HMCPSI
HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate

Quality of Victim Communication and Liaison scheme letters

Is the CPS sending quality letters to victims under the Victim Communication and Liaison scheme?

July 2026

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HMCPSI Publication No. CP001:1342

Who we are

His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) inspects prosecution services, providing evidence to make the prosecution process better and more accountable.

We have a statutory duty to inspect the work of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and Serious Fraud Office (SFO). By special arrangement, we also share our expertise with other prosecution services in the UK and overseas.

We are independent of the organisations we inspect, and our methods of gathering evidence and reporting are open and transparent. We do not judge or enforce; we inform prosecution services' strategies and activities by presenting evidence of good practice and issues to address. Independent inspections like these help to maintain trust in the prosecution process.

Our vision

We are part of the solution to improving the Criminal Justice System through high quality inspection.

We have four priorities to enable us to deliver this vision:

- we hold the CPS and SFO to account for what they deliver (we make recommendations that drive improvement)
- victims will be at the heart of inspection (where we can, we will use victim experience in our inspection)
- using our 25 years of experience we will help public prosecutors improve (their legal casework)
- inspection will identify and spread best practice.

Our values

We act with integrity, creating a culture of respect, drive innovation, pursue ambition, and commit to inclusivity in everything we do.

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1. Chief Inspector's foreword

Effective communication with victims is a fundamental part of delivering a fair and credible prosecution service. When the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) decides not to proceed with a case, or to alter one, that decision must be explained to the victim in accordance with its Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme.

The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime sets out the rights of victims and the statutory duties placed on criminal justice agencies, including the CPS, in the services they provide. In the context of VCL scheme letters, two rights are particularly important:

- the right to be able to understand and to be understood
- the right to be provided with information about the investigation and prosecution.

These rights lie at the heart of the CPS's duty to communicate its decisions clearly, accurately and in a way that enables victims to fully understand how and why those decisions have been made, and what their rights are.

This is the third time His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPSI) has examined the quality of letters sent under the VCL scheme. Our previous inspections in 2018 and 2020 highlighted serious and persistent shortcomings, with just under a quarter of letters meeting the expected standard. In those reports, we called upon the CPS to strengthen its approach, particularly in respect of quality assurance and the clarity of explanations provided to victims.

In this inspection, we have found that some progress has been made over the past six years. The CPS has invested significantly in improving its service to victims through the Victim Transformation Programme and the establishment of the Victim Centre of Excellence.

These initiatives have had a positive impact. In particular, we have seen substantial improvements in:

- the level of empathy shown in letters
- the consistent offering of the Victims' Right to Review
- the inclusion of meetings with prosecutors where appropriate.

These are important developments and reflect a clear organisational focus on improving the experience of victims.

However, despite this progress, this report demonstrates that the CPS has not yet achieved the step change required in the overall quality of its communications. While more letters now meet the standard expected, we assessed fewer than four in ten of those we examined as adequate. This is clearly not good enough.

The most significant weaknesses are still in the quality of the legal explanation provided to victims. Too many letters fail to explain decisions clearly, accurately or in enough detail. In some cases, explanations are overly general or rely on formulaic wording that does little to help a victim understand why a case has been stopped or changed. In others, the information provided is incorrect.

Improvements have not yet been embedded consistently across the organisation

These are not minor issues. They go to the heart of the CPS's duty to provide meaningful and transparent explanations to those affected by its decisions.

Our findings also highlight a structural issue. Improvements driven through templates, guidance and central support have enhanced tone and consistency, but they have not addressed the underlying weakness: that is, insufficient case analysis and legal reasoning, which result in unclear explanations to the victim. Quality assurance processes that sit largely within Victim Liaison Units cannot, on their own, resolve deficiencies in legal content.

There is also varied performance across CPS Areas, indicating that improvements have not yet been embedded consistently across the organisation. This gap between national ambition and local delivery remains a key concern.

The CPS has demonstrated its commitment to improving services for victims, and we recognise the work it has already done. However, the evidence is clear: more needs to be done to make sure every victim receives a letter that is clear and accurate, and that fully explains the decision made in their case.

We have made a single recommendation focused on improving the quality of legal explanations in VCL scheme letters. Given the importance of this issue, we intend to carry out a further inspection in 2027 to assess progress made.

Victims are entitled to understand decisions that affect them. Providing clear and accurate explanations is not an optional aspect of service delivery — it is central to maintaining confidence in the criminal justice system. The CPS must now build on the commitment it has signalled and deliver the level of quality that victims rightly expect.



Anthony Rogers

HM Chief Inspector

2. Summary

2.1. The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims' Code) sets out the services, and the minimum standards for these services, that organisations (referred to in the Victims' Code as service providers) must provide to victims of crime in England and Wales. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) is a service provider under the Victims' Code.

2.2. The Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme[1] was created to make sure the CPS fulfils its duties under section 6.15 of the Victims' Code[2]: to inform victims of decisions to stop a charge and proceed with another; to make a significant change to a charge; or to stop the case, after a suspect has been charged; as well as to tell victims, in those circumstances, how to ask for a review of the decision under the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme.

2.3. In 2015, the CPS established Victim Liaison Units (VLUs) to manage the VCL scheme. Prosecutors are responsible for providing a short explanation of their decision to the VLU, and for drafting bespoke communications in serious and sensitive cases. VLU staff are responsible for producing the final letter sent to the victim.

2.4. HMCPSI inspected the letters sent to the public by VLUs in 2018[3]. Our report identified significant issues with the quality of letters. Only 24% of letters were of the quality expected. A follow-up inspection two years later, in 2020, showed only a 0.1% improvement in letter quality[4].

2.5. The then Chief Inspector, Kevin McGinty, called upon the CPS to review whether the arrangements it had in place were the right ones to deliver on its commitments to victims. He stated 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".

2.6. Following the 2020 report, the CPS launched the Victim Transformation Programme (VTP) to improve its service to victims, including the quality of communication — including VCL scheme letters. For victims with the greatest needs, starting with victims of rape and serious sexual offences, the programme

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[1] *Victim Communication and Liaison scheme*; CPS; May 2026. cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/victim-communication-and-liaison-vcl-scheme

[2] 6.15, *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales*; Ministry of Justice; January 2025. gov.uk/government/publications/the-code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime/code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime-in-england-and-wales-victims-code

[3] *Victim Liaison Units: letters sent to the public by the CPS*; HMCPSI; November 2018. webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240605045313mp_/https:/www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmcpsi/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2018/11/VLU_thm_Nov18_rpt.pdf

[4] *Victim Communication and Liaison scheme: letters to victims*; HMCPSI; October 2020 hmcpsi.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/report/victim-communication-and-liaison-scheme-letters-to-victims-2/

now offers an enhanced service. Every CPS Area has a dedicated victim liaison officer in its Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) Unit to act as a consistent point of contact for victims. Adult rape victims are offered a pre-trial meeting with the prosecution team to discuss special measures available to them and ask the CPS questions.

2.7. In addition, the Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE) was created in September 2023 to oversee the CPS's victim-related standards, communication and guidance and to improve the quality of VCL scheme letters sent to victims:

- in homicide and RASSO cases (and other cases where the prosecutor deems it appropriate) where the CPS decides not to charge
- in charged cases where the CPS decides to stop or to substantially alter a charge.

2.8. Given how much the CPS has focused on developing its services to victims, and how important it is to improve the service to victims across the criminal justice system, HMCPSI decided to inspect the quality of VCL scheme letters, to assess whether the changes made by the CPS have resulted in victims receiving better quality letters.

Headlines

2.9. The CPS has improved the quality of its letters across all casework types (magistrates' courts, Crown Court and rape and serious sexual offences).

2.10. In 2020, we rated 24.1% of the letters we inspected as 'adequate'. This rose to 36.9% in this inspection.

2.11. We found significant improvements in some aspects of the letters, most notably in empathy, signposting to the VRR scheme, and offering meetings where appropriate[5].

2.12. Issues remained with the quality of the explanation of the legal decision. These included the sufficiency of the explanation to drop the case or alter a charge, the clarity of the explanation (whether it could be easily understood), and whether everything set out within the explanation was accurate or correct.

[5] When the CPS is responsible for informing the victim about decisions not to prosecute, to discontinue, or to alter charges, it must offer the victim a meeting (unless the prosecutor decides against it) when the case involves: a death; child abuse; sexual offences; an offence aggravated by hostility based on disability; racially/religiously aggravated offences; a homophobic/transphobic/sexual orientation element; an offence motivated by vulnerability or perceived vulnerability due to age (over 65).

2.13. The work of the VCE has improved the quality and consistency of VCL scheme letters through template-driven elements: for example, in setting out appropriate empathy, in signposting recipients to the VRR scheme, and in making sure meetings with prosecutors are offered in appropriate cases.

2.14. Letters drafted in RASSO cases and cases involving allegations of domestic abuse were of a marginally better standard; we rated 37.1% of RASSO case letters and 40.7% of domestic abuse case letters as adequate, compared to 36.9% of letters overall.

2.15. RASSO cases are usually dealt with in specialist units and the letters in these cases are often more bespoke. Domestic abuse cases are dealt with in either magistrates' court teams or Crown Court teams, depending on the seriousness of the charges.

2.16. Despite the enhanced focus the VTP places on RASSO victims, letters in RASSO cases were less likely to comply with basic drafting and presentation requirements — but they were stronger on the accuracy and sufficiency of explanations and on offering a meeting in appropriate cases.

2.17. Letters from domestic abuse cases were more likely to demonstrate empathy, to meet the overall adequacy standard and to provide sufficiently full explanations — but the explanations given were less likely to be technically correct in all aspects.

2.18. We assessed 39.1% of the letters from magistrates' court cases as adequate. This covered a large volume of the domestic abuse cases we assessed, because these form a large proportion of all magistrates' court work.

2.19. Crown Court cases emerge as the weakest category overall, with 32.1% of letters rated as adequate.

2.20. We assessed 86.4% of the letters in all the cases we examined as having an appropriate level of empathy. This is a significant improvement.

2.21. The level of empathy can vary significantly depending on the nature and sensitivity of the case. In 2020, we assessed 58% of the letters as having appropriate levels of empathy. The improvement has largely been driven by the improved templates developed by the national VCE. These template letters contain standardised empathetic content that, in most cases, we found to be proportionate and appropriate.

2.22. In some of the more sensitive cases, particularly in the domestic abuse cases, RASSO cases and Crown Court cases, this templated content had to be adapted or developed. This was done well in most of the letters we assessed.

2.23. We assessed 87.4% of letters in magistrates' court cases, 85.7% of letters in Crown Court cases and 84.3% of letters in RASSO cases as including appropriate levels of empathy.

2.24. The percentage of letters correctly offering a review, under the VRR scheme, also improved significantly. In cases where it was appropriate to do so, 89% of letters offered the victim a review — up from 72% in 2020. Meetings were appropriately offered to victims in 92.8% of the letters we examined in the relevant specified case categories.

2.25. When a CPS prosecutor makes a decision that triggers the need to send a letter to a victim, the prosecutor is responsible for providing the Victim Liaison Unit (VLU) with the information needed to prepare the letter, including the explanation of their decision. The VLU then completes the letter, assesses it for quality and issues it to the victim. The prosecutor is accountable for the content and accuracy of the explanation of the decision. The VLU is responsible for drafting and assuring the overall communication.

2.26. In at least 40.1% of letters we examined where the VLU had amended the explanation provided by the prosecutor, this improved the quality of the final communication.

