

Response ID ANON-6F6Y-6F8N-D

Submitted to Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill
Submitted on 2026-09-24 23:40:59

Introduction

Confirmation of having read the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee's Privacy Notice.

I confirm that I have read the privacy notice.:

Yes

What is your name?

Name:
Dr Zhraa Alhaboby, Senior Lecturer in Biomedical and Health Sciences at The Open University (Profile: <https://profiles.open.ac.uk/zhraa-alhaboby>)

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If you are providing a submission on behalf of an organisation or business, please state its name.

Organisation:

The Committee for Justice has agreed to publish all responses as part of the survey results. If you would like to have your survey results anonymised and for us not to publish your name or organisation, please indicate so here.

I am content for my information, including details of my name and organisation, to be published in the survey results.

Clauses 1 and 2 - The Commissioner

Clause 1 establishes the Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime for Northern Ireland, who will be appointed by the Department of Justice. It introduces Schedule 1 which relates to the constitution and operation of the Commissioner and the office. Do you agree with Clause 1 and Schedule 1 of the Bill?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I support the establishment of a statutory Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime for Northern Ireland. I have carried out research addressing the cyber-victimisation of disabled people in Northern Ireland. I presented this work as part of the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS) in Parliament Buildings to NGOs and policymakers, organised an awareness-raising event in collaboration with the Hate Crime Advocacy Service and Victim Support Northern Ireland, and have published policy briefs and an academic paper:

- <https://kess.org.uk/2026/05/13/the-cyber-victimisation-of-disabled-adults-in-northern-ireland-evidence-from-a-mixed-methods-study/>
- https://kess.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Alhaboby_Cyber_victimisation_disabled_people.pdf
- <https://www.policywise.org.uk/sites/www.policywise.org.uk/files/hate%20crime%20policy%20brief%20%284%29.pdf>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>

The research in Northern Ireland on the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults highlights the importance of ensuring that the experiences of victims who may have limited engagement with formal criminal justice and support systems are recognised within victim policy and practice.

This research was funded by the British Academy and carried out in partnership with the Hate Crime Advocacy Service and Victim Support Northern Ireland. This study forms part of a broader programme at The Open University addressing the cyber-victimisation of disabled people as a societal challenge, aiming to enhance support through changes in policy and practice

(<https://societal-challenges.open.ac.uk/challenges/the-cyber-victimisation-of-disabled-people-in-the-uk/71>).

Clause 2 provides that the principal aim of the Commissioner is to promote the interests of victims and witnesses. Do you agree with Clause 2 of the Bill?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree with the principal aim of the Commissioner to promote the interests of victims and witnesses.

My research (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>,

<https://kess.org.uk/2026/05/13/the-cyber-victimisation-of-disabled-adults-in-northern-ireland-evidence-from-a-mixed-methods-study/>

) on the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland highlights the importance of ensuring that this aim is inclusive of victims who may not

engage with formal criminal justice processes. Cyber-victimisation is a form of online abuse or targeting that refers to repeated harmful behaviour online, such as harassment, insults, threats, or sharing personal information without consent. In our study, 30.1% of disabled adults surveyed reported experiencing cyber-victimisation. Most participants who experienced cyber-victimisation received no formal support, and none reported their experiences to the police.

These findings suggest that some victims may experience significant harm while remaining largely invisible to formal reporting and support systems. In promoting the interests of victims and witnesses, it will therefore be important for the Commissioner to consider the experiences of victims who face barriers to reporting or accessing support, including disabled people experiencing online abuse.

Do you have anything further to add on Clause 1 or 2 or Schedule 1 of the Bill?

No

Please provide any further information relating to Clause 1 here::

Clauses 3 to 8 - Functions of the Commissioner

Clause 3 provides that the Commissioner must: promote an understanding of the rights of victims and witnesses and an awareness of matters relating to their interest; keep the law and practice relating to victims and witnesses under review to ensure adequacy and effectiveness; advise the Northern Ireland Executive or Departments on issues concerning victims and witnesses; and must take steps to raise awareness of the role and functions of the Commissioner, encourage victims and witnesses to engage with their office and seek the views of victims and witnesses regarding the exercise of the Commissioner's functions. Do you agree with these as suitable for the general duties for the role of Commissioner?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree with the general duties proposed for the Commissioner, particularly the duties to promote awareness of victims' rights, keep the adequacy and effectiveness of law and practice under review, and seek the views of victims and witnesses.

