

Witness Preparation and Pre-trial Support in London

Introduction

Attending court is often a distressing and dehumanising experience for victims. Despite recent efforts to improve the system, victims continue to be treated as secondary to the legal process, rather than as individuals at the heart of it. The criminal justice system frequently fails to involve or support them adequately.

Waiting times at London Crown Courts remain historically high, with cases now taking an average of 297 days from receipt to completion¹. Many victims will wait significantly longer than this, with cases now being listed into December 2029. While waiting for court, victims endure many months of worry with minimal or no support related to giving evidence and the cross-examination process. This can exacerbate stress and trauma for many.

“I had no support ahead of giving evidence. Going into the cross examination felt like going into combat or war” - Victim of stalking

[Research](#) published by MOPAC's Evidence and Insight Team showed that after police charge, victim withdrawal accounts for a quarter of all non-convictions and highlighted that the likelihood of withdrawal increased when the victim had concerns about the court process². If the victim and witness experience is improved through engaging them more effectively in the lead up to court, the likelihood of victims remaining in the process increases.

Building on this, we believe that greater focus and investment is needed to help victims and witnesses before they give evidence in court. This includes helping them feel ready to give evidence, familiarised with the court process, and ensuring they receive clear and consistent communication throughout their criminal justice journey.

¹ Data Source: Ministry of Justice - Criminal court statistics quarterly January – March 2025– published 26 June 2025

- [Criminal court statistics quarterly: January to March 2025 - GOV.UK](#)

² [Understanding Victim Withdrawal in London – MOPAC Evidence and Insight](#)

In this paper we set out a series of recommendations to improve the support available to witnesses before they give evidence in court. These recommendations are grouped under three themes: giving best evidence, courtroom familiarisation, and communication with victims. Although our focus is on London, many of these recommendations require national change and would benefit victims across England and Wales.

If the recommendations are delivered, we believe this would result in:

- More victims remaining engaged in the criminal justice process.
- Pre-trial support becoming more victim-centred and responsive to individual needs.
- Victims feeling informed, confident, and ready to give their best evidence.

Before outlining our proposals, it is important to recognise the wider systemic issues that are shaping victims' experiences of court. The growing London Crown Court backlog poses a significant challenge, with the number of outstanding cases reaching a high of 18,118 at the end of June 2025³. Delays and repeated changes to trial dates continue to place enormous strain on victims, as highlighted in research published by the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales which found that nearly half (48%) of victims who were given a trial date experienced at least one change, and over a quarter (26%) had their trial date changed four or more times⁴.

Furthermore, the condition of the court estate also affects victims' experience. Many court buildings have outdated infrastructure which prevents courts from operating effectively. These infrastructure issues also restrict the use of video and audio technology, which are used to offer special measures such as giving evidence via a live link, pre-recording of evidence (Section 28), or playing pre-recorded evidence.

We also know that victim and witness support services are facing financial pressures due to their funding being cut by 4.2% and the increase in the cost of National Insurance contributions⁵. High-quality support is key to helping victims stay engaged in the justice process- especially during long delays or repeated disruptions. There is a wealth of research that shows this support can make a critical difference in whether a

³ Data Source: Ministry of Justice - Criminal court statistics quarterly April – June 2025– published 23 October 2025

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/criminal-court-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2025>

⁴ Justice delayed: The impact of the crown court backlog on victims, victim services and the criminal justice system, March 2025, Sasha Murray, Dr. Sarah Welland, Dr Madeleine Storry

⁵ <https://www.victimsupport.org.uk/government-cuts-funding-for-victims-support-services/>

victim continues or withdraws from the process⁶. According to the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, one in four victims who had access to a dedicated Stalking Advocate secured a conviction – far outperforming the national conviction rate of just one in 1,000⁷. Evaluation of the London Survivors Gateway also found a significantly lower rate of victim withdrawal in cases with an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor, with the victim withdrawing in just two out of 62 cases⁸.

We hope that delivering the recommendations outlined in this paper can help mitigate the impact of these underlying issues on victims, help them stay engaged in the criminal justice process, and ensure justice is delivered - ultimately contributing to greater public safety.

