



Commissioner for Older People
for Northern Ireland

Victims and Witnesses Team

Victims Support Division

Department of Justice

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27/10/24

Re: Call for views on the new Victim and Witness Strategy 2025 – 2030

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing on behalf of the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (COPNI). Mr Eddie Lynch, who is currently in a caretaker role in the office of COPNI, and his office welcome the opportunity to engage with you on the development of a new Victim and Witness Strategy.

COPNI has produced several studies that explore the impact of crime on older people. Namely, *Improving Access to Justice for Older Victims of Crime*,¹ *Crime and Justice: The Experience of Older People in Northern Ireland*,² and *A Different Crime*.³ Each discuss the barriers faced by older people and provide recommendations for improving the experiences of older victims navigating the criminal justice system. *Crime and Justice* found that older people face a number of barriers when accessing the criminal justice system. Older people may delay or avoid reporting certain crimes. Some older victims and witnesses may feel reluctant to give evidence in court. Given these findings, COPNI is supportive of the Strategic Vision to support all victims and witnesses in improving their confidence in the criminal justice system, as well as the Mission Statement to ensure victims and witnesses are central to “a fair and effective criminal justice system”.

In relation to each of the proposed Strategic Priorities, COPNI offers the following comments:

¹ Brown and Gordon (2019) *Improving Access to Justice for Older Victims of Crime: Older People as Victims of Crime and the Response of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland*. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3382120#:~:text=The%20report%20sets%20out%20a,victims%20and%20the%20establishment%20of

² Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2019) *Crime and Justice: The Experience of Older People in Northern Ireland*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/206567-online-a4-crime-report-56p.pdf>

³ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

Strategic Priority One: An improved understanding of the needs, interests and experiences of victims and witnesses

In Northern Ireland, older people are less likely to be victims of crime when compared to people within other age groups.⁴ Yet, should an older person be a victim or a witness to a crime, they can experience a host of distinct factors that can lessen their ability to cope with the aftermath. COPNI's *A Different Crime* report found that a victim's "pre-offence status" can be a factor in determining the extent to which a crime impacts them.⁵ In Northern Ireland, older people are more likely to live alone⁶, live with a disability⁷, experience health issues⁸, be widowed⁹, and experience loneliness and isolation¹⁰, among other issues. Older people are also more likely to have high levels of fear of crime, despite being relatively safe from crime.¹¹ Such issues and their consequences can work to encourage many older people to feel hesitant about reporting a crime, receiving help, and engaging with criminal justice system processes. COPNI is therefore pleased by the Strategy's proposed priority to improve understanding of the experiences of older victims and witnesses, their subsequent needs and barriers to intervention they may experience.

⁴ In Northern Ireland, in 2022/23, there were 7,773 recorded victims of crime aged between 20 and 24, 9,295 aged between 30 and 34, 7,206 aged between 40 and 44, and 4,567 aged 65 and above. Data taken from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (2023) *Annual trends in police recorded crime 1998/99 to 2022/23, Pivot table 3*. Available at:

[https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.psn.i.police.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2F2023-11%2F517487509%2FPolice Recorded Crime in Northern Ireland 1998-99 to 2022-23.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.psn.i.police.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2F2023-11%2F517487509%2FPolice%20Recorded%20Crime%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%201998-99%20to%202022-23.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

⁵ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*, p 9. Available at:

<https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

⁶ In 2025, the number of people aged 75+ living alone is projected to be 57,560. By 2040, this figure is projected to increase to 77,924. NISRA (2018) *Northern Ireland Household Projections (2016 based)*. Available at:

https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nisra.gov.uk%2Fsites%2Fnisra.gov.uk%2Ffiles%2Fpublications%2FHHP16_NI.XLS&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

⁷ Census 2021 results showed that 56.8% of people aged 65+ live with a limiting long-term health problem or disability. Census 2021 (2022) *Main statistics for Northern Ireland, Statistical bulletin, Health, disability and unpaid care*, p 18. Available at:

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-2-statistical-bulletin-health-disability-and-unpaid-care.pdf>

⁸ Census 2021 results showed that 17.4% of people aged 65+ have 'bad or very bad general health' compared to 11% of 40 to 64 year olds, 3.1% of 15 to 39 year olds. Census 2021 (2022) *Main statistics for Northern Ireland, Statistical bulletin, Health, disability and unpaid care*, p 10. Available at: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/system/files/statistics/census-2021-main-statistics-for-northern-ireland-phase-2-statistical-bulletin-health-disability-and-unpaid-care.pdf>

