

Living in Limbo: the impact of delays in the criminal justice system on young victims of crime

1. Introduction

SAFE! Support for Young People Affected by Crime was originally set up in 2008 as the Oxfordshire Young Victims of Crime Project by a multi-agency team who were concerned that the needs of young victims were not being met and children were left isolated and unsupported, leading to further issues. Since that initial pilot, SAFE! has grown into a regional charity providing a range of services for children, young people and families around the Thames Valley, including through a contract with the Police and Crime Commissioner for services to young victims of crime. SAFE! now supports over 1200 children a year through that contract, and over 50% have experienced sexual harm or domestic abuse. Practitioners have always done their best to support children and families with understanding the criminal justice process but in 2019 SAFE! received funding from the Ministry of Justice to employ a dedicated Children's Independent Domestic & Sexual Violence Advisor (ChIDSVA), and now has one per county supporting children and families where there is an ongoing criminal justice process following an experience of sexual or domestic abuse. The SAFE! ChIDSVA team are currently supporting over 150 children going through the criminal justice process following an experience of sexual harm or domestic abuse.

In the organisation's experience of providing support for children going through the criminal justice system as victims and witnesses, we increasingly find ourselves powerless to providing truly meaningful support when the criminal justice system is repeatedly retraumatising those awaiting justice. All too often children tell us that if they had known what it would be like then they would have chosen not to report the crime. One young woman described the process of going through the court system as being more traumatising than the crime she had experienced. We are finding children experiencing years of their young lives in limbo whilst awaiting the outcome of criminal justice process, faced with postponements, last minute delays and lack of communication. These children are severely disempowered by this process at a formative time in their lives, and these experiences are likely to continue to impact them for the rest of their lives. We believe that this is unacceptable, and that something needs to change to improve the journey of young people through our criminal justice system.

This report highlights some of the issues that young people are finding in their experiences of the criminal justice system and the impact that this is having on their lives. We have consulted widely with children and professionals and would like to thank them for generously sharing their experiences.

2. The commitment of the CPS to support young victims within the criminal justice system

Annual crime surveys conducted in England and Wales have consistently shown that young people are disproportionately at risk of becoming victims of crime. Due to the many vulnerabilities that young people present with, incidents of victimisation can have a significant impact on a young person's growth

and development, with research showing that acute childhood experiences can often lead to problems in later life if left unsupported or not addressed within a timely manner.

The 'Every Child Matters' report that was presented to Parliament in 2003 and the subsequent 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' guidance published in 2018, set out the importance of agencies working in partnership to provide *'high quality and effective support as soon as a need is identified'* (working together, 2018). The Crown Prosecution Service has outlined a commitment to this in their 'Safeguarding Children as Victims and Witnesses' document published in October 2019 which *'provides practical and legal guidance to prosecutors dealing with cases that involve children'*. The document outlines the ways in which prosecutors can play a role in safeguarding children and young people through processes such as charging decisions, bail considerations and through successful prosecutions. However, as highlighted by HHJ Jonathan Cooper, Resident Judge at Aylesbury Crown Court at the Reducing the Risk 'Justice for Domestic Abuse Victims' Conference in March 2023, *'procedural justice is even more critical than outcome justice'*. The experiences of victims whilst they are in the criminal justice system form their understanding of what they perceive to be 'justice' and the impact of a negative experience, cannot simply be undone by a positive outcome. Lack of communication, significant delays around concluding investigations, making charging decisions, and scheduling trials have all been cited by young victims as experiences that have had a detrimental impact on their overall experience of the criminal justice process and their wellbeing.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, young victims were experiencing significant delays within the criminal justice system. Post pandemic these delays are extended even further with reduced court capacity, barrister strikes and backlogs throughout the criminal justice process, meaning that young victims are waiting too long to receive what they consider to be justice. Guidance published to prosecutors within the Crown Prosecution Service ([Victims and Witnesses, CPS commitments to support](#); February 2022) identifies young victims as being one of the vulnerable groups whose cases ought to be prioritised within the criminal justice system so that best evidence outcomes can be achieved and the risk of further harm can be kept to a minimum. As outlined within the published guidance on Safeguarding Children as Victims and Witnesses, *"cases involving children either as victims or as witnesses, delay should be kept to a minimum to reduce the levels of stress and worry about the process that the child may feel"*. However, when gathering research for this report, when we asked the Thames and Chiltern CPS to tell us how many young people are currently waiting to have their cases heard at court, they were unable to provide that information, stating that they do not collect data on specific victim demographics. When asked how they ensure that young victims' cases are prioritised, they were unable to clarify, stating that the current backlog is so significant that they do not have the ability to prioritise cases, because they are having to manage 'high risk cases that are competing with other high-risk cases' (namely those cases where the defendant is remanded in custody awaiting trial) which is causing further delays within the system.

