



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Justice

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Speeding up Justice and Improving Services  
for Victims and Witnesses

13 March 2014

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Justice

### Speeding up Justice and Improving Services for Victims and Witnesses

13 March 2014

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Sydney Anderson  
Mr Stewart Dickson  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mr William Humphrey  
Mr Seán Lynch  
Mr Alban Maginness  
Ms Rosaleen McCorley  
Mr Patsy McGlone  
Mr Jim Wells

**Witnesses:**

Ms Maura Campbell	Department of Justice
Ms Veronica Holland	Department of Justice
Mr Chris Matthews	Department of Justice
Ms Jean Moore	Department of Justice

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I invite the officials to the table. I advise members that Include Youth has provided a copy of its written submission to the Department on the consultation on the proposal for the introduction of statutory time limits in the youth courts. NIACRO and Victim Support have provided information and a copy of their joint submission on the same issue. I welcome Maura Campbell, Veronica Holland, Jean Moore and Chris Matthews. For members' clarification, we will take the two separately; we will proceed with unavoidable delay and then with improving witness services. It is the same format — opening remarks and then questions from members. I take it, Maura, that you are leading.

**Ms Maura Campbell (Department of Justice):** Yes, I am. Thanks very much, Chair. As you say, we are happy to do it as a game of two halves, so to speak. This is the latest in our series of regular reports on speeding up justice, and we are also taking the opportunity to give you our first report on the delivery of the new victim and witness strategy.

Starting with speeding up justice, when we gave our last report in July I said that we were not expecting to see a dramatic change in performance over the following period, and that has proved to be the case. As you will have seen from the briefing pack, performance in the Crown Court, and for adult and youth charge cases, has stayed fairly level. There has been some improvement in both adult and youth summons cases, but they are still taking a lot longer than charged, so they are longer than we would like them to be.

We are now generating new performance reports using data taken from the Causeway system. That meets a recommendation by the Criminal Justice Inspection. In developing the Causeway reports, we have taken the opportunity to add some new measures to give us a more comprehensive picture of how the system is performing, including end-to-end measurement from the start of proceedings to the completion of a case. We are also now measuring performance in percentage terms. The principal measurement continues to be average days so that we can continue to make broad comparisons with previous reports, but we have changed the way in which we measure the time taken at key stages in order to give greater clarity about how individual organisations are performing, which should give us a better insight into where some of the blockages may be. We have provided a bit more detail on the change in reporting in the paper at annex C.

Since our previous update, we have been conducting a consultation on the equality impact assessment of youth engagement clinics. We are due to come back on 3 April to brief you on the outcome of consultation and the proposed way forward. We received six replies, which were supportive of the concept of clinics. Although the responses highlighted some areas of concern, those were essentially the same issues that we had identified ourselves, through the equality impact assessment (EQIA) process and the evaluation of the clinics. All those issues are being addressed, but, as I said, we will be coming back shortly to brief you in more detail.

We have also been consulting on our proposals for statutory time limits in the youth court. That consultation had been due to close on 25 February but has been extended at the request of some organisations that asked for extra time to respond. Although that consultation is still under way, it is clear from the responses so far that some organisations continue to have concerns about the proposed start point for the time limit, although there has been support pretty much across the board for statutory time limits. We want to take time to consider the responses carefully and come back to you with proposals on the way forward.

In the interim, we might seek to have further discussion with stakeholders about what more we might do at the front end of the process, because that seems to us to be the root of the concerns expressed. For instance, with the agreement of the Criminal Justice Board, we have recently been looking at whether there is scope to increase the use of charge in youth cases where that would be an appropriate and proportionate response, for instance, for prolific offenders, young people already in custody or those who failed to respond to a summons in the past. We are also looking at further ways of cutting down the time taken to serve a summons, because that is what has been taking up the bulk of the time in summons cases. It is still at an early stage, but today would be a good opportunity for the Committee to share any views with us as we decide how we might take that forward.

