



Ministry  
of Justice

# A Process Evaluation of the Victim Notification Scheme

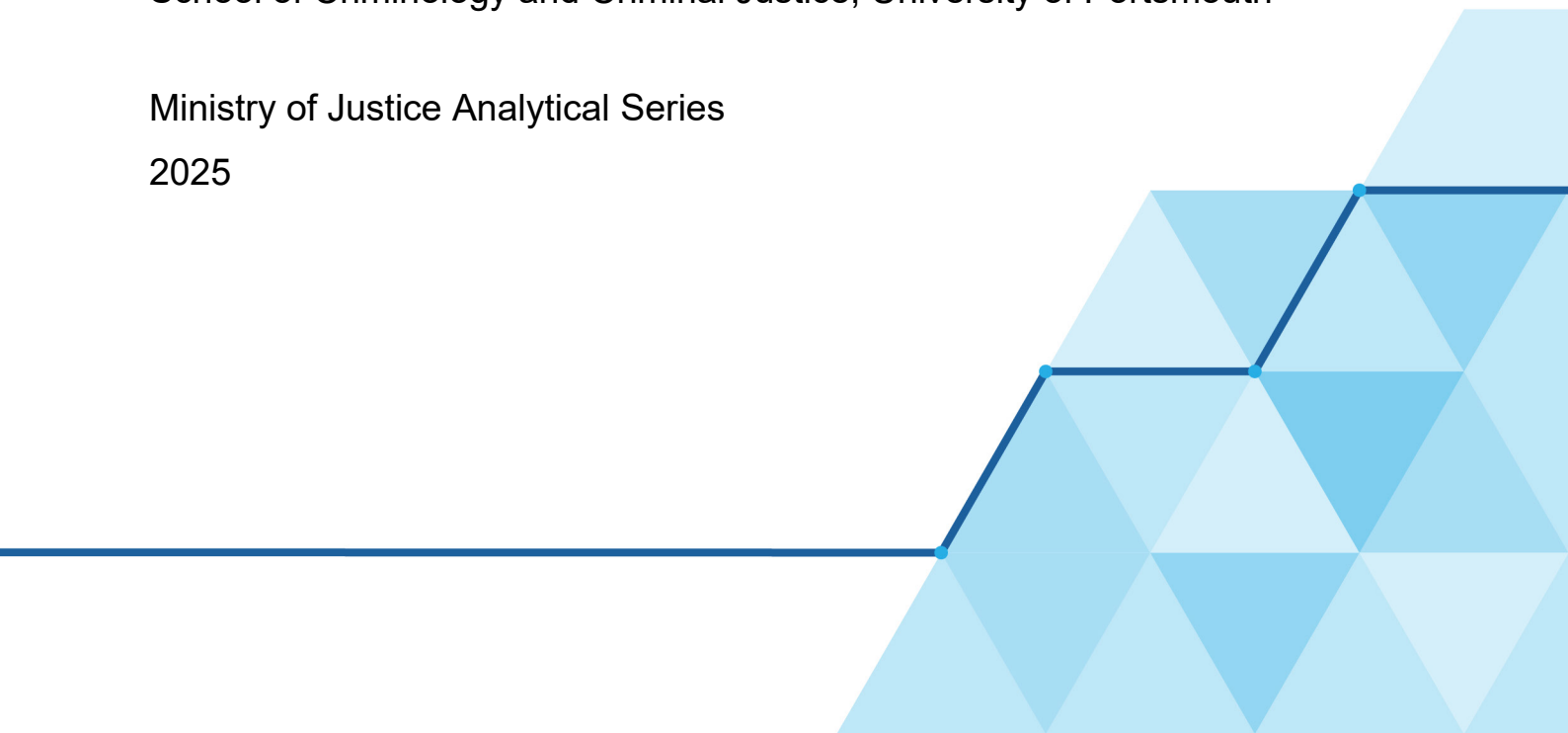
**A scheme for victims of stalking,  
harassment and coercive and  
controlling behaviour, where the  
sentence is less than 12 months**

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# Glossary

- CCB** – Coercive and Controlling Behaviour
- COM** – Community Offender Manager
- CPS** – Crown Prosecution Service
- HMPPS** – His Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service
- ISAC** – Independent Stalking Advocate Caseworker
- IDVA** – Independent Domestic Violence Advocate
- ISVA** – Independent Sexual Violence Advisor
- KSS** – Kent, Surrey and Sussex
- MARAC** – Multi Agency Risk Assessment Conference
- NVWS** – Northumbria Victim and Witness Service
- OIC** – Officer in the Case
- POM** – Prison Offender Manager
- RASSO** – Rape and Serious Sexual Offences
- SA** – Specialist Advocate
- SPO** – Senior Probation Officer
- VAO** – Victim Administration Officer
- Victims’ Code** – Code of Practice for Victims of Crime
- VCS** – Victim Contact Scheme
- VCU** – Victim Care Unit
- VLO** – Victim Liaison Officer
- VLU** – Victim Liaison Unit
- VNS** – Victim Notification Scheme
- VPS** – Victim Personal Statement
- WCO** – Witness Care Officer
- WCU** – Witness Care Unit



## Executive Summary

The Victim Contact Scheme (VCS) requires the Probation Service to offer contact to victims of specified sexual and/or violent offences to provide information about the offender's sentence and release. The VCS applies to cases where the sentence is 12 months or more, or where the offender is made subject to a hospital order. The 2021 Target Operating Model for the unified Probation Service highlighted the desire to provide a similar service to victims of stalking, harassment and coercive and controlling behaviour, where the length of sentence is less than 12 months.

The Victim Notification Scheme (VNS) differs from the VCS; it is a non-statutory scheme and due to the nature of the shorter sentences there is a need to contact victims more quickly. The VNS was initially trialled from April 2022 in three Probation regions: Hampshire and Thames Valley, Northumbria, and the whole of Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

This report provides findings from a process evaluation of the VNS. The aim of the research was to explore the process by which the VNS has been rolled out in the pilot areas, and its perceived impact on those criminal justice professionals responsible for its delivery, as well as the perceived impact on victims' experiences and the specialist support services assisting them. It also aimed to identify parts of the new process that are working well and areas where further improvements are required, particularly in relation to the shorter timescales required for VNS cases.

## Methods

The fieldwork was undertaken from April 2023 to August 2023. The process evaluation utilised a mixed-methods approach to gain the perceptions and experiences of participants, consisting of a victim online survey, interviews with criminal justice practitioners and eligible victims, focus groups with Witness Care Units (WCUs) and specialist support services, and analysis of quantitative performance data.

## Key Findings

### Performance data findings – achieving referral and contact targets

- A total of 519 eligible cases were identified across the regions between April 2022 and June 2023. Of these, 61 per cent were completed within the target time of 15 days from the offender being sentenced to contact being made with the victim. The main cause of the delay was the time taken for the WCUs to refer victim information to the Probation Victim Liaison Units (VLUs), however, this is impacted by the timeliness and quality of sentencing information the WCUs receive from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Courts.
- Of the 519 eligible cases, 63 per cent were for breaches of a protection order and therefore involved repeat victims and repeat offenders. This is a crucial factor when considering the wider context and nature of the offending, the impact on victims/survivors, and the implications for practitioners when supporting them.

### Practitioner experiences

- Timely and accurate sentencing information is an essential starting point for the VNS process if target dates are to be achieved. Not all practitioners have access to the same digital systems, resulting in patchy, inconsistent and inaccurate information. For example, WCUs and Victim Liaison Officers (VLOs) do not have access to magistrates' and Crown Court digital systems, which limits the availability of essential information.
- To implement the VNS effectively, cases must be responded to as a priority, information gathered quickly and initial contact with the victim made as soon as possible. The time available to perform the tasks is limited, adding to the intensity of the work. Delays impacting the ability of practitioners to meet the targets are caused by both internal and external factors.
- VLOs commented on the high take up rates for the VNS compared to the VCS. Due to the repeated nature of the offences and the high risk of further harm, victims want information about the release date and licence conditions to help them make plans for their own safety and protection.

- The development of effective partnerships and improved information sharing would benefit those responsible for implementing the VNS and improve the support and protection provided to victims. This is particularly pertinent between VLOs and Prison Offender Managers (POM) and/or Community Offender Managers (COM).
- VLOs' contact with victims is at the end of what is frequently a protracted criminal justice process. The victim interviews indicated high levels of dissatisfaction with the earlier stages of the criminal process prior to sentencing. Evidence of this is reported widely in the literature, indicating that what victims want most is timely and accurate information (Rossetti et al, 2017; Shapland, 2018) and a preference to be updated by 'a single point of contact' (Wedlock and Tapley, 2014). A report by Suzy Lamplugh Trust (2023) found a significant lack of understanding by criminal justice agencies in relation to the behaviours that constitute stalking, resulting in no further action being taken, perpetrators being charged with the incorrect offence, low conviction rates, and the judiciary not recognising the risks posed by stalkers resulting in an insufficient use of Stalking Protection Orders and sentencing. These findings are supported further by evidence found in the recent report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) (2023) which has found that the police, the CPS and the Probation Service, whilst attempting to comply with the Victim's Code, do not always consider the needs of victims.

### **Victim/survivor experiences**

- The majority of victims were repeat victims and had been through the criminal justice process before. Many reported that previously they had received no information about the release of the offender and felt relieved to be contacted by a VLO to be given information about the offender's release date and licence conditions.
- Many victims mentioned the VLO being kind, supportive and accessible. Of particular importance was the VLO demonstrating an understanding of the nature and impact of the offences.

- Evidence indicates victims want timely and accurate information from reliable sources, preferably one. Multiple sources often provide information that, whilst unintentional, can be confusing and conflicting.
- Limitations around what information the VLO can provide caused victims further anxiety and concern. Whilst VLOs can provide the intended week of release, they cannot state the actual date until the day of release, unless there is an overriding public protection reason to do so. As with the VCS, they also cannot tell victims what help offenders are receiving, although this can act to reassure victims that an offender is getting the support they need and may help to reduce reoffending and protect the victim from further harm.
- Whilst victims can request an exclusion zone, preventing the offender from entering a specific area where the victim resides, VLOs cannot state which area the offender is living in. Victims and specialist support services say this essentially traps victims in the exclusion zone, by not knowing where else is safe to travel or which areas to avoid.
- Whilst victims value the information and support provided by the VNS, they can be frustrated by having to chase for information and the provision of inaccurate and/or conflicting information. Victims also reported confusion at barriers that prevent them from being given information they state they need to keep themselves safe.

### **Specialist support services' experiences**

- A number of recommendations were made by specialist support advocates:
  - VLOs should avoid contacting victims using a No Caller ID number. This acts as a trigger for victims experiencing stalking and harassment. As a result, they may not respond, thereby preventing them from engaging with the VNS.
  - Improved communication is required between VLOs and local specialist support services. This could be achieved if VLOs identify at the initial case review stage whether an advocate is working with the victim, and then provide their contact details to the advocate.

- Closer partnership working assists victims and improves perceptions that the process and services are joined up. It also prevents victims having to constantly repeat their stories.

