

A 'Victim Care Hub' for London

Context

- It is clear from conversations with victims and the sector that timely and effective communication is fundamental to a victim's engagement with the justice system.
- Justice agencies and statutory partners are routinely failing to deliver a minimum level of service as guaranteed by the [Victims' Code](#), as evidenced by the poor compliance data available through the latest [survey](#) conducted by the National Victims' Commissioner, which found:
 - o Less than a third (29%) of respondents were aware of the Victims' Code;
 - o 71% of respondents were dissatisfied with the police response to the crime;
 - o Over a third (34%) of respondents said they would not report a crime to the police again;
 - o Only 29% said they were offered the opportunity to make a Victim Personal Statement, a drop from 39% in 2021; and
 - o Only 8% of respondents were confident that they could receive justice by reporting a crime.
- Even when individual agencies have made progress on victim care and communication, the journey from a victim's perspective remains fragmented and complex. This contributes to high rates of victim withdrawal as the justice process can hinder recovery.
- The [2021 London Rape Review](#) found 65% of rape victims withdraw from the justice process, up from 58% in the 2019 Review. More recent data from MOPAC's Evidence and Insight team has put this figure as high as 68%.
- We also see minoritised communities disproportionately withdrawing, with Black victims of sexual offences significantly more likely to withdraw. High rates of withdrawal in turn affects public confidence and safety:
- Back in the [2019 Review into the Victims' Code of Practice](#), London's Victims' Commissioner made the following recommendation:

A national network of local, integrated, multi-agency Victim Care Units is needed, to own the relationship between the criminal justice service and victims of crime, reducing workload on front line officers to allow more time for investigation and ensuring a consistent and quality service to victims of crime. A Unit of this kind should own ongoing communication with victims; be able to provide expert, trauma-informed advice to victims and practitioners alike at every stage of a case; and signpost victims to support services, ensure victim entitlements are delivered effectively and inform victims of sentencing outcomes.

- Significant work has been undertaken since this recommendation, following its inclusion in the Mayor of London's 2021 Manifesto.
 - This paper sets out the key principles, benefits, and details of a Victim Care Hub in London.
-

The Role of a Victim Care Hub

- To address the significant issues in victim care and Victims' Code compliance, a Victim Care Hub is envisaged as delivering the following for victims of crime in London:
 - o a single point of contact,
 - o key updates on case progression,
 - o information and advice,
 - o answers to questions,
 - o referrals on to specialist support,
 - o ensuring entitlements under the Victims' Code are being delivered,
 - o and monitoring this to drive better performance.
- What victims lack in the justice system is any kind of 'troubleshooting' mechanism. When justice agencies fail a victim, this can lead them to disengage. They may submit a formal complaint, which can take over a year to result in any outcome, which is anyway unlikely to be satisfactory as the case will likely be dropped without a victim's participation.
- What a Victim Care Hub would seek to do is keep victims engaged and supported in the justice system by both preventing issues before they arise but also addressing them when they do, getting a case back on track and ensuring justice is delivered.

Roles and Responsibilities

- The Victims' Code sets out the rights victims are entitled to in the justice system, and is broadly divided into 12 key rights, with a significant number of rights and entitlements within each one.
- Responsibility for delivering these rights currently sits with a range of agencies including the police force, police Witness Care Units, and CPS – who are often not best placed to deliver information to victims in a trauma-informed way.
- A Victim Care Hub would not replace the core functions of these agencies, and nor would it seek to add complexity for a victim. Instead, it would enable justice agencies to discharge some of their duties to a body which is better served to communicate with victims thanks to its skills, expertise, and capacity – which would be focused on victims.
- This would include receiving key updates on their case progression (e.g. when a case is marked for no further action, when a suspect is charged, when key court dates are, and the outcome of any hearings, etc.).
- A Victim Care Hub would not take responsibility for directly delivering some rights, but would instead ensure that victims are aware of these rights and support them in accessing them (e.g. telling a victim they can make or update a Victim Personal Statement, that they have a Victim Right to Review, etc.)
- The role of a Hub is also not to replace existing specialist support services but to act as a navigator-type role, building a team of people around that victim to ensure they are both well-supported and prepared for the justice process.
- The hub would not duplicate or replace the functions of advocates like ISVAs or IDVAs who provide holistic specialist support, but would instead collaborate with them to ensure

the victim's rights and entitlements are met, and advocates are provided with swift access to information throughout the justice process.

