

Standards of Service for Victims and Witnesses Annual Report 2023-24



CROWN OFFICE
& PROCURATOR
FISCAL SERVICE

SCOTLAND'S PROSECUTION SERVICE

Scottish Courts
and Tribunals Service



Introduction – Setting the Standard

The Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 was brought in to improve support for victims and witnesses. To make this a reality, the Act called for organisations in the criminal justice system to set clear standards of service.

In this report you'll hear from:

- Police Scotland
- Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service
- Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service
- Scottish Prison Service
- Parole Board for Scotland

Each of these organisations is a key part of the justice system.

If you're a victim or witness of crime, you're likely to come into contact with some of these organisations and different people in the criminal justice system. Some will support you directly, for example with advice or information. Others will be in touch with you because you're involved in a court case.

This is why our standards are so important. We want to make sure you have what you need for your journey through the justice system, and that every organisation or team member you meet treats you fairly.

We also want you to know what your rights are, so you know what should happen and how we should treat you. You can read what your rights are in the Victims' Code at www.mygov.scot/victims-code-for-scotland.

We have a set of common standards we all work to (see page 2). But each organisation sets its own standards of service beyond that. We publish a joint report on how we've met them over the year.

About this report

Each justice partner is responsible for setting their own standards of service and reporting on them. However, we have worked collaboratively from the outset to publish a joint annual report, to explain what each organisation does and has done over the last year to meet their standards in helping victims and witnesses feel supported, safe and informed at every stage of the process. If we've not met a standard, we've explained why.

It shows our commitment to meeting, challenging and reviewing our standards, to make sure they're as effective as possible. It also gives some examples of where we've gone beyond our standards to support victims and witnesses.

The common standards you can expect from us

Each justice organisation has its own standards of service – which you can read about shortly. But we also all follow the same three common standards.

These standards underpin all of our work and help us make sure we give the highest standard of service possible.

We appreciate that having a crime committed against you or witnessing a crime can be an upsetting and difficult experience. We will do the following to make your journey in the justice system as easy as possible:

- We will make sure you have fair and equal access to services, and treat you with dignity and respect at all times, regardless of:
 - age
 - disability
 - gender identity
 - marriage and civil partnership
 - pregnancy and maternity
 - race
 - religion or belief
 - sex or sexual orientation.

If you need it, we'll give you extra support and make reasonable adjustments to make sure you can access the information and support services you need.

- We will work with victim and witness support organisations to make sure you get the best service possible.
- We will follow our respective complaints procedures if you are unhappy with our service, try to put things right and improve things for the future.

Police Scotland



Chief Constable, Jo Farrell

A word from our Chief Constable:

“Police Scotland is committed to delivering a high-quality service to victims and witnesses and our standards reflect this.

During this year we have continued to work closely with our justice partners and support agencies to help victims and witnesses feel supported, safe and informed throughout their journey.

We know that with the right support, victims feel more confident engaging with services, provide their best evidence and are less likely to become a repeat victim of crime.”

What we do

Police Scotland is responsible for policing across the whole of Scotland. Our purpose is to improve the wellbeing of people, places and communities, focusing on keeping people safe in line with our values of integrity, fairness and respect.

We have 13 local policing divisions supported by national divisions – each committed to keeping the communities they serve safe.

We also work closely with our criminal justice partners to identify priority areas. This includes improving the rights, support, protection and participation of victims and witnesses in a streamlined and unified criminal justice system.

As well as our Standards of Service for Victims and Witnesses, we're guided by the [Code of Ethics for policing in Scotland](#) and our [Standards of Professional Behaviour](#).

How we met our standards

Victims and witnesses can experience a range of emotions during the criminal justice process. If they don't have much experience of the process, trying to navigate the system can cause them even more unnecessary stress and confusion.

We understand victims and witnesses rely on police officers and staff to give them information about their rights – including how to get support if they need it. It's essential we get this right, so the standards we've set ourselves reflect that.

In this report, we've summarised our performance against our standards, and given details about our ongoing work to improve the experiences of victims and witnesses.

Standard 1

We will discuss with you how you will be kept informed of the progress of your case; we will also explain how we will deal with your case and what we may ask you to do to help us.

When we're investigating a crime, we work hard to keep the people affected up to date with any progress and make sure they know what's going to happen.

It's the responsibility of each officer to give the highest possible standard of service to our communities. This includes explaining to people what's going to happen and what they might need to do. We will also tell people about their rights including their right to be supported.

The importance of this standard is reinforced to our officers in our Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), National Guidance and internal communications.

What we've done

Every month, we conduct a 'User Experience Survey for Local Policing' – run by an independent market research agency called Progressive Partnership Ltd. This survey captures the experiences of people who have reported a crime or incident to Police Scotland.

As part of this survey, we ask people to tell us whether they felt they were adequately informed about the progress after their report. This year, 50% said they felt they were. The table below provides more details on the survey and what else we found out this year.

Question	April 2023-March 2024
How easy or difficult was it to contact Police Scotland? (Easy & very easy)	73%
During the initial contact how satisfied are you with the way you were treated by the staff member? (Satisfied & very satisfied)	85%
Did you feel staff properly understood what you needed? (Yes)	87%
Do you feel that the police provided the appropriate response to the incident you reported? (Yes)	64%
How satisfied are you with the way you were treated by the officers who attended the incident? (Satisfied & very satisfied)	82%
Were you adequately informed about the progress of the incident you reported? (Yes)	50%
Based on your overall experience, how satisfied are you with Police Scotland? (Satisfied & very satisfied)	69%

We are progressing our work to improve our response and drive the change needed to end [violence against women and girls](#). In May 2023, we launched a feedback mechanism for domestic abuse and sexual crime which invites victim survivors to [provide anonymous feedback](#) on the service they received.

We have had 142 responses in 2023-24, with 73 responses related to domestic abuse and 20 relating to rape. 23 relate to 'any other sexual crime'. 42% of respondents felt police were respectful towards their situation, 27% were satisfied with their experience overall.

This year, we are piloting a new victim strategy aimed at enhancing the contact between Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) and Police Scotland for crimes of sexual harm to ensure the wishes of the victim, in relation to how and how often they would like to be contacted, are documented in the police report and taken into account. Sexual Offences Liaison Officers (SOLO) also maintain contact logs with victims to ensure that all contact is appropriately recorded and can be routinely checked.

Following a successful [pilot](#) in the North East, our Proportionate Response to Crime (PRTC) Model began a national roll out in March 2024. This approach recognises that on some occasions, crimes are reported where there is no associated threat, risk, harm or vulnerability and also no proportionate lines of enquiry for local officers to investigate such as CCTV or witnesses. When this happens, our staff will inform the caller that the enquiry has been recorded and a crime reference will be supplied but no further action will be taken. This means that reporters are informed about the progress of their case more quickly rather than waiting for officers to contact them days later with the same update.

Our Summary Case Management pilot ongoing across the country is designed to resolve cases at the earliest opportunity. It works by providing evidence such as CCTV and statements, during the submission of police reports to COPFS. This allows the earlier disclosure of this evidence to the defence and can help to conclude cases much quicker, reducing the number of cases having to go to court. This means that we may ask victims and witnesses of crime to help us by providing this evidence to us sooner, but it has the benefit of being able to update on the outcome much earlier.

What we will do

Over the coming year, we'll continue to do our monthly survey and encourage victim survivor feedback. We will also continue to carry out engagement and research programmes with victims and advocate organisations. This is so we can make sure we're keeping people up to date effectively and find out if there's anything else we can do to make sure we give people all the information they need.

Our new national crime recording system roll out was completed in November 2023. This means that every crime across Scotland is recorded on the same system. We are currently developing ways to enhance the system to better support our officers in keeping victims and witnesses of crime up to date with the progress of their case.

Standard 2

If you are a victim or witness, a person who has given a statement in relation to a crime or a family member of a victim who has died as a result of a crime, you can make a request for information. When we receive your application, we will respond within 40 days.

What we've done

People can apply for [information about their case](#), and we'll give them what they ask for, as long as it's not confidential or inappropriate to give out. Between 1 April 2023 and 31 March 2024, we received 60 information requests.

What we will do

This standard is embedded into practices and procedures and victims and witnesses will be provided with this information as long as it is not restricted.

Standard 3

If you are a victim of either a sexual offence, trafficking for sexual exploitation for prostitution, trafficking for exploitation, domestic abuse or stalking, Honour Based Abuse (HBA), Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) or Forced Marriage, you will have the option to let officers know whether you want a male or female officer to interview you. We will try to meet your request wherever possible.

We know how important it is for victims and witnesses – especially the crimes this standard focuses on – to feel safe and comfortable when we interview them. We know some people prefer to speak to an officer of a certain gender, and they have the right to ask for this in Section 8 of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014.

What we've done

This standard is part of our day-to-day processes and our person-centred approach to handling cases like this. In June 2023, we updated our interim Vulnerable Persons Database (iVPD) system to make it easier for officers to identify the offences and behaviours applicable to this right. When we arrange interviews, we ask the person affected by the crime if they have a preference. If they do, we do our best to arrange the interview in line with that.

We know training our officers and staff is key to meeting this standard. Our Police Scotland Service Centre (PSSC) staff complete a formalised training and evaluation process covering all aspects of emergency and non-emergency calls. This includes a focus on specialist crime to ensure that all victim survivors receive the best service from first contact. The initial briefing report (IBR) that officers complete when they first respond to people affected by serious sexual crime also includes a section for their preference of interviewing officer.

This year, 41,578 victims were eligible to specify the gender of the interviewing officer and we offered this for 88% of victims. For those that we did not offer, the majority were because the statement was no longer needed or the victim was uncooperative or unable to specify their preference.

What we will do

We'll continue to train our teams to give people affected by these crimes the chance to tell us if they'd prefer to be interviewed by a man or a woman.

We'll also continue to make sure our specialist teams have enough interviewing officers of each gender so we can give victims and witnesses the choice wherever possible.

Over the last 24 months, Police Scotland and Heriot Watt University have collaborated to carry out projects, Justisign2 and Silent Harm. Both projects aimed to understand and address the challenges deaf people have in reporting domestic abuse.