### Identifying good practice

- Having the VLU directly request victim referrals from the WCU is the most effective way of ensuring eligible VNS victims are identified and contacted within the target times.
- All VLOs in a team should be allocated VNS cases to spread the intensity of working with potentially complex, high-risk victims and the urgency of the action required due to the short sentences.
- The speed required to contact victims has meant it is not practical to contact by letter. Victims are wary to answer a No ID call, so VLOs can send a text or email before or after. Contact through a specialist advocate already supporting the victim could offer an alternative approach, which may be preferred by the victim.
- Training has been identified and delivered for VLUs and WCUs in some areas, including training with partner agencies on stalking and coercive behaviour. Further training is required to improve knowledge of the increasing use of cyber abuse and technology facilitated domestic abuse and stalking.

### Considerations and conclusions

- Practitioners overwhelmingly agree that the VNS provides an essential service to a vulnerable group of victims at risk of further harm. Whilst the work involved can be fast paced and intense, practitioners acknowledge the benefits for victims and the necessity of the information and support required. However, their ability to do this would be improved by more effective communication and information sharing within and between agencies. This was viewed as particularly important for the VNS due to the short timescales for contacting victims.
- Providing information about the sentence, release dates and conditions has been broadly welcomed by victims, as has the support and reassurance provided by

VLOs. However, lack of timely and accurate information still causes frustration and dissatisfaction.

- Practitioners state that the VNS has been referred to as a “lighter touch” compared to the VCS, however, this evaluation has found particular challenges for the VNS due to the complexity and repeated nature of the offences targeted, and the speed required to contact victims. These factors must not be underestimated, and a greater understanding of the wider context needs to be explored when assessing the impact on and needs of victims and survivors.
- The wider evidence presented by victim/survivors in this research indicates dissatisfaction with a criminal justice process that they believe places an emphasis upon victims to protect themselves. The performance data shows that protection orders are frequently breached, creating a repeated cycle of offending and short sentences.
- Victims feel they are required to make everyday choices based on anticipated risks, changing their lives and routines in order to accommodate the offender. For the vast majority of victims, the VNS has been a positive addition to how they manage these risks.

## Introduction

### Terminology

For the purposes of this report, the term “victim” will predominantly be used, because it is the term that the majority of statutory agencies use and understand when referring to someone who has experienced victimisation, and is the term officially used in policies and legislation. However, it is also acknowledged that some victims and many non-statutory agencies reject the term “victim” and prefer to use the word “survivor”, believing that it returns some autonomy, power and a sense of control to the person harmed, but is not a term accepted by everyone. Both terms will be used interchangeably in this report.

### Background

#### The Victim Contact Scheme

The Victim Contact Scheme (VCS) was introduced by the first Victim’s Charter (Home Office, 1990), placing victim contact responsibilities on the Probation Service for the first time. It was intended to provide families of homicide victims with information about life-sentence prisoners when release from custody was being considered, and for their concerns to be heard when decisions were made regarding licence conditions. At this time, initial contact by a Victim Liaison Officer (VLO) was not made following the sentence, but only made when plans for release were being considered. Prior to the VCS, there was no process in place to inform the families of homicide victims of the release of the offender from prison. Under the VCS, victims were required to opt-in and so relied on families being informed about the VCS.

The VCS was extended by the revised Victim’s Charter (Home Office, 1996) to victims whose offenders were sentenced to a custodial sentence of four or more years for violent offences. Under the revised scheme, initial contact was to be made by the Probation Service within four weeks of sentencing and information to be provided at important stages during the sentence, including release date and licence conditions.

The VCS was placed on a statutory footing as part of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000. From April 2001, victims of a specified sexual or violent offence where

the sentence is 12 months imprisonment or more had a statutory right to be offered contact by the Probation Service. This work is undertaken by Victim Liaison Officers (VLOs), probation staff who ensure victims are kept updated with key stages of the sentence and enable victims to exercise their statutory right to request licence conditions. The first Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victims' Code) was published in 2006 pursuant to the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 ("the DVCVA 2004"), replacing the Victim's Charter. The DVCVA 2004 (specifically Chapter 2 of Part 3 of the Act) is the legislation that now underpins the VCS. Victims were still required to opt in to the VCS. Those who are deemed by the Probation Service to be the victim, or act for the victim of a specified sexual or violent offence, where the sentence is 12 months or more imprisonment have a statutory right to be offered contact by the Probation Service and make representations on licence conditions and supervision requirements. They can also receive information the Probation Service considers appropriate in all the circumstances of the case. Any information provided must comply with data protection legislation, ie be necessary and proportionate.

Subsequent reviews of the VCS (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2013; 2018) identified a number of challenges with its implementation, including eligible victims not being informed of the VCS, victims not being given timely and accurate information, limitations to the information being provided to victims, and a lack of communication between Offender Managers and VLOs. Individual Probation regions implement the scheme in accordance with local resources, thereby resulting in differences in how the VCS is managed and delivered. The Victims' Code was revised in 2020 (Ministry of Justice, 2020) with eligible victims now automatically referred to the VCS, rather than being required to opt in.<sup>1</sup>

The above demonstrates how the VCS has evolved over time, in an attempt to improve information being given to victims and their families about offenders given custodial sentences for 12 months or more for specified sexual and violent offences, from the initial sentencing through to release.

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<sup>1</sup> Right 11 of the Victims' Code– 'To be given information about the offender following a conviction' states that, 'where eligible, you have the right to be automatically referred to the Victim Contact Scheme, which will provide you with information about the offender and their progress in prison, and if/when they become eligible for consideration of parole or release. Where applicable, you also have the Right to make a new Victim Personal Statement, in which you can say how the crime continues to affect you.'



## **The Victim Notification Scheme**

In 2021, previous Ministers decided as part of the Target Operating Model for the unified Probation Service to introduce a scheme to victims of stalking, harassment and coercive and controlling behaviour, where the length of sentence is less than 12 months. This scheme is known as the Victim Notification Scheme (VNS). Unlike the VCS, this is a non-statutory scheme.

Contacting victims where the sentence is less than 12 months does present particular operational challenges. Specifically, contacting victims promptly after sentence. This is because release could take place shortly after sentencing, sometimes even straight from court, especially for those offenders who have spent time on remand.

Given the short nature of most of the sentences associated with these cases, the priority is to contact victims quickly. VLOs aim to contact the victim within 10 working days of receiving a referral from the WCU to explain the sentence, notify the victim of the scheduled week of release and give them the opportunity to request licence conditions. This differs from the VCS where the target is 20 days. Victims can be contacted initially in writing, including email, or by telephone. Unlike the VCS, a face-to-face meeting or home visit is not required, unless there are deemed to be exceptional circumstances.

Each contact will differ depending on the individual victim's situation and needs, but VLOs should ensure that victims understand the role of the VLO, the purpose and scope of the VNS, their entitlements and key information about the offender's release, and ensure that a timeline for future contact has been clarified. The VLO should also provide victims with details of organisations that provide emotional and practical support to victims of stalking, domestic abuse and harassment.

## **Evaluating the Victim Notification Scheme**

From April 2022, the VNS was piloted in three Probation regions to test how the new scheme should operate: Hampshire and Thames Valley, Northumbria, and Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

A process evaluation was commissioned to explore how the new scheme is operating in the pilot regions, identifying perceived impact on criminal justice practitioners and victims, as well as on resources. The evaluation will ensure an evidence-based national rollout of the VNS.

## Process Evaluation

### Aims and objectives

The aim of this research was to explore the process by which the VNS has been rolled out in the pilot areas, and its perceived impact on the criminal justice professionals responsible for its delivery, as well as the perceived impact on victims' experiences and the specialist support services assisting victims.<sup>2</sup> It also aimed to identify which parts of the process were working well, highlighting key areas of good practice, and areas where further improvements could be made in national rollout.

The process evaluation research objectives were to:

- Provide an evidence-based approach to implementation and national roll-out of the VNS, including a clear set of recommendations.
- Understand the perceived operational impact of expanding the scheme in terms of process, methodology, best practice and resources required.
- Understand the perceived impact on WCUs and Victim Liaison Units (VLUs), particularly in terms of resources and their ability to refer eligible cases in a timely way.
- Understand the perceived impact on VLOs, their ability to contact victims in a timely way, to provide the relevant information, and liaise with other criminal justice professionals to ensure the safety of the victim.
- Understand the perceived impact on victims/survivors, their expectations and experiences.

### Methodology

The research was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to a team of researchers from the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Portsmouth. A mixed-

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<sup>2</sup> The nature of a process evaluation does not allow for attribution of impact and causality – as such, this process evaluation can only explore participants' perceptions of the scheme.

methods approach was utilised to provide an evidence-based approach. The fieldwork was undertaken from April 2023 to August 2023.

## Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted.<sup>3</sup> In this case, all participants had knowledge and experience of the VNS from a range of different perspectives thereby providing ‘information rich’ cases (Erlandson *et al*, 1993: 84). The achieved sample is detailed further in Annex A.

Although the samples were small, the qualitative data did reach saturation, whereby the same themes were emerging repeatedly.<sup>4</sup> Whilst the findings may not be generalisable to other regions and the wider population of practitioners and victims, subsequent reports<sup>5</sup> have since published similar findings (further explored in the Analysis and Discussion section).

## Online victim survey

An online survey (using JISC Online Survey software) was distributed to eligible victims by administrative staff in the VLUs across the regions. The survey was based upon the current victim satisfaction survey distributed by the MoJ to victims who participate in the VCS, but with additional questions to ensure the aims of the pilot could be evaluated (Annex B). A mix of closed and open questions were used, and the data was analysed using SPSS.<sup>6</sup> There were 27 responses, providing a response rate of 4 per cent, which is relatively high for research involving sensitive topics and potentially vulnerable groups (Evans and Mathur, 2018; Tourangeau, 2019). As the probation VLU acted as gatekeepers, the research team did not have access to the contact details of eligible victims and so could not employ strategies commonly used to encourage participation,

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<sup>3</sup> Purposive sampling is a non-probability method for obtaining a sample of participants that have the required characteristics ‘to maximise discovery of the heterogeneous patterns and problems that occur in the particular context under study’ (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper and Allen, 1993: 82).

<sup>4</sup> Hennink and Kaiser (2022) reviewed empirical studies in qualitative research and found that saturation could be achieved within a narrow range of interviews (9-17) or focus group discussions (4-8), when undertaking research with relatively homogenous populations and narrowly defined objectives.

<sup>5</sup> [HMICFRS \(December, 2023\)](#) Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate ‘Meeting the needs of victims in the CJS’ and [Suzy Lamplugh Trust \(November 2023\)](#) ‘I just want this to be over’: Preliminary Findings of Research into Stalking Victims’ Experiences of the CPS, HM Courts & Tribunal Services & the Judiciary.

<sup>6</sup> IBM SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is software for advanced statistical analysis

including a follow-up email as a reminder. The demographic breakdown of survey respondents can be found in Annex C.