Theme 1: Giving Best Evidence

Rationale

Perceptions of the court process and victim withdrawal

For many victims, the courtroom can feel like a daunting environment. This perception can lead to some being deterred from pursuing their case. For those who do continue, the court experience can be distressing and can take a toll on their mental and emotional wellbeing. Victims also report feeling unprepared and unsure of what the cross-examination process entails, which can increase anxiety and possibly affect the clarity and accuracy of their evidence.

*“[Court] is a no-go zone. Is it worth it for me?”
- Victim of Domestic Abuse*

As mentioned previously, if victims have concerns about the court process the likelihood of them withdrawing from the criminal justice process increases. When victims withdraw, trials are more likely to collapse. According to HMCTS data, in the year ending February 2025, 32.9% of trials in London’s Crown Courts were ineffective, with 28.5% of these due to prosecution-related reasons - including absent witnesses. Each time this happens, there are financial costs, with a single sitting day in Crown

⁶ Justice delayed: The impact of the crown court backlog on victims, victim services and the criminal justice system, March 2025, Sasha Murray, Dr. Sarah Welland, Dr Madeleine Storry

⁷ [Bridging the Gap: A Stalking Advocate for Every Victim](#), Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 2022

⁸ [The London Victim Attrition Review](#), London Victim’s Commissioner and MOPAC, 2025

Court costing the public on average £3,036⁹. Supporting victims more effectively in the lead-up to trial can help prevent these outcomes, reducing both the emotional cost to victims and the financial cost to the system.

Preparation sessions ahead of giving evidence

Research has shown that familiarising witnesses with the process of cross-examination can make a meaningful difference. A study done by Jacqueline M. Wheatcroft and Louise E. Ellison (2012) found that familiarising the witness to the cross-examination process improved the accuracy of responses and reduced errors. They also found that written materials explaining what to expect in the cross-examination process were especially helpful¹⁰.

Furthermore, there are existing rights and laws that allow for witnesses to be informed of the court process and what to expect during trial. Under Right 8 of the Victims' Code, victims are entitled to information and support around attending court. The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 introduced a legal duty for the CPS to offer pre-trial meetings to adult victims of rape and serious sexual offences.

Current pre-trial outreach services, delivered by Citizen's Advice and the London Victim and Witness Service (LVWS), aim to familiarise witnesses with the court process primarily through Pre Trial-Visits and on the day support during the trial. While there is some opportunity for cross examination familiarisation - such as role play using neutral topics - this is often constrained by courtroom availability. As a result, the information may be delivered hastily and at a basic level, leading to inconsistencies in the quality of support and witness preparedness. We believe there is scope to provide more comprehensive and tailored guidance on the process of giving evidence, particularly for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses.

To address this, we propose the introduction of a dedicated session focused on in-depth support for giving evidence, complementing existing pre-trial visits and on the day court support. This would be delivered by a trained support worker to all vulnerable and intimidated witnesses¹¹ who would benefit from extra support in the court process.

⁹ According to HMCTS data from FY22-23 which was submitted to parliament <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2023-11-30/4727/>

¹⁰ 'Evidence in Court: Witness Preparation and Cross-Examination Style Effects on Adult Witness Accuracy', Jacqueline M. Wheatcroft* and Louise E. Ellison, Behav. Sci. Law 30: 821–840 (2012)

¹¹ Vulnerable witnesses are defined by the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act (1999) as all children under the age of 18 and any witness whose quality of evidence is likely to be diminished because they have a mental or physical disorder or disability, including impairments to cognitive and/or social functioning. Intimidated witnesses are defined as those suffering from fear or distress in relation to testifying in the case.

The aim of the session would be to increase witness confidence and help them to give clear evidence, while also demystifying the cross-examination process. These sessions would help develop simple but important skills, such as where to direct one's gaze, how to ask for a break, how to self-regulate, and how to speak clearly and loud enough. The sessions can also include neutral cross examination role-play on a topic unrelated to the witness's case, such as describing and being questioned on a visit to the cinema, while ensuring that the facts of the case are not discussed. If these sessions are successful and witnesses feel better prepared for court, it can encourage more victims to give evidence confidently in court.

