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administration  
of justice

Northern Ireland Court Service

# Victims and Witness Policy

March 2006



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

[www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)

## **Customer Service Commitment**

**The Northern Ireland Court Service is committed to providing an efficient, accessible and quality service for all customers by listening and responding to their needs.**

### **What We Currently Do**

The Court Service recognises the importance of creating an environment where all court users feel comfortable. We have already taken a number of steps which are designed to improve the quality of customer care for all our court users.

Examples of our commitment to this can be found in:

- The Court's Charter for Northern Ireland. This outlines the standards of service a court user can expect when dealing with any court office;
- Various information leaflets under the following categories:
  - The work of the Court Service
  - Who's who in the courtroom
  - Countering Intimidation
  - Court Etiquette
  - Juror
  - Defendant
  - Youth Court

This policy for Victims and Witnesses builds upon all of this work. It aims to inform Victims and Witnesses of the support and guidance that is currently available to them.

All information contained in this policy can be obtained from:

- Customer Service Officer at any court venue;
- Information Centre; or
- Via website [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)

Currently we have the following services available to victims and witnesses:

## **1. Customer Service Strategy**

The Customer Service strategy is the overarching policy for customer service in Court Service. It details the standards all customers of the Court Service can expect when they use our services; including the information available, facilities provided and, most importantly how they are treated by our staff.

This strategy is available to download from our website [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk)

## **2. Witness standards and Vulnerable Victims and Intimidated Witness Standards**

Standards for witnesses attending court were drawn up in 2004. The aim of the standards is to provide witnesses with clear information on the service they can expect from the Court Service before and during court.

Standards for vulnerable victims and intimidated witnesses were drawn up to make them aware of the special arrangements we could make if appropriate to their case.

A leaflet and poster of both of these standards are available at every court venue and on internet site [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk). Or alternatively, they can be provided via telephone request.

Some of the standards of service we aim to provide for witnesses include:

- Reception desks, information points and public counters where you can ask for information;
- Separate waiting rooms in all main court venues for all vulnerable and intimidated witnesses;
- An opportunity to visit the courthouse and view facilities before you come to give evidence;
- Information leaflet about the courthouse you are to attend;

- Child witness room available in all main court venues.

### **3. Victim Support/NSPCC/Court Service Partnership Protocol**

Victim Support Northern Ireland (VSNI), National Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and the Court Service recognise that each has a role to play in supporting witnesses who come to court. The three agencies have been working in partnership for some time to support victims and witnesses in Northern Ireland.

Together we have devised a protocol which defines the nature and scope of the partnership arrangement and addresses the practical aspects of the working relationships. This protocol is available in court offices and on our internet site at [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk).

### **4. Guide to the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland**

The guide to the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland has been designed to explain each aspect of the system, and the roles and responsibilities of those working within it. It should guide all users through the system from beginning to end.

This guide is available to download from [www.cjsni.gov.uk](http://www.cjsni.gov.uk)

### **5. Waiting Times**

We recognise that witnesses may have to wait before being called to give their evidence. However, we are working closely with our partners to ensure there is regular communication between the person responsible for asking the witness to attend court and the witness themselves to reduce any avoidable delay.

We have devised a poster entitled “**Are you waiting to go into Court**”; this poster is available at every court office and outlines the steps you should take if you are experiencing a delay on the day of hearing.

We are also considering other ways to minimise delay. For example a pilot scheme which has as one of its objectives

**to reduce delay in waiting times for victims and witnesses**

has commenced in one of Belfast's magistrates courts and in Newtownards, Downpatrick and Bangor magistrates courts. This pilot involves listing some cases for 12 noon and it asks the legal representatives to ensure all steps have been taken before the hearing to allow cases to proceed on their allocated day.

## **6. Special Measures**

If you feel particularly intimidated or vulnerable, the following special measures are currently available:

- Screening the witness from the accused  
This allows the witness to be prevented from seeing the accused and the public gallery by means of a screen or other arrangement.
- Evidence by live link  
The witness while not physically in the courtroom would be able to see and hear court proceedings and to be seen and heard by the court.
- Evidence given in private  
This allows for the exclusion from the court persons of any description specified in the direction while the witness is giving evidence. However, the accused, legal representatives acting in the proceedings, interpreters or other persons appointed to assist the witness should remain in the courtroom.
- Removal of wigs and gowns  
Judiciary and legal profession can remove their wigs and gowns while the witness is giving their evidence.
- Aids to communication  
A witness may have an interpreter, use Braille oath cards, use the Loop system should they have a disability or requirement to do so.

