



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

Helping victims and witnesses: the work of Victim Support

**Seventeenth Report of
Session 2002–03**



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Session 2002–03

Report, together with formal minutes, minutes of evidence and an appendix

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The Committee of Public Accounts

The Committee of Public Accounts is appointed by the House of Commons to examine “the accounts showing the appropriation of the sums granted by Parliament to meet the public expenditure, and of such other accounts laid before Parliament as the committee may think fit” (Standing Order No 148).

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The following was also a member of the Committee during the period of this inquiry.

Angela Eagle MP (*Labour, Wallasey*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 148. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/committee_of_public_accounts.cfm. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Nick Wright (Clerk), Leslie Young (Committee Assistant) and Ronnie Jefferson (Secretary).

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Summary

Some 28% of adults in England and Wales are thought to have been the victim of a personal crime or a crime on their household in 2001–02.¹ Being a victim or a witness to a crime can be a life-changing event, whatever its nature or severity. Each person is affected differently, experiencing a range of emotional and physical reactions, and in some cases a financial loss. Some victims and witnesses may be able to cope with the reaction themselves, or with the support of family and friends, but others may need emotional support and advice, or professional help.

Victim Support (the Charity) is a national charity, working with local affiliated charities. Most of its services are offered by trained volunteers who are recruited, trained and supported by paid local co-ordinators. During 2002–03, the Home Office (the Department) allocated Victim Support funding of some £28 million to provide support and information to victims and witnesses in England and Wales. The Home Office is a major contributor to the charity's income, but funds are also raised locally from other sources, for example from the public and local authorities.

Victim Support aims to contact all victims referred to it by the police, and also operates a national telephone support line, offering emotional support and practical help and information. Advice and support to witnesses is provided by the charity through Witness Services which, by April 2002, were operational in all Crown Courts and Magistrates' Courts.

On the basis of a Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General,² we took evidence from the Home Office and the Chief Executive of Victim Support, Dame Helen Reeves. The Committee wish to pay tribute to Dame Helen, and all she has achieved over 22 years of working in the field, and also to the outstanding contribution made by the volunteers and staff who work for the Victim Support movement. Victim Support's volunteers provide a dedicated and professional service which is highly valued by victims and witnesses. We acknowledge the pioneering role undertaken by the voluntary sector generally in raising the profile of victims' needs, and in taking the lead to develop innovative services to meet those needs.

We draw the following main conclusions from our examination.

- The Home Office has yet to establish clearly the support services it wishes to deliver for victims and witnesses, and in particular whether to establish a universal support service, or whether instead to fund voluntary bodies delivering a service to the extent of their capability.
- Victim Support and other voluntary sector organisations have done much to promote support for victims and witnesses of crime, but the Home Office's reliance on largely

1 British Crime Survey estimate 2000

2 *Helping victims and witnesses: the work of Victim Support* (HC 1212, Session 2001–02)

voluntary effort makes it more difficult to provide a consistent level of support services across the country. Access to existing services depends, for example, on the availability of volunteers and the level of funds raised by local Victim Support charities from sources other than the Home Office grant-in-aid. As a result, the provision of support to victims in some high crime areas is less comprehensive than elsewhere in the country.

- The level of support provided to victims and witnesses is central to achieving wider objectives of the criminal justice system, in particular encouraging victims and witnesses to report crime, and to give evidence at a subsequent criminal trial. The Home Office should therefore specify the desired national outcomes for a victim and witness service, and then devise a strategy to achieve the outcomes, taking into account the costs, and considering the range of funding options, public, private and charitable. The challenge for the Home Office is to retain the valuable voluntary contribution but to deliver a service which meets more fully the needs of victims and witnesses, and consistently across the country.
- The Home Office has been slow to put in place appropriate accountability arrangements for the funding it provides to Victim Support. Some two years after the grant-in-aid memorandum was finalised no targets have been set for the Charity, despite a recommendation made over eight years ago by Home Office consultants. Having defined clearly the core services it is seeking from the Charity, the Home Office should put in place appropriate targets for 2003–04.