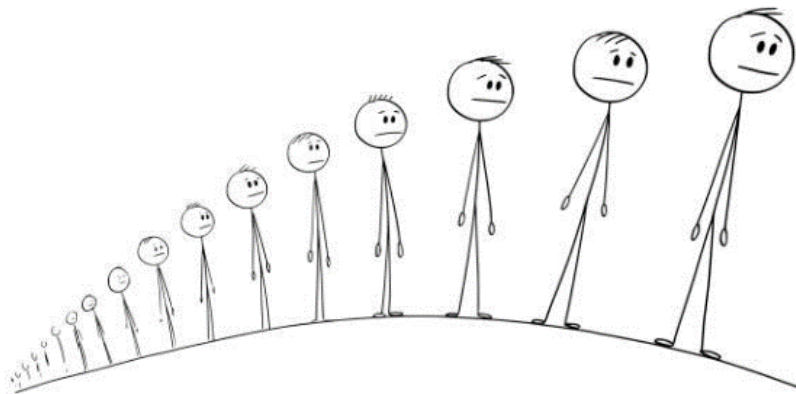
The lack of process around prioritisation seems to be at odds with the safeguarding guidance and legislation that the CPS adheres to. It can be argued that without robust processes that directly benefit young people within the criminal justice system, the CPS are not:

- Protecting young people from maltreatment.

- Preventing impairment of children’s health or development.
- Ensuring that children grow up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care.
- Taking action to enable all children to have best outcomes.

Working Together to Safeguard Children – A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote welfare of children.

It is important to acknowledge that safeguarding young victims of crime is the responsibility of every agency that plays a role in delivering justice. However, as delays within the criminal justice process continue to hinder a person’s ability to move forward from an experience of victimisation, other agencies are facing increasing pressures as victims become reliant on support services for an extended period, stretching resources and funding beyond a support service’s capacity. During a London Assembly question and answer session which took place in June 2021, Joanne McCartney from the Greater London Assembly shared her concern that the Metropolitan Police witness and victim care unit had seen a 90% increase in workload with the safety of victims and rate of attrition producing particularly worrying statistics. As outlined below, these concerns and experiences are also shared amongst services within the Thames Valley.



Waiting for your case to progress through the criminal justice system, is akin to being in a virtual queue. No one knows what number they are in the queue, when they will get to the front of the queue and can often find that their position changes, without warning and without explanation.

3. Experiences

Children supported by SAFE! only form a small proportion of minors experiencing the criminal justice system. There will be many more victims and witnesses who have not sought/accessed our support. There are also many children going through court processes and investigation as alleged offenders. As preparation for this report, SAFE! surveyed young victims of sexual violence actively being supported by SAFE! as well as Child and Adolescent Sexual Violence Advisors both internally and externally, to gather their thoughts and experiences of the criminal justice process. Below is a detailed account of the feedback received.

Delays

Feedback from young victims of sexual violence and the ChISVA's that support them, indicate that there are significant delays throughout all stages of the criminal justice system from reporting stage through to trial. Statistics published by the MOJ show that criminal cases in 2021 took an average of 128 days for someone to be charged following a report, and an average wait of 196 days for cases to conclude. This is an almost 50% increase when compared with published statistics from 2016. Since then, we have continued to see a significant backlog within the Crown Court, with the 'ineffective trial rate' increasing from 27% to 31% in 2022.