One of the findings suggested that victims and witnesses of the offences/behaviours applicable to this right would benefit from the opportunity to specify the gender of the interpreter.

We will continue to work to improve our services so that any victim or witness of these offences will, where practicable, be afforded the right to also specify the gender of any interpreter.

Standard 4

To assess your requirements as a witness, we will consider, with our partners, your particular needs and try to ensure those needs are met.

We understand that witnessing a crime can be upsetting and stressful. Having to then talk to police and go to court can add to that stress.

This standard helps us identify people's needs and focus on supporting each person affected by crime in the best way for them.

What we've done

Sharing information more effectively

To give victims and witnesses the right support – and make sure it's consistent – it's important we work with our justice partners. This is particularly true for vulnerable people.

Our Divisional Concern Hubs triage, research and assess all reports concerning vulnerable people received through our interim Vulnerable Person Database (iVPD) system. They then share relevant, necessary, justifiable and proportionate information with our justice partners. This is to make sure the person in the report gets the right support, in line with legal requirements, national guidance and General Data Protection Regulations.

The revised National Guidance for Child Protection in Scotland was published in September 2023, outlining how agencies should work together with families and communities to prevent harm and protect children from harm caused by abuse and neglect. The guidance integrates Child Protection with Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) and aims to provide a national framework for services and local inter-agency forums. This includes identifying Inter-Agency Referral Discussion (IRD), which provides consistency in the formal process of information sharing, assessment, analysis and decision-making, as the 'cornerstone' of the Child Protection System.

Senior Investigating Officers (SIO) actively participate in national child death learning across the country to improve the multi-agency response to child death, positively influencing experiences for bereaved families and ensuring every death of a child in Scotland is subject to a quality review through a consistent process.

Meeting the needs of children in our interviews

This year, we've continued to work with Social Work Scotland and other partners to take forward recommendations of the Evidence and Procedure Review and to improve the quality and consistency of Joint Investigative Interviews (JIIs) of children.

Our aim is to use these interviews as ‘evidence in chief’ and remove the need for children to give evidence within court.

The National Joint Investigative Interview Team (NJII) made up of experienced police officers and social workers, continue to work with local partnerships across Scotland to adopt and implement the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM). This model sets standards for JIIs and adopts a trauma-informed approach to reduce the likelihood of causing further trauma to child victims and witnesses and to secure best evidence for court purposes. SCIM will be available across the country by late 2024.

Supporting vulnerable witnesses

The Vulnerable Witness (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Act 2019, sets out special measures including in some circumstances the use of pre-recorded evidence of vulnerable witnesses. This process known as ‘evidence by commission’, will be used as ‘evidence in chief’ and will remove the need for their evidence to be given in court.

We are committed to improving the experience of young people and vulnerable witnesses through the justice process and continue to increase the number of officers trained to offer visually recorded interviews (VRI’s).

Bairns’ Hoose – a child-friendly place to heal

Scottish Government continues to work on bringing the Icelandic Barnahus Model to Scotland. It is currently ongoing through 10 local Pathfinder and Affiliate projects across the country.

This model gives children affected by abuse or violence access to trauma-informed recovery, support and justice. This includes children who have caused significant harm or abuse but are under the age of criminal responsibility– under 12 in Scotland at the moment.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland and the Care Inspectorate have created a set of standards to introduce this ‘Bairn’s Hoose’ model to Scotland. Police Scotland are members of the local partnerships that are helping to support and develop this work.

Working together to protect children - tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation

We’re committed to supporting people affected by online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) and preventing this type of crime. This year we’ve been finding new ways to tackle the problem and changing the way we work with other organisations to protect children more effectively.

We continue to lead a Multi-Agency Preventing OCSAE Group which coordinates and develops learning. We have built new relationships with academia and national agencies such as the National Crime Agency (NCA), Internet Watch Foundation and Ofcom Scotland. We encourage and support each other’s campaigns and national

investigations and work together to improve processes and remove harmful content of children from the worldwide web.

We've strengthened our approach in dealing with the OCSAE material we gather from offenders to help us protect children and prevent the same thing happening to the same child again.

The Police Scotland Victim Identification team (VID) provides specialist support to OCSAE investigations throughout Scotland. They help identify where the opportunity exists, each child shown in imagery and protect them from more harm. They also support local policing through an ongoing education strategy.

Supporting people affected by domestic abuse

We want to support victim survivors of domestic abuse and gender-based violence in the best possible way for them.

We have a three-tiered approach to handling domestic abuse, with victims and witnesses at its core.

To make sure our teams understand what's expected of them and what they need to do to meet the needs of people affected by domestic abuse, we've set out our approach in the Domestic Abuse Investigation Standard Operating Procedure and Toolkit and on our intranet.

The guidance defines the responsibilities for all police officers and other roles when it comes to victim survivors including telling people about their rights and the support available to them.

Our Domestic Abuse Questions (DAQ) which officers ask anyone reporting domestic abuse, help us make an accurate and swift assessment of the danger they are in so we can get the right help for them. We know how important it is to understand these questions properly, so we have worked with Heriot Watt University and other partners to create a new, more accessible version of the DAQ. This will make it easier to translate the DAQ into BSL and other languages.

Training our officers

We've continued to run our pioneering Domestic Abuse Matters (Scotland) course and have trained over 14,000 officers and staff. This helps teams put the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 into practice and gives guidance on practical issues like gathering evidence and reporting coercive or controlling behaviour. It also teaches the dynamics of power and control in abusive relationships and tackles the myths and misconceptions common in some communities.

We have a network of Domestic Abuse Champions. They continually work to make sure the learning from the Domestic Abuse Matters core training programme is embedded in our work. The champions support their colleagues with advice and guidance to make sure they're working to the key principles of the training

programme. In December 2023, we delivered a week long *Train the Trainer* event for officers in a variety of roles to become Domestic Abuse Subject Matter Experts. This increased the number of trainers that will be used to train additional Domestic Abuse Champions during 2024.

This year, we have worked with SafeLives and other partner organisations to develop a Continuous Professional Development training programme. The 6 module programme offers a wide range of information including the effects of trauma, the use of technology and the effects of Domestic Abuse on children. It also reinforces the need to work together to support people affected by Domestic Abuse and will further equip officers and staff with the tools needed to do this. Delivery of the modules started in December 2023.

The national Domestic Abuse Investigators Course (DAIC) is for specialist domestic abuse investigators working within Divisional Domestic Abuse Investigation Units (DAIUs) and the national Domestic Abuse Task Force (DATF).

The course focuses on our proactive approach to investigations about:

- domestic abuse
- forced marriage
- honour-based abuse
- stalking.

It reinforces how important it is to keep people affected by these crimes engaged in the criminal justice process by sharing appropriate information with them regularly.

We ensure all our training is underpinned by Lived Experience accounts through the use of a number of case studies and input from partner agencies, which shapes the learning.

Preventing domestic abuse

The Disclosure Scheme for Domestic Abuse Scotland (DSDAS) is a way of sharing information about a partner's abusive past, with a person potentially at risk of domestic abuse. We have secured funding from the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) to evaluate the scheme and to improve protection for people at risk.

We also protect people affected by abuse through our role in the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARACs). These are meetings where agencies talk about the risk of harm to adults affected by domestic abuse and draw up an action plan to help manage that risk.

Through the Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination (MATAC) process we identify and tackle serial domestic abusers to reduce their offending and protect people at risk. We've also supported rehabilitation and behaviour change programmes aimed at reducing re-offending.

Campaigning for change

We supported the 16 Days of Activism Campaign in 2023, an annual international campaign tackling violence against women and girls. We also ran high-profile awareness campaigns including [Is that me? Domestic abuse campaign](#) and [Don't be That Guy](#) focussing on the male sexual entitlement behaviours that can lead to sexual violence. Both campaigns encourage frank conversations and aim to contribute towards lasting change in society.

We continue to strengthen our partnerships with agencies working with under-represented groups including migrants. In association with Hemat Gryffe Women's Aid, we have launched a [new animation](#) informing all women experiencing domestic abuse and exploitation that they are protected by Scots Law. It provides reassurance and guidance on how to ask for support and is available in a range of languages.

'You, Me, Together' is a resource created in collaboration with key partners to target domestic abuse (including themes of coercive control, inappropriate relationships and peer pressure) in young persons' relationships. The interactive workshop delivered in schools, aims to educate students around the issues of domestic abuse and its correlation with Violence Against Women and Girls.

An initial pilot was well received with 96% of students finding the input impactful, 95% left with a better understanding of domestic abuse and 92% had an improved understanding of coercive control within a relationship.

What we will do

We'll carry on working hard – campaigning, assessing and refining our support – to keep vulnerable victims safe and feeling confident we're responding to their needs.

We will continue to develop and improve the Child Protection system, incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), The Age of Criminal Responsibility legislation, The Promise and the implementation of the Scottish Child Interview Model (SCIM).

The Domestic Abuse Task Force and the Domestic Abuse Coordination Unit will maintain a rolling programme of divisional reviews to ensure a consistent and robust response to domestic abuse across Scotland.

We will work to implement the provisions of the new Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021, which came into force in April 2024. We will engage with communities to improve trust and confidence in reporting crime and non-crime hate incidents.

We'll continue to make sure all our officers and other staff are well trained and know about all the materials and other support available for people affected by any crime so they can show them where to get help. This will include the creation of British Sign Language (BSL) versions of our domestic abuse pages on the Police Scotland website to promote greater awareness and accessibility for deaf victim survivors.

We'll also keep working directly with people affected by abuse, encouraging feedback and sharing of lived experience. That way we can improve our services and make sure we're as effective as possible when we support them.

Standard 5

We will ensure you receive a Victim Care Card if you are a victim of crime. This provides you with the details of the enquiry officer, the crime you have reported and information about how you can access Victim Support and the Scottish Government's Victims' Code.

Once you've reported a crime, we understand how important it is for you to know who to contact if you have any questions and what your rights are. This standard helps make sure we give you the details you need and that you can find out about your rights in the Victim's Code.

