

Standards of Service for Victims and Witnesses Annual Report 2024-25



CROWN OFFICE
& PROCURATOR
FISCAL SERVICE
SCOTLAND'S PROSECUTION SERVICE

Scottish Courts
and Tribunals Service



SPS
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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 [the Victims' Code for Scotland webpage](#).

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.

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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
 - marriage and civil partnership
 - pregnancy and maternity
 - race
 - religion or belief
 - sex
 - sexual orientation.
 - transgender identity

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

An overview from our Chief Constable:

“Supporting victims is a core pillar of our 2030 Vision. We are dedicated to providing a quality service to victims and witnesses and our Standards of Service reflect this. This year we have continued to work closely with our justice partners and support agencies to help victims and witnesses feel supported, safe and well-informed throughout their journey. We recognise that with the right support, victims are more confident of engaging with services, they can provide their best evidence and are less likely to become repeat victims 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, respect and upholding human rights. We have 13 local policing divisions supported by national specialised divisions and each one is 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 are 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 have little or no 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 is essential we get this right, so the standards we have set ourselves reflect that. In this report, we have 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.

What we have done:

When we are investigating a crime, we work hard to keep the people affected up to date with any progress and make sure they know what is going to happen. It is the responsibility of each officer and member of staff to give the highest possible standard of service to our communities. This includes explaining to people what is going to happen and what we may ask of them. We will also inform people about their rights including their right to be supported. The importance of this standard is reinforced to our officers and staff in our Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), national guidance and internal communications.

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. In 2024-25, we received 40,607 responses to our Local Policing User Experience Survey.

Within this survey, we ask people to tell us whether they felt they were adequately informed about the progress of their report. This year, 50% said they

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felt they were which is the same as in 2023-24. The table below provides more details on the areas we measure in the survey:

Question	April 2024-March 2025*	Previous year April 2023-March 2024
How easy or difficult was it to contact Police Scotland? (Easy & very easy)	75%	73%
During the initial contact how satisfied are you with the way you were treated by the staff member? (Satisfied & very satisfied)	86%	85%
Did you feel staff properly understood what you needed? (Yes)	88%	87%
Do you feel that the police provided the appropriate response to the incident you reported? (Yes)	66%	64%
How satisfied are you with the way you were treated by the officers who attended the incident? (Satisfied & very satisfied)	83%	82%
Were you adequately informed about the progress	50%	50%

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of the incident you reported? (Yes)		
Based on your overall experience, how satisfied are you with Police Scotland? (Satisfied & very satisfied)	71%	69%

*Please note the figures above show a combined % of strongly agree and agree/very satisfied and satisfied responses.

We are progressing our work to enhance 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 and survivors to provide anonymous feedback on the service they received. We have had 90 further responses between May 2024-May 2025 with 44 responses relating to domestic abuse, 16 relating to rape and 9 relating to any other sexual crime. 31% of respondents felt police were respectful towards their situation and 22% were satisfied with their experience overall.

Our Summary Case Management (SCM) pilot which is 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 Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS). This allows for 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 with the benefit of being able to update you on the outcome at an earlier stage.

An evaluation of the pilot, published in September 2024, highlighted that more than 500 summary (non-jury) trials did not require to be fixed in the pilot courts over the 19-month

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period directly as a result of SCM within the pilot courts. An estimated 18,000 witnesses, including approximately 7,000 victims and witnesses, particularly in domestic abuse proceedings, were not cited or recited to attend court unnecessarily.

Police Scotland Assistant Chief Constable Wendy Middleton, Criminal Justice Service Division lead said:

“In addition to the obvious benefits to victims, Police Scotland is seeing a reduction of first issue citations for domestic abuse cases by up to 34% in all pilot courts which equates to around 5,000 citations not being served on operational officers. This reduction is welcomed by Police Scotland as more officers are available to deliver a policing service in local communities. It also ensures that officers can be rested appropriately, ensuring that they remain fit and well to continue to deliver an effective service.”

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 continue to develop 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.

Our National Conduct Unit within the Professional Standards Department engages directly with victims and witnesses to provide clarity and an overview of the process where the case involves allegations of police misconduct. Where the allegation of misconduct has arisen following a complaint from a member of the public, we will notify you in writing of the outcome of the proceedings.

The importance of keeping victims and witnesses updated on the progress of their case is highlighted during probationer training and through all aspects of continuous professional development.

What we will do:

Over the coming year, we will continue to monitor our monthly survey and encourage victim and survivor feedback. We will also continue to carry out engagement and research programmes with victims and survivors and advocate organisations. This will

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ensure we are keeping people up to date effectively and find out if there is anything else we can do to make sure people feel fully informed and supported.

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 have done:

One of the key provisions of the [Victims and Witnesses \(Scotland\) Act 2014](#) is that victims, witnesses or prescribed relatives can ask why we are not investigating a crime or why we stopped an investigation. On receipt of these requests, the enquiry officer involved in the investigation will typically provide a direct update to the requester.

Police Scotland, COPFS, Scottish Courts and Tribunal Service (SCTS) and Victim Support Scotland (VSS) have developed a joint [Access to Information Protocol - A Guide for Victims and Witnesses](#). The Protocol clearly sets out the information each organisation can supply and aims to avoid duplication and confusion so that we can all improve certainty around the court experience.

Between 1 April 2024 and 31 March 2025, we received 11 information requests in relation to the provisions of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014.

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. The Joint Protocol was last updated in 2022 and will be reviewed over the coming year.

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

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let officers know whether you want a male or female officer to interview you. We will try our best to meet your request wherever possible.

We know how important it is for victims and witnesses – especially in relation to 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 and trauma-informed approach to handling cases like this.

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland (HMICS) provides independent scrutiny of both Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority (SPA). The HMICS Thematic Inspection of Domestic Abuse Phase 1 2023/2024, identified that Police Scotland should take further action to ensure it is meeting the standard of service statutory obligations, by offering the appropriate gender of interviewing officers to victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

To achieve this, we updated our interim Vulnerable Persons Database (iVPD) system to make it easier for officers to identify the offences applicable to this right. We will always aim to do our best to arrange the interview in line with the wishes of the victim-survivor.

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.

Over the last two years Police Scotland have collaborated with Heriot-Watt University, on Justisigns2 and Silent Harm projects. Both of these projects highlighted the barriers preventing a deaf person making a report to police and the wider challenges specific to domestic violence.

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One of the findings suggested that victim-survivors and witnesses of the offences and behaviours applicable to this right, would benefit from the opportunity to specify the gender of the interpreter.

We have worked with external partners such as Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities (SCLD) to create a service that reduces obstacles for deaf people to engage with Police Scotland. This has now been successfully launched and was the recipient of an Excellence Award within the category of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the Scottish Institute of Policing Research Impact awards and shortlisted for The Herald Education Awards Research Project of the Year.

Where the crime involves an allegation against a police officer, our Professional Standards Department will use statements taken during the criminal proceedings when carrying out subsequent misconduct enquiries. This is to prevent the victim-survivor having to provide the same information and possibly experience re-traumatisation. Where additional information is required and a further statement is needed, the victim-survivor will be offered the option to specify the gender of the officer.

What we will do:

We will continue to train our teams to give victim-survivors and witnesses affected by these crimes the chance to tell us if they would prefer to choose the gender of their interviewing officer.

We will also continue to make sure our specialist teams have enough interviewing officers of each gender so we can give victim-survivors and witnesses the choice, wherever possible.

We aim to extend the success of British Sign Language projects to other business areas within Public Protection Policing, such as Honour Based Violence and Stalking, to ensure victim-survivors of these crimes from within this community are empowered and understand their right to choose the gender of their interviewer and interpreter, whenever possible.

In 2025/26, we will continue to work with HMICS during phase 2 of the Thematic Inspection on Domestic Abuse. We will work hard to improve on the progress made so

far, ensuring the welfare and support of victim-survivors are at the core of everything we do.

Standard 4

To assess your requirements as a witness, we will consider, with our partners, your particular needs and try to ensure these 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 have done:

To give victims and witnesses the right support, and make sure it is consistent, it is important we work with our justice partners. This is particularly true for vulnerable people. Our Divisional Concern Hubs triage, research and assess all reports received through our interim Vulnerable Person Database (iVPD) system concerning vulnerable people. 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 (GDPR).

We help protect victims of domestic 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 have worked with COPFS to standardise the process which notifies victims of domestic abuse about court bail decisions. The development of a new national form has improved clarity, reduced duplication and places the safety of the victim at the heart of the process.