1 Improving victims' and witnesses' services

1. Over the past 28 years, Victim Support has grown from a local charity counselling victims of crime in the Bristol area to a national movement offering support and advice to victims and witnesses in each of the 42 criminal justice areas in England and Wales. Home Office funding, which started in 1979, has risen from £2 million in 1987–88 to £28 million in 2002–03. The Home Office expects this funding to help provide a range of services to victims and witnesses.

Figure 1: Services to be provided by Victim Support using Home Office funding³

Victim Support receives Home Office funding to provide the following services to victims.

Victims

To provide emotional support to victims to help alleviate the anxieties caused by crime incidents.

To offer general practical help to victims, for example assistance with claims for criminal injuries compensation and advice on how a victim can seek protection or help with security measures.

To liaise with criminal justice agencies on behalf of victims.

To co-ordinate support for victims from other voluntary and community organisations.

To liaise with Witness Services to provide a continuing service to victims of crime.

Witnesses

To offer familiarisation visits to the courts in advance of the trial to witnesses summoned to court and their families, and information and support on the day of the trial.

2. National surveys, and the National Audit Office's work, suggest that the support provided to victims and witnesses by Victim Support is well-regarded by those who have used its services. The British Crime Survey has consistently reported that around two in three respondents, who had been victims of crime and who could recall contact from Victim Support, thought the service "very" or "fairly" helpful. This figure increased to around three out of every four victims who had been in face-to-face contact with Victim

3 C&AG's Report, paras 1.10, 1.14

Support. In a Witness Satisfaction Survey commissioned by the Home Office in 2000, 97% of witnesses reported their satisfaction with the Charity's Witness Service.⁴

3. The Home Office lacks evidence, however, on which forms of support are most effective in helping victims and witnesses overcome their experience. The Home Office noted that research existed on victims' and witnesses' needs, but in response to the National Audit Office report the Home Office was considering more in-depth research about what produces the best longer term return in terms of trauma, return to work, and other important issues. Isolating the impact of any particular service on a person over an extended period might, nevertheless, be a difficult task.

4. Restorative justice, where the offender meets the victim under controlled conditions, is only applicable where the offender is known and the victim consents to a meeting. Only 3% of victims have their case solved, so for the majority of victims, where the offender is never found, restorative justice programmes would not be appropriate. Victim Support were concerned that such programmes should not be seen as a victim service, but an additional way of dealing with offenders, and they should therefore be funded from budgets for that purpose.⁵

5. Around 97% of victims contacted by Victim Support have been referred to the charity by the local police. Under the terms of the Victim's Charter, victims of most crimes can expect the police to pass their details to Victim Support unless they express a contrary wish. Victims of more serious crimes, such as homicide and sexual crime must give their express consent, and in many cases may already be receiving some support from police family liaison officers.⁶

6. Referral rates of victims to Victim Support by the police vary significantly around the country. Victim Support was concerned that the level of referrals was much lower in some areas than others. In 2000–01, for burglary from dwellings for example, the rate of referral varied between 47 and 75% of recorded crimes (Figure 2) for the half of criminal justice areas in the mid range of referral rates. Similar variations occurred for victims of crimes where prior consent is required before referral. Some of the variability may be due to different methods of counting, but differing interpretations by police forces of their obligations under the Data Protection Act 1998 have also been a major factor. Some police forces have been reluctant to pass on victims' details in the belief that this would be unlawful. In October 2001, in consultation with the Information Commissioner, the Home Office had issued revised guidelines seeking to clarify the current arrangements. Victim Support suggested, however, that despite the revised guidance, staff within some forces continued to take a different view.⁷

