

# Helping victims and witnesses: the work of Victim Support



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
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# executive summary

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- 1 Being a victim or a witness to a crime can be a life-changing event, whatever its nature or severity. From the British Crime Survey it is estimated that 28 per cent of adults in England and Wales were the victim of a personal crime or a crime on their household in 2001-02.
- 2 The Victim Support movement, which comprises a national charity, working with local affiliated charities, receives a large proportion of its funding from the Home Office (totalling £28 million in 2002-03) to provide support and information to victims and witnesses in England and Wales. Victim Support aims to contact all victims referred to it by the police to offer its support and operates telephone helplines available to the public. The support given to victims will often range from emotional support to help with practical matters such as seeking information on progress with the criminal investigation, completing claims for compensation and, if needed, seeking help from other agencies. Victim Support's Witness Service offers familiarisation visits to the Crown and Magistrates' Courts and information in advance of the trial to witnesses and their families and friends, and provides support on the day of the trial.



- 3 This report examines whether the services funded by the Home Office and provided by Victim Support are meeting the needs of victims and witnesses; and the management of the performance of Victim Support.
- 4 Our main conclusions are as follows:
  - Overall, the establishment of a national service for victims and witnesses across England and Wales compares favourably with the situation in many other countries and represents a notable achievement for the voluntary charitable movement that makes up Victim Support. The evidence indicates that Victim Support's services are highly thought of by both victims and witnesses. As Victim Support has expanded its work to provide more services to victims and witnesses, it has also strengthened management within the movement. As a locally based charitable movement Victim Support has added value to the funding provided by the Home Office, through its use of a large pool of volunteers and its fundraising from other sources. These findings reflect credit on the work of Victim Support's trustees, volunteers and staff.

- The continuing challenge for both the Home Office and Victim Support is to ensure that victims and witnesses have reasonable access to these services, irrespective of where they live, in particular that services are made accessible to those victims of unreported crime and defence witnesses who would like it. In meeting this Victim Support should retain flexibility for local groups to meet local needs, building on the local knowledge and experience of the voluntary movement. Our examination suggests that the Home Office needs to clarify its specification of its priorities for Victim Support and strengthen its arrangements for monitoring the level and quality of service delivered and the financial sustainability of Victim Support. Victim Support needs to focus on sustaining the volunteer base in the movement and use its new area structure to further improve the management and the financial sustainability of services.

## Detailed findings and conclusions

### On the provision of services to victims:

- 5 Victims we spoke to appreciated the dedication and professionalism of the service provided by Victim Support volunteers and considered their support had helped them cope with a traumatic experience. In recent national surveys two-thirds of victims found that contact with Victim Support had been very or fairly helpful. Representatives of the various criminal justice agencies we spoke to at local level, including police officers, court officials and staff from the Crown Prosecution Service, were positive about Victim Support's role in acting as an advocate on behalf of victims and witnesses and the work of its staff and volunteers.
- 6 Access to Victim Support's services can vary widely between areas for a variety of reasons. In the vast majority of victims' cases (97 per cent) Victim Support relies on information supplied by the police to make contact with victims. Our estimates suggest that there are fewer referrals from the police than there are recorded crimes. For example in 2000-01 police referrals represented 57 per cent of burglaries from dwellings and 69 per cent of thefts from the person. Referral levels varied significantly between areas, although some of this may be due to different counting methods. In part, some of the variability in referral rates has reflected differing interpretations amongst police forces about their obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998 with some constabularies significantly reducing the number of referrals they made. In October 2001, in consultation with the Information Commissioner, the Home Office issued revised guidelines seeking to clarify the referral arrangements. Some of the local groups we visited expressed concern that the new guidance might result in the police treating referral as discretionary rather than as an obligation in cases involving victims of crimes covered by the Victim's Charter.
- 7 Victim Support is also expected by the Home Office to provide support for victims of crime not referred to them by the police, in recognition that not all victims will report the crime. In 2000-01, self-referrals and referrals from organisations other than the police accounted for three per cent of Victim Support's total workload. However, the most recent British Crime Survey estimated that in 2000 only 45 per cent of crimes against people living in private households were made known to the police. It is likely that some of the 5.4 million victims of unreported crime would not wish to be helped. Nevertheless, an earlier survey in 1998 suggested that around a third of the victims of unreported crimes would welcome help in some form - principally advice on personal protection and security, and someone to talk to. This is likely to include some victims of crimes, which are excluded from the scope of the Victim's Charter. Whilst the number of self-referrals and referrals from organisations other than the police to Victim Support has doubled since 1998-99 to 35,000 in 2000-01, the overall total, including callers to the national Supportline, is still small compared to the number of victims of unreported crime.