Feedback received from the victims of sexual violence that have been supported by SAFE! shows that it is currently taking an average of 6 months for cases to be NFA'd by police at investigation stage. Those whose cases are being submitted to CPS for a charging decision are having to wait an average of 4 months for an outcome and those whose cases are listed for trial, are waiting an average of 16 months for cases to conclude.

Section 27 of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 introduced a special measures direction which *'provides for the video recording of an interview of the witness to be admitted as evidence in chief'*. Section 28 of the Act permits a child's cross-examination to be pre-recorded. This was a welcomed advancement in the criminal justice process, however since its implementation, SAFE! has seen young people's section 28 video recording dates delayed an average of 4 times before eventually taking place. Furthermore, there is growing concern amongst ChISVA's that once a section 28 has taken place, that young person's case is not prioritised beyond that point. Is there a perception that a young person's involvement in the case has come to an end once a section 28 process has been concluded and therefore the case does not require the same level of prioritisation through the remainder of the criminal justice process? Whilst it is true that section 28 questioning can end a young victim's involvement in the criminal justice process at an earlier stage, the emotional impact of waiting for a trial outcome, and sentencing in the event of conviction that may involve an updated Victim Personal Statement remains and continues to be detrimental to their wellbeing when cases are not listed within a timely manner or are rescheduled at short notice and without explanation.

Lack of contact/communication

Feedback consistently talked about the lack of communication that young people, their families and ChISVA's received throughout the criminal justice process. Of those surveyed, 75% of young people knew who their investigating officer was, but when asked, the same 75% said that they were not kept up to date during the investigative process, with one saying, *'it's unreliable because they don't give you any information, it's completely on their terms, even though it's your incident'*. This was a view echoed by another who said, *'I feel like the process isn't as personal as it could be and it is nowhere near as sensitive as it should be'*. ChISVA's have also reported issues, with communication agreements made between the investigating officer and the victims and their families often not being adhered to and changes to the OIC not being communicated, often leading to the line of communication between the victim and the police being broken, creating a sense of mistrust.

Partnership agencies also face difficulties when it comes to seeking updates and using this information to support young victims. For instance, in recent times we have seen a sharp rise in peer-on-peer abuse and schools are left having to manage the victim and the defendant who continue to attend the same school for extended periods of time. However, all too often we see a lack of communication between the school and the police, leaving teachers unsure of how to manage such situations. Whilst many schools try to be proactive in adopting a multi-agency approach to help safeguard the victim and defendant, multi-agency meetings are not regularly attended by the relevant OIC, leaving professionals unaware of how a case is progressing and stuck when it comes to making informed decisions about how to manage the fallout of an incident.

Out of the young people we surveyed, 50% had their cases 'NFA'd' (No Further Action) at various stages of the criminal justice process. When asked how this decision was communicated to them, only half of these young people received the decision face-to-face and were told why the case couldn't progress and how to go about appealing the decision. The ChSVAs reported that those young people that have had their cases NFA'd often get the decision over the phone. They do not receive a letter, making it difficult for them to start the Victims' Right to Review process. The lack of consistency around effective communication between those within the criminal justice process and those outside of it, creates a lottery for victims and hinders the ability to create a set standard that can be monitored and lead to action should those responsible for delivering justice fall below those expectations.

Reports of victim blaming throughout the criminal justice process

When support agencies meet with young victims of crime, the idea of going to trial, whilst an unnerving thought, often serves as the moment that they hold onto which drives them forward despite the issues listed above. As mentioned previously, section 28 has been a great benefit to young people facing cross-examination. However, ChSVAs are still witnessing young people being questioned by defence barristers in a 'harsh and inappropriate way'. When speaking to our partners at Trust House, they informed us that the young people that they have supported through the criminal justice process, have experienced a re-traumatisation, not because they have been questioned about the abuse, but because of the suggestions being made by defence barristers that can feel like an attack on character. This is despite clear guidance being provided to Barristers (Advocacy and the Vulnerable) as to how they should go about cross-examining young victims.

17-year-old victim of sexual violence.

