

# Draft

# **Victims and Witnesses**

# **of Crime**

# **Strategy**

# 2025 – 2030

# A strategy for

# **all**

# victims & witnesses

## Alternative formats

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## Contents

Foreword by Minister of Justice 4

1. The Strategy at a Glance 6

2. Introduction 9

3. The voice of victims and witnesses 16

4. Principles, Themes and Wider Context 19

5. The draft Strategy 25

6. Delivery 34

7. Impact Assessments 36

8. Accessing support 36

**9. Criminal Justice Process Flowchart ----------------------------------------------------- 38**

## Foreword by Minister of Justice

**I am delighted to introduce the new draft five-year Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025-2030.**

It is an unfortunate reality that any one us can be a victim of, or witness to, a crime. As Justice Minister I want to ensure that all victims of all crime are supported; that they feel safe and listened to, from the moment they enter the justice system, and as they progress through each stage. It is my aspiration that every citizen of Northern Ireland should have confidence in our justice system, so that they feel able to report a crime where it happens; so that they continue to engage with criminal justice organisations as their case progresses; and so that they are supported to recover from the impact of the crime.

It should always be a victim’s choice whether to report a crime, but when someone does take that step, I want to ensure that they are shown respect, courtesy and sensitivity; that they have their rights met; and that they are offered support to help them as they proceed along their justice journey. These are simple but vitally important principles that run throughout this draft strategy.

I am encouraged by the many improvements that have been introduced to benefit victims and witnesses since the launch of the previous strategy, including the appointment of Geraldine Hanna as Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime in 2022. I am grateful to Geraldine for her engagement with victims and her unwavering determination to raise issues that victims and witnesses bring to her and to call for the changes required to achieve our common goals.

This draft strategy builds upon the groundwork laid by the previous strategy. It has been developed in collaboration with our criminal justice partners and with victim representatives and stakeholders from the voluntary and community sector. It has also been informed by those who expressed their views during the Call for Views exercise in 2024. Critically, the strategy reflects the voices of those who have been victims and witnesses of crime, including those who came forward to share their experience with me and my Department. I extend my sincere appreciation to all those involved in providing invaluable feedback, including to me personally. Sharing details of the impact of crime and indeed of the criminal justice system, can be a deeply personal and often painful experience and I hope that all of those who have done so feel that they have been listened to. I hope you are able to see the value that has been placed on your words through the content of this draft strategy.

Evidence tells us that the impact of crime transcends boundaries of gender, age, sexual orientation, and ethnicity and that, in addition, the process of accessing justice through the criminal justice system can often be daunting, disorientating and at times traumatic for victims and witnesses. That is why we have sought to embed a victim-focused and trauma-informed approach as a key theme running through this strategy. It is vital that the harm inflicted by the impact of crime is not exacerbated by the criminal justice system.

In acknowledging the positive changes and progress in recent years, I also recognise that there are areas that could be improved and where victims and witnesses feel let down. Like many of our public services, the justice system remains under-funded and under-resourced. However, while I as Minister will continue to make the case for greater investment, I also have real confidence that much can be achieved through the strong collaborative relationships that exist across all of the agencies and partners at every level. The justice system is a challenging, complex process, consisting of separate, independent (as they must be) organisations. Achieving reform so that victims and witnesses can rely on consistent best practice requires an over-arching, comprehensive framework of outcomes and actions. I am confident that under this strategy we can collectively deliver change and see further positive impact as we move into the future.



Minister for Justice

# 1. The Strategy at a Glance

**Vision and Mission Statement**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Our** **Vision**  |  Increasing confidence in the justice system by empowering and supporting all victims and witnesses with a trauma informed approach |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Our Mission Statement** |  We will achieve this by providing victims and witnesses, including children, young people and vulnerable users, with tailored support and effective communication, in a transparent, rights compliant way |

**Pillars**

1.1 The draft strategy is structured around five **pillars**: Support; Communication and Information; Transparency and Participation; Rights and Confidence in Justice; and Children and Young People. In addition, Partnership is a key principle that underpins the delivery of the entire strategy. These pillars and the **objectives** that we want to achieve against each of these are summarised below. Chapter 5 provides more detail on each pillar, the associated objectives, the priority areas for action that we want to address, as well as the intended outcomes that we hope to achieve through this draft strategy.

**Pillar 1: Support**

*Ensuring all victims and witnesses of crime can access tailored, responsive and specialised support to help recover and rebuild their lives.*

Objectives:

* Victims and witnesses are able to access support, regardless of diversity of need.
* Victims and witnesses are guided into support at the right time and at all key stages of the criminal justice system, including after the court process.
* Support for victims is delivered through a co-ordinated and joined up approach.

**Pillar 2: Communication and Information**

*Ensuring information about the justice system is accessible*

Objectives:

* Victims and witnesses are provided with the information they need at all stages; and understand their role in the criminal justice system and what is expected of them.
* All communication with victims and witnesses is carried out in an accessible, trauma-informed and compassionate manner.

**Pillar 3: Transparency and Participation**

*Empowering victims and witnesses to understand the process of the criminal justice system and the decisions made which impact upon them*

Objectives:

* + Victims and witnesses are empowered to remain engaged throughout the Criminal Justice System.
	+ Alternatives to prosecution are used where appropriate
	+ Measures are in place to enable victims and witnesses to feel safe when giving evidence and to minimise the risk of additional trauma.

**Pillar 4: Rights and Confidence in Justice**

*Ensuring victim and witness entitlements are met, and that public confidence in the justice system improves*

Objectives:

* + Victims’ and witnesses’ rights and entitlements under the Victim and Witness Charters are promoted at all stages in the Criminal Justice System.
	+ Criminal justice organisations comply with their Charter obligations; encourage best practice; and promote positive developments to meet the needs and interests of victims and witnesses.
	+ The views and issues raised by victims and witnesses are listened to; considered; and any necessary action is taken, to drive improvement.

