

CPS Response to HMCPST Thematic Inspection of Victim Liaison Units and the letters sent to the public by the CPS

08/11/2018



HMCPST has today [8 November 2018] published a report into the work of the CPS Victim Liaison Units (VLUs) with a focus on the timeliness and quality of the letters sent to victims of crime when charges are stopped or substantially altered, and those letters sent in response to complaints or a victim's right to review.

The CPS accepts that there is much to do to improve the communications that it provides to victims, including those who are seeking a further review, to ensure that letters reach the quality standard expected. Although inspectors found a number of very good letters, far too many of those checked contained simple mistakes, or were lacking in empathy. We agree that this needs to be addressed.

We accept that victims and/or their families receive Victim Liaison Unit letters at a time when they are likely to feel vulnerable or even threatened by what they have been through. It is right that our letters speak to victims as individuals and explain our decisions in ways that are easy to understand and reflect the significant impact of what has happened in their lives.

The report notes that when VLUs were set up in 2014, training was comprehensive, and effective. We accept however that this has not continued for staff recruited later, although inspectors also noted that training for prosecutors which is currently being rolled out has been well received. Also, in recognition of the request for additional training, e-learning packages specifically aimed at VLUs were released at the same time. The report goes on to highlight significant variations in compliance with the Victim Communication and Liaison scheme in those Areas visited, and in terms of variations in the role of the VLU in the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) Scheme. It also indicates that guidance on the role of VLUs in Complaints is unclear. It is accepted therefore that there is more work to be done in terms of improvements to systems, regarding circulation of guidance, clarification about quality assurance processes, and in relation to addressing non-compliance.

We were pleased however that inspectors were impressed by the care and enthusiasm of staff in the VLUs, who were found to be keen to deliver the best service they could for victims, demonstrating an absolute commitment to the CPS priority to offering a quality service. There was also an aspect of good practice identified where a library of reference materials was available to assist with drafting of quality communications, and also the system for logging and acknowledging Complaints was noted as a strength.

Inspectorate's issues to address for the CPS

1. The CPS need to ensure that there is a clear and effective system for prosecutors to notify the VLU of the reason for decision in all cases. Managers need to be reminded that non-compliance should be addressed.

CPS response: Systems are in place. However, we will review compliance and provide further guidance where appropriate.

2. The CPS needs to improve its systems to measure and track the timeliness of VCL letters, with a focus on those requiring the enhanced service.

CPS response: We have reviewed current systems and identified changes required to our digital Case Management System (CMS) to enable better identification of cases requiring letters. However, we are unable to make the changes until 2020. In the interim, we will provide further guidance on the manual identification and tracking of cases requiring a letter.

3. 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.

5. The CPS needs to ensure that letters being sent to victims are properly quality assured.

CPS response: A new quality assurance process was implemented in August 2018. Chief Crown Prosecutors (CCPs) and Area Business Managers (ABMs) are responsible for ensuring quality of letters, and performance against quality standards will be reviewed as part of Area Performance Reviews led by the Directors of Legal Services and the Director of Business Services.

4. The CPS should ensure that control and quality of the local resolution stage of VRRs is regularised and consider whether there is a need for oversight nationally.

CPS response: We will review the VRR guidance and train appropriate staff. We will also ensure that systems are in place to monitor Area compliance, led by CCPs. As part of the review, we will consider whether national oversight is required.

6. The CPS should urgently clarify the role of VLUs within the quality assurance process for complaint letters.

9. The CPS should develop an assurance process for the assessment of complaints responses to ensure that letters are free from simple mistakes.

CPS response: We will undertake a review of how complaints are managed from the moment they are received until a response is given. This will ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined, and that staff are appropriately trained to provide a high quality response. This review will be led by an ABM, who will report in February 2019.

7. (See also 8.) The CPS should re-circulate and reinforce the guidance on how timeliness of complaints should be accounted for, setting out in clear terms when the 'clock starts' for those complaints that are received outside of usual business hours.

CPS response: Guidance was recirculated to all staff in early October, and will be reissued to CCPs and ABMs week commencing 5 November.

8. The CPS should reinforce current guidance to remind Areas that if a complaint includes both elements of a VRR and complaint that a letter should be sent to the complainant explaining that the elements of the complaint will be responded to after the VRR has been considered.

CPS response: We will provide further guidance as part of the new VRR guidance. (See response to 7 above.)