“The scariest thing [for victims] is not knowing what they’re walking into” - Senior ISVA

In addition to avoiding discussion about the facts of the case, there are other principles that can be implemented to safeguard against any perception of coaching and cultivate the trust of justice partners. This includes ensuring the structure and protocols for the session being co-designed and jointly agreed with the Ministry of Justice, Judiciary, Crown Prosecution Service, and Criminal Bar Association. Furthermore, we propose that these preparation sessions be available to both prosecution and defence witnesses. This is in alignment with the services already provided by LVWS and the in-court Witness Service, where witnesses eligible for pre-trial support are defined as persons who have witnessed a crime or are otherwise involved in the proceedings of a criminal court, with the exception of defendants or expert witnesses.

It will also be important to agree a narrative that the Judiciary and Barristers use to describe the session in court to avoid the misinterpretation of the session and clarify that it is neutral support that doesn't affect the content of witnesses' evidence. Applying these safeguards will be essential to ensuring this support is not mischaracterised in court as 'coaching', which could undermine the witness' credibility and integrity in the eyes of the jury.

For these sessions to be delivered effectively, the right profile of support worker to facilitate the session will need to be agreed. Ideally, the support workers will have both clinical and legal knowledge and operate strictly under agreed protocols. This support function could potentially be delivered by LVWS, which currently run London's devolved pretrial support services, however further funding would need to be secured to pilot the preparation session as explored further on page 8.

“I am a confident public speaker. But even for me it was very inhibiting and intimidating to take the stand, especially during cross-examination. Most people have never experienced anything that would prepare them for this. Having support to prepare you for giving evidence is essential.” - Victim of stalking

Safeguarding against the perception of witness coaching

To ensure the preparation session is maintained as neutral support and not misrepresented as coaching/training, the below safeguards should be built into the delivery:

- 1. No case specific content** - sessions should not involve any discussion of the facts of the case. Any exercises (e.g. role play) should use generic scenarios that help them understand the courtroom process without influencing their evidence.
- 2. Co-design session structure with justice partners** - the content of the session should be developed in collaboration with CPS, Judiciary, and CBA to ensure impartiality.
- 3. Equal support** - the session should be offered to both defence and prosecution witnesses to ensure equal access to support and fairness.
- 4. Managing the narrative in court** - CPS can clarify that the session is equivalent to the neutral support provided in a court familiarisation visit. Judges can also clarify to juries that that support is general and does not influence the evidence.
- 5. Learn from international practice** - apply learning from the Witness Preparation Programme in Quebec, including how they maintained credibility and neutrality.

Online resources for witness preparation

In addition to the witness preparation sessions, we believe that clear and accessible online resources can play a valuable role in helping witnesses understand and prepare for giving evidence. We propose the development of a short, standardised guide to cross-examination, hosted on official websites such as the CPS. Alongside this, a short video could also be created to explain courtroom roles, common questioning techniques, and guidance for witnesses - such as what to do if they need a break, don't understand a question, or forget something. These resources should be clearly signposted in one central location, such as the LVWS website, alongside existing materials on the court process to make them easier to find.

“More guidance on cross examination would be really beneficial - we get asked [by victims] about this a lot” – Senior ISVA

Remote Evidence Centres (RECs)

Under the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act, victims may give evidence outside the courtroom through Special Measures including through live link or pre-recorded evidence through Section 28. Providing evidence from a remote location can be a way of reducing the trauma that vulnerable witnesses can feel about participating in the criminal justice process, and ensures vulnerable witnesses giving evidence will not meet the defendants or their connections within a court building.

Currently in London, live links are set up in the court building where the trial is taking place, however we recognise that for some vulnerable adult witnesses having an alternative environment for giving evidence can be important. To enable this, appropriate locations should be identified where witnesses can give evidence away from court.

The REC model already exists in other parts of the country (e.g. through SARCs) and operate under existing national [protocols](#) set by CPS, HMCTS, and NPCC. In five London boroughs, The Lighthouse¹² provides support for child witnesses in giving evidence to Crown Courts remotely, supported by specially trained child psychologists. This model demonstrates how more targeted support to vulnerable victims can improve the quality of evidence available to the police and courts.