"I wish that each individual case was taken into account and approached in a more sensitive manner. I felt like I wasn't being treated as a victim. It was as if they were trying to catch me out with the types of questions they were asking me. It was distressing doing a VRI and being sat in a room with 2 officers as a 17-year-old and not being allowed to have my mum there. I felt like I should have been given the opportunity to rethink my decision about going ahead and feel like I was taken advantage of because of my age and it wasn't considered that I was very vulnerable. My dad is a police officer and the response I had from the police was much quicker and better than what other people experience. I can't believe it could be worse. It has made me understand why women don't want to come forward".

4. Impact

Being a victim of crime, can have an incredibly detrimental impact on a young person's view of the world in which they live, how they move forward following such an experience and how it shapes their views and behaviour throughout their childhood and into adult life. Whilst we cannot undo what has already been done, everyone involved in a young victim's criminal justice journey can and should play a part in minimising the impact felt. However, as already outlined, the experiences that young people and their ChISVA's tell us they have when going through the criminal justice process can have a significant impact on a young person's ability to heal from the harm caused. Below is an outline of the impact that young people tell us that their experience of criminal justice journey has had on them and their families.

Mental health and well-being

Victims of crime can be left battling emotional and mental health issues, with many requiring some form of mental health treatment and/or intervention. Even those that do not present with significant issues, can nevertheless experience feelings of distress and anxiety that can impact day-to-day. Despite the obvious benefits of reporting a crime and engaging in the criminal justice process, the re-traumatisation and at times, revictimisation that young victims experience, can be said to outstrip the justice benefits.

"He didn't have any bail conditions. He could go wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He would often approach me".

ChISVAs within SAFE! and those from our partner agencies have reported a notable correlation between the delays being experienced within the criminal justice process and the deterioration in young people's mental health. Young people have reported the way in which their case was handled left them feeling as though they were not seen as a victim or were even to blame for what had happened. When we asked young people what the impact of delays within the criminal justice process has had on them, they told us that knowing that the person who had hurt them was '*walking free*', coupled with feeling as though '*nothing was happening*', had a substantial impact on the way in which they lived their life. Not going out, isolating from the community around them and limiting their social interactions were all commonly listed as techniques used to protect themselves, because they felt as though they did not get that protection throughout their criminal justice journey.

Studies have shown that procedural justice can help to heal the harm caused, simply through the recognition shown by aiding a victim through their journey efficiently and without delay. However, this is not currently the experience of many young people and the support services they engage with. When asked, 63% of the young people we surveyed, said that they would not report a crime again. Not because the alleged perpetrators were not found '*guilty*', but because the procedure embedded within the system left them feeling unheard.

Breakdown in family relationships

It is not uncommon for parents/carers of young victims of crime to be asked to be a witness in court. However, when this is required, it puts a metaphorical 'gag' on the family. Without warning, a young person can suddenly be silenced, not able to speak to the closest person to them about what they have gone through. Feeling forced to bottle it up, through fear that any contravention could lead to their case being 'chucked out'. This is an unfortunate, but important part of the criminal justice procedure. Victims and their families understand that talking amongst one another, could have a detrimental impact if they were to ever reach the stand. But as delays continue to increase, a family's ability to heal as a unit, decreases. Young people often report feeling as though they are not being heard. They are not able to speak about the incident, so there's a feeling that the only thing to do is to continue as 'normal'. This can lead to misplaced anger, arguments within the home, lashing out and even at times, breakdowns in family relationships. When working with one particular family, one young person said, *'I cannot control my anger. It's like it bubbles up and then I explode like a bottle of Coke that's been shaken'*. The Mother of that child stated, *'this sounds awful to say, but I wished I hadn't encouraged her to report to the police. If I had known how long it would take and the impact it would have on all of us, I would've just got her some support so that she could start to move forward. This feels like being stuck in limbo'*.

Distrust in the justice system

Reading the above, it is no surprise to learn that young victims often report to us a sense of distrust in the justice system. When we asked young people how their experience of the criminal justice process impacted their view of the police and the CPS, their answers were unified, *'they are inefficient', 'they are not as useful as hoped', 'they did not treat me with sensitivity', 'the process felt impersonal' and 'my experience wasn't taken seriously'*. When asked what they would want to say to the police or CPS, they said, *'be more organised', 'you need to work faster' and 'you don't do enough'* to name a few. A lack of communication and routine delays throughout the criminal justice process has left young victims feeling helpless and has shaped what they thought 'justice' looked like. With 63% of the young people we surveyed stating that they would not report a crime moving forward, we are in danger of creating an environment whereby criminals can act with impunity, safe in the knowledge that the distrust that has been built will act as a barrier to reporting offences in the future.