- Video recorded evidence in chief  
This is available for children in all proceedings, but only available in the Crown Court for adult witnesses.

\*Each of the above measures is subject to the application being made to the court in advance of the hearing.

## **SUMMARY**

### **What can Victims and Witnesses expect during the court process?**

#### **Before Court:**

- Opportunity to visit the courthouse and view facilities before you come to give evidence;
- Contact information for voluntary agencies and support services;
- Information about the court building in which the case will be heard;
- Information about who's who in the courtroom;
- Information about the court process.

#### **At Court:**

- Separate waiting rooms on request;
- Information about progress on the day, waiting time;
- Courteous and sensitive treatment by court staff;
- Reduction in unnecessary formality in the court;
- Use of interpreters if necessary;
- Explanation of process;
- Clean, comfortable waiting rooms and refreshment facilities.

**Post Court:**

- Information about the verdict and sentence \*;
- Use of an interpreter to explain results after court hearing;
- Opportunity to provide feedback on process.

*\* the level of information available may be restricted due to legislative restrictions.*

## Working With Others

We recognise that we need to work together with other agencies that also have a responsibility for offering support to victims and witnesses. Court Service is a member of the Vulnerable Victims & Intimidated Witnesses Group, which aims to facilitate partnership working between each of the criminal justice agencies and representatives from the voluntary sector, including Victim Support NI and NSPCC.

In July 2005, the Criminal Justice Inspectorate (CJI) undertook a thematic review of how Victims and Witnesses were treated within the Criminal Justice System. They produced a report called, *“Improving the Provision of Care for Victims and Witnesses within the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland.”* Their report set out a range of findings based on extensive interviews and discussion groups with interested parties. One of the recommendations for the Court Service states that we

“should develop a Victims and Witnesses Policy that identifies linkages to the work they undertake, the facilities they provide and the reliance placed on their partners to develop good customer care.”

This document aims to meet that commitment and provide information to Victims and Witnesses about what the Court Service offers in terms of support and guidance.

The Inspection Report also recommended that:

“the Criminal Justice Board (CJB)\* should develop an overarching Victims and Witnesses Strategy that will promote the accountability of each agency for the services which they deliver. The strategy should be designed to ensure that a robust, joined-up service is available across agencies and the voluntary sector to facilitate a consistent approach for the provision of care for victims and witnesses.”

Court Service will contribute to this and each of the recommendations made by the Inspector.

The Criminal Justice Inspector’s Report can be accessed via their website [www.cjini.org](http://www.cjini.org)

## **Review**

This document will be reviewed in line with the Victims and Witnesses Strategy to ensure we continually improve the quality of service we provide to victims and witnesses.

\*Membership of CJB comprises of the heads or senior representatives from the following Criminal Justice agencies:

- Police Service of Northern Ireland;
- Public Prosecution Service;
- Northern Ireland Court Service;
- Probation Board for Northern Ireland;
- Northern Ireland Prison Service; and
- Northern Ireland Youth Justice Agency

Under the chairmanship of the Northern Ireland Office.

## Contact Information for Court Offices

Each Court office has a Customer Services Officer. Their role is to improve customer service delivery to all court users.

### **Antrim Court Office**

The Courthouse  
30 Castle Way  
Antrim BT41 4AQ  
Phone: 028 9446 2661  
[antrimcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:antrimcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Armagh Court Office**

The Courthouse  
The Mall  
Armagh BT61 9DJ  
Phone: 028 3752 2816  
[armaghcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:armaghcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Ballymena Court Office**

The Courthouse  
9-13 Ballymoney Road  
Ballymena BT43 5EH  
Phone: 028 2564 9416  
[ballymenacourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:ballymenacourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Banbridge Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Victoria Street  
Banbridge BT32 3DH  
Phone: 028 4062 3622  
[banbridgecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:banbridgecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Bangor Court Office**

The Courthouse  
6 Quay Street  
Bangor BT20 5EA  
Phone: 028 91472626  
[bangorcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:bangorcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Belfast Combined Courts**

Laganside Courts  
45 Oxford Street  
Belfast BT1 3LL  
Phone: 028 9032 8594  
[cmslaganside@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:cmslaganside@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Coleraine Court Office**

The Courthouse  
46A Mountsandal Road  
Coleraine BT52 1NY  
Phone: 028 7034 3437  
[colerainecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:colerainecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Craigavon Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Central Way  
Craigavon BT64 1AP  
Phone: 028 3834 1324  
[craigavoncourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:craigavoncourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Downpatrick Court Office**