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This year, to support victims of rape and sexual crime, a walk-around video of the forensic medical facility has been piloted to enhance transparency and foster trust. This visual tool assists victim-survivors in understanding the environment and procedures and seeks to alleviate fears and uncertainties. The video displays the forensic medical examination facility and process, detailing the expectations of both victims and medical professionals. It supports the trauma-informed principles by empowering victims, ensuring they feel safe, secure and informed about the support options available to them before consenting to the medical examination. This initiative seeks to enhance communication and provide victims with clear and essential information.

We have developed a victim strategy template which is now embedded into our national reporting system to support victims of rape. This method enables us to effectively share essential information about a victim's vulnerabilities, care plans, support networks, contact and necessary assistance in the Criminal Justice System, to reduce the risk of additional trauma. This provides an opportunity for investigating officers to supply COPFS with information which identifies early prosecution challenges and helps develop tailored strategies for each victim ensuring a victim-centred approach.

Sexual Offences Liaison Officers (SOLO) also maintain contact logs with victim-survivors to ensure that all contact is appropriately recorded and can be routinely checked.

We are supporting the SCTS with vulnerable witness reform and practicing a more trauma-informed approach to statement taking from vulnerable witnesses. The presumption is that the evidence from all 16/17-year-old witnesses in the most serious high-court cases will be captured by way of a video-recorded interview, and COPFS may consider using this as evidence in chief to reduce the need for these young people to appear in court in these cases.

Police Scotland are continuing to train officers as Vulnerable Witness Interviewers to support this ongoing method of evidence gathering.

We have collaborated with groups of people with lived and living experience to understand how we can improve our approaches and services. Collaborative voices can highlight and promote changes that better meet the needs of victims and witnesses. The

lived and living experience groups have offered valuable insights by discussing both positive and negative interactions with us. This has enabled us to explore more effective methods of providing victims and witnesses with empowerment, trust-building, and sharing of the best practices. An example of this is the ongoing reciprocal learning days for Joint Investigative Interview trained staff and interpreters to ensure a more victim-centred approach to interviewing child victims and witnesses.

Scottish Government continues to work on bringing the Icelandic Barnahus Model to Scotland. 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 time of writing. 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 national and local partnerships which are helping to support and develop this work.

What we will do:

We will carry on working hard, campaigning, assessing and refining our support, to keep vulnerable victims safe and feeling confident that we are responding to their needs. We will continue to expand the scope of video-recorded interview to include the evidence from witnesses aged under 16, and to expand to the most serious sheriff and jury cases.

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 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 support. We will 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 are 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 support services and the Scottish Government's Victims' Code.

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

What we have done:

We have listened to victim feedback and with the support of communication company, The First Word, have updated and rebranded our victim care card.

'Your Care Card' was launched in November 2024 and is available in 20 different languages. If another language or version is required, we will make sure you are provided with this. The card provides details of your rights under the Victim's Code and lets you know how to get support if you need it. 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. We wanted to make sure all officers could easily provide you with the information that you need in a way that you choose and have updated our system to enable local police officers to also email this. We have added a Quick Response (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.

We have also updated our Victims and Witnesses intranet page to include a 'quick guide' to support officers in issuing the care card and to provide a range of other tools to encourage victim-centred care.

The People at Heart approach was developed by The First Word Communications company in partnership with criminal justice agencies, third sector partners and people with lived experience. It originates from the Victims' Taskforce and aims to put people at

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the heart of communications by being empathetic and empowering, and ensuring that communications are easy to access and understand.

This year we have continued our work with The First Word and have organised a webinar and several training courses to provide officers and staff with practical advice on how to communicate in a clearer, more trauma-informed way. We have also included the People at Heart guide to communicating with victims and witnesses as an available resource on our intranet for all officers and staff.

We continue to work closely with Victim Support Scotland and other support agencies to better understand the experiences of victims and witnesses and to use the insights to improve our services. System updates, care card distribution and continued engagement and awareness raising across the organisation has contributed to a 16% increase in the number of support referrals to Victim Support Scotland in Q1 2025 compared to the same period in 2024.

What we will do:

We recognise that people have become more reliant on and accepting of technology. We want to further streamline the distribution process and are testing ways to fully automate this for those with email access. We will maintain other methods of delivery where digital services are not available to ensure every victim and witness has equal access to information.

We are continuing to work with The First Word to review the language and accessibility on our Victims and Witnesses pages of our website. We want to make it easy for officers and the public to quickly find the information they might need to access appropriate support, empower people in their own decision making and to avoid additional trauma.

Going beyond our standards:

As well as working to meet our standards, there are several other areas of work we are progressing which are aimed at improving people's experiences of the justice system.

Victims Taskforce

Police Scotland is a key partner in the [Victims Taskforce](#). The Taskforce is co-chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and the Lord Advocate and its key role is to co-ordinate and drive improvements to the justice system to support the experiences of victims and witnesses. It brings together senior leaders across a wide range of agencies including direct representation from victims.

Children's rights

[The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\) \(Scotland\) Act 2024](#) came into force in July 2024. The act will ensure that children's rights are respected and protected in Scotland and places a duty on all public bodies to actively consider and respect children's rights in everything that they do.

We have been developing our Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) which will be considered each time we update a policy, procedure or guidance document and will make sure any updates or changes are considered through a child rights lens.

We have appointed Youth Engagement Officers to allow us to better consult with children, young people and their parents or carers during the development of future work and policy, making sure that their voices are heard. We have also appointed a Children's Rights Officer. This role will support Police Scotland's commitment to embedding the principles of the UNCRC and will shape, influence and drive positive policy and practice change across the organisation.

Trauma-Informed Practice

The Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill seeks to progress the ambition and priorities set out in the [Vision for Justice in Scotland](#) of delivering person-centred and trauma-informed practices, including taking greater action to hear and listen to victims' voices.

Police Scotland's [2030 vision](#) supports this ambition. It sets out to ensure that victims are fully heard and supported, shaping our service to better support the needs of victim-survivors through a trauma-informed approach.

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To support the ambitions of the Bill and our own 2030 vision, we will continue to explore and create safe and meaningful opportunities to share power with individuals with lived experience of trauma to ensure our service is shaped and informed by people's experiences and needs, deliver and enhance trauma-informed training so that officers and staff feel confident, skilled and empowered, and review policies and processes to ensure they are considered through a trauma-informed lens.

We are a key partner in the [Trauma-informed workstream](#) of the Victims Taskforce. We are working together with other justice partners to create and deliver a plan to embed trauma-informed practice in our organisation as part of the wider delivery plan for the justice sector and in line with the [National Trauma Transformation Programme \(NTP\)](#).

We continue to work closely with SCTS and other justice partners within Aberdeen to implement a Sheriffdom wide fully virtual Trauma-informed Domestic Abuse court model. Feedback from victim-survivors continues to inform this work as it progresses. The model aims to reduce the anxiety and trauma associated with attendance at court, improve efficiencies and ensure that victim-survivors and witnesses are supported to be able to provide their best evidence.

Tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation

We are committed to supporting people affected by online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) and preventing this type of crime. We continue to lead a Multi-Agency Preventing OCSAE Group which coordinates and develops learning. We liaise 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 have 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.

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Our standards of service for victims and witnesses 2025-2026

Police Scotland will continue to monitor the standards of service we have set ourselves and will make improvements, as required, to ensure they meet the needs of victims and witnesses in the coming year.

The Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS)



The Lord Advocate, Dorothy Bain KC

The Lord Advocate, head of the systems of criminal prosecution and death investigations, 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

COPFS is Scotland’s independent public prosecution and death investigation authority.

We receive reports about crimes from the police and other reporting agencies and decide what action to take, in the public interest, including whether to prosecute. We also examine deaths that need further explanation and investigate allegations of criminal conduct by police officers.

We work closely with key stakeholder groups and our partners in the criminal justice system to help make Scotland a safer place to live, work and visit.

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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.

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

This Act came into force in July 2024 and the requirements apply to all public authorities in Scotland, including COPFS.

We have reviewed and updated all relevant policies and processes (both internally and externally published), directly and/or indirectly, associated with children as accused, as witnesses, or more generally, to ensure that they are compatible with the UNCRC requirements.

Extensive internal guidance was prepared for staff on the UNCRC requirements, UNCRC compatibility issues minutes, how to assess the best interests of children and how to record UNCRC considerations taken in decision making. Mandatory in person training has also been delivered to ensure all relevant staff are trained on our UNCRC obligations.

Below are other examples of 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 Lord Advocate is the co-chair of the Scottish Government's Victims Taskforce. Its primary role 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. We also co-chair the victim-centered approach workstream of the Taskforce programme which published its scoping and modelling report in November 2024. Key commitments are to create a more 'humanised' justice system by:

- Enhancing the profile and activities of victim support organisations;
- Moving to an 'opt-out' referral process;
- Introduce a type of Victim Passport to enable data sharing between justice partners;
- Create a single point of contact for victims and witnesses;

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- Implement a shared purpose across criminal justice agencies.