Independence

- Ideally a Victim Care Hub would be staffed by independent workers who are not directly employed by criminal justice agencies such as the police, so that it can be accessible to, and maintain the confidence of, all victims, including those who have yet to report and are fearful of statutory agencies.
- A Hub's independence from the police is particularly important in cases where the crime may have been perpetrated by an employee of a justice agency (e.g. police-perpetrated domestic abuse)
- As stated in the EU Victim Directive, "*a one-stop-shop victim agency could be established to serve as the main contact for victims and should be responsible for keeping the victim informed, liaising between the victim and all authorities and agencies involved*".

Data Access

- Although staff in a Victim Care Hub would be independent of any specific justice agency, the success of a Hub is reliant on access to the systems used by relevant justice agencies and strong working relationships.
 - We know from engagement with other roles such as IDVAs and ISVAs – who fulfil a similar role of being a channel of communication to a victim – that they often struggle to receive timely and accurate information from justice agencies, and are reliant on relationships with individuals. For a Hub to be successful at scale, staff need access to certain levels of information held by agencies such as the police and CPS.
-

Benefits to Victims

- A Victim Care Hub is envisioned as transforming the experience of victims in our criminal justice system, including through:
 - o **Better victim engagement:** A hub will reduce the current fragmentation which occurs in victim support and communication, by ensuring that there is a single coordinator for the end-to-end victim justice journey.
 - o **Better victim welfare:** A hub can ensure that victims needs are understood and catered for in the justice process and that they are signposted to the support they need.
 - o **Better recovery outcomes:** Better signposting for victims will enable them to access right support earlier on, aiding cope and recovery.
 - o **Better justice outcomes:** As victims will be better informed and supported, they will be more engaged with the CJS process. It will also provide a trouble shooting mechanism – something which the London's Victims' Commissioner's office often

undertakes but is not resourced to do – that will enable more cases to proceed to court and more victims to stay within the process and obtain a sense of procedural justice.

- To illustrate the real-world impact a Victim Care Hub might have, below are examples of a victim and bereaved family members whose journeys could have looked quite different if a Hub had been available to them.

Jade

- Jade was raped in March 2017 and has experienced huge delays in her case going to trial.
- She describes the feeling of stress and anxiety when receiving a call from the police regarding updates to her case. Calls from the police can be anxiety-inducing, and there is too great a reliance on having a supportive officer. **An independent Hub would work with CJS partners to ensure the information is delivered to the victim in a trauma informed way and at an agreed time that works for the victim.**
- She describes the feeling of having to navigate the CJS by herself through research and reading documents online. **A Victim Care Hub would automatically provide information on what to expect through the justice system, what victims are entitled to, greater clarity about the process, and simplify it by offering to act as a single point of contact for the victim's end to end journey.**
- Contact was minimal, and weeks would pass without hearing anything. Jade's emails and calls went unanswered, sometimes for weeks, especially whilst waiting for charging decision and post plea hearing. **A Victim Care Hub would lighten the burden placed on officers to provide regular updates to the victim, especially where there may not have been progress made in the case by ensuring contact is maintained to check in, put the victim at ease and ensure the right support is there to help them be resilient and stay engaged in the long process.**
- Jade wanted to update her VPS to reflect the ongoing trauma (e.g. panic attacks, anxiety, etc.) and contacted her SOIT officer however this was met with resistance and this caused Jade added distress. **A Victim Care Hub would have been able to advise her of her rights in updating the VPS, and would have communicated this to the police officer to ensure Jade's rights and needs were met.**
- She was pushed back and forth between Victim Support and Citizens Advice because of a lack of clarity over who was commissioned for which service. Complex commissioning arrangements add to the complexity of the justice system, with contracts changing hands every few years. **Victims cannot be expected to keep up with these changes, but a Victim Care Hub would understand this system and be able to signpost the victim appropriately without them being bogged down with the complexities of different commissioning arrangements.**
- The Witness Service reached out to other witnesses in her case but not to Jade directly, meaning she did not receive important and relevant information. **A Victim Care Hub would have identified this mistake and ensured the information was sent to Jade so she was not being informed by friends and family and also had the paperwork she was entitled to and needed.**