The papers on speeding up justice also give an overview of the draft Justice Bill, which we hope to introduce soon. If the timetable that you are discussing for the Legal Aid and Coroners' Courts Bill is followed, that would allow us to make progress on that Bill before recess as well. It also includes the work that is under way to reduce turnaround times for forensics. In summary, the briefing pack for today on speeding up justice covers a wide range of activity. We are happy to answer any questions or to provide detail on any of the issues covered.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much. The purpose of this is to do away with avoidable delay or how to tackle it. How far has the Department progressed on the targets that it set itself, and what are the main obstacles to achieving what should be realised?

**Ms M Campbell:** We have made fairly steady progress since 2006, which was when we started measuring performance against performance standards that were developed by the Criminal Justice Board. It was the Department in collaboration with the principal agencies. Although at times we have failed to match up to those standards, even if we met them, there is still a chunk of time that we would want to take out of the system if we can, particularly in relation to youth cases, where we have had a focus over the past year or two. We will want to take any opportunity that we can to reduce the time further.

We have probably exhausted the scope to make much more progress under the recommendations that we had previously from Criminal Justice Inspection. They have taken us part of the way, and we now need to get into the substantive reforms of the system, some of which will require legislation. That is why we are keen to bring forward the Justice Bill, as it will tackle issues such as committal, help us with encouraging earlier guilty pleas, make the summons process more streamlined and so forth. Statutory case management should help us as well.

There is more that we can do procedurally to streamline processes wherever possible. During the consultation on statutory time limits (STL) we tested proposals on how far we could go with that, and we will be analysing the responses as part of the STL consultation.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Has the Causeway system highlighted or thrown up a particular type of case or location that is not as fast as others? I accept that this is a bit anecdotal, but you get the impression sometimes that a particular judge in a particular area does not allow delay to happen. Are you picking that up from the database or do you still look at it from a general point of view?

**Ms M Campbell:** The Causeway allows us to break the data up in different ways, which is helpful. I do not think that our analysis to date has highlighted any particular geographic differences. More serious offences will tend to take longer, which is fair enough.

**Ms Jean Moore (Department of Justice):** The reports are still at a fairly high level and would not drill into the level of detail that you are talking about for individual courts. We look at regional performance across the piece and whether one region is outperforming another and the reasons behind that. Generally, areas are consistent in performance. The blockages that we are already aware of, for example in the time taken to serve a summons, are in the frame before we move to the Causeway system.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** They are consistent right across. There is no particular region where, say, the PSNI is better at presenting statements to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS), which speeds it up. You are not seeing any regional disparity. It is pretty consistent.

**Ms Moore:** Nothing particularly stark.

**Ms M Campbell:** It is pretty much the same issues across the board and the same interventions that will be required.

**Mr Lynch:** Thanks for the presentation. Maura, you said that from the report in July there had been no big change. What are the key problems blocking major change?

**Ms M Campbell:** We have seen a fair bit of change in charge cases; we have made pretty good inroads into those. The real problem, as we see it, is in summons cases. As I said, a big chunk of time tends to be taken up with the service of summons, which is why we are keen to see whether there is more that we can do with that. There are some provisions in the Bill that will help with that, but we are looking to see if we can go further.

Under the youth engagement clinic process, we developed what we refer to as immediate summons. If the young person did not take up the offer of a diversion, the summons could be served on them on the day rather than sending it out and waiting four or five weeks for it to be responded to or perhaps not responded to and having to reissue it. We may be able to take the learning from that and find ways of applying it more broadly. There are pros and cons with the different options for doing that, but that is the sort of thing that we are trying to work through at the moment.

**Mr Lynch:** Is that what you meant when you said that you are looking at the front end of the process?

**Ms M Campbell:** Yes. An issue that was raised with us in discussion with the Criminal Justice Inspection was whether we should be trying to move more towards the use of charge. At the moment, only about one third of cases proceed by charge and two thirds by summons. Summons is proving to be more inefficient in getting cases through the process. However, we want to proceed cautiously because, as soon as you move into the realm of charge, you raise the prospect of the young person either being out on bail, during which breach of bail could re-criminalise them, or having to be remanded in custody. We are very keen to avoid bringing young people into custody unless absolutely necessary, particularly when, over the past few years, we have made good progress in reducing the number of young people who have been remanded in custody. We think that it could be justified for certain types of offenders. However, that would be quite a development on what we are doing, which is why we wanted to take the views of stakeholders. If we wanted to be more proactive on charge, we would have to do further consultation and perhaps pilot that. Those are the issues that we are trying to progress at the moment.