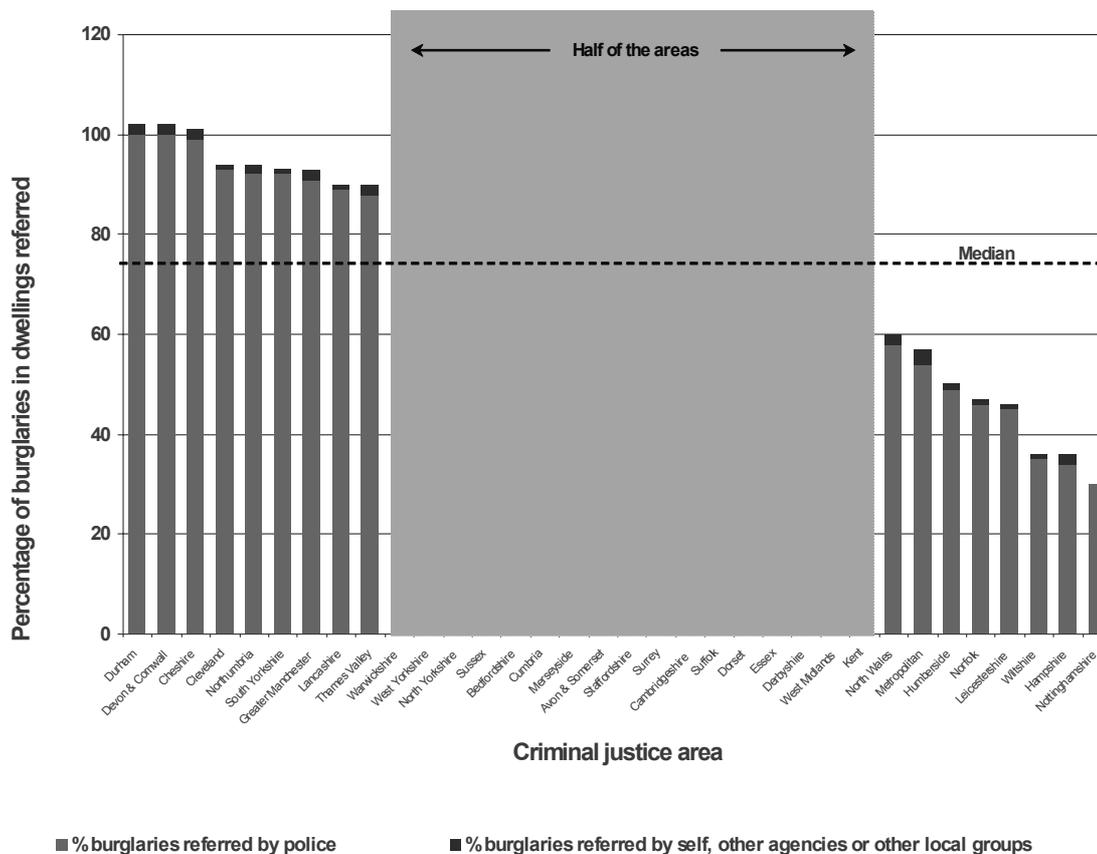
4 C&AG's Report, paras 2.2–2.3

5 Qq 12, 67, 71

6 C&AG's Report, paras 2.8–2.9

7 Qq 18–19, 98–99, 135, 142–148, 183

Figure 2: Victim Support in half of the criminal justice areas received referrals for the victims of burglaries in dwellings of between 89 and 61% of recorded crimes



Source: National Audit Office analysis of Victim Support Data 2001–02 and Home Office Crime Statistics