My research on cyber-victimisation among disabled adults in Northern Ireland highlights the importance of ensuring that these duties reach victims who may not engage with formal criminal justice processes. None of the participants in our study who experienced cyber-victimisation reported approaching the police, and most had not been signposted to safeguarding or advocacy services.(

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>)

This suggests that relying primarily on existing reporting or criminal justice pathways to identify and engage victims may leave some experiences under-represented. In implementing Clause 3, please consider accessible and proactive ways of engaging victims who face barriers to reporting and support, including disabled people experiencing online abuse. Engagement should also extend beyond people already in contact with police or criminal justice services. This engagement could be achieved through proactive, accessible and innovative approaches involving advocacy groups and social media, as demonstrated in my research.

The duty to seek the views of victims and witnesses is particularly welcome. My research and collaborations with advocacy groups demonstrate the value of lived-experience evidence in identifying harms and barriers that may otherwise remain largely invisible within formal systems.

Clause 4 provides the general powers of the Commissioner including the power to conduct, fund or support research or education activities; to compile information; provide advice and information; publish any matter concerning the interests of victims or witnesses of crime; and to make representations and recommendations to any body or person concerning the interest of victims or witnesses. Do you agree with the general powers as outlined in Clause 4?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree with the general powers outlined in Clause 4, mainly the powers to undertake and commission research, compile information, provide advice, and make recommendations concerning the interests of victims and witnesses.

My research highlights the value of these powers in identifying experiences of victimisation that may not be adequately captured through existing formal systems. Cyber-victimisation of disabled people remains an under-researched area in Northern Ireland, with consequences extending beyond the online environment. Among participants who experienced cyber-victimisation in our study, 44% reported that it affected the management of their health condition. Participants described impacts including missed healthcare appointments, reduced medication adherence and flare-ups of physical symptoms associated with psychological stress.

The Commissioner's research and information-gathering functions could help develop a stronger evidence base on emerging and under-reported forms of victimisation, including their wider health and wellbeing impacts.

Are there any other powers that you believe the Commissioner should have?

Yes

If yes, what should they be?:

The key consideration from my research is how these powers are exercised in practice, particularly to ensure that under-reported and less visible forms of victimisation, and the experiences of victims who may not engage with formal criminal justice processes, are included within the Commissioner's evidence base.

Clause 5 stipulates that the Commissioner must review the operation and the effectiveness of the Victim and the Witness Charters at least every 3 years or as directed by the Department; prepare a report and, in doing so, consulting the Department and any other person the Commissioner considers appropriate; and publish a report. . Do you agree with the provisions at Clause 5?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

The findings in my research demonstrate the importance of ensuring that victim support arrangements remain responsive to changing forms of victimisation and to the diverse needs of victims. Disabled adults who experienced cyber-victimisation described impacts across mental health, physical wellbeing, daily life and management of existing health conditions, while many had not been signposted to safeguarding or advocacy support.

Clause 6 provides that the Commissioner may issue guidance on best practice in relation to any matter concerning the interests of victims and witnesses and that this must be taken into regard by persons exercising public functions; and makes provision in respect of revision, consultation and publication of the guidance. It also prohibits the Commissioner from issuing guidance to a court or tribunal. Do you agree with Clause 6 of the Bill?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree with Clause 6 and the Commissioner's power to issue best-practice guidance on matters concerning the interests of victims and witnesses, and specifically the Commissioner's right to revise any guidance.

My research highlights the importance of guidance that is responsive to the experiences of disabled victims and to forms of victimisation that occur online. Participants identified gaps in awareness, professional responses and access to appropriate support. One participant described the problem as: "Lack of public information and not being treated seriously by police." (Participant 9)

These experiences support the value of best-practice guidance that promotes disability awareness, appropriate recognition of cyber-victimisation, accessible responses and greater consistency in how disabled victims are supported.

Participants also called for specialised training and multidisciplinary approaches bringing together healthcare professionals, legal experts, support organisations and social services.

Clause 7 grants the Commissioner the power to establish advisory groups to provide support and information to the Commissioner on matters related to the Commissioners functions . The Commissioner will determine membership of the group(s) and how expenses will be reimbursed. The Commissioner may also determine the procedure of any advisory group. Do you agree that the Commissioner should have the power to establish advisory groups?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree that the Commissioner should have the power to establish advisory groups, and that membership should be determined through transparent arrangements with meaningful representation of people with lived experience and relevant advocacy expertise. Such groups could provide an important mechanism for ensuring that the Commissioner's work is informed directly by relevant expertise and the experiences of different groups of victims and witnesses, including those whose experiences may be less visible within formal criminal justice systems.