It is important to acknowledge that the use of RECs is affected by the active debate regarding the impact of pre-recorded evidence on conviction rates, with many judges and barristers expressing their concerns around how they are perceived by juries. Despite this, there is evidence to show that having the option to give evidence away from the court estate could reduce stress associated with the risk of witnesses encountering the defendant or their connections, enhancing their sense of security and increasing willingness to give evidence. In Northern Ireland, the use of Remote Evidence Centres helped reduce victim attrition, and increase the rate of early guilty pleas – accounting for 62% of all convictions in 2024 - as it became more likely a witness would give evidence.

¹² [The Lighthouse](#)

VRI transcripts

Another area we believe can benefit from improvement is the options offered to victims when viewing their video-recorded interview (VRI) before trial. Victims are often only offered the option to rewatch their VRI, which can be distressing - particularly when faced with seeing themselves in a state of trauma from years earlier. We heard of one instance where a victim found the experience too upsetting and had to have the screen playing the video turned away from them. Providing victims with the option to read a transcript of the VRI instead of watching, or listening to the VRI audio while reading the transcript can be a straightforward trauma-informed adjustment that can improve the victim experience. Officers in charge of the case should ensure the VRI transcripts are available ahead of trial, giving victims the opportunity to prepare in the way that feels more manageable to them.

“Whilst it is essential to remind ourselves what we said and how we phrased things, to rewatch footage of yourself moments after often the most horrific event in your life, is a very tough ask. In my case I watched it five years after the event, and seeing myself in that interview room so freshly holding a mix of terror, disassociation and the attempt to self soothe or even deny the trauma was a highly traumatising watch. There has to be another way” - Victim of rape

Key Recommendations

- 1. A pilot project should be established aimed at providing vulnerable witnesses with dedicated sessions on how to give best evidence, as part of pretrial support.**
- 2. Online resources, including cross-examination guidance and supporting videos, should be made available by CPS/HMCTS to witnesses.**
- 3. Appropriate locations across London should be made available for vulnerable adult witnesses to give remote evidence - where this special measure is granted- away from the court building where the trial is taking place.**
- 4. Victims should be offered the option to read a transcript of their Video Recorded Interview (VRI) instead of watching the recording.**

How can the recommendations be achieved?

Providing preparation sessions to vulnerable witnesses.

To improve how vulnerable witnesses are supported before trial, we propose a pilot project to test the impact of offering dedicated preparation sessions focused on providing neutral guidance on giving best evidence. These sessions would form part of the wider pre-trial support offer, specifically targeting witnesses that need additional support, such as victims of rape or serious sexual offences.

We recognise that there may be barriers to implementing this pilot. Justice partners may be concerned that such sessions could be perceived as 'coaching' witnesses, rather than offering neutral support, and that this could be used against the witnesses in court. There are also the practical constraints, including LVWS not having enough resources to provide one-to-one sessions in addition to existing court familiarisation work (the Pre-Trial Visits), and it may be difficult to identify support workers with the right combination of legal understanding and clinical insight to deliver the sessions effectively.

To address these challenges, we would work closely with MOPAC and the Ministry of Justice to lobby for funding, which would allow LVWS to pilot sessions on a small scale with a defined group of witnesses. This group could be adult RASSO victims, children (in partnership with The Lighthouse), or vulnerable witnesses involved in cases at a specific London Crown Court. Practical alternatives to lower delivery costs can also be explored such as using small-group workshops or webinars where one-to-one session delivery proves too resource-intensive.

Simultaneously, work can start on the co-development of a clear structure and protocol for the sessions, working in partnership with representatives from the judiciary, CPS, CBA, MoJ and other relevant support services. This structure can then be tested through forums such as the Victims Board, Victims Reference Group, and London Criminal Justice Board (LCJB) for feedback before finalising. This process can also generate further buy-in for a pilot.

As mentioned previously, the appropriate profile of support worker needed to deliver these sessions would need to be agreed, including a decision on whether new staff need to be recruited, or if a group of existing support workers can be trained to deliver the session (following an assessment of training requirements). Although we have suggested this support be delivered via LVWS as they are responsible for pretrial support, there are also ISVAs, IDVAs, and other advocate roles who provide support to victims in the lead up to court.