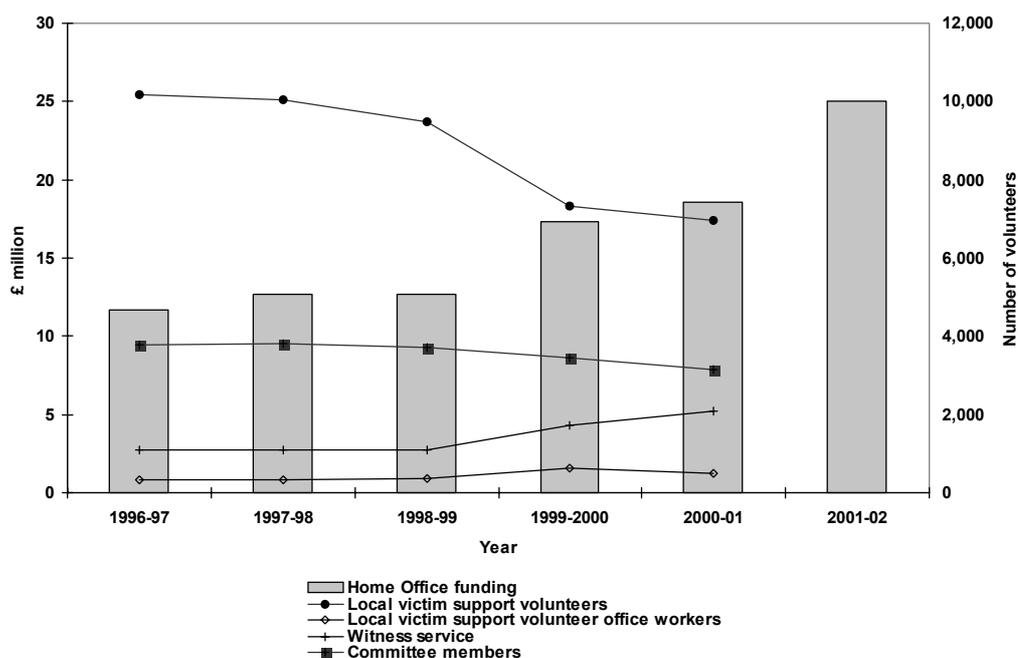
Note: Excludes Dyfed-Powys, Gloucestershire, Gwent, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, South Wales and West Mercia for which referrals data were not comparable with police recorded crime data.

1. The variance in results may be explained by a number of factors.
 - (i) Different methods of counting referrals by local groups. For example some local groups record a household burgled as one referral, whereas others may record a referral for each member in a household.
 - (ii) Different interpretations between local groups and their police forces about what crimes should be referred. For example, if it was agreed by police forces to refer burglaries to buildings other than domestic dwellings, this could result in referrals being greater than the level of referable crime, as is the case in Dyfed-Powys, Gloucestershire, Gwent, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, South Wales and West Mercia.
 - (iii) High levels of victims not opting to be referred to Victim Support.

7. Once a victim is referred to Victim Support, the service provided is dependent on the availability of volunteers in the locality. The number of volunteers working with victims has dropped in recent years (Figure 3). 53% of local groups responding to a National Audit Office survey reported that they had too few volunteers to meet the demands they faced. Victim Support had, nevertheless, been successful in recruiting volunteers to establish a Witness Service in all magistrates' courts by the end of April 2002. On action to monitor whether the shortage added to volunteers' stress levels the Charity considered that local co-

ordinators were careful to avoid overloading individual volunteers. Stress and pressure on volunteers was increasing, but primarily because a higher proportion of their work was now with victims of violent and sexual crime. Limited resources meant proportionately less time was being spent with victims of property crime. Additionally, the scope of the Charity's work had widened into crime prevention, for example forums for the prevention of domestic crime and racist crime, and other related areas.⁸

Figure 3: Funding and volunteer numbers 1996–97 to 2000–01



Notes

1. The Home Office began contributing to Victim Support National Office costs in 1979.
2. In 2000–01 in addition to the above volunteers, Victim Support had 40 volunteers operating the national support line and 87 volunteers to help with the implementation and use of IT.

Source: Home Office and Victim Support

8. Victim Support considered that the reduction in volunteer numbers arose from better systems for appraising volunteers and renewing their agreements, and improved systems for recording volunteer numbers. It was, however, difficult to recruit volunteers in high crime areas where they were most needed, and where competition for volunteers existed from other agencies. Victims in some of these areas were therefore receiving a less comprehensive service. The contact level in some inner London boroughs was, for example, much lower than elsewhere in the country. Where volunteers were not available, junior Victim Support paid staff, funded by some of the London boroughs, had been used to cover some of the workload.

9. Victim Support had widened recruitment methods and was now better informed on the most effective approach. It expected to have increased its volunteer numbers by 1000 over the past year, the Home Office having contributed funding for a recruitment campaign.