### **Semi-structured interviews with practitioners and victims**

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders across the Probation regions (N = 21) and with victims (N = 6) who had experience of the VNS. This qualitative method enables the collection of rich data, capturing the experiences and perspectives of participants in their own words (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The interviews lasted on average between 60 and 80 minutes, with the victim interviews tending to take longer than practitioner interviews. The interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams, were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were then analysed and coded using thematic analysis. An inductive approach was adopted to ensure the themes that emerged were driven by the data. Codes were generated and themes agreed by the research team to ensure reflexivity (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

### **Focus groups with Witness Care Units and specialist advocacy services**

Focus groups are a time and cost-effective way to gain insights into the experiences and perspectives of people working within the same environment and undertaking the same tasks. They allow for a level of diversity of opinion as people are contributing their views and help to create a fuller picture by observing and listening to both their shared sentiments and differing accounts (Barbour, 2018). Focus groups were held with the WCUs in each region<sup>7</sup> and with specialist advocacy services based in Thames Valley, Northumbria and Sussex.<sup>8</sup> There were six focus groups held with WCUs (22 WCOs in total, 2–5 members per focus group) and three focus groups held with specialist advocacy groups (10 specialist advocates, 3–4 members per focus group). The focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted online using Microsoft Teams. They were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and then analysed and coded using thematic analysis, enabling new concepts and themes to emerge (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

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<sup>7</sup> Probation regions may include one or more counties and each county has its own police constabulary which operate their own WCUs.

<sup>8</sup> All of the regions have a complex network of non-statutory third sector agencies working to support victims of crime, including Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) and more recently Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworkers (ISACs).

## Analysis of performance data

Data collated by administrative staff in the VLUs recording the number of eligible cases, WCU referrals and VLO contact targets across the regions were analysed using basic descriptive statistics. As with all manual data collection, the data may be subject to clerical and input errors, which has implications on the quality of the data.

## Ethical considerations

The evaluation sought and was awarded ethical approval by the University of Portsmouth, Faculty of Humanities and Social Science Ethics Committee in July 2022. The project plan, recruitment strategy, information materials and methodological tools were submitted, highlighting the ethical considerations inherent in the project and outlining the approaches taken to address them and mitigate any associated risks. The MoJ complies with the Data Protection Act and GDPR laws and the Data Protection Team advised on the project and the data being collected.

Informed consent was sought from all participants, who each received an information sheet and consent form providing background to the research. The information sheet and consent form explained why and how the research was being conducted and emphasised that participation was voluntary and that all data would be confidential and anonymous. Participants were also advised when and how they could withdraw their participation and their data.<sup>9</sup>

Additional measures were put in place to ensure care for victims due to their vulnerability:

- The VLUs acted as a gatekeeper to recruit potential participants for victim surveys and interviews, so no personal data was provided to the research team.
- Although under the Victims' Code (2020) the victims participating should have already been offered or receiving specialist ongoing support, additional efforts were made when contacting victims to ensure they had been offered and were receiving the relevant support services. If they had not, information about relevant support services was provided.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview participants had up until three weeks after the interview to withdraw their data. Survey participants had up until the survey had been submitted. Focus group participants had up until the focus groups had been transcribed.

- If, during an interview, participants showed signs of distress, the interview would be stopped and advice and information on relevant support services provided.
- Victims were reminded throughout the research process that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any point without explanation. Ways to withdraw were reiterated at the conclusion of the interview, and during the debrief interviewers enquired whether victims had support following the interview.

## Limitations

- Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants from the pilot regions, so the findings may not be generalisable to other regions and the wider population of practitioners and victims.
- The sample size for the victim interviews was small (N = 6), as expected for a study of this nature. The victim survey did provide wider representation of victim's experience of the scheme; however, these may not be representative of the wider population of victims who experienced the VNS.
- The qualitative findings reflect the perceptions of participants and may not present or be consistent with other evidence relating to victim research or HMIP reports based on a larger cohort of cases. To minimise researcher bias, an inductive and reflexive approach was adopted.
- The nature of a process evaluation does not allow for attribution of impact and causality. The monitoring data should not be used to infer causality, instead it gives an indication of performance in each pilot region.
- The monitoring data may be subject to clerical or input errors and has not been validated. All cases recorded by the pilot regions were included in the analyses.

## Performance data findings

Data were collated by administrative staff in the pilot regions to give an indication of performance. As evidenced by the findings in this report, there is large variation between regions, both in how they operate and the caseloads they deal with, and so care must be taken when making comparisons and drawing conclusions.

### Extent and demand for the Victim Notification Scheme

Table 1 shows a total of 519 VNS cases<sup>10</sup> identified during the period April 2022 to June 2023, with Kent, Surrey and Sussex (KSS) receiving the highest number (N = 231, 45%) and Northumbria receiving the lowest number (N = 137, 26%).

**Table 1: Number and percentage of Victim Notification Scheme cases per region**

Probation Region	VNS cases	Percentage
Kent, Surrey, Sussex	231	45
Northumbria	137	26
Hampshire, Thames Valley	151	29
<b>Total</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 provides a breakdown of the VNS cases identified by each WCU. As each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales is responsible for managing a WCU, and there are 12 probation regions in England and Wales, VLUs may be required to liaise with more than one WCU.<sup>11</sup> Kent had the highest number of VNS referrals (N = 148, 28.5%), whereas Surrey had the lowest (N = 4, 0.8%).<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> During quality assurance, a small number of the cases (N = 4) recorded by pilot regions were found to be not eligible for the VNS. This was due to incorrect recording on the case management system.

<sup>11</sup> Kent, Surrey and Sussex probation region liaise with three WCUs; Thames Valley and Hampshire probation region liaise with two WCUs; and Northumbria probation region liaises with one WCU.

<sup>12</sup> Further analysis would be needed to explore reasons behind the low number of referrals in Surrey, but this is not in scope for the current evaluation.

**Table 2: Number of Victim Notification Scheme referrals by Witness Care Unit**

<b>Witness Care Unit</b>	<b>VNS referrals</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Kent	148	28.5
Surrey	4	0.8
Sussex	79	15.2
Northumbria	137	26.4
Hampshire	55	10.6
Thames Valley	96	18.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 3 provides a breakdown of offences eligible for the VNS across the regions. Most notable is the high number of offences for breaches of a protection order, including Stalking Protection Orders, Non-Molestation Orders and Restraining Orders, some of which may include repeated breaches by the same offender. This is indicative of the nature of the offences, whereby offenders are persistent and undeterred by protective orders made by the court. This data helps to illustrate the repeated nature and complexity of VNS cases, the work required by VLOs to respond to the needs of vulnerable and high-risk victims, and the resources required to implement the VNS. A full breakdown of offence types can be found in Annex D.

**Table 3: Breakdown of Victim Notification Scheme offence types across all regions**

<b>Offence type</b>	<b>VNS cases</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Breach of order/conditions	326	63
Stalking	102	20
Harassment	63	12
Other	28	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>100</b>



## Achieving referral and contact targets

The VNS Operational Guidance outlines the targets agreed and requires WCUs to automatically refer eligible VNS cases to the VLU within 5 working days of the sentencing date, and for VLOs to aim to contact victims within 10 working days for non-urgent cases (but as soon as possible for urgent cases), making the overall target time from sentencing date to victim contact 15 working days.

However, Right 9, Section 9.2 of the Victims's Code (Ministry of Justice, 2020) allows the courts five working days from the date of sentencing to inform the WCUs of the sentence, and the WCUs then have one working day in which to inform the victim. This means WCUs have only one day to identify the eligible VNS cases, making it difficult to achieve VNS targets.

Table 4 provides a breakdown of performance by Probation region. Overall attainment indicates 61 per cent of eligible cases were processed within the target time of 15 working days. Northumbria achieved the highest performance (87%), followed by Kent, Surrey and Sussex (60%) and Hampshire & Thames Valley (39%). Those regions where a process has been developed to assist in the identification of VNS cases achieved a higher performance rate. In some cases, the VLU had identified a VNS case before receiving a referral from the WCU and in urgent cases contact with the victim had already been made (indicated by minus figures in Table 4). For example, when the offender is released on the day of sentence due to time spent on remand.

**Table 4: Target time performance by Probation region**

Probation region	Stage	On-time attainment (%)	Mean (days)	Range (days)
Northumbria	Sentence to referral	88%	3.2	0 to 43
	Referral to victim contact	85%	6.4	-4 <sup>13</sup> to 33
	Sentence to victim contact	87%	9.6	1 to 47

<sup>13</sup> Minus figures indicate cases where victims were contacted before the WCU referral. In some probation regions, sentencing information was gained directly from the court and contact was made early.

<b>Probation region</b>	<b>Stage</b>	<b>On-time attainment (%)</b>	<b>Mean (days)</b>	<b>Range (days)</b>
<b>Kent, Surrey and Sussex</b>	Sentence to referral	25%	10.1	0 to 138
	Referral to victim contact	79%	6.4	0 to 34
	Sentence to victim contact	60%	16.5	0 to 144
<b>Hampshire and Thames Valley</b>	Sentence to referral	31%	23.3	0 to 132
	Referral to victim contact	87%	6.2	0 to 80
	Sentence to victim contact	39%	29.1	1 to 134
<b>Overall</b>	Sentence to referral	44%	12.1	0 to 138
	Referral to victim contact	83%	6.3	-4 to 80
	Sentence to victim contact	61%	18.3	0 to 144

## Practitioner Findings

This section provides a summary of the experiences and perceptions of practitioners involved in the VNS, gathered via focus groups and interviews. It explores the perceived operational impact of expanding the VCS on those responsible for implementing it in terms of process, methodology, best practice and the resources required.

### Witness Care Unit focus groups

WCUs manage the care of victims and witnesses, from the charging of the defendant(s), through to the conclusion of a case (Home Office, 2021: 21). Their responsibilities include: being a single point of contact for victims and witnesses; completing a full needs assessment for victims and witnesses; guiding and supporting individuals through the criminal justice process and coordinating support and services; and communicating with victims and witnesses to inform them of the case outcome. Following the restructuring of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) into 13 new larger regions in April 2011, WCUs have since become governed and staffed by the police in each of the 43 forces in England and Wales.

The evaluation found that the six WCUs in the VNS pilot regions were located, organised and resourced differently. Northumbria WCU combines victim care (initial contact with victims and referring onto support services) with witness care in their Northumbria Victim and Witness Service (NVWS). In Kent, the WCU sits with Kent criminal justice command and is co-located with the Victim Care Unit,<sup>14</sup> which is managed by Victim Support. The WCUs in Surrey, Sussex and Thames Valley are based separately in one location within each force, whilst the Hampshire WCU is located across three different sites in Hampshire.

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<sup>14</sup> Victim Care Units (VCUs) were introduced by most Police and Crime Commissioners in 2016, when responsibility for the commissioning of the majority of victim support services was passed to the PCC's. Various models have been introduced, but most have a VCU based within the police, which are tasked to contact victims following the reporting of a crime, ensure a needs assessment is undertaken and victims are referred on to support services, as required by the Victims' Code

## Challenges delivering the VNS targets

The greatest challenge faced by WCUs was the ability to gain timely and accurate sentencing information from the courts and the CPS, which is an essential starting point for the VNS process if target dates are to be achieved. Under the Victims' Code, the courts are meant to advise the WCUs of sentence outcomes within five working days, but the systems are not always updated and the WCUs have to search for the information. This was complicated further as not all WCUs have access to the same digital systems and so rely on a variety of different sources. WCOs also reported that the information received was often basic, partial and contradictory:

“Ultimately, we're the messengers, so we're very heavily reliant on CPS and the courts, and what information we get back, which even though you may have the officer go [to court], you may then have three very different outcomes from the same hearing, that you've then got to sieve through and work out what is the ultimate outcome” (Kent WCU).

Some WCUs were using the more recently introduced Common Platform, but the information provided here was not always reliable. Whilst cases involving vulnerable victims are usually updated within 24 hours, in accordance with the 'enhanced rights' included in the Victims' Code, other cases can take from 3 days to a week:

“The Common Platform, it really is, if you read through it, it is just a minefield, so much so that when I asked one of the court staff on Monday to tell me what a result was, she was, like, I think it's this but I can't be sure” (Kent WCU).