The Courthouse  
English Street  
Downpatrick BT30 6AD  
Phone: 028 4461 4621  
[downpatrickcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:downpatrickcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

### **Dungannon Court Office**

The Courthouse  
46 Killyman Road  
Dungannon BT71 6FG  
Phone: 028 8772 2992  
[dungannoncourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:dungannoncourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Enniskillen Court Office**

The Courthouse  
East Bridge Street  
Enniskillen BT74 7BP  
Phone: 028 6632 2356  
[enniskillencourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:enniskillencourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Limavady Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Main Street  
Limavady BT49 0EY  
Phone: 028 7772 2688  
[limavadycourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:limavadycourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Londonderry Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Bishop Street  
Londonderry BT48 6PQ  
Phone: 028 7136 3448  
[londonderrycourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:londonderrycourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Newry Court Office**

The Courthouse  
23 New Street  
Newry BT35 6JD  
Phone: 028 3025 2040  
[newrycourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:newrycourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Omagh Court Office**

The Courthouse  
High Street  
Omagh BT78 1DU  
Phone: 028 8224 2056  
[omaghcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:omaghcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Strabane Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Derry Road  
Strabane BT82 8DT  
Phone: 028 7138 2544  
[strabanecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:strabanecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Larne Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Victoria Road  
Larne BT40 1RN  
Phone: 028 2827 2927  
[larnecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:larnecourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Lisburn Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Railway Street  
Lisburn BT28 1XR  
Phone: 028 9267 5336  
[lisburncourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:lisburncourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Magherafelt Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Hospital Road  
Magherafelt BT45 5DG  
Phone: 028 7963 2121  
[magherafeltcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:magherafeltcourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Newtownards Court Office**

The Courthouse  
Regent Street  
Newtownards BT23 4LP  
Phone: 028 9181 4343  
[newtownardscourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:newtownardscourthouse@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Royal Courts of Justice**

Chichester Street  
Belfast BT1 3JF  
Phone: 028 9072 5910  
028 9072 4661  
[supremecourtadministration@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:supremecourtadministration@courtsni.gov.uk)

**Information Centre**

Windsor House  
10-12 Bedford Street  
Belfast BT2 7LT  
Phone: 028 90328594  
[informationcentre@courtsni.gov.uk](mailto:informationcentre@courtsni.gov.uk)

## Contact Information for other agencies

### **Women's Aid**

129 University Street  
Belfast BT7 1HP  
Phone: 028 90249041  
[info@womensaidni.org](mailto:info@womensaidni.org)

### **NSPCC**

Block 1  
Jennymount Business Park  
North Derby Street  
Belfast BT15 3HN  
Phone: 028 90351135  
[www.nspcc.org.uk](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)

### **Victim Support NI**

Regional office  
3rd Floor  
Annsgate House  
70/74 Ann Street  
Belfast BT1 4EH  
Phone: 028 9024 4039  
[info@victimsupportni.org.uk](mailto:info@victimsupportni.org.uk)

### **Probation Board NI**

Victims Unit  
Imperial Buildings  
72 High Street  
Belfast BT1 2BE  
Phone: 028 9032 1972  
[victimsunit@pbni.org.uk](mailto:victimsunit@pbni.org.uk)

### **Citizens Advice Bureau**

11 Upper Crescent  
Belfast BT7 1NT  
Phone: 028 90231120  
[info@citizensadvice.co.uk](mailto:info@citizensadvice.co.uk)

### **The Law Society of N Ireland**

Law Society House  
98 Victoria Street  
Belfast BT1 3JZ  
Phone: 028 90231614  
[info@lawsoc-ni.org](mailto:info@lawsoc-ni.org)

### **Executive Council of the Bar**

Bar Library  
91 Chichester Street  
Belfast BT1 JQ  
Phone: 028 90562349  
[chief.executive@barcouncil-ni.o](mailto:chief.executive@barcouncil-ni.o)

## **Complaints**

The Court Service aims to provide a high standard of service to all court users. However, we recognise that occasionally things do go wrong.

If you have experienced a difficulty at court, please tell us so we can put it right.

The Court Service's complaints procedure is documented in the "Making a complaint about the Court Service". This can be found at all court offices and on our website [www.courtsni.gov.uk](http://www.courtsni.gov.uk). Complaints and comments can also be submitted on-line.