**Mr Lynch:** What has been the reduction in the number of young people in custody? Have you a percentage?

**Ms M Campbell:** I do not have the figures to hand, but the last time I heard was that there are 22 young people in custody. I would have to check that for you, but I know that there has been quite a marked decrease over the past number of years.

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you again. As regards your focus for the next six months, your paper refers to:

*"full roll-out of the Victim and Witness Care Unit's coverage".*

What do you envisage when you say "full roll-out"? Will it be available to every victim and witness?

**Ms M Campbell:** Yes, the intention is — that is sort of dipping into the next section.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Tom, we are going to do it in two separate bits if that is OK.

**Mr Elliott:** OK; that is all right.

I will come to my other point on time limits. There is a big issue, as the Department proposes not to implement what the youth justice review report said. There are questions on that every time you come here, and we never seem to make any progress. Are you totally fixated on not progressing the youth justice review recommendation?

**Ms M Campbell:** The youth justice review was the starting point for many stakeholders. As there was a recommendation in that, they were measuring how well our proposals would fit with it. We are responding to several independent reports, including earlier reports from the Criminal Justice Inspection. This issue has been raised in the past. In the consultation document, we went into an awful lot of detail to set out why we thought that there might be difficulties with starting at the point of arrest. As you noted, we have explained that at this table before.

We have also sought to set out in detail the other initiatives to support improvements in case-processing time from end to end, basically the whole way through the process, so that statutory time limits are not the only show in town. Despite that, despite extensive pre-consultation and despite our discussions with stakeholders during the consultation, there still seems to be a strong view among some organisations — principally in the youth lobby but throughout the voluntary sector — that we should have an earlier start point.

The key issue for us is that we want to try to avoid any perverse incentives arising as a result of whatever option we choose. Some people suggested starting at the point of accused informed. However, that is not a statutorily defined point but an administrative one. Therefore, as things stand, we could not implement that in the way that people are suggesting.

However, given the concern, it is not something that we can easily set aside. We are not going to ignore it; we need to look at the options. One option is that we revisit the start point. We will have to put a range of options to the Minister. There may be other options that we could consider, including looking at what more we could do procedurally at the front end to allay concerns. We may have further discussions with stakeholders about whether that would go some way to meeting their concerns.

**Mr Elliott:** However, at this stage, you are opposed to the principle of implementing the youth justice review recommendation.

**Ms M Campbell:** We have been very open that we think that the appropriate start point is charge and complaint, and we have set out our reasons for that.

**Mr Elliott:** So, the answer is yes.

**Ms M Campbell:** Essentially, yes.

**Mr A Maginness:** Your target is 120 days; is that correct, Maura?

**Ms M Campbell:** That is the timescale that we proposed; yes.

**Mr A Maginness:** The argument from the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and others is that that is not a very stretching time period. How do you respond to that?

**Ms M Campbell:** The view that we get from the statutory agencies is that it should be quite challenging. Our latest figure for charge case for the youth courts is about 109 days. That is an average, so there will be cases that take longer than that on the basis of charge. The figure for summons cases is 217 days. When we were looking at 120 days, the figure was over 240 days; it was going to be about half of that. In summons cases it is quite challenging.

**Mr A Maginness:** For charge cases, however, you are talking about an average of more than 100 days, and your statutory time limits are 120 days. That statutory time limit, for the charge cases anyway, does not seem to me to be that demanding.

**Ms M Campbell:** One option is that you set a shorter timescale for charge cases than for summons cases. However, that creates the perverse incentive that you might want to proceed by way of summons because it gives you more time. We have had to weigh that in the balance as well.

**Mr A Maginness:** Could you not start with charge cases and leave summons cases? Would that be a way of dealing with the situation? I do not know whether you could do that.