2.27. In most of the cases we assessed, the VLU's input added to the clarity, tone and presentation of letters, but did not address issues related to the accuracy or sufficiency of the explanation of the legal decision. This is, perhaps, understandable, given that VLU staff are not legally qualified. It may reflect the inherent limitations of a model that relies on VLU staff to quality assure legal reasoning.

2.28. Inspectors found that 69.3% of letters provided clear and understandable explanations and 47.4% of letters provided enough detail.

2.29. We found that 78.3% of letters contained correct information: a decline from 86.5% in 2020.

2.30. While accessibility needs were present in only 22 cases, in 15 of them, these requirements were not identified or addressed.

2.31. A VCL scheme letter should set out, in easily understandable terms, why a prosecutor has reached the decision, after applying the Code for Crown Prosecutors[6], to either drop or substantially alter a charge or charges in a case. Where the legal reasoning in the case analysis and strategy of the prosecutor's

[6] *The Code for Crown Prosecutors*; CPS; October 2018. cps.gov.uk/publication/code-crown-prosecutors

review was weak, the reasons for the decision were not clearly articulated in the letter to the victim. In our Area inspection programme[7] and our individual quality assessment inspection[8], we cited the need for better quality case analysis and strategy. The CPS is working to achieve this, but in this inspection we saw that these weaknesses still have an impact on the quality of the explanations in letters to victims.

2.32. This is the third HMCPSI inspection to find that the quality of VCL scheme letters the CPS sends to victims needs to improve significantly.

2.33. Our findings illustrate a continuing gap between national ambition and local delivery.

2.34. The CPS has invested significant time and resources through the VTP and the work of the VCE to improve its service to victims. A significant element of this work so far has focused on improving the quality of VCL scheme letters. In this inspection, the improvements we have seen have been driven largely by central changes to templates, guidance and process. However, the continuing weaknesses in the sufficiency, clarity and correctness of legal explanations, together with the variation in performance between Areas, indicate not only that the cultural shift needed to embed ownership of high-quality victim communication among prosecutors has not yet been secured consistently across the CPS, but also that wider weaknesses in case review, case analysis and case strategy continue to affect the quality of the explanation ultimately given to victims.

The quality of VCL scheme letters to victims needs to improve significantly

2.35. The CPS should use the evidence in this inspection to significantly improve the quality of its letters to victims. Given how important this is, we are planning a further inspection in the latter half of 2027.

[7] *Area inspection programme*; HMCPSI; January 2025. hmcpsi.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/report/area-inspection-programme-2/

[8] *Individual quality assessment: an inspection of how the CPS uses IQA to monitor and improve casework quality*; HMCPSI; February 2025. hmcpsi.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/report/individual-quality-assessment-iqa-an-inspection-of-how-the-cps-uses-iqa-to-monitor-and-improve-casework-quality/

Recommendations, compliance issues and strengths

2.36. We make one recommendation:

Recommendation
By July 2027, the CPS should significantly improve the quality of the legal explanations in their Victim Communication and Liaison scheme letters.

Compliance issues

Compliance issue
By October 2026, the CPS should make sure all Victim Communication and Liaison scheme letters are produced using the current Victim Centre of Excellence templates, and that outdated versions are removed from local and personal storage.

Strengths

Strengths
The CPS correctly offered victims their right to a review in 89% of appropriate cases.
The CPS correctly offered the victim a meeting in 92.8% of appropriate cases.
The CPS expressed appropriate and proportionate empathy in 86.4% of the letters we examined, an improvement of over 28 percentage points from our 2020 inspection.
There is a significant collection of resources and support available for CPS staff from the Victim Centre of Excellence, demonstrating an appetite to drive improvement in letter quality.

3. Context and background

3.1. The fundamental role of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) is to protect the public, support victims and witnesses and deliver justice. Through its Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme, established in 2014, the CPS has committed to providing victims with clear, empathetic and timely explanations of qualifying decisions.

3.2. Where the CPS decides not to authorise charges after consulting with the police, in accordance with the Director's Guidance on Charging[9], the police are responsible for informing the victim about:

- the decision
- how to get more information about the decision from the CPS
- how to seek a review of the decision, if they are dissatisfied with it, under the CPS Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme.

3.3. Notwithstanding the responsibilities of the police, it is the CPS's policy to send a VCL communication in:

- homicide cases[10]
- rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) cases
- cases where the prosecutor deems it appropriate.

[9] *Director's Guidance on Charging, sixth edition, December 2020, incorporating the National File Standard*; CPS; December 2020. cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/directors-guidance-charging-sixth-edition-december-2020-incorporating-national

[10] *Victims & witnesses: CPS service for bereaved families*; CPS; July 205. cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/victims-witnesses-cps-service-bereaved-families-english-version

3.4. A 'qualifying decision' is one where the CPS has decided:

- not to prosecute, if the decision is made during a charging consultation with the police in homicide cases, in RASSO cases and in other cases where the prosecutor deems it appropriate
- to discontinue (or to withdraw, in the magistrates' courts) a charge and proceed on another
- to offer no evidence in all proceedings
- to substantially alter a charge
- to leave a charge in the proceedings to lie on the file
- that the suspect should be cautioned or given a conditional caution, or to agree a bind over for the defendant in place of a criminal conviction[11].

Victim Communication and Liaison Scheme

3.5. The VCL scheme provides a mechanism for the CPS to communicate with victims directly about key decisions in their cases, in accordance with the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims' Code). It fulfils the CPS's responsibility contained in part 6.15 of the Victims' Code: that "if, after the suspect has been charged with an offence(s), the CPS decides to stop a charge and proceed with another, make a big change to a charge or stop the case, you have the Right to be told the reason why and, where the decision is to stop the case, how to ask for a review under the Crown Prosecution Services' Victims' Right to Review Scheme, if you disagree with their decision".

3.6. The Victims' Code defines a victim as "a natural person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offence or a close relative of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offence".

3.7. The CPS's duty to communicate certain decisions to all identified victims includes victims who may not have engaged with the process at all or who have not been asked to make a witness statement. Victims who no longer wish to pursue their complaint are still entitled to, and should receive, an explanatory

[11] *Out of court resolutions*; CPS; July 2025. cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/out-court-resolutions

letter under the VCL scheme. In such cases, the CPS guidance states that it is good practice to include a reference in the letter to the victim's wishes.

Victim Liaison Units and prosecutors' roles

3.8. Victim Liaison Units (VLUs) located in each of the 14 geographical CPS Areas are responsible for managing the VCL scheme and for communicating with victims about decisions that fall under the scheme. The decision-making prosecutor remains accountable for explaining their decision to discontinue or to substantially alter a charge under the VCL scheme, but the administration is conducted by the VLU.

Decisions made in court

3.9. When a qualifying decision is made in court, the prosecutor is responsible for giving the VLU enough information to draft a high quality VCL scheme letter. There are templates available in the Victim Resource Centre if Areas choose to use them. There is no requirement for the court prosecutor to draft a letter using the CPS's case management system (CMS).

3.10. The VLU add their content to the letter, quality assure it and dispatch it to the victim.

Decisions made in the office

3.11. When the qualifying decision is made in the office, it is the prosecutor's responsibility to select the correct letter template and complete certain sections of that letter. The amount of bespoke content will vary according to the nature of the decision and the facts of the case. This draft is created on the CMS.

3.12. The VLU complete their parts of the letter before quality assuring and dispatching the letter.

3.13. Reporting arrangements for heads of VLUs vary across CPS Areas. In some Areas, the head reports to a unit business manager; in others to the business centre, as their immediate line manager may not be part of the VLU.

Our 2018 and 2020 inspections

3.14. HMCPSI inspected letters sent to the public by the CPS in 2018. This inspection included letters sent under the VCL scheme.

3.15. The report identified significant issues with the quality of letters: only 24% of letters examined were of the quality expected. HMCPSI set out a series of issues for the CPS to address in the report, including:

- The CPS needs to ensure that there is a clear and effective system for prosecutors to notify the Victim Liaison Unit of the reason for decisions in all cases. Managers need to be reminded that non-compliance should be addressed.
- The CPS should develop a more effective quality assurance process for the assessment of Victim Communication and Liaison scheme responses to ensure that letters are free from simple mistakes.
- The CPS needs to ensure that letters being sent to victims are properly quality assured.

3.16. The 2018 inspection also considered how the CPS dealt with complaints and timeliness. Both these themes are outside the scope of this inspection. The issues which included complaints and timeliness have not been included here.

3.17. Following the findings and recommendations of the 2018 report, HMCPSI followed up in 2020 to assess the effectiveness of the actions and changes the CPS had put in place since the 2018 inspection.

3.18. The follow-up inspection found 24.1% of letters to be of the quality expected: a 0.1% improvement. The then Chief Inspector, Kevin McGinty, called upon the CPS to review whether the arrangements it had in place were the right ones to deliver on its commitments to victims.

CPS actions since the 2020 inspection

3.19. In June 2021, the CPS commissioned Crest Advisory, a UK based consultancy and research firm specialising in justice, policing and public safety, to conduct a victims' needs assessment. In June 2022, Crest Advisory published a consulting report, and the CPS accepted a series of recommendations[12].

3.20. As a result of the findings. the CPS committed to:

- improve the quality of communications for all victims, working with partners across the criminal justice system to develop a different model
- enhance the service provided to victims with the greatest needs
- innovate and pilot new ways to strengthen engagement with victims
- build an organisational and leadership culture that prioritises engagement with victims.

The Victim Transformation Programme and Victim Centre of Excellence

3.21. In July 2022, the CPS launched its Victim Transformation Programme (VTP), acknowledging that its communication with victims had fallen short of what they needed and expected. The programme sought to improve victims' experience of the criminal justice system and address Crest Advisory's findings, recognising that significant change was needed to design and deliver a service that better met the needs of all victims.

3.22. One such change was the creation of the Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE) in late 2023. The VCE is a central team described as a knowledge hub, responsible for setting consistent standards in the CPS's service to victims. The team enables the CPS to effectively deliver these standards through training, guidance and victim facing communication materials.

3.23. The VCE is customer facing and works directly with the CPS Operational Assurance Team to effect change at a national level. The head of the VCE is responsible for supporting VLUs and those involved with the VTP. Overall responsibility for the VCE sits with the Director of Transformation and Change, within the Transformation and Change Directorate. While Area VLUs do not report directly to the VCE, the VCE works closely with all VLUs. During this inspection, the head of the VCE expressed the view that the relationship

[12] *A victims' strategic needs assessment for the Crown Prosecution Service*; Crest Advisory; June 2022. crestadvisory.com/post/a-victims-strategic-needs-assessment-for-the-crown-prosecution-service

between the VCE and Areas is important to driving improvement and embedding good practice.

3.24. The VCE prioritised the refresh of VCL scheme letter templates as its first deliverable. It appointed Crest Advisory as evaluation partner to the VTP and conducted an independent, comparative dip sample of VCL scheme letter quality.

3.25. Following this work, in 2024, the VCE drafted new VCL scheme letter templates to drive improvements and consistency in quality. They contained a supporting user guide for prosecutors and VLU colleagues to make sure they addressed essential components of each letter, including prompts and tips.

3.26. The VCE has established a series of victim reference groups (VRGs) to support its work. Two groups facilitated by the Survivors' Trust and Victim Support are helping redevelop of CPS letters. The VRGs provide input, from victims, about their lived experiences of the CPS and the criminal justice system, which has contributed to the design and content of the victim products and services produced by the VCE.