Other challenges for the WCUs related not to the volume of cases, but their complexity. Some cases may involve multiple offenders, a number of charges relating to one victim or multiple victims. This makes identification of the index offence and eligible VNS victims difficult.

“You may have multiple victims from the same defendant or have your case where you might have one victim, for instance, but say [another WCO] may also have another charge, a separate charge, and they've all linked them together to be sentenced all at the same time for court costs and time in the court system. But

yes, in short it can be ever so difficult to identify which outcome relates to which victim” (Kent WCU).

To manage the complexities, the WCUs need to ensure WCOs have the relevant knowledge and experience, but this has been problematic due to a high turnover of staff. WCUs were responding to these challenges in different ways and some have agreed and implemented formal processes with the regional VLUs to improve the identification of eligible cases and speed up victim referrals. Some additional training was also provided for WCOs, including joint training with partner agencies, but this could be expanded further.

### **Examples of best practice**

In Northumbria, WCU supervisors checked the WMS system every morning to identify the VNS cases, which were then allocated to the relevant WCO to warn them of a VLU referral once the case is finalised. This has made the process more efficient and reliable, which could explain the performance data in Table 4, showing 88% of referrals in Northumbria completed within the target time. The WCO can then inform the victim that a VLO will be in touch shortly to explain the sentence and confirm the release date, which following the sentencing information, is the question most frequently asked by victims.

“It’s [the VNS] been very positive. It’s something we have really welcomed for the victims, because it’s not nice calling and saying, they’ve been sentenced to X amount of time, but we can’t tell you the release date. It’s not a nice phone call to have with the victim. So the fact we’re now able to say Probation will be in touch with further details, it’s just a nicer ending to that phone call, knowing the victim will be getting further updates going forward” (NVWS).

Northumbria has also developed a good working partnership with the Witness Service, arranging visits for all new members of staff, and raising awareness of the roles and responsibilities of both teams. This good partnership working extends to their relationship with the Probation VLU, where they hold quarterly meetings and joint training sessions to encourage regular communication on a more informal basis.

A further example of good practice is that the NVWS team include the details of the Officer In Charge (OIC) in the referral to the VLU, providing the VLO with another point of contact if they are having any problems contacting the victim. NVWS has also been proactive in

developing other best practices, including developing an Engagement Plan for victims/witness, which acts as a checklist to ensure the victim/witness receives all the services and information they are entitled to.

To assist in the timely identification of VNS cases, the Kent, Surrey and Sussex (KSS) VLU have developed a three-prompt process with the WCUs in their area and this has improved their ability to meet the target dates. As part of the three prompt process, the KSS VLU identify the eligible VNS cases and request the victim referral information from the three WCUs with a ten-day target date. The first request goes directly to the WCO and if the referral is not received, a second reminder is sent after five days, which goes to an inbox managed by a supervisor. Although rarely required, a third reminder will go through an escalation process. Surrey WCOs stated that a prompt is particularly helpful when offenders have been released on the day of sentencing, as it enables them to provide the information on the same day.

“Having the prompt from Probation is very helpful.... It helps to prioritise it and get it done before the deadline they request” (Sussex WCU).

“I had a really helpful email prompt... which basically just stated what offence the victim related to. So, on the email, it stated at the bottom, this offence relates to this victim, we just need details for this person and it was actually really helpful” (Kent WCU).

In Thames Valley, WCOs work closely with the OICs, especially if the victim is hard to reach (for example, in one case a victim was homeless and, in another VCS case, the victim was in a refuge). WCOs will also ask victims if they are receiving any additional support and refer them on to the relevant support services if required.

Further good practice is checking the court listings for bail hearings, which the WCOs receive the day before to ensure victims are advised when offenders are released on bail and what the conditions are. WCOs agree that the majority of victims welcome the VNS and the support provided by WCOs:

“Where you get such small [short] sentences in the magistrate’s court, it’s nice for them [victims] to know that they don’t have to worry at all times whether they’re

going to bump into them [the offender]. I've had quite good feedback and they're [the victims] very thankful that they will know when they're being released" (Thames Valley WCU).

### Areas for improvement

In Hampshire and Thames Valley, individual WCOs were required to identify the VNS cases and a combination of inaccurate sentencing information and complex cases resulted in some delays. Table 4 indicates that only 39 per cent of referrals in Hampshire and Thames Valley were achieved within the target time. In Hampshire and Thames Valley, at the time of the fieldwork taking place, no process had yet been introduced to formalise VLU prompts for victim referrals, as seen in the KSS probation region. This is a practice that could be considered in order to achieve VNS referrals within the target times.

A high turnover of WCU staff, inexperience and a lack of understanding has caused some confusion regarding which offences are eligible. This has resulted in some ineligible cases being referred to the VLU. On one occasion a victim was incorrectly advised they were entitled to the VNS and had to be told they were not. This caused some distress to the victim and the WCO.

The Surrey WCU advised that another frequent problem was insufficient information about bail conditions. In addition, when a Restraining Order is made, WCOs are unable to provide the victim with the conditions of the Order, as a copy will not have been sent by the courts. Subsequently, WCUs had to chase for the information to ensure they can provide the relevant information to victims about any conditions imposed on the offender to help keep the victim safe. Enabling the sharing of digital information systems would ensure all agencies have access to the relevant documents.

Surrey WCOs advised that victims' dissatisfaction with the outcome of cases can impact negatively on the morale of the team, as they are responsible for delivering news that victims are not happy to hear. For example, cases being adjourned, breaches of bail conditions being replaced with the same bail conditions, and a continuous cycle of short sentences. WCOs advised that, as a consequence, victims are put off from re-engaging with the criminal process, reflecting the repeated nature of the offences and the cycle of trauma it creates for the victims:

“Initially they’re [the victims] thankful, but then they’re like, well when the 16 weeks is up, I’m going to be feeling this exact same way again and then it’s got to go through the whole system again to get to the point where we are now” (Surrey WCU).

### **Perceived benefits of the VNS for victims**

Despite victim dissatisfaction with the outcomes, WCOs have found that victims respond positively to the information provided by the VNS.

“I’d say they [the victims] are very up for it... They want to be kept updated. I think it gives them a lot of confidence and a lot of control with regards to what’s happening and they’re not necessarily then left in the dark ... So having that confirmation and another team as part of the after service, I think it massively helps” (Kent WCU).

“... I have had good feedback from them [the victims] because you think when you’re going to tell somebody they’re going to be released in a couple of days’ time, they’re going to be irate, but I haven’t had that experience. They’ve all just been grateful to be told the date... Although it’s not a great thing somebody’s being released, at least they know they’re coming out and they can prepare...” (Hampshire WCU).

### **Summary**

The points raised by the WCUs indicate that timely and accurate sentencing information is an essential starting point for the VNS process if target dates are to be achieved. Other challenges for the WCUs relate not to the volume of cases, but their complexity.

Participants agreed that it has taken some time to become familiar with the VNS, the shorter sentences and range of offences, and unlike VCS cases, identifying stalking and harassment cases as eligible for a VNS referral has yet to become automatic. WCUs are responding to these challenges in different ways and some have agreed and implemented formal processes with the regional VLUs to improve the identification of eligible cases and speed up victim referrals.



It is important that best practices are shared so that WCUs and VLUs can draw upon the experiences of other areas when developing processes to suit their own specific local requirements. It was agreed unanimously that having the VNS cases identified for them, either by WCU supervisors or prompts from a VLU, was the most effective way of ensuring eligible VNS victims were referred.

WCOs viewed the VNS as very positive and based upon their interaction with victims, believe that the majority of victims want information about release dates and conditions. WCOs agreed that being able to assure victims that a VLO will be in contact shortly to clarify the sentence and release date, reduces confusion and helps to ensure victims receive timely and accurate information.

### **Probation practitioner interviews**

Three key themes emerged from the practitioner interviews, providing evidence of the feasibility of the VNS process, the impact on those responsible for its implementation and the perceived benefits for those who receive the service. The themes examine the complexity of VNS cases, the barriers that impact on the ability of VLUs and VLOs to effectively implement the VNS, and VLO contact with victims and perceptions of their needs.

### **The complex nature of Victim Notification Scheme cases**

Practitioners stated that the VNS has been referred to as a “lighter touch”. It is a non-statutory scheme so does not have the same framework as the VCS, and due to covering shorter sentences than the VCS and the priority to notify victims quickly, the full VCS service is not offered (e.g. home visits). However, this evaluation has found particular challenges with VNS cases, reflecting the frequently complex and repeated nature of the offences, which often involve people where a relationship or acquaintance exists or has previously existed. As such, the perpetrator and victim are known to each other and may have ongoing connections despite the relationship ending. For example, children, relatives, friends, property, finance and business.

In addition, these offences are rarely a one-off incident and by their very definition involve a repeated pattern of behaviour. As shown in Table 3, 63 per cent of the VNS cases were for a breach of a protection order. Most notable was the high number of offences for the

breach of a Restraining Order (49 per cent), which carries a maximum sentence of five years (although the sentences imposed are often much shorter). This is indicative of the repeated nature of the offences, whereby some perpetrators' abuse is persistent and undeterred by protective orders made by the court, even when detained in prison. As such, the complexity of these cases should not be underestimated and an understanding of the wider context needs to be explored when assessing the needs of often vulnerable victims, where the risk of further harm remains high. As observed by one VLO: "you need the whole back story, not just the current offence" (VLO3).

The evaluation found that the shorter sentences placed additional pressures on practitioners to gather information from a range of sources within less time, as release of the offender may already have occurred or be imminent. As such, the immediacy and level of intensity was much higher than for a VCS case, where a longer sentence allows more time for information to be gathered and contact to be made with the victim:

"It was sold to us as a "light touch", it certainly isn't light touch at all. It's actually the opposite, because it's so intense and there's such a quick turnaround that you almost have to drop everything else and just concentrate on your VNS cases. So it's just very quick paced.... it's much more stressful I think for the officer" (SPO1).

"It's about prioritisation really, I might have other things I need to do, but if somebody's being released on that day, it's a priority, you need to speak to that person and you need to let them know" (VLO2).

Due to the connection with the offender, whether past or existing, evidence demonstrated that the needs of victims were higher, especially when offences were repeated and protection orders breached. Victims fear for their safety, so have a need for timely and accurate information about release dates and licence conditions, in order to plan for their own safety and protection, and sometimes of others (e.g. children).

Evidence found that the complex nature of VNS cases created higher workload demands for both VLUs and VLOs. VLOs must gain a significant amount of information at pace from a range of different agencies before the initial contact with the victim can be made. Findings indicated that this process was both time-consuming and resource intensive, but essential to improve the protection and support of victims:

“I can’t believe we didn’t contact these victims before. I think we’ve basically been ignoring probably the most needy, most at risk cohort of victims for a long time, or forever. We’re almost... waiting for the offender to commit a more serious offence, before we can offer them any more support” (SPO1).

## **Barriers that impact on the implementation of the Victim Notification Scheme**

### *Responsibilities of Victim Liaison Units*

The need to access and share information between practitioners and partner agencies is paramount to the success of both the VNS and VCS processes, but the need is more urgent for the VNS due to tighter timescales.