**Mr Chris Matthews (Department of Justice):** Legislatively, yes, you can implement in a phased way. As you have identified, the problem in our system is not really charge cases, which happen relatively quickly and are relatively small in number. If we want to tackle the greater problem, we need to tackle summons cases. In a sense, it would be easier for us to deal with charge cases, but we would not really be tackling where problems in youth cases lie. We might make some improvement, and that would be good in those cases, but we would not be tackling where the real problems are.

**Mr A Maginness:** If the average time for summons cases is 240 days or thereabouts, 120 days, although a massive improvement, is far too lax as regards the length of time taken to complete cases. That is a serious problem.

**Mr Matthews:** That is why summons is our focus. The time taken for summons cases is massively too long for people who are trying to move on with their life, particularly young people. A court case may come back two thirds of a year after whatever it is they have done. When they think that it may have settled, it comes back to them. We have heard stories of people leaving school, getting a job and then proceedings come in —

**Mr A Maginness:** And disrupt the whole thing.

**Mr Matthews:** Absolutely. That is why our focus is on summons cases. The other thing is that statutory time limits are not really meant to set out your average performance; they are meant to be a statutory statement of the absolute maximum time that the system will tolerate for a case to happen. That is in a similar sort of way to statute bar cases, where you have a total of six months to initiate proceedings, but you should be aiming to do it more quickly. So, with statutory time limits, we are not trying to say to the agencies: "You can relax: you have 120 days." Rather, 120 days is the absolute maximum that they should be taking, and if they can do it more quickly, they should. That is where reforms such as statutory case management come in because, at the other end of case initiation, they set out the things that the judge will expect you to have resolved by the time you bring a case to court. Things like agreeing witnesses, evidence and that kind of thing can just be agreed on the papers. So, even before the case is in front of a judge, we are looking to the PPS and the defence to manage cases more effectively than they do at the minute.

**Mr A Maginness:** Is there any way of making a statutory point of beginning in a summons case? Maura, you talked about it being an administrative action, but is there any way of constructing a statutory beginning to a summons case?

**Mr Matthews:** That is the tricky thing. The statutory start, I guess, is the minute when the complaint is laid. So what you are talking about is making a statutory event of the point where the police say, "We intend to write to the PPS about you". Technically, yes, we could do that. However, I think that the definitional problems would cause difficulties. You would have to be able to define precisely the

circumstances which oblige the police to say to someone, "We are bringing proceedings against you". That would probably require the police to make a determination about the state of readiness of the case, and that brings into it a kind of unavoidable subjectivity.

What we have at the minute is a statute bar which is unavoidable. If you want to bring proceedings, it has to be done within six months; and then, once they are brought, the second time limit kicks in, which is also unavoidable. When you bring charges against someone, the second clock starts ticking. If we were to bring that forward to the point at which the police decide that the case is solid enough to proceed, all that may mean is that police officers become very cautious about when they decide that the case is ready, and that point is not massively different from the point at which the charge is laid.

In Scotland, the system is very different to ours. They have time limits. Before a time limit is initiated, the police have to approach the Procurator Fiscal, who says that the police are authorised to investigate the case and how long they have. That is a very different system to ours, but it means that there is some independent oversight of the way in which time limits are managed. That is really the resistance that we have to moving beyond the point of charge. Where you have operational independence and decision-making, it is very difficult to define in legislation how that should be exercised for every case.

**Ms M Campbell:** And if we just simply made that a statutory point, there is a risk that, in practice, it would occur at a later stage because it starts the clock ticking. One of the issues that came through in some of the consultation responses was that young people are saying that there is a problem with how they are communicated with in the early stages. That is something that we would need to address as well. If there is reluctance in the system to engage formally with the young person until a later point, because it will kick-start a time limit, that could work against providing better information and helping them to make better decisions about their options.

We have to look at all this in the mix, and look at it holistically. Everything has to come back to the best interests of the child. We have to be wary that, in doing one thing, we do not create a problem elsewhere. I think that there is probably a need for some further discussion with stakeholders, which will take a bit more time, but I would rather do that than plough ahead with something with a body of concern about how we are doing it. We should see if there is some way in which we can reach some sort of consensus around it.