My research was informed by an approach that recognises disabled people as experts in their own experiences, with meaningful collaborations with and support from advocacy groups. The findings demonstrate the importance of listening directly to disabled victims when identifying barriers, harms and appropriate responses to cyber-victimisation.

Participants also emphasised that cyber-victimisation is a complex experience requiring multidisciplinary responses. They identified the value of bringing together healthcare professionals, legal experts, support organisations and social services to provide a more comprehensive and coordinated response. Advisory groups should therefore include meaningful representation from people with lived experience, including disabled victims, alongside relevant advocacy, support and professional expertise. This is the approach used in my research at The Open University, with support from Victim Support in NI and the Hate Crime Advocacy Service.

Do you agree that the Commissioner should have the power to determine the membership of advisory groups?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree that the Commissioner should have the power to determine the membership of advisory groups includes transparent representation of people with lived experience and advocacy groups.

Clause 8 provides that the Commissioner cannot become involved in an individual case or intervene in criminal or related proceedings. Do you support the restriction proposed in Clause 8?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you have anything further to add in relation to Clauses 3 to 8 of the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clauses 9 to 15 - Charter service providers

Clause 9 lists the criminal justice agencies which are specified as "charter service providers". Do you agree with the list of bodies specified in Clause 9?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you believe that there are any other criminal justice agencies that should be added to the list?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you believe that any of the agencies listed should be removed from the list?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 10 requires the Commissioner to monitor compliance with the Victim Charter and enables the Commissioner to request information from a charter service provider. It requires charter service providers to comply with such a request as far as is practical. Do you agree with the purpose stated for Clause 10?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 11 provides that charter service providers must collect and retain data in relation to the provision of services set out in the Victims Charter and to provide statistical information to the Commissioner. The Department must make regulations setting out how the particular statistics, or category of statistics to be provided to the Commissioner are to be determined. The Department must consult with the Commissioner and charter services providers it considers appropriate before making regulations, which will be subject to the draft affirmative procedure. Do you agree with the intent behind Clause 11?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

My research on the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland demonstrates both the importance of:

1) robust data and the need for better disaggregation of data collected by service providers.
2) recognising the limitations of relying on administrative or service-based statistics alone and the need for independent research and lived-experience evidence to understand victims who do not report or access services. My research at The Open University is an example of this category (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>). The study used a mixed-methods design, with 113 disabled adults completing more than 50% of the survey and 17 participants providing qualitative input (Alhaboby and Sondhi, 2026).

Within this sample, 30.1% reported experiencing cyber-victimisation, and 23.0% reported experiencing it during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the harms experienced, most participants who experienced cyber-victimisation did not receive formal support and none reported their experiences to the police. Among those who responded to the question about support, 77.27% (17/22) reported receiving no support (Alhaboby and Sondhi, 2026). The impacts extended beyond the online environment. Among participants who experienced cyber-victimisation, 44% reported that it affected the management of their health condition. Reported consequences included missed healthcare appointments, reduced medication adherence, unintended lifestyle changes and flare-ups of physical symptoms of their chronic conditions (Alhaboby and Sondhi, 2026).

These findings highlight an important issue for the implementation of Clause 11: victims who do not report incidents or access formal services may be largely absent from administrative statistics, even where the impact of victimisation is substantial. Administrative data should therefore not be treated as representing the full extent or nature of victimisation.

When the categories of statistics required under Clause 11 are developed, I recommend consideration of data that can identify differences in victims' experiences and access to services, including, where appropriate, disability, cyber-victimisation, hate or hostility motivation, and engagement with and access to victim support services. Statistics collected from charter service providers should also be considered alongside independent research and lived-experience evidence so that victims who are under-represented in official data are not overlooked.