To gain information more quickly and efficiently, VLUs require access to magistrates’ and Crown Court digital systems, as delays in systems being updated is preventing access to important information and documents, including details of any protective orders. This creates a particular urgency when offenders have been released on the same day of sentencing due to time already spent on remand.

“The referral from the WCU is just one form. From there we have to check other systems and look for the documents, which has proven a bit difficult because we aren’t allowed access to all the programmes that we could get the documents from. If we had access to that, we’d be laughing, because we’d be able to process them so much quicker than what we can” (VAO01).

“When we get the referral [from the WCU], we don’t find out then that they’re [the offender] out, we just literally get told how many weeks they got, how many months. It’s when you go into the DELIUS account [the Probation Service case management system] and you see what the key dates are, like, released same day, and your heart sinks... if that offender’s been out three days, what’s happening to the victim? Everything else I was doing then has to wait... and any misinformation I’ve got, it hinders everyone else in the process.” (VAO02).

Although other Probation staff have access to the information and some of the systems sit within HMPPS, access is currently denied to staff in the VLU, which hinders their ability to gain the relevant information quickly and forward it to the VLO. Instead, they have to chase

for information and rely on others to forward it to them, which is an inefficient use of time and impacts on their ability to achieve the target dates.

### *Responsibilities of Victim Liaison Officers*

When VNS cases are referred and set up, it is the responsibility of the Senior Probation Officer (SPO) to allocate the cases to a VLO. Different approaches have been adopted in some regions, with some allocating all VNS cases to a small number of VLOs, whereas others have spread the workload across the team. Evidence from practitioners, especially VLOs, indicated a consensus that all VLOs within a team should be allocated VNS cases, instead of one VLO having them as their caseload:

“It’s very, very time-consuming and can be very involved.... they’re very high-risk cases...it’s too much for one person and a variety of work is needed to balance it out. I think being shared amongst the team is a much better way to sort of deal with the cases, ‘cause I think one person doing it could get burnt out, get really sort of overwhelmed” (VLO2).

Before making initial contact with the victim, VLOs undertake a case review to gain information from a range of sources in order to understand the wider context and position of the victim. As indicated by the VNS performance data, it is rarely the first experience of the criminal justice system for both the offender and the victim, so it is essential to gain the relevant information, especially for complex cases involving vulnerable victims. Being prepared with the relevant information avoids victims having to repeat their stories again and assists in building confidence and trust in the VLO.

Evidence from VLOs indicated that the short sentences require improved communication between the VLO and Prison Offender Manager (POM) and/or Community Offender Manager (COM), which helps to inform release plans and licence conditions. Contact with the victim enables the VLO to gain a clearer insight to the behaviours of the offender and the risks posed to the victim from the victims’ perspective, which POMs and COMs are unable to gain from the offender.

Some VLOs believe that POMs and COMs need to become more victim focussed. Even though the involvement of a VLO should be flagged on DELIUS (the Probation Service case management system) and the VLO contact details provided, participants reported

that some offender managers do not contact the VLO and omit to provide important information about changes in custody status and release dates. To increase victim awareness among practitioners, some VLOs deliver training to COMs, but VLOs have commented that a greater victim focus is still required.

“We’re still on the back foot, we’re still always the last people to be advised of anything, or given an update. It’s better than it was, but there’s still more... I attend team meetings to raise the profile and do workshops for newly qualified officers and training, but it’s still not where it should be” (VLO4).

These findings are reflected in the recently published Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorate report *‘Meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice system’* (HMICFRS, 2023), which raises concerns of a lack of knowledge in the Probation Service about the VCS and the role of VLOs. The report recommends training for probation practitioners<sup>15</sup> to improve the quality of information to victims and to ensure that the victim’s voice is heard by criminal justice bodies involved in offender management.

#### *Victim Liaison Officer’s contact with victims and perceptions of their needs*

VLOs advised they make initial contact with the victim as soon as possible, often on the day the case is allocated, especially if the offender has already been released or release is imminent. Information provided by the VLU should indicate the victim’s preferred method of contact and this should be followed whenever possible. In the majority of cases, telephone or mobile is the preferred method, but some VLOs are aware that such ‘cold-calling’ may not be welcomed by victims. To avoid alarming victims, some VLOs send an email before the call to introduce themselves and warn that they will be calling, whilst others telephone and if the call is unanswered, leave a voicemail briefly introducing themselves and an explanation for the call, followed up with an email if an email address is available or a letter. Guidance indicates that a letter should be sent following every contact so that the victim has a record of the information provided.

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<sup>15</sup> Training has been made available for COMs and POMs online to provide information about the Victim Contact Scheme and effective sentence management. Heads of Probation Regions have been asked to ensure staff who manage offenders complete this training and take-up of the training will be monitored.

Unlike the VCS, VNS cases do not get a home visit, except in exceptional cases and an SPO would need to authorise this. Instead, the majority of contact is maintained by telephone or email. However, as observed by a VLO, this can result in important information being missed:

“So we don’t actually get to see them [victims], and I think you can pick up a lot when you actually go and see the person, at their home address, you can pick up a lot of information” (VLO3).

Meeting in person has the benefits of building a better rapport to gain a level of trust and confidence, and from this be able to assess in greater detail any previously unknown vulnerabilities or risks. Whilst introducing home visits for all VNS cases would not be practicable, further consideration could be given to greater use of video calling and identifying cases where a visit may be beneficial for monitoring risk. Working in partnership with a specialist advocate who is already working with the victim could also supplement the need for a home visit, as they would also be maintaining contact and assessing ongoing safety.

VLOs were aware that when they make initial contact, the victims are often at the end of a very long and protracted journey through the criminal justice system (CJS). For some, it may be their first experience of the CJS, but for many victims entitled to the VNS it may already have become a repeated cycle of offending and short sentences. As the VNS provides victims with an opportunity to receive information which they will not have received before, VLOs advise that the take-up rate is high.

VLOs stated that what victims want most is accurate and timely information from a reliable source, as this helps to provide victims with some certainty and helps them to regain a sense of control. Although some victims are disappointed by the short sentences, a number of practitioners believed that a lot of the frustration is caused not only by the length of the sentence, but how complicated the sentences are. VLO4 provided an example of when a victim had been in court and the judge provided inaccurate sentencing information, which then needed to be clarified with the CPS and passed on by the VLO:

“So you start off on the backfoot sometimes straightaway with the victim, because information about the sentence dates and how it’s broken down may be different to what they thought” (VLO4).

As a consequence, victims can often feel anxious and confused by the system:

“I would probably say a lot of the time the victims are frustrated and exhausted, both of the defendant’s [offenders] behaviour and that they’re having to go through the system again. We get the brunt of their frustration and we can’t justify what the outcome is” (VLO1).

The impact of the repeated offending on victims is reflected in their desperate need for information about the sentence and the release dates of the offender, so that they can protect themselves.

“As soon as that person goes into custody there’s an instant sense of relief that they [the victim] can start living again. So it’s really risky for that person not to know that risk has come out, is current again.... they absolutely do alter their whole lifestyle, their whole routine according to whether the offender is present within the community or not” (SPO1).

Whilst the evaluation found examples of victims receiving inaccurate information from one or more of the criminal justice agencies, or in one particular case, no information at all, VLOs reported that victims’ responses to the VNS were still overwhelmingly positive. In many cases, victims were just relieved to be receiving the information, especially repeat victims who had never received any information before:

“I think a lot of the time, before the VNS came in, the first the victims would know about it [the offender’s release] is when the offender’s at their door. So the VNS gives them that ability to be prepared, to be aware, know what’s happened... and I’ve had a few cases where they’ve [the victims] been really, really grateful, because a lot of the stalking cases it isn’t the first time it’s happened, but now they’re having someone they can liaise with and get information” (VLO1).

“I don’t think I’ve had any VNS victim who hasn’t wanted to take up the scheme. I’d say the majority are for breaches of a restraining order... Previously they didn’t know when the offender was going to be released and that caused a whole heightened sense of anxiety” VLO5).

## Summary

Evidence from practitioners demonstrates the challenges presented by VNS cases, the complexity of the cases and the high needs of often vulnerable, repeat victims, whose risk of further harm remains high. To implement the VNS effectively, referred cases have to be responded to as a priority, information gathered quickly and initial contact with the victim made as soon as possible. The time available to perform the tasks is limited and so adds to the intensity of the work required. However, the development of effective partnerships and improved information sharing with other practitioners can benefit those responsible for implementing the VNS and improve the support and protection provided to victims.

## Specialist advocate services focus groups

Three specialist advocacy services based in Thames Valley, Northumbria and Sussex contributed to the evaluation by participating in focus groups. The Thames Valley service delivers Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs), Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs) and Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworkers (ISACs) across the region. The Northumbria service provides specialist stalking services for survivors in a domestic abuse context, and the service in Sussex focuses solely on delivering a stalking advocacy service.

All three services had been made aware of the VNS by contacts in the regional VLUOs and had experience of working with survivors eligible for the VNS. A number of police forces, including Thames Valley, now have stalking co-ordinators and stalking tactical advisors, and some have Stalking Clinics (Hampshire) or Stalking Panels (Thames Valley).<sup>16</sup>

Prior to a VLOs contact with the victim, a number of agencies may already be supporting the victim, including a specialist advocate. To gain a clear understanding of the

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<sup>16</sup> These are multi-agency panels tasked with identifying high risk stalking cases to ensure improved risk management, including the application by police for a Stalking Protection Order when appropriate (Stalking Protection Act 2019). Breach of a Stalking Protection Order is an eligible offence for the VNS.



background and context of the offending, communication with the specialist advocate could be beneficial for the VLO and reduce the need for victims to repeat their experiences to another professional. The participants suggested a number of ways to improve partnership working between specialist advocates and VLOs, and the service provided to survivors:

- VLOs should avoid contacting victims using a No Caller ID number, as this acts as a trigger for victims experiencing stalking and harassment and they may not respond. This may prevent vulnerable and high-risk victims from engaging with the VNS and may explain why some survivors are unaware of the service.
- Victims indicate a preference for receiving information from one source rather than from a range of different people and agencies. It can become confusing for victims to remember who has been in contact and the information they have provided, especially as many roles now have very similar titles, including the words 'victim' or 'witness'.
- VLOs should identify at the initial stages whether an advocate is working with the victim and provide their contact details to the specialist advocate.
- If a specialist advocate is working with a victim, then the initial contact by the VLO could be facilitated through the specialist advocate – for example, the specialist advocate could contact the victim to advise of the VNS and that a VLO will be in contact shortly.
- There is evidence of inconsistencies in the ability of victims to contact their VLO. Some VLOs provide contact details, others provide a general number for the office and some victims are unaware of how to contact their VLO. To ensure some level of consistency, guidance should be provided to VLOs, and if this already exists, VLOs should be reminded.

## Summary

Evidence suggests that closer partnership working between VLOs and local specialist advocacy services could improve the information and support being provided to survivors. In particular, if VLOs and specialist advocates are more aware of each other's roles, this may contribute to survivors experiencing a more 'joined up' service, and reduce the need for them to receive information from a number of sources and practitioners, which can be experienced as confusing and disjointed.

## Victim/Survivor Findings

This section provides a summary of the experiences and perceptions of those victims eligible for the VNS. When evaluating a service designed to support victims and survivors it is essential to gain a victim perspective in order to understand the impact of the service on those who are in receipt of it. This helps to identify good practice, areas that require improvement and any unintended consequences. The views of victims were sought via an online survey and interviews.