As I say, we will have to brief the Minister, and we will put all the available options to him; the one you mentioned about starting with charge cases only could be an option and we could look at the pros and cons of that. However, until the Minister has reached a view on it, I do not think that we can say where we might go with it. I think that there is some further work to be done.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Just on that particular point, we have the prison review team and the youth justice review which come to similar conclusions on statutory time limits. Then we have papers today from NIACRO, Victim Support and Include Youth which more or less say that that is the best way forward, but the Department seems to be at odds with that. What engagement do you have, particularly with the two review groups and the community and voluntary sector, in explaining your position, or is it a matter of, "We think that you are wrong and we are going to go about it in a particular way"?

**Ms M Campbell:** The progress against the youth justice review is now being monitored by the Criminal Justice Inspection, which we have a long-standing relationship with anyway. A lot of what we have been doing through the speeding up justice programme has been informed by its recommendations. Its report into statutory time limits did not specify arrest as the appropriate point; it left that as a matter for the Department.

The Prison Reform Trust review has oversight arrangements in place that we feed into, so we report on what we are doing there. However, it is difficult in some ways in that we are reporting against a series of slightly different recommendations. We have to go back to what the Minister is committed to, which is the introduction of time limits within the mandate of this Assembly for youth cases and then to review whether and how we might get into the adult sphere at a future point. Our starting point is what he had concluded on the foot of the Criminal Justice Inspection reports.

The recommendations from those other reports came along as we were working our way through this and as we were already having discussions at Criminal Justice Board level about how we might take this forward.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Chathaoirigh. Thanks very much for the presentation.

It has been suggested that it would be better if this was broken down and that each stage would have an individual time limit, because there are different agencies involved. You can see how, if one agency takes too much time, it might impact on another agency. What do you think: do you think that it should happen like that?

**Ms M Campbell:** We looked at that at an earlier stage when we were deciding whether there should be one time limit. There are lots of different ways that you can use time limits. We could see pros and cons with that, and I suppose that the con was that, if the police's time limit was about to be breached, they would just fire the case on when it is not quite ready to the Public Prosecution Service and then it would have to take time out of its time limit to go back with requests for further information. Again, it is all down to anticipating behaviours; about what would happen in practice if you did it in a particular way.

We gave the options to the Criminal Justice Board and it favoured a single time limit as something that would be a bit less bureaucratic and easier to manage. We do not want to create a mini-industry within the justice system and generate confusion about what point we are at or what is meant to be happening. We felt, initially at least, that it was probably the best way forward, but it is an issue that we have looked at.

**Ms McCorley:** If it were to be the case that it looked as if some agencies were taking too long, would you look at that?

**Ms M Campbell:** Now that we have the Causeway reporting, it allows us to look at what is happening underneath the time limit. If we are having difficulty in meeting time limits or if we are coming in very tight, we can look to see why that is happening and where the problems are occurring. We have more information now that we can use and we can start to break it down a bit more than we did previously.

**Ms McCorley:** There has also been a suggestion that there should be something in the proposals examining the possibility of having a mechanism for looking at how it is impacting on the people involved — the victims, the offender and their families — so that they are not treated as observers in the process and that they are actually included and they understand the process. Sometimes, people do not understand what is happening and, while it is about them, it seems to go on past them as though they were merely observers. Do you think that there is a place for a mechanism to ensure that people understand what is happening?

**Ms M Campbell:** I think that that is a very good suggestion. Certainly, on our victims strand of work, one of the things that we are looking at is better information and communication, helping to demystify the process for people and giving them more real-time information about what is happening in the case. I would be happy to pick up on that. As you say, it is not just the victims or witnesses, it is sometimes on the offenders side or the accused. Often, they feel as if they are in the dark about what is happening and what is going on. That is a very fair observation and it is something that we are happy to take away and look at.

**Ms McCorley:** Would you consider having support in place? People can be traumatised at different stages along the way depending on what might arise. Would you consider that?

**Ms M Campbell:** There have been some improvements, certainly as far as victims and witnesses are concerned. We will talk shortly about the roll-out of the victims and witnesses care unit, and, in fact, that now includes an initial needs assessment and reviews of need as a victim or witness moves through the process. There is a mechanism for that. If and when we introduce a statutory time limit, I suppose that one of the things that we will have to be alive to is whether that will have an additional impact on victims or witnesses that was not there before.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** No other member has indicated that they want to ask a question. We will move into the victims aspect.