The timing and venue for preparation sessions will also need to be considered. Ideally, sessions should take place once a trial date is confirmed, with flexibility to offer refreshers if there are significant delays or changes.

Finally, any pilot must be carefully evaluated to capture results and impact, identify lessons learned, and inform a wider rollout across London or nationally.

Improving online resources for witnesses

We recommend that CPS and HMCTS lead on developing and publishing neutral, explanatory resources that clearly set out what victims can expect from cross-examination. As part of this offer, we believe it would be beneficial to also create a short educational video, ideally a mock cross-examination. The CPS has already produced [video content](#) on their website explaining special measures as part of their Victim Transformation Programme, and the approach to develop these can also be used for the cross-examination guidance.

Another element of this work involves having a central hub for all online guidance related to the court process. We know work is already underway by LVWS to create a Witness Information Support Pack (WISP) on their website where all relevant information for witnesses is signposted in one place, and is presented in an easy-to-follow format.

Expanding access to remote evidence locations

A few barriers must be overcome to make Remote Evidence Centres more widely available – the key challenges being lack of funding for new infrastructure and for costs of administration, and the need for more reliable tech and Wi-Fi connections in court buildings.

To move this forward, we would work closely with MOPAC, the MoJ, justice partners, local authorities, and support services to identify potential REC locations across London. This might include using the existing facilities that belong to support services. It could also be possible to make use of facilities in other parts of the HMCTS estate, provided they are different from where the trial is taking place and have adequate video link technology.

As part of this work, the cost implications of using RECs, including administration and tech upgrades, should be identified and factored into planning. Therefore, as part of a testing phase we recommend identifying one location that could be used to pilot the use of a REC and work with MOPAC and the MoJ to secure the appropriate funding for a year of use.

Giving victims the choice to read their VRI

We believe that victims should be given the option to read a transcript of their VRI instead of watching it. To enact this, we will work on making a formal submission to the upcoming Victims' Code consultation, recommending that the option to request a transcript be clearly included.

At the same time, guidance should be issued to police officers to ensure that VRI transcripts are prepared in good time, and that victims are actively offered the choice between watching the recording or reading the transcript.

The option to read the transcript should be raised at the plea and trial preparation hearing (PTPH) in case there is a particular reason the witness should be reminded of their statement by playing the VRI itself. If so, providing a description or playing a short clip may suffice.

Examples of good practice

Witness Preparation Programme - Quebec, Canada

In Quebec, Canada, the Crime Victims' Assistance Centres (CAVACs) offer a Witness Preparation Programme as part of their wrap around victim care services. This programme was first developed for child witnesses and later expanded to include adult victims of sexual or domestic violence. The WPP was co-developed with their CPS to ensure the support delivered was neutral and to safeguard against perceptions of coaching. The programme includes a series of tailored sessions to support the witness in the lead up to trial, with children receiving up to 7/8 sessions and vulnerable adults receiving 2/3 sessions. These sessions are focused on familiarising the witness to the court process and often includes neutral cross examination role play, as well as tailored advice to strengthen practical skills (such as how to speak clearly) to help witnesses build their confidence.

CAVAC support workers delivering this support have both clinical and legal knowledge and are trusted by justice partners. Early evidence shows that the programme helps reduce victim attrition and improves the witness's legal understanding, particularly among children. Further evaluation results will be available soon, following analysis of data from 200 research participants.

Remote Evidence Centres (REC) - Northern Ireland, UK

In 2023, Northern Ireland's Department for Justice opened a Remote Evidence Center in Belfast to help vulnerable or intimidated witnesses give evidence via live video link, away from court buildings.

For the first few months after opening, Belfast REC bookings were intentionally managed in a phased way to allow systems to be tested and for protocols to be developed with a view to increasing usage over time. The Department for Justice also engaged in a concerted effort to raise awareness and promote the benefits of remote evidence facilities. This work has included over 50 promotional guided tours, the creation of videos to highlight REC facilities and additional information added to NI Direct.

The results of REC use have been encouraging. In its first year of full operation, 344 witnesses used the facility. Conviction rates have remained high at 91% in 2024, and in many cases, defendants entered guilty pleas without the victim needing to give oral evidence - this made up 62% of all convictions.