**Pillar 5: Children and Young People**

*Ensuring the criminal justice system takes account of the needs of children and young people who are victims and witnesses*

Objectives:

* Children, young people, parents and carers are empowered to report crime; and measures are put in place to remove barriers to participating in the justice system.
* Children and young people are supported and feel safe, inclusive of diversity of need; and are guided to support quickly using a trauma-informed approach.
* The views and issues raised by children, young people, parents and carers are listened to; considered; and any necessary action is taken, to drive improvement.

# 2. Introduction



Purpose

2.1 This is a five-year strategy that is intended to run from 2025 - 2030. It builds on the work carried out under the Victim and Witness Strategy 2021-2024[[1]](#footnote-1) and under the addendum one-year action plan published in October 2024[[2]](#footnote-2). It has been developed by the Victim and Witness Steering Group, who will also oversee its delivery. This Group’s membership includes representatives from Northern Ireland’s criminal justice organisations, and key delivery partners, including victim representatives:

* The Department of Justice
* The Police Service of Northern Ireland
* The Public Prosecution Service
* The Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service
* The Youth Justice Agency
* The Probation Board for Northern Ireland
* Office of the Lady Chief Justice
* The Bar of Northern Ireland
* The Law Society
* Victim Support Northern Ireland
* The NSPCC Young Witness Service

2.2 This strategy aims to build on the positive changes delivered under the previous strategy[[3]](#footnote-3) but also takes account of what victims and witnesses have told us about their experiences in the justice system. While we have made significant advances towards a more trauma-informed justice system, responses to our Call For Views process also identified gaps. We have therefore taken a fresh look at how all parts of the system interface with and respond to victims and witnesses, to establish where we can do better.

2.3 The new strategy has been informed by the responses to a Call for Views exercise; feedback and evidence received directly from victims and witnesses; engagement with criminal justice agencies; and by engagement with the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime. It also takes into account feedback from victim and witness support services; developments in other jurisdictions; issues highlighted by the Criminal Justice Inspectorate’s Follow-Up Review of 2023[[4]](#footnote-4); and the findings from the most recent Northern Ireland Victim and Witness Survey[[5]](#footnote-5).

2.4 Just as the response to crime and the impact of crime needs to be wider than the work of the justice system alone, so this strategy exists in a wider strategic framework of provision that incorporates many other strategies and programmes, including those that are currently being taken forward that aim to:

* speed up justice and reduce avoidable delay;
* protect and improve the experiences of victims of sexual and domestic abuse;
* bring an end to violence against women and girls;
* implement the recommendations of the into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences in NI;
* promote safeguarding and protection from exploitation; and
* improve mental health provision in Northern Ireland.

2.5 As we have developed this strategy, we have engaged with colleagues across the Department of Justice and other departments within the Northern Ireland Executive to identify and ensure that this strategy is appropriately aligned with relevant linkages and interdependencies. This collaborative approach ensures that the Victim and Witness Strategy will complement and support the work that others are doing and avoid duplication of resources. We will continue to work closely with colleagues and partners as we implement this strategy.

2.6 Delivery of this strategy will also require joint working across multiple sectors. We have already built strong foundations but wish to develop this further through extensive stakeholder engagement across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors, legal professionals, the general public and, most importantly, victims and witnesses themselves. We want to ensure that this strategy renews and invigorates efforts to improve communication and real collaboration between the criminal justice organisations, their stakeholders and those who have been affected by crime.

Vision and Mission Statement

2.7 We have agreed a draft vision and a draft mission statement which reflect the consensus about what our partners, stakeholders and those we have engaged with told us they want from a justice system. While this strategy applies to all victims and witnesses, we must treat everyone as an individual, with their unique experience, characteristics and needs. Our vision is that through this draft strategy we will *increase confidence in the justice system by empowering and supporting all victims and witnesses using a trauma-informed approach.* Our Mission Statement sets out how we aim to achieve this vision, *by providing victims and witnesses, including children, young people and vulnerable users, with tailored support and effective communication, in a transparent, rights-compliant way*.

What this draft strategy covers

*Crime in Northern Ireland*

2.8 The latest figures from PSNI[[6]](#footnote-6) show that in 2023 – 2024 there were over 69,000 victims of recorded crime in Northern Ireland and a total of 104,344 crimes. It is interesting to note that the proportion of violence against the person[[7]](#footnote-7) and sexual offences has increased since 1988/89, when it was one in five, to represent around **half of all crimes recorded last year (49%)**. Decreases in crime have mainly been experienced within property-type offences (robbery, burglary, theft and criminal damage). Victim based crime is therefore showing a steady increase while property based offences are decreasing.

2.9 Crime can have a range of negative impacts on individuals and society. While crime is often seen as a harm in its own right, the negative impacts related to any one incident will differ by the type of crime experienced as well as the perspective of the victim. These harms include a wide range of outcomes for both individuals, such as financial loss, physical harm, emotional harm and an impact on mental health, and for communities and wider society, it leads to greater fear of crime and increased use of health and victim services. According the Office of National Statistics[[8]](#footnote-8) there are 5 key categories of “harms” or how a victim or witness can be impacted by crime:

• physical – any physical damage including death, injury, or violence

• emotional or psychological – adverse impacts on psychological and emotional well-being: fear of repercussions from a perpetrator and damaged confidence, and potential of traumatisation from having to relive the experience multiple times. Victims may feel a personal sense of injustice, and mental health can be impacted.

• financial or economic – any material or financial losses, and this has added impacts when exploitation or coercion is involved, as with any type of crime

• community safety – any restrictions in autonomy, freedom of movement, access to information, or growth and development because of fear or other detrimental effects of crime, and even a stigma around reporting, fear for losing family/friends/support

• privacy – any violation of privacy, including access to personal or confidential information or unauthorised entry to property. To many victims of such crimes, confidentiality is key, and a safe space is necessary to ensure the victim or witness can open about the crime and the impact.

