



**Public
Prosecution
Service**

Independent
Fair
Effective



Communications and Engagement Strategy

2021 - 26





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Director's Foreword

Since our inception in 2005, the Public Prosecution Service has been underpinned by a commitment to serve society in an **independent, fair** and **effective** way.

The **independence** of the PPS cuts to the heart of all work. It is this core value which ensures the integrity of our decision-making and that, in turn, provides the public with confidence that we discharge our duties without fear or favour, and without undue pressure or influence from any quarter.

The role of the prosecutor is to act at all times in the interests of justice. There is often a perception that the prosecution is or should be a victim's legal representative or personal advocate. While the views of victims are certainly heard and extremely important to many aspects of how the justice system operates, a prosecutor has a duty to be **fair** to *all* parties in criminal proceedings, including a defendant. This requirement of fairness is a fundamental principle of the rule of law. We therefore take seriously our responsibility to be honest, open and accountable, balancing this appropriately at all times with the

many complexities and sensitivities that accompany the work of prosecution decision making and the conduct of court proceedings.

As a central pillar of the criminal justice system, the work of the PPS understandably attracts a high level of scrutiny and commentary. We value that accountability and we recognise fully that in order for the public to have confidence in the work and role of the PPS, there must be understanding of it. In order for the PPS and other parts of the justice system to be viewed as **effective**, it is vital that information placed in the public domain, whether about individual cases or particular types of offending, is put into the right context and is accurate and balanced.





I therefore believe that strong and clear two-way communication is key to maintaining the public confidence in our service, as well as assisting our continuous improvement. To that end, this Strategy recognises the immense value of increased and open engagement with the victims and witnesses of crime, stakeholders including representative groups, and the wider community. It also outlines the importance of effective engagement with other stakeholder groups such as the media and political representatives. Together, these groups play a powerful role in helping advocate for PPS work, but also in holding us to account.

The Strategy also highlights the commitment of the PPS to our most important asset, the staff at all levels of the organisation who work tirelessly to provide a high level of service to the public. We want to reflect the same values internally as we do externally, and effective communication between ourselves is central to achieving our strategic objectives.

The PPS is one part of a wider system which works collaboratively to meet the collective aim of service to justice and to the public. Although respect for the independence and different roles and responsibilities of each organisation has to be observed, the PPS values the working relationships we hold with partner agencies including, for example, the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Office of the Lord Chief Justice, the Attorney General for Northern Ireland and the Department of Justice. We can and do work together, from our individual positions, to highlight the importance of good communication with the ultimate aim of increasing effectiveness of the justice system.

My hope as Director of a service that sits at the heart of the justice system, is that we can avail of technological advances and digital ways of working to make many aspects of the justice system more effective, including communication. I would like to see this taken forward as not just a transactional relationship regarding the exchange of information, but a way

of providing more bespoke and tailored communication to suit the individual needs of the recipient. The speed and efficacy of smartphones, email and apps should always leave space for spoken or face to face communication. Any such engagement from PPS representatives should be conducted with the level of clarity, kindness and understanding that we all need when dealing with often difficult experiences.

This Strategy covers the period from 2021-26 and marks the first time we have set out how we intend to expand and organise engagement with key audiences and thus foster trust in our work.

All activities lead back to the one core aim of helping the public understand our role and responsibilities, and therefore have confidence in us. I look forward to seeing the value of its strategic direction unfold over the next five years.

STEPHEN HERRON
The Director of Public Prosecutions



1 Introduction

About the Public Prosecution Service

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) is the principal prosecuting authority in Northern Ireland. In addition to taking decisions as to prosecution in all cases investigated by the police, it also considers cases investigated by other statutory authorities, such as HM Revenue and Customs.

The Service was established on 13th June 2005 by the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002. It is headed by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP).

The PPS Management Board supports the DPP in his leadership of the organisation. The Board is chaired by the Director and is comprised of the Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions, two Senior Assistant Directors (SADs) and two independent non-executive members.

The PPS is based across four locations, with offices in Belfast, Londonderry, Newry and a satellite office in Omagh. There are six legal sections within the PPS, each headed by an Assistant Director who has overall responsibility for decision-making on investigation files and for the conduct of prosecutions in their section.