What we've done

We've listened to victim survivor feedback and supported by a communication company called The First Word, we are updating and rebranding our victim care card. The card provides details of your rights under the Victim's Code and lets you know how to get support if you need it and will be provided by the officer taking your report. If you have reported a crime over the telephone, then the officer or staff member taking your call will offer to send you this by email or text message or will arrange to get one delivered to you.

'Your Care Card' will launch later this year and will be available in 20 different languages. If another language or version is required, we will make sure you are provided with this.

We have added a QR code to our new care card which takes you to the Police Scotland Victim and Witnesses [internet page](#). This provides further information and advice which you may find helpful.

What we will do

We know that many people now prefer electronic communication. We also want to make sure our local officers can easily provide you with the information that you need and in a way that you choose. We are working to provide an electronic method to distribute the care card to you. This is something that is already done when you report a crime through our contact centre and we want to make sure this option is available no matter how you report a crime to us.

We are also reviewing both our intranet and internet Victims and Witnesses pages and working with the communications company to make sure they are accessible and informative. We want to make it easy for officers and the public to quickly find the information they might need to access necessary support and avoid additional trauma.

We'll continue to work with Victim Support Scotland and other support agencies to better understand the experiences of victims and witnesses. Over the next year, we'll continue to use the findings in a way to improve our service and maintain the public's confidence in policing in Scotland.

The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS)



The Lord Advocate, Dorothy Bain KC

The Lord Advocate, the ministerial head of COPFS, said:

“I am committed to delivering better support to victims and witnesses throughout the investigation and prosecution of crime.

COPFS operates in the public interest and, within that public interest, it is important we do what we can to support victims and witnesses through what is often a very challenging process.

To me, that means victims and witnesses know what to expect, that they have confidence in the justice system, and that all staff they encounter act in a trauma informed way.

I am very pleased to introduce this year’s annual report on our Standards of Service, as we work towards the goal of a trauma informed and person centred justice system.”

What we do

The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) is Scotland’s prosecution service. We receive reports about crimes from the police and other reporting agencies and then decide what action to take. We also investigate deaths that require further explanation and investigate allegations of criminal conduct made

about police officers. We work closely with our partners in the criminal justice system to help make Scotland safer.

COPFS recognises the significant impact that crime has on individuals and communities. We strive to respond fairly, effectively and robustly to all reports of crime while making sure that victims and witnesses receive the support and information that they need as they navigate the criminal justice system.

Below is some of the work carried out in the past year by COPFS in relation to the Standards of Service for victims and witnesses.

Standard 1

We will treat you fairly and with respect, we will listen to you through our Comments and Complaints and Feedback Policy and the review of our decisions, and we will communicate with you clearly and effectively.

What we have done

The launch of our “Improving our Service Strategy” (2023-27) in May 2023, aims to provide a person centred and trauma informed service to the people of Scotland. To help us meet the aims of this strategy, we have established a Service Improvement Programme. The Service Improvement Programme is working with our Response and Information Unit (RIU) to review the outcome of complaints and identify common themes we can learn from.

We were pleased to welcome the People at Heart: guide to communicating with people affected by crime in March 2024. This was commissioned by the Scottish Government from The First Word, an organisation specialising in effective communication. The guide provides helpful, practical tips to criminal justice agencies like COPFS, about how to make written communication more clear, inclusive and trauma informed. The guide has been distributed to staff in COPFS to help them communicate more effectively with victims and witnesses.

We are committed to implementing the [Scottish Government Trauma Informed Justice Knowledge and Skills Framework](#) to improve our communications with victims, witnesses and next of kin. The Framework was commissioned from NHS Education for Scotland (NES) and launched in May 2023. It was developed by trauma specialists in partnership with victims, witnesses and criminal justice agencies, and based on academic research. The Framework recognises the importance of all staff in the justice sector understanding the impact of trauma on witnesses and having the appropriate knowledge and skills to do no harm, minimise re-traumatisation and support recovery.

Work continues on establishing key performance indicators to monitor how we process complaints, and their outcomes. We are working towards publishing information on complaint outcomes and actions taken to improve our services on a quarterly basis.

What we will do

We are working to become more trauma informed and to encourage feedback. These priorities are relevant to our work on implementing the recommendations from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland (HMIPS)'s [report on the prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level](#). The inspection considered our approach to domestic abuse cases heard without a jury, where the maximum sentence is 1 year's imprisonment. This is the majority of domestic abuse cases we deal with (in 2022-23, the figure was 79% among 28,184 charges). The Inspectorate's Report was published on 17 April 2024, and made 27 recommendations for improvement, including improving our communication with victims and witnesses. The Lord Advocate has accepted all 27 recommendations and we are in the early stages of implementing them. The recommendations regarding communication include ensuring victims are updated promptly on case outcomes, updating victims more regularly, being more consistent in the information provided to victims and witnesses, and ensuring staff can identify and respond to additional support needs.

Our [Strategic Plan for 2023-27](#) and [annual business plans](#) set clear actions and leadership accountability for aligning and embedding service improvement across all areas of work and improvement priorities. Improving our communication and engagement with victims, witnesses and next of kin are key priorities in our business plans for 2024-25. We will continue training our people on how to handle complaints in accordance with the Complaints Handling Procedure we established in 2022.

Standard 2

We will make sure that you have access to the relevant and appropriate information that you are entitled to and in situations where we cannot provide that information, we will explain the reasons why.

What we have done

Our [Victim Information and Advice \(VIA\)](#) service supports victims and witnesses by providing case information and guidance on the prosecution process. Our VIA Modernisation Programme has undertaken a comprehensive review of all correspondence with victims, witnesses (including children) and bereaved families to

ensure that our letters are clear, easy to understand and provide details of where further information can be found.

We are reviewing all our policies and processes which are directly and indirectly associated with children (as accused and witnesses) to ensure that they are compatible with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This is due to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 becoming law on 16 July 2024. Child-friendly letters have been commissioned from an external specialist organisation, with input from children and young people.

Since launching a new [COPFS website](#) in June 2022, we have further improved our communications by enhancing information available on our website. We conducted an accessibility audit of our website in November 2023. Based on feedback from service users, we have updated the '[Guide for bereaved family members](#)' on our website to improve the information available about our deaths investigation process. We have created videos to explain the deaths investigation process which were made available on our website in 2024.

The Witness Gateway, an online portal designed to improve access to information for victims and witnesses, is now being used by witnesses as part of a pilot phase. The Witness Gateway provides secure access to case information online, allowing witnesses to view their statement, confirm their availability for court and receive updates on case progress. The pilot will continue throughout 2024 and include both civilian and professional witnesses.

The Witness Gateway is designed to better support the needs of witnesses and improve online interactions between the public and our prosecutors.

We have published information on the COPFS website to provide an [overview of the Witness Gateway](#), including a video showing how witnesses can use the Witness Gateway and the range of services it offers.

What we will do

The first phase of our VIA Modernisation Programme considered how to deliver an improved service through effective preparation and prosecution of casework, and communication. Phase two of the programme in 2024-25, will consider the fundamental elements of the VIA service and devise changes needed to ensure it continues to meet the needs of victims, witnesses and next of kin. This links to our work on implementing the recommendations from the [HMIPS report on domestic abuse prosecutions](#), as two of these recommendations relate to improving VIA.

The VIA Modernisation Programme will continue working with the Witness Gateway project to explore alternative ways we can contact and provide information to victims, witnesses, and bereaved families other than by hard copy letter, including using digital messages.

COPFS will continue engaging with justice partners and stakeholders to further develop the Witness Gateway as part of our commitment to delivering a trauma informed service as we fully implement the Gateway on a phased basis over 2024-25.

We will continue to improve the information available to the public on our [website](#). We aim to provide online content that better explains our work, processes and the support available to victims and witnesses, including publishing more videos and a range of guidance to support users of our services. We will continue to review the content of our website in consultation with service users and by working closely with service improvement and policy programmes to better inform the public of our processes and support. Current work includes expanding our 'Crime Information' pages to include information about different types of crime, and continuing to improve the quality and accessibility of the information provided.

We recognise the need to improve our initial point of contact service. The Lord Advocate has asked His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prosecutions in Scotland (HMIPS) to review our [National Enquiry Point \(NEP\)](#), [our initial point of contact centre](#). The [HMIPS inspection](#) will consider how we respond to enquiries received by NEP as well as considering the role of NEP and how it is supported to deliver its functions.

COPFS continues to engage with justice partners and stakeholders to develop our communication with victims and witnesses as part of our commitment to delivering a trauma informed service.

Standard 3

We will ensure that you are given the help you need to give evidence in court. We will assess your vulnerability, explain the special measures available to you under the law and when available, apply for you to be supported with the appropriate measures.

What we have done

We extended the scope of the VIA Modernisation Programme to consider and consult on a re-design of the service being provided - not just by our VIA staff but by staff in all roles in COPFS. Our work and improvement plans have been informed by

what victims and witnesses want and need from us as an organisation and by the recommendations in the [HMIPS report on domestic abuse prosecutions](#).

The VIA Modernisation Programme has reviewed current business processes meantime, identifying and implementing a number of changes and improvements, including enhanced training and guidance for staff and increased collaboration with partner agencies to ensure that victims and witnesses are provided with key information, advice and support prior to giving evidence in court.

We have developed our policy on child witness's access to their statements. The amendments provide clear guidance for prosecutors and ensure that a trauma informed approach is taken in the decision as to whether a child should have access to their witness statement, and that the best interests of the child and their views are considered and documented in line with UNCRC. The policy further safeguards child witnesses and ensures appropriate support.

To complement the Sexual Offences Review by the Lord Justice Clerk, the Lord Advocate instructed a review - led by the Susanne Tanner, KC - of how prosecutors deal with the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences (the COPFS Sexual Offences Review). The Review team gathered evidence over 2023, engaging with prosecutors, COPFS administrative staff, case preparers, advocates, defence counsel and solicitors, police, third sector agencies, Scottish Government officials, judges, sheriffs and victims. The Review's report will be complete in 2024 and the Lord Advocate has committed to publish the recommendations.

Further information about the Review, the Terms of Reference and progress updates are available on the [Sexual Offences Review page](#) of the COPFS website.