Updates about this workstream will be provided in next year's report.

We also have an agreement with Rape Crisis Scotland to receive anonymous feedback in sexual offence cases in order to improve our services. The HMIPS report on the [prosecution of summary domestic abuse](#) cases recommended the introduction of further feedback loops. This will feed into the work of the VIA Modernisation Programme.

In May 2023 we committed to providing a person centred and trauma informed service to the people of Scotland. 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.

To support our commitment to becoming a more trauma informed organisation, in August 2024 we appointed a dedicated Lead for Trauma Informed Practices who is responsible for overseeing implementation of the [Scottish Government Trauma Informed Justice Knowledge and Skills Framework](#) within COPFS. 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 minimise the risk of re-traumatisation or further harm and to support recovery where possible.

Communication was identified as a priority area for review in terms of the impact our words may have on persons with lived experience of trauma. Consequently, there has been a focus to ensure that trauma informed principles are embedded in all forms of communication.

In January 2025, the People at Heart method to communicating with those affected by crime was launched. This was commissioned by the Scottish Government from 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.

We hosted a webinar for staff with the Director from the First Word, added training modules for our staff to access on our learning platform, and have had staff attend more in depth half day training sessions hosted by the First Word including our complaints handlers and staff who review our decisions in our Response and Information Unit (RIU). The training has enhanced RIU's work to further improve the tone and content of communications, and provide more effective responses to complaints and Victims' Right to Review requests.

We have reviewed all letters sent from our Victim Information and Advice teams to make them more person centred and trauma informed.

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RIU have commenced providing data to senior management on Victims' Right to Review requests, in order that learning can be shared with relevant teams to better enable staff to make the right decisions first time.

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

RIU have continued to provide training on complaints handling at the foundation course for new prosecutors to empower staff to provide excellent customer service and to identify and handle Stage 1 complaints effectively and in line with COPFS Complaints Handling Procedure

In November 2024 we published our Lord Advocate's guidelines on the investigation and reporting of child deaths and non-accidental injuries in children. The guidelines were prompted by specific findings of our comprehensive [review of child deaths](#) and non-accidental injury in children in order to provide a framework of clarity and consistency for Police Scotland and our staff when dealing with these most sensitive and challenging cases.

During the course of the review, there were a number of emerging themes including the need to capture learning and improve training in how to sensitively and professionally deal with these cases – this is reflected in the need for a de-brief process, enhanced, structured training for COPFS and also for colleagues including pathologists and Police Scotland.

Work on the 19 recommendations from the review has begun and will be included in in our next annual report.

What we will do

We continue to review feedback received in relation to our letters and to adapt our communications based on that to ensure we are meeting the needs of victims and witnesses. This will include the establishment of feedback loops and considerations around ethical power-sharing with persons with lived experience. We are also working on updating our Complaints Handling Procedure to ensure it is modern, person centred and trauma informed, to best serve those who need to use it.

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](#).

We recognise the importance of learning from the experience of others. We have collated the reports and findings of previous inquiries into investigations involving issues of race and these are now easily accessed from our internal website with our staff

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encouraged to consider the contents and apply learning where appropriate in our own investigations into deaths and criminal activity, and in respect of our prosecutorial decision making. We are in the process of collating findings from investigations involving other protected characteristics to adopt a similar approach.

Our [Strategic Plan for 2023-27](#) and [Annual Business Plan 2025-26](#) set clear actions and leadership accountability for aligning and embedding service improvement across all areas of work and improvement priorities.

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. As part of the VIA Modernisation Programme, in February 2025 we launched the VIA workload application as a pilot for staff working in High Court and deaths investigation units. In April 2025 the pilot was extended to include VIA Local Court teams in Lothian and Borders.

The Witness Gateway Programme was launched in April 2024, with the development of a website providing victims and witnesses online access to information related to their case. In designing and developing the Witness Gateway service, COPFS spoke to victim and witness groups as well as our own staff. By the end of March 2025, the Witness Gateway was available in all Local Court locations.

Access to the website is through a secure login when victims and witnesses must first verify their identity. The website allows victims and witnesses to:

- update their contact details and information
- view their court appearance date
- confirm their availability for attending court in Sheriff and Jury cases
- view their witness statement, and
- receive text messages or emails alerting them to updates about their case.

The Witness Gateway has streamlined processes for our victims and witnesses, automated some of our administrative processes and resulted in more accurate and up-to-date information being held on case management systems

We have also worked with our VIA Modernisation Programme to produce a series of child-friendly letter templates that comply with our obligations under UNCRC. These are letters that are sent to children and their parents / guardians to provide information

and updates on cases involving the children as victims and witnesses. Revision of the letters was led by consultations with Children's 1st and some of the children they support, who have received letters from COPFS previously.

We appreciate that PDF documents may not be suitable for users of assistive technology, therefore readers can request any document in a format that meets their communication need. We are also working on making all our publications more accessible in line with new accessibility regulations.

The Corporate Communications team led our accessible communications project and worked with content creators throughout COPFS to let them know about their responsibilities to make information more accessible. In the past year they have:

- added a new [Sexual offences](#) page to our website. This has information for victims about sexual offences crimes, what to expect from COPFS and sources of support
- updated our [Adult survivors of institutional child abuse](#) page. In creating this content we included input from a survivors support group. This resulted in more visual elements on the page, like the support agency logos, and a content warning at the beginning of the content so that people viewing the page are aware from the start of what it contains.
- created new digital forms [Victims' Right to Review application form](#) and [Subject access request \(SAR\) form](#) which offer improved accessibility for service users.
- added a link to Victim Support Scotland's virtual courtroom tours on the [Support at Court](#) section of our website.

We also work with our partners in the criminal justice system to ensure that those accused of a crime, as well as bereaved relatives, victims and witnesses, have access to high quality interpreting and translation services when accessing our services. This includes the provision of interpreters for both spoken languages and British Sign Language. We also provide translations of our documents and correspondence as well as a transcription service for video recordings.

The need for clear communication with next of kin and victims in all of our cases is vital across the prosecution service. At all times, we remain sensitive to the needs of bereaved relatives at this distressing time and, in accordance with the [Family Liaison Charter](#), it is our aim to keep relatives informed about any deaths that COPFS is investigating.

This Charter sets out how we will liaise with the family of a person in relation to whose death a Fatal Accident Inquiry (FAI) may be or is to be held. It sets out the different stages of the investigation process, the information which will be provided to bereaved

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families and the timescales for giving information. Insofar as it is possible to do so, additional information will be provided at any stage of the investigation upon request.

It should be noted that bereaved next of kin now take part in our annual child death training – sharing lived experience with our teams. Working with and learning from families in this way is not something which we did until very recently but it is incredibly impactful and essential to improving the way in which we deal with death investigations.

What we will do

In January 2025, HMIPS published its report on our [National Enquiry Point](#), our customer contact centre. Enquiry Point deals with call and email enquiries from victims, witnesses, next of kin and accused, as well as professionals working in the justice system. As the first point of contact for many who are seeking information or advice from or providing information to COPFS, National Enquiry Point plays a key role in delivering our obligations towards victims and witnesses.

The report found that operators and their managers were committed to delivering the best service possible but could be better supported by the wider organisation. In addition, operators require better guidance, training, systems and processes.

The report made 18 recommendations aimed at improving in how COPFS responds to enquiries. COPFS will implement actions over 2025-26 to address these and progress will be included in our next report.

The Law Officers have approved the creation of an ‘Abuse in Institutions Board’. The purpose of the Board is to oversee all ongoing pieces of work and new proposals to improve the service delivered to survivors of institutional abuse and to deliver increased efficiencies in the investigation and prosecution of these cases. The Board is taking forward three key areas of improvement in the prosecution of cases concerning abuse in residential care: survivor communication; efficiency and quality; and knowledge and awareness.

COPFS will continue engaging with justice partners and stakeholders to further develop the Witness Gateway by extending it to High Court and Specialist Casework cases. Discussions continue with partner agencies such as Victim Support Scotland to allow them to support their service users when signing up to Witness Gateway. Future developments also include the provision of Victim Impact Statements and claiming witness expenses functionality during 2025-26.

We are working with Local Court leads on plans to extend use of the VIA workload app to Local Court Summary Teams across the country.