### Victim online survey

The online survey was distributed by the regional VLUs to eligible victims. Regarding participant demographics, the majority of respondents were female (N=22, 81%, male N=5, 19%), heterosexual (N=27, 100%) and ages ranged from 16 to 69 years. 60 per cent of respondents were over 40 years old, challenging common perceptions that stalking and coercive and controlling behaviour offences predominantly affect younger women. Importantly, over 80 per cent of participants were repeat victims.

Their reasons for engaging with the VNS centred on being provided with information about the release date, wanting help and support, seeking clarity and feeling reassured, and having their concerns taken into consideration when planning license conditions. Findings indicate that the majority of victims (80%) were satisfied with the information provided and that their concerns had been listened to:

“I’m really glad of this service. It’s helped my mental health tremendously after such a horrific ordeal with what the next steps will be. Keeping me informed which aided in safety planning for myself and my children, and always being available and responsive if I had any questions or queries.”

The findings highlighted the importance victims attached to the VLO being kind, supportive and accessible. Of particular importance to victims was the VLO demonstrating an understanding of the offender’s behaviour and the impact on the victim – empathy and understanding was crucial, as one victim said, “When you have dealings with people that don’t have a good idea, it can be quite frustrating”.

The main reasons stated for victim dissatisfaction with the VNS included not being given timely and accurate information, having to chase the VLO for information and barriers to the VLO being able to provide the information required. Victims reported frustration at not being kept updated and, in particular, for what they perceived to be unnecessary barriers to obtaining information about release dates. There was also surprise that the agencies are not joined up and able to share information, a problem raised throughout the evaluation by practitioners.

“I feel like I had to chase for information a lot of the time as the expectations set out at the start of the process weren’t being met by the end. Although the lady I dealt with was very nice, friendly, easy to speak to, she just never seemed to have the answers I needed. To me, a prisoner will know their release date and the police, so why didn’t the victim notification service? I assumed all computer systems would be linked to keep everyone in the loop to best support me in such a stressful time.”

Whilst the findings indicate high levels of satisfaction with the overall VNS service, it demonstrates the importance victims attach to being given accurate and timely information and the negative impact on their sense of wellbeing and safety when they encountered barriers to accessing it. These key findings are reiterated further in the interview data.

## **Victim interviews**

Six victims contacted the researcher to take part in an interview. Despite the small sample, it consisted of a wide demographic and involved very different circumstances. Five of the participants were female and one male, and ages ranged from 25 to 65 years. Three of the victims had separated from long-term partners and two cases involved more recent dating experiences, which had ended due to concerns about the offenders’ behaviour. In one case, the victim was acquainted with the offender through their employment.

Participants spoke in some depth about their experiences, the impact of the offences on their lives and their perceptions of the services received. Four key themes emerged: benefits of the VNS, expectations of the VNS, the accessibility and provision of information, and proposed improvements. Overall, victim satisfaction with the VNS was very high, providing improved safety and support for victims.

All of the cases involved repeat offences, breaches of protection orders, time spent on remand, short sentences and upon release the cycle would often start again. The majority of victims felt unsupported by the criminal process, especially the earlier stages of the process prior to sentencing. This included perceived failures to take appropriate action when breaches occurred, not being kept updated, and receiving contradictory and confusing information about the sentence outcome. In one case, the victim was not given any sentencing information and had to chase for it and in another case, the offender was released early on a tag and given a Home Detention Curfew (HDC). However, this policy has since been changed.<sup>17</sup>

Victim contact with a VLO comes at the end of a long and protracted criminal justice process and, following the sentencing of the offender, victims expressed relief to be contacted by someone offering to give them information and to listen to their concerns. Consequently, their experiences of the VNS were mainly positive:

“I’ve got nothing but praise for the way she [the VLO] treated me and the job she did was brilliant, but I do have issues with certain things that happened in the course of the process. She [the VLO] explained the terms of the licence, what would happen if there were any breaches, how long the licence would last for... very supporting... it was quite an upsetting time” (V03).

“Once [name of VLO] was in place everything was fine, if I had any questions or concerns, if I sent an email it was replied to either the same day or the next day, there was never a delay” (V05).

“I was very lucky with [name of VLO], she was very approachable, she was very knowledgeable ... I think you need to have people who understand the situation and she did. It would have been very traumatic if somebody hadn’t understood” (V01).

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<sup>17</sup> From June 2023, a number of offences have been added to the ‘presumed unsuitable’ list for a Home Detention Curfew in relation to prisoners convicted of harassment or domestic abuse related offences. This includes the majority of offences that come under the VNS, including the breach of Restraining Orders.

The key findings are presented below as brief case studies to enable the wider context to be understood. This helps to gain a better understanding of the experiences of the victims, highlighting the benefits of the VNS, their expectations, the accessibility and provision of information, and identifying areas where further improvements are required.

### Case V01

V01 had separated from an abusive partner, but the offences escalated following the separation. V01 had been identified as high-risk and despite the perpetrator being subject to a restraining order, he repeatedly breached this. Although an IDVA had been allocated and a Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC)<sup>18</sup> had been held, the victim's experience was not of a joined-up process. Whilst the VLO attempted to assist them, the victim was frustrated by the lack of progress made:

“She [the VLO] was very supportive, but it was almost as if she had her hands tied... she contacted the police about some things that were going on, but we didn't seem to get anywhere. I even had a MARAC, but that ...fell down because the people running the MARAC didn't liaise with probation as to what he was up to” (V01).

Throughout the process, V01 found the contact with the VLO a great support, as it provided a one point of contact where they could gain information and reassurance when needed, and the VLO was also able to intervene on the victim's behalf.

“After probation finished he kept pestering the police about collecting belongings, so I had various requests from different police officers, and in the end, higher up in probation, alarm bells rang and they said, no, we're not having this, and my VLO said this is too much, and they put a stop to it” (V01).

“I used to email sometimes and then just say, can we have a chat, and she'd say yeah, ring me or vice versa. I've been very lucky with [name of VLO]” (VL01).

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<sup>18</sup> For information about MARACs see p.130, [Home Office \(2022\)](#) Domestic Abuse Statutory Guidance.

This case illustrates the complexities and risks that VLOs are required to manage, the level of intensity involved, the support victims require when they are vulnerable and the role that VLOs play in providing this support.

### Case V02

V02 became acquainted with the offender on an evening out and started to date him until concerns about his behaviour led them to end the relationship, but then the stalking behaviour began. Following several court hearings, the offender was convicted and sentenced to custody. V02 was advised of the sentence by the WCU, but had not been told that a VLO would be in touch:

“When I first had contact with them [VLO], she rang me to say... he’s being recalled because he’s breached his conditions. But [after the weekend] she rang back to say there had been an issue, they’re letting him back out, he’s served enough time when he was on remand previously so they don’t have to recall him for this offence.” (V02).

This was an especially complex case and provides evidence of the confusion caused by sentencing processes, which is an issue raised by practitioners in this report. Due to the short sentence, V02’s contact with the VLO ended very quickly, but started again following a further conviction of the same offender later that year. One positive was that the participant had the same VLO, which provided some continuity for the victim:

“That was really good... she knew quite a bit because it was the same person [and] at that time I was over the moon, I’d got these dates... I can plan my life, I know exactly what’s happening, when.” (V02).

Due to the repeated offending and confusion around the actual sentencing, V02 was anxious to gain information about the release date. However, they did not receive the updates they had been led to expect. VO2 was told by the VLO that they would be in touch a month before release, two weeks, and a week before release, but that they cannot

advise of the actual date of release.<sup>19</sup> In this case, information was not being provided and V02 felt they had to keep chasing for it:

“...Now my understanding of this service was, and maybe I’m wrong, is that her system would have the same information as the police and the prison... And she would have all the information. Like I needed to be mentally prepared, because as the days were getting closer I was thinking, god, he’s just going to turn up again. I was back watching over my shoulder, not going out... I used to watch every bus that passed. I watched my cameras on the house, I was on constant high alert” (V02).

This example illustrates the importance of providing information to victims and indicates the barriers created by information systems not being updated. Release dates should be available on DELIUS (Probation case management system), but this relies on timely information being updated on the system by the POM. It also clearly illustrates the impact of the offences on the victim and their fear of what may happen when the offender is released. On this occasion, V02 felt the VLO showed insufficient empathy with the levels of anxiety and frustration that they were feeling:

“I had those expectations that that was going to happen and it didn’t happen. So I don’t think I should have been told that. And she did keep saying don’t worry, I’ll tell you on the day once he’s been released. But I needed to prepare myself. When you’re not in that situation you might think that’s fine, but it’s not when you’re in that situation. I’ve had to change my fun-life when I’m not the criminal” (V02).

The experience of V02 highlights the frustration victims feel when not having their expectations met and how they feel they are expected to change their lifestyle to manage the risks posed by the perpetrator. It also demonstrates the importance of VLOs being able to demonstrate empathy and understanding of the impact the situation is having on the victim. These offences are complex, the victims vulnerable and the risk of further harm can

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<sup>19</sup> Due to data protection requirements, VLOs are unable to provide victims with information that could be deemed personal, such as the prison where an offender is held, details of their progress or behaviour in prison, or an offender’s release location.

be high. Despite the problems, the contact with the VLO has continued and V02 views these positively:

“I can still contact her if anything was to happen... I think until his licence ends. She hasn't checked in with me again, but I don't mind that. If something was to happen she said she would ring and let us know. I am happy now that she's telling us she'll just contact us if anything happens. I wasn't happy with getting told I would hear a month before.... because that was raising my expectations...” (V02).

VLOs are required to manage and balance the needs and expectations of victims. This increases the intensity of their workload and can be time consuming, especially if they are required to chase for information themselves, as outlined by evidence in the practitioner interviews. This emphasises the importance of having access to the relevant digital systems and close partnership working with other practitioners to ensure important information is shared.

### Case V03

V03 separated from their long-term partner and a non-molestation was granted, but was subsequently breached on a number of occasions. They were not kept informed by the WCU of the court hearings or outcomes, but instead found the information from other sources, including the perpetrator's mother. This included information about the offender being arrested on a warrant and being given a custodial sentence. V03 calculated the estimated release date and then contacted the WCU for confirmation, as they were concerned the offender may get in touch. This raised awareness that the case had not been referred to the VLU and a VLO was subsequently allocated. V03 described the process as “all very last minute” and on occasions they found it difficult to know who they were speaking to. Although an exclusion zone was drawn up, there had been some resistance from the Prison Offender Manager:

“...because I live and work in [name of town] the VLO had asked for the whole town to be the exclusion zone, but someone in the prison said it wouldn't be suitable because there may be parts of the town that he may need to attend to get to services.”



Whilst V03 accepted this and thought overall an exclusion zone would be helpful, they would have liked to know the general area where the offender would be living in order to avoid it. Instead, not knowing meant they would be reluctant to travel elsewhere, impacting on their quality of life:

“... it would have been more supportive to be told that he is no longer in [name of town], rather than me having to work it out [from another source]. If they just said, he’s not within five miles of [name of town] that would have been a comfort to know that because I wouldn’t have been looking around all the time” (V03).