2.10 All of these impacts are personal to each victim or witness, and it is acknowledged that harms from non-physical or non-violent crimes can also be extreme and lead to trauma. As a society, there is a responsibility to ensure that those who experience or witness crime are supported and feel safe, and this falls within the Safer Communities element of the Northern Ireland Executive’s Programme for Government’s Wellbeing Framework[[9]](#footnote-9).

2.11 Alongside the policing response provided to victims and witnesses, a comprehensive range of supports have been established in recognition of the range and extent of impacts that can result from crime. The Department of Justice funds Victim Support NI to deliver free and confidential supports and services to victims of all crimes, regardless of when it happened and can assist with applications for criminal injuries compensation. It includes support throughout the justice system, and for children and their families, NSPCC’s Young Witness Service provides support through the court process and this is also funded by the Department. We have developed detailed Charters to help guide victims and witnesses through the complex processes of investigation, prosecution and post-court, setting out what help and information is available, and which they are entitled to, at every stage. These are augmented by specific services such as advocacy for serious sexual offences and for hate crime, and in certain cases victims can avail of restorative practice where they would feel this helpful.

2.12 While there is a strong foundation of help and support available, and specific services in certain categories, victims and witnesses of crime still face challenges in terms of coping with the impacts of crime and navigating the justice system.

*Scope*

2.13 This draft strategy sets out 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.

2.14 Ensuring that each victim and witness is supported and communicated with in a trauma-informed way will require every element of our justice system to play their part under this strategy. This draft strategy is also tied closely to the Victim Charter and the Witness Charter[[10]](#footnote-10). These are key documents which set out the entitlements that every victim and witness should expect across each stage of the criminal justice system; the strategy aims to increase their effectiveness and public awareness of their existence and what they mean in practice. A flowchart setting out the criminal justice process from a victim perspective is attached at the end of this document.

*An inclusive approach*

2.15 This draft strategy recognises that anyone can be a victim of, or witness to, crime regardless of their age, ethnicity, religion, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or any form of disability. Crimes are committed in all parts of our community: rural and urban; and across all socio-economic backgrounds. As such the strategy adopts an inclusive approach. We noted in our Call for Views responses those who referred to specialist approaches based on gender in particular, and the risk that a focus on improving supports for one group having the result that services for others are compromised or ignored. As stated, this is strategy for all victims and witnesses of crime; we aspire to ensure best practice across the board. The strategy has been screened for impact assessment and these have been published for consideration. We will continue to consider impacts and these will be updated as appropriate.

2.16 Whilst anyone can be a victim of crime, it is also the case that many factors, including the nature of the crime; the victim’s personal circumstances; their previous experiences of trauma; the nature of their personal support networks; their age etc. are likely to affect the degree of both harm and trauma that a victim may experience as a result of the impact of that crime. Victims and witnesses may present with multiple characteristics, representative of all of society. We therefore need to recognise and respond to the intersectional nature of needs as a result of experiencing crime. Through the work that we progress under this strategy we will seek to understand better and respond to the intersectional needs of victims.

*Terminology*

2.17 Within this strategy, we use the following definitions:

***‘Victim’*** has the meaning attributed under Article 2 of directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council, i.e. a natural person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offence; or family members of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offence and who have suffered harm as a result of that person’s death.

**‘*Witness*’** has the meaning attributed by Section 30(9) of the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, i.e. a person who has witnessed criminal or other conduct in relation to which that person may be or has been called to give evidence in criminal proceedings; is able to provide or has provided information or any other thing which might assist a criminal investigation or which might be or has been used in evidence in criminal proceedings; or for any other reason is called or might be called to give evidence in criminal proceedings.

# 3. The voice of victims and witnesses

3.1 In developing this draft strategy one of our priorities has been to ensure that it is informed by the experiences of victims and witnesses and that it reflects and addresses the issues that they have identified. As such, a key focus for us has centred around engagement and consultation with a wide a range of people and organisations and in particular, victims, witnesses and the people and organisations who represent them. This engagement has identified priority areas that we need to focus on in order to make the most difference for victims and witnesses of crime. We are grateful to all of those who have shared their views. It is only through listening to real life experiences that policy makers and service delivery organisations can understand the challenges that exist for those who are engaging with the criminal justice system.

3.2 The views and feedback received from victims and witnesses have been extremely important during this process. The Department does not underestimate that for those who have chosen to share their personal experiences of crime this can also present personal challenge. While we view engaging with victims and witnesses to gain insights to help us improve the justice system as being valuable, the Department will not seek to do so at the risk of additional harm and will only ever invite input or where a victim or witness volunteers to do so. Some of the comments received as part of our pre-consultation engagement are captured below[[11]](#footnote-11).



3.3 The criminal justice system has a responsibility to learn from, and build on, the experience and expertise that has been shared; to improve and strengthen our systems and services; to ensure victims and witnesses of crime are supported and informed throughout. This will be important as we take forward work through this strategy and its associated action plans. We are determined that those who have generously shared their views will see that their concerns have been heard and that they are reflected in this strategy.

3.4 This draft strategy is evidence that criminal justice organisations are committed to working in partnership to improve the experiences of victims and witnesses within the system; to build trauma-informed responses; and to ensure that each victim and witness is treated as unique with individual needs. We are also committed to ensuring that the staff within our organisations, who come into direct contact with victims and witnesses, are professional, courteous, and trained appropriately to deal with the needs of each individual.

3.5 In doing so, we will ensure the needs of victims and witnesses are considered at each stage of the criminal justice system as well as where changes are being planned which may impact on victims and witnesses. We will continue to work closely with criminal justice partners to build on the excellent work that is already taking place and to ensure that a clear and supportive pathway through the criminal justice system is in place for those in need.