Corporate Services provides a range of professional, technical and other support services, including the work of the Communications Unit which has responsibility for the implementation of this Strategy.

For further detail of the full PPS corporate structure, please refer to our latest [Annual Report](#).



2 Background and Communications Context

This Communications and Engagement Strategy has been developed to protect and enhance understanding of the work and role of the PPS.

In adopting a strategy, the aim is to clearly communicate our role at the heart of the criminal justice system and the organisation's strategic priorities to key audiences.

The direction of this Strategy has been informed by the priorities of PPS Management Board and their collective aim to enhance engagement and expand understanding of the organisation's work.

This is built on a recognition of the value of improving stakeholder engagement by listening to the stakeholders and continuing to build effective two-way relationships.

The PPS recognises its duty and desire to communicate with victims, witnesses and the wider public in a way which is accurate, clear and sensitive at all times.

This Strategy's definition of stakeholder includes PPS staff in recognition of their role in delivering effective communication

on behalf of the organisation and ensuring high levels of public confidence in an effective, transparent and empathetic Service.

Our aim is to support PPS staff in an informed working environment. This is to provide staff with the motivation and information needed to ensure effective delivery of wider PPS goals, as well as encouraging internal support for the operational requirements of this Strategy.

The work of the PPS attracts a high level of attention and commentary from victims and witnesses (service users), stakeholders, partner agencies, the media and the wider public.

Given the often complex nature of business that the PPS is engaged in, and that of the wider criminal justice system, there can often be misconceptions about our role which it is vital to challenge, correct and influence through effective engagement.

As a public body, the PPS embraces a duty to be open and transparent where possible, as well as to be fully accountable and meeting our statutory duties. However, this duty must be balanced with a responsibility to protect the integrity of all live court proceedings, and the rights of individuals involved in high profile cases. Finding this balance can create challenges in striking the appropriate level of engagement and information for release.

As a prosecuting authority, the PPS faces a number of challenges in explaining work in areas of high public interest and potential reputational risk, including for example the handling of sexual offence cases, delays, disclosure issues and victims' issues.

The PPS, which is wholly independent and non-political, carries the added challenge of legacy work and the accompanying political and public debate which can generate debate and discussion of a highly political nature.



3 Strategic Communications Vision and Aims

3.a High level aims

The PPS Communications and Engagement Strategy 2021-2026 is underpinned and driven by the wider organisational aims, vision and values as outlined in Appendix A. It also draws a direct line between communications activity and the organisation's five Strategic Priorities which can be found at Appendix B.

The Strategy has three high level aims.

They are to ensure:

- **That we help victims, witnesses, stakeholders and the wider public understand the work of the PPS and feel confidence in its operations;**
- **That we are honest, open and clear in all communications; and**
- **That we build advocates by developing strong, trusted relationships with our stakeholders (including PPS staff) through listening to them and keeping them informed and engaged.**

In trying to meet these three high-level aims, this Strategy sets out activity aimed at strengthening the organisation's capability in four priority areas of:

