

Scoping Document

An examination of the quality of the Crown Prosecution Service's victim communication and liaison letters

Background

In 2018, HMCPSI undertook an inspection of Victim Liaison Units: letters sent to the public by the CPS¹. This inspection included three CPS policies: letters sent for the Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme; letters sent at the local resolution stage of the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme; and complaint letters, which the Victim Liaison Units (VLU) had responsibility for. The report identified significant issues with the quality of letters sent by the CPS: for VCL letters only 24% of letters were considered to be of the quality expected.

Following the findings and recommendations of the 2018 report, the CPS took action to improve the process and quality of letters sent by the victim liaison units (VLUs). In 2020, HMCPSI undertook a follow-up inspection² to assess the effectiveness of the actions and changes the CPS had put in place since the 2018 inspection in improving the quality and timeliness of letters sent under the VCL scheme. Inspectors examined 490 letters (35 from each of the Areas - 20 from magistrates' courts cases, ten from Crown Court cases and five from rape and serious sexual offence (RASSO) cases). Interviews were conducted with the Area Business Manager for each of the 14 Areas and with VLU managers from five CPS Areas. The follow-up inspection showed that there had been little improvement (0.1%) and identified significant issues with the quality of letters sent by the CPS with only 24.1% of letters considered to be of the quality expected.

No recommendations were made in the 2020 follow up report, as the recommendations/issues to address in the 2018 report remained valid (the one issue to address directly related to quality of VCLs was that *"the CPS should develop a more effective quality assurance process for the assessment of VCL responses to ensure that letters are free from simple mistakes"*). Instead, the then Chief Inspector called upon the CPS to review whether the arrangements it had in place were the right ones to deliver on its commitments to victims.

Senior leaders in the CPS had an appetite for a radical rethink and since 2020 the CPS has embarked on a victim transformation programme (VTP) to improve its communication with victims. The Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE), which is part of the victim transformation programme, is a central team working to oversee CPS victim-related standards,

¹ [VLU_thm_Nov18_rpt.pdf](#) Victim Liaison Units: Letters sent to the public by the CPS November 2018

² [Victim Communication and Liaison scheme: letters to victims – HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate](#)

communication and guidance and has been working to improve the quality of letters sent to victims under the VCL scheme.

The VCE refreshed VCL letter templates in April 2024. There are now updated supporting guides and a bank of useful phrases to assist CPS staff in drafting quality, accurate and empathetic letters to victims. The templates were further refreshed in December 2024 following continued collaboration and feedback including from the Victim Reference Groups³.

In our 2025–26 Business Plan, HMCPSI committed to reviewing the quality of Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) letters to assess whether improvements have been made since our 2020 inspection. As no specific recommendations were made in the 2020 report, this is not a follow-up inspection in accordance with our methodology, but an assessment of VCL quality.

We will be reaching findings about whether the quality of VCLs and consequently this aspect of the service to victims, has improved with the work the CPS has undertaken since 2020. For this reason we will be using much of the same methodology, including the original question set and guidance, to ensure consistency and allow meaningful comparisons with our 2020 findings.

Our aim is to determine whether the quality of VCL letters has improved and whether any actions taken since 2020 have led to better communication with victims. The findings will be presented in a way that highlights progress and identifies any areas where further improvement may be needed.

Inspection Question

Is the Crown Prosecution Service sending quality letters to victims under the Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme?

Objective

To assess the quality of letters sent to victims under the VCL scheme and whether changes introduced since 2020, including current assurance processes, have driven the necessary improvements in VCL letter quality.

Out of scope

Timeliness of VCL letters is out of scope. Our 2020 inspection highlighted that it was quality of the letters rather than timeliness that required the significant improvement.

The most recent CPS data for timeliness of VCL communications (Quarter 3 of 2024-25) shows that timeliness of VCL communications remains relatively strong and consistent with 73.6% of VCLs sent to vulnerable or intimidated victims being timely and 87.7% of VCLs sent to other victims being timely.

Methodology

The inspection will be conducted by way of an examination of VCL letters and an interview with the manager of the Victim Centre of Excellence.

³ The Victim Reference Group (VRG) is facilitated by the Survivors' Trust and made up of survivors of rape and sexual assault. A second group, the Lived Experience Engagement Forum (LEEF), features victims from a wide range of crime types.