# 4. Principles, Themes and Wider Context



Principles

4.1 Our engagement process so far, including the Call for Views, has identified several principles which should underpin our delivery of the strategy. These are:

* informed by victims and witnesses
* partnership
* trauma-informed practice
* research and national & international best practice

*Informed by victims and witnesses*

4.2 Engaging with and learning from the direct experiences of those who have participated in the criminal justice system brings insight and a level of understanding that statistics and data cannot provide. Policy makers and service planners can gain valuable information about good practice and trauma-informed responses by inviting input from those willing to share their experiences, reflections and ideas. Under our strategy we will build in opportunities to make this kind of communication standard practice, whilst also ensuring safeguards to protect wellbeing and privacy. We note too that we must not assume that we can expect such input to be provided in depth and on request, without adequate acknowledgment or return.

*Partnership*

4.3 The criminal justice system is a complex ecosystem of independent statutory organisations with clearly defined roles and independent governance structures including law enforcement; the judiciary; legal professions; voluntary partners who are funded to deliver services; and the Department of Justice led by the Minister. There are associated organisations who have a role in monitoring, inspecting, and handling complaints as well as a Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime. While each has a defined purpose and role, how they operate, both individually and as a system, impacts on the experiences of victims and witnesses of crime. Without adopting a partnership, to consider how each part of the system delivers its specific role in relation to victims and witnesses, there can be no choreographed or streamlined response and the experience for victims and witnesses becomes disjointed. This strategy establishes a framework for partnership, facilitating the development of shared objectives; joined-up planning; and agreed standards to ensure victims and witnesses experience a cohesive consistent experience. Examples of effective partnering take place routinely as part of working groups and thematic-based conferences and events.

*Trauma-informed practice*

4.4 Trauma-informed practice is threaded throughout this strategy. It is the key approach that our engagement and feedback has told us will transform the experience of victims and witnesses within the justice system. We have already commenced work to explore what it means for each of our organisations and partners. For example, our Victims Champions (these are senior leaders across the criminal justice system with a key role in promoting best practice for victims) have agreed that promoting and embedding trauma-informed practice should be their first priority and they have engaged with the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to explore how a system-wide trauma-informed approach can be embedded within all touchpoints and engagements with victims and witnesses. This will be central to many of the outcomes we seek to achieve over the next five years.

*Research and National & International Best Practice*

4.5 The Department of Justice and our partner organisations will always strive to ensure our systems, services and operations are informed by best practice and by the highest quality standards. We will seek to maintain close links with our local academic institutions and research bodies to avail of evidence-based reports and recommendations, as well as with our neighbouring jurisdictions to share experiences and compare responses.

Themes

4.6 We believe it is important to acknowledge and consider other factors that are relevant both to this strategy and to how victims and witnesses of crime experience the criminal justice system. We may be constrained in the degree to which we are able to impact on or control these, but we should understand that they are relevant.

In this section we discuss the main themes that we believe are most relevant to this strategy. These include:

* related strategies: we want to complement and ensure alignment with what others are doing and avoid duplication
* delay within the criminal justice system: we want to assist efforts to reduce delay and to help victims and witnesses dealing with delay
* minority groups and marginalised communities: we want to support communities to report crime, and make this a system where all victims feel safe

4.7 Some of these areas are highlighted below, although this is not an exhaustive list and we will undertake to continue to work collaboratively to ensure that there is alignment with other existing and emerging interdependent areas.

4.8 The Executive Office has published a Framework for Ending Violence Against Women and Girls that identifies priorities and actions to stop violent and abusive behaviour that is directed at women and girls because of their gender. This includes crimes and unwanted behaviour in the physical and online world. PSNI has also published a Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan.

4.9 This strategy has close linkages with the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy also has and work being taken forward under the Gillen Review into the law and procedures in serious sexual offences, which contains 16 key priority areas including work in relation to remote evidence centres, Sexual Offence Legal Advisors, support for child victims and addressing delay in the criminal justice system. While much of the work to tackle these issues will be undertaken outside this strategy there will be cross over with actions under this strategy dealing with these work areas.

4.10 There are a range of victim relevant legislation that the Department of Justice has delivered or is planning and there are also existing strategies and programmes of work relevant to the strategy. This is not an exhaustive list but some examples include:

* [Programme for Government 2024-2027](https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/articles/programme-government-2024-2027-our-plan-doing-what-matters-most)
* [Policing Plan 2025-2030;](https://www.nipolicingboard.org.uk/policing-plan-annual-performance-plan)
* [Keeping Children and Young People Safe: An Online Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland 2020–2025](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/online-safety-strategy-and-action-plan);
* [Independent Review of Children’s Social Care Services](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/independent-review-childrens-social-care-services);
* [Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Strategy 2024-2027](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/modern-slavery-strategy-24-27.pdf);
* the Department of Justice’s programme of legislation to deal with [stalking](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/17/enacted) and [sexual offences](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2022/19/enacted)
* Action Plans to implement relevant Criminal Justice Inspection Reports [Criminal Justice Inspection Reports](https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Inspection-Reports) ;
* [Mental Health Strategy 2021–2031](https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-strategy-2021-2031#:~:text=Mental%20Health%20Strategy%202021-2031%20Date%20published%3A%2029%20June,Mental%20Health%20Strategy%202021-2031%20on%2029%20June%202021.);
* Ending Homelessness Together – [Homelessness Strategy 2022–2027](https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=7234c17336af66ddJmltdHM9MTY3MTQwODAwMCZpZ3VpZD0yM2MzYWU5OS1lYzNlLTY5YzQtM2IwYi1iZjQzZWQ2NjY4NmQmaW5zaWQ9NTM5Mw&ptn=3&hsh=3&fclid=23c3ae99-ec3e-69c4-3b0b-bf43ed66686d&psq=Homelessness+Strategy+2022%e2%80%932027&u=a1aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cubmloZS5nb3YudWsvRG9jdW1lbnRzL0hvbWVsZXNzbmVzcy1TdHJhdGVneS0yMDIyLTIwMjcvSG9tZWxlc3NuZXNzLVN0cmF0ZWd5LTIwMjItMjctWWVhci0xLUFjdGlvbi1QbGFuLmFzcHgjOn46dGV4dD1UaGUlMjBIb21lbGVzc25lc3MlMjBTdHJhdGVneSUyMDIwMjItMjclMjBpcyUyMGd1aWRlZCUyMGJ5JTIwdGhlLGJlcHJldmVudGVkJTJDJTIwaWZob21lbGVzc25lc3NjYW5ub3QlMjBiZXByZXZlbnRlZCUyMGl0c2hvdWxkJTIwYmUlMjByYXJlJTJDYnJpZWYlMjBhbmQlMjBub24tcmVjdXJyaW5n&ntb=1) and Interdepartmental Homelessness ActionPlans;
* The Executive Office’s Strategic Framework to [End Violence Against Women and Girls](https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls);
* Safeguarding arrangements for children and adults at risk of harm including the development of new adult protection legislation;
* PSNI and PPSNI Serious Sexual Offences Strategy.