Nevertheless, the Charity considered that in some areas paid staff, rather than volunteers, would have to continue undertaking the work, although uncertainties inherent in the Charity's funding made this approach difficult to plan for. The Charity thought its core services should be funded so that it could plan and manage services to a common standard across the country.⁹

10. The Home Office explained that the recruitment of volunteers was a problem for many voluntary organisations. It noted that a strategy for increasing volunteering was under development and would be published by the end of the financial year. The Home Office aimed to increase the number of people participating in the community, including voluntary work, by 5% over the next three years. It had provided support to organisations which helped to match volunteers with opportunities, but Britain already had quite a lot of volunteers relative to many other countries.¹⁰

11. Differing levels of Victim Support services across the country also arose from variances in the extent of funding raised locally. A National Audit Office survey of local Victim Support areas found that amounts raised locally ranged from 2% to 65% of the total funding available, with the level of funding from local authorities accounting for much of the difference. Local funding is not taken into account when distributing the Home Office grant, which is allocated by Victim Support's National Office to local areas on the basis of recorded crime levels and the volume of court workload. Victim Support considered that allocating more funds to areas where local authority funding was not forthcoming would only encourage more local authorities to reduce funding. The Home Office confirmed that its role was to contribute to the costs of providing a Victim and Witness Support Service. Meeting the full costs of providing such services would result in funds being drawn away from other expenditure areas. Full funding would also reduce the independence of Victim Support. Victim Support noted, however, that victims received a comparatively small proportion of the overall resources available within the criminal justice system, and that victims had a right to equality of service across the country.¹¹

12. On the question of whether it was appropriate for a national service to depend on the efforts of volunteers and the ability to raise funds locally, Victim Support and the Home Office considered that the involvement of members of the community, offering their time free of charge, was vital to the work. Victims did not necessarily want full-time paid professional counsellors supporting them but local people. The Home Office noted that the aim was to provide an acceptable service in every part of the country but as the service depended on local charities and volunteers, some areas would receive better services than others. In its view, funding was already allocated according to need.¹²

13. Victims may sometimes wish to have access to more specialised services, and Victim Support noted that local groups worked with other specialist agencies, including the voluntary sector, to refer victims to the services they needed. The Charity had developed specialist training programmes for dealing with domestic violence and victims affected by

9 Qq 9, 113, 116, 118

10 Qq 86, 88

11 Qq 34, 40, 112, 114-115, 135, 166

12 Qq 27, 60, 118

racist crime, and for homosexual men who had been victims of sexual crime and assault. The Home Office noted that it had also funded two voluntary bodies providing specialist services, Support after Murder and Manslaughter (funding of £120,000) and the Rape Crisis Federation Wales and England (funding of £406,000).

14. Victim Support indicated that gaining access to professional health services such as psychiatric counselling could be difficult for victims. Some general practitioners did not recognise the emotional disruption caused by crime. The Charity did not have sufficient funds to provide specialist services to vulnerable witnesses, including children. The Home Office had discussed access to specialist help with the Department of Health but that Department found it difficult to provide universal access to such services across the country. The Home Office's planned national strategy was, however, a cross government department strategy including health and housing issues, for example, and would consider how to best engage departments and local agencies in responding to the range of victims' needs.¹³

13 Qq 20, 60, 62–63, 97, 158; C&AG's Report, para 3.6

2 The role of support services in promoting confidence in the criminal justice system

15. The Home Office regards support services for victims and witnesses as a key part of the strategy to increase confidence in the criminal justice system. The Home Office accepted, however, that until recently it had not looked sufficiently strategically at the range of services available to victims and witnesses. The Victim's Charter, first published in 1996, was a statement of the government's intentions for helping victims.