Corporate Communications plans for next year include:

- completion of an accessibility audit of our public website content to make sure it meets the requirements of the Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) (No. 2) Accessibility Regulations 2018.
- continue to improve the content available on our website about crime. We have planned new content about Domestic Abuse and will continue to develop other content as appropriate.
- making improvements to our website content in response to the Sexual Offences review, improving content and navigation for victims and other service users.

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 apply for you to be supported with the appropriate measures.

What we have done

In February 2025, the Scottish Government published the '[Multi-Agency Partnership Approach to Distress](#) - The Framework for Collaboration'. The Partnership Delivery Group also published 'Collaborative Commitments' to support the implementation of that framework. The framework is intended to ensure that where people in mental health distress or crisis present to a service that is not best placed to help them e.g. to emergency services, there are effective pathways in place to make sure the person is directed to the right care. The idea is that there should be 'no wrong door' and all agencies should work together to get people the care they need no matter what service they present to.

In relation to sexual offending and child abuse, it is acknowledged that reporting such crimes can be very difficult for victims, as can reporting abuse. Victims of sexual crimes or child abuse that are reported to COPFS by Police Scotland will be offered additional support throughout the court process.

COPFS has a Victim Information and Advice service who can help victims of crime to understand how the Scottish criminal justice system works and can organise any additional support that is appropriate for giving evidence. They can also put victims in touch with other agencies who can provide practical and emotional support. A page entitled 'Adult Survivors of Institutional Child Abuse' has recently been added to the COPFS website. It provides information on how COPFS handle reports of child abuse and the support available, as well as information on the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry.

In relation to children and young people, we were involved in the development of the [Bairns' Hoose Standards](#), which reflect Scottish Government's commitment to developing 'Bairns' Hooses' for all eligible children who are victims or witnesses to abuse or violence by 2028.

Bairns' Hoose is Scotland's approach to the Icelandic 'Barnahus', which means 'children's house'. This offers holistic, child-centred support to those who have been victims or witness of abuse and to children under the age of criminal responsibility whose behaviour has caused harm. The Four Rooms approach does this by bringing together child protection, health, justice and recovery services in one setting.

The aim is to reduce the number of times children are asked to retell their stories as this can be difficult and retraumatising. Instead, trauma-informed practice is prioritised to support the child's recovery in a safe, respectful, friendly, and welcoming environment.

Six pathfinder sites have been selected, namely, North Strathclyde, Aberdeenshire, Aberdeen City, Fife, Tayside and the Outer Hebrides. So far, North Strathclyde is fully operational and delivering protection, care and recovery support to children and young people.

In relation to our commitment to becoming a trauma informed organisation, in August 2024 we appointed a dedicated Lead for trauma informed practices who is responsible for overseeing implementation of the trauma informed justice framework within COPFS.

As mentioned above, in January 2025, the People at Heart guide to communicating with those affected by crime was launched. This includes a written guide, an introductory webinar, half day training sessions and an e-learning module. This has been positively received by staff and work continues to ensure our written styles are updated to reflect the approach. For example, all VIA letters sent to victims in domestic cases have been updated using a trauma informed approach.

In March 2025 COPFS launched the new NHS Education for Scotland justice specific e-learning at both informed and skilled level and the Scottish Prosecution College is working to develop our own role specific enhanced level training.

What we will do

In December 2024, the Lord Advocate instructed COPFS and Principal Crown Counsel to create a pilot for single victim rape cases with the aim of improving victim experience during the criminal justice process. This is part of our commitment to making improvements to our services to benefit and empower women and improving how we communicate and support victims. The outcome of this pilot will inform any necessary improvements in the investigation and prosecution of single victim rape cases.

The pilot aims to improve the experiences of victim of this crime type, from the point at which the crime is reported to the police, to the end of the trial process. It is recognised by COPFS that the quality of much of their work associated with these case types requires to improve, particularly around prosecution decision making, early victim engagement, selection of special support measures, case preparation and victim

support both prior to and during trial. It is recognised that the conviction rate for 'acquaintance type rapes' is significantly lower than the overall all conviction rate for this category of crime and it is hoped that "end to end" improvement will go some way to redressing this imbalance.

The Sexual Offences Review Report was delivered to the Lord Advocate on 30 April 2025. The Crown Agent and Chief Executive of COPFS and officials are considering the report and its recommendations and will provide advice to the Lord Advocate. We will create a delivery plan for implementing the recommendations relevant to COPFS.

COPFS recognises that becoming a trauma informed organisation will involve a whole system change, rooted in culture and will involve looking at every aspect of our service through a trauma informed lens. Consequently, a stand-alone project to implement the trauma-informed justice framework has been created. Additionally, a team is being formed to support the wide breadth of work required to implement the level of change required.

We continue to improve the design of our VIA services, building on the work of the VIA Modernisation Programme. By implementing trauma-informed service delivery, we aim to ensure that VIA is best equipped to meet the needs of those who require our services.

We will also continue to work with criminal justice partners and Scottish Government to ensure the smooth roll out of the Bairn's Hoose model across Scotland.

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

Our [Prosecution Code](#) makes clear the need to consider the background and personal circumstances of both the accused and the victim before deciding what action to take in any case. The impact of the offence on the victim must also be considered. Where relevant, this may include consideration of any equality, diversity or inclusion issues.

We have specialist teams and prosecutors dealing with sexual offending, domestic abuse, complaints of criminal conduct against police officers and all our death investigations.

The Scottish Prosecution College (SPC) provides in-person, online and with the introduction of a new Learning Management System (SPC Online) in October 2025, blended training opportunities. 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. Delivery is both proactive and responsive. The College identifies need and trainers will travel to provide face-to-face courses when required.

The Scottish Prosecution College Prospectus is published biannually. The most recent prospectus covers April to October 2025 and again focuses on supporting trauma informed practices. Courses are promoted using a variety of effective communication strategies, including articles on our intranet and direct approaches to target audiences.

The SPC has developed comprehensive training on Body Worn Video cameras in partnership with our Policy Division and this is being delivered across Scotland on a phased basis to coincide with the Police Scotland rollout. Our Abuse in Institutions training is being piloted and new online modules are being published as part of our continued response to the HMIPS report on the prosecution of domestic abuse.

Role specific training has been delivered by webinar on bail in response to legislative changes, complemented by an e-learning package and a new course has been developed for our people managers at all levels to focus on management fundamentals. We have enhanced our partnership working with external stakeholders, providing training to the police, medical professionals and forensic scientists.

Following the success of our foundational learning 'Becoming Trauma Informed Part 1', 'Becoming Trauma Informed Part 2' launched in March 2025. Part 2 provides our staff with the justice sector training modules developed by NHS Education for Scotland in collaboration with victims and witnesses affected by trauma and justice agencies. The modules are designed to help those working and volunteering in the criminal justice sector understand, respond, and adapt to those affected by psychological trauma to help mitigate the risk of re-traumatisation. The learning builds upon the foundational knowledge gained in part 1 and embeds the concepts into a justice context.

The VIA Modernisation Programme's Learning and Development workstream has worked with VIA staff and managers to create a VIA learning space on our internal webspace. This new section will help VIA staff easily access and search the support and guidance they need to provide a key service to victims, witnesses and bereaved relatives. It includes recommended learning and guidance; a VIA Toolkit a legal procedure guidance manual.

The Learning Space will continue to evolve and be refreshed as additional learning and guidance appropriate for VIA staff is made available.

What we will do

We will continue our work to implement the Trauma Informed Justice Knowledge and Skills Framework in partnership with specialists from NHS Education for Scotland, providing enhanced training for identified roles to improve our service to victims and witnesses.

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Our new deutes will attend a comprehensive 15-day in-person induction programme, returning to the College to embed learning on a further 5-day course after 6 months in their roles. A new assessment of competency will be introduced to ensure these deutes excel in their posts.

We will work with senior leaders to identify training recommendations from the Sexual Offences Review instructed by the Lord Advocate, and design and deliver learning in response to these.

We will implement recommendations from the HMIPS report published in January 2025 on responding to enquiries through our National Enquiry Point service, supporting our people in answering queries from our service users and delivering a high quality public service to the people of Scotland.

Training for deutes who deal with child deaths will be developed with our subject matter experts in this area and will include specialist advocacy training. We will instigate training on expert evidence, with a focus on forensic work.

We will scale up the People Management Fundamentals courses, and expand management and leadership training across all our roles, at all levels, as part of Designed for Success – a corporate programme to implement improvements to our organisational structure, governance, leadership and talent management.

We will continue to undertake learning needs analysis and to review and develop our current and new training material in response and expand the use of SPC Online where appropriate to innovate and improve engagement with learning. We will develop closer links with operational colleagues to enhance local learning, supported by the appointment of a new Learning Champion who will assist in embedding a strengthened learning culture across COPFS.