3.27. In March 2024, the VCE introduced the new VCL scheme letter templates and guidance to the 14 CPS Areas, to be used in all VCL scheme letters from April 2024. Three months later, Crest evaluated their impact through a staff survey and an independent quality assessment of a sample of letters.

3.28. Although Crest found that the templates had improved letter quality substantially, some issues remained. Crest reported that their findings still suggested a need for consistent and clear communication and training regarding the focus on quality over quantity. Crest made four recommendations around:

1. formatting
2. tailoring templates to cover a range of common scenarios
3. amendments to phrasing
4. promoting consistency.

3.29. The CPS completed recommendations 1, 3 and 4 but did not accept recommendation 2 on the basis that the current templates could easily be adapted for different scenarios. As a result, the CPS revised templates in December 2024, incorporating the feedback from Crest and the VRGs.

3.30. VCE resources now include updated guides to letter templates and a bank of useful phrases to help CPS staff draft quality, accurate and empathetic letters to victims. These are all easily accessible by all CPS staff, including prosecutors and VLU staff, on the CPS intranet.

Work to support improvements

3.31. The VCE worked with CPS Learning Services to address a gap in the provision of centrally designed learning and development for staff working in VLUs. It used a comprehensive learning mapping exercise to understand the priority requirements for VLUs. Feedback was obtained through focus groups and surveys with VLU staff, and in consultation with heads of Area operations (formerly Area Business Managers).

3.32. A core curriculum was produced, consisting of 16 hours of learning, with mandatory courses for all VLU staff, regardless of length of service. Another 9 hours of optional training courses were offered based on individual interest or identified development needs.

Changes to the assurance process

3.33. The Operational Assurance team consists of CPS staff from the Operational Delivery area of the business. In June 2025, the team worked with the VCE to introduce a new internal mandatory level 1 VCL quality assurance process for every CPS Area.

3.34. The assurance contains a set of minimum standards which determine the key requirements of a quality letter[13].

- The decision summary is case specific and easy to understand. If there has been a retraction statement or an indication of withdrawal from the police, that should be referenced.
- The reason includes an accurate reflection of whether the decision was evidential or public interest.
- There is a clear and detailed explanation that expands sufficiently on the summary, with jargon explained.
- A meeting is offered if the case meets the criteria for a meeting.
- The correct VRR scheme paragraph is included in the letter, if applicable.
- The correct statutory time limit paragraph is included in the letter, if applicable.
- The letter does not include any obvious spelling and grammar errors; it is addressed to the right person and contains no formatting issues.
- The empathy rating is one or higher[14].

Victim Liaison Unit panels

3.35. HMCPSI's 2020 VCL inspection report stated that, since our 2018 inspection, all CPS Areas had established a VLU panel, mainly led by heads of Area operations and including a selection of operational delivery staff, some lawyers and apprentices.

3.36. The primary role of the panels was to assess the quality of a sample of VCL scheme letters sent by the Area. The panels identified issues and themes to address to improve quality and consistency across the Area.

3.37. Panels continue to exist in all 14 CPS Areas.

[13] *CPS operational assurance VCL scheme level 1 assurance guidance and question set*; CPS; October 2025.
[14] The CPS level 1 assurance requires an overall empathy rating of 0,1, 2 or 3.

Victim Service Standards

3.38. In May 2025, the CPS launched Victim Service Standards[15] which set out the service victims can expect from the CPS, as well as their entitlements under the Victims' Code. They include:

- we'll communicate with empathy
- we'll provide you with clear explanations of our decisions
- we'll listen to your feedback and use this information to improve our services.

[15] *Our Victim Service Standards: what victims can expect from us*; CPS. cps.gov.uk/information-and-support-victims/our-victim-service-standards-what-victims-can-expect-us

4. Framework and methodology

Inspection question

4.1. We designed this inspection framework to assess the quality of Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme letters sent by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to victims of crime in accordance with its duty in section 6.15 of the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims' Code).

4.2. In line with our methodology, each inspection has an inspection question that allows us to gather evidence to support our findings. The overarching question for this inspection was: "Is the Crown Prosecution Service sending quality letters to victims under the Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme?"

4.3. The timeliness of VCL scheme letters was out of the scope of this inspection. Our 2020 inspection highlighted that it was the quality of letters, rather than their timeliness, that required significant improvement. Recent CPS data demonstrated that the timeliness of VCL scheme communications remains relatively strong and consistent.

Methodology

4.4. To assess whether the quality of VCL scheme letters has improved with the significant work the CPS has done, and to ensure consistent and meaningful comparisons with our 2020 findings, we adopted the same methodology as we used in our 2020 inspection, including the original question set and guidance for assessing the quality of letters in our case file sample.

4.5. Our objective was to assess the quality of letters and whether changes introduced since 2020, including current assurance processes, have driven the necessary improvements in VCL scheme letter quality.

4.6. We use the word 'victim' in this report because it reflects the way 'victim' is used in other publications such as the Victims' Code, and is the terminology used by the CPS. 'Victim' can include other terms such as complainant and survivor. We mean no offence by using the term.

4.7. We reviewed 420 VCL scheme letters, read CPS and Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE) documentation and guidance materials, and interviewed the head of the VCE.

4.8. The question set and accompanying guidance for the VCL scheme letter examinations are in Annex A. To enable direct comparison with our 2020

inspection, we did not adopt the CPS's level 1 VCL scheme assurance process or assess empathy by way of a numerical grading system.

4.9. In line with our methodology, we held an internal consistency exercise for our inspectors. Our file examination assessments were then subject to internal quality assurance, which included data checks, consistency checks and dip sampling by the lead inspector. Dip samples were checked again by a senior legal inspector to ensure consistency of approach.

File examination

4.10. Our original intention was to examine a total of 280 letters: 20 from each of the 14 CPS Areas.

4.11. Additional resources allowed us to increase the volume of letters we assessed to provide a broader evidence base for our assessment.

4.12. In total, we examined 420 letters, 30 from each of the CPS Areas, broken down as follows.

Casework type	Number of letters
Magistrates' courts	17
Crown Court	8
RASSO	5

4.13. The exceptions were London North (where we examined 28 letters) and London South (32 letters). Here we adjusted the volumes slightly because of the merger of these two Areas' Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) Units, which now sit within the London South Area.

4.14. Letters to victims drafted by prosecutors in the casework directorates and CPS Direct, and letters sent under the bereaved family scheme, were out of scope, as per the 2020 inspection. Any VCL scheme letters drafted as part of the CPS Universal Service pilot were also out of scope.

4.15. Most of the letters we examined were sent in September and October 2025, to reflect the most recent position and the use of revised, up to date templates.

4.16. The file sample was weighted more heavily in favour of magistrates' court letters, to reflect the volume of cases dealt with by these units.

4.17. Of the 420 letters we examined, 172 were letters sent to domestic abuse victims. This reflected the proportions in the 2020 inspection, allowing us to make direct comparisons; important, since in the 2020 inspection, we found that

letters in domestic abuse related cases were of slightly better quality than in other cases.

4.18. Although we included a proportion of RASSO VCL scheme letters in this inspection, HMCPSI's business plan 2026-27 also includes *Rape: the service to victims*, an inspection focusing on how the CPS engages with victims of rape. This will consider, separately, the impact of the implementation of the CPS's national operating model, which incorporates enhanced services for adult victims of rape.

4.19. The composition and selection of our samples of letters were discussed with the head of operational assurance at the CPS's Transformation and Change Directorate, and with the head of the VCE.

Document review

4.20. We reviewed documents provided to us by the head of the VCE.

4.21. We read the CPS's guidance on VCL scheme letters, its supporting guides, and the Victims' Code.

Fieldwork interviews

4.22. We interviewed the head of the VCE to get evidence of the work the CPS has done since 2020 to improve VCL scheme letter quality, and to assess whether the current assurance processes are driving the necessary improvements.

4.23. The inspection did not include Area visits or interviews with operational delivery or legal staff.

Inspection team

4.24. This inspection was led by legal inspector Lauranne Middleton.

4.25. She was assisted by legal inspectors Andrew Hodgson, Asma Hopkinson, Helen Lee, Joyce Kerrigan, and Samantha Wells, and associate inspectors James Jenkins and Sue Gallon.

4.26. Business support was provided by Shauna Compton.

4.27. Senior legal inspector Rachael Pavion supervised the inspection.

5. Policy and guidance

5.1. As part of this inspection, we considered the resources available to Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) staff to support the production of high-quality Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme letters.

5.2. CPS guidance on the VCL scheme, last updated on 15 October 2024, is publicly available and sets out:

- the roles of Victim Liaison Units (VLUs) and prosecutors
- the definitions of 'victim' and 'qualifying cases'
- methods of communication
- meetings
- the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme.

5.3. There is also legal guidance available on the CPS's intranet.

5.4. The Victim Resource Centre on the CPS's intranet describes itself as "a central area for victim-related information, guidance and key updates". It is accessed via the Strategy and Policy section of the intranet and includes guidance for CPS Direct, a directory of legal definitions and a bank of paragraphs to help VLU staff and prosecutors communicate with victims and witnesses about some common scenarios.

Banks of paragraphs

5.5. The Victim Resource Centre includes a bank of legal paragraphs explaining decisions to drop or substantially alter charges as a result of common scenarios: for example, a victim withdrawing support for the case, meaning that there is no longer enough evidence to proceed.

5.6. We found this bank of paragraphs to be a valuable resource.

5.7. We saw examples of letters using these explanations. Given our findings in this inspection, as well as in 2018 and 2020, about the need to improve the clarity and sufficiency of legal explanations, we encourage greater use of this resource to improve letter quality and promote consistent good practice nationally — not only in letters, but also as an example of what 'good' looks like.

5.8. During the inspection we identified recurring errors and a lack of clarity in legal explanations relating to:

- the distinction between section 18 (wounding or causing grievous bodily harm with intent) and section 20 (wounding or causing grievous bodily harm) under the Offences Against the Person Act
- offences under sections 4 (fear or provocation of violence), 4A (intentional harassment, alarm or distress) and 5 (harassment, alarm or distress) of the Public Order Act 1986
- simple and conditional cautions
- youth policy and diversion.

5.9. We recommend that the CPS expands the bank of paragraphs with suggested wording that covers these specific areas of law, to further support consistency across Areas and units. This echoes the recommendation made by Crest Advisory that the CPS rejected: to tailor templates to cover a range of common scenarios.

Templates

5.10. CPS guidance contains the most recent letter templates and accompanying guides which prosecutors are expected to use, replacing any templates that pre-date April 2024. The templates and accompanying guidance were created by the Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE), who sought input from victim reference groups on the content. The templates cover the decisions that a prosecutor is required to communicate to a victim.

5.11. Each template is supported by guidance to help prosecutors and VLU staff produce bespoke, empathetic, victim-focused letters.

5.12. The expectation is that the prosecutor or VLU selects the correct template to suit the decision they are writing about and then adds a degree of bespoke content. Naturally, in rape and serious sexual offences, homicide and serious casework, the degree of bespoke content will be much greater than in letters explaining routine matters. Still, the requirement is that all letters follow the structure in the template.

5.13. In this inspection, we found that templates were used in most cases (90.2%) but that some out of date templates were still being used by a minority. Using out of date templates can have a negative impact on quality. We explore this in more detail in chapter 6.

Locating guidance

5.14. We found that access to relevant guidance could be improved.

5.15. There is currently no direct link from the VCL scheme legal guidance page on the CPS's intranet to the Victim Resource Centre in the Strategy and Policy section. This means prosecutors and VLU staff need to access different places to access relevant guidance. As this is not clearly linked, there is a risk that staff may only access one or the other, missing key guidance and information and ultimately diminishing the quality of the letter.