Employment, training, and education

Following an impact of victimisation, a young person's schoolwork, education or employment can often be affected. This can be because the person who committed the offence attends the same establishment, because they do not feel safe traveling to or from school/work or because they simply cannot concentrate on the tasks at hand. Whatever the reason, studies on intimate partner violence in young relationships has shown that *'victims have less education as adults than non-victims, which also*

*affects their earnings*¹.

It can be argued that as mentioned previously, this impact could be minimised with an efficient system that is able to prioritise the needs of young victims through the whole of their criminal justice journey. However, this is currently not the case with many young people reporting difficulties at school. There is an increasing expectation on teachers to be able to keep young people focused on their education, despite what is taking place outside of school. The anger and frustration that young people tell us they feel when experiencing delays and a lack of communication can at times manifest in their behaviour, further impacting their ability to continue to engage in their education or employment.

Impact on the risk of repeat victimisation

When SAFE! asked young people if based on their experience of the criminal justice system they would be willing to report a crime in the future, a staggering 63% of young people said that they wouldn't. SAFE! often supports young people who experience a number of barriers that can prevent them from wanting to report a crime, with past experience occasionally being given as a primary reason for not wanting to report further experiences of victimisation. A refusal to report a crime can not only lead to an underreporting more generally, which makes it difficult to build systems and processes that can respond to the crimes being experienced, it also creates a vulnerability within a person that can leave them open to becoming a victim of a crime in the future.

The findings of a serious case review published in 2013 detailing the experiences of young victims of sexual exploitation in Rochdale, outlined the numerous times in which the police, social care and others did not hear the voices of the young girls that were being exploited. This compounded the abuse that they were already experiencing which resulted in them shutting down and the abuse escalating. Research has shown that failure to respond to a report of a crime within a timely manner can lead to an increased rate of attrition throughout all points of the criminal justice process and put young people on a path to normalising the trauma they experience, taking their unsupported experiences with them into adulthood and at times, finding themselves trapped within the victim/offender cycle.

Re-traumatisation as a result of experiences with the criminal justice system

Feedback from young people surveyed highlighted that the experiences they had whilst navigating their way through the police investigation, CPS decision and subsequent trial, did not meet with their needs and values.

Successive Governments have vowed to reform the criminal justice process to make it more victim focused, but despite numerous promises, young people that we have supported and continue to support are telling us that they do not feel that the system makes them feel safe. Whilst the introduction of section 28 cross examination aims to protect vulnerable victims, those same young

¹ Thunberg, S. (2022). Victimization and school: Young people's experiences of receiving support to keep up with their schoolwork. *International Review of Victimology*, 0(0).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/02697580221109284>

people are still subject to harsh and inappropriate questioning from defence Barristers, despite there being clear guidance in place for Barristers on how to manage a cross-examination of a minor. This can often lead to a young person feeling like they are to blame for what has happened to them and hinder their ability to move forward from the trauma they have experienced.

5. Case studies

These case studies provided by SAFE!'s Childrens Independent Domestic & Sexual Violence Advisors (ChIDSVA) highlight the impact of the delays being experienced by SAFE! clients within the criminal justice process. Names have been changed to protect anonymity

15-year-old Amelie was referred to SAFE! by social care after she was sexually exploited by an 18-year-old male in February 2021. Amelie was highly anxious, experiencing suicide ideation, panic attacks, had withdrawn from school and was struggling with skin irritation as a result stress. A section 28 hearing was scheduled for early July 2022 and as preparation a ChIDSVA from SAFE! accompanied her to look around the court and ask questions of the Witness Service. Following the visit, the ChIDSVA continued to support Amelie to prepare for the hearing. Sessions focused on improving her understanding of the court process and easing anxieties she was feeling about the day itself.