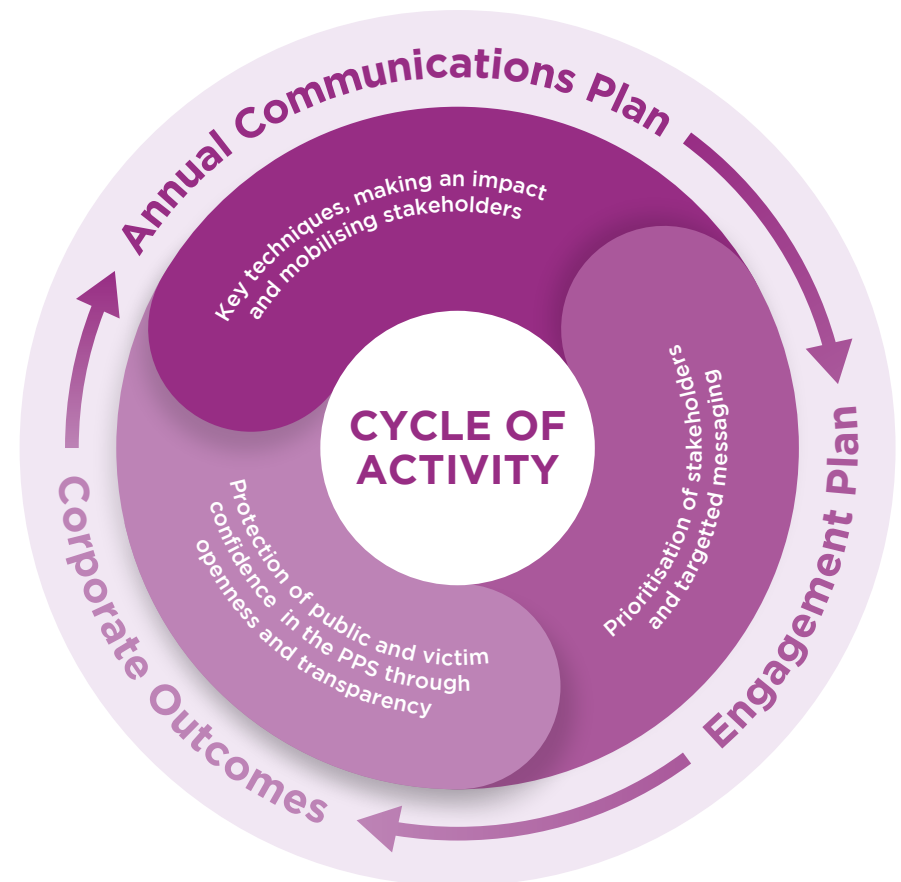
- **Stakeholder Engagement;**
- **Media Relations;**
- **Digital Communications; and**
- **Internal Communications.**

The aim of the Strategy is to provide a clear framework within which to actively engage with our audiences, build advocates and to do so clearly and effectively over a five year period. It creates clear goals, as well as ensuring continuity and consistency in our planning.

See further detail of these four priority areas in Section 6.

The Strategy aims to embed the value of clear communications in all areas of business across the PPS, not just those under the responsibility of the Communications Unit.

3.b Strategic Communications Approach





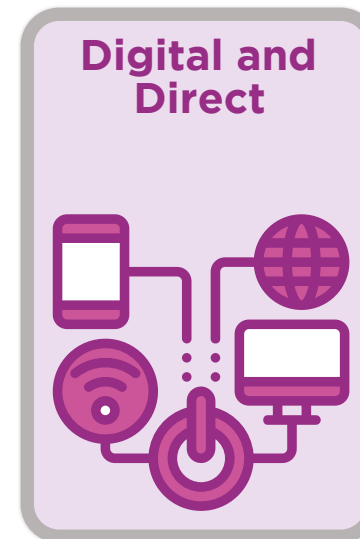
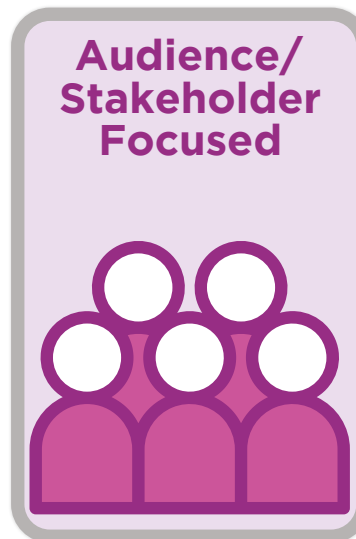
4 Communications Work Programme

Overview: The Communications Strategy will engage a number of specific techniques to meet its vision and aims.

These include:

- the adoption of a Corporate Communications Commitment;
- developing sub-strategies in media engagement, stakeholder engagement and digital communications;
- bespoke communications plans to be provided for priority areas of complex needs (including victims' issues, legacy and sexual offences);
- communications support for key internal suites of information/policy or data (statistical bulletins, for example);
- enhanced suite of measures of communications success;
- programme of continued training and improvement for communications staff;
- annual communications business plan.

