

The Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales

Purpose of report

For discussion

Summary

This paper provides a brief overview the role of the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales and outlines some of the key issues affecting victims and witnesses of crime. It accompanies a presentation by Dame Vera Baird DBE QC, the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales, who will be speaking about her role and her upcoming priorities.

Recommendation

Members of the Safer and Stronger Communities Board are asked to note this paper and provide any further feedback.

Action

Officers to take forward as directed.

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The Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales

Background

1. The Victims' Commissioner aims to listen to and represent the views and needs of victims and witnesses. The Commissioner's office carries out research into victim's services and produces reviews which reflect on what is and what is not working, in order to recommend positive changes to improve the support offered to victims.
2. The Victims' Commissioner is appointed by ministers but is independent of the Government and free to advise, challenge and offer their own views.
3. The role of Victims' Commissioner is outlined in the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004. The four key principles are:
 - 3.1 Independence of Government and criminal justice agencies.
 - 3.2 Inclusivity in representing all victims and witnesses, particularly the most vulnerable members of our community.
 - 3.3 Transparency in all work, including in the issues the Commissioner raises with policy makers and our priorities for change.
 - 3.4 Encouraging responsibility through work with all criminal justice and local agencies to ensure the voices of victims and witnesses are heard and that each organisation takes responsibility for them.

Appointment of Dame Vera Baird QC

4. Dame Vera Baird DBE QC was appointed as the new Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales in May 2019.
5. Dame Vera Baird's appointment is expected to last for three years. Her role will involve:
 - 5.1 Engaging with victims to build up a picture of how support services are working and how they could be improved.
 - 5.2 Promoting the interests of victims and witnesses.
 - 5.3 Encouraging good practice in their treatment.
 - 5.4 Keeping the operation of the Victims' Code under review.
6. Dame Vera was previously the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Northumbria from 2012. Dame Vera has taken an active role in promoting the views of victims, also serving as the Association of Police and Crime Commissioner's (APCC) lead for supporting victims and

reducing harm. She was also a Member of Parliament (MP) for Redcar from 2001 to 2010, and she worked as the Solicitor General for England and Wales from 2007 to 2010.

Victims Law Reform

7. In the Queen's Speech 2019 (December), the Government announced it would continue to develop and implement a Victims' Law that guarantees victims' rights and the level of support they can expect. The Government confirmed there would be a consultation on this in early 2020.
8. The Queen's Speech confirmed a revised Victims' Code, which will clearly set out the minimum level of service victims can expect from criminal justice agencies, will also be published in early 2020.
9. The Government has said it plans to consult on enhancing powers for the Victims' Commissioner so that they can better hold the Government to account. Dame Vera Baird has also called for the Office of the Victims' Commissioner to have stronger powers.
10. In addition to the new reforms outlined in the proposed Domestic Abuse Bill and wider protections for victims, the Government has also committed to exploring how to strengthen support offered to survivors of terrorism and their families.

LGA's view

11. One of the key priorities for the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board is to support councils to improve community safety, for example by helping them to address key issues such as serious violent crime, domestic abuse and anti-social behaviour.
12. In much of our work, we highlight the vital importance of investing in early intervention to prevent crimes from occurring in the first place. We have seen how strong partnerships that take a multi-agency preventative approach to improving community safety can make a considerable difference.
13. It is clear that every victim will have different experiences, reactions and needs. This is why it is so important that local areas continue to have services that are flexible and responsive to the victim's experience and voice.
14. Across the range of community safety issues, the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board will continue to press for the victim's voice to be central to developing and improving support services. We will continue to work with the Government, the Commissioner and partners on the proposed victim's law reforms and wider victim's support services. We will also lobby for improved support services for domestic abuse victims and greater investment in perpetrator intervention programmes, when the Domestic Abuse Bill is introduced into Parliament.

LGA's Anti-Social Behaviour Conference

15. In October 2019, Dame Vera spoke at the Local Government Association's Tackling Anti-Social Behaviour Conference. She touched on a number of issues, including support for victims of domestic abuse, particularly during the court and prosecution process, and continued support for victims of anti-social behaviour.
16. Dame Vera highlighted the importance of the community trigger process and called on local authorities to ensure information and guidance is made readily available to members of the public. This follows the former Commissioner Baroness Newlove's [report](#), "Anti-Social Behaviour: Living a Nightmare", which outlines a series of recommendations on the community trigger process.
17. At the conference, Chair of the LGA's Safer and Stronger Communities Board Cllr Simon Blackburn outlined that many anti-social behaviour offences are serious issues for local residents and businesses. This is why councils are keen to protect them from offenders who can make the lives of those they target a misery.
18. The LGA is a member of the Home Office's Anti-Social Behaviour Advisory Board and has worked closely with partners to publicise the community trigger process.

Possible questions (in response to Dame Vera Baird's presentation)

19. How do you see your role as the Victims' Commissioner for England and Wales working with local authorities?
20. What are some key actions that local authorities could take to help support and promote the interests of victims of anti-social behaviour?
21. How do you think the proposed Domestic Abuse Bill will help to support victims and witnesses of domestic abuse? Are there any additional reforms you would like to see included in the Bill?
22. How does the Victims' Commissioner she herself working with the other Commissioners (for example, the Anti-Slavery Commissioner, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and the Children's Commissioner)? And how collectively will they ensure their work is coordinated and their remits are understood by local partners?
23. Do you think your office has been given the right resources and powers to promote the interests of victims and witnesses?

Financial Implications

24. All work can be carried out using existing LGA resources.

Next steps

25. Officers to note any feedback from SSC Board Members and take forward any future work, as directed.