4.11 As we work to deliver this strategy and its associated action plans, we will also continue to take account of our obligations under domestic and international conventions. These include:

* the transposition of the [EU Victims Directive](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1421925131614&uri=CELEX:32012L0029) (and associated [Victim](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/victim-charter) and [Witness Charters](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/witness-charter) that placed this on a statutory footing);
* the [European Convention on Human Rights](https://www.echr.coe.int/Pages/home.aspx?p=basictexts&c=);
* the [UN Convention on Elimination and Discrimination against Women](https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/);
* the [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/);
* the [Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](https://www.coe.int/en/web/children/lanzarote-convention) (the Lanzarote Convention); and
* the [UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities](https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-2.html)
* the UK’s ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the [Istanbul Convention](https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/about-the-convention)).

4.12 Since this strategy is to apply over a five-year period, we will also consider any future developments or changes which may be of relevance to its implementation and associated action plans.

4.13 Some of those engaging with us have pointed out that the victim and witness experience of the justice system is most negatively influenced by the length of time taken at each stage. Waiting for updates, adjournments in cases and other delays has the potential to exacerbate the trauma and anxiety faced by victims and witnesses. Delays mean victims and witnesses may withdraw from proceedings, or their recollection of evidence declines over time.

4.14 The Criminal Justice Board (CJB)’s key priority for 2024-25 continued to be the reduction in avoidable delay across the criminal justice system, and remains so now. The Department of Justice and key partners are progressing five workstreams to address key issues across the system that have been identified as potential sources of delay or areas where improvements in services could aid efficiencies. This work commenced during 2022/23, but is a substantial change programme and it will take a number of years to fully implement. The Executive have also recognised the importance of this issue and has included the Speeding up Justice Programme within the Safer Communities priority of the current Programme for Government (PfG). Over £20 million in funding has also been allocated from the interim Public Sector Transformation Board and will be used for a range of activities that support the development and introduction of the new initiatives within the Early Engagement and Out of Courts Disposals workstreams.

4.15 We will keep in contact with colleagues and updated on this work to ensure that the needs and experiences of victims and witnesses continue to inform these workstreams.

4.16 Ensuring that victims and witnesses who are in minority or marginal communities can access appropriate support to engage, and remain engaged, with the criminal justice system is of key importance as we deliver this strategy. While it is a strategy for all, this does not mean that we consider every victim or witness to have similar experiences or needs, and where specific supports are required these need to be considered. Our Call for Views responses helpfully suggested that the justice system could engage more meaningfully with voluntary and community sector groups and representative organisations. This has already commenced, and we will continue to reach out, as we deliver the strategy, to such groups to help promote awareness of the Victim Charter and Witness Charter and the entitlements they contain.

# 5. The draft Strategy

5.1 The strategy is structured around five Pillars. These are:

* Support,
* Communication and Information,
* Transparency and Participation,
* Rights and Confidence, and
* Children and Young People.

5.2 Aligned with these pillars we have identified 15 **strategic objectives** as well as **key priority areas** for action, that will support us in achieving these strategic objectives. These are set out in further detail below.

5.3 Delivery of the strategy will be supported by a series of delivery plans that will set out in detail the SMART actions that we intend to progress to achieve outcomes. One of our early actions under our first delivery plan will be the development of a comprehensive Performance Framework that will allow us measure the impact of the strategy to ensure that it is effective. However, we have identified a range of anticipated **strategic outcomes** against each of the pillars of the strategy that describe the effect we wish to achieve, if the strategy is working as intended. These are also set out below.

**PILLAR 1: SUPPORT**

5.4 There are many aspects involved in supporting victims and witnesses within the criminal justice context. The system must be able to respond to offer support with efficiency, professionalism, compassion, and fairness, and it must do this on a consistent basis. Many funded support services are already in place and delivering responsive support. However we will explore what more can be done to ensure that every victim and witness receives effective support at the right time, and that fewer people report that they did not receive the support they needed. We recognise that victims and witnesses of crime can have a broad range of support needs, including complex and critical needs which may have arisen as a result of crime. Where such support is available through services that fall under another Department’s remit, we will seek to ensure that accessible that pathways are explored and developed.

5.5 Through collaboration, we want to ensure that we have in place a support framework that empowers victims and witnesses feel able to report crime; to remain engaged with the justice system; and to recover from the impact of crime. We plan to explore how we can improve the way in which the needs of victims and witnesses are assessed. We will also take steps to ensure that those working with victims and witnesses have trauma-informed training and support; and that victims and witnesses are referred and signposted to effective supports.