Reference:

Alhaboby, Z. and Sondhi, A. (2026) 'I fear for what other people are going through': the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland. *Disability & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>

Clause 12 allows the Department to extend the provisions regarding the Victim Charter at Clauses 10 and 11 to the Witness Charter. Are you content with Clause 12?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 13 relates to co-operation with the Commissioner and states a charter service provider must comply or provide the reasons for non-compliance. Do you have any comments on Clause 13?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 14 relates to the duty to record and report on complaints received in each financial year that relate to alleged breaches of Victim or Witness Charter entitlements and the outcome of each complaint. Do you agree with Clause 14 of the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 15 relates to the disclosure of information between charter service providers and the Commissioner if the information would assist or enable the Commissioner to carry out their functions. These disclosure powers are subject to restrictions set out in subsections (3) to (5) – namely, they do not override patient confidentiality, data protection legislation or prohibitions on disclosure in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. The sharing of information does not affect any other power that exists to disclose information. Do you support the intention behind Clause 15?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you believe that there should be other restrictions to the disclosure of information other than those set out in subsections (3) to (5)?

Not Answered

If yes, what other restrictions should be placed on the disclosure of information between charter service providers and the Commissioner?

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you have anything further to add in relation to Clauses 9 to 15 of the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clauses 16 to 19 - Strategic plan, business plans and annual reports

Clauses 16 requires the Commissioner to prepare a strategic plan setting out objectives and priorities, how they will be achieved and how the outcomes will be monitored. The Commissioner must specify groups of victims and witnesses to whom they will have particular regard and why. The Commissioner may review the strategic plan at any time during their tenure. Clause 17 requires the Commissioner to send an annual business plan to the Department of Justice setting out how they propose to carry out the Commissioner's functions. Do you agree with the provisions at Clauses 16 and 17?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

I agree with the provisions relating to the Commissioner's strategic and business plans, and welcome the requirement in Clause 16 for the Commissioner to identify one or more groups of victims or witnesses to whom particular regard will be given.

My research on the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland provides evidence that disabled people who experience online abuse should be selected as a group requiring particular regard, because of the harm imposed on health management, under-reporting, coupled with poor recognition of the seriousness of online experiences that can extend beyond the online context to real life consequences. In our mixed-methods study, the survey included 113 disabled adults and we had qualitative input from 17 participants via interviews or written input. Within the sample, 30.1% experienced cyber-victimisation (Alhaboby and Sondhi, 2026).

The findings indicate that vulnerability may arise from both nature of the cyber-victimisation and its impact, and from barriers to recognition, reporting and support. None of the participants who experienced cyber-victimisation reported their experiences to the police, and most received no formal support. The impacts included effects on mental health, physical wellbeing and daily life, while 44% of those affected reported an impact on the management of their health condition (Alhaboby and Sondhi, 2026).

The qualitative findings also demonstrate the seriousness of some experiences beyond the online environment. One participant described:

"The impact, it was very, very frightening. I didn't know who to trust? I was worried for the safety of myself. I was worried for the safety of my children and my family. I was worried that perhaps my children would be targeted if they would be out and about. It had a major impact, to be honest [...] it really, really did. It was a very, very frightening experience." (Participant 1)

I therefore recommend that, when determining the groups to whom particular regard should be given under Clause 16, the Commissioner selects disabled victims and other groups whose experiences may be under-reported or under-represented within criminal justice data, including victims of online targeting.

Reference:

Alhaboby, Z. and Sondhi, A. (2026) 'I fear for what other people are going through': the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland. Disability & Society. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>

Clause 18 requires the Commissioner to produce an annual report and sets out what it must include. Do you agree with Clause 18?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 19 places a duty on charter service providers to respond to recommendations made in the Commissioner's annual report and state how they will be addressed, or provide reasons why a charter service provider does not propose to act on a recommendation. The response must be published within 56 days of the publication of the Commissioner's report. Do you agree with the intent and purposes of Clause 19 of the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you have anything further to add on Clauses 16 to 19 of the Bill regarding strategic plans, business plans and annual reports?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clauses 24 to 27 - Criminal evidence and procedure

Clause 24 of the Bill provides that witnesses are eligible for assistance with giving evidence in cases dealing with an offence involving aggravation by hostility. It inserts into the Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 Order that the definition of "an offence involving aggravation by hostility" means an offence of any kind in respect of which an allegation that the offence is aggravated by hostility is specified alongside the offence in accordance with section 33(1) of the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Act 2027 [see more information]. Do you agree with the provisions in Clause 24?

Yes

Please provide information to support your answer here::

My research on the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland provides relevant evidence about disability-related hostility and its impact on victims (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>). The mixed-methods study included a survey of 113 disabled adults and qualitative input from 17 participants.