The VLOs can provide release date and licence conditions relating to the victim, but are restricted on what other information they can share. When victims are able to gain this information from other sources (e.g. police, friends and relatives) it can undermine victims’ confidence in the service. Further guidance has since been provided to VLOs to help reduce inconsistencies in the information being provided. VLOs must also manage expectations about the level of information that can be provided via the VNS.

A further limitation on what information can be given to victims relates to any support the offender may be receiving. Due to data protection legislation, VLOs cannot state what treatment or support the offender is receiving. However, the victim interviews revealed that they want this information as it helps to reassure them and increase their sense of safety. Victims feel that if the offender is getting the help they need, it may reduce the risk of them reoffending, and may stop them continuing with the abuse following their release, as expressed by V03:

“The more I know he’s getting support, he’s got housing, social workers, whatever, that would reassure me to think he’s less likely to cause any trouble. But because I’m not allowed to know any of those things, it just makes you wonder... is he going to suddenly knock on the door ‘cause he’s got nowhere to live. So the more positive information you can be given about somebody’s status, the less worried you’re going to be.”

It came to light in this case that if a victim needs to contact an offender for a legal matter, contact is made through their COM. However, information in the email states the area the COM is based. This provides some clue as to the area where the offender may be

residing. In this case, the information provided by the COM unintentionally provided the victim with some reassurance that the VLO was unable to give them. For the purposes of confidentiality, emails being sent to victims should be reviewed to ensure information is not unintentionally being shared.

#### Case V04

V04 was acquainted with the perpetrator through their employment. The case involved a non-intimate offender who had a past history and was known to the statutory agencies. This raised concerns relating to the level of risk posed. Appropriate action was taken to help mitigate the risks, but this created some tension with the victim. Whilst the police response was positive, V04 became dissatisfied because they felt their voice was not being listened to by the relevant criminal justice professionals. V04 had been reluctant for charges to be made and it was unclear whether they had been made aware of the potential risks posed by the offender. Even when acting in the best interests of a victim, it is important for professionals to listen to their views and then explain clearly why certain processes have to be followed.

With regards to their overall contact with the VLO, V04 felt that the information provided was less informative than the information they had received from the WCU and the police. They described the VLO as often 'inhibited by rules – she stuck to the rules and said he had rights' (V04). In particular, V04 wanted to be reassured that the offender was getting the support he needed, out of what appeared to be a genuine concern for the offender:

“What I wanted to know I couldn't be told. I wanted to know if he was getting any help or support. The focus should be on prevention. I wanted to know if he was getting support, because this would give me peace of mind” (V04).

V04 was able to get some of the information they needed from the police, which again reveals inconsistencies between the information being given by the police and what information the VLO can provide. This impacts on the victims' confidence in the VLO. This was exacerbated further when the victim was informed of the release of the offender two days after he had been released, because the VLO had not been informed by the Prison Offender Manager. This raises serious concerns as a Restraining Order was in place and the victim was considered to be at risk.

One experience of the VNS was more positive, as the VLO did listen to V04's concerns when deciding on the licence conditions. The VLO had wanted to include an exclusion zone to exclude the offender from the city, but V04 felt this would take away his only access to support. Instead it was agreed that a smaller exclusion zone would be included as part of a Restraining Order, but for a longer period.

This case differs markedly from the others in that the victim had not been in an intimate relationship with the offender. In this case, practitioners were concerned about the potential risks, but the victim was not, which can heighten the risk to the victim. It is important that the risks are managed, but victims should also be listened to. Despite some of the limitations, V04 found the information and support provided by the VLO to be important. When they realised the VNS had only been introduced during the last year, they were shocked that the information would not have been available before:

“I can't imagine it without it [the VNS]. How would people have managed before? It would have caused a lot of uncertainty and I would have been left feeling anxious” (V04).

## Summary

Evidence provided by victims via the online survey and interviews clearly indicates the benefits of the VNS, the importance victims attach to receiving information and the support provided by the VLO. In particular, it demonstrates that what victims want most is to be able to feel safe, protected and reassured that the offender is being prevented from causing further harm, either by being kept in custody, by the use of protective orders, or by receiving support that assists them to reduce their reoffending. Receiving information about release dates and contributing to licence conditions enables victims to regain some sense of control, make plans and improve their safety. In the main, VLOs are able to provide this level of support and to do so with empathy and sensitivity.

Dissatisfaction arises when victims receive inaccurate or no information, or when information is perceived to be withheld. This can sometimes be caused by information not being shared between professionals and limitations on the information that can be shared with victims. As evidenced, victims would like to know the general area where the offender will be living upon release. Whilst victims are satisfied that an exclusion zone can be

imposed to prevent offenders being able to come near their home or place of work, they want to know the area where the offender is so that they can avoid it. Victims and specialist support advocates report that without this information, victims are essentially trapped in the exclusion zone, as they do not know where else is safe to travel and which areas to avoid.

In particular, victims' expectations are not met when they perceive there are barriers to obtaining information they need, but this information can be gained from other sources. This undermines their confidence in the VNS. Critically, VLOs must be clear from the outset what level of information can be provided, to manage victim expectations of the service.

Evidence also found that the repeated nature of the VNS offences, non-compliance with protection orders and failures to adequately respond to the breaches, places greater responsibility upon the victims to protect themselves. When a perpetrator is in custody, victims feel immense relief as it offers them some respite, even though the sentences are often short. However, when their release is imminent, victims become anxious and their need for information and support increases, which is why the benefits of the VNS are welcomed by the majority of victims.

## Analysis and Discussion

This process evaluation has provided an evidence-based approach to the implementation of the VNS scheme piloted in three Probation regions – Northumbria, Thames Valley and Hampshire, and Kent, Surrey and Sussex. The evidence gathered from VNS performance data, practitioner interviews and focus groups has examined the operational impact of expanding the VCS on those responsible for implementing it in terms of process, methodology, best practice and the resources required. Evidence from an online victim survey, victim interviews and focus groups with specialist advocacy services has provided a victim perspective, by drawing upon the perceptions and experiences of those most impacted by the service.

### Practitioner perspectives

A key theme emerging from the practitioner interviews and focus groups is the need to improve access to information and for this to be shared more effectively between partner agencies. Evidence found that access to timely and accurate sentencing information is paramount for the success of both the VNS and VCS, but for the VNS the need is more urgent due to the shorter sentences and therefore tighter timescales.

Evidence from practitioners reveals the challenges presented by VNS cases and the high needs of often vulnerable, repeat victims, whose risk of further harm remains high. To implement the VNS effectively, referred cases have to be responded to as a priority, information gathered quickly and initial contact with the victim made as soon as possible. The time available to perform the tasks is limited and so adds to the intensity of the work required. The development of effective partnerships and improved access to digital information systems can benefit those responsible for implementing the VNS and improve the support provided to victims.

It is important that best practices are shared so that WCUs and VLU's can draw upon the experiences of other areas when developing processes to suit their own specific local requirements. This evaluation has identified examples of best practice that should be shared with existing VNS regions so that they can decide which process may best suit their local needs and arrangements:

- KSS have developed a three-prompt process whereby the VLU administrators run a report to identify eligible VNS cases and then send prompts to the WCUs to request the victim referrals.
- NVWS have developed a system whereby two supervisors check the WMS every morning and identify the VNS cases, which are then allocated to the relevant WCO to warn them of a VLU referral.
- NVWS has quarterly meetings and joint training sessions with external partners, including the VLU, which encourages regular communication on a more informal basis.
- NVWS has been proactive in developing other best practices, including developing an Engagement Plan for victims/witness, which acts as a checklist to ensure the victim/witness receives all the services and information they are entitled to, including an assessment for special measures, making or updating a Victim Personal Statement, confirming whether they would like to read it out in court, and referral to the Witness Care Service.
- Training has been identified and delivered for WCUs in some areas, including working with partner agencies to receive training on stalking and coercive and controlling behaviour.
- To avoid providing eligible victims with conflicting and confusing sentencing information, some WCOs advise eligible victims that the final sentence may be subject to changes and that a VLO will be in contact shortly to fully explain the sentence and the release date. This helps to manage victim expectations by advising in advance that the sentence may be revised when other factors, such as time spent on remand, are considered.
- VLOs know that victims are wary to answer a No ID call, and so follow-up with a text or an email identifying themselves and the reason for their contact.

Some specific suggestions were made by practitioners during the evaluation that should be explored further:

- When there are multiple offences and/or repeat offences, there can be difficulties in identifying the index offence and additional problems when offences are terminated. This impacts on identifying eligible victims for the VNS. Processes need to be developed to ensure eligible victims do not fall through the net.

- VLOs raised concerns regarding post sentence supervision and that the role of the VLO can expire during this period, leaving the victim without support and ongoing information.
- Practitioners expressed a view that entitling VNS victims to make a Victim Personal Statement would not be practicable due to the limited time available and the resources required. An exception could be cases involving a recall, where providing a victim perspective would enable the impact of the repeated offending on the victim to be heard.
- A number of practitioners proposed that Non-Fatal Strangulation, introduced as an offence under Section 70 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, be added to the list of VNS offences.

## Victim/survivor perspectives

Evidence from the process evaluation indicates that the majority of victims value the information and support provided by the VNS and that VLOs deliver this with empathy and sensitivity.

There were some frustrations caused by issues with information sharing and the limitations of the VNS. Evidence from this evaluation indicates that what victims want most is:

- Timely and accurate information from reliable sources, preferably one. Multiple sources can provide information that is conflicting, confusing and distressing. Gaining the information required from sources other than those provided by the VLO undermines victims' confidence in the VNS.
- To know where the offender is – knowing where the offender is can help victims plan to avoid them and make victims feel safer. An exclusion zone may stop the offender entering it, but it acts as a major restriction on the ability of victims to travel beyond it. Not knowing the general area where an offender may be living means they are reluctant to travel elsewhere.
- To know what support and help the offender is getting, because it may help to stop their offending behaviour, reassuring the victim and making them feel safer. If offenders are being supported to address their problems and to improve their lives, they may be less likely to offend and become less of a risk to the victim and other potential victims.

- To receive support from specialist advocacy services and for these to work in partnership with the VLO.

Shortly after completing this evaluation, a Criminal Justice Joint Inspection report was published (HMICFRS, 2023), exploring the roles of the police, the CPS and the Probation Service in meeting the needs of victims. The findings reflect very closely the findings of this process evaluation:

- It identifies the difficulties agencies face due to a lack of 'joined-up' digital systems, preventing effective communication and information sharing.
- It acknowledges that WCUs are not referring all eligible victims to the Probation Service due to difficulties in identifying the relevant VCS cases, and those that are referred are sometimes delayed or the information is incomplete.
- It finds that victims lose confidence in the criminal process when they receive confusing and conflicting information from different agencies, indicating that the agencies are not working together effectively.
- It reports that the quality of VLO engagement with victims is very good and that the VLO acts as a consistent point of contact for the victim.
- It found that many probation practitioners do not understand the VCS and the role of VLOs. It recommends that the Probation Service provide training on the work of the VCS to all probation practitioners and those in training, as this should improve the quality of information provided to victims and ensure the victim's voice is heard by all criminal justice bodies involved in offender management.



## Conclusion and Considerations

Before the pilot began, there was an assumption that the VNS would be a “lighter touch” compared to the VCS. This is because, due to the shorter sentence and the priority to contact victims more quickly, the full service is not offered (e.g. home visits, victim personal statement at the parole board). However, this evaluation has found particular challenges for the VNS due to the nature of the offences targeted, the repeated cycle of offending behaviour and the speed required to contact victims. As such, the complexity of these cases must not be underestimated and a greater understanding of the wider context needs to be explored when assessing the impact on and needs of victims.