- 8 The level of personal support provided to victims reflects, among other factors, the availability of volunteers compared to the levels of crime in the area. Data from local groups show that the number of referrals each volunteer has to deal with varies from one a week in Dorset to ten a week in the West Midlands. Between 1996-97 and 2000-01, the number of volunteers providing support to victims across England and Wales fell from 10,180 to around 6,970. It is not known how much this reflects a real reduction in volunteers or steps taken by Victim Support to improve its record keeping. Some volunteers are likely to have transferred to help set up the new service for witnesses. However, 53 per cent of local groups reported to us that they had difficulty in finding enough volunteers to provide support, although in some cases they could ask volunteers to take on extra cases away from their normal patch.

### On the provision of services to witnesses:

- 9 By April 2002, the Witness Service had been established in all criminal courts in England and Wales. The introduction of a witness service in all Magistrates' Courts within a relatively short time span was a significant achievement. A recent survey by the Home Office found that almost three-quarters of witnesses surveyed in the Crown Court had contact with the Witness Service. Ninety-seven per cent of the witnesses surveyed who had contact with the service reported satisfaction with it.
- 10 Defence witnesses are less likely to have contact with the Witness Service - around 44 per cent of defence witnesses in 2000 had contact with the Service. Just over half of the defence witnesses who did not receive support indicated that such support would have been welcome. The levels of support for victims and prosecution witnesses reflect, in part, the arrangements agreed between the Crown Prosecution Service and Victim Support in the Crown Court, which enable the witness service to make direct contact in advance of the trial and also ensure that witnesses are sent literature explaining the services available. There are no comparable arrangements in place between Victim Support and the many hundreds of defence solicitors.
- 11 There is limited data available on the profile of the victims and witnesses referred to Victim Support or those it actually helps. The limited evidence, based on small samples, taken from the British Crime Survey in 1998 and a witness satisfaction survey commissioned by the Home Office in 2000, suggests that households with a black or Asian respondent were less likely to recall contact with Victim Support and the Witness Service. Local Victim Support groups responding to our survey had undertaken specific initiatives to reach out to sections of the community. Sixty-two per cent of local groups reported, for example, that they had undertaken initiatives to meet the needs of minority ethnic groups, and 36 per cent to meet those of gay men and lesbians.

### On managing the performance of Victim Support:

- 12 Since 1990, successive governments have used the Victim's Charter to set standards for the services victims might expect from the various criminal justice system agencies and Victim Support. The Charter was revised in 1996. In many respects, the Charter has helped guide the expansion of services across the various agencies. Although services to victims and witnesses have been reviewed as part of the comprehensive spending review process, the Home Office has not had a long term plan of how the services for victims and witnesses might be developed. For example, such a plan might be expected to specify what services should be delivered, who should deliver them, the desired outcomes and responsibility for reviewing achievements. The Home Office is now leading the development of a cross-departmental strategy, which is to include agencies beyond the criminal justice system such as health,

housing and local authorities. An outline of the strategy was presented to the Criminal Justice Strategic Board in May 2002. The strategy will be distributed in draft form for consultation later in 2002.

- 13 Research to date has primarily focused on victims' satisfaction with Victim Support. There has, however, been limited evaluation of the effectiveness of the support provided by Victim Support and other statutory agencies in helping victims and witnesses overcome the impact of crime. As well as meeting the immediate practical and information needs of victims, the services currently provided, including support from the health service and local authorities, could have an impact on the rate at which victims are able to return to their day to day life, including work. More research could help identify which services, or combination of services, have the greatest impact on meeting victims' needs. Further evaluation could also seek evidence of whether services available to victims and witnesses can play a part in encouraging them to report crime and come forward as witnesses.
  
- 14 The Home Office has not subjected the development of new services for victims and witnesses to competition from other providers. The Home Office told us that its aim had been to develop a seamless, comprehensive and consistent voluntary-based service to victims and witnesses from the time of the crime to the conclusion of the case. The 1998 Compact on relations between the Government and the voluntary and community sector allows provision for the Government to provide fair access to strategic funding. The Home Office has not had an explicit programme to enable voluntary sector organisations fair access to bid to run other services for victims and witnesses, although the Home Office did provide funding totalling £526,000 to two other voluntary bodies in 2001-02 to run specialist services. The Home Office told us that, when funding is available, it plans to go out to tender for a proposed new service for the victims of road traffic incidents and to do so for any other future new services.