All communications activity will aim to be:





5 Corporate Communications Commitment

The aim of this concept is to act primarily as symbolic, but also as a practical guide to PPS staff on the importance of keeping clear communication at the heart of all work and engagement with key stakeholders and audiences, including victims.

Staff will be encouraged and expected to adhere to the Commitment at all times, which emphasises the importance of communicating clearly and with empathy at all times.

Staff will be provided with a toolkit of ten questions to help guide the content of a specific communication before it issues. This would be of most value, for example, when drafting a communication to a victim which deals with complex or sensitive material.

Symbolically, its aim is to help embed the principle of clear communication in staff culture. In a practical sense, it should also ensure consistent sign-posting to sources of information of benefit to the recipient (for example, the Victim and Witness Charter).

The commitment should be endorsed and adopted by PPS leadership, and actively championed at all levels of line management. A period of one year will be designated to actively promote the Commitment to staff (including practical help) and to allow time for it to bed in, before Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are introduced after this time.

For samples of the 10 Questions and a suggested wording of the commitment, please see Appendix C.



6 Four Priority Areas

6.a Media Relations

The PPS is committed to the spirit of open justice and values the role of the media in accurately informing the public of our work, as well as that of the wider criminal justice system. We are committed to maintaining an open and transparent approach with the media, where appropriate, and to working collaboratively with the media to ensure accurate, balanced and trusted coverage of our work.

The Communications Unit has worked hard to build and maintain a high quality service to the media, making a conscious effort to shift the balance from reactive to proactive activities.

The Communications Unit handles approximately 1,000 media contacts per year touching on a wide range of themes and issues. The work of the PPS is a daily feature of the news agenda, often making international headlines, as well as national and local.

In the area of media relations, the Communications Strategy proposes the:

- Development of a bespoke media sub-strategy;
- Development of a PPS Media Handbook;
- Emphasis on collaborative and proactive working;
- Development of a Key Messages Handbook.

Please see Appendix D for detail on activities and commitments expected to be included in the Media Sub-Strategy.

6.b Stakeholder Engagement

The PPS works with a diverse range of stakeholders and partner agencies. This Strategy recognises the immense value of the connections we enjoy with them and the role they play in helping explain and support the work of the PPS within the wider criminal justice system.

Effective stakeholder engagement is crucial to the success of the PPS in engendering trust and confidence in our role.

The PPS sees increased open and transparent engagement with the victims and witnesses of crime, representative groups, the wider community, the media and public representatives and our own staff as being key to maintaining confidence in the PPS and the wider system. It is also an important tool in addressing misconceptions about the Service.

We value the benefit these stakeholder relationships bring to the PPS through mutual learning and insight.

This PPS Corporate Communications Strategy identifies enhanced, tailored stakeholder engagement as an area of significant potential and value.



It proposes the following activity:

- **Adoption of sub-strategy for stakeholder engagement as a priority;**
- **Audit of all current stakeholder activity across the organisation;**
- **Consideration of bringing coordination and learning from all activity under one internal owner;**
- **Inclusion of stakeholder engagement in all relevant media plans;**
- **Enhanced mapping of audiences and their needs;**
- **Yearly stakeholder plan;**
- **Communications support for the PPS Stakeholder Forum;**
- **Defining PPS staff as a stakeholder to be targeted with enhanced internal communications (as set out below).**

6.c Internal Communications

The PPS values the role of all staff in delivering its services on a daily basis. Senior Management sees effective internal communication as an integral element of our organisation's success.

Through this Strategy, the PPS shows its commitment to enhancing staff engagement to ensure employees receive the information they need, understand the importance of the work of the wider organisation, feel valued for the work they do and have a two-way communication channel.

Internal communications ambitions include:

- ▶ Adoption of consistent theme which reflects staff cohesion and value (One PPS for example)
- ▶ New intranet
- ▶ Two DPP / Senior Management visits to all PPS offices per annum
- ▶ Support the work of the People Forum and the PPS People Plan
- ▶ Large staff event every five years
- ▶ Refresh of Core Brief process
- ▶ Continued expansion of channels adopted for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic
- ▶ Consistent communication of NICS / Corporate HR information
- ▶ Collaborative work between the Communications Unit and the PPS Resource Management Team



6.d Digital Communications

The PPS has made significant progress in recent years to develop and transform how it uses digital platforms to enhance direct communication with the public and stakeholders.