Furthermore, feedback from users has been positive:

"I would not have been able to give evidence if I had to go to court, so this made it much better".

"It made a big difference that I did not have to worry about meeting the defendant or his supporters. Attending the REC, rather than a courthouse, improved the experience immeasurably".

"Thoughts of having to give evidence were still scary but it was a lot better because of the REC. Thank you so much for making what should have been a bad day so much better".

These examples demonstrate the impact of introducing relatively simple support options on the victim experience.

Theme 2: Courtroom Familiarisation

Rationale

Limitations of the current approach to courtroom familiarisation

Familiarising witnesses with the courtroom environment plays an important role in managing anxiety and ensuring they feel more prepared for court. Although in person Pre Trial Visits (PTVs) are very beneficial, they also present some limitations.

Oftentimes last-minute courtroom locations changes can make it difficult to arrange additional in person visits; this issue is particularly acute in the case of floating trials where exact location may not be confirmed until shortly before the trial. This also rings

true for cases in Harrow Crown Court, which is currently closed, resulting in witnesses often finding out the location of their hearing the day before it is heard. There are also other barriers that could prevent witnesses attending pretrial visits such as courtroom scheduling constraints, or the personal circumstances of the witness.

Use of technology in courtroom familiarisation

Given these barriers, there is an opportunity for technology to improve courtroom familiarisation and make it more flexible and accessible. These tech driven options would supplement the existing offer of in-person PTVs and not replace them.

We recommend developing 360-degree videos of London courtrooms and making them available for the public online. There are several benefits to providing this option for witnesses, including having a convenient method for revisiting courtroom layout as many times as the witness needs, and having the ability to quickly access virtual tours of specific courtrooms in case of last-minute location changes. Having this online resource can also act as a sufficient standalone alternative for courtroom familiarisation for those who do not necessarily want or need an in person PTV.

There is also potential, where there is sufficient funding, to develop Virtual Reality (VR) tours which would allow the witness to walk through a digital recreation that mirrors the actual experience of going to court - from entering the court building to the courtroom layout including an explanation of different roles. This can help witnesses who cannot attend a PTV better prepare practically and emotionally for court. MOPAC and LVWS could explore whether this approach would be useful in London and how funding could be secured to deliver this option.

“[VR] would have helped me feel the embodied reality of being in the court, and how it feels to be doing the things” – Victim of rape.

In addition, virtual courtroom videos can help witnesses decide if they need to use special measures. By showing the view from the witness box, and what screens, video links, or separate entrances look like in practice, a witness can make more informed decisions when applying for special measures.

Although developing online courtroom tours would require upfront investment, we believe the long-term benefits are clear. These tech tools can provide more options for courtroom familiarisation, support a wider range of witnesses over time, reduce

pressure on the providers of PTV services, and provide more consistent access to familiarisation support regardless of the witnesses' circumstances.

Key Recommendations

- 1. MOPAC and HMCTS to work on making available accessible, on-demand 360° virtual courtroom tours of London courts to support witness familiarisation.**
- 2. MOPAC should explore the potential use of immersive Virtual Reality technology to enhance court familiarisation for witnesses.**

How can the recommendations be achieved?

Work is already underway between MOPAC, the London Victim and Witness Service (LVWS), and HMCTS to deliver 360 courtroom videos. This work includes development of a proposal and securing approvals needed from HMCTS and Judiciary to photograph the inside of London courtrooms and produce a walk-through of the key areas a witness will see, while following the necessary security protocols.

In England and Wales, Citizens Advice, who are currently responsible for delivering pretrial support outside of London, provide 360 courtroom tours via Teams calls which needs the presence of a support worker to take the witness through the video. This is because HMCTS security protocols stipulate that courtroom photos or videos should not be available online permanently or publicly. A next step for our office will be to continue working with HMCTS on identifying a workable solution that balances accessibility and the benefits of having a 'self-serve' tool, with security needs.

In terms of costs, we learned from support services across the UK that the cost of producing the 360 courtroom videos is relatively modest, and this would be a one-time investment. On the other hand, delivering virtual reality tours can be significantly more expensive.