In late June the ChIDSVA heard from Amelie's mother that the section 28 hearing had been postponed until late July. She had been given no explanation as to why the hearing had been postponed, so the ChIDSVA met with her to explain why this may have happened. As the date for the hearing grew close, in late July, Amelie was informed that the hearing had been further postponed until late September 2022, again with no explanation provided. Then in September the hearing was postponed for a third time until early October. Three days before this date, the hearing was postponed for a further fortnight – the fourth postponement.

On the day of the eventual section 28 hearing, the ChIDSVA arrived at court with Amelie to be informed that they would not be able to be in the witness care unit whilst the section 28 was taking place in case she needed a break and to support afterwards, despite having received prior agreement. This caused undue distress to Amelie who struggled to adapt to the change. Following the hearing Amelie said that she felt unsupported throughout the hearing and was worried about the impact this had on her ability to answer the questions coherently. Amelie also said that the delays to the hearing made her feel that her case was not being considered a priority.

In early November Amelie heard that the trial had been postponed until March 2023, and in March she heard that it had been delayed again until September. When the ChIDSVA contacted witness care they were not able to provide any reason for the delay. During a recent session Amelie disclosed that she has been struggling emotionally since being informed of the delay to the trial and could not see 'any light at the end of the tunnel'.

17-year-old Eva was referred to SAFE! by Thames Valley Police after she reported that she was raped at her father's home by an older male in spring 2021. When the ChIDSVA met with her, she presented as

being highly anxious and was particularly fearful about the criminal justice process and what the impact of reporting the crime would have on her and her relationships with friends who were also friends with the perpetrator. She was struggling with college after missing quite a lot of the previous term as a result of the incident. Eva had returned to college by the time of the referral but felt as though she was behind the rest of her class and did not feel supported by staff.

By the time of her first SAFE! session in September 2021, Eva had provided a statement to the police, an investigation had been conducted, the perpetrator was arrested, and all evidence was submitted to the Crown Prosecution Service for a charging decision. Eva provided the details of the officer managing the case and was happy for the ChIDSVA to guide her through the rest of the criminal justice process once a decision had been made.

In mid-November 2021 Eva received a telephone call from a Specially Trained Officer (STO) at Thames Valley Police informing her that based on the evidence received, the CPS were unwilling to take the case forward. However, permission was being sought for the release of the medical records following her visit to a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) immediately following the rape. The STO explained that the case may not progress to court, but that if it did, this would be no sooner than 18 months from the charging decision. Eva was highly anxious about the length of time it could take for the case to progress to court and even though she did not want to drop it, she felt like it was 'so far away'.

Eva described herself as feeling like she was in 'limbo'. She tried to attend college as best she could but found some subjects triggering and was often left feeling unsupported. She was isolating herself more and more from her friends and did not want to venture out of the home to socialise. The ChIDSVA spoke with Eva regularly over this period and met with members of staff at her college to help her to get her needs met and improve her focus and engagement in lessons.

In early February 2022 Eva received a call to say that the case was being sent back to the CPS for a charging decision. She had not received any communication from the police since November and told the ChIDSVA that the telephone call had stirred up a lot of feelings and worry about the case that she had just about been managing to deal with. She was particularly anxious about the possibility of the CPS not progressing the case and feeling like she had 'done all this for nothing'.

During a session Eva disclosed that she had been drinking as a way of coping with her emotions. She said that she had been arguing with her mum a lot and staying away from the family home as a result. Eva expressed her frustration at the criminal justice process having been told by the STO that there was a statement missing from the evidence provided to the CPS that they were currently chasing. Eva was agitated at the further delay this could cause.

Mid-May 2022 marked a year since the rape took place and Eva felt compelled to contact the STO to ask for an update on her case. She told the ChIDSVA that she felt the STO was rude and dismissive towards her. Since then, her mood had dipped, and she was not engaging in college or preparing for her upcoming exams.

