

## INITIAL FINDINGS OF RESEARCH WITH VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE AND VIOLENCE

- **Experience at court:** The majority of participants in the research indicated that the court experience had been daunting and stressful. Most were nonetheless very complimentary about the support services that had been provided and most had availed of the court familiarisation visit. There was relatively little comment on interactions with either the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service staff or with the security staff at court; any comments made were generally positive. A number of participants indicated that it was good to have a separate waiting area at court as they had concerns about their proximity to the perpetrator. There were mixed comments made in relation to the attitude of judges in the handling of cases.
- **PPS:** There were mixed views about the service provided by the Public Prosecution Service. In some cases participants stated that the experience with the barrister had been positive in that they had informed them about what would happen and had made them feel at ease about proceedings. A significant number of participants indicated that they would like to have met with the barrister before the day of the trial, given that there is just so much happening on the day. A number of participants expressed concern about how barristers dealt with victims at court; they suggested a need for greater empathy on the part of barristers, for information to be conveyed in simple language and for people to be ultimately treated as they themselves would wish to be treated, rather than simply as another case.
- **PSNI:** In the majority of cases participants were either supportive of or reported very positive experiences with the police, albeit with some suggestions around how services might be improved. Some of the comments made were highly complimentary of the police; this was especially in relation to keeping participants informed about the progress of their case (including in relation to the court stage). A number of participants suggested that there was no need for improvement to the service provided by the police. A small number of participants were critical of the police for reasons related to their perceived attitude, lack of empathy, communication skills, information provision and evidence gathering.
- **Support services:** Participants were overwhelmingly very complimentary about the services provided by Nexus, Women's Aid and Victim Support NI's Witness Service, in terms of their support, advice and assistance and most had used these services. The vast majority of participants reported that they had been offered and had availed of a court familiarisation session provided by Victim Support NI's Witness Service and that they had found this to be helpful. There appeared to be relatively low levels of awareness of Victim Support NI's Community Service.
- **Victim and Witness Care Unit:** There appeared to be little awareness of this Unit, which provides a single point of contact for victims and witnesses. It is possible, however, that a number of the cases covered by the research may have pre-dated the roll-out of the Unit.

- **Victim information release schemes:** A number of participants would have been eligible to avail of the victim information release schemes, which advise on the release or supervision of an offender. Of those who were eligible, some had registered with the scheme, a few had not been aware of the scheme and one decided not to use the scheme.
- **Victim personal statements:** There appeared to be a low level of awareness of victim personal statements, which give victims the opportunity to set out the impact the crime has had on them (with the assistance of Victim Support NI). Of the few participants who reported having made a statement, they expressed dissatisfaction with the process. Expert Victim Impact Reports (typically prepared by medical experts) were made in around half of the cases.
- **General comments:** In the course of their interviews, a number of participants identified areas across the criminal justice system that ought to be targeted for training in order to improve the victim experience. There were comments made about how changes to charges were handled and the pressure participants felt under in considering these. While some participants indicated that the time taken for their case to be dealt with was in line with what they had anticipated, others expressed concern about the delays involved and the time taken for the case to conclude.