This includes a new mobile responsive, accessible website for the PPS, launched in 2019, after the organisation's first social media account was developed in 2018.

This Strategy aims to build on these developments by continuing to develop new ways of communicating directly with the public and others in a modern way.

In the area of digital communications, the Communications Strategy proposes:

- **That all activity should complement the wider PPS Digital Strategy;**
- **The development of a digital communications sub-strategy;**
- **The continuation of finding ways to promote and embed the new PPS brand;**
- **The delivery of a new PPS intranet platform;**
- **Developing an ability for the Communications Unit to create and share video/audio content;**
- **The maintenance and expansion of social media channels and the content used.**



7 Audiences

7.a Core Groups

The PPS has five core stakeholder groups:

1. Direct service users (victims and witnesses);
2. Partners (victim representative groups, voluntary organisations, PSNI, Courts Service, the Judiciary, and other CJS organisations);
3. Those indirectly affected by PPS work (the public);
4. Those who deliver our work (PPS staff);
5. Strategic, government and/or statutory partners (the Attorney General, the Justice Committee, the wider Executive and Assembly, the Department of Finance and Department of Justice and elected representatives including party leaders and justice spokespeople).

A stakeholder map can be found opposite:



For further detail of stakeholders, their relationships and their communications needs, see Appendix E.



8 Measures of Success

To ensure the success of the effectiveness of this Strategy, all communications activity will be regularly measured and evaluated against the vision and aims of this Strategy.

To assist in this evaluation, a suite of indicators will be developed.

These include delivery of specific projects highlighted by the Strategy, including but not limited to:

- **The proposed sub-strategies;**
- **adoption of a Corporate Communications Commitment within the 2021-22 financial year;**
- **delivery of new intranet platform within the 2021-22 financial year;**
- **creation of media and key messages handbooks within the 2021-22 financial year;**
- **increased website traffic, creative programme of regular content and expansion of social media users / channels.**

Other Key Performance Indicators will include:

Analysis of reputational matters and tracking of media sentiment and briefing material



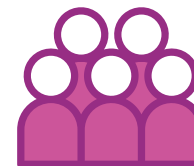
Evaluation of staff engagement with Senior Management communications (For example, Core Brief opening rates of 80+ %, staff event attendance and compliance with Corporate Communications Commitment)

Maintenance of 70% plus confidence in the annual Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey on confidence in the PPS



Aiming for >75% positive / neutral underlying sentiment in media coverage

Annual evaluation of all activity against Strategy aims



Stakeholder survey every 18 months (with commitment to listen and act on findings where possible)



9 Governance and Accountability

9.a Ownership

The Communications and Engagement Strategy is owned by PPS Management Board and will be implemented by the Communications Unit.

The Communications Unit will continue to report directly to the Senior Assistant Director (Resources and Change) and also continue to directly support and work to the DPP and the wider Senior Management team on all communications matters.

The Management Board will support and champion the Strategy both internally and externally.

All PPS staff will also be required and equipped to adopt and support the Strategy by:

- Supporting the Corporate Communications Commitment;
- Participating in communications activities;
- Ensuring a flow of relevant information to communications colleagues;
- Owning corporate messages/branding.

9.b Development and Implementation

The Strategy will be evaluated and revised after three years.

Significant revisions will be referred to Management Board for consideration and approval.

The Head of Communications has oversight of the pace and method of implementation by communications staff.

The Unit will look for development opportunities for communications staff to ensure training in modern techniques, skills and industry best practice.

The Unit will also continue to use the right blend of in-house staff and supplier resource to deliver value for money when required.

We will continue to work collaboratively with other areas of PPS business with overlapping interests and responsibilities, such as Freedom of Information, the Policy and Information Unit, the Victim and Witness Care Unit and those areas undertaking prosecutorial functions.

9.c Communications Resources

The Communications Unit currently has a staff of five and a fixed annual budget which is kept under continuous review. All spend is in line with business needs.