Tracey

- Tracey is the mother of Josh Hanson, who was stabbed in a club in 2015, and whose killer remained at large for years. She has since set up the Josh Hanson Trust.
 - Tracey had a difficult experience of the of the criminal justice system, and highlights that she needed to go to third parties (victims commissioners, politicians, etc.) for advice, because this wasn't forthcoming as part of the system. **Victims are already seeking out voices they think are independent of the system for advice, demonstrating the lack of trust in the system and the value that could be brought by an independent Victim Care Hub.**
 - Tracey also mentions other parts of the system outside of the criminal justice system, including her GP's Surgery. **This point highlights the need for a Victim Care Hub to also effectively signpost to relevant medical and therapy routes, going further than the justice system.**
 - She signed the Human Tissue Act the first-time visiting Josh in the morgue, without having this explained to her, and only found out more recently (via email) that Josh's tissues had been disposed of 'as per her request'. **A Victim Care Hub would have ensured this form was fully explained, or even asked authorities to delay the signing of this because Tracey was clearly in trauma and unable to make any informed decision at that time.**
 - Tracey also wasn't told about her right to appeal under the Unduly Lenient Sentence (ULS) Scheme until London's Victims' Commissioner told her, in spite of the information she had been given that the sentence would not be considered as unduly lenient. **A Victim Care Hub would have ensured Tracey was made aware of the ULS (as is her right under the Victims' Code) and crucially would be on her side, rather than providing an opinion that the sentence wouldn't be considered unduly lenient. As Tracey says in her video, this is her choice to make and a Hub would be there to empower victims with their rights and information to make an informed decision.**
-

Benefits to Justice Agencies and the Justice System

Reducing Attrition

- The focus of a Victim Care Hub model would be keeping victims engaged in the justice system and linked in with support, which in turn reduces the significant levels of attrition we see in the process.
- The 2021 London Rape Review found that 65% of rape victims withdrew from the justice process, up from 58% recorded in the 2019 Rape Review. Of those who withdraw, 38% do so in the first seven days and almost two-thirds (64%) withdraw within 30 days. This is a significant increase from the 2019 London Rape Review, where only 18% of those who withdrew had done so in the first 30 days.
- A recent report from the [National Victims' Commissioner into the provision of advocacy in the justice system](#) highlighted the impact that a support role can have in reducing attrition, with victims 49% less likely to withdraw when they have an advocate.

Increasing Victims' Code Compliance

- Compliance with the Victims' Code, as shown on Page1 of this paper, is at seriously low levels, with many victims not receiving or not even aware of their rights. A Victim Care Hub would drive up levels of compliance by delivering rights which – understandably – justice agencies are often too busy to fulfil, or do not have the expertise to deliver.
- Securing more effective compliance with the Victims' Code is critical to its success, particularly when considering that it will soon be given a statutory footing in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

Improving Compliance Monitoring

- Not only would a Hub improve levels of compliance with the Victims Code, but it would also improve reporting mechanisms on this compliance.
- It is well known that the data recorded by agencies like the police – particularly when it comes to victims – has significant gaps, and the age and design of these systems makes it difficult if not impossible to record and analyse information. A Hub would be able to monitor and report compliance across organisations and increase compliance through proactive alerting to victims and partners.