We have been involved in the development of the Bairns' Hoose Standards, which were approved by the Lord Advocate and published on 31 May 2023. The standards reflect Scottish Government's commitment to developing 'Bairns' Hooses' for all eligible children who are victims of or witnesses to abuse or violence by 2028.

Six pathfinder sites were selected by the Scottish Government and announced in October 2023, namely, North Strathclyde, Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, Fife, Tayside and the Outer Hebrides.

COPFS have identified points of contact in each Function/Sheriffdom to act as local leads, with Policy officials providing overarching support and guidance to ensure national consistency in the development of the Bairns Hooses.

We have established an internal working group to ensure consistency and share feedback to improve children's experience of the criminal justice system.

What we will do

We will design our VIA services reflecting the work of the VIA Modernisation Programme, implementing trauma informed service delivery enhancements and factoring in both our Service Improvement Programme, and the recommendations from the [HMIPS report on domestic abuse prosecutions](#). Work is ongoing to develop a COPFS Victims and Witnesses Charter which will outline standards of service and what can be expected.

We are in the process of implementing the recommendations in the HMIPS report on domestic abuse prosecutions and await the recommendations arising from the Lord Advocate's commissioned COPFS Sexual Offences Review.

We will further develop the services and information available from the Witness Gateway and will continue our work with justice partners through our role on the Scottish Government's Victims Taskforce.

Standard 4

We will take decisions in cases reported to us in line with our Prosecution Code and continue to review the training needs of our staff to ensure that they have the appropriate skills.

What we have done

The Scottish Prosecution College provides in-person, online and blended training. Courses on core skills such as advocacy and court procedure are in person. Remote, e-learning and other learning solutions offer a choice of dates and enhance accessibility to support our people to do their jobs.

The College's Operating Model and appointment of specialist posts has improved our learning and development capabilities. The Scottish Prosecution College Steering Committee - established in April 2022 - meets quarterly to review and support learning needs analysis across the organisation. The Scottish Prosecution College Prospectus is published biannually. The most recent prospectus covers April to October 2024, and focuses on supporting trauma informed practices.

Training on 'Becoming Trauma Informed Part 1', launched in November 2022 and provided important foundations for COPFS' implementation of the Trauma Informed Justice Knowledge and Skills Framework, particularly in relation to contact with victims and witnesses.

COPFS senior leaders attended a Trauma Informed Workshop in November 2023 - facilitated by trauma specialists from NHS Education for Scotland - as part of our drive to establish a trauma informed workforce throughout COPFS. Staff across our departments have engaged with NES on development of e-learning modules which will be rolled-out to staff working with victims and witnesses across the justice sector. Further implementation of the Framework, policies and ways of working will take place over 2024-25.

Work on the VIA Modernisation Programme has widened training provision for VIA staff which has been included in our Scottish Prosecution College Prospectus from April 2023. From April 2024, development of our training related to domestic abuse is being informed by the recommendations of the [HMIPS report on domestic abuse prosecutions](#).

COPFS staff have received training on the principles of UNCRC. An e-learning module published on 21 September 2022 has been complimented by mandatory in-person training on the making and recording of decisions involving children. This training package was rolled out in a “train the trainer” format in May 2024. We have created opportunities for staff engagement and understanding on UNCRC principles through question and answer webinars and an internal online training session.

What we will do

In summer 2024, we published our [People Strategy: 2024 – 2027](#). The People Strategy sets out how we will support the vision, aims and activities contained in our Strategic Plan for 2023-27, and outlines the key priorities and initiatives to enhance people management practices, performance and accountability across COPFS. The People Strategy is backed by a delivery plan to manage and measure the impact of its aims and the role of the Scottish Prosecution College in supporting our people to deliver the services we provide. This work will continue to have regard to the [HMIPS report on domestic abuse prosecutions](#), and will have regard to the Sexual Offences Review, once published.

We will continue to undertake learning needs analysis and to develop our current and new training material in response. We will create space for learning and develop a strong learning culture, supported by the roll-out of our ‘Scottish Prosecution College Online’ in 2024. ‘SPC Online’ is a learning management system / virtual learning environment which will provide the technical capability to support blended learning and improve training completed virtually.

Our Scottish Prosecution College is represented on the Abuse in Institutions Programme Board chaired by the Lord Advocate. Training has been developed in relation to abuse in institutions and is due to be launched in 2024.

The Standards of Service in the coming year

COPFS continuously reviews policies and procedures. We will continue to monitor their effectiveness, working to make improvements, as required, to ensure that the Standards of Service continue to meet the needs of victims and witnesses. COPFS will continue to improve the implementation of the existing standards of service as set out above.

The Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS)



Chief Executive, Malcolm Graham

SCTS Chief Executive Officer, Malcolm Graham, said:

“SCTS remains committed to improving the experience of victims and witnesses in their journey through Scotland’s justice system and I am delighted to introduce this year’s annual report on our standards of service.”

What we do

The purpose of the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) is supporting justice. We fulfil that purpose by providing the people, buildings and services needed to support the judiciary (judges, sheriffs and justices of the peace), the courts, devolved [tribunals](#) and [Office of the Public Guardian \(OPG\)](#).

Our work focuses on improving access to justice, reducing delay and cost within the justice system, modernising our services in line with reform, and using leading technology to improve our services for everyone.

Our standards of service reflect the key engagement that victims and witnesses may have with the courts, and SCTS, during their journey through the criminal justice system.

This report provides an annual review of performance against the specified standards, as well as exploring the ongoing efforts being made to improve the experience for victims and witnesses who attend court.

In total, the estate comprises 71 buildings made up of courts, vulnerable witness suites, tribunals and offices. We operate from 51 distinct locations across Scotland’s

six sheriffdoms, together with 26 vulnerable witness remote sites. Tribunals also make use of some 70 further venues across Scotland for hearings.

Our Standards of Service

Standard 1

If you are a witness attending one of our locations to give evidence in person or virtually, we will update you once per hour on the progress of the court case while you wait. We will advise when you are no longer required.

Standard 2

We will provide separate waiting rooms for prosecution and defence witnesses, and access to refreshments.

Standard 3

If you are due to give your evidence to the court by live TV link, we will ensure that an explanation of the process for giving your evidence is provided on the day, at the location, if not in advance of that.

Standard 4

We will respond to requests received on behalf of witnesses, for accommodating court familiarisation visits, within 3 working days of receipt.

Standard 5

If you want to know what support is available to you when you arrive at court, we will direct you to Victim Support Scotland or other support services which are present in the court building or otherwise provide information on how to contact such support if they are not present at court.

Going beyond our standards

As well as working to meet our standards, there are all sorts of other projects helping us improve people's experiences of our organisation and the justice system. The following sections provide more details on other key things we've been doing this year.

How we have improved services and access to justice

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that the continuing high case volumes, which developed during the pandemic and have been sustained due to the growth in cases – especially serious cases – proceeding to trial continues to have a significant impact across the justice sector.

In recent years, we have built strong foundations for a more resilient, modern and efficient justice system. Throughout the pandemic, we quickly adapted our business model and accelerated key reforms. Through creative and innovative use of technology we have been able to continue supporting justice and victims and witnesses in their journey to improving their experiences, whether they attend court in person or via a live television link from an alternative location.

In recent years, we have considered and continue to work on and innovate on the alternative ways of 'attending' court for victims and witnesses to give evidence. Such as working with justice partners, including [Victim Support Scotland \(VSS\)](#) and [Children 1st](#) to enable the most vulnerable to give their evidence remotely from alternative premises such as VSS sites and Scotland's first Bairns' Hoose with associated available support. This has provided a range of benefits and has been warmly welcomed by those who no longer required to physically attend court.

We continue to create better systems for our users by learning and adapting the approaches taken, as well as working collaboratively with justice partners to continuously improve on victims' and witnesses' experience of the justice system.

Access to Information – Joint Protocol

One of the key provisions of the [Victims and Witnesses \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) is that victims and witnesses have a legal right to request certain information about their case.

We worked with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service and Police Scotland on a review of the joint protocol [Access to Information Protocol – A Guide for Victims and Witnesses](#).

The joint protocol clearly signposts which organisation to approach for relevant information and sets out the information that may be provided. This was updated in May 2022 and we will further update in the coming year.

Criminal Justice Reform

SCTS remains committed to continuously driving forward initiatives which have emerged from the judicially led [Evidence and Procedure Review](#) (EPR) and the Lord Justice Clerk's cross justice sector [Review in to the Management of Sexual Offence cases](#) (the Sexual Offences Review) which supports children and vulnerable witnesses being able to give the best quality evidence as early as possible, while minimising further trauma.

The EPR and Sexual Offences Reviews identified the potential for witnesses to be re-traumatised whilst giving evidence as well as the importance of witnesses being supported to give their 'best evidence'. As such, it is paramount that children and vulnerable witnesses can give their best evidence at the earliest opportunity, in a safe, trauma informed and high-quality/user friendly environment.

Informed in part by the EPR, the Scottish Government introduced primary legislation ([the Vulnerable Witnesses \(Criminal Evidence\) \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#)) that creates a legal presumption in favour of the pre-recording of evidence from child witnesses, and adult vulnerable witnesses in particular case types.

The Sexual Offences review recommended the expansion of this presumption to all complainers in serious sexual offences (Recommendation 1). The legal presumption is being implemented via a phased rollout.

Sexual Offences Review

In the last year, we have continued to work with and support justice partners in the implementation of the [Sexual Offences Review](#) whilst reporting on, reviewing and considering revised proposals for the further phased commencement of the [Vulnerable Witnesses \(Criminal Evidence\) \(Scotland\) Act 2019](#).

We continued to participate in dedicated Implementation and Governance Groups led by Scottish Government, which support effective collaboration. On 23 April 2024, the Scottish Government announced a revised implementation plan for the next steps in the roll out of the 2019 Act presumption (accessible [here](#)).

The next planned step will see the implementation of the presumption for child witnesses aged under 16 in sheriff and jury cases for a defined list of offences¹. This is to be implemented by April 2026.

To support this initiative and our vision, SCTS have successfully secured additional capital funding to allow us to create two additional bespoke trauma informed evidence by commissioner facilities. Our focus will be to provide these additional dedicated facilities within the geographical reach of sheriffdoms that currently do not have any such facilities, South Strathclyde Dumfries and Galloway and North Strathclyde. These facilities will support vulnerable witnesses both in Sheriff Court and High Court cases.