5.16. Given the operational importance of these materials, a direct link from the VCL scheme legal guidance would improve access for all CPS staff and enable consistent practice across the Areas and units.

5.17. The current VCL scheme guidance contains a direct link to *Giving reasons: short form*, which was written in 2018 and contains some outdated terminology. The CPS should remove the document and incorporate useful content into the current VCE resources.

6. Letter quality

6.1. As set out in chapter 4, the 420 letters we inspected consisted of 30 from each Area (17 magistrates' court case letters, eight Crown Court case letters and five rape and serious sexual offences case letters; except in CPS London North and London South).

6.2. We assessed the letters against a question set (see Annex A) incorporating the CPS's own standards, as set out in their Victim Service Standards, and the duties set out in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (the Victims' Code). Our question set largely mirrored the one we used in 2020, to enable us to compare and assess the direction of travel. We amended the questions only where necessary to reflect recent changes.

6.3. Overall, we found improvements in:

- use of templates
- spelling
- empathy
- offering reviews and meetings.

6.4. However, challenges remain in:

- the sufficiency and correctness of explanations
- accessibility
- the consistent application of quality assurance processes.

Adequacy of letters

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was the letter of an adequate standard?								
Yes	155	36.9	93	39.1	36	32.1	26	37.1
No	265	63.1	145	60.9	76	67.9	44	62.9

6.5. Our primary measure of letter quality was whether the correspondence was of an adequate standard.

6.6. We rated 36.9% of the 420 letters we examined as adequate: an improvement of 12.8 percentage points since the 2020 inspection.

6.7. We found that performance varied considerably across the 14 CPS Areas, with adequacy rates ranging between 10% and 70%.

6.8. As in 2020, we adopted a 'critical fail' model: if the answer to a 'key question' was negative, we classified the letter as inadequate, regardless of any other positive elements, including positive answers to the other key questions — unless it would be disproportionately harsh, looking at the overall letter and context, to do so.

6.9. Consequently, some individual question scores in this inspection are higher than the overall adequacy percentage. This reflects the application of the 'critical fail' rule rather than inconsistency in the findings.

6.10. The key questions were:

2. Was the addressee correct?
3. Was the explanation understandable/clear (include grammar and use of jargon)?
4. If the answer to question 3 was no, did issues include the use of jargon?
5. Was the explanation sufficient?
6. Was the explanation correct?
7. Was the VRR scheme offered where appropriate?
8. If a statutory time limit was appropriate, was it explained correctly?
9. Was a meeting offered where appropriate?
10. Was there empathy in the letter?
11. Did the letter contain spelling mistakes (more than minor, or the error involved the name of the victim or defendant)?

6.11. We chose this approach, rather than simply averaging out the answers to the critical questions, because it more accurately reflects the overall quality of Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme letters. Our examination provides detailed data around each of the questions, providing a deep dive into which critical aspects need more focus by Area and casework type.

Case study
A letter sent to a victim of an assault, explaining that the case could not proceed on public interest grounds, failed to offer the victim a review under the Victims' Right to Review scheme. The letter was marked positively for all other key questions but could not be rated as adequate because it failed to offer the review. This was a failure of the CPS's own policy and potentially deprived the victim of a right (right 6 of the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime, to ask for decisions to be looked at again). In these circumstances, it was not unduly harsh to rate the letter as inadequate.

Spelling and accuracy

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Did the letter contain spelling mistakes?								
Yes, one only, not the name of the victim or defendant	23	5.5	11	4.6	5	4.5	7	10
Yes, one only, but this was the name of the victim or defendant	5	1.2	4	1.7	1	0.9	0	0
Yes, more than one minor spelling mistake	4	1.0	0	0	0	0	4	5.7
No	388	92.4	223	93.7	106	94.6	59	84.3

6.12. We found 92.4% of the letters we examined free from spelling mistakes. This is a strength and a two-percentage point improvement from the 2020 inspection.

6.13. We found 23 letters containing one error, four letters containing more than one minor spelling error, and five letters where the names of victims or defendants were incorrect. These are very small numbers in the context of the 420 letters we examined, but spelling mistakes, particularly misspelled names, can undermine the quality of the letter and the victim's perception of the quality of the CPS.

6.14. Spelling mistakes were, on the whole simple, errors that the CPS may be able to use new technology to eradicate.

6.15. Where there were simple errors that did not have a significant impact, this would not have led to the letter being marked as inadequate if all the other key questions were positive.

Clear and understandable explanations

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was the explanation understandable/clear (include grammar and use of jargon)?								
Yes	291	69.3%	166	69.7%	79	70.5%	46	65.7%
No	129	30.7%	72	30.3%	33	29.5%	24	34.3%

6.16. The explanation of the decision provided to the victim should be clear and understandable. It should contain the information to enable the victim to understand what decision was made and why. They should be clearly told about any remedies available to them.

6.17. When reading the letters, inspectors considered whether the average person with no knowledge of the criminal justice system would be able to understand the letter.

6.18. Inspectors found that 69.3% of letters provided clear and understandable explanations. This is a slight decrease of 1.9% from 2020, where the figure was 71.2%.

6.19. The main reason for answering 'no' to this question was the use of legal jargon.

6.20. Inspectors also found the mixing of tenses throughout letters was a common theme across all CPS Areas. Some of this was a result of using templated paragraphs without amending as necessary.

6.21. Of the 129 letters which did not meet the standard for clarity and understanding, 71 (55.0%) contained jargon as the sole issue, or jargon combined with other issues leading to a lack of clarity.

6.22. One example of this was a letter that twice referred to shoplifting as "Theft of other including theft by finding". Another letter referred to a racially aggravated public order offence as "Racially/religiously aggravated intent to cause harassment/alarm/distress by word/writing". These are examples that should have been identified and corrected through the letter assurance process.

6.23. The percentage of letters containing jargon has decreased by 16.6 percentage points since 2020, which is encouraging. But there is still room for improvement, as the examples demonstrate. The use of legal jargon undermines the accessibility of VCL scheme letters, preventing victims from understanding key decisions, increasing distress, and eroding confidence in the justice process, with a disproportionate impact on more vulnerable individuals.

6.24. To assist with clarity of explanation, Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE) guidance mandates the use of a table of charges at the end of a letter when writing to explain a substantial alteration to charges. In other letters, the use of the table is optional and at the discretion of the prosecutor or victim liaison officer. The guidance is that the table should only be included if the victim may not be able to identify the case from its unique reference number. The table should not be used as a matter of routine.

6.25. Our sample included 39 letters about substantial alterations to charges. Of these, 19 letters (48.7%) contained a table.

6.26. Where tables of charges were used effectively, it helped to improve the clarity of the explanation — particularly in cases involving multiple defendants or multiple charges. However, in straightforward cases, we found that a simple sentence explaining the changes at the beginning of the letter has more impact and provides a clearer explanation for the recipient.

6.27. We did not automatically rate a letter as inadequate if it did not contain a table as required by the guidance, focusing instead on whether the explanation was clear and understandable. Our findings do, however, illustrate inconsistencies in the CPS's approach to following guidance.

6.28. Victim reference groups recommended that the CPS should not name the suspect or defendant in their letters to victims. It was felt that such content could be triggering for victims.

6.29. Although the CPS has adopted this recommendation, in some cases we found that this meant letters did not provide enough detail about the offender or case to identify the incident that was the subject of the letter, particularly where there were several ongoing prosecutions or investigations involving the same victim. In some cases, we found that it would have been preferable to name the defendant so that the victim could identify the incident being written about, ensuring that their right to be provided with information about the investigation and prosecution (right 6 under the Victims' Code) was satisfied.

Case study
The victim was a security guard in a case where no evidence was offered. It was known that he was a witness in several other cases. There was no information in the letter about the offences or offender, to distinguish this case from others he was involved in.

6.30. A recurring issue with a negative impact on clarity and understanding was the mixing of past and present tenses in letters relating to cases that had already been finalised. This inconsistency was most evident where standard template content had not been modified, particularly in the introductory sections of the letter. The uncertainty created by the mixed tenses was a factor in some letters being rated as inadequate, where this affected the clarity or correctness of the explanation.

Case study

One letter we examined included the sentence:

"I have considered whether we can still proceed with the prosecution, and I have made the decision that the charge of assault a person thereby occasioning them actual bodily harm … can no longer continue."

In fact, the decision had been made several days earlier, on the day of trial, when no evidence had been offered at court when the victim had been present.

6.31. Using the wrong tenses in letters can lead to confusion as to whether a decision has already been made or is ongoing. This may raise questions about bail conditions in appropriate cases. It can also be perceived by victims as a lack of care, leading to an overall impression of rushed decision-making, and may influence an increase in communications, complaints or VRR scheme requests. It may also raise the victim's hope that there is opportunity to review a decision, if they believe it has not yet been finalised. Having to read and then re-read a letter to try to understand the contents risks re-traumatising victims and damaging the credibility of the CPS.

6.32. We found several letters where the prosecution had offered no evidence at court but failed to remove the standard wording of "I have also written to the police and the defence about my decision". The CPS should remove this sentence in appropriate cases, as it can be particularly confusing when the victim has been to court and is already aware of the outcome.

Sufficiency of explanation

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was the explanation sufficient?								
Yes	199	47.4	117	49.2	45	40.2	37	52.9
No	221	52.6	121	50.8	67	59.8	33	47.1

6.33. The explanation in a VCL scheme letter should contain enough detail that the victim can understand the circumstances of the case or charge not proceeding. The explanation should set out what happened, why, and the outcome.

6.34. Inspectors considered whether the explanation contained enough information for the victim to understand the decisions made in their case. Too much information, as well as too little, can affect sufficiency.

6.35. We found that the sufficiency of the explanation of the decision to stop or substantially change a charge remains an issue.

6.36. Inspectors found that 47.4% of letters provided sufficient detail, a slight decrease of 0.9 percentage points from the 2020 inspection. Letters frequently:

- lacked specific information about evidential barriers or procedural steps
- failed to explain what had happened between the decision to charge and the decision to stop the case in enough detail for the victim to understand the reasoning, to understand what had changed, or to decide whether to exercise their right to review.

6.37. In many cases, this issue reflects the quality of the underlying review, case analysis and case strategy. Where the prosecutor's reasoning was clearly recorded, and the review adequately explained the evidential and procedural basis for the decision, we found it usually translated into a clearer and more sufficient letter. Conversely, where decision-making was poorly documented or the review was vague, formulaic or underdeveloped, the resulting letter was also more often insufficient.

6.38. While RASSO performance was slightly better (52.9%) than that of the magistrates' courts (49.2%) and Crown Court units (40.2%), it was not a level of performance to be expected from a specialist unit, staffed by senior crown prosecutors, producing bespoke communications, who have recently benefitted

from communication with victims training as part of the Victim Transformation Programme (VTP).

6.39. This is consistent with HMCPSI's July 2025 inspection of early advice and pre-charge decision-making in adult rape cases[16], which found:

- weaknesses in the quality of legal analysis
- inconsistency in operational delivery
- a gap between the CPS's victim-centred ambitions and the service actually experienced by victims.

6.40. In both inspections, weaknesses in underlying legal reasoning translated into a poorer quality service to victims.

6.41. We also found a lack of candour in several communications with victims. This is inconsistent with the CPS's value of being honest and open: explaining its decisions, setting clear standards about the service the public can expect and being honest if it makes a mistake[17].

