 to victims in compensation for personal injury and criminal damage and in compensation paid under Terrorism legislation. The Northern Ireland Office also provides substantial financial support to fund a range of valuable cross-cutting victim and witness support services. This has included:

- £1097k (2005-06) to Victim Support in relation to: Community Service – to provide support, help and information to victims of crime; Criminal Injuries Compensation Service – to assist applicant's in claiming criminal injuries compensation; and the Witness Service – a support service to assist prosecution witnesses attending court.
- £251k (2005-06) to NSPCC for the provision of the Young Witness Service which supports young prosecution witnesses, their friends and supporters, attending court.
- Up to £83k to Women's Aid for NI (2006-07), in support of a 24 hour Helpline for victims of domestic violence.
- £62k to NEXUS (2005-06) for the provision of counselling services to victims of sexual crime in Belfast.
- £26k (2006-07) to NICEM in respect of a Racial and Harassment and Advocacy Project, aimed at tackling racial harassment through the provision of support and advocacy to victims of racial harassment.
- £18k (2006-07) to the 'Stop it Now' project, a national campaign aimed at preventing child sexual abuse by encouraging abusers and potential abusers to seek help. It provides adults with the information needed to effectively protect children.
- And over the next two year period, £313k has been committed by Community Safety Partnerships (2006-2008) to fund projects aimed at

assisting victims of crime, particularly victims of domestic violence and sexual crime.

- 8.2 Agencies are committed to providing more effective victim and witness services and to developing better ways of partnership working. We will remain alert to opportunities to prioritise and make the most effective use of existing resources to meet any additional costs in fulfilling the measures set out in the strategy.

09 – Communications Strategy

- 9.1 The publication of this strategy is the first stage in a wider drive to communicate clearly the Government's commitment to responding to the needs of victims and witnesses. We seek to reach out to a wide range of audiences to promote better understanding of the criminal justice system and the services it offers and in turn learn from the experiences of victims and witnesses and best practice in delivering services in other jurisdictions.

- 9.2 The strategy document will be made available on the CJSNI and NIO websites. For those whose first language is not English, translated copies of the strategy and any subsequent progress reports and action plans will also be made available by NIO upon request.

10 – Monitoring and evaluation

- 10.1 The multi-agency Victims, Vulnerable or Intimidated Witnesses Steering Group (VVIW) will monitor progress on a regular basis and will be responsible for the review and development of further action plans associated with this strategy.
- 10.2 The strategy sets out the action which is to be developed over the next five year period (2007- 2012). Its first action plan, contained **at Annex A** of this document, sets out the key actions required and associated timescales that it is intended to achieve over the next 12 months. This initial plan will be reviewed at the end of the specified period and a report on its progress will be published on the CJSNI website (www.cjsni.gov.uk). A secondary action plan, to identify the action required over the next 12 month period will also be made available on the CJSNI website.

ANNEX A

Strategic Action Plan – The first 12 months

Key area	Action	Milestones/Target dates
<i>1: Access to information</i>	To develop a witness interactive website and victim and witness handbook to complement the current victim interactive website.	By June 2007.
<i>2: Case progression</i>	To establish an information and support facility for victims and witnesses of crime.	Proposals to be agreed by June 2007. Pilot service to be in place by April 2008.
<i>3: Quality service</i>	To develop an overarching victims' code of practice to establish standards for all criminal justice agencies interacting with victims and witnesses.	Draft code to be agreed by June 2007. To go out to public consultation by August 2007. To be published by November 2007.
<i>4: Supporting victims</i>	To extend the Witness Service and Young Witness Service to all magistrates' courts, youth and county courts across Northern Ireland.	Full roll out of Witness Service to all magistrates' and youth courts by August 2007. Piloting of Young Witness Service in one designated court area by end of March 2008.
	To establish standards for the use of interpreters across the criminal justice system.	Publish standards by December 2007.
	To evaluate the effectiveness of 'special measures' provisions of the Criminal Evidence (NI) Order 1999.	Initial scoping study to be carried out by June 2007. Commission evaluation by September 2007. Interim evaluation report by March 2008.