**Ms M Campbell:** We were almost naturally moving into victims and witnesses.



We have moved on a bit since we submitted the papers. At this stage, we are almost halfway through the first year of our first two-year action plan. By the end of this month, we anticipate that we should have achieved 18 of the 30 actions that we set out.

One area where it looks like there may be a little bit of slippage in is in finalising new guidance on supporting intimidated witnesses, which we had hoped to have completed by the end of March. We have had it in draft form since early December, but it is just taking a bit longer than anticipated to get final sign-off from all the agencies. Some have responded, but we want to check that the detail of that is right before we publish it. I do not think that there are any significant issues with it. It is just about people getting the time to give it their attention. We aim to have that finalised during the first quarter of the new business year. Other than that, the remainder of the targets appear to be on target. We will continue to monitor those closely.

On the key achievements this year, the further roll-out of the victim and witness care unit model has been significant. I think that the intention is for that to be completely rolled out by the end of April. So, we are very close to that having full coverage across all areas of Northern Ireland. We also now have in place our new arrangements for victim personal statements, which we briefed the Committee on towards the end of last year. We have extended remote live link facilities and are well under way with the pilot registered intermediary schemes. Yesterday, we received our 100th request for a registered intermediary for cases involving vulnerable persons, including young children. That is working well.

We have also just published a new autism guide for criminal justice professionals. That was not part of this action plan, but was in response to a new cross-departmental autism strategy. I mention it because it is another useful tool for us in supporting vulnerable victims and witnesses as well as vulnerable suspects and defendants.

Looking ahead, we plan to come back to you in the near future with a draft of the victim charter, with a view to launching a consultation on it before the summer. We discussed the charter at a meeting of the victims champions forum earlier this week and we have asked the agencies to plan for its introduction, initially on a non-statutory basis. We thought that, rather than waiting for the faster, fairer justice Bill to get through — it will come behind the legal aid Bill — we would go ahead and publish that on a non-statutory basis by around the end of the calendar year and put it on a statutory footing the following year. That would allow us to meet the deadline for transposing the EU directive on establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime.

Our next report will provide a further update on the charter and it is also likely to cover the work that is under way to reduce waiting times in court, improve information sharing and the outcome of the allocation of this year's victims of crimes fund. By that stage, we should also have the latest results from the Northern Ireland victim and witness survey and some other research that we have under way. We are happy to take any questions on the victims and witnesses papers.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Again, thank you very much for that. I will begin. You outlined some of what you described as key achievements. If someone was observing this from this time 18 months ago, would they say that the changes were noticeable and that there has been a step change in the approach to this issue?

**Ms M Campbell:** We have had some really good feedback from some of the voluntary organisations, including Victim Support, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Nexus, for instance, on the difference that the victim and witness care unit is making. Those organisations have noticed an appreciable difference in how victims are being treated with that new service.

The registered intermediaries is something that we have not had before; it is completely new, and the feedback on that has been very positive to date. We will formally evaluate that at the end of the pilot, which runs to the end of November, but the indications so far are very good. The feedback from victims and witnesses in particular has been that they have felt better supported through the process to date, even in cases where there has not been disclosure or it has not got to court.

The fact that an extra effort was made to allow more vulnerable people to try to provide evidence has been very much appreciated. We have had direct feedback already from those areas but we need to continue to more formally evaluate these service changes. I know that the victim and care unit project board has been looking at building in evaluations as we go. There was a small-scale evaluation before we started the roll-out after the pilot, just to identify any immediate issues that needed to be

taken into account in the design. There will need to be ongoing review of what is happening there just to make sure that it is delivering the service that is intended.

**Ms Veronica Holland (Department of Justice):** The victim and witness care unit is the big one. As a result of the registered intermediaries scheme we are seeing disclosure from children as young as two or three years of age. About a third of the cases that are coming through at the moment involve young children and, given the offences and vulnerabilities that that involves, it is largely those with learning disabilities or very young children who have been the victims of sexual offences and assaults. The big difference is that in cases that came through previously, the police would have said that they could not take the case forward because of the vulnerabilities or difficulties that an individual had. That is making a material difference in ensuring that justice is provided to victims and witnesses as they go through the system. Those are the two big things.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** You talked about feedback; is there some sort of recording process so that if you are speaking to particular agencies that that is recorded and can be tracked in future?

