

NSPCC Response to 'Delivering a better service to victims and witnesses of crime – a Northern Ireland draft strategy'.

April 2007

INTRODUCTION

1. The NSPCC welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Northern Ireland Strategy 'Delivering a Better Service to Victims and Witnesses of Crime'. The draft strategy pulls together the efforts of agencies across the Criminal Justice System, both statutory and voluntary. It is an appropriate implementation of aspects of the Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland and addresses the recommendations of the Justice Oversight Commissioner and Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland.
2. The NSPCC is the lead voluntary child protection agency in the United Kingdom. The Society is unique in having statutory powers under the Children (NI) Order 1995 and operates 20 projects in Northern Ireland offering a broad portfolio of services relating to child protection and prevention, safeguarding, working with victims, family support, training and consultancy, research and policy development and listening services. Two services have a direct relevance to this draft strategy. The Young Witness Service provides support to young witnesses in all of Northern Ireland's Crown Courts and is in the process of piloting services to magistrates and youth courts prior to a roll out across Northern Ireland. The Young Witness Service has been developed in line with recommendations from the Review of the Criminal Justice System and is funded by the Northern Ireland Office. The NSPCC in Northern Ireland also operates three post-abuse treatment teams for children and young people who have experienced sexual, physical and/or emotional abuse and/or neglect.
3. Our response to the draft strategy draws on our experience of working with the victims of child abuse and witnesses in court, both in Northern Ireland and Great Britain. The NSPCC is also a member of the Victims, Vulnerable and Intimidated Witnesses (VVIW) Steering Group which has been responsible for the development of the draft strategy. The inclusion of the NSPCC and Victim Support NI on VVIW has helped to underpin a more co-ordinated approach to victim and witness issues between the statutory criminal justice agencies and in their relationships with voluntary organisations. The NSPCC welcomes the opportunity this has afforded to assist in the development of this draft strategy and views the strategy as a very important component of a wider reform agenda within the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland. Our response focuses on areas where the strategy could be improved now, or as it continues to develop over time, through the action plan.

GENERAL

4. To maximise the effectiveness of the strategy for children and young people it is critical that the strategy is regularly and explicitly cross-referenced with the Strategy for Addressing Sexual Violence in Northern Ireland 'Hidden Crimes, Secret Pain', which is also out for consultation and appears in the OFMDFM action plan underpinning the 10 year Children's Strategy. It is important that these strategies emphasise the need for close, collaborative working between VVIW and the inter-departmental Steering Group on Sexual Violence and the relationship to wider children's policy and high level outcomes being taken forward by the Children and Young People's Unit. This is particularly pertinent to the commitments made at 6.3 in the draft strategy.
5. The NSPCC welcomes the commitment outside this strategy by NIO and the Criminal Justice Board to produce a Northern Ireland version of Achieving Best Evidence Vol. 2 and the complementary pre-trial therapy guidance in relation to children and adults. These three guidance documents will greatly assist the development of an overarching Code of Practice which is proposed in the draft strategy.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 1: ACCESS TO INFORMATION

6. The NSPCC supports the proposals in this section.
7. In relation to victims and witnesses the Review of the Criminal Justice System has been a major success. Previous attempts to communicate this to the public could have been more successful as a result of better media and PR planning. The last launch of the witness services was overtaken by other media announcements from NIO and other government departments on the same day despite the presence of a minister and the Lord Chief Justice. It is important to ensure that these 'good news' stories about the Criminal Justice System are not drowned out (Cf. Section 9 – Communications Strategy, of the draft strategy).
8. NI Court Service has done valuable work with schools as part of the citizenship component of the curriculum. This could play a role in a wider information strategy.
9. Northern Ireland is a community where people still read their local papers. Local prosecutors, court managers, divisional/sub-divisional police commanders and probation managers could all play a role in using the local media to provide information. District Policing Partnerships could also consider this as part of their information strategy.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 2: CASE PROGRESSION

10. The NSPCC supports the proposals in this section.
11. Whether it is a named individual or a 'one stop' shop it is imperative that witnesses and victims in particular know how to access information about their case and that this is provided accurately and in a timely fashion. Care must be taken not to reduce services to the level of the lowest common denominator. For witnesses on the periphery of a case, telephone contact to a central number may suffice. Victims and witnesses involved in more complex, serious and/or traumatic cases may depend on the investigating officer or even PPS staff. When those identified or named individuals are not available a central inquiry number may be of use.
12. All these arrangements need to be underpinned by consistent protocols between the key agencies – PSNI, PPS, NI Court Service, Victim Support NI and the NSPCC. Victim Support NI and the NSPCC already provide a considerable amount of case progression information to witnesses and victims. If it is desirable to continue this arrangement then it will need to be backed by clear protocols with the statutory agencies that provide role clarity and data sharing guidance.
13. There is a need to review the experience of Witness Care Units in England and Wales. An assessment of the applicability of this model to Northern Ireland will also need to take account of the review of the PPS Community Liaison Teams.
14. A physical 'one stop' shop that possibly acts as a drop in centre may only be viable in Belfast. While this may appear attractive as a flagship service, it may represent an unbalanced use of scarce resources. This would require a very careful cost-benefit analysis before proceeding.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 3: A QUALITY SERVICE

15. The NSPCC supports the proposals in this section, in particular the proposal for an overarching Code of Practice. This would underpin the policies of each agency and the consistent protocols between all the agencies that will ensure seamless, efficient and equitable service delivery across Northern Ireland.
16. Common training standards should include volunteers as well as staff. There is a role for Skills for Justice in the development of training standards for staff and volunteers.
17. To provide quality services to victims and witnesses, information sharing protocols should also include the NSPCC and Victim Support NI, probably as end users of information held by statutory agencies.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 4: SUPPORTING VICTIMS AND WITNESSES

18. The NSPCC supports the proposals in this section. Addressing waiting times on the day of hearing is particularly important.
19. Post-trial there is a vital linkage with the Sexual Violence Strategy and the Bamford Review of Mental Health Services in relation to the availability of post-abuse treatment services for children and young people across Northern Ireland. Current arrangements are inconsistent across the region and quality post-trial outcomes for victims will depend on the availability of appropriate treatment services. This is an issue that will need to be considered by the new Regional Health and Social Care Authority, possibly through the development of a national service framework.
20. The development of remote TV link facilities for young and vulnerable witnesses would represent a major improvement. NSPCC are currently working to secure funding to pilot this approach in Londonderry. Remote TV link is being used successfully in England.
21. The strategy should begin to consider cross-border aspects to services for victims and witnesses. This has been a feature of young witness cases in Londonderry since the inception of the Young Witness Service.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE 5: LISTENING TO VICTIMS AND WITNESSES

22. The NSPCC supports the proposals in this section.
23. Obtaining the views of victims and witnesses must include the involvement of children and young people. This can be time consuming and resource hungry work. Care must be taken that service user involvement from young people is not tokenistic. The NSPCC has experience of seeking the views of children, young people and their parents/carers through regular feedback and formal service evaluations. Our experience in Northern Ireland and Great Britain is that young witnesses are a difficult group to engage in large numbers because once a trial is finished they do not want to be reminded about the crime or the criminal justice process. It will be important to set realistic objectives and targets in relation to meaningful consultation with young witnesses.

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