	To evaluate the PBNI Victim Information Scheme.	Full evaluation by June 2007.
	To develop a statutory victim information scheme to provide information and support to victims of mentally disordered offenders.	Publishing proposals for a scheme by spring 2007.
	To provide legislation to prevent convicted criminals from profiting upon the published accounts of their crimes.	Legislation to be introduced by spring 2007.
<i>5: Listening to victims and witnesses.</i>	To create a cross-cutting victim and witness satisfaction survey.	Survey to be implemented by March 2008.

ANNEX B

Other relevant strategies/initiatives

Strategy title	Aim	Consultation/ publication date	Lead agency	Contact Details
<i>'Tackling Violence at Home'</i> – A Strategy for addressing Domestic Violence in Northern Ireland.	The strategy aims and associated action plan set out a vision for the future, with aims and targets focusing on preventative measures and on the provision of better protection, justice and support services for victims and their children.	Strategy published October 2005. http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/tackling_violence_strategy.pdf	DHSSPS and NIO	DHSSPS: Leslie Frew, Director of Mental Health & Disability Services DHSSPS. leslie.frew@dhsspsni.gov.uk NIO: Conal Devitt, Deputy Director NIO Community Safety Unit. conal.devitt@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk
Hate Crime – Project RIOH (Recording Incidents of Hate)	To provide a multi-agency facility through which victims of hate incidents reluctant to contact the police, can report the incident to a third party. The initiative allows incidents to be reported directly to individuals representing a range of organisations within the statutory, voluntary and community sector.	Pilot project launched in South Belfast in June 2006 and an evaluation of the project is expected to be carried out in December 2006.	NIO	David Lennox, NIO Community Safety Unit. David.Lennox@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk
Sexual Violence Strategy	To develop a comprehensive regional framework for addressing sexual violence which will guide policy and service delivery relevant to healthcare, education and criminal justice.	Strategy to go out to public consultation on 29 January 2007.	DHSSPS and NIO	DHSSPS: Leslie Frew, Director of Mental Health & Disability Services DHSSPS. leslie.frew@dhsspsni.gov.uk NIO: Adrian Arbuthnot, Deputy Director NIO Criminal Justice Policy Division. adrian.arbuthnot@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk

Community Safety Strategy	The strategy aims to tackle the effects and underlying causes of crime and anti-social behaviour in order to prevent their occurrence and re-occurrence. It sets out Government's priorities for community safety over the next 3-5 years based on the following 4 key cross cutting themes : (i) reducing Crime and anti-social behaviour; (ii) creating safer neighbourhoods; (iii) creating positive opportunities; and (iv) building strong, confident communities.	Strategy due to go out to public consultation by spring 2007.	NIO	Conal Devitt, Deputy Director NIO Community Safety Unit. conal.devitt@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk .
Public Protection Measures	New legislation will provide for enhanced levels of public safety. Proposals include new public protection sentences for dangerous violent and sexual offenders and statutory multi-agency public protection arrangements for managing risk such offenders pose to the public when released back into the community.	Public protection legislation to be in place by autumn 2007.	NIO (in partnership with other relevant agencies)	Public protection legislation: Tom Haire, Head of NIO Criminal Law Branch. tom.haire@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk . Management arrangements: Amanda Patterson, Head of Criminal Justice Projects Unit. amanda.patterson@nio.x.gsi.gov.uk .

VVIW STEERING GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Membership includes representation from:

Northern Ireland Office [*Criminal Justice Policy Division (Chair), Criminal Justice Reform Division and Community Safety Unit*] www.cjsni.gov.uk

Police Service of Northern Ireland www.psnipolice.uk

Public Prosecution Service www.ppsni.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Court Service www.courtsni.gov.uk

Northern Ireland Prison Service www.niprisonservice.gov.uk

Probation Board for Northern Ireland www.pbni.org.uk

Youth Justice Agency www.youthjusticeagencyni.gov.uk

Victim Support Northern Ireland www.victimsupport.org

NSPCC www.nspcc.org.uk

Northern Ireland Statistics & Research www.nio.gov.uk