**Ms Holland:** We are taking feedback on the registered intermediaries scheme from the police, the Public Prosecution Service, counsel involved in the cases and the judiciary. We will look at the process for each of those cases, the way in which they have worked, what is deemed to be the benefits of them and any difficulties that have been encountered and try to take that into account in taking the scheme forward.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Is there any strategy to put that into the public domain through some sort of reporting mechanism?

**Ms M Campbell:** We will do an evaluation report at the end of the pilot and I imagine that we will make that available.

**Mr Elliott:** I was trying to establish the six-month focus and, in particular, the victims and witnesses programme. How will that be rolled out, and will it apply to all victims and witnesses throughout Northern Ireland?

**Ms M Campbell:** As of the end of April it will apply to all victims and witnesses; that is the intention. There are two offices in operation; it started with an office in Belfast and there is now an office open in Foyle, which is picking up a number of other areas. As far as we are aware, that is on target so we are making good progress with that.

**Mr Elliott:** Will one office in Belfast and one in Foyle cover all of Northern Ireland?

**Ms M Campbell:** Most of the contact with victims is by telephone. In the past, it would have been by letter, so it is a step in the right direction. There can be a facility for face-to-face contact in certain cases, but that would not be the norm; it would mostly be telephone contact. It was felt that the two-centre model would be the best way of delivering that.

**Mr Elliott:** How did victims and witnesses feel about the assessments or audits being carried out mainly by way of telephone contact as opposed to direct contact?

**Ms M Campbell:** The feedback has been mainly from organisations that represent victims, because they can compare the before and after. The main difference they see is that instead of quite legalistic letters going out, it is a person and a named contact who the victim can contact at any time if they want an update on the case. Plus, there would be regular contact with that individual when there is anything to let them know about. Requests from victims for direct contact tend to be fairly low. There are certain circumstances in which they can seek a meeting with the prosecution service, for instance. I think that the vast majority of victims are happy enough just getting the information. I do not think that the fact that it is not being delivered face to face is necessarily proving to be an issue.

**Mr Elliott:** Are they proactive in giving that information and do not necessarily wait until the victim or witness phones up — they actually try to be proactive and say that there has been a development?

**Ms M Campbell:** If there has been a development in the case, they will be proactive and let the victim know about it, but sometimes there can be periods when not much happens. The victim can contact

them in the interim to check if there is anything going on. I know that the PPS is also looking at the development of a victim information portal whereby victims can go online to see whether there have been any developments in their case. It is working on that at present. It is one of the measures that we intend to support through the victim of crime fund.

**Ms McCorley:** I have a brief question, go raibh maith agat. We went on a visit to the centre in Antrim for victims of sexual crimes. I am just wondering how that service has been progressing. It had just been opened when we went to visit. What is the update on that?

**Ms M Campbell:** Work on victims of sexual and domestic violence is being led by colleagues in the community safety unit through the domestic and sexual violence strategy. I am afraid that I might not be entirely up to speed with that. As far as I understand, progress on that has been good.

**Ms Holland:** We have had good reports of the work that has been involved in that.

**Ms M Campbell:** We have been keeping in contact with colleagues with a view to seeing whether, in the coming financial year, we might be able to help, through the victim-of-crime fund, with the development of the role of independent sexual and domestic violence advisers, which I think is progressing. That will be another enhancement to the service. Certainly, we can find out for you whether there have been any other developments and let you know.

**Ms Holland:** With regard to the crime fund, we are hopefully looking at just short of £100,000. That money would go towards both the sexual and domestic violence advisers for the training of those staff and the roll-out of the pilot scheme. So, we hope to be able to give a chunk of money towards those measures, which have obviously produced benefits with regard to the Sexual Assault Referral Centre.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** There are no other questions. I thank the four of you for being here and giving us evidence this afternoon. Thank you very much.