The Standards of Service in the coming year

COPFS continuously reviews policies and procedures. We will continue to monitor their effectiveness, work internally and with justice partners to make meaningful improvements, 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 is committed to providing an improved experience of the justice system for victims and witnesses as we work to enhance our services by becoming a trauma informed organisation.

We continue to collaborate with our justice partners to innovate on alternative ways for victims and witnesses to give their evidence, together with driving forward initiatives aimed at encouraging early resolution of cases.

Critically, I am committed to ensuring the experiences of victims and witnesses directly shapes our plans for improvement, and am developing our engagement with groups and services that represent those experiences and advocate for change.

I am very pleased 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, Justices of the Peace and Tribunal Members), the courts, devolved [tribunals](#) and [Office of the Public Guardian \(OPG\)](#).

SCTS also provides the staff and administrative support to the:

- [Scottish Civil Justice Council](#) - which drafts rules of procedure for the civil courts, and advises the Lord President on the development of the civil justice system; and
- [Scottish Sentencing Council](#) - which is responsible for preparing sentencing guidelines, and for publishing guideline judgments and information about sentences imposed by the courts in Scotland.

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 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.

Our estate covers 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 27 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 we continue to create better systems for our users by learning and adapting in order to improve people's experiences of our organisation and the justice system. We work collaboratively with justice partners on a range of projects as well as on our own developments. The following sections provide more detail on other key things we've been doing this year.

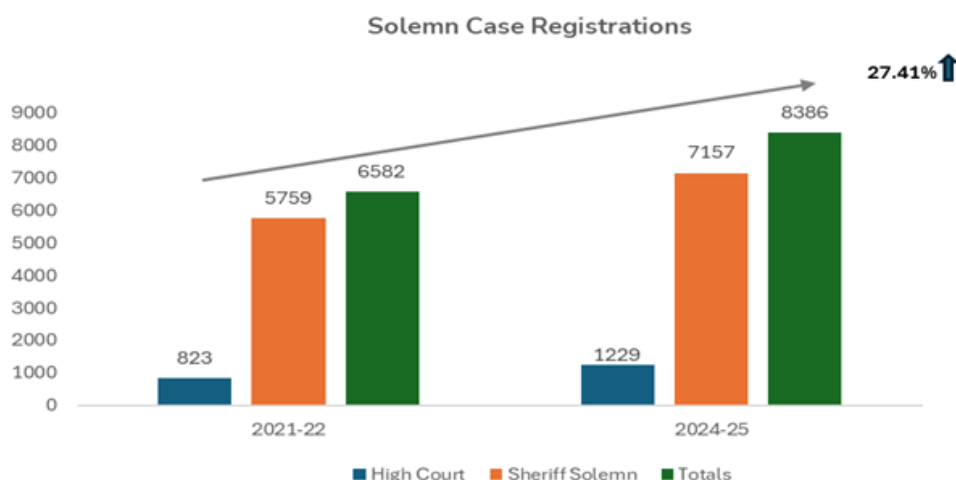
How we have improved services and access to justice

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that SCTS has operated an increased number of criminal courts since September 2021. Initially this was to address backlogs that were generated by the pandemic. Our goal was to return to a position where the number of scheduled trials across all criminal business levels was below 20,000 – as this represented a manageable workload for the system.

This work has been successful – scheduled trials have reduced by over 23,000 from their peak level and now sit at 19,499 as at the end of March 2025. This has been achieved alongside a sustained increase in solemn business (the most serious criminal

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cases, heard before a jury), which were over 27% higher in 2024-25 compared to 2021-22.



Over the coming year, SCTS is facing exceptional business pressures in relation to those more serious criminal cases. A general and sustained rise in case levels has been apparent since before the pandemic. This reflects an increased focus by police and prosecutors in recent years on proactive investigation of historical sexual and domestic abuse cases, leading to complex and time-consuming prosecutions. These, in turn, have increased confidence in the system, leading to greater numbers of victims having confidence that their complaints will be properly managed and choosing to proceed with action.

We believe that these levels will increase further in the coming years, driven by changes in the law on corroboration which are likely to increase the number of prosecutions for serious sexual offences in particular. Whilst these are welcome developments in terms of public safety (and the role that the justice system can play) their full effect on court business levels is yet to be felt and could be very significant.

Innovation and funding will be required to meet these pressures, as set out in our [Business Plan for 2025-26](#), to avoid the level of scheduled trials in these most serious of cases reaching unacceptable levels, resulting in significant and adverse effects on victims, witnesses and accused. This would run counter to the justice sector's ambition to manage business in a trauma informed way.

In recent years we have built strong foundations for a more resilient, modern and efficient justice system. We have also adapted our business model and accelerated key reforms. Through creative and innovative use of technology we have continued

supporting justice and victims and witnesses in their journey to improve their experiences, whether they attend court in person or via a live television link from an alternative location.

We continue to work on and innovate on alternative ways of ‘attending’ court for victims and witnesses to give evidence. This includes 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 require to physically attend court.

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 then Lord Justice Clerk, Lady Dorrian’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.

In the last year, our dedicated team have continued to work with our justice partners in the implementation of the elements of the Sexual Offences Review that don’t require legislation. This has included attending and participating in various Government led Governance Groups and workstreams. Further crucial work we have carried out in this area has been the creation of further trauma informed user focused evidence by commissioner facilities (discussed below) and link facilities within the spaces we traditionally occupy and in Bairns’ Hoose.

Sexual Offences Review

[The Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform \(Scotland\) Bill](#) is taking forward a number of the proposals of the Sexual Offences Review that require changes in the law. The proposals include: -

- the creation of a national trauma informed court for sexual offences,
- a presumption for the pre-recording of all sexual offence complainer evidence,
- the right for sexual offence complainers not to be named (statutory anonymity),

- and the right to independent legal advice for sexual offence complainers when certain applications are made to court to disclose types of evidence (known as section 275 applications).

The Bill is currently at Stage 3 in the Scottish Parliament. We have reviewed and shared our views on the provisions to the Scottish Government and provided evidence to the Scottish Parliament on the proposals and how they may be changed to further support the realisation of the Sexual Offences review's vision.

In the next year we will continue to monitor the Bill closely as it completes its progress through the Scottish Parliament. It will enable the creation of a trauma informed national sexual offences court with pre-recorded evidence and improved user experience at its heart.

The Evidence and Procedure Review (EPR)

SCTS's [Evidence and Procedure Review](#) recommended 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 was to remove children from the court setting entirely.

The Scottish Government have now given a commitment to developing 'Bairns' Hooses' for all eligible children who are victims of or witnesses to abuse or violence across Scotland. It is testing the approach across ten areas first before a national rollout, incrementally, from 2027.

This year, we have continued to work with a number of the 10 test areas, and additional future Bairns' Hoose areas, providing practical guidance and support to help ensure national consistency in the development of the Bairns' Hooses from a court process perspective. This has included continued work with the North Strathclyde Pathfinder Partnership, in the provision and operation of SCTS's equipment in the bespoke justice suite within Scotland's first Bairns' Hoose. This facility and equipment has crucially allowed a number of children and young people to give evidence by live television link to court in a more trauma informed and supported environment, away from the physical court building.

We have also welcomed the opportunity to join and participate in the newly created National Bairns' Hoose Implementation Group. The Group's function is an advisory one

to provide operational and delivery input, and strategic advice to support delivery of the Pathfinder phase of the Bairns' Hoose programme, in line with the Scottish Government's [Bairns' Hoose: Vision, Value and Approach](#).

We look forward to working and collaborating with Scottish Government, Bairns' Hoose partnerships, justice partners and others in this essential reform and in the further development of the justice aspect of the Bairns' Hoose model in Scotland, including supporting the creation of further physical justice spaces in the next year.

We are continuing to work 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. We continue to liaise with partners to agree next steps in relation to the rollout.

It was 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 Summary Case Management (SCM) Pilot was launched in September 2022 at Dundee, Hamilton and Paisley Sheriff Courts, before being expanded to Glasgow and Perth Sheriff Courts in 2024. Following its successful evaluation, the decision was taken to roll SCM out to all Sheriff Courts in Scotland.

The overall aim of SCM is to reduce the number of cases that are set down for trial unnecessarily and reduce the volume of late pleas of guilty on the day of the trial. At its core, SCM involves early disclosure of evidence, early engagement between the defence and Crown and pro-active judicial case management.

At the outset of the Pilot, the intention was to deliver a system which would benefit all those involved in the summary criminal justice process, particularly complainers, witnesses and accused persons. SCM delivered that system in the pilot courts and

demonstrated the potential of the approach to transform the summary criminal justice system.