In mid-July Eva heard that the police had resubmitted the case to the CPS. No further updates were

provided for the next 2 months until she was asked to undertake a pre-recorded interview with the police detailing the communication, she had with the perpetrator over snapchat. Following the interview Eva was told that should her case to progress to court, it would now not be heard until 2024. This took a massive toll on her mental health and at the end of September she was admitted to hospital with difficulties breathing. The nurse put the incident down to stress and anxiety and assigned her to a mental health practitioner for further support.

Eva continued to struggle with college and her relationship with her family who were all advising her to drop out of the criminal justice process. At the end of December 2022 Eva made the difficult decision to leave college and move out of her family home. At the time of writing, she is still waiting for a charging decision from the CPS.

This is an ongoing case that demonstrates the challenge that some young people face in having their rights adhered to under The Code of Practice for Victims of Crime. Namely to be provided with information about the investigation and prosecution.

14-year-old Sophie was referred to SAFE! by Victim’s First after she was sexually assaulted by someone who she had met online. When the ChIDSVA met with the young person, she was unable to sleep which was affecting her mental health. She had a history of self-harming and had previously taken an overdose. She was also experiencing bullying at school and there were ongoing concerns from professionals that she was isolated from peers and may be vulnerable to further victimisation.

In early January Sophie told the ChIDSVA that the perpetrator’s bail conditions were soon due to expire, and she was not sure what this meant for the investigation. In late January she was informed that the perpetrator was being re-interviewed and then the case would be reviewed and passed to the CPS for a charging decision. In early March 2022 Sophie’s mother contacted the ChIDSVA to outline her frustration at not having received any further updates from the police and the impact that this was having on her child. The table below outlines a timeline of attempts made by the family and the ChIDSVA to contact the OIC and the wider TVP team for updates and responses received:

Date of contact	From	Notes
16.11.2021	OIC	Email to mum from OIC thanking her for sending a statement text through and informing her that she would send out the completed statement for her signature next week.
13.01.2022	Mum	Email sent requesting an update on the case and asking why she hadn’t been sent a copy of her statement to be signed.
17.01.2022	Mum	Email sent asking for a response to the email dated 13.01.2022. Concern raised by Mum as to the impact that the lack of communication is having on her child’s wellbeing.

17.01.2022	OIC	Emailed sent informing Mum that they are currently waiting for an update on the forensic evidence being gathered. Mum also informed that the perpetrator's bail conditions have expired.
17.01.2022	Mum	Mum responded to ask if the case will go to court.
18.01.2022	OIC	Response explaining that the evidence will be submitted to the CPS for a charging decision once a review has taken place.
07.03.2022	ChIDSVA	Emailed OIC for an update on the case so that she could feedback to family.
18.03.2022	ChIDSVA	Second email sent to OIC chasing a response following the email sent on 07.03.2022.
23.03.2022	ChIDSVA	No response to emails sent. ChIDSVA attempted to call OIC but no answer. Voicemail left.
29.03.2022	ChIDSVA	Second telephone call attempt made to OIC. No answer. Voicemail left.
04.04.2022	ChIDSVA	Third telephone call attempt made to OIC. No answer. Voicemail left.
05.04.2022	TVP	Telephone call from another officer at TVP who had picked up the voicemails being left for the OIC. He stated that he had contacted the OIC on the ChIDSVA's behalf and had been told that they would contact the ChIDSVA.
07.04.2022	Mum	Mum emailed OIC to ask for an update and stated that she felt let down by the lack of communication around the case. She outlined frustration at not having received her statement to sign and said that she was still unsure as to whether the perpetrator was re-interviewed in January.
11.04.2022	ChIDSVA	ChIDSVA attempted to contact OIC via telephone for an update. No response. Voicemail left.
22.04.2022	ChIDSVA	No response to telephone call made on 11.04.2022. ChIDSVA emailed OIC to ask for an update on the case.
22.04.2022	OIC	OIC contacted ChIDSVA to say that they had spoken to the family 'earlier in the year' so didn't understand why they were asking for an update. Stated that the re-interview of the perpetrator did not take