16. The Home Office planned to publish in 2003 a strategy for victims and witness services. Independent support for victims provided through Victim Support would be complemented by a more victim focussed approach from the criminal justice agencies including the police, Crown Prosecution Service, Court Service, National Probation Service and the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. For both victims and witnesses giving evidence in court could add to the stress caused by crime.¹⁴

17. The British Crime Survey identified that victims report less than half the crimes they experienced. In many cases, the victim might consider the case too trivial to report but the Department acknowledged that in particular categories of crime, for example domestic violence, there may be reluctance to report a crime. The Home Office had run campaigns to encourage people to report and challenge crime. On whether Victim Support could do more to encourage the reporting of crime, the Charity said that encouraging victims or witnesses to report crime or to come forward as witnesses was not its purpose. Nevertheless, the Charity thought its availability and willingness to listen did lead victims to report crimes which they might otherwise not have done. On the Street Crime initiative, for example, the Charity was working with the Home Office to determine whether the Charity's support for witnesses was leading to a greater number arriving in court to give evidence. The Home Office considered that Victim Support's primary aim of responding to the individual victim's needs need not exclude the wider objective of encouraging greater reporting of crime.¹⁵

18. The number of victims of unreported crime using Victim Support's service remains small. Victims who choose not to report a crime can seek support by contacting Victim Support directly through a national telephone helpline. Volunteers working for Victim Support have, however, suggested that the location of some Victim Support offices, within police stations for example, might put off some victims seeking support. In September 2001, one in five Victim Support offices was located within police offices.¹⁶

19. The Home Office acknowledged that many ineffective trials were caused by witnesses failing to turn up at court. Victim Support assisted witnesses once they were called to court

14 Qq 2-3, 63; C&AG's Report, Figure 4

15 Qq 12-14, 75

16 C&AG's Report, paras 2.8, 2.15, 2.17

but until there was a court case it had no role, other than where a witness was also a victim. More support for witnesses was needed in the period between a person reporting a crime through to arrest of a suspect by the police, as the chances of a witness sustaining their evidence to help the police apprehend a suspect are greater the more support a witness is given. The Home Office was experimenting with different ways of supporting and encouraging witnesses to turn up at court in co-operation with the police and Crown Prosecution Service. Which of these criminal justice agencies would provide support depended on the point at which support was needed. Police had the main contact initially as they took the statement, whereas the Crown Prosecution Service only became involved if a charge was made. The Home Office considered that it was appropriate for support for witnesses to be provided by agencies which are part of the prosecution process, but agreed voluntary independent support was also needed.¹⁷

20. In 2000, the British Crime Survey reported that only three out of every five recent witnesses said that they would be willing to attend court again as a witness. Victims and witnesses often complain that they do not get any feedback from the police or the Crown Prosecution Service although the Government's Victim's Charter includes a commitment to keep victims informed. Victim Support's volunteers have encouraged the various criminal justice agencies to meet their commitments but the Home Office agreed that the standard of service for victims and witnesses from such agencies could be improved. The Department's planned strategy would also cover this issue.¹⁸

17 Qq 76-77

18 Q 180; C&AG's Report, paras 1.5, 1.8

3 The Home Office's oversight of Victim Support

21. Victim Support established its service without Home Office support but then sought funding to expand and develop the service. This collaborative arrangement had helped create a nationwide service for victims and witnesses. In 2001–02, 98% of Home Office funding for voluntary sector-based victim and witness services went to Victim Support. The Department accepted that more could be done to open up funding to other organisations, and was planning to put funding for new services, for example, for road traffic victims, out to tender.¹⁹

22. Victim Support's National Office monitors whether its affiliated local groups operate to national policies and procedures, and whether Home Office money is spent in accordance with the grant agreement. Victim Support requires local groups to comply with the Victim Support Code of Practice, which covers aspects of management including employment, training, recruitment and also the type of work groups undertake, the victims they see and the range of services they offer.²⁰ Victim Support had not set targets for affiliated groups but it was planning to do so. The Charity had established a Quality and Standards Unit reporting directly to the committee responsible for allocating Home Office funding, which it believed would enhance the monitoring of performance of affiliated groups.²¹