Better Justice Outcomes

- As victims will be better informed and supported through a Victim Care Hub, they will be more engaged with the justice process.
 - A Hub would also provide a form of 'troubleshooting' mechanism, addressing victims' questions or concerns before they derail a case and/or lead to a victim withdrawing.
 - This will enable more cases to proceed to court and more victims to stay within the process and obtain a sense of procedural justice.
-

How a Hub Can Be Achieved

Amending the Victims' Code

- The Victims' Code would need to be amended to enable justice agencies to discharge certain responsibilities to a Hub.
- The Victims' Code is expected to go out to consultation following the Victims and Prisoners Bill receiving Royal Assent, which presents an opportunity for amendment.
- Government has said on many occasions that national pieces (such as the Victims' Code and subsequent legislation) need to be considerably broad enough to enable local areas operational flexibility.

Enabling Data Access

- In order to successfully fulfil its functions and serve victims, a Victim Care Hub would require access to information about that victim and the case in which they are involved.
- We do not believe that current data protection legislation prevents this, subject to Hub staff receiving the appropriate vetting, and so agreement and relevant data sharing agreements would be required between agencies.

Securing Support from Justice Agencies

- More broadly than just data sharing, a Victim Care Hub needs buy-in and support from all agencies in order to be successful. The aim of a Hub is to build a team around the victim, which can only happen through effective partnership working.

Reallocation of Funding

- Lastly, a Victim Care Hub would require appropriate funding. There is existing significant investment by all justice agencies specific to victims, but this piecemeal approach risks duplication.
- Reallocation and streamlining of funding and resources from existing units and roles (e.g. Witness Care Units (Police), Victim Focus Desks (Police), Victim Liaison Officers (CPS), Victim Liaison Officers (Probation), etc.) could be used to operate a Victim Care Hub.

Good Practice from Québec

- Crime victims' assistance centres, commonly referred to as CAVACs (*Centre d'aide aux victimes d'actes criminels*), are non-profit organisations that are governed by the [Act Respecting Assistance for Victims of Crime](#).
- For most victims, engagement with CAVAC begins at the point of reporting, with a referral from the police. This referral happens automatically, without consent being required from the victim. Victims are also able to self-refer to CAVACs.
- In order for the police referral to take place, an article was added to the [Act to Assist Victims of Crime and Promote their Recovery](#), which enables data sharing between a police force and victim organisation for the purposes of informing victims of, and delivering, their rights:
 - *Article 109. A police force may communicate any information to the Minister or to a centre for assistance to victims of crime recognized under section 7, including personal information relating to the victim contained in an occurrence report or in a document relating thereto, if the information is necessary for the administration of this Act. 2021, c13 a.109 [Translated from the original French]*
- Roughly 80% of victims engaging with the CAVAC have reported their crime to the police, with the other 20% having not yet reported. In the majority of these cases, the victim is thinking about reporting, and CAVAC will provide advice on how they can report, what support is available, and information on the criminal justice journey.

- Across the province of Quebec there are 17 CAVACs, with over 400 staff seeing 68,000 clients per year. These staff are trained and registered professionals (e.g., psychologist, criminologist, etc.)
- Their workers are also embedded in police stations and courts, allowing them access to their computer systems and hence victims' records (CAVAC workers are also vetted to allow them this access). We visited the CAVAC section of the courthouse, which provides several meeting rooms, a comfy waiting area, children's play area, and more. The CAVAC worker who is present on the day of trial will be the same worker who has been navigating that victim through their journey.
- The aim of CAVAC is not to replace the role of the justice agencies but to act as a navigator / liaison, building a team of people around that victim to ensure they are both well-supported and prepared for the justice process. CAVAC accompanies a victim throughout their justice journey, which might be years-long – coordinating services around that victim.
- CAVAC have also developed a programme for preparing witnesses for trial (more information in this report) and partner with the charity Marie-Vincent to provide a child witness programme.
- If a case collapses, things go wrong, or a victim is unhappy with the police, CAVAC are still there to advise them, to help them apply for compensation through IVAC (more information in this report) and can look at the case themselves to help the victim understand what went wrong.