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| **PILLAR 1: SUPPORT**All victims and witnesses of crime can access tailored, responsive and specialised support to help recover and rebuild their lives |
| **OBJECTIVES** | **KEY PRIORITY AREAS** |
| **Victims and witnesses are able to access support, regardless of diversity of need.** | Providing tailored, trauma informed and specialised support for victims and witnesses. |
| Working to secure sufficient funding to ensure support organisations are adequately resourced. |
| Enabling service providers to better understand the needs of individuals to ensure victims and witnesses get the responses and support they need. |
| **Victims and witnesses are guided into support at the right time and at all key stages of the criminal justice system, including after the court process** | Identifying clear pathways which indicate the support available at each stage, and a contact point, including post court and compensation. |
| Putting in place arrangements for assessing and responding to victim and witness needs at all stages of the criminal justice process. |
| **Support for victims is delivered through a co-ordinated and joined up approach** | Working collaboratively across criminal justice organisations and with statutory, voluntary and community bodies to provide support for all victims. |
| Informing policy, legislation and service development with better quality data, research and shared learning. |
| **STRATEGIC OUTCOMES:*** Victims and witnesses will be able to access the support they need.
* Victims and witnesses will feel supported to recover from the impact of crime.
* More victims and witnesses will feel confident that if they report a crime they will be supported.
* There will be a reduction in the number of victims and witnesses who feel retraumatised by engagement with the criminal justice system.
* There will be an increase in public confidence in the justice system.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will disengage from the criminal justice system, leading to a reduction in attrition rates.
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**PILLAR 2: COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION**

5.6 The manner in which we communicate and share information with victims and witnesses about their case, their role, their wishes and rights are all essential parts of an effective justice system. Many of these are already set out in the Victim Charter and Witness Charter. Even though the requirements are prescribed in the Charters, some victims and witnesses still report that they do not receive timely updates; that the way in which they were communicated with was not trauma-informed or understandable; and that they were not given explanations about what happened or a chance to give their views or preferences. For most members of the public the criminal justice system is complex and unfamiliar and many victims and witnesses report that they do not know what the justice system expects of them, and that there is no clear source of information to let them know what will happen, when it will happen, or what provision is in place to support them. Often this leads to confusion and dissatisfaction. Whilst there already are sources of information victims and witnesses have told us that these are not easily accessible to a wide range of people.

5.7 We also recognise that, as a criminal justice system, we need to improve how we gather statistical victim data and feedback to help us gain insights into the victim and witness experience.

5.8 The strategy identifies two main objectives under this pillar that are intended to ensure that victims and witnesses receive the information they need to help them as they navigate through the criminal justice system; and that the system communicates with them in an appropriate, compassionate and trauma informed way.

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| **PILLAR 2: COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION**Ensuring information about the justice system is accessible |
| **OBJECTIVES** | **KEY PRIORITY AREAS** |
| **Victims and witnesses are provided with the information they need at all stages; and understand their role in the criminal justice system and what is expected of them.** | Providing clear, accessible and consistent information for victims and witnesses about the criminal justice process. |
| Providing accessible options for victims to report a crime. |
| Providing regular updates and information to victims and witnesses at key points of the justice process. |
| Informing victims and witnesses of the reasons for decisions made at all stages of the criminal justice system which relate to them, in a way which victims and witnesses can readily understand. |
| Ensuring that criminal justice organisations comply with their obligations under the Victim and Witness Charters. |
| Gathering feedback on the experiences of victims and witnesses in the criminal justice system to provide insights into experiences and improve outcomes for victims and witnesses.  |
| Ensuring there are accessible mechanisms for victims and witnesses to raise complaints about their experience of the criminal justice system. |
| **All communication with victims and witnesses is carried out in an accessible, trauma-informed and compassionate manner.** | Listening to victims in a trauma-informed and compassionate way when they are reporting crime. |
| Increasing opportunities for victims’ voices to be heard and ensuring that strategy delivery recognises the diverse range of victim and witness needs. |
| Ensuring information can be understood by all victims and witnesses, including children and young people, and those with additional needs. |
| **STRATEGIC OUTCOMES** * More victims and witnesses will receive the information they need in a timely manner.
* Victims’ and witnesses’ experiences of the criminal justice system will be improved and fewer victims will feel re-traumatised by the criminal justice system.
* Victims and witnesses will have a better understanding of how the criminal justice system operates and how to navigate it.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will feel frustrated about their personal experiences of the criminal justice system.
* Victims and witnesses will have improved confidence in the criminal justice system.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will disengage from the criminal justice system, leading to a reduction in attrition rates.
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**PILLAR 3: TRANSPARENCY AND PARTCIPATION**

5.9 This pillar has interdependencies with the previous one as it involves understanding and engagement, but it also seeks to clarify and improve opportunities for victims and witnesses to be active within the justice system. Our legal system is based on a model in which victims often feel peripheral to the process: they may be required to provide a statement; to give evidence; to have that evidence tested and cross-examined; but often they feel that they are not informed or included in decisions. Some victims have reported that this has created an impression that the legal system is exclusive and secretive, and even that those most impacted by the crime have the least involvement.

5.10 We recognise that there are good reasons (for example, linked to the independence of our judicial system and to protecting the ECHR Article 6 rights of defendants) for some of the limitations on how victims can participate, however, there are also parts of the process where victims and witnesses can and should be informed, and be supported to have a clear and active role. The objectives within this Pillar seek to improve engagement across the various stages; as well as identifying options for participation and building on the progress that has been made so far in assisting victims and witnesses to give evidence.