Any future resource changes will be identified to Senior Management, with business cases raised where required.



10 Covid-19 Challenges

At the time of writing, the operations of the Communications Unit and the wider PPS face continuing disruption as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Communications Unit adapted swiftly in March 2020 to fully meet the challenges of the unfolding disruption. A communications plan was immediately put in place to ensure a seamless continuation of all services whilst the entire team worked remotely and a revision of work streams to identify priority duties.

Staff communication has been prioritised throughout.

This Communications Strategy has been drafted on the premise of operating in the context of relative normality. In the event of longer term disruption, however, the Communications Unit is well placed to meet the aims of this Strategy by continuing to diversify and operate with the creativity and flexibility shown in recent months. The Strategy can be adjusted appropriately if these circumstances continue.

The Communications Unit will continue to support Senior Management in the context of the wider risk that Covid-19 will impact on PPS delivery and performance.



Appendix A

The Vision, Aim and Values of the Public Prosecution Service

Our Purpose

We will provide an independent, fair and effective prosecution service for the people of Northern Ireland. We will act impartially and in the interests of justice at all times, applying the highest professional standards and treating everyone fairly and with respect.

We are at the heart of the criminal justice system and will work with partners to build a safer community in which we respect the law and each other. We will strive to deliver a modern, innovative and transparent service that shows compassion and understanding towards victims of crime while meeting our obligation to ensure fairness to all.

Our Values

Independence and Integrity

We will maintain our independence and act at all times with integrity, fairness and impartiality. We will seek to deliver justice in every case in accordance with the law, respecting the human rights of all persons.

Openness and Honesty

We will communicate openly and honestly, in accordance with our professional duties. We will set clear standards about the service the public can expect from us.

Respect

We will respect each other, our colleagues and the public we serve, showing courtesy, sensitivity and understanding.

Excellence

We will make the best use of our people and resources, seeking to achieve excellence in everything we do.

Partnership

We will work in partnership within the criminal justice system to better serve the community.



Appendix B

PPS Strategic Priorities

PPS corporate planning is based around five strategic priorities which act as a framework to drive our planning outcomes and our approach to managing performance and risk. Within each priority area a number of objectives have been set out as the focus of the PPS's work programme and will progress the delivery of the Service's vision.

These priorities are:

1. Supporting a safer community by providing an effective and high quality prosecution service;
2. Building confidence in independence, fairness and effectiveness of the Service;
3. Meeting the needs of victims and witnesses;
4. Strengthening our capability by continuously improving the way we work;
5. Supporting and empowering our people.



Appendix C

Corporate Communications Commitment

QUESTION TOOLKIT:

1. Who is the recipient and what is the purpose of the communication?
2. Does the content meet their specific communication needs?
3. Is the content accurate and as open as possible?
4. Is the language and terminology used easily understood to the reader and/or a non-lawyer?
5. Does the communication offer a sufficiently empathetic or human tone if appropriate?
6. Does it use correct grammar, punctuation and PPS branding?
7. How would you feel if this correspondence was passed to a third party, such as a politician or the media? What perception would they have of the PPS from it?
8. Is it being provided in a timely way and offering information directly to the recipient before they learn of it elsewhere?
9. Does the communication sign-post the reader to further resources, such as the PPS website, the Victim and Witness Charter or contact details for further engagement?
10. If the recipient is a victim or witness, does the communication meet their full entitlements by providing all information they should have or should be directed to?

Sample CCC:

“The Public Prosecution Service values the power of clear, concise and accessible communication and believes this principle should be embedded at all levels of the organisation.

“This organisation and its staff is committed to communicating openly and transparently and to showing courtesy, sensitivity and empathy at all times to victims, witnesses and stakeholders, partners and the wider community. We are in particular committed to the provision and promotion of all information in line with that entitled to and of benefit to victims and witnesses.”