A question set and accompanying guidance for the VCL letter examination has been prepared (Annex A). It reflects that used in the 2020 inspection for questions that directly relate to letter quality, to allow for a direct comparison to accurately assess VCL quality now and if there has been an improvement in VCL quality since 2020 following the work of the VCE.

Empathy and CPS Level 1 VCL Assurance

To ensure parity in assessing overall letter quality, it is proposed that the same guidance and benchmark for assessing empathy used in our 2020 VCL inspection is replicated for this inspection. In doing this, we recognise this differs from the minimum benchmark set by the CPS for quality assurance purposes, known as CPS Level 1 VCL Assurance.

The CPS level 1 VCL assurance requires an overall empathy rating to be given as 0, 1, 2 or 3. These numbered ratings have been developed following testing and evaluation. For an overall “met” assessment, empathy must be assessed as 1 or higher. To achieve a rating of 1 the letter must contain empathy albeit templated and scripted. Some examples of scripted words/sentences are provided in the assurance guidance and where these examples alone are used, a score of 1 is given. For a level 2 rating, one additional unscripted sentence is used beyond those that are templated or scripted. This would include an apology when the delivery of the decision was late, or where there had been general delay throughout the case. For a level 3 rating, there is more than one additional unscripted sentence using empathetic language in addition to any scripted language in the template/guidance. These letters show clear and consistent empathy and unscripted language is tailored to the circumstances of the victim. As a minimum there is unscripted language in the introduction and closing sections of the letter.

In the 2020 inspection, inspectors often assessed letters as not being a quality letter even if, for example, there was a standard scripted empathetic line but not an apology for lateness or not an appropriate tone/level of empathy throughout the letter.

While we need to be careful not to set a higher standard than the CPS has set itself, we are mindful that one scripted phrase at the start or end of a letter may not necessarily, when considering the whole context of the case and the impact on victims, be sufficient. Where scripted lines are used that are proportionate and sufficient, we will reflect that in our judgements.

The CPS has not yet carried out an internal level 2 review of the level 1 assurance of letters carried out in Areas. The level 1 assurance is still relatively new with the first returns sent June 2025. The operational assurance team will usually allow a six-month period for any new level 1 assurance to embed before carrying out a review to assess whether it is being applied consistently and delivering improvement. The CPS will use the findings from this inspection to inform future internal assurance activity.

VCL Letter selection:

We will assess VCL letters from all 14 CPS Areas. Letters to victims drafted by prosecutors in the casework directorates, CPSD and letters sent under the bereaved family scheme, are out of scope, as per the 2020 inspection. Any VCL letters that have been drafted as part of the universal service pilot will not be included. We will assess Area written VCL letters only.

The letter selection from each of the 14 CPS Areas will comprise of 30 letters from each Area - 17 magistrates' courts letters, eight Crown Court letters and five RASSO letters - totalling 420 letters. The file sample is weighted more heavily in favour of magistrates' courts

letters taking account of the larger caseloads in magistrates' courts units. 173 of the 420 letters to be assessed will be letters sent to domestic abuse victims. This is because in the 2020 inspection we found that the quality of letters for domestic abuse related cases was of a slightly better quality than non-domestic abuse cases. Therefore, to maintain parity and the drawing of any direct comparisons to the 2020 findings on VCL quality, we will assess the same proportion of domestic abuse cases as in the 2020 inspection.

We will assess the VCL letters that have been sent most recently, as many as possible from those sent in September and October 2025, to reflect the most recent position and the use of the revised templates.

We will assess 70 fewer letters than in the 2020 inspection, but the sample remains sufficient to identify whether the necessary improvement in quality has been achieved. Although we have included a proportion of RASSO VCLs in this inspection, HMCPSI's business plan 2025-26 includes an inspection focussing on how the CPS engages with victims of rape. This will consider the Code of Practice and the enhanced service and will therefore naturally include a review and assessment of VCL communications.

The letter selection and composition has been discussed with the lead for the VTP and manager of the VCE who agrees with this proposed VCL letter sample.

Interviews:

It is proposed that an interview will be conducted with:

- Victim Centre of Excellence Manager

This interview will provide evidence as to the work CPS has conducted since 2020 to seek to improve VCL letter quality and to assess whether the current assurance processes in place are driving the necessary improvements in VCL letter quality.