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| **PILLAR 3: TRANSPARENCY AND PARTCIPATION**Empowering victims and witnesses to understand the process of the criminal justice system and the decisions made which impact upon them |
| **OBJECTIVES** | **KEY PRIORITY AREAS** |
| **Victims and witnesses are empowered to remain engaged throughout the Criminal Justice System.** | Creating a criminal justice system portal to provide easily accessible information for victims and witnesses  |
| Providing information about PSNI’s and PPS’ decision making processes and reasons, including information about review processes and alternative prosecutions. |
| Empowering and supporting victims to have their voices heard about the cases and decisions that affect them. |
| **Alternatives to prosecution are considered where appropriate.** | Ensuring that alternatives to prosecution are explored and that victims and witnesses are made aware of options and can participate where appropriate. |
| **Measures are in place to enable victims and witnesses to feel safe when giving evidence and to minimise the risk of additional trauma.** | Providing a trauma-informedenvironment to support victims and witnesses giving evidence. |
| **STRATEGIC OUTCOMES:*** Victims’ and witnesses’ experiences of the criminal justice system will be improved and fewer victims will feel re-traumatised by the criminal justice system.
* Victims and witnesses will have a better understanding of how the criminal justice system operates and how to navigate it.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will feel frustrated about their personal experiences of the criminal justice system.
* More victims and witnesses will be able to understand the reasons for decisions and criminal justice outcomes.
* More victims and witnesses will feel that they have been able to actively participate in the criminal justice system.
* More victims and witnesses will feel safe and confident to give evidence.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will feel re-traumatised by engagement with the criminal justice system.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will disengage from the criminal justice system, leading to a reduction in attrition rates.
* There will be improved public confidence in the criminal justice system.
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**PILLAR 4: RIGHTS AND CONFIDENCE**

5.11 The Victim Charter and Witness Charter were designed to clarify and protect the rights of victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system. At each stage in the system, and with each engagement with a criminal justice organisation, the Charters set out what should be expected, including how victims and witnesses should be treated; the types of support available and referral processes into these; the information and updates that should be provided at key points; the provision of access to information in different formats; the help that should be available for those with particular needs; and many other types of entitlements. The Charters are essential protections for victim and witness rights, however we recognise that there is more that we need to do to promote the Charters so that victims, witnesses and the wider public are familiar with them; to improve how they are applied by criminal justice organisations across the system; to monitor compliance with them; and to demonstrate that the justice system is delivering procedural rights for victims and witnesses as well as for those accused of crime.

5.12 This Pillar draws out the interdependencies that exist between safeguarding the rights of victims and witnesses with improving confidence in the justice system. We believe that reinforcing the rights of victims and witnesses will lead to increased public confidence in the criminal justice system. This does not imply or create a conflict of rights, but rather is about improving performance and compliance; driving best practice; and using international standards and developments to assess our own procedures and ensure that the operation of our justice system is balanced, trauma-informed and rights-compliant. Confidence can also be raised through greater transparency and through further developing a system which explains its processes. In this respect, it is clear that there are strong interdependencies between this pillar and each of the others.

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| **PILLAR 4: RIGHTS AND CONFIDENCE**Ensuring victim and witness entitlements are met, and that public confidence in the justice system improves |
| **OBJECTIVES** | **KEY PRIORITY AREAS** |
| **Victims’ and witnesses’ rights and entitlements under the Victim and Witness Charters are promoted at all stages in the Criminal Justice System.** | Promoting the Charters, including complying with Human Rights obligations and ECHR conventions. |
| Establishing a new statutory Commissioner for Victims of Crime, designed to oversee and protect the rights of victims. |
| **Criminal justice organisations comply with their Charter obligations; encourage best practice; and promote positive developments to meet the needs and interests of victims and witnesses.** | Providing leadership and championing the needs and interests of victims and witnesses across relevant sectors, including when developing new policies and procedures, to ensure that the wider impact on victims is taken into account |
| Demonstrating compliance and accountability by collating and publishing data. |
| Improving public confidence by sharing outcomes through statistical evidence and survey results to increase openness and transparency. |
| **The views and issues raised by victims and witnesses are listened to; considered; and any necessary action is taken to drive improvement.** | Establishing a new statutory Commissioner for Victims of Crime, to give a voice to victims. |
| Increasing opportunities for the voice of victims and witnesses to be heard, ensuring that strategy delivery reflects the voices and needs of victims including hard to reach groups. |
| **STRATEGIC OUTCOMES*** There will be improved public awareness of the Victim and Witness Charters.
* Victims and witnesses will be aware of their rights under the Charters.
* There will be improved compliance with the Victim and Witness Charters.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will feel frustrated about their personal experiences of the criminal justice system.
* More victims feel engaged by the system.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will feel re-traumatised by engagement with the criminal justice system.
* Fewer victims and witnesses will disengage from the criminal justice system, leading to a reduction in attrition rates.
* There will be more effective policies and services, informed by the experiences of victims and witnesses.
* There will be improved public confidence in the criminal justice system.
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**PILLAR 5: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

5.13 For many of us, when we think of a criminal justice system we envisage how it applies to adults. However, the most recent PSNI statistics[[12]](#footnote-12) show that of the 69,000 victims of reported crime in Northern Ireland in 2024, over 11,500 were children and young people under the age of 20. The reality is that children and young people represent a sizeable proportion of the victims and witnesses who are required to engage with police, prosecutors and judges, often in buildings and offices that have originally been designed for adults.

5.14 It is important to highlight that much progress has already been made in recognising the needs of children and young people and in adapting the justice system for them; this includes the establishment of trauma-informed services and supports and, in some cases, new dedicated facilities, such as the Belfast Remote Evidence Centre. Nonethless, outside of the established services, children, young people and their representatives have highlighted where there are inconsistencies. These include that pilots and examples of good practice or child-friendly facilities in one area may not be accessible for children and young people in other areas.

5.15 As well as addressing regional differences, our strategy seeks to expand how we engage with children and young people about their experiences, so that the justice system can further respond to their needs and tailor services and language appropriately. Children’s rights and best practice models will be central to the delivery of strategic objectives and outcomes under this Pillar, with a continuing focus on delivering specific supports to meet the high level of need that child victims in sexual offence cases present with.