Case study

In a magistrates' court case, a letter to the victim, explaining the decision to withdraw a charge of breach of a non-molestation order following five pre-charge advice reviews and four court hearings, 18 months after the incident had been reported, gave the following explanation:

"The matter had previously been stopped by the police in error. Unfortunately, despite their efforts to restore this case, it is procedurally not possible to continue"

The charge had been authorised by the CPS, and the defence case was that the police had mistakenly informed the suspect that no further action would be taken against him before charge. The issue was whether the CPS could successfully oppose an anticipated abuse of process argument. One prosecutor decided to proceed and respond to an abuse of process argument if one was received, but another prosecutor that reviewed the case took a different view and withdrew the case.

Considering the length of time it had taken to reach this stage, the unusual nature of the defence and the change of CPS position, the victim was entitled

[16] *A thematic rape inspection report*; HMCPSI; July 2015. hmcpsi.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/report/a-thematic-rape-inspection-report/
[17] Crown Prosecution Service 2030 strategy; CPS. cps.gov.uk/publication/cps-2030

to a more detailed explanation of the decision to stop the proceedings. The delay was not mentioned in the letter; nor was the victim referred to the police if they required more information about how the decision to take no further action arose.

Case study
In a Youth Court case, a letter to the mother of a 16-year-old victim of a stabbing failed to disclose serious case progression failings. These were important factors considered and mentioned by the court when refusing the prosecution's application for an adjournment at the second trial listing, which led to the case being stopped.

6.42. A theme identified in 2020, which continues to be present in the letters we inspected, was letters simply stating that "the evidential test was not met", without explaining the specific evidential barriers, the role of the suspect's account or what had changed evidentially since charge to lead to the case being stopped or substantially altered. Common terminology we saw included "insufficient evidence", "problems with some of the evidence" and "issues with some of the evidence", none of which offer the victim enough detail about why a case was stopped.

6.43. We also found that explanations of important procedural steps, such as adjournment applications and witness summons considerations, were often omitted.

6.44. Inspectors found a common issue in letters about evidence led domestic abuse prosecutions in the magistrates' courts. Where charges were stopped which had originally been charged as being capable of proceeding without the victim's evidence, letters to victims failed to adequately explain why the prosecutor writing the letter had decided to stop the charges when nothing had changed. Letters often stated that it was because of the non-cooperation of the victim, which was incorrect and would not have made sense to a victim who had never supported the case.

6.45. Sufficiency of information includes providing too much or unnecessary content. This was a theme frequently seen in RASSO cases, where inspectors saw unnecessarily graphic content with the potential to cause distress without improving sufficiency. Letters frequently repeated the victim's intimate account in unnecessary detail or quoted verbatim phrases that were likely to be triggering. Some letters misapplied trauma informed practice, warning victims of distress yet then repeating details at length. This risks not only re-traumatising the victim

but also perceptions of victim blaming, leading to potential disengagement from the process by the victim.

Case study
In a RASSO case, a letter was sent to a 17-year-old victim to explain a decision to take no further action following her complaint of rape when she was 15 years old. The letter contained no warning of the graphic and potentially triggering content which was to follow, and proceeded to outline in minute detail the allegations she had made. The content, which would have been inappropriate for an adult victim to receive, was not adapted for a teenage reader, contained a large amount of legal jargon and risked re-traumatising the victim.

6.46. We also saw several letters containing confidential information about a defendant's medical information, with no record of whether the CPS's guidance on the provision of private information[18] had been considered, or why the decision had been made to include such content.

Correctness of explanation

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was the explanation correct?								
Yes	329	78.3	179	75.2	89	79.5	61	87.1
No	91	21.7	59	24.8	23	20.5	9	12.9

6.47. The explanation provided to the victim should be accurate. If there is any reference to a legal point then this should be correct.

6.48. We found that 78.3% of all the letters we examined contained correct information — a decline from 86.5% in 2020.

[18] Personal information, particularly medical data, should only be disclosed after the most careful consideration, because it is of fundamental importance to a person's rights under article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. This applies not only to defendants but also to witnesses.
Article 8, Right to respect for private and family life, *European Convention on Human Rights*; Council of Europe.
coe.int/en/web/human-rights-convention/private-life

6.49. Errors included:

- wrongly stating which stage of the test in The Code for Crown Prosecutors[19] (the Code) had not been met
- including potentially defamatory content
- failing to accurately describe how cases were concluded, confusing withdrawal with discontinuance or offering no evidence.

6.50. In other cases, we identified basic legal errors which had the potential to confuse the victim, to lower their perception of the quality of service provided by the CPS, and to lead to the letter creating more questions than answers.

6.51. The issues we found with the correctness of information included:

- mis-stating the test for prosecution
- incorrectly explaining the key evidential issues influencing the decision to take no further action against a suspect
- failing to correctly explain that additional counts on an indictment were also proceeding to a re-trial in addition to a substantive charge
- a mistaken explanation of the law in respect of grievous bodily harm.

Case study

In a magistrates' court case involving a charge of using threatening behaviour, the prosecutor incorrectly informed the victim that "we have no evidence identifying the people outside your home", when defendants had admitted presence and there was a statement from the interviewing officer identifying the defendants as those captured on the CCTV footage at the location.

The explanation in the letter reflected the flawed evidential analysis in the prosecutor's case review.

In another case, a decision was made in court that it was no longer in the public interest to proceed with a threatening with an offensive weapon matter, on the basis that the defendant was serving a life sentence with a minimum term of 25 years. A letter to the victim contained this information. But in fact, the defendant had been given a life term but with a minimum term of eight

[19] *The Code for Crown Prosecutors*; CPS; October 2018. cps.gov.uk/publication/code-crown-prosecutors

years and 317 days. This was clearly incorrect information provided to the victim.

6.52. In RASSO cases, performance in this area was slightly better, at 87.1%. This would appear consistent with a unit staffed by senior crown prosecutors in specialist roles.

6.53. Prosecutors need to exercise caution when correctly explaining which limb of the Code test has been applied. We found examples where decisions were made on public interest grounds, but where the letter cited evidential grounds. We saw examples of retrospective thinking being included in the letter, which did not reflect the reasoning applied at the time of the actual decision.

6.54. The inspection also highlighted issues with several letters containing potentially defamatory content. The CPS's guidance on the presumption of innocence — that everyone charged with a criminal offence has the right to be "presumed innocent until guilty according to law"[20] — and the risk of implied or express defamation of the defendant had not been considered.

6.55. We found examples of express statements of guilt in cases where decisions had been made to offer no evidence, such as in a RASSO case in a domestic abuse context: "I am sorry to learn about what you have been through, given that you were assaulted by the defendant" and "the fact that you were the victim of a violent assault".

6.56. Such statements risk reputational damage to the CPS — and harm to the victim because, in some cases, particularly domestic abuse matters, there is a real likelihood that the defendant will read the communications sent by the CPS.

6.57. We also found errors, most often in letters in magistrates' court cases, in explanations of the way a case had ended, confusing withdrawal with offering no evidence, dismissal or discontinuance. This information is important to the victim, because the way a case is finalised directly affects the remedies available.

6.58. Cases that have been discontinued or withdrawn in court do not result in the defendant being found not guilty. Such cases could be reinstated if more evidence is found, or through a successful review.

[20] Article 6, Right to a fair trial, *European Convention on Human Rights*; Council of Europe.
coe.int/en/web/human-rights-convention/justice

6.59. This is very different to the situation where no evidence is offered against a defendant or there is a finding of not guilty after trial. This is a final bar to restarting proceedings, save for in extraordinary, limited circumstances.

Case study

In a magistrates' court case, a letter sent to a victim to explain why several offences had been stopped mistakenly stated that the case could not legally be restarted as "the defendant has will (sic) be found formally not guilty by the court".

In fact, the case had been discontinued and could be reinstated if another prosecutor disagrees with the decision, or more evidence becomes available in the future.

While the victim was correctly offered their right to a review, there is a risk that they may have decided not to request one because they had mistakenly been informed that the case could not be restarted.

6.60. Another theme we found was in magistrates' court and Crown Court cases disposed of by way of a simple caution or conditional caution[21].

6.61. A simple caution is a formal warning, issued and recorded as an alternative to prosecution. A conditional caution involves the offender agreeing to abide by specific conditions such as rehabilitation, paying compensation or fixing damage — and, if they comply, avoiding prosecution.

6.62. For both forms of caution, there must be an acceptance of guilt and sufficient evidence available to provide a realistic prospect of conviction; and the public interest must be properly served by an out of court resolution in accordance with the Full Code Test set out in the Code.

6.63. The two categories of caution were often incorrectly or poorly explained, especially when the offender was a youth.

6.64. It is important that the CPS gives victims an accurate explanation so that they understand the different consequences, for the offender, of re-offending or not complying with terms of a conditional caution.

[21] *Out of court resolutions*; CPS; July 2025. cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/out-court-resolutions

Empathy

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was there empathy in the letter?								
Yes	363	86.4	208	87.4	96	85.7	59	84.3
No	57	13.6	30	12.6	16	14.3	11	15.7

6.65. Inspectors were looking to see whether letters were written with care, sensitivity and an understanding of the victim's situation. Empathy is writing in a way which shows care and awareness of how the victim may feel. It does not mean being overly emotional but does mean avoiding cold or blunt language and making sure the letter feels thoughtful and respectful.

6.66. In our 2020 inspection, we found that 58% of letters contained empathy. Area performance varied between 34.3% and 77.1%.

6.67. In this inspection we found that 86.4% of letters contained empathy; Area performance varied between 76.7% and 96.7%. This is a substantial improvement that reflects the positive impact of the CPS's work to improve this aspect of letter writing.

This is a substantial improvement that reflects the positive impact of the CPS's work to improve this aspect of letter writing

6.68. Empathetic content was consistently high across all units, with only slight variation between magistrates' court cases (87.4%), Crown Court cases (85.7%) and RASSO cases (84.37%). Letters sent in domestic abuse cases demonstrated a higher level of empathy (89.5%) than those in other cases (85.1%).

6.69. We found positive examples of bespoke sentences demonstrating empathy from prosecutors and the VLU in both magistrates' court and Crown Court cases; and the use of well-drafted template sentences which, when used in the correct context, conveyed an adequate level of empathy.

Case study

Examples from magistrates' court case letters:

"I am sorry to learn about what you have been through with your ex-partner and the delay in getting this case to trial. I can see the effect this case has had on you and how you are still affected"

"I am sorry to learn about what you have been through and how this crime has affected your children, as well as the financial inconvenience it has caused you."

Example from a Crown Court case letter:

"I was sorry to learn about what you have been through. I understand this has been a very unsettling experience for you and I appreciate the behaviour has affected you in many ways. I would like to thank you for taking the time to report this matter to the Police and I commend your willingness for giving an account of what happened, as recalling such events can be very difficult for some. You may wish to show a copy of this letter to your parents."

6.70. It was a strength that several RASSO case letters we inspected started with a sentence forewarning the reader of potentially distressing content. Inspectors found that such wording contributed to a strong demonstration of empathy in RASSO cases. While the paragraph features in the VCE guidance, the CPS should consider adding this content to the actual RASSO letter templates to encourage its use.

Case study

From a letter sent in a rape and serious sexual offence case:

"I want to let you know that this letter includes some information that you may find difficult to read. It is not my intention to cause you any distress. I am sharing this information because I believe it is important that you are fully informed about the decision that has been made in this case"

6.71. Bespoke content in a letter contributes a great deal to the demonstration of empathy. Including bespoke content taken from a victim's witness statement or Victim Personal Statement contributed to the high empathy rating in this inspection.