The [final evaluation of the pilot](#), published in September 2024, revealed that: -

- more than 500 summary trials did not require to be fixed in the pilot courts over the 19 month period directly as a result of SCM.
- During the same period, an estimated 18,000 witness citations or recitations were not issued unnecessarily, including for approximately 11,000 police officers.
- Had the scheme been in place at a national level over the same period, it is estimated that almost 3,300 trials would not have been fixed and a further 89,000 witnesses (including an estimated 50,000 police witnesses) would not have required to be cited or recited.

Arrangements are now underway for the extension of SCM across Scotland over the course of 2025. This will be on a phased basis, whilst building on progress and maintaining momentum in the Pilot courts.

Since the commencement of the roll out in January 2025, SCM has been extended to non-Domestic Abuse cases in Glasgow Sheriff Court and Domestic Abuse cases across the non-Pilot courts in Tayside, Central and Fife. It is due to commence extension to Domestic Abuse cases in Grampian in mid-April 2025.

Improving witnesses' experiences of giving evidence

Expansion of legal presumption in the pre-recording of evidence

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

A staged roll out was agreed to help support the most vulnerable, ensure the justice system was not overwhelmed and to help ensure resources could be put in place with appropriate evaluation. The first step in the roll out started in January 2020 in the High Court with all child witnesses in certain case types.

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Since this point to the end of financial year 2024-25 more than 1500 applications for children to record their evidence, by the evidence by commissioner process, have been granted. During this period we have also supported year on year an increasing number of vulnerable adults to give their evidence by this pre-recorded process. Applications granted for vulnerable adults to use this process are now exceeding those for children.

On 23 April 2024, the Scottish Government published a revised [implementation plan](#) for the next steps in the roll out of the presumption. The next planned step will see it introduced for child witnesses aged under 16 in Sheriff and Jury cases for a defined list of offences. This is to be implemented by April 2026.

We have continued to work in collaboration with Scottish Government and justice partners to support the successful implementation of this next essential step for victims and vulnerable users.

Crucial to supporting this initiative and our and the EPR's vision, is the provision of bespoke trauma informed evidence by commissioner facilities, and fully trained and equipped staff, judiciary and justice partner participants. This report has already outlined the ongoing work in relation to the development of 'Bairns' Hooses'. The further steps we have taken in the last year to develop more evidence by commissioner facilities are outlined below.

Dedicated and trauma informed evidence giving facilities

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 2024 to 31 March 2025 there have been a total of: -

- 1053 evidence by commissioner applications lodged, and

- 949 evidence by commissioner applications granted.

848 witnesses have given their evidence by way of an evidence by commissioner hearing during this period. These figures include both adults and children.

Dundee Justice Hub

Following on from our first purpose built bespoke evidence suite going live in Glasgow in 2019, we officially opened our 5th trauma informed evidence giving facility in Dundee in August 2024.

This new [Justice Hub](#) provides 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 also has two trauma informed vulnerable witness suites allowing vulnerable witnesses to give evidence by 'live television link' to other court locations and in other court processes. When not utilised for the evidence by commissioner process the dedicated area of the hub for that can change in to another 'live television link' facility. This helps us to provide additional space and capacity and further support choice for victims and witnesses.



Evidence by Commissioner Suite, Dundee Justice Hub



Live television link room, Dundee Justice Hub

Building upon the successful collaboration with justice partners at the Inverness Justice Centre, Victim Support Scotland have also co-located with us in the Justice Hub facility. The site is also crucially located within close proximity of other justice partner offices, helping support further collaboration and provision of services for vulnerable users across the justice system.

Plans for the rest of Scotland

Using additional capital funding secured from Scottish Government in April 2024, construction work on a further evidence by commissioner suite in the Hamilton area is close to completing. The space will benefit from its own dedicated entrance and importantly increase our capacity to support vulnerable users within the geographical reach of the sheriffdom of South Strathclyde, Dumfries and Galloway to give their 'best evidence' in a more trauma informed manner through evidence by commissioner or live link to other proceedings.

Work has also begun within our existing Glasgow site to increase national trauma informed evidence by commissioner capacity. The works include the creation of a further state of the art recording facility, and improved areas for our vulnerable users. Both sets of works are scheduled to complete in the summer of 2025.

Plans are also being progressed to create additional bespoke trauma informed, multifunctional evidence giving facilities to support users within the geographical reach of the sheriffdom of North Strathclyde. Following the completion of those works SCTS will have more than 11 dedicated facilities in at least 7 locations. It will ensure there is at least one facility within each sheriffdom.

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

Trauma informed domestic abuse model

What we have done to support arrangements for the Trauma Informed Domestic Abuse Court

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,

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- 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 the Trauma Informed Domestic Abuse Courts

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 domestic abuse court. This will operate in Aberdeen before being expanded across the sheriffdom of Grampian, Highland and Islands.

The current intention is that this model 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.

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.



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.

The delivery of this model is currently paused pending ongoing discussion between Scottish Government and the Scottish Solicitors Bar Association (SSBA).

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 providing front line services as opposed to travelling to/from court and waiting in court, and
- a reduction in associated costs.

In the course of the last year we have implemented technical enhancements in the High Court including the introduction of a dual screen solution which mimics the physical presence of a witness in court more closely.

This has resulted in an increased proportion of witnesses giving evidence remotely. From 01 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 over 922 police and professional witnesses have given evidence remotely to the High Court.

Due to funding constraints, SCTS was unable to expand the use of remote provision of evidence to sheriff solemn or summary courts over the past year. It remains an ambition of SCTS to complete the rollout across all of our courts to make the most of new technology whilst helping those who support the system.

Criminal court business programme

SCTS has operated an increased number of criminal courts since September 2021. Initially this was to address backlogs that were generated by the pandemic. Our goal was to return to a position where the number of scheduled trials across all criminal business levels was below 20,000 – as this represented a manageable workload for the system – and this goal has been achieved.

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Within the Sheriff Courts the number of pending solemn trials as at the end of March 2025 had decreased to 1,004 (there were 1,709 pending scheduled trials at the end of March 2024). This was mainly due to the introduction of an additional 8 Sheriff solemn trial courts funded through the Scottish Government's Recover, Renew, Transform (RRT) programme.

At the end of March 2025 the number of pending summary trials had decreased to 15,787. It is anticipated that the number of pending trials will reduce further in 2025-26.

Justice of the Peace (JP) summary business has now returned to a level below the pre-pandemic baseline and at the end of March 2025 the number of pending trials was 1,965. There has been a significant reduction in the volume of JP court registrations and the introduction of section 54 of the Road Traffic Act is anticipated to further reduce JP court registrations.

Within the High Court, pending scheduled trials had risen to 743 (an increase of 50 cases on the year before) meaning waiting times for those cases are growing. This is due to a sustained increase in the level of solemn case registrations. SCTS has finite resources making it increasingly difficult to manage the level of cases now being registered. Over the coming year, further increases are expected. We are working closely with other justice organisations and engaging with the Scottish Government to minimise the potential impact on victims, witnesses and accused.

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

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

The [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, who is head of Scotland's criminal prosecution system.

Its primary role 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.

SCTS continues to be represented on the Taskforce, and also on the dedicated victim centred approach; the trauma informed approach; and the more recently created communication work streams. Significant work has been undertaken in the last year within the victim centred approach workstream, culminating in the publication of the [Victim Centred Approach to Justice in Scotland: Scoping and Modelling Project](#). This report provides modelled and costed options for transforming the justice system to be one which is more victim-centred. We remain committed to supporting the actions set in the work plans for each of these work streams.

Improving our communications with Victims and Witnesses

As mentioned above a new dedicated workstream within the Victims Taskforce has been created with the intention of improving communications to victims across the justice system. The workstream reports to the Taskforce to ensure its work remains aligned with other Taskforce activities. The workstream has met on several occasions throughout the reporting year with a key focus on how the 'People at Heart' approach can be adopted.

The People at Heart: guide to communicating with people affected by crime was commissioned by the Scottish Government from The First Word. The First Word is an organisation specialising in effective communication. The guide provides practical tips

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for criminal justice organisations on how to make written communication clearer, more inclusive and trauma informed in so far as possible.

We are committed to using the Guide and other user centric tools, to help improve our communications with victims and vulnerable users, where possible. As part of this work we carried out a review and rewrite of the key letters SCTS issues in the criminal court process to victims from a People at Heart lens. These improved letters have now been launched.

We have also supported and provided feedback in the course of the year on a proposed public wide People at Heart guide to be launched by the First Word in the future.