There might also be scope to collaborate with academics in the UK who are researching the use and impact of immersive VR tools for courtroom familiarisation and preparing witnesses for giving evidence.

Examples of good practice

Use of tech in courtroom familiarisation in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Technology is currently being used to support courtroom familiarisation across the UK.

In both Scotland and Northern Ireland, Victim Support have developed publicly accessible 360-degree courtroom tours for all their courts. These were made available online following approvals from Judiciary and their Justice departments. Since their roll out, Victim Support has had positive feedback from witnesses on how useful the 360 videos have been in helping them better understand the courtroom environment and the convenience of being able to access them online.

Victim Support Scotland has also gone a step further and invested in providing Virtual Reality courtroom tours after a successful pilot. These allow witnesses to experience the courtroom from the moment they enter the building, including walking through security, locating the waiting area, the view from the witness box and what it looks like behind a screen, as well as an explanation of the key roles in court. This too has had positive feedback from witnesses as it provides a realistic depiction of the court experience.

Theme 3: Communication with Victims

Rationale

Inefficiencies in the communication with victims

Clear and timely communication with victims is key to making them feel supported and properly engaged during their journey through the criminal justice system. However, there are currently communication issues that increase the risk of victims having a negative experience in the lead up to court. We know the Metropolitan Police's Witness Care Unit (WCU) still relies on manual process for much of its communication with witnesses, which can lead to slow responses, make mistakes happening more likely, and can be a frustrating experience for the witness. For example, we were made aware of a case where the victim witness was given the wrong court date, preventing her from giving evidence. As a result, the charges against her abuser were dropped, leaving her deeply distressed that her chance to seek justice was lost despite her willingness to attend.

In addition, the high number of potential contact points post-charge - including WCU staff, police officers, CPS Victim Liaison Officers, the LVWS support workers, Witness Service workers, and specialist advocates such as ISVAs or IDVAs - can leave victims

unsure of the difference between some of these roles and who to approach for support or updates. Moreover, if information sharing between different agencies is not streamlined, this could lead to unintended consequences such as witnesses not being informed about changes to their trial date or not being offered a Pre-Trial Visit. This can have a particular impact on vulnerable victims, undermining their trust in the system, and increasing the risk of withdrawal.

“Most people don't know what the next person does - it's like different languages... and I'm bridging the language gap”- Victim of child sexual abuse.

Digital solutions

We believe investment in digitising communications with witnesses could significantly improve the consistency and reliability of updates. The development of a digital platform could offer a wide range of options such as real-time case notifications, enable witnesses to update their availability for trial on an ongoing basis, and send reminders about court dates. These kinds of tools can reduce the burden on stretched WCU staff, and allow for more streamlined case management.

The Ministry of Justice are currently working with criminal justice agencies to explore data and digital opportunities to improve communication and information sharing with victims in the criminal justice system. If these digital solutions are developed and rolled out, it could offer a self-service portal for victims who may not need direct contact with an officer. This approach could reduce demands on police officers' time, and free them up to focus on victims who require more intensive support.

To help this work in practice, we propose the introduction of a Single Justice Journey Number - a unique identifier for each victim, like an NHS number - which would address systemic issues in data sharing in the criminal justice system and enable justice agencies to securely track a victim's progress through the system. A single identifier would also help reduce victim frustration by minimising the need for them to repeat their story or re-identify themselves at every stage.

A single point of contact

Currently, Witness Care Unit staff are the primary contact point for victims whilst they are waiting for trial, but they face intense pressure from high caseloads, stress,

vicarious trauma, and have limited training¹³. Alongside digital solutions, we strongly believe victims would benefit from a single, consistent point of contact throughout their journey in the justice system. This is a core principle of the [Victim Care Hub model](#) advocated by the London Victims' Commissioner. The Hub would be designed to act as a navigator role for victims in the justice process, offering victims key updates on case progression, answers to their questions, access to specialist referrals, and active monitoring of Victims' Code entitlements.

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.

The success of this model depends on the ability of agencies to seamlessly track and integrate data. For the Hub to function effectively, it would need to be granted access to information about victims and the relevant stages of their case. We do not believe current data protection laws prevent this, provided that staff are vetted and data-sharing agreements are in place.

