



News Release
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LAUNCH OF NEW VICTIM AND WITNESS CARE UNIT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

A dedicated single point of contact for victims and witnesses of crime was formally launched today. The Victim and Witness Care Unit's (VWCU) primary function is to keep victims and witnesses fully informed of the progress of their case and can also make referrals to other service providers if additional support is required.

The Director of Public Prosecutions, Barra McGrory QC was joined at the launch in Belfast by the Minister of Justice, David Ford MLA, ACC Mark Hamilton, PSNI, Victim Support NI (VSNI) Executive Director, Dr Eugene McGuckin together with representatives of a broad cross section of both the voluntary and statutory bodies including the judiciary, Chair and members of the Justice Committee, Women's Aid and NSPCC.

Announcing the establishment of the Unit, Barra McGrory QC said: **“The establishment of the VWCU is a joint initiative between PPS and PSNI to ensure victims and witnesses receive a first class service and recognises the significant role they play in the justice system. It creates a single point of contact within the criminal justice system providing a clear focus for and on victims and witnesses.**

“Located in both PPS Belfast and Foyle offices its primary function is to keep victims and witnesses fully informed of the progress of their case. The Unit will communicate with them by their preferred means of contact provide timely and relevant information. It will also assess their individual needs and where appropriate offer access to additional services.

“It is anticipated that VWCU will deal with some 160,000 victims and witnesses a year, 23,000 of which will be victims of crime.”

Commenting on the progress made in establishing the VWCU, Minister for Justice, David Ford MLA said: **“The Victim and Witness Care Unit is the centrepiece of**

the five-year victim and witness strategy that I launched in June last year. Substantial progress has already been made in delivering the actions contained in that strategy, including a new Victim Charter, which I intend to consult on later this month, and pilot registered intermediaries schemes for victims, witnesses and defendants with significant communication difficulties. I also plan to introduce a new Justice Bill, to create a faster, fairer justice system, before the summer.

“The new Unit is a major part of our response to feedback from victims and is already making a real, practical difference to peoples’ lives. It is an excellent example of the value of working in partnership, with effective collaborative working between the Public Prosecution Service and the Police Service, supported by staff from Victim Support N.”

PSNI ACC Mark Hamilton speaking at the event: **“The PSNI welcomes the establishment of the Victim and Witness Care Unit. Being the victim of a crime or witnessing a crime can often be a harrowing experience for those concerned.**

“We hope that the establishment of this single point of contact will enable a multi-agency, coordinated approach to ensure that those affected by crime are kept informed of the progress of their case.”

Speaking on behalf of victims, Victim Support NI Executive Director, Dr Eugene McGuckin, said: **“This Unit represents one of the most significant developments of the past decade, in respect of enhancing the services and support available to victims and witnesses of crime in Northern Ireland.**

“We firmly believe that improved co-ordination and communication between the Police, Prosecution and ourselves at Victim Support NI, will help us to respond to victims and assist us to address their needs in a more timely and effective manner.

“We hope that this Unit, with offices in Belfast and Foyle, will improve the experience of individuals as well as hopefully improving public confidence in our criminal justice system.”

Notes to Editors

1. The VWCU provides a single point of contact within the criminal justice system.
2. The VWCU which started as a pilot in Belfast Region in November 2012 is now fully operational across Northern Ireland.
3. Located in PPS Foyle and Belfast offices will be staffed by 62 PPS and police civilian staff and two VSNI support representatives.
4. Its primary role is to keep victims and witnesses fully informed of the progress of their case throughout the criminal justice process. The VWCU can also make referrals to other service providers if additional support is required.
5. A named case officer will be appointed to each case and will act as a single point of contact from when an investigation or charge file is submitted to the PPS through to and including the outcome of any court proceedings.
6. Communicate with victims and witnesses using their preferred means of contact and at a preferred time of day where possible. This includes by telephone, letter or email.

If a victim the VWCU case officer will:

- Tell them when a charge file or the full investigation file has been submitted to the PPS;
- Tell them if a defendant is granted bail or their bail conditions are significantly changed;
- Notify them when a decision is taken by a prosecutor in the case;
- Provide them with information about making a Victim Personal Statement;
- Tell them about relevant court hearings including those they are not required to attend;
- Keep them updated at key stages of the case;
- Give details of any court outcome and sentence, as appropriate;
- Tell them if the defendant appeals against their conviction or sentence, and the outcome of any appeals.

If a bereaved relative or the next of kin of a person who has died and who was involved in the case, VWCU will keep them updated on the progress of the case. The case officer can communicate directly with them or if preferred, through the Family Liaison Officer.

If a witness, the case officer will:

- Tell them if they will be required to give evidence;
- Tell them the location, dates and times of relevant court hearings;
- Provide information on the facilities available at all court locations;
- Give information about claiming for expenses that may be incurred in attending court;
- Give the information needed to help them prepare for attending court to give evidence;

- Conduct and review Needs Assessments as the case progresses, to help provide them with the specific support and guidance needed;
- Give information about Special Measures which can be granted by the court to help them give their best evidence if vulnerable and or intimidated;
- With their consent, make a direct referral to Victim Support NI or to NSPCC Young Witness Service;
- Arrange for an interpreter to be present at court to help if English is not their first language.

Additional Assistance

VWCU works closely VSNI. VSNI representatives are based within the VWCU and can provide immediate advice and emotional support by telephone. They can also make a referral to a VSNI Community Office for further help such as counselling or assistance with making a compensation claim. VWCU also works with NSPCC Young Witness Service who can provide support to young victims and witnesses.