In further support of this a dedicated team of individuals across our organisation participated in further training provided by the First Word on the People at Heart Guide. We are now looking at how the learning and tools provided by the First Word, and in other areas, can be used to help support all of our colleagues in our commitment to improve communication with our users where possible, and to become a trauma informed organisation.

Trauma Informed Practice

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 across all parts of the justice system, whilst ensuring a fair justice system for those accused of crime.

The Taskforce has focused on the development of a victim centred approach and a justice specific knowledge and skills trauma framework. This was approved and launched in May 2023. 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.

Following the launch of the NHS Trauma Informed Justice Knowledge and Skills Framework, SCTS has focused on building foundational learning for leaders and our workforce, as well as establishing leadership and governance structures to support this learning.

Our trauma informed training approach is supported by our trauma strategy steering group, together with an operational level working group. The steering group will

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continue to take forward implementation work, which extends beyond training into our service design, policies, processes, communication and environments.

SCTS continues to engage with the Victims Taskforce workstreams in support of our shared aims and ambitions for a trauma informed justice system.

We undertook an initial training needs analysis across the organisation, identifying the following needs: -

- **Trauma Informed level (Level 1):** All Staff and Contractors
- **Trauma Skilled level (Level 2):** All staff within our Supreme, Sheriff and JP Courts, all Senior Managers, and other select roles.
- **Trauma Enhanced level (Level 3):** Select staff operating within Specialist Courts, and select Senior Management roles.

Following initial leaders training sessions being delivered in December 2023, we have taken further steps to support SCTS leaders in their understanding of trauma informed leadership and management of organisations. Senior Managers continue to engage with the NHS-led Scottish Trauma Informed Leadership sessions (STILT). In December 2024 we launched a digital toolkit of information and further resources for Senior Managers, and, in recognition of staff wellbeing and vicarious trauma, we released Trauma and Wellbeing guidance for line managers.

We have collaborated with NHS Education for Scotland, alongside other Justice partners, in the creation of the NHS Trauma Informed Justice e-modules. These e-modules are developed to support those working in the justice sector with victims and witnesses. SCTS launched the modules to our workforce in a phased delivery from November 2024 for Level 1 and February 2025 for Level 2, allocated according to our training needs analysis.

In addition to e-learning, we have partnered with Epione Trauma Training and Consultancy experts to upskill our in-house training team within our Education and Learning Unit (ELU) and develop a bespoke trauma informed training course for SCTS. This course was developed alongside lived experts and Epione clinicians, to support learning to a skilled level.

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Since May 2024, ELU have delivered full-day face to face sessions to over 160 staff members. This has included prioritising training sessions for those likely to be operating within the Trauma Informed Domestic Abuse pilot court within Aberdeen Sheriff Court.

What we will do going forward

Moving forward, the e-module training will be incorporated into the induction process for all new starts as part of our regular compliance training. ELU will continue to offer in-house training and support sessions to all staff, and will incorporate trauma informed practice into our technical training programmes.

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 or assisting jurors. 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, for example in Glasgow Sheriff Court, real time updates are provided to witness muster areas and staff then update witnesses.

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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 have already discussed the initiative in regard to the remote provision of evidence by police and professional witnesses in High Court trials and consideration is currently being given to expanding this to Sheriff and Jury cases. 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 messaging facilities within the Cisco WebEx meeting platform. 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. Perth Sheriff Court and Glasgow High Court do not currently have dedicated waiting rooms for defence witnesses however staff are often able to use alternative accommodation or waiting areas for this purpose.

Access to fresh drinking water for witnesses continues to be provided by all courts. One Sheriff Court does not currently provide water to witnesses however this is being reviewed, while several other courts are considering ways to improve the current system of water provision to witnesses. Some courts permit witnesses access to the canteen if it is for public use. Tea bars and vending machines are also 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 27 remote sites which are open and available to all courts 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.

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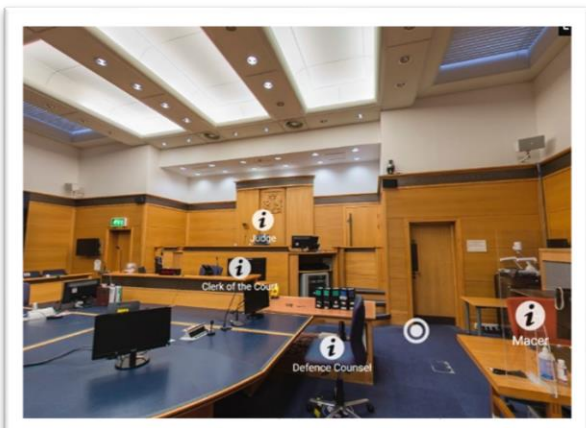
We will continue to work with VSS volunteers across court locations to ensure that witnesses giving evidence to court, by any means, are prepared and able to give their best evidence.

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 people affected by crime 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 visits themselves are typically facilitated by Victim Information and Advice Service (VIA) or Victim Support Services (VSS).



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.

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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.

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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 2025-26

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:

"We, in the Scottish Prison Service, believe it is vital that the voice of victims are heard across the justice system. I am hopeful that the legislative changes proposed will help deliver the meaningful improvements for victims that we all want to see.

We also continue to focus on improving our delivery of the aspects of the Victim Notification Scheme that we administer, and to provide our input into the wider ongoing improvement work surrounding the Victim Notification Scheme.

I am pleased to provide this year's annual report on our Standards of Service."

What we do

General

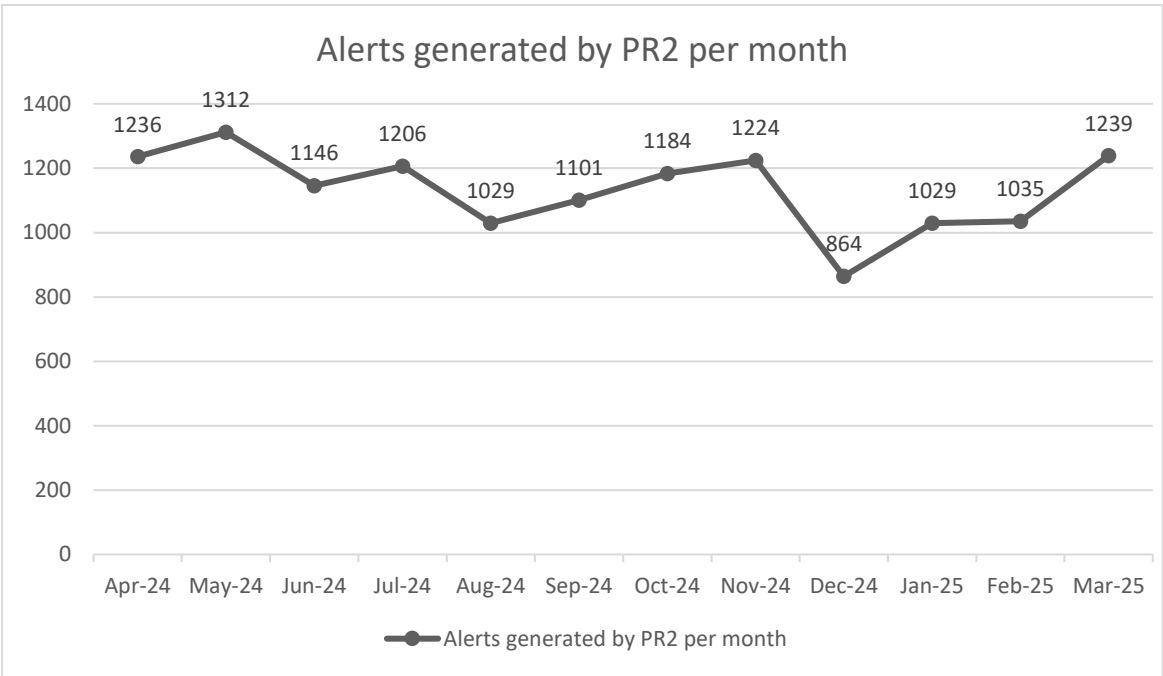
The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) is an Executive Agency of the Scottish Government and was first established in April 1993. In Scotland, there are currently 16 publicly managed prisons and 1 privately managed prison, HMP Addiewell. SPS currently has a contract for Scottish Court Custody and Prisoner 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 registered victims' and offenders' 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 that is 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 under the remit of VNS. 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 continues to collaborate with the Scottish Government on policy development and has continued to be actively engaged with the work of the Victims Taskforce. SPS' VNS team is live to the potential changes being brought forward by The Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Bill.

In 2024-25, 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.

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Managers from SPS' VNS team also attended the Victim Centred Approach workshops and meetings Chaired by Victim Support 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 developing the VNS propositions. We will continue to be involved in this work in the year ahead.