The Evidence and Procedure Review (EPR)

[The Evidence and Procedure Review](#) first supported the adoption of the international 'Barnahus' model for Scotland back in 2015. The model seeks to support the specific needs of children who have been hurt, harmed or witnessed a crime. It brings together justice, health, social work and recovery support for children, traditionally within one location e.g. a house. Its aim is to remove children from the court setting entirely.

This year, we have worked with Children 1st and the associated North Strathclyde Partnership, to support the opening of Scotland's first Bairns' Hoose in North Strathclyde in August 2023. We facilitated the provision and installation of digital

¹ Covers criminal cases where the charge involves: culpable homicide and assault to the danger of life, rape and other sexual offences, domestic abuse, abduction and plagium (child kidnapping), human trafficking, slavery and female genital mutilation; or an attempt to commit any of these offences.

equipment within the bespoke justice suite. This will allow and support children and young people who require to give evidence by live television link to court in a more trauma informed and supported environment, away from the physical court building.

We look forward to working and collaborating with justice partners, Scottish Government and Bairns' Hoose partnerships and others in supporting the further development of the justice aspect of the Bairns' Hoose model in Scotland. We are also working towards the introduction of a simplified notifications process, for witnesses who are automatically entitled to what are termed 'Standard Special Measures' (use of a live television link either from the court building or from a remote site; use of a screen; and a supporter) when giving their evidence.

SCTS and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) have developed the software for the automated transfer process for standard special measures. Testing is currently on-going and SCTS is working with the Lord President's Private Office to progress a request for a rule change to the Criminal Courts Rules Council. Thereafter, next steps in relation to rollout will be agreed.

It was also recognised that witnesses are often required to attend court unnecessarily due to cases not proceeding because they were either not ready for the trial to commence or the accused offered a plea. The EPR outlined core principles for a new approach that would deliver stronger case management procedures in summary criminal cases, known as the summary case management pilot (detailed below).

The Summary Case Management Pilot (SCM)

The SCM aims to reduce the number of cases set down for trial unnecessarily and to reduce the volume of late pleas of guilty and late decisions to discontinue proceedings. It was introduced at Dundee, Hamilton and Paisley Sheriff Courts in September 2022.

The pilot facilitates early disclosure of evidence, early engagement between the prosecutor and defence and early judicial case management. Key evidence should be available to be released to the defence prior to or at the first calling in domestic abuse cases. Specified disclosure material can be requested where it is considered that such early disclosure may make a material difference to a plea or the early resolution of issues in all non-domestic abuse cases.

The [SCM Pilot Interim Evaluation](#) report, published in November 2023, revealed that key achievements in the first 12 months of the Pilot included:

- At least 250 summary trials did not require to be assigned in the Pilot courts, directly as a result of early resolution due to SCM;
- A 25% reduction in the first citation of civilian witnesses in domestic abuse cases in the aggregated Pilot courts; and

- A 34% reduction in the first citation of police witnesses in domestic abuse cases in the aggregated Pilot courts.

Following the publication of the report, the approach was extended to Domestic Abuse cases in Glasgow Sheriff Court on 29 January 2024.

While domestic abuse cases have been highlighted for this distinct approach, it is anticipated that the lessons learned may lead to the same approach being adopted in other types of summary sheriff court criminal business.

A full evaluation report on the SCM Pilot is due to be published in the summer of 2024.

Improving witnesses' experiences of giving evidence

The Vulnerable Witnesses (Criminal Evidence) (Scotland) Act 2019, created a rule that children and other vulnerable witnesses giving evidence in the most serious cases will automatically have it pre-recorded before the trial.

SCTS developed designated evidence giving suites to provide children and vulnerable witnesses with more appropriate and supportive environments in which to provide their evidence to a courtroom via a live TV link, or to have their evidence pre-recorded in advance of trial through the procedure of taking Evidence by Commissioner.

Dedicated suites for witnesses giving evidence

Following on from our first purpose built suite going live in Glasgow in October 2019, we have developed further suites in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Inverness. Our Aberdeen facility is located out with our public facing court estate and benefits from a designated user entrance and waiting room alongside a state of the art hearing room.

In accordance with that, we were pleased to secure additional funding from the Scottish Government to allow the creation of a new multifunctional evidence facility within Dundee in 2024/2025.

This new 'Justice' Hub will provide a multi-functional, trauma informed, evidence by commissioner suite with a designated entrance to support vulnerable witnesses to give pre-recorded best evidence earlier in proceedings. Acknowledging the importance of informed choice, the facility will also have two trauma informed vulnerable witness suites allowing vulnerable witnesses to give evidence by 'live television link' to other court locations.



Our most recent suite, located in [Dundee Justice Hub](#) will be formally opened in August 2024.

David Fraser, SCTS Executive Director of Court Operations said:

“I am delighted that the much needed facility which has been designed to meet the needs of our court users has become operational.

The new evidence by commissioner facility further expands our bespoke trauma informed facilities into the sheriffdom of Tayside, Central and Fife. It is designed around the needs of vulnerable witnesses, allowing them to give their best evidence in advance of the trial using the latest technology.”

Our bespoke facilities and suites have been designed to:

- provide more trauma informed spaces to make witnesses more comfortable, and
- facilitate the giving of their best evidence in a less traumatic way using the best technology available.

Our evidence by commissioner facilities benefit from specified and specially designed waiting rooms, with our Glasgow and Inverness evidence giving facilities providing bespoke support spaces and sensory equipment to improve the lived experience for all victims and witnesses, and particularly children, attending to give evidence.

For the High Court alone from 01 April 2023 to 31 May 2024, there has been a total of:

- 1166 Evidence by Commissioner applications lodged,
- 1007 Evidence by Commissioner applications granted, and
- 802 Evidence by Commissioner hearings held.

These figures include both adults and children.

Plans for the rest of Scotland

SCTS remains committed to the further development and expansion of multipurpose, trauma informed, evidence giving facilities within its estate to support evidence by commissioner and live television link evidence across a wider geographical reach, where possible, to support those most vulnerable in our society to give their 'best' evidence in a trauma informed way.

Building upon the successful collaboration with justice partners at the Inverness Justice Centre, there are also plans for Victim Support Scotland to co-locate within the Dundee Justice Hub facility.



Here is an example of one of our sensory suites.

Children were at the centre of this and their voices were reflected in the final design which influenced the furnishings, fabrics, colours and flexible environments available.

Trauma informed domestic abuse model

What we have done to support arrangements for virtual Domestic Abuse Cases

The National Project Board published a [report on the piloting of virtual summary trials](#) in January 2022, following a pilot of virtual domestic abuse trials. The recommendations included that every sheriffdom across Scotland should have a dedicated virtual summary court for domestic abuse cases. Key advantages of this model include:

- increasing protection and reducing anxiety and trauma associated with unnecessary interactions for those victims and witnesses that would have required to attend our court buildings,
- making it easier for witnesses to give their evidence,
- offering efficiencies by reducing footfall, the need for many people to travel to court and leaving existing courtroom capacity free for in-person cases,
- easing the impact of delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic on complainers and accused, and
- the ability to capture best evidence and introducing trauma informed practices.

What we are doing to support arrangements for virtual Domestic Abuse Cases

Whilst the pilot in Aberdeen is ongoing, we continue to work with justice partners, including the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, Police Scotland, Scottish Government, Victim Support Scotland and the legal profession, at a national and local level.

To improve upon the model the proposal is to test and evaluate a specialist trauma informed and fully virtual domestic abuse court. This will operate in Aberdeen before being expanded across the sheriffdom of Grampian, Highland and Islands.

This fully virtual model from custody to sentence will place an increased focus on the needs of complainers and witnesses who are particularly vulnerable to trauma, caused by having to attend court and give evidence in close proximity to the accused and their supporters. It also aims to enable support services to be effectively focused, for the development of bespoke community remedies such as the [Caledonian Programme](#), and a problem solving approach to bail, remand and sentencing.

Proposals for this include:

- judicial case management by designated specially trained trauma informed sheriffs
- trauma informed training for court staff,
- specialist prosecutors, and
- support for solicitors to undertake trauma informed training.

We aim to deliver this model with our justice partners during 2024-25.



How we support professional witnesses to give evidence remotely

In January 2022, we started an initiative which enables police and professional witnesses including medical professionals to give evidence remotely in High Court trials. The significant cross-sector value the model brings includes:

- evidence from police and medical professionals to be given remotely from different locations,
- ensuring that high quality evidence continues to be provided by such witnesses,
- freeing up considerable amounts of time to allow them to continue with their essential duties as opposed to travelling to/from court and waiting in court, and
- a reduction in associated costs.

From 01 May 2023 to 31 May 2024, over 529 police and professional witnesses have given evidence remotely to the High Court.

We are committed to expanding our capacity to host remote evidence by police and professional witnesses in our Sheriff and Jury Courts.

Criminal court recovery programme

In response to the impact of the pandemic on outstanding criminal case levels and the continued trend of increasing solemn case registrations, the criminal court recovery programme commenced in September 2021.

An additional 4 trial courts were allocated to the High Court, 2 for Sheriff Solemn business and 10 for Sheriff Summary business. In April 2023, recovery resources were switched from summary to solemn business. A further 2 trial courts were introduced in the High Court and 6 for Sheriff Solemn business, with the simultaneous reduction of 10 trial courts in Sheriff Summary business.

While the backlogs generated by the pandemic have been significantly addressed we continue to face growing business pressures, especially in relation to more serious criminal cases.

Our aim is to reach a position where the number of scheduled trials across all criminal business types is around 20,000. Since commencement of the programme scheduled trials have reduced by over 17,000 and sit at just over 26,000 as at the end of March 2024.

Updated modelling was published in December 2023. This can be found at the following link: [scts-modelling-report-12-23-final.pdf \(scotcourts.gov.uk\)](https://scotcourts.gov.uk/scts-modelling-report-12-23-final.pdf).

This indicates that summary criminal court scheduled trials are projected to reach a revised baseline during 2024-25, slightly later than previous modelling had indicated, due to higher than expected levels of case registrations.