- 15 To keep pace with the expansion of its role and funding, Victim Support has strengthened its Board of Trustees and its senior management team. Since 1997 it has pursued a major restructuring exercise to streamline the movement from some 450 affiliated local groups and potentially over 500 Witness Services to 49 new Area charities, and co-ordinated borough charities in London. With additional funding from the Home Office this has involved introducing a new layer of professional management at area level. During the reorganisation inspections of local services by the National Office were suspended, with reliance placed instead on Areas' completion of detailed planning reports. Victim Support is now planning to introduce more robust and independent inspection of local groups and is working towards allocating local funding on the basis of workloads determined by crime levels and the numbers of court cases.
- 16 The Home Office has increased its grant to strengthen Victim Support and to fund extensions to the services provided. We found it had specified and monitored these services in broad terms but had not specified the performance improvements required. As a result of late decisions on funding and uncertainty over future funding, Victim Support underspent against the sums allocated for the setting up of the Magistrates' Courts Witness Service, by £7 million over three years. Victim Support used the funds to support its other activities within the scope of the Home Office grant memorandum. We have identified weaknesses in the quality of data used by Victim Support to monitor the performance of local groups and found that the Home Office has not sufficiently used the data available to it to assess the level of service and the quality delivered, and to identify risks to Victim Support's performance. As a result, the Home Office is not in a strong position to appraise the extent to which the services specified in the grant memorandum are being provided across the country and hence the sufficiency, or otherwise, of the current funding levels.



# Recommendations

We make the following recommendations:

- i** The Home Office should examine whether the victims of unreported crime have sufficient awareness of the services currently available from Victim Support and other groups and whether suitable help may encourage more victims to report crime. Victim Support should work to reduce the perceived barrier to self-referral which may arise when local groups are located in police accommodation.
- ii** Victim Support, the Home Office and the police should examine the reasons underlying the variation in rates at which victims are referred by police to Victim Support across the country. The Home Office should seek explanations and action to improve referral rates whenever expected levels are not achieved.
- iii** Victim Support should ensure that it has appropriate processes in place to recruit and retain sufficient volunteers to help deliver the services being funded. The Home Office should routinely monitor Victim Support's plans for addressing the risk of loss of volunteers. It should satisfy itself that any proposal from Victim Support to expand services is supported by a robust plan for the recruitment, training and retention of sufficient volunteers, whilst maintaining existing services at appropriate levels.
- iv** Victim Support should collect data on the profile of victims and witnesses receiving support and make comparisons against data from the British Crime Survey and the Witness Survey to confirm that the service is being taken up by all sections of society.
- v** The Home Office should commission research to evaluate the impact of the services provided by Victim Support and other agencies, to determine what works best in helping different groups of victims overcome the impact of crime, and use this evidence to improve services.
- vi** Victim Support should work with the Lord Chancellor's Department to ensure that defence witnesses have adequate access to information and support. In particular, Victim Support and the Legal Services Commission should reach agreement to ensure that defence witnesses are made aware of the services available in advance of the trial.

- vii Victim Support should work with police and the Crown Prosecution Service to complete a national procedure for the advance notification of witnesses attending the Magistrates' Courts.
- viii The Home Office should clearly specify what service priorities it expects Victim Support to deliver with the funding it provides. When granting additional funding, the Home Office should distinguish between the amounts intended to sustain existing services and the amounts intended for the development of new services.
- ix The Home Office should strengthen its arrangements for monitoring the progress made by Victim Support, including the financial sustainability of the services it supports. In particular, through setting clear performance goals, receiving better information on where its funding is being spent, for example against each of the main services, and reviewing reports on area inspections to assess the quality and quantity of services delivered around the country.
- x Victim Support should strengthen its scrutiny of the annual reports and accounts of local groups. The Home Office should carry out its own periodic scrutiny of this information.
- xi The Home Office should review the current arrangements for funding voluntary sector activity in the field, with the aim of improving co-ordination between government departments, clarifying its expectations for Victim Support's fundraising for services it is funding and ensuring that the opportunity to bid to run new services is available to all potential providers.