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| **PILLAR 5: CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**Ensuring the criminal justice system takes meets the needs of children and young people who are victims and witnesses |
| **OUTCOMES** | **KEY PRIORITY AREAS** |
| **Children, young people, parents and carers are empowered to report crime; and measures are put in place to remove barriers to participating in the justice** **system.** | Providing children and young people with accessible information, services and facilities to support engagement in the criminal justice process, in a way that ensures they feel protected and safe and can give their best evidence |
| **Children and young people are supported and feel safe, inclusive of diversity of need; and are guided to support quickly using a trauma-informed approach.** | Delivering a child-centred approach by providing tailored, responsive and specialised support for children and young people in an age-appropriate manner, to reduce trauma and understand their needs, including ongoing consideration of a Barnahus-informed model for Northern Ireland.  |
| **The views and issues raised by children, young people, parents and carers are listened to; considered; and any necessary action is taken to drive improvement.** | Child participation is achieved through best practice, e.g. Lundy approach. |
| Children and young people are consulted, and their experiences are captured through age-appropriate surveys and other means of engagement. |
| Age-appropriate amenities and facilities are available. |

6. Delivery

*Delivery plans*

6.1 It is intended that delivery of the strategy will be supported by a series of delivery plans that will set out in detail the SMART actions that we intend to progress to achieve outcomes. These will include clear, measurable targets and progress indicators which will be monitored and reviewed across the span of the strategy.

6.2 To supplement the Strategic Outcomes that have been identified against each pillar of the strategy, an early actions under our first delivery plan will be to develop a comprehensive Performance Framework setting out indicators and measures that will allow us to monitor the impact of the strategy to ensure that it is effective and to intervene with mitigations where we are not achieving the anticipated outcome.

6.3 Delivery of the strategy will be overseen and monitored by the Victim and Witness Steering Group, who will ensure a continuous and responsible focus on the strategic Vision and objectives. Action owners and timescales will be clearly identified. We will also ensure that there is sufficient flexibility to be able respond dynamically to new issues and needs that emerge across the lifespan of the strategy. Where necessary, multi-agency Task and Finish groups will be established (with a clear lead agency) to take forward specific actions under the strategy. We will also publish regular progress reports to highlight the work that has been delivered as well as performance metrics on the impact of the strategy’s outcomes. The Victim and Witness Steering Group will monitor and review actions plans on a quarterly basis and ensure any corrective action or barriers to implementation are addressed.

*Funding*

6.4 Many responses to the Call for Views stressed the importance of developing costed delivery plans and that longer-term sustainable funding needed to made available to support delivery of the strategy and its delivery plans.

6.5 In developing associated delivery plans we will seek, so far as possible, to set out the costs associated with implementation. In some cases preparatory scoping work may need to be carried out before there is a reliable estimate of costs. Where this is the case, we will reflect this in the action plan.

6.6 At the point of publication, future budgets remain uncertain and, within this context, where there are funding pressures, we will seek to progress work against priority objectives that will deliver the most positive impacts to victims and witnesses, subject to available funding. The allocation of funding and work to be progressed will be considered by the Victim and Witness Steering Group as part of the development of delivery plans, informed by engagement with key stakeholders and delivery partners, and will be agreed by Ministers.

7. Impact Assessments****

7.1 The Department has conducted screening and impact assessments alongside the development of this draft strategy. These are in relation to:

* Equality Impact
* Rural Needs Impact
* Child Rights Impact.

These documents are published an available at [Draft Victims and Witnesses of Crime Strategy 2025 – 2030 | Department of Justice](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/consultations/draft-victims-and-witnesses-crime-strategy-2025-2030)

We will continue to review and update our impact assessment process as required.

# 8. Accessing support

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8.1 We know that for those affected by crime, reading this document and reflecting on the issues raised might lead to negative feelings, or you may wish to speak to someone.

If you have been upset or affected by reading this draft Strategy, help and support is available. Victim Support NI is an independent charity which helps people affected by crime. They offer a free and confidential service, whether or not the crime has been reported, regardless of how long ago the crime took place.

Victim Support NI can give you emotional support and practical advice to help you recover from the impact of crime and move on with your life. They will not pass on the details of your case to anyone, except in cases where they believe someone is at risk of serious harm and needs immediate help.

Victim Support NI works in partnership with a range of organisations who can provide you with the necessary support and information you need, dependant on your individual needs. They can be contacted at 028 9024 3133, or 028 7137 0086.





1. [Victim and Witness Strategy 2021-24](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/victim-and-witness-strategy-2021-2024) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Addendum one-year Action Plan](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/victim%20and%20witness%20strategy%20addendum%20one-year%20action%20plan.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Victim and Witness Strategy 2021-2024 Progress Report](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/victim%20and%20witness%20strategy%20progress%20report.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [CJINI - Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland - The care and treatment of victims and witnesses by the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland](https://www.cjini.org/TheInspections/Action-Plan-Reviews-Inspection-Follow-Up-Revie/2023/Oct-Dec/Victims-and-Witnesses-Follow-Up-Review) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [Victim and Witness Experience of the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System: Key Findings 2022/23 (justice-ni.gov.uk)](https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/justice/Victim%20and%20Witness%20Experience%20of%20the%20Northern%20Ireland%20Criminal%20Justice%20System%20-%20Key%20Findings%20-%202022-23.pdf) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Police Recorded Crime Statistics | PSNI](https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Violence against the person includes a wide range of offences from murder to minor assaults such as pushing and shoving that result in no physical harm. Even within the same classification the degree of violence used can vary considerably between incidents. Behavioural crimes such as stalking and harassment are also included. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [The impact of crime on victims and society - Office for National Statistics](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/articles/theimpactofcrimeonvictimsandsociety/march2022) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [Programme for Government | The Executive Office](https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/programme-government) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [Victim Charter and Witness Charter | nidirect](https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/charters) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Responses provided on an anonymous basis. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [Police Recorded Crime Statistics | PSNI](https://www.psni.police.uk/about-us/our-publications-and-reports/official-statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)