6.72. Terminology which inspectors felt could have a negative impact on empathy included the term "contribution", when referring to the role of the victim in the case. Thanking the victim for their contribution made the communication

feel procedural rather than empathetic in several letters we assessed, especially in domestic abuse and RASSO cases. The VCE templates do include several alternative suggestions of how to thank a victim for their involvement in the proceedings, which should be followed.

6.73. As mentioned in paragraph 6.54, inspectors found examples of potentially defamatory content in letters. On several occasions we found examples of this being done in a well-meaning attempt to convey empathy. While attaining the correct level of empathy is a fine balance which can vary from case to case, care must be taken that empathy does not stray into suggestions of guilt or provide an opinion on the conduct of the defendant in matters where there has been no finding of guilt.

Case study

In a case where no evidence was offered because the victim withdrew, a letter to the victim stated, "The economic abuse you have suffered is unacceptable". The defendant had denied the matter, and there was some CCTV evidence to support his account.

In another case, discontinued on public interest grounds, where the offence had been denied:

"I am sorry to learn about what you have been through having had your car damaged by the defendant who threw a torch at your car whilst you were driving. However, with regret, I am writing to let you know that I have reviewed the charge of criminal damage and I have made the decision that it can no longer continue".

In an allegation involving a complaint of recent controlling and coercive behaviour, where no evidence was offered: "I am so sorry for everything that you have been through over the last 20 years, particularly in recent months".

Victims' Right to Review scheme

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was a review offered where appropriate?								
Yes	137	89	55	85.9	37	86	45	95.7
No	17	11	9	14.1	6	14	2	4.3

6.74. The CPS Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme enables victims to seek a review of certain CPS decisions not to start, or to stop, a prosecution. It is a right under the Victims' Code, at certain stages of the justice process, to ask for a qualifying decision to be looked at again by the CPS. It is a prosecutor's responsibility to advise the victim of their right to a review.

6.75. A review was correctly offered in 89% of appropriate cases in this inspection. This is an improvement of 17 percentage points from 2020.

6.76. On four occasions (2.6%) a review was offered in circumstances where the victim was not entitled to one. In none of those four cases did the victim go on to request a review.

6.77. In 13 cases in our sample, a review was not offered when it should have been. One was a RASSO case, six were Crown Court cases and six were magistrates' court cases.

6.78. We found four cases where victims were treated as having withdrawn their support for the prosecution when they had not done so.

Case study
The victim's shop was burgled when he was not present. His evidence consisted of exhibiting CCTV footage, and he had not been warned to attend the trial. The letter said that because he had not attended the court hearing, the charges involving him were stopped. He was not offered a review, because he was mistakenly treated as having withdrawn support for the prosecution.

6.79. While this is a small number of cases, it is potentially distressing to the victim to read inaccurate information. It may affect that individual's confidence in the CPS and criminal justice system.

Meetings

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Was a meeting offered where appropriate?								
Yes	77	92.8	10	76.9	4	80	63	96.9
No	6	7.2	3	23.1	1	20	2	3.1

6.80. Meetings must be offered to the victim in specified case categories, unless the prosecutor concludes that, in the circumstances, such a meeting should not take place.

6.81. A meeting was offered in 92.8% of appropriate cases. There were just six cases where no meeting was offered when one should have been. This is a substantial improvement of 17.5 percentage points since 2020.

Strength
The CPS correctly offered victims their right to a review in 89% of appropriate cases, and correctly offered the victim a meeting in 92.8% of appropriate cases.

Use of correct templates

Answers	All cases %	Magistrates' courts %	Crown Court %	RASSO %
Has the correct letter template been used?				
Yes	90.2	92.9	91.1	80
No	9.8	7.1	8.9	20

6.82. Using the correct template is a separate issue from the language used within a letter. If the current template is not used, there is a risk that mandatory content will be omitted, including the offer of a review, and that the structure and sequence of the letter will not reflect current CPS guidance.

6.83. While the right template helps the CPS to draft good quality letters, this was not a key question for our overall assessment of adequacy.

6.84. Inspectors found that use of the correct template was generally stronger in the magistrates' courts and Crown Court units than in RASSO cases. In RASSO letters, we saw examples of:

- outdated templates being used
- current templates being selected, but with older wording retained.

6.85. The outdated templates we saw have been removed at a national level. Only current updated templates are available. This suggests that some superseded templates or draft wording remain in local or personal folders and continue to be used.

6.86. The CPS should therefore reinforce the requirement to use only the current VCL scheme letter templates and make sure that outdated versions are removed from local and personal storage. This is a compliance issue because failing to use the correct template can affect whether:

- required information is included
- the letter follows the structure intended by current guidance.

6.87. The terminology used in letters is a separate issue. Even where the correct template is selected, inspectors found examples of wording that the VCE has moved away from, particularly in RASSO letters.

6.88. This included the use of terms such as "disappointing", "regrettably" and "unfortunately". This wording matters because it can shape the tone of the letter in an unhelpful way and detract from the proper exercise of legal judgement in accordance with the Code. Victim Reference Group feedback in 2024 was critical of this language on the basis that it was inappropriate to expect staff to choose or attribute an emotion in this way. The VCE no longer includes this wording in its guidance.

6.89. The following example illustrates the terminology issue. It shows how wording associated with older drafting can be softened and improved in the final version of the letter.

Letter example

Draft: "I am writing to update you and to bring what, unfortunately, might be disappointing news. Regrettably, I must inform you that I have taken the decision not to bring any charges and therefore there will not be a prosecution in this case. This is because the legal test I must apply when deciding whether I can bring a case has not been met. The main reasons for this is that there are points of law which are not covered by the evidence."

Final version:

"Firstly, I would like to thank you for speaking to the police and telling them about what happened. It was very courageous of X to come forward, especially due to the nature of the report.

"I have now concluded my careful and thorough review of the evidence, and I must inform you that I have taken the decision not to bring any charges against the suspect. This is because the legal test that I must apply, when deciding whether I can authorise a charge, has not been met."

Compliance issue

By October 2026, the CPS should make sure all Victim Communication and Liaison scheme letters are produced using the current Victim Centre of Excellence templates, and that outdated versions are removed from local and personal storage.

Accessibility

Answers	All cases		Magistrates' courts		Crown Court		RASSO	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Did the letter consider any identified accessibility needs?								
Yes	7	1.7	2	0.8	2	1.8	3	4.3
No	15	3.6	3	1.3	6	5.4	6	8.6
Not applicable	398	94.8	233	97.9	104	92.9	61	87.1

6.90. While this was not a key question contributing towards the critical fail criteria, under right 1 of the Victims' Code, victims are entitled to understand and be understood during criminal proceedings. They are entitled to have information in a language they understand, including communications under the VCL scheme. If the victim's statement is not in English, the letter must be translated into the appropriate language. If the statement is in English, the CPS's guidance is to add a sentence in the letter offering a translation if it would assist, or to translate a letter if the victim indicates that they would prefer the letter to be written in their first language. The guidance provides that the CPS should use a translator from an approved list.

6.91. This guidance also provides that, where a victim has a disability which will affect their ability to understand, the CPS should consider easy read versions of the communication. The CPS can also obtain a Braille version of the letter where appropriate.

6.92. Missing accessibility requirements have the potential to prevent the victim from accessing justice and taking further steps such as a review or complaint. This lessens public confidence in the service.

6.93. Accessibility needs existed in 22 of the letters we examined. Inspectors found that, in 15 of these 22 letters, accessibility requirements were either not identified at all or, where they were identified, not addressed.

6.94. We found several cases where it was clear from the material on the case that the victim required the services of an interpreter or struggled with communication in English, but no translation of the letter had been arranged by the VLU.

6.95. We also saw cases where victims had issues with comprehension, because of either brain injuries or vulnerabilities, and letters had not been adapted into plain English; nor were there suggestions that the letter be read with a trusted person present.

6.96. We also found that the correct process for writing to children and young people was not always followed.

6.97. It is normally inappropriate to write directly to a child under 12. If the victim is 12 or over, it may be appropriate to send a letter to them directly, as well as to their parent, carer or guardian. Parents and carers do not have an automatic entitlement to confidential information about the child if the child is capable of sufficient understanding. The prosecutor should refer to the file to ascertain the level of parental or carer involvement and, if in doubt, speak to the police.

6.98. In respect of older children, the letter should be sent to them and contain a suggestion that they show it to a parent. A separate letter can be sent to parents to say that a letter has been sent to their child outlining the reasoning for the decision.

6.99. We did find some positive examples of victims' accessibility needs being considered, including translating letters and adapting language for recipients with learning difficulties.

Case study

In a letter sent to a 15-year-old RASSO victim with learning, mental, social, emotional, verbal and sensory issues, the prosecutor used age appropriate, sensitive language. They wrote in an easy-to-read style, using short sentences and avoiding legal jargon. The letter was tailored with care to the individual needs of the victim.

A letter sent in a Crown Court case to an adult victim of sexual assault, who had initially been too upset to speak to police, lived in sheltered accommodation and had a history of self-harm, was not hand delivered to her; nor was there a suggestion that she read the letter with her support worker present. It was reasonable to assume that she would be very distressed by the contents of the letter. No adaptations were made to the letter's content or method of delivery to attempt to minimise the trauma to the victim.

6.100. While official translations of letters can take time, potentially causing a letter to be late and thereby breach the Victims' Code, we saw a proactive solution to the situation: a letter was sent in English but contained a banner at the start of the letter in Latvian, the victim's first language, to say that a copy of the letter would be sent to her in Latvian in due course.

6.101. This balanced the need to supply information in a timely manner with assuring the victim that a more accessible letter would follow. This is an area of

work where the CPS could consider using automation-assisted tools — restricted to examples like this one, or letters where the statute of limitations for bringing or reinstating a charge is imminent and the victim's views need to be urgently obtained.

Case study

Šīs vēstules kopija jums tiks nosūtīta latviešu valodā pienācīgā laikā:

A copy of this letter will be sent to you in Latvian in due course.

6.102. CPS Cymru Wales undertakes to provide an equal service to victims and witnesses in the Welsh or English language. They set this out on their website in Welsh and English[22].

6.103. Letters written by prosecutors working in RASSO Units are hand delivered to victims by the police because of the serious and sensitive nature of the cases. The CPS's guidance also advises including a suggestion that victims read the letter with a support worker or trusted person present, to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation and emotional distress as much as practicable.

6.104. It was clear, from some cases we read, that the victims being written to had severe mental health issues; yet we saw letters which failed to include such warnings and suggestions.

Domestic abuse cases

Criterion	All cases %	Domestic abuse cases %	RASSO cases %
Clear explanation	69.3	71.5	65.7
Sufficient explanation	47.4	52.3	52.9
Correct explanation	78.3	73.8	87.1
Adequate standard	36.9	40.7	37.1

6.105. We assessed letters in domestic abuse cases separately.

6.106. 40.7% of domestic abuse letters met the adequate standard: an improvement from 28.3% in 2020. While there is still considerable room for improvement, the increase in quality is notable, and demonstrates that the CPS is moving in the right direction.

[22] *Cymru-Wales*; CPS. cps.gov.uk/cy/Cymru-Wales

6.107. The CPS clearly acknowledges that not all domestic abuse victims are female but has for many years demonstrated its commitment to tackle the issue of violence against women and girls (VAWG)[23]. VAWG crimes are deeply harmful and have a devastating impact on victims and witnesses, families, communities and society.

6.108. The CPS is committed to seeing justice delivered for victims of VAWG offending, which is among its highest priority work. All prosecutors have had domestic abuse refresher training in the years since the 2020 inspection. The increased emphasis on case strategy in this area of casework may well have contributed to the improvement in these VCL scheme letters.

