

Criminal justice

Briefing

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# Victims and witnesses

Providing better support

*The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our work covers local government, housing, health and criminal justice services.*

*As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.*

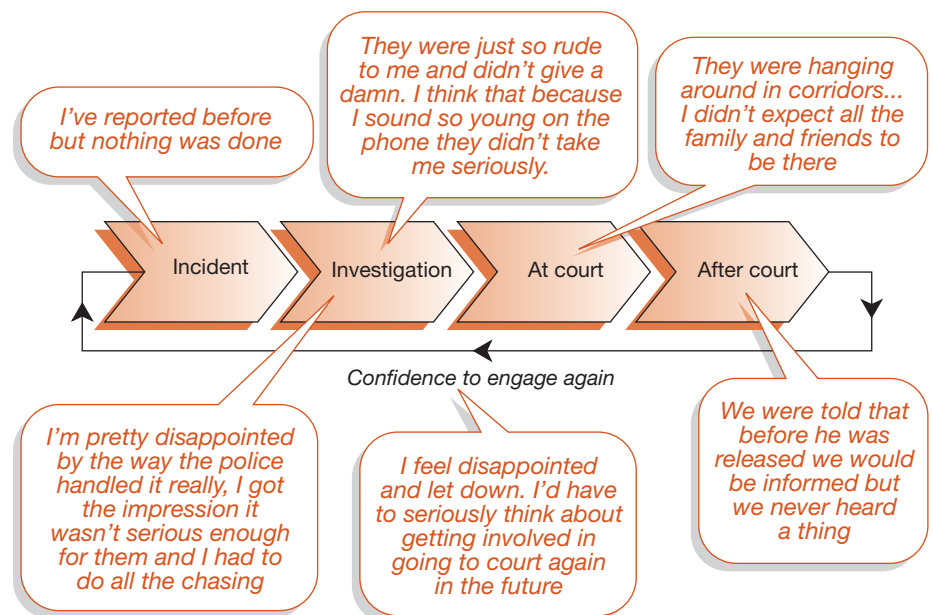
- 1 Each year around one-quarter of people in England and Wales are victims of crime. Yet few victims will feel that the criminal justice process that follows delivers a satisfactory conclusion. Victims and witnesses face a potentially long and complicated pathway through the criminal justice system (CJS).
  - only a small proportion (9 per cent) of victims will see an offender brought to justice
  - two out of five witnesses would not be prepared to go through the process again under similar circumstances
- 2 While crime rates have been falling over the past twenty years, people do not necessarily believe the statistics. The British Crime Survey reveals that fear of crime is rising. For around one-third of people, disorderly or antisocial behaviour makes them feel unsafe and reduces their quality of life. Such incidents may not be classified as crimes by the police and it can be difficult for people to locate or contact the agencies which are best placed to respond and provide advice to victims and witnesses.
- 3 As part of the drive to improve public confidence in the CJS, the Government has made a commitment to putting victims and witnesses at the heart of it. It has pledged to provide them with the support and services they need, whether within the CJS itself or through other agencies. This is not just a matter of providing better value for money by joining up services, it is a recognition that by improving the way in which victims and witnesses are treated, it should lead to a greater number of offenders being brought to justice.
- 4 Around £13 billion is spent annually on the CJS. Apart from just over £29 million that is currently allocated to Victim Support, no specific funding stream is attached to victim and witness care and no activity based costing exists in this area of service delivery. This absence of financial data, combined with the lack of a framework for managing performance across all agencies, means that accurately evaluating the cost effectiveness of current services is impossible.
- 5 Local authorities provide support for victims and witnesses and deal with antisocial behaviour issues within a number of their mainstream services. The CJS, local authorities and Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs) need to develop much better integrated crime reduction approaches and support mechanisms for victims and witnesses.
- 6 However, to date, no comprehensive evaluation has taken place of the services currently provided to victims and witnesses of crime, disorderly or antisocial behaviour. Victims and witnesses themselves have not been asked in depth about their experiences of trying to access the help and support that they need, or about their subsequent engagement with the agencies that provide this help and support.

- 7 To address this, the Audit Commission has looked not only at current service provision to victims and witnesses, but also at what those on the receiving end of these services think about them. It has talked directly to both victims and witnesses of crime, disorderly and antisocial behaviour, as well as to practitioners and policymakers.
- 8 For victims and witnesses, having an unsatisfactory experience of services can occur at any point along a pathway, which potentially extends from the initial incident through to court and beyond with key milestones along the way (**Exhibit 1**).

### Exhibit 1

#### Key milestones along the victim or witness pathway

Victims and witnesses may experience problems at any point along the pathway.



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 At each stage of the process therefore, a range of factors lead to large numbers of victims and witnesses dropping out of, or being dropped by, the system. Consequently, of all those experiencing crime, disorderly or antisocial behaviour, only a very small minority actually see the offender sentenced in court. *Victims and Witnesses: Providing Better Support* looks at what can be done to minimise these factors, thereby improving the experience for victims and witnesses, increasing individual and community confidence in the CJS as a whole and, ultimately, helping to bring more offenders to justice.

## The way ahead

- 10 National action should include setting common goals for government departments, with associated service standards and performance targets for agencies. Local action should focus on better services that make victims and witnesses feel that they are an important and valued part of the process. Critical to improvement is a shared local vision of victim and witness care, with clarity about who is responsible for action. Local capacity to improve will vary widely. We therefore recommend the following changes:
1. CJS and crime reduction partners should give greater priority to victim and witness needs. National targets need to be explicit with regard to victim and witness care. They should apply to local authorities, CDRPs and the CJS so that whole system improvement is achieved. Performance improvement frameworks being developed for CDRPs should be supported by joint inspection processes and public reporting of performance against their crime reduction strategies. Strategic Regulation of LCJBs should be designed and delivered jointly by CJS regulators, with a high emphasis placed on user focus and the effective use of resources.
  2. Local Criminal Justice Boards (LCJBs) need to be given a statutory basis to support greater devolvement of resources and freedoms to lead service improvements involving CDRPs and Youth Offending Teams (YOTs). This will provide a strong basis to move to pooled budgets and the introduction of activity based management accounting across the CJS and crime reduction partners.
  3. The performance of local authorities relating to their duties under the Crime and Disorder Act and their effectiveness in providing integrated support to CDRPs and LCJBs should be incorporated into comprehensive performance assessment. CDRPs must broaden their analysis and activities to include incident reporting and the issues of non-reporting of both crime and non-crime incidents.
  4. YOTs should support LCJBs in their work with victims of youth crime and translation of good practice and ideas which work in the Youth Justice system.
- 11 Perhaps the greatest challenge facing these agencies is the need to see victims and witnesses as critical to their performance in reducing crime and the fear of crime. The challenge for the many agencies involved is to champion and deliver a culture change that will support an approach that gives much greater priority to victim and witness care.

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