Solemn business is more challenging as the level of cases entering the system continues to grow – a trend that was apparent before the pandemic and shows no sign of abating. A continued increase in court capacity will be required in the longer-term to address this continued growth.

The switching of recovery programme resources from summary to solemn since April 2023, has had a positive impact. Our modelling indicates that, provided these resources are sustained, it will be possible to reach a stable, albeit higher, level of outstanding High Court cases during 2025, with Sheriff Solemn case levels stabilising during 2026-27.

Improving the management of sexual offence cases

On 18 March 2021 the judiciary-led, cross-justice review group, led by the Lord Justice Clerk, Lady Dorrian published its final report, [Improving the Management of Sexual Offence Cases](#).

The Sexual Offences Review made a number of transformative recommendations to improve the experience of sexual offence complainers (and witnesses) without compromising the rights of the accused.

The recommendations are wide ranging; requiring collaboration, resourcing, and in some instances the introduction of legislation to ensure their successful implementation.

A Scottish Government-led cross-justice governance group, was established in late 2021, to support consideration and delivery of the review recommendations, with a particular focus on what areas may require public consultation and legislative change. SCTS are represented on the group and continue to play a key role, including participation in a number of essential work streams within it. [The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform \(Scotland\) Bill](#) (the Bill) was introduced to Parliament on 25 April 2023.

The Bill contains a number of transformational proposals to support victims and witnesses including:

- provisions seeking to respond to the Sexual Offence Review's recommendations concerning the creation of a specialist sexual offences court,
- a presumption for the pre-recording of evidence,
- complainer anonymity and independent legal representation in specific circumstances.

We have continued to explore the recommendations made within the Sexual Offences Review, developing and advancing our own implementation plan, with a focus on the elements applicable to us which do not require legislation and can be progressed individually and/or in conjunction with justice partners. This included the expansion of pre-recorded evidence via the construction and operation of the new bespoke evidence by commissioner facilities in Aberdeen and Dundee.

In the last year, we have worked with the Scottish Government and justice partners on fulfilling the recommendations, supporting the work under way for those requiring legislation. We submitted and gave evidence on the 2023 Bill to the Criminal Justice Committee providing guidance on the operational implications and suggesting improvements to ensure the aims and vision of the Sexual Offences Review are more achievable.

Providing special measures to support vulnerable witnesses

A range of special measures is available to vulnerable witnesses to give evidence to court including:

- the use of privacy screens,
- having a supporter,
- evidence by commissioner – this is when a nominated person (commissioner) can record you giving evidence at a different time and/or place to the court case, and
- using live television links in court, between courts or from a remote location.

There are currently 26 external remote sites across Scotland for vulnerable witnesses to give evidence via live television link out with our court buildings.

As our ambitious court recovery programme continues, the number of applications received for special measures has increased from pre-pandemic and this upward trend is expected to continue.

In addition, there are 44 vulnerable witness rooms currently available within 35 of our court buildings for vulnerable witnesses to give their evidence by live television link.

Victims Taskforce

What is the Victims Taskforce

A [Victims Taskforce](#) was established to improve support, advice and information for victims of crime. It is co-chaired by the Justice Secretary and the Lord Advocate, head of Scotland's system of criminal prosecution.

The primary role of the Taskforce is to co-ordinate and drive action to improve the experiences of victims and witnesses within the criminal justice system, whilst ensuring a fair justice system for those accused of crime.

The Taskforce has brought together senior decision-makers from justice agencies, the legal profession, academia and the voluntary sector, including direct representation of victims.

What the Victims Taskforce does

The Taskforce has agreed to focus on the development of a victim centred approach and a justice specific knowledge and skills trauma [framework](#). The approach looks to equip justice organisations with the skills and knowledge needed to reduce the re-traumatisation of victims and witnesses of crime. It underpins a key aim of the [Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform \(Scotland\) Bill](#), to embed trauma informed practice across the justice system.

The Taskforce also want to develop a mechanism for structured and regular engagement with people with lived experience. SCTS continue to be represented on the Taskforce, in particular the victim centred approach and trauma informed work streams, and is committed to supporting the actions set in the work plans for each of these work streams.

We are committed to providing excellent service and becoming a trauma-informed organisation is a key priority for us. The adoption of trauma informed practices is a key step in improving the experience of victims and witnesses. The Taskforce approved the [framework](#) and this was launched in May 2023.

The framework identifies three levels of trauma training and maps them against workforce roles in the justice sector. The three levels for SCTS are:

1. all SCTS employees must be trauma informed,
2. all team members who come into contact with people affected by and accused of crime must have the skills to support people affected by trauma, and,
3. all court team members who handle domestic abuse and sexual offence cases must be trauma specialists.

What we will do going forward

Our Education and Learning Unit are working alongside NHS Education for Scotland and trauma training and consultancy experts Epione to curate and deliver learning content to address these levels according to our workforce needs.

In addition SCTS has:

- developed and delivered trauma enhanced leaders training to support SCTS leaders to take a trauma enhanced lens to the organisation, supported by a Leaders Toolkit of further resources. To date, training has been delivered to our Senior Executive Team, Executive Directors, Directors, and some Heads of Department, and;
- created a Trauma Informed Strategy Steering Group to take forward continued implementation work, which extends beyond training into our service design, policies, processes, communication and environments. The steering group will continue to work alongside the Victims Taskforce to align their action planning with the aims of the Taskforce.

Anticipated outputs will improve the experience of victims and witnesses across all parts of the justice system, whilst ensuring a fair justice system for those accused of crime.

How we met our standards

Our standards reflect the key engagement that victims and witnesses may have with SCTS on their journey through the justice system.

In this section, we've reviewed our performance against these standards. We have included details about our ongoing work to improve the experience for victims and witnesses.

Standard 1

If you are a witness attending one of our locations to give evidence in person or virtually, we will update you once per hour on the progress of the court case while you wait. We will advise when you are no longer required.

What we have done

Court officers, macers and clerks of court continue to liaise with the prosecutor to update witnesses and updates are provided in all locations. On a small number of occasions this hasn't been possible when the court officer or macer has been helping to present evidence in court, which is a key part of their role. However a member of court staff will always ensure that witnesses are updated as often as possible. They always advise witnesses when they can leave and provide them with as much information as they have been given.

Arrangements are also in place to provide updates to witnesses who are giving evidence from remote sites or from other court locations.

In the majority of courts hourly updates are provided and in some more frequent updates are provided, for example, in Glasgow sheriff court real time updates are provided to witness muster areas and staff then update witnesses.

In some court buildings, information around location and progress of cases is also visible to witnesses on wall mounted display screens.

What we will do

We will continue to engage with COPFS locally and when permitted we will obtain case information to allow us to update witnesses on progress of cases.

We noted earlier that an initiative commenced in January 2022, in regard to the remote provision of evidence by police and professional witnesses in High Court trials and our intention is to expand this to Sheriff and Jury cases in 2024/25.

We continue to work with COPFS to agree the method and frequency of updating police and professional witnesses. At present professional witnesses are updated via email. This is subject to review as we look at ways to communicate more efficiently.

Standard 2

We will provide separate waiting rooms for prosecution and defence witnesses, and access to refreshments.

What we have done

Across the wider estate, separate waiting areas and witness rooms continue to be provided for prosecution and defence witnesses where they are required to attend court.

Access to fresh drinking water for witnesses continues to be provided by all courts. Some courts permit witnesses access to the canteen if it is for public use and vending machines are available in some locations.

What we will do

We will continue to make the best use of available space within court buildings and, as mentioned earlier, we will support and develop further initiatives like remote provision of expert evidence and remote hearings which support the reduction in footfall in our courts to support those vulnerable witnesses requiring to attend our buildings.

However, it remains important to note that in some instances, due to the protected status of a building, there may be limitations as to the extent of potential alterations.

Standard 3

If you are due to give your evidence to the court by live TV link, we will ensure that an explanation of the process for giving your evidence is provided on the day, at the location, if not in advance of that.

What we have done

We continued to provide facilities for vulnerable witnesses to give their evidence to court via live TV link. This can be from within court buildings, from court to court or from remote sites.

We have 26 remote sites which are open and available for use. In addition there are 44 vulnerable witness rooms currently available within 35 of our court buildings for vulnerable witnesses to give their evidence by live TV link.

All applications for giving evidence by live TV link continue to be accommodated by courts.

As discussed above, this year we have worked in partnership with VSS to support the provision of trauma informed remote venues for live TV link evidence, located within their offices. By providing witnesses with the option of attending a hearing from a VSS office, they can access the organisation's support services in a setting that is more familiar to them. We are continuing to work in collaboration with them to support the provision of similar facilities in the east of Scotland.

Whilst court staff are available on the day to explain the process for giving evidence in court, most courts have advised that victim support services will usually facilitate this prior to the courts informing the witness (either prior to attending court or on the day of attending court).

What we will do

We will continue to monitor the use of remote sites and where appropriate we will attempt to source additional sites to enable vulnerable witnesses to give their evidence to court via live TV link.

We will continue to work with VSS volunteers across court locations to ensure that witnesses giving evidence to court, by any means, are prepared and able to give their best evidence.

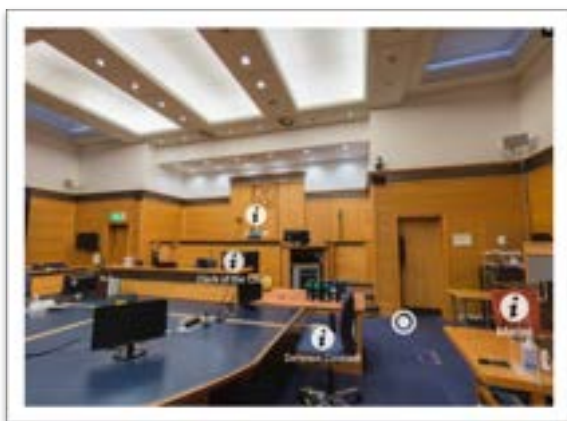
Standard 4

We will respond to requests received on behalf of witnesses, for accommodating court familiarisation visits, within 3 working days of receipt.