6.109. The CPS considers that phrases such as "insufficient evidence" are not enough to explain to a victim of domestic abuse why the case has been stopped. The victim needs to be able to understand the main reason a case has stopped from the initial explanatory paragraph, with a fuller explanation given later in the letter. This should not be copied from the first paragraph but, instead, should expand on the first paragraph and include more case specific details.

6.110. Inspectors found several examples of domestic abuse cases where the promised detailed description was not provided.

6.111. There is a requirement that evidence led prosecutions be considered as part of the prosecutor's review of domestic abuse cases. From the outset of a case where a victim is supportive, and where a victim retracts their allegation or withdraws support, the prosecutor has a duty to review the case and determine if there is still enough evidence to prosecute the case in the absence of the victim.

6.112. This was not routinely explained to victims of domestic abuse. This had an impact on the sufficiency of explanations in this type of case.

6.113. When considering whether letters provided victims with correct information, we inspected several where the CPS charged a domestic abuse case, knowing that the victim would not assist, but deciding that evidence led prosecution was viable.

6.114. In three cases from the same Area, the letters gave the victim the inaccurate and misleading impression that the case had been ended before trial because the victims had withdrawn their support. Each letter should have explained that the decision to charge had been made on the basis that the case

[23] *Violence against women and girls*; CPS. cps.gov.uk/types-crime/violence-against-women-and-girls

could be proved without the victims' support, and that it was later recognised that this approach was not viable.

High-quality letters

6.115. We assessed 156 of the 420 letters we examined to be of an adequate standard.

6.116. Of those 156, we assessed that 43 were better than adequate. These letters represent 27.6% of the 156 adequate letters, and 10.2% of the 420 letters we examined in total. These letters contained clear, succinct explanations which flowed well and included bespoke content, sensitivity and tailored empathy.

6.117. Features that most frequently elevated a letter above the adequacy threshold included:

- clarity of expression
- personal tailoring
- accessible content, including appropriate use of tables setting out charges
- an absence of legal jargon.

6.118. Among other reasons, inspectors assessed letters as better than adequate where they:

- acknowledged distressing content in advance
- included apologies (where due)
- clearly explained relevant policies
- adopted a proportionate tone
- did not avoid providing difficult explanations.

Case study

The following explanation was sent to explain a decision not to proceed with one charge on public interest grounds, in a domestic abuse case in the magistrates' courts. The letter contained a table summarising the charges, thanked the victim for her support of the criminal proceedings, gave a clear and understandable explanation and contained an appropriate degree of empathy.

"Although there was sufficient evidence in this case to support the charge of criminal damage, I also had to consider the second part of the legal test, referred to above as 'public interest'. In this case, the offender was charged with the three offences that are set out in the Table of Charges.

"At [edited] Magistrates' Court on 8 September 2025, the offender offered to plead guilty to assaulting you and to disorderly behaviour that caused you to fear immediate violence … but he would not admit to the separate charge of criminal damage.

"I considered his offer carefully and, in my assessment, he would be unlikely to receive any additional penalty even if he was found guilty of criminal damage after a trial. In other words, it was not in the public interest to have a trial on that denied charge when he was willing to enter guilty pleas to the other two charges. I therefore notified the court of my decision to stop the criminal damage charge.

"You do not need to do anything as a result of my decision. The offender pleaded guilty at the court hearing to assault by beating and disorderly behaviour that put you fear of immediate violence. He is currently due to be sentenced at the same court on [edited] October 2025. This is to allow time for a Pre-Sentence Report to be prepared about the offender by the Probation Service, which will give the magistrates more information about their sentencing options. The police's Witness Care Unit will keep you updated about the sentencing hearing and confirm the result. Once sentencing has occurred, this case will be concluded.

"I appreciate that this has been a very difficult time for you. I hope my explanation has helped you to understand more about how I reached my decision. I would also like to sincerely thank you again for supporting this case. Although on this occasion, one of the charges did not continue, we often cannot prosecute serious offences like these without such assistance."

7. Governance and assurance

7.1. In accordance with Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme Standard Operating Practice, the decision-making prosecutor is responsible for informing the Victim Liaison Unit (VLU) of a qualifying decision they have made. They do this by either sending a bespoke letter or email or, when deciding in court, providing the correct information on the hearing record sheet or in the Prosecutor App.

7.2. This should give the VLU enough information to draft and dispatch the VCL scheme communication. In some cases, this will be a paragraph explaining the reasons for the decision. In others, the prosecutor will draft a bespoke letter using a template.

7.3. Our inspection found that, in 86.9% of cases, the prosecutor gave the required information to the VLU. This is much improved from the position in 2020, when prosecutors provided information to the VLU in 40% of cases. Sending an explanation to the VLU now appears to be reasonably well embedded in CPS culture.

7.4. Whether the communication is drafted by the VLU or the prosecutor, the VLU is responsible for quality assuring and dispatching all VCL scheme communications to victims — or, in the case of RASSO letters, to the officer in the case, to be hand-delivered to the victim. All drafted letters should be subject to a peer review by VLU colleagues before being dispatched.

7.5. Peer review by VLU staff is widely used. Of the 420 letters we examined, 362 (86.2%) showed evidence of peer review; in the remaining 58 letters (13.8%) we could find no such evidence.

7.6. However, the adequacy rates for letters that had been peer reviewed and those that had not were virtually identical:

- 37% of letters with evidence of peer review were adequate
- 36% of letters without evidence of peer review were adequate
- overall, 36.9% of letters were adequate.

7.7. This answers the question of whether peer review, in its current form, is improving quality: it appears to add some value in relation to presentation, tone and template-driven elements, but it is not operating as an effective control on overall adequacy.

7.8. The main weaknesses identified in this inspection were not principally administrative or stylistic, but concerned the sufficiency, clarity and correctness of the legal explanation. Weaknesses in the final letter often reflected

weaknesses in the prosecutor's underlying review, case analysis and case strategy. In that context, a peer review process undertaken largely by VLU staff cannot reliably remedy deficiencies in legal reasoning or poorly articulated decision-making.

7.9. The limited impact of peer review on adequacy outcomes therefore reflects the wider structural issue identified in this report: improvements driven by templates, guidance and process have not yet translated into consistently better legal explanations for victims.

7.10. A question we asked in the inspection was whether, in cases where the prosecutor sent an explanation to the VLU and the VLU amended the information provided, it improved the quality. We found that 39.9% of letters were improved by the VLU and 38.1% showed no improvement.

7.11. Inspectors could not determine whether the VLU improved the quality of 22.0% of letters. These were letters where inspectors knew, from the CPS case management system (CMS), that prosecutors had provided input, but there were no copies of the original draft to allow us to assess what, if any changes, had been made.

7.12. From September 2025, the Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE) introduced a national VCL scheme letter quality checklist to replace local versions used in some CPS Areas. This checklist was designed to drive consistency and improve quality standards across the operational business. It reflects the minimum quality standards set out in the level 1 assurance process and includes a new empathy-scoring matrix. It should help teams identify and address quality issues early, so they can be rectified by either the peer reviewer or the drafter. It includes a box at the end for the reviewer to record any required actions. The checklist is available in the VCL template pack in the CMS.

7.13. The VCE fed back that all Areas recognise how necessary it is for VLU staff to be able to have constructive conversations with prosecutors about sub-standard submissions. Still, it is unrealistic of the CPS to expect this to happen across all areas, particularly in an area of the business where adherence to deadlines is strictly monitored.

7.14. Victim liaison officers can be trained on many aspects of the VCL scheme but expecting all VLUs to consist of team members with the confidence and autonomy to recognise and then challenge legal colleagues on legal aspects of the letters is also unrealistic.

7.15. The expectations on VLU staff when carrying out quality assurance should therefore be clearly defined. Their role is to make sure the correct

template has been used, that mandatory content has been included, that the letter is addressed to the correct person, and that it is clear, appropriately worded, empathetic, free from obvious spelling, grammar or formatting errors, and takes account of any identified accessibility needs.

7.16. Where a VLU reviewer identifies that the explanation is unclear or inconsistent with the case history, or appears legally inaccurate or insufficient, the expectation should be that this is raised promptly with the prosecutor or an appropriate legal manager for correction. VLU staff can and should act as an important quality control at the point of dispatch, but they should not be expected to resolve deficiencies in legal reasoning themselves.

7.17. Additionally, the VCE acknowledges a gap in training and products to facilitate empowering victim liaison officers to challenge legal staff.

7.18. The issue identified in this inspection is therefore not confined to the final drafting stage. The legal quality of a VCL scheme letter depends on the quality of the underlying review and decision-making process. Quality assurance at the point of dispatch cannot compensate reliably for weaknesses in case analysis, legal reasoning or case strategy upstream. Any revised quality assurance model must therefore recognise that improving letter quality requires stronger legal ownership of both the decision and the explanation.

7.19. As the finding of this inspection is that there are issues with the quality of the legal content of letters, the CPS may wish to review whether the responsibility for quality assurance of the legal content should sit with the legal area of the business, rather than with the VLUs, whose staff are not legally qualified.

Victim Liaison Unit panels

7.20. All CPS Areas have established a VLU panel, whose duties include assessing a dip sample of sent VCL scheme letters. The aim of the panels is to drive improvement by assessing quality and identifying themes for dissemination across the Area.

7.21. We concluded, in the 2020 HMCPSI report, that there were differences between Areas in how the panels were set up. The head of the VCE told us that this remains the case.

7.22. Panels can include operational delivery staff from the VLU, prosecutors and legal managers. The number of letters discussed by each Area's panel can also vary.

7.23. We were told that the processes for feeding back information gained from panel discussions also varies according to Area. In some Areas, VCL scheme data was taken to casework quality boards as a standing issue; in other Areas it was not.

7.24. While in the past, the work of Area VLU panels has informed change at the national level of the VCE — such as changing template letters, sharing good examples and creating the bank of useful paragraphs — the use of the panels to effect change varies across the Areas, according to the VCE. There appears to be no consistent formal process of feeding the learning arising from the panels back to the VCE. This reduces the positive impact these panels can have on improving the quality of letters throughout England and Wales.

Annex A
Inspection framework

Inspection question

Is the Crown Prosecution Service sending quality letters to victims under the Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) 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 scheme letter quality.

Framework

The framework for this inspection consisted of the overarching inspection question and a set of 16 questions.

From our file read we considered:

- Are VCL scheme letters of the right quality?
- Do Areas' letters provide a quality response?
- Do Areas have a system for quality assuring letters that is effective?
- Is the quality of letters being improved as a result of assurance checks?
- What improvements have been made by CPS Headquarters to the VCL scheme?
- Has policy and guidance at the national level been successfully introduced to Area practices?
- Is there any evidence of performance improvement for VCL scheme letters at Area and national level?