Practitioners overwhelmingly agree that the VNS provides an essential service to a vulnerable group of victims at risk of further harm. Whilst the work involved can be fast paced and intense, often requiring an immediate response, practitioners acknowledge the benefits for victims and the necessity of the information and support required. Evidence provided by the practitioners demonstrates a clear understanding of the needs of victims, as expressed by the victims who participated in the evaluation. However, their ability to meet these needs would be improved by more effective communication and information sharing within and between agencies.

From a victim/survivor perspective, evidence reveals a system which for some creates a cycle of trauma. This places an emphasis on victims to make everyday choices and plans based on anticipated risks, changing their lives and routines to reduce the risks posed by the offender. For the majority of victims, the VNS has been a positive addition to how they manage these risks. Being provided with information about the sentence, release dates and conditions has been broadly welcomed, as has the support and reassurance provided by VLOs. However, a lack of timely and accurate information, and limitations on what information they can be told about the offender’s release date and whereabouts, can cause frustration and dissatisfaction.

## Implications and proposals

- Access to and the sharing of information is paramount to the success of the VNS. To reduce delays in the provision of information, there is a need for practitioners (WCU, VLU, VLO) to be given access to digital systems to ensure they can obtain timely and accurate information more efficiently.
- The majority of VLOs believe all VLOs in a team should be allocated VNS cases, rather than cases being allocated to only one or two VLOs in a team. This spreads the intensity and complexity of VNS cases across the whole team and helps to avoid a negative impact on the well-being of VLOs.
- Training and practice standards for probation practitioners could be revised to promote greater awareness of the VCS and the VNS and improve the sharing of information between POMs, COMS and VLOs.
- Closer partnership working with specialist advocacy services should be promoted to assist in the monitoring of ongoing risk. Advocates are more likely to have face-to-face contact with victims and more frequent contact. They are also likely to have built a rapport with the victim and be able to act as a liaison between the criminal justice agencies and the victim.
- There were inconsistencies in the type of information provided by VLOs to victims. A review and updating of the guidelines and training for practitioners regarding what information can be provided to victims would be helpful to ensure procedural justice is achieved.
- Joint training by statutory and third sector agencies to improve knowledge and understanding of the offences and their impact on victims would be beneficial. Training could improve professionals' understanding of Restraining Orders, and the increasing use of cyber enabled abuse, and technology facilitated stalking and domestic abuse.
- Consider adding Non-Fatal Strangulation to the list of VNS offences, as whilst this is an indicator of very high risk, the offence attracts short custodial sentences.
- Further research could examine the efficacy and efficiency of protection orders, whereby both offenders and victims are trapped in a traumatic cycle of repeat offending and short sentences. Additionally, considering whether victims can be provided with copies of such orders by the court with no fee being charged.

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## Annex A

### Sampling tables

**Table A.1: Survey respondents and regions**

Region	Victim
Kent	9
Thames Valley	8
Sussex	3
Hampshire	2
Northumbria	2
Other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>

Note – this is the region the survey participant reported to live, but they may have been supported by a VLU/WCU in a different region.

**Table A.2: Interview participants and regions**

Region	Victim Liaison Officer	Senior Probation Officer	Manager/ Senior Administration Officer	Victim Administration Officer	Victim
Northumbria	3	1	1	1	2
Kent, Surrey and Sussex	4	1	2	1	2
Hampshire and Thames Valley	4	2	1		2
<b>Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>6</b>

**Table A.3: Focus group participants and regions**

Region	Witness Care Units	Specialist Advocates
Northumbria	4	3
Kent	5	0
Surrey	3	0
Sussex	2	3
Thames Valley	4	4
Hampshire	4	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>10</b>

## Annex B

### Survey questions and responses

**Table B.1: Provision of sentencing information**

**Q1.** Have you been told what sentence was given to the offender?

	No.	%
Yes	25	93%
No	2	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.2: Clarity of sentencing information**

**Q2.** Following the sentencing hearing, how clear was the initial information provided to you about the sentence given to the offender?

	No.	%
Very clear	8	32%
Clear	11	44%
Unclear	4	16%
Very unclear	2	8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.3: Provider of sentencing information**

**Q3.** Who told you about the sentence given to the offender?

	No.	%
Witness Care Unit	17	68%
Police	6	24%
Crown Prosecution Service	2	8%
Other	5	20%
I can't remember	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>124%</b>

Note – 19% heard from multiple sources, hence why total exceeds 100%.

**Table B.4: Method of providing the sentencing information****Q4.** How was the information about the sentence given to you?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Telephone	15	60%
Email	10	40%
Verbally	8	32%
Letter	7	28%
Text message	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>164%</b>

Note – 41% received communications by multiple methods, hence why total exceeds 100%.

**Table B.5: Length of custodial sentence given****Q5.** What was the length of the custodial sentence given to the offender?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Under 12 months</b>	20	80%
1 to 4 years	5	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.6: Nature of offence****Q6.** What was the nature of the offence?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Breach of a Restraining Order</b>	8	30%
Stalking	9	33%
Harassment	4	15%
Breach of a Stalking Protection Order	4	15%
Breach of a Non-Molestation Order	3	11%
Coercive and controlling behaviour	1	4%
Other	5	19%
Prefer not to say	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>148%</b>

Note – 15% recorded multiple offences, hence why total exceeds 100%.

**Table B.7: Provision of information about the VNS – provider****Q7.** Who told you about the Victim Notification Scheme?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Witness Care Unit	13	48%
Victim Liaison Officer	10	37%
Police	7	26%
Crown Prosecution Service	0	0%
Other	6	22%
I can't remember	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>137%</b>

Note – 41% heard about the VNS from multiple sources, hence why total exceeds 100%.

**Table B.8: Provision of information about the VNS – method used****Q8.** How was the information about the Victim Notification Scheme given to you?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
<b>Email</b>	11	41%
Telephone	7	26%
I can't remember	5	19%
Letter	3	11%
Verbally	2	7%
Other	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>111%</b>

Note – 11% were contacted via multiple methods, hence why the total exceeds 100%.

**Table B.9: Clarity of information about the purpose of the VNS****Q9.** How clear was the information provided to you about the purpose of the Victim Notification Scheme?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Clear	22	81%
Unclear	5	19%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>



**Table B.10: Decision to opt-in to the VNS****Q10.** Did you choose to opt into the Victim Notification Scheme?

	No.	%
Yes	20	74%
No	7	26%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.11: Options around contact methods****Q.11.** Were you asked how you would like to be contacted by the Victim Liaison Officer?

	No.	%
Yes	12	60%
No	0	0%
I'm not sure / I can't remember	8	40%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.12: Method of contact with VLO****Q12.** Which method of contact did you use with the Victim Liaison Officer?

	No.	% of opt-ins
Telephone/mobile	14	70%
Email	14	70%
Text	5	25%
I'm not sure / I can't remember	2	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>175%</b>

Note – 50% used multiple methods for contact, hence why the total exceeds 100%.

**Table B.13: Satisfaction with contact methods****Q13.** How satisfied are you with the method of contact with the Victim Liaison Officer?

	No.	%
Satisfied	19	95%
Dissatisfied	1	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.14: Satisfaction with level of contact**

**Q.14.** How satisfied are you that the Victim Liaison Unit have kept you updated at key stages of the offender’s sentence?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Satisfied	16	80%
Dissatisfied	4	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.15: Satisfaction with opportunities to share their views**

**Q15.** How satisfied are you that you have been given enough opportunity to share your views and make representations?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>% of opt-ins</b>
Satisfied	18	90%
Dissatisfied	2	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.16: Satisfaction with safety considerations**

**Q16.** How satisfied are you that matters related to your safety have been considered?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Satisfied	18	90%
Dissatisfied	2	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.17: Overall satisfaction with VNS**

**Q17.** Overall, how satisfied are you with the service you have received under the Victim Notification Scheme?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>% of opt-ins</b>
Satisfied	19	95%
Dissatisfied	1	5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table B.18: Information about support services**

**Q18.** Were you given any information about any other support services that may have been helpful for you?

	<b>No.</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Yes	14	52%
No	5	19%
I'm not sure / I can't remember	8	30%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Annex C

### Survey respondent's demographics

**Table C.1: Breakdown of age**

Age	No.	% of respondents
16–29	6	22%
30–39	5	19%
40–49	5	19%
50–59	8	30%
60–69	3	11%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table C.2: Breakdown of gender**

Gender	No.	% of respondents
Male	5	19%
Female	22	81%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table C.3: Breakdown of ethnic group**

Ethnic group	No.	% of respondents
White English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British	25	93%
Any other White background	1	4%
Indian	1	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table C.4: Breakdown of sexual orientation**

Sexual orientation	No.	% of respondents
Straight or heterosexual	24	89%
Gay or lesbian	0	0%
Bisexual	3	11%
Other	0	0%
Prefer not to answer	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table C.5: Breakdown of disability**

<b>Disability</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>% of respondents</b>
Yes	6	22%
No	19	70%
Prefer not to say	2	7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100%</b>

## Annex D

### Victim Notification Scheme offence types across all regions

**Table D.1: Breakdown of VNS offence types across all Probation regions**

Offence	No.	%
Assault by beating	1	0.2%
Assault by penetration (Section 2 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003)	1	0.2%
Assault occasioning ABH (Section 47)	4	0.8%
Attempting to choke, suffocate or strangle in order to commit or assist in committing an indictable offence (Section 21)	1	0.2%
Breach of conditions of injunction against harassment (Section 3A of Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	6	1.2%
Breach of Non-Molestation Order (Section 42A of Family Law Act 1996)	59	11.4%
Breach of Probation Order	1	0.2%
Breach of Restraining Order issued on acquittal (Section 5A of Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	71	13.7%
Breach of Restraining Order issued on conviction (S363 of the Sentencing Act 2020)	16	3.1%
Breach of Restraining Order issued on conviction (Section 5 of Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	168	32.4%
Breach of Stalking Order (Section 3 of Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	3	0.6%
Breach of Stalking Order (Section 8(1) and (2) of the Stalking Protection Act 2019)	2	0.4%
Common assault	1	0.2%
Controlling and coercive behaviour in an intimate relationship	5	1.0%
Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship (Section 76 of Serious Crime Act 2015)	2	0.4%
Harassment	33	6.4%
Harassment (Section 4 of Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	30	5.8%
Putting people in fear of violence and stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress	5	1.0%

<b>Offence</b>	<b>No.</b>	<b>%</b>
Racially or religiously aggravated harassment or stalking with fear of violence (Section 32 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998)	3	0.6%
Racially or religiously aggravated offences under Section 4 or 4a of the Public Order Act 1986 (c.64)	2	0.4%
Sexual activity with a child (Section 9 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003)	1	0.2%
Sexual assault (Section 3 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003)	1	0.2%
Stalking (Section 2 of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	64	12.3%
Stalking involving serious alarm/distress (Section 4A of Protection from Harassment Act 1997)	38	7.3%
Threatening/disorderly behaviour	1	0.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>519</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Note – During quality assurance, a small number of the cases (N = 4) recorded by pilot regions were found to be not eligible for the VNS. This is due to incorrect recordings on the case management system.