What we have done

To help people through the court process we facilitate court familiarisation visits which are when victims and witnesses who need to come to court can have a look around before a trial.

They are available to all witnesses including children and vulnerable witnesses who intend to give evidence at a remote site or evidence suite. Requests include allowing access to courtrooms and vulnerable witness facilities in advance of the case calling for trial.



The opportunity to visit our facilities can help to:

- alleviate concerns for witnesses and assist them in gaining a better understanding of the court process as a whole,
- provide an opportunity for witnesses to ask questions about what will happen when they attend court, and;
- help to alleviate anxiety as it provides an opportunity for those individuals to familiarise themselves with the facilities available.

In April 2023, VSS launched a virtual court experience allowing victims and witnesses to use virtual reality headsets to familiarise themselves with giving evidence in court.

VSS supporters will still support the victim or witness when they are wearing the headset to answer any questions they may have. The virtual experience will be an additional tool for court familiarisation visits and will not replace physical court familiarisation visits which will remain available to witnesses who want them, thus providing choices to victims and witnesses on how and when they wish to view courts.

VSS have delivered a working prototype and they have plans in place to roll this out in the coming year.

What we will do

SCTS will continue to work closely with VSS to enable requests for court familiarisation visits to be dealt with and accommodated timeously.

Standard 5

If you want to know what support is available to you when you arrive at court, we will direct you to Victim Support Scotland or other support services which are present in the court

building or otherwise provide information on how to contact such support if they are not present at court.

What we have done

A member of SCTS staff is available to greet witnesses and direct them to the available support services within the building, if requested from the witness. In particular, court officers, macers and reception staff have local knowledge of the support services available within their respective court buildings and continue to act as a key point of contact. In some locations where there are no support services on site or support services are not on site each day, arrangements are in place for court staff to provide contact details should they be required.

We acknowledge the importance of equipping our staff with the skills and knowledge to assist and support our service users in a trauma informed way. As previously mentioned we remain committed to providing an excellent service with work ongoing towards becoming a trauma informed organisation.

What we will do

We will maintain contact with support services to ensure we understand which services can still be provided within court buildings and we will continue to direct witnesses, who are required to be physically present in our courts, to support services if and when available.

We will continue to support VSS by allowing them access to courts for training new volunteers to ensure essential support services can be maintained for victims and witnesses.

Our standards of service for victims and witnesses 2024-25

SCTS will continue to monitor the effectiveness of its Standards of Service and will make improvements if and when they are required to ensure they continue to meet the needs of victims and witnesses during their attendance at court.

Scottish Prison Service



Chief Executive, Teresa Medhurst

SPS' Chief Executive, Teresa Medhurst, said:

"SPS is focused on improving our delivery of the aspects of the Victim Notification Scheme that we administer. We also continue to provide our input into the wider ongoing improvement work surrounding the Victim Notification Scheme.

We recognise the importance of clear communications to victims, and continue to strive to provide an empathetic and supportive approach. I am pleased to provide this year's annual report on our Standards of Service."

What we do

General

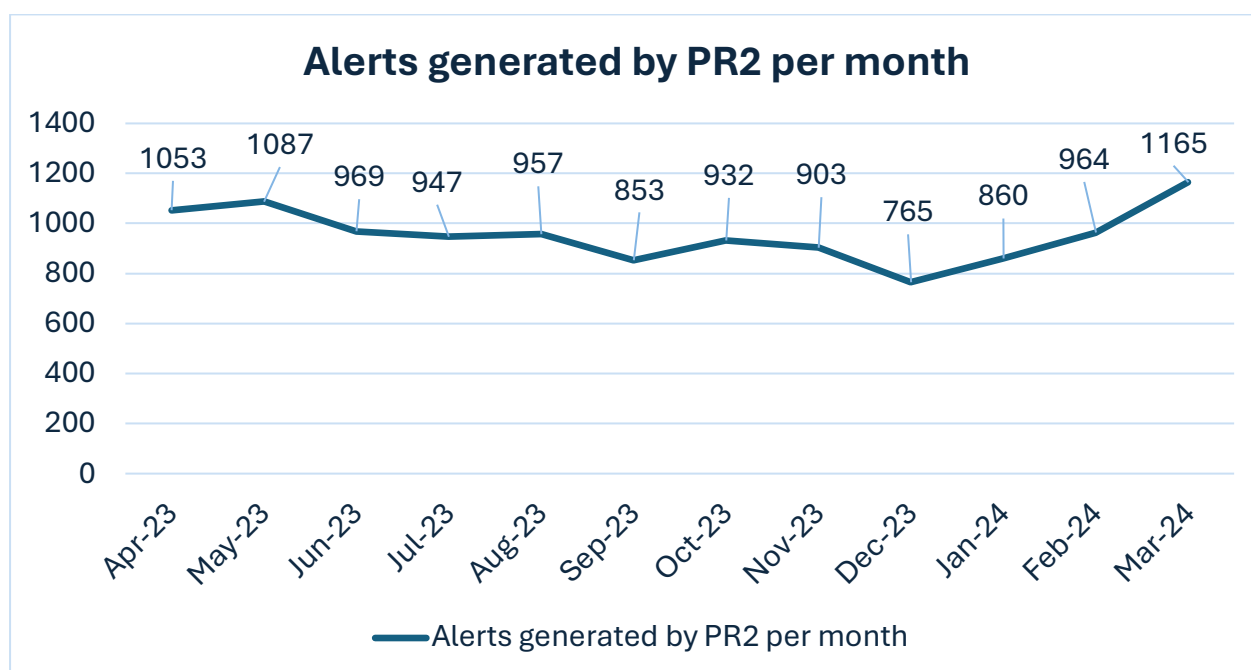
The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) is an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government and was first established in April 1993. In Scotland, there are currently 16 publicly managed prisons and 1 privately managed prison, HMP Addiewell. In March 2024, HMP Kilmarnock changed from being privately operated into being publicly managed as a result of the formal ending of the contract. SPS currently has a contract for Scottish Court Custody and Prisoner Escort services with GEOAmey PECS.

How the delivery of the scheme works

Compliance with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) is essential in how the SPS' Victim Notification Scheme (VNS) team handles both offenders and registered victims' personal information. The operation of the part of the VNS that SPS has responsibility for delivering, largely relies on a system of electronic alerts. SPS' internal prisoner records

database (PR2) records relevant information about an offender and their sentencing arrangements. An alert on PR2 is triggered by changes to key information recorded against an offender which has relevance to a victim registered on the VNS. All such alerts are then manually interrogated by SPS' VNS team to determine, whether a registered victim should be notified of the information. The manual interrogation of alerts requires those within SPS' VNS team who operate the delivery of the VNS to have sufficient knowledge of the scheme and the potential changes that can occur in relation to an offender's sentence management over the course of serving a sentence of imprisonment.

Continually changing factors such as the number of offenders in custody, the number of registered victims and the stages that offenders are at in their custodial sentence, all impact on the numbers of alerts the PR2 database generates. Consequently, the number of alerts varies month to month, and year to year.



Collaborative Working

SPS collaborates with the Scottish Government on policy development and has continued to be actively engaged with the work of the Victims Taskforce. In 2023-24, representatives from SPS' VNS team have also attended a number of external victim groups such as Victim Centred Approach Fund (VCAF) meetings and Victim Centred Approach Governance Group.

The SPS has also had representatives attending the co-chaired workshops by Victim Support Scotland and the Parole Board for Scotland, and we have shared our experience of delivering the parts of the VNS for which SPS are responsible for, and engaged with those in attendance to identify areas for improvement and provided input on the proposed VNS propositions.

Five members of SPS staff have previously attended a Scottish Government sponsored virtual 'First Word' webinar session to learn more about 'how to put people's needs at the

heart of our writing'. The training provided examples of how small changes in the layout and language used in correspondence, can have a significant positive impact when organisations communicate with victims. SPS feels that the learning gained from the workshop has been transferrable to different types of VNS correspondence and communications. In 2023-24, SPS staff, who administer the parts of Victim Notification Scheme (VNS) for which SPS have responsibility, have since rewritten a further two of the VNS letters frequently sent to registered victims using the learning from the webinar session. In the year ahead SPS' VNS team will continue its work to rewrite more of the VNS letters, being influenced by the learning and style from 'First Word - People at Heart training'.

Stakeholder to the Independent Review of the Victim Notification Scheme

The Independent Review of the Victim Notification Scheme (VNS) published its report on 12 May 2023. In 2022-23, the Independent Review gave SPS the opportunity to share our experiences of administering parts of the scheme, to help inform where positive improvements could be made, and we continue to welcome its findings.

Common Standards of Service

There are a number of common standards of service for the agencies and these are set out earlier in the document.

Complaints

SPS received less than five formal complaints relating to VNS this reporting year. Victims may express dissatisfaction when making a telephone or email enquiry, however, this can be due to misunderstanding information received and the query can normally be resolved by speaking with the victim. As detailed above, SPS has continued and will continue to work to improve the communications victims receive through implementing the use of the First Word People at Heart style guide.

Request for Information in alternative format/language

Any requests received for information to receive VNS communications in an alternative format/language in the period from April 2023 to March 2024, have been actioned by SPS' VNS team.

SPS standards of service

Context

SPS delivers custodial and rehabilitation services for offenders in custody. SPS achieves this by ensuring delivery of secure custody, safe and ordered prisons, decent standards of care and opportunities for offenders to develop in a way that helps them reintegrate into the community on release. After appropriate risk assessment, this may include unescorted access to the community which many victims find difficult for understandable reasons. SPS is acutely aware of this difficulty and will continue to ensure that victims' representations are sought.

The table below shows the number of victims currently registered at 31 March 2024, compared with the previous three years:

Year	Total number of registered victims	Life Sentence (inc. Order of Lifelong Restriction)	Long Term Sentence (4 years or more)	Short Term Sentence (less than 4 years) – includes those registering for the 'Victim Information Scheme' (less than 18 months)
March 2024	2676	1139	1264	273
March 2023	2757	1105	1326	326
March 2022	2675	1065	1258	311
March 2021	2331	1032	980	319

Applications to join the scheme

In 2023-24, there were 474 applications to join the scheme received in the year. The VNS is an opt in scheme in Scotland, victims may choose to join the VNS at any time after an offender is convicted and may choose to do so sometime after the offender has been sentenced.