Among participants who reflected on why they believed they had been targeted, 56.25% perceived their disability or health condition to be a motivating factor. Participants described derogatory comments about disability, their perceived value and their right to participate in society. One participant described their experience:

"Individual made specific reference to my worth as individual and questioned the purpose of me existing." (Participant 13)

The consequences of cyber-victimisation were not confined to the online environment. Participants reported impacts on mental health, physical wellbeing and everyday life, and 44% of those affected reported an impact on the management of their health condition as noted in my earlier responses.

These findings support the principle underlying Clause 24: hostility connected to disability can be associated with substantial psychological, physical and social consequences that may affect a victim's ability to participate effectively in criminal proceedings.

In implementing Clause 24, it is important to recognise that disability-related hostility can also be expressed through online and technology-facilitated abuse and that the resulting harms may extend into victims' offline lives.

My research did not examine court proceedings or the operation of special measures. The findings therefore do not evaluate particular special measures but provide evidence of the nature and impact of disability-related hostility that should be considered when supporting victims.

Clause 25 provides that no person charged with an offence involving aggravation by hostility may cross examine a witness, including a child, who is the complainant in connection with the offence or any other offence with which that person is charged in the proceedings. Do you support the inclusion of Clause 25 in the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 26 introduces provisions for complainants in sexual offence cases in the Crown Court, to make oral or written representations to the court, be legally represented and entitled to be present at any hearing of an application for documents or records which relate to the complainant and which they could have a reasonable expectation of privacy in relation to. It makes similar provisions in relation to applications made to the court relating to the complainant's sexual history. Do you agree with the inclusion of Clause 26 in the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Clause 27 is a technical fix required for the forthcoming introduction of committal reform provisions. It provides that, in cases involving death or serious harm of a child or vulnerable person, charges cannot be dismissed unless the charge of an offence under section 5 of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 is also dismissed. Do you agree with Clause 27 being included in the Bill?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Do you have anything further to add on Clauses 24 to 27 of the Bill relating to Criminal Evidence and Procedure?

Not Answered

Please provide information to support your answer here::

Any Other Comments on the Bill

Do you have any other comments or views on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill?

Yes

Please provide any other comments or views you have on the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill here::

I welcome the overall direction of the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill and the opportunity it provides to strengthen the recognition, support and representation of victims and witnesses in Northern Ireland.

My research highlights one issue that I encourage the Committee to consider across the Bill: some victims may experience significant and continuing harm while remaining largely invisible to criminal justice and victim-support systems. I therefore encourage consideration across the implementation of the Bill of:

- disabled victims and other groups whose victimisation may be under-reported;
- technology-facilitated and online forms of victimisation;
- accessible and meaningful involvement of people with lived experience;
- evidence from research and lived experience alongside administrative criminal justice data; and
- coordinated responses across criminal justice, victim support, advocacy, health and other relevant services.

These considerations would help ensure that the new Commissioner and the wider provisions of the Bill are responsive not only to victims who enter formal systems, but also to those whose experiences and needs may otherwise remain largely unseen.

The evidence presented in this response draws primarily on my recent Northern Ireland study (Alhaboby and Sondhi, 2026):

- Alhaboby, Z. and Sondhi, A. (2026) 'I fear for what other people are going through': the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland. *Disability & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2026.2710778>
- Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS), Northern Ireland Assembly (2026): policy briefing and seminar on the cyber-victimisation of disabled adults in Northern Ireland. <https://kess.org.uk/2026/05/13/the-cyber-victimisation-of-disabled-adults-in-northern-ireland-evidence-from-a-mixed-methods-study/>

The following publications from my wider programme of research may also be relevant to the Committee's consideration of disabled victims, cyber-victimisation and access to support:

- Alhaboby, Z.A., Barnes, J., Evans, H. and Short, E. (2023a) 'Cybervictimization of adults with long-term conditions: Cross-sectional study', *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 25, e39933.
- Alhaboby, Z.A., Evans, H., Barnes, J. and Short, E. (2023b) 'The impact of cybervictimization on the self-management of chronic conditions: Lived experiences', *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 25, e40227.
- Alhaboby, Z., Rouse, L., Hadley, R., Vijaykumar, E. and Al-Khateeb, H. (2025) 'Healthcare consultations for people with chronic conditions and disabilities: Managing cyber-victimisation impact and training needs', *Health Services Insights*, 18, 11786329251386909.