23. A review of Victim Support by Coopers and Lybrand in 1994 on behalf of the Home Office concluded that the Home Office had not set out what Victim Support should achieve with its public funding. A Grant-in-Aid memorandum was agreed in March 2000, and was reviewed and amended in late 2001. The memorandum specified who should have access to the services, identified the main referral sources and provided a broad description of the support Victim Support might provide. However, beyond the commitment in the Victim's Charter to offer to help victims and witnesses, the memorandum did not specify the Home Office's priorities for a minimum level of service. The Home Office said it had three priorities for Victim Support: to provide support for victims referred by the police; to extend the witness service from the Crown Court to all magistrates courts (which had been achieved); and to provide a telephone help line for people who choose to refer themselves. The Home Office was now planning, in agreement with Victim Support, to set baselines for future services covering quality, standards and the size of the service.²²

19 Qq 5–6

20 Q 91

21 Qq 92–95

22 Q 123; C&AG's Report, para 3.7

Conclusions and recommendations

Improving victims' and witnesses' support services

1. To address its lack of evidence about which are the most effective forms of support for victims and witnesses, the Home Office should examine the impact of the existing range of support services in helping people overcome the effects of their experience, for example by minimising working days lost, and improving their perceptions of the criminal justice system.
2. The Home Office should compare regularly the rates of referral of victims to the Charity by individual police forces and seek explanations where these rates are low, as adequate referral rates are key to providing victims with access to support services.
3. The recruitment of volunteers in high crime areas can be more difficult, and the Home Office should therefore consider with Victim Support whether alternative bases of service provision may be possible to enable a satisfactory level of service to be provided to all victims wherever they live in the country.
4. The Home Office has yet to finalise its strategy to increase volunteering although it has had a Public Service Agreement target to do so since 2000. The Home Office should now complete its strategy, setting out how it plans to assist voluntary bodies in meeting their needs for volunteers.
5. Existing public and voluntary sector support services for victims may not meet the needs of particularly vulnerable groups, for example the victims of homophobic, racist and domestic crime. The Home Office should therefore review whether alternative approaches are needed to help such victims, for example through assisting community groups to provide local support, and by working with other public bodies such as the Department of Health to put in place access to specialist services and facilitate referrals between services.

Role played by support services in promoting confidence in the criminal justice system

6. The experience of victims and witnesses suggests that they are not always kept informed of progress with their cases by criminal justice agencies, including the police, Crown Prosecution Service, Probation Service and the courts. The Home Office should consider whether it would be possible to assign victims and witnesses a single contact point for obtaining information on their cases' progress.
7. Victim Support drew a clear distinction between their role in supporting victims and witnesses, and the separate issue of encouraging victims and witnesses to report crime and to give evidence if required, which they considered to be the responsibility of others. The reporting of crime, and attendance of victims and witnesses at trials, are fundamental to an effective criminal justice system. The Home Office should therefore determine, as part of its strategy for victims and witnesses, which criminal

justice agency should have the principal responsibility for this problem, and for seeking feedback from victims and witnesses on their experiences of the system.

The Home Office's oversight of Victim Support

8. The Home Office should review the outcome of inspection visits to local Victim Support areas by the Charity's Quality and Standards Department to obtain assurance that local services are being provided properly.
9. In developing additional support services the Home Office should create more choice of supplier by seeking tenders from across the voluntary and private sectors to provide the service.

Formal Minutes

Monday 7 April 2003

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon
Mr Ian Davidson
Mr George Howarth
Mr Brian Jenkins

Mr David Rendel
Mr Gerry Steinberg
Jon Trickett
Mr Alan Williams

The Committee deliberated.

Draft Report (Helping victims and witnesses: the work of Victim Support), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the Chairman's draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 23 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations agreed to.

Summary agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Seventeenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That the provisions of Standing Order No 134 (Select Committees (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

[Adjourned till Wednesday 9 April at Four o'clock

Witnesses

Wednesday 6 November 2002

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Sir John Bourn KCB, National Audit Office; Mr Rob Molan, HM Treasury; Mr John Gieve CB and Mrs Jane Furniss, Home Office; Dame Helen Reeves DBE, Victim Support

Ev 1

List of written evidence

1 Home Office

Ev 19

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