Appendix D

Media Sub-Strategy

Please see examples below of activities or commitments which will be included in the Media Sub-Strategy:

- Adoption of a formal proactive approach to positive outcome cases;
- Commitment to provision of media briefings/material, as required, depending on the level of demand and resource, and where public confidence is served;
- Policy of challenging inaccurate, imbalanced and ill-informed media narratives;
- Collaborative communications approach with criminal justice system partners in areas of mutual interest (including commitment to external and internal joint protocols on media matters where public confidence is served and within resources);
- Media handling of all issues/cases of reputational risk to be supported with a full, integrated communications plan;
- Stakeholder and digital communications to be integrated with media handling where effective;
- A structured flow of information between internal teams, such as prosecutors, and the Communications Unit.



Appendix E

Stakeholder Mapping: Relationships and Communication Needs

Stakeholder	Primary Relationship	Communication Needs	Method	Relationship Benefits/ Risks	Lead Internal Responsibility
Victims and Witnesses	Direct two-way relationship, based on provision of service.	Empathetic and sensitive engagement. Requirement to keep them informed on cases and to help them understand the PPS processes.	Timely and clear information directly from the PPS (both operationally and through digital channels), targeted messages via stakeholders.	Victims and witness are vital to effective prosecutions. They are also powerful influencers of opinion.	Victim and Witness Care Unit, Directing Officer, Communications Unit and Policy and Information Unit.
Operational Criminal Justice Partners	Direct, officer to officer contact on specific issue or case. Also relationship building via senior management, communications and policy lead channels.	Efficient and effective engagement, with clear terms of reference and a focus on constructive working relationships. Proactive, two way channels with victim representative/voluntary organisations.	Collaborative approach to areas of mutual interest, which enhances public confidence in the Criminal Justice System. Strong mutual understanding of each other's role and work.	Operational partners have an impact on delivery and core remit. Divisive or confusing public approach is detrimental to public confidence. Benefits include building a network of informed and engaged advocates for PPS work.	Senior Management, Officer to Officer, Victims' Champion, Stakeholder Forum, Victim and Witness Care Unit, Policy and Information Unit, the Communications Unit.
The media and wider public	Public interest is generally indirect and one way contact, while media relations are two-way and built on trust and sustained engagement. Interest for both is largely in short-term topical issues or cases.	Accurate, factual and accessible information provided directly to the public on accessible platforms. Open relationship with the media based on provision of factual and contextualised information to inform accurate narratives.	Use of own PPS channels such as website and social media channels. Continued engagement with the media to share information in an open way, where appropriate, and to build trusted and effective relationships.	Need to balance protection of live proceedings and sensitive information with being open and transparent. Challenge of countering strong media narratives which form public opinion.	Senior Management, legal staff and the Communications Unit.



Appendix E

Stakeholder	Primary Relationship	Communication Needs	Method	Relationship Benefits/ Risks	Lead Internal Responsibility
PPS staff	Direct relationship – providing a service, providing visibility to leadership and enhancing confidence.	Must ensure two-way engagement to provide staff with timely and clear information of relevance. Clear explanation for decisions, clear visibility of Senior Management leadership.	Frequent and clear communication disseminated in a suite of accessible ways, with clear established channels for feedback and questions.	A motivated and engaged staff will ensure effective delivery of PPS goals. They will also have their own external networks through which to advocate work.	Senior Management, Resource Management Team and Communications Unit.
Strategic, government and/or statutory partners (including Justice Committee and political parties).	Direct relationship, impact on strategic context.	Interest in performance and fulfilment of remit. Expectation of full disclosure and transparency.	Proactive and open engagement on issues of relevance. Relationship building based on frequent, valuable and focused contacts.	This highly influential grouping impacts on financial/statutory reputational context of the PPS. Division or criticism of PPS risks being high profile and damaging.	Senior Management, Private Office, Corporate Services including Policy and Information Unit and DALO.
Defence (including Suspects, Defendants and Legal Representatives)	Relationship based on entitlement to provision of service and timely information.	Needs include case-specific updates and accessible and clear information on PPS processes.	Use of own PPS channels such as website and social media channels to highlight processes. Direct case-specific correspondence at key points.	Timely communication is vital to effective prosecution. They can be powerful influencers of opinion.	Directing Officer / Assistant Director Communications Unit (for channels only).