This year, SPS' VNS team has also recruited an additional member of staff into the team, which enables SPS to deliver a more efficient service to victims. Members of the team have also undertaken e-learning modules related to understanding the impact of trauma and responding in a trauma-informed way.

Five members of SPS VNS team 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 2024-25, SPS' VNS team has continued its work to rewrite more of the VNS letters, being influenced by the learning and style from 'First Word - People at Heart training'. A further 3 VNS letters have been rewritten, reflective of the improved style. In 2024-25 there have been no complaints relating to the wording included in the letters SPS VNS team have issued to registered victims.

Emergency Release

In mid-2024, registered victims, where the offender was released early as part of Emergency Early Release, were notified by SPS' VNS team of the change to the offender's release date, ahead of their release.

In addition, temporary expedited processes were also introduced to enable victims who had not registered on the VNS but confirmed eligible to join, to find out themselves or through a named Victim Support Organisation, an offender's release date.

Early Release

In early 2025, The Prisoners (Early Release) (Scotland) Act 2025, changed the point at which some Short-Term Prisoners (STPs) (i.e. those serving a sentence of less than four years), who are not statutorily excluded, are released from prison.

When the Act came into force, as it applied retrospectively, some offenders were released in three tranches. All registered victims, where the offender was released early as a result of the legislative change, were notified by SPS' VNS team of the change to the offender's release date, ahead of their release.

In addition, temporary expedited processes were again introduced to enable victims who had not registered on the VNS but confirmed eligible to join, to find out themselves or through a named Victim Support Organisation, an offender's release date.

Common Standards of Service

There are a number of common standards of service for the agencies, and these are set out 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 in the forthcoming year 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 2024 to March 2025, have been actioned by SPS' VNS team.

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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 2025, compared with the previous three years:

Date	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 2025	3104	1185	1488	431
March 2024	2676	1139	1264	273
March 2023	2757	1105	1326	326
March 2022	2675	1065	1258	311

Applications to join the scheme

In 2024-25, there were 599 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.

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The table below shows the number of applications to join the scheme at 31 March 2025, compared with the previous three years. Applications have risen significantly by over 100 registrations when compared with the last reporting year.

Year to	Total
March 2025	599
March 2024	474
March 2023	464
March 2022	400

Provision of information

The table below shows the number of letters containing information sent to victims at 31 March 2025. The previous three years are reported for comparison:

Year to	Total	No. not issued within 48 hrs
March 2025	2169	2
March 2024	1267	1
March 2023	1683	8
March 2022	1715	115

The VNS standard for information to be provided in response to an alert is '48-hours'. During the reporting period 2 letters were 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 2024-25, it remains the case that 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 included continues to have had a positive impact as we receive regular requests to update contact details.

Representations

In 2024-25, VNS letters were issued to victims who had selected the option to make representations about the release of an offender, including temporary release. Where an offender is granted access to temporary release, victims of life sentence prisoners

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can also 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 on completion, the victim provides their representations directly to the Parole Board for Scotland for consideration.

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 in 2024-25 were largely responded to within one day with the majority able to be dealt with at the time of the call.

What you can expect from us:

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.

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Standard 4

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 no less than two weeks before any decision will be taken for release:

- On the first occasion that the prisoner is considered for temporary release; or
- By the Parole Board for Scotland.

Standard 5

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 by telephone where you have provided a current contact number.

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

Where a victim is registered for part 2 of the Victim Notification Scheme, The Board will take account of any representations alongside other relevant information when deciding whether to approve release. Victim Support Scotland may be able to help in preparing any representations (contact number 0345 603 9213);

Standard 2

Where a victim is registered for part 2 of the Victim Notification Scheme, Parole Scotland will advise when a decision has been made. Victims will be offered the option of being told by telephone (unless there are good reasons for not doing so) and, if release is granted, Parole Scotland will provide information about any licence conditions that are relevant. If the victim prefers to receive a letter, Parole Scotland will send this by 1st class post within 1 day of the Parole Board's decision;

Standard 3

Where a victim is registered for part 2 of the Victim Notification Scheme and the prisoner has been given a life sentence, The Board will give the victim an opportunity to make any representations in person to a member of the Parole Board. The Parole Board member the victim meets will not be part of the Oral Hearing that considers the prisoner's case.

- 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 be at the victim's home. The meeting will be at a time and place that is suitable for the victim.

Standard 4

Parole Scotland will answer victim letters, emails or telephone calls promptly. Letters or emails will be answered within 5 working days. If Parole Scotland are not able to answer victim telephone enquiries at the time of the call, a call back will be arranged or text or email may be used.

Standard 5

Parole Scotland will normally contact victims by letter clearly stating the reason for contact and any action needed. If Parole Scotland need to contact the victim by

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telephone, Parole Scotland will check that it is convenient for the victim to discuss the matter and will explain why contact was needed, followed by any action needed.

Standard 6

The Parole Board will carefully consider representations submitted by the victim, including whether any information contained in them should be withheld from the prisoner under Rule 9 of the Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2022. Rule 9 includes the possible grounds on which information may be withheld. 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 will be advised of the information which has been redacted. Where appropriate, the victims views may be sought in advance of deciding whether information falls under Rule 9.

Standard 7

The Board will provide a summary of any decision where required under Rule 34 of the Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2022. This rule refers to indeterminate cases only. These are cases of life sentence and OLR sentence prisoners as well as prisoners serving an extended sentence who have been recalled to custody and who are in the extended part of their sentence.

The rights of victims

In some criminal cases, victims may have the right to receive information about the release of an offender. Victims 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

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representations in person under Section 17(1) of the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003.

Victims of offenders who are serving a life sentence, extended sentence or order for lifelong restriction are able to request to attend the oral hearing of the offender as a silent observer. This provision is made possible under 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 2024– April 2025.

What have we done:

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

1. Parole Scotland have continued to develop its Victims Team to support the key changes made by the introduction Parole Board (Scotland) Rules 2022.
2. Victim Service Delivery has been a key objective for the Board for 2024 – 2025.
3. Parole Scotland have continued to listen to victims and learn from experiences of the parole system to enable improvements to be made in guidance, operating procedures and training.
4. Parole Scotland have developed a new means of obtaining feedback via QR code, allowing victims to scan this from any mobile device and leave feedback. This will assist Parole Scotland in improving the service provided to victims. Feedback in writing or by telephone may also be accepted.
5. Board member and staff guidance has been kept under constant review to ensure that sections relating to victims are current.

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6. Victim training for Board members and Parole Scotland staff has been reflected in learning plans. Further Trauma Informed and Skilled practice training is being delivered later this year to further develop the skillset of staff when dealing with victims.
7. Parole Scotland have constantly monitored internal operating systems and procedures to ensure the best service delivery is provided for victims. The Victims Team continues to utilise the new casework management system to its optimum efficiency, ensuring Parole Scotland can provide the best service to victims. This is on the back of the new system being introduced earlier this year. The Victims Team gave input to the development of this system to ensure it meets the needs of victims.
8. Parole Scotland 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. Parole Scotland are also reviewing communication methods to ensure optimum reliability and efficiency.
9. Parole Scotland 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).
10. Parole Scotland continue to maintain and monitor the Safe Space Initiative, which includes the support of all 32 Local Authorities and the Scottish Fire & Rescue Service, who have provided 38 venues to support the network.
11. The Victims Team issues quarterly newsletters to ensure that members of the initiative are kept up to date with the projects activities.

What we will do:

Some of these activities have been carried forward from 2024/2025.

1. Parole Scotland will continue to monitor the requirements of the Victims Team and ensure the team have all the resource needed to provide an excellent service for victims.
2. Parole Scotland will continue to ensure all emails are answered within 5 working days of receipt to the Victims Team Mailbox.

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3. Parole Scotland 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.
4. Parole Scotland will continue to listen to victims and learn from experiences of the parole system to enable improvements to be made in guidance, operating procedures and training.
5. Parole Scotland will continue to ensure that Board members and staff guidance is kept under constant review to ensure that sections relating to victims are current.
6. Parole Scotland will continually monitor requirements for future victim training for Board members and Parole Scotland staff and implement this when needed, this includes Trauma Training taking place in June and September 2025.
7. Parole Scotland will continue to consider its internal operating systems and procedures to ensure the best service delivery for victims.
8. Parole Scotland 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. Parole Scotland will continue to review its communication methods to ensure optimum reliability and efficiency.
9. Parole Scotland 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).
10. Parole Scotland will continue to monitor and improve the Safe Space Initiative, ensuring access to safe and secure meeting venues for victim interviews and observations across Scotland. Parole Scotland will ensure to send updates and lessons learned to the projects members quarterly.

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