The table below shows the number of applications to join the scheme at 31 March 2024, compared with the previous three years. Applications have risen slightly since the last reporting year.

Year to	Total
March 2024	474
March 2023	464
March 2022	400
March 2021	306

Provision of Information

The table below shows the number of letters containing information sent to victims at 31 March 2024. The previous three years are reported for comparison:

Year to	Total	No. not issued within 48 hrs
March 2024	1267	1
March 2023	1683	8
March 2022	1715	115
March 2021	1681	64

The VNS standard for information to be provided in response to an alert is '48-hours'. During the reporting period 1 letter was issued out with the 48-hour period. There were no delays over 5 working days and no record of a notification not being sent which should have been.

In 2023-24, a small number of VNS letters sent to registered victims continue to be returned to SPS Headquarters by Royal Mail marked as undelivered. VNS correspondence is sent by Recorded Delivery. When SPS receives mail returned undelivered, we make a further attempt to provide the victim with the information in writing. It's not always clear why the registered victim has not received their letter. It may be because the registered victim has moved address, no longer wishes to receive VNS information, or the attempts to deliver the letter have been unsuccessful. To help increase awareness of the need to keep contact details up-to-date, VNS correspondence issued by SPS includes information asking victims to please inform us of any change of address. This reminder continues to have had a positive impact as we receive regular requests to update contact details.

Representations

In 2023-24, VNS letters were issued to victims who had selected the option to make representations about the release of an offender, including temporary release or release on home detention curfew (HDC). When the offender attains access to temporary release victims of life sentence prisoners can make representations in person by contacting SPS' VNS team to arrange this, or by phone or in writing.

SPS' VNS team also issues VNS letters seeking representations where an offender is being considered for Parole, and then on completion the victim provides their representations directly to the Parole Board for Scotland.

VNS Telephone and Email Enquiries

SPS continues to receive a substantial number of VNS telephone enquiries on a daily basis. The phonenumber and mailbox are monitored on a regular basis (Monday to Friday). Enquiries received were largely responded to within one day with the majority able to be dealt with at the time of the call.

Standards of service for victims and witnesses 2023-24

Standard 1

For those who have joined the Victim Notification Scheme (VNS), information that you are entitled to receive under section 16(3) of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 will be provided to you by the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) within two working days.

This consists of the following:

- The date of the prisoner's release (other than being granted temporary release);
- If the prisoner dies, their date of death;
- If the prisoner has been transferred out of our custody;
- That the prisoner is, for the first time, entitled to be considered for temporary release;
- That the prisoner is unlawfully at large; or
- That the prisoner who was released or was unlawfully at large has been returned to custody.

Standard 2

If you write to SPS about any matter concerning the Victim Notification Scheme, they will respond within 5 working days.

Standard 3

Where a telephone enquiry cannot be answered by SPS at the time, they will call you back within one working day.

Standard 4

For those victims of offenders sentenced to less than 18 months, they will notify you of the date of release or escape of the offender within 2 working days of confirmation that you are an eligible victim. They will do this either in writing or by telephone where you have provided a current contact number.

Standard 5

For those of you who have joined the Victim Notification Scheme, and have expressed a desire to make representations in relation to licence conditions under section 17 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003, SPS will write to you to seek your representations no less than two weeks before any decision will be taken on release:

- On Home Detention Curfew;

- On temporary release (but only on the first occasion that the prisoner is considered); or
- By the Parole Board for Scotland.

Standard 6

For those victims of **life sentenced offenders** who have joined the Victim Notification Scheme, and have expressed a desire to make representations in relation to licence conditions under section 17 of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003, SPS will provide you with an opportunity to make representations in person, orally or in writing before any decision is taken **on the first occasion that the prisoner is considered for temporary release.**

Parole Board for Scotland

Standard 1

If you are registered for part 2 of the Victim Notification Scheme, we will take account of your representations alongside other relevant information when deciding whether to approve release. Victim Support Scotland may be able to help you prepare your representations (contact number 0345 603 9213).

Standard 2

If you are registered for part 2 of the Victim Notification Scheme, we will tell you when the Parole Board has made its decision. You will be offered the option of being told by telephone and, if release is granted, we will tell you about any license conditions that are relevant to you. If you prefer to receive a letter, we will send this by 1st class post within 1 day of the Parole Board's decision.

Standard 3

If you are registered for part 2 of the Victim Notification Scheme, we will give you the opportunity, where the prisoner has been given a life sentence, of making your representations in person to a member of the Parole Board (the Parole Board member will not be part of the Oral Hearing considering the prisoner's case).

Standard 4

Please note that the meeting with the member of the Parole Board will normally take place between 12 and 8 weeks before the date set for the Oral Hearing and will not normally be at your home. The meeting will be at a time that is suitable for you.

Standard 5

We will answer your letters, emails or telephone calls promptly. We will answer your letters or emails within 5 working days. If we are not able to fully answer your telephone enquiry at the time of your call, we will arrange to call you back.

Standard 6

We will normally contact you by letter clearly stating why we are contacting you and if there is any action that we need you to take. If we need to contact you by telephone, we will check that it is convenient for you to discuss the matter and we will explain why we are contacting you and, if there is any action that we need you to take, we will tell you what that is and why it is required.

Standard 7

We will carefully consider representations submitted by victims, including whether any information contained in them should be withheld from the prisoner under Rule 9 of the Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2022, which states the grounds on which information may be withheld.

Standard 8

Where the Board is of the view that any of these grounds are met, the information will be redacted from any documentation provided to the prisoner. The victim(s) will be advised of the information which has been redacted. Where appropriate, their views may be sought in advance of deciding whether information falls under Rule 9.

The rights of victims:

In some criminal cases, victims may have the right to receive information about the release of an offender. They may also have a right to be told when the offender is being considered for release and to make representations about the release of the offender.

The scheme that allows victims to be told about an offender's release and to make representations is known as the **Victim Notification Scheme (VNS)**.

The VNS is in two parts:

- **Part one** allows victims to receive information about an offender's release.
- **Part two** allows victims to make representations to the Parole Board in advance of an offender being considered for release on parole or non-parole licence.

Victims in cases where a life sentence has been imposed have continued to be offered an interview with a Parole Board member to allow them to make their representations in person.

The introduction of Rule 26A of the Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2001, allowed victims in relevant cases to request to observe the prisoner's oral hearing. This opportunity is open to victims of prisoners who are serving a life sentence, extended sentence or an order for lifelong restriction. This provision has been replicated in Rule 30 of the Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2022, which came into effect on 1 April 2023.

The Board will consider victim representations along with all other information on the offender's case before reaching a decision. Representations are fully considered by the Board as part of its overall decision making process.

If the Board does decide to release, then representations may assist in deciding the licence conditions that will be imposed. The primary aim of licence conditions is to minimise risk to public safety. Licence conditions must be lawful, proportionate and necessary. Licence conditions will stay in force until the end of the sentence that was given.

The following provides information on what the Board has achieved in relation to the Standards of Service during April 2023– April 2024.

What have we done:

Some of these activities have been carried forward from 2022/2023.

- We have continued to develop the Victims Team within Parole Scotland to support the key changes made to the Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2001.
- Victim Service Delivery has been a key objective for the Board for 2023 – 2024.
- We have continued to listen to victims and learn from their experiences of the parole system to enable improvements to be made in our guidance, operating procedures and training.
- Board member and staff guidance has been kept under constant review to ensure that sections relating to victims are current.
- Victim training for Board members and Parole Scotland staff has been reflected in learning plans. Further Trauma Informed and Skilled practice training is being planned to further develop the skillset of staff when dealing with victims.
- We have constantly monitored our internal operating systems and procedures to ensure they provide the best service delivery for victims. We continue to work with our current IT contractor on improving victim service delivery within our new casework management system (CMS). The Victims Team have met with Business Analysts to share their operational knowledge to assist the analysts in creating a more fit for purpose system.
- We have looked to design and launch various information tools for victims and continue to update the dedicated page on our [website](#) for victims and their families. We are also reviewing our communication methods to ensure they are effective.
- We have engaged with the Scottish Government's plans to procure external expertise to work with others across the justice sector to review victim-focussed publications (including letters, leaflets, websites) and to develop a style guide.

- We have further developed the Safe Space Initiative by obtaining the support of all 32 Local Authorities and the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service. We now have over 38 venues from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and are in discussions with the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service to obtain further venues to form part of our network.
- The Victims Team issues quarterly newsletters to ensure that members of the initiative are kept up to date with the projects activities. A current redesign is underway which will make an official appearance in the coming months.

What we will do:

Some of these activities have been carried forward from 2023/2024.

- We will continue to monitor the requirements of the Victims Team and ensure we have all the resource we need to provide an excellent service for victims.
- We will continue to ensure all emails are answered within 5 working days of receipt to our Victims Team Mailbox.
- We will continue to develop induction materials for new members of the Victims team to ensure they are brought up to speed as quickly and efficiently as possible.
- We will continue to listen to victims and learn from their experiences of the parole system to enable improvements to be made in our guidance, operating procedures and training.
- We will continue to ensure that Board members and staff guidance is kept under constant review to ensure that sections relating to victims are current.
- We will continually monitor requirements for future Victim training for Board members and Parole Scotland staff and implement this when needed.
- We will continue to consider our internal operating systems and procedures to ensure they provide the best service delivery for victims. We will continue to input where required for the design of our new casework management system (CMS).
- We will continue to look to design and launch various information tools for victims and continue to update the dedicated page on our [website](#) for victims and their families. We will continue to review our communication methods to ensure they are effective.
- We will continue to engage with the Scottish Government's plans to procure external expertise to work with others across the justice sector to review victim-focussed publications (including letters, leaflets, websites) and develop a style guide.

- We will continue to develop the Safe Space Initiative, ensuring we have across Scotland access to safe and secure meeting venues for Victim Interviews and Observations. We will ensure to send updates and lessons learned to the projects members quarterly.

This document has been prepared by Police Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, the Scottish Prison Service and the Parole Board for Scotland working in partnership

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December 2024