⁹ Census 2021 results showed there were 80,802 people aged 65+ who were widowed or a surviving partner from a civil partnership, equating to 24.7% of all those aged 65+. Census 2021 (2023) *Marital and civil partnership status by broad age bands*. Available at:

<https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nisra.gov.uk%2Fsystem%2Ffiles%2Fstatistics%2Fcensus-2021-ms-a33.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

¹⁰ 18.7% of those aged 65 to 74 and a further 22.6% of those aged 75+ report high levels of loneliness. NISRA (2023) *Wellbeing in Northern Ireland, 2022/23*, p 5. Available at: <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/execoffice/wellbeing-in-northern-ireland-report-2022-23.pdf>

¹¹ The 2020/21 Northern Ireland Safe Community Telephone Survey found that 11% of those aged 75 plus had high levels of worry about crime. Respondents aged 65 and above were also more likely to describe the effect of fear of crime on their quality of life as 'moderate' or 'great'. NISRA (2022) *Findings from the 2020/21 Northern Ireland Safe Community Telephone Survey*. Available at: <https://www.justice-ni.gov.uk/publications/findings-202021-northern-ireland-safe-community-telephone-survey>

Strategic Priority Two: Ensuring victims and witnesses receive the emotional and practical support they need

Older people are a diverse group. They embody multiple identities related to characteristics such as age, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality. As such, older victims and witnesses can experience barriers to accessing support relating to each of these characteristics, often intersecting to exacerbate vulnerability.

COPNI's *A Different Crime* report found that "an older victim of crime may be subject to the same crime as a younger victim but frequently, she or he, experiences a greater impact from that crime due to pre-existing issues".¹² The report called for more consideration to be given to the impact of crime on older people to ensure "tailored, ameliorative measures" are identified and implemented.¹³

Older victims and witnesses require unique support mechanisms that can effectively address issues and needs relating to their multiple identities and "pre-offence status". Thus, COPNI is supportive of the Strategy's proposed focus on ensuring support for victims is effective. We hope this serves to support older victims and witnesses as they navigate the criminal justice system and give their best evidence.

Strategic Priority Three: Increasing organisational focus on victims and witnesses

Navigating the criminal justice system can be a challenging task for all victims, but particularly older victims who may be more vulnerable to the impacts of crime. COPNI's 2019 report *Improving Access to Justice for Older Victims of Crime* highlighted that "justice is only served if victims, including older people, can participate fully within the criminal justice process in order to have their voices heard and their experiences recognised without suffering undue distress".¹⁴ Similarly, COPNI's engagement with criminal justice staff highlighted that the criminal justice system "has focussed on the offenders. And we have left the victims to their own devices. Hopefully we are starting to see a change in that, so victims are at the heart of the process".¹⁵ COPNI is supportive of the Strategy's proposed focus on the experiences of victims and witnesses. Lived experience is central to shaping

¹² Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*, p 13. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

¹³ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*, p 15. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

¹⁴ Brown and Gordon (2019) *Improving Access to Justice for Older Victims of Crime: Older People as Victims of Crime and the Response of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland*, p 12. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/improving-access-to-justice-for-older-victims-of-crime-k-j-brown-and-f-gordon-v1.pdf>

¹⁵ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*, p 32. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

effective interventions and we trust victims and witnesses will play a key role in shaping this new Strategy.

Strategic Priority Four: Victims and witnesses receive the services and information they need and are entitled to

Engagement with criminal justice agencies during the production of *A Different Crime* revealed that victims are often confused about the roles and responsibilities of criminal justice organisations. A focus group participant, from the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, said that victims often mistake one organisation for another. They reflected that staff may forget how confusing and daunting it can be for a victim when navigating and engaging with multiple criminal justice agencies.¹⁶ COPNI concluded that services for victims appear to be delivered in an “unsystematic manner”.¹⁷

To ensure older victims and witnesses receive appropriate support, services and information, this Strategy should encourage collaboration between criminal justice agencies in signposting victims and witnesses to the most appropriate services relative to their needs. COPNI is encouraged by the proposed commitment to work collectively across the criminal justice system to improve the experiences of victims and witnesses.

Finally, COPNI is supportive of the development and implementation of a new Victims and Witnesses Strategy. We look forward to engaging with you further during this process. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this response, or the new Strategy, should it be necessary or helpful.

Best wishes,

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¹⁶ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*, p 32. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>

¹⁷ Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland (2023) *A Different Crime*, p 35. Available at: <https://copni.org/assets/general/resources/a-different-crime-2023-crime-report.pdf>