As mentioned previously, the introduction of a Single Justice Journey Number would also help facilitate the delivery of a Victim Care Hub model by enabling more effective data sharing. It would also help transform the fragmented experience victims currently face by creating a cohesive, transparent, and accountable system that truly centres on the victim's journey through the criminal justice system.

Key Recommendations

1. Digital solutions should be implemented by MoJ to streamline communication with witnesses.

2. A single point of contact for victims should be established in line with the 'Victim Care Hub' model advocated for by the London Victims Commissioner.

¹³ Murray, Sasha; Welland, Sarah; Storry, Madeleine, [Justice delayed: The impact of the Crown Court backlog on victims, victim services and the criminal justice system](#) (Office of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, March 2025)

How can the recommendations be achieved?

To improve communication with victims, and to progress the MoJ's work in developing data and digital solutions, further funding will need to be secured. Once in the delivery phase, this could be piloted in London.

The establishment of a single point of contact through a Victim Care Hub model will require multi-agency buy-in and a new approach to data sharing. A key step would also be to amend the Victims' Code to allow certain responsibilities to be discharged to a Hub. Furthermore, for the hub model to work, it must be fully integrated into the justice system and supported by a formal commitment from the key agencies.

To fund and operate the hub sustainably, the 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.

In order to implement a Single Justice Journey Number which would aid in the delivery of digital solutions for communication and the introduction of a single point of contact, legislative change would likely be needed.

Examples of good practice

A victim centred approach to justice in Scotland

In 2024, the Scottish government's Victims task force commissioned a report that made several recommendations on how to deliver a more victim-centred approach across their justice system. A key recommendation was to standardise a Single Point of Contact (SPOC), to ensure all victim-survivors, regardless of crime type, are assigned a SPOC from a support organisation to provide consistent support and communication throughout their case.

Another proposal in the report was to implement a Victim Passport which would create a centralised, secure platform for data-sharing to reduce the need for victims to repeatedly recount their experiences and to improve access to information.

These proposals are being considered for implementation by the Scottish Government and have been well received by key stakeholders.

Crime Victims' Assistance Centres, Quebec, Canada

The 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.

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).

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.

Conclusion

For too many victims, the experience of attending court remains daunting, with limited support in preparing for trial which, coupled with the long waiting time due to the backlogs, is often an emotionally exhausting and traumatising experience. If we want victims to stay engaged in the criminal justice system, give their best evidence, and ultimately see justice delivered, we must make their needs a central focus.

In this paper we set out several key recommendations that aim to improve pre-trial support and prepare witnesses for giving their best evidence, deliver more accessible courtroom familiarisation, and facilitate consistent communication. Many of these changes can be delivered within existing structures, but they require strong coordination and collaboration between agencies, investment, and a shared commitment to improve the victim experience.

We stand ready to work with partners in MOPAC and across the justice system to take these recommendations forward and ensure that victims in London, and across the country, are better supported at every stage of the court process.

“I thought going to court would help me move on... it was already difficult trying to cope with how you feel, and the legal process can make you feel even smaller. Sometimes it feels like more damage is done by the system itself than by what started it” - Young victim

List of recommendations

1. A pilot project should be established aimed at providing vulnerable witnesses with dedicated sessions on how to give best evidence, as part of pretrial support.
2. Online resources, including cross-examination guidance and supporting videos, should be made available by CPS/HMCTS to witnesses.
3. Appropriate locations across London should be made available for vulnerable adult witnesses to give remote evidence - where this special measure is granted - away from the court building where the trial is taking place.
4. Victims should be offered the option to read a transcript of their Video Recorded Interview (VRI) instead of watching the recording.
5. MOPAC and HMCTS to work on making available accessible, on-demand 360° virtual courtroom tours of London courts to support witness familiarisation.
6. MOPAC should explore the potential use of immersive Virtual Reality technology to enhance court familiarisation for witnesses.
7. Digital solutions should be implemented by MoJ to streamline communication with witnesses.
8. A single point of contact for victims should be established in line with the 'Victim Care Hub' model advocated for by the London Victims Commissioner.