		place and had been scheduled for 27 th April 2022. Following this, other witnesses will be contacted for interview.
06.05.2022	Mum	Mum emailed OIC requesting that she receive an update on the case directly from her. Mum highlighted that she had not received any direct communication from the OIC since 18.01.2022.
18.05.2022	ChIDSVA	ChIDSVA emailed OIC to ask if the interview scheduled with the perpetrator on the 27 th of April took place and if so, whether the victim would need to provide a further interview/statement.
23.05.2022	Mum	Mum had heard a rumour that the perpetrator was working in a gym where children's classes were being held. Mum called the OIC to disclose this. Another officer answered and explained that they are short staffed but would note her message.
29.07.2022	ChIDSVA	ChIDSVA called OIC for an update. No answer. Left a voicemail.
01.09.2022	OIC	Mum spoke to OIC. No further developments. Witnesses were yet to be interviewed and statements signed off before the case could be reviewed. OIC agreed to check in with her with more information next week.
23.09.2022	ChIDSVA	Mum had not heard from OIC as agreed so ChIDSVA attempted to contact the OIC via telephone. No answer. Voicemail left.
29.09.2022	ChIDSVA	No response to call made on 23.09.2022. ChIDSVA called again and managed to speak to OIC. She informed her that the case has been reviewed and is awaiting signed statements and 3 rd party material before it is passed over to the CPS for a charging decision.
03.11.2022	TVP	No further case updates received. Mum made a formal complaint to TVP and spoke to a CAIU officer who agreed to contact Mum within 7 days with an update on the case.
14.12.2022	ChIDSVA	CAIU officer had not contacted Mum as agreed. ChIDSVA called the officer and left a message asking for a call back and suggested that it would be helpful for them to contact the family, even if it was only to help relieve their stress.
20.12.2022	ChIDSVA	No response received from CAIU officer. ChIDSVA called and spoke to another member of staff who said that a new OIC officer was yet to be appointed to the case. ChIDSVA asked that someone reach out to the family just to let them know that they hadn't been forgotten.

At the time of writing no further case updates have been received.

When Sophie was asked what impact the investigation has had on them and their family, they stated that they felt unheard and let down by the police. Over the course of the investigation their mental health has declined to the point of requiring CAMHS intervention. Whilst the lack of communication received from the OIC cannot be considered the only contributing factor, Sophie does feel that lack of awareness around the case has had a direct impact on the anxiety they are currently experiencing.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The above report highlights that despite protocols designed to expedite cases involving children and protect them from further harm, delays and poor communication throughout the criminal justice system are severely impairing the lives of children and young people who have already been harmed by crime. These experiences, which can go on for many years, could make a lasting footprint on these young people's future social and emotional wellbeing, confidence in police and justice systems putting them at risk of further revictimisation. We believe that more should be done now to address these issues in order to improve the experiences of the thousands of children who pass through the criminal justice system. Below we list eight recommendations which are asking to be considered locally in order to improve outcomes for young victims of crime in the Thames Valley:

1. Ask the police and CPS to prioritise investigations and charging decisions involving cases with child witnesses. Set expedited turnaround times.
2. Ask the Local Criminal Justice Board (LCJB) to set a target for dealing with such cases with the aim of being the best performing Area in the country for such cases.
3. Ask the LCJB to task the LCJB Victims and Witnesses Delivery Group to focus on the speedy processing of these cases (this was done very effectively for the Street Crime initiative in 2002, and also the earlier Persistent Young Offender initiative). Ensure this Group has clear Terms of Reference and targets for case disposal that are agreed by all CJS agencies.
4. Create a Tracker and performance manage centrally for all cases involving child witnesses. Appoint a performance manager to monitor all these cases, and the turnaround times, and report back to the LCJB every month.
5. Accept the recommendation in the joint report in 2022 by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, for 'specialist rape courts' but go further and designate one Crown Court centre in the Thames Valley for all cases involving all child witnesses (and defendants) to focus the expertise in one centre and assist with the effective listing of such cases.
6. Ensure that all court staff, police, and prosecutors working on serious sex offence cases in this court will receive specialist trauma training under a pilot of the plans. Independent children's sexual violence advisers will be made available to victims.
7. Centralise section 28 cases so that Judges have greater flexibility in arranging the recording sessions to fit in with other court commitments.
8. Extend the witness protocol for witnesses under the age of 10 years to all under the age of 18.