Annex B
File examination data

Answers	All cases		Excluding not applicable	
	Number	%	Number	%
Case type				
Magistrates' courts	238	56.7	238	56.7
Crown Court	112	26.7	112	26.7
Rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO)	70	16.7	70	16.7
Total	420	100	420	100
Area				
Cymru Wales	30	7.1	30	7.1
East Midlands	30	7.1	30	7.1
East of England	30	7.1	30	7.1
London North	28	6.7	28	6.7
London South	32	7.6	32	7.6
Mersey Cheshire	30	7.1	30	7.1
North East	30	7.1	30	7.1
North West	30	7.1	30	7.1
South East	30	7.1	30	7.1
South West	30	7.1	30	7.1
Wessex	30	7.1	30	7.1
West Midlands	30	7.1	30	7.1
Yorkshire & Humberside	30	7.1	30	7.1
Total	420	100	420	100
Type of letter sent				
1. No prosecution or discontinuance; Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme	112	26.7	112	26.7
2. No prosecution or discontinuance; victim withdrawal	81	19.3	81	19.3
3. Offered no evidence; VRR	82	19.5	82	19.5
4. Offered no evidence; victim withdrawal	63	15.0	63	15.0
5. Substantial alteration; decreasing	36	8.6	36	8.6
6. Substantial alteration; increasing	3	0.7	3	0.7
7. RASSO no further action; VRR	39	9.3	39	9.3

Answers	All cases		Excluding not applicable	
	Number	%	Number	%
8. RASSO no further action; victim withdrawal	4	1.0	4	1.0
Total	420	100	420	100
Domestic abuse				
Yes	172	41.0	172	41.0
No	248	59.0	248	59.0
Total	420	100	420	100

Answers	All cases		Excluding not applicable	
	Number	%	Number	%
01. Has the correct letter template been used?				
Yes	379	90.2	379	90.2
No	41	9.8	41	9.8
Total	420	100	420	100
02. Was the addressee correct?				
Yes	404	96.2	404	96.2
No	16	3.8	16	3.8
Total	420	100	420	100
03. Was the explanation understandable/clear (include grammar and use of jargon)?				
Yes	291	69.3	291	69.3
No	129	30.7	129	30.7
Total	420	100	420	100
04. If the answer to question 3 was no, did issues include the use of jargon?				
Yes — sole issue	11	2.6	11	8.5
Yes — multiple issues	60	14.3	60	46.5
No	58	13.8	58	45.0
Not applicable	291	69.3	291	0
Total	420	100	129	100

Answers	All cases		Excluding not applicable	
	Number	%	Number	%
05. Was the explanation sufficient?				
Yes	199	47.4	199	47.4
No	221	52.6	221	52.6
Total	420	100	420	100
06. Was the explanation correct?				
Yes	329	78.3	329	78.3
No	91	21.7	91	21.7
Total	420	100	420	100
07. Was a review offered where appropriate?				
Yes	137	32.6	137	89.0
No — not offered	13	3.1	13	8.4
No — offered incorrectly	4	1.0	4	2.6
Not applicable	266	63.3	266	0
Total	420	100	154	100
08. If a statutory time limit was appropriate, was it explained correctly?				
Yes	18	4.3	18	62.1
No	11	2.6	11	37.9
Not applicable	391	93.1%	391	0
Total	420	100	29	100
09. Was a meeting offered where appropriate?				
Yes	77	18.3	77	92.8
No — not offered	6	1.4	6	7.2
No — not suitable	0	0	0	0
Not applicable	337	80.2	337	0
Total	420	100	83	100
10. Was there empathy in the letter?				
Yes	363	86.4	363	86.4
No	57	13.6	57	13.6
Total	420	100	420	100
10A. Where delay is a known reason for victim or witness disengagement, or for a victim supporting a decision to stop a case, does the letter acknowledge the impact of delay?				

Answers	All cases		Excluding not applicable	
	Number	%	Number	%
Yes	8	1.9	8	53.3
No	7	1.7	7	46.7
Not applicable	405	96.4	405	0
Total	420	100	15	100
11. Did the letter contain spelling mistakes?				
Yes — one, but this was not the name of the victim or defendant	23	5.5	23	5.5
Yes — one only, but this was the name of the victim or defendant	5	1.2	5	1.2
Yes — more than one minor spelling mistake	4	1.0	4	1.0
No	388	92.4	388	92.4
Total	420	100	420	100
12. Was the letter of an adequate standard?				
Yes	155	36.9	155	36.9
No	265	63.1	265	63.1
Total	420	100	420	100
12A. If the answer to question 12 was yes, was the letter of a better than adequate standard?				
Yes	43	10.2	43	27.6
No	113	26.9	113	72.4
Not applicable	264	62.9	264	0
Total	420	100	156	100
13. Did the prosecutor provide input (either by drafting this part of the letter or by sending a paragraph to Victim Liaison Unit) on the explanation of the decision reached?				
Yes — the prosecutor drafted this part of the letter in the letter template on the case management system	236	56.2	236	56.2
Yes — the prosecutor sent a paragraph/information to the VLU explaining the decision	129	30.7	129	30.7
No	9	2.1	9	2.1
Unknown	46	11.0	46	11.0

Answers	All cases		Excluding not applicable	
	Number	%	Number	%
Total	420	100	420	100
14. Was the final letter subject to a peer review before being sent?				
Yes	362	86.2	362	86.2
No	58	13.8	58	13.8
Unknown	0	0	0	0
Not applicable	0	0	0	0
Total	420	100	420	100
15. If the prosecutor did draft the explanation section of the letter, or send a paragraph to the VLU and the VLU amended the information provided, did it improve the quality?				
Yes	129	30.7	129	39.9
No	123	29.3	123	38.1
Unknown	71	16.9	71	22.0
Not applicable	97	23.1	97	0
Total	420	100	323	100
16. Did the letter consider any identified accessibility needs?				
Yes	7	1.7	7	31.8
No	15	3.6	15	68.2
Not applicable	398	94.8	0	0
Total	420	100	22	100

Annex C
Glossary

Glossary

Case management system (CMS)

An IT system for case management used by the CPS, which records most of the details of cases and provides management information and data. Through links with police systems, the case management system receives electronic case material that has replaced paper files.

Code for Crown Prosecutors (the Code)

A public document, issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions, that sets out the framework for prosecution decision-making. Cases should proceed to charge only if there is sufficient evidence against a suspect to provide a realistic prospect of conviction and it is in the public interest to prosecute.

Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victims' Code)

Sets out a victim's rights and the minimum standards of service that organisations must provide to victims of crime. Its aim is to improve victims' experience of the criminal justice system by providing them with the support and information they need. It was published in October 2013 and last updated on 29 January 2025.

Crown Court

The court which deals with graver allegations of criminal offences, such as murder, rape and serious assaults. Some allegations can be heard at either the Crown Court or the magistrates' courts.

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

The main public agency for conducting criminal cases in England and Wales, responsible for:

- prosecuting criminal cases investigated by the police and other investigating bodies
- advising the police on cases for possible prosecution
- reviewing cases submitted by the police
- determining any charges in more serious or complex cases
- preparing cases for court
- presenting cases at court.

It has been operating since 1986 and is headed by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Crown Prosecution Service Area

The CPS operates across England and Wales, with 14 regional teams prosecuting cases locally. Each of these 14 Crown Prosecution Service Areas is headed by a Chief Crown Prosecutor and works closely with local police forces and other criminal justice partners.

CPS Direct

An out-of-hours service within the CPS that provides the police with immediate charging advice and decisions for serious crimes or suspects requiring remand during evenings, weekends and bank holidays.

Defendant

A person who has been charged with, or summonsed for, a criminal offence.

Evidence-led prosecution

A CPS approach allowing cases, particularly domestic abuse cases, to proceed without victim support and testimony. Police and prosecutors gather evidence and build evidentially strong cases so that the prosecution is not focused solely on victims' statements. This means that if victims cannot or are unable to support the prosecution, cases may still proceed in an evidence-led prosecution.

Full Code Test

A method by which a prosecutor decides whether to bring a prosecution, based on the Code. A prosecution must only start or continue when the case has passed both stages of the Full Code Test:

1. the evidential stage
2. the public interest stage.

The Full Code Test should be applied when all outstanding reasonable lines of enquiry have been pursued — or before the investigation is completed, if the prosecutor is satisfied that any further evidence or material is unlikely to affect the application of the Full Code Test, whether in favour of or against a prosecution.

Lie on file

In the Crown Court, the judge has the power to order that entire indictments, or some counts on an indictment, are to lie on the file. There is no verdict, so the proceedings are not formally terminated. There can be no further proceedings against the defendant on those matters without the leave of the Crown Court or the Court of Appeal. The procedure is particularly useful when the defendant has pleaded guilty or has been convicted of other counts, in the same indictment or another indictment, and convictions for the remaining offences would have no significant impact on the sentence; and it is no longer in the public interest to proceed on the remaining matters.

Pre-charge decision

The process by which the police and CPS decide whether there is enough evidence for a suspect to be prosecuted. The process is governed by the Director's Guidance on Charging.

Prosecutor

A prosecutor in England and Wales who is independent from the police and other investigators. CPS prosecutors decide whether to bring criminal charges, decide on appropriate charges, advise investigators, prepare cases and present them at court.

Rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO)

Allegations of rape and other serious sexual offences perpetrated against men, women or children. In the CPS, the prosecution of RASSO cases is undertaken separately from other cases, in RASSO Units or teams.

Review

The process whereby a CPS prosecutor determines that a case received from the police satisfies, or continues to satisfy, the legal test for prosecution in the Code. This is one of the most important functions of the CPS.

Statutory time limit

These offences carry a maximum penalty of six months' imprisonment. Proceedings must be commenced within six months of the date the offence was committed.

Substantially altered charge

A change in charge which, in the opinion of the crown prosecutor, alters the overall seriousness of the case, or which the victim is likely to perceive as altering the overall seriousness of the case, and which is likely to affect the sentence the court would impose (if the defendant were convicted of all charges). In determining seriousness, crown prosecutors will take into account the maximum penalty permissible by law.

Universal Service

A pilot scheme designed to improve the minimum level of service and communication the CPS provides to all victims of crime. Part of a broader five-year Victim Transformation Programme.

Victim

- A person who has made an allegation.
- A person who has experienced harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss, which was directly caused by a criminal offence.
- A close relative (or a nominated family spokesperson) of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offence.

The term 'victim' also encompasses other terms such as 'complainant' and survivor'.

Victim Centre of Excellence (VCE)

A central CPS team established to oversee victim-related standards, communications and guidance, and to promote consistency and improvement in the quality of correspondence and services provided to victims.

Victim Communication and Liaison (VCL) scheme

A victim in a case should be informed by the CPS of any decision not to prosecute, to stop a case or substantially alter a charge. In the main, victims are informed by letter, and vulnerable or intimidated victims must be notified of a decision within one working day.

Victim liaison officer

A member of CPS staff who supports communication with victims under the VCL scheme, including preparing and quality assuring letters and helping to make sure victims receive information about qualifying CPS decisions.

Victim Liaison Unit (VLU)

The CPS unit responsible for managing the VCL scheme, including preparing, quality assuring and sending letters to victims following qualifying CPS decisions.

Victim Personal Statement (VPS)

When a victim explains to the court how a crime has affected them. If a defendant is found guilty, the court will take the VPS into account, along with all the other evidence, when deciding on an appropriate sentence.

Witness care officer

The central point of contact in a Witness Care Unit for a victim or witness, from the time an offender is charged to the end of the court case.

Witness Care Unit

A predominantly police staffed unit which provides information and support to victims and witnesses in cases progressing through the criminal justice system.

Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme

This scheme provides victims of crime with a specifically designed process to exercise their right to review certain CPS decisions, such as the decision not to start a prosecution, or to stop a prosecution. If a new decision is required, it may be appropriate to institute or reinstitute criminal proceedings. The right to request a review of a decision not to prosecute under the VRR scheme applies to decisions that have the effect of being final, made by any crown prosecutor, regardless of their grade or position in the organisation. It is important to note that the right referred to in the context of the VRR scheme is the right to request a review of a final decision. It is not a guarantee that proceedings will be instituted or reinstituted.

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