Improve police support for victims of crime with English as an additional language – report

Monday 21 October, 2024

Freedom of Information requests of police forces across the country reveal a patchy approach to supporting victims whose first language is not English. This is despite the fact that the first right in the government's Victims Code' is "to be able to understand and to be understood."

To improve support for all victims, a new report launched on Monday recommends improvements to five key aspects of police conduct. While the report covers an earlier period, its findings and recommendations remain current, following a recent wave of disorder and attacks on migrants and groups who support them.

The report is published by charities Law Centres Network and its member Harrow Law Centre, with support from City law firm A&O Shearman. The charities' report is part of a project dedicated to understanding and supporting victims of crime with language needs.

The project arose from an increase in local hate crime and Harrow Law Centre's response to it. The violence was aimed at people who were born abroad—a majority in the London borough—and speak English as an additional language. They have faced difficulties in accessing support, in reporting the crime and in getting follow-on help with its effects.

The Freedom of Information requests have set out to understand how the UK's police forces understand English as an additional language when working with victims. They have asked who is tasked with assessing a victim's English proficiency as a key to providing them with support; how, if at all, they are trained for the task; what guidance or tools, if any, they have for making this judgement consistently; how often English support needs lead to using an interpreter; and the quality of interpretation services.

The research project has found that:

- About a third of the forces approached **did not count a victim's limited or no English as a vulnerability**—even though this can unlock significant support for them throughout their journey across the criminal justice system
- Ten police forces explained that the classification of a victim as vulnerable was to some extent **based on individual officers' impressions**. Varying training material and record keeping conventions mean there was no overall consistent approach to guide officers
- There was **difficulty in obtaining responses from police forces** to the FOI requests. Only 1 in 7 forces has answered all questions. Nearly half (22) initially declined to answer; when sent refined questions to address their grounds for decline, 12 gave partial replies.

The report makes the following recommendations:

- **Improve data recording** to capture victims' language needs: recording complainants' first language in all crime reports; officers' comments on relevant language issues; and, on case closure, any measures used in its course to assist communication.
- **Enhance the accuracy** of victims' testimonies by relying only on accredited interpreters such as those on the Police Approved Interpreters and Translators Scheme (PAIT), and avoid volunteer interpreters (e.g. police officers with relevant language skills).
- **Adopt a consistent approach**: promote interactive training sessions for police officers, to help them identify language and communication barriers. These should be a compulsory part of officer training and identical across police forces.
- **Strengthen accountability**: routinely publish language needs data through police forces' official statistics, and include it in regional/national accounts of victim support services.

Earlier this year, the Victim's Code was written into law in the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024, but practical progress has stalled. Safeguarding minister Jess Phillips MP admits that victims' trust in the criminal justice system has been "broken". Baroness Newlove, the victims commissioner for England

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and Wales, has expressed concern that these challenges affect victims' reporting behaviour. This report's findings are another reflection of current problems but offer simple and practical steps for improving support, accountability and trust.

Julie Bishop, director of the Law Centres Network, said:

"Police forces are leaving it to individual officers to assess victims' English language support needs, without consistent training, guidance or monitoring. We are expected simply to take it on trust that this works, without the ability to verify it. Victims—and the rule of law—deserve better; and our report, alongside these findings, also offers a benchmark for improvement."

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Notes to editors:

- Find the full report: "'To be Understood': Are the police doing enough to help victims with low proficiency in English report crime?" at News | LCN (lawcentres.org.uk/news)
- Law Centres Network is the national membership body for Law Centres. A Law Centre is a law practice that is a charity, supporting disadvantaged people with legal problems arising from their disadvantage, such as in housing, benefits, discrimination and immigration. There are 42 Law Centres, the first of which have opened in 1970. Home | LCN (lawcentres.org.uk)
- Harrow Law Centre is a local legal assistance charity based in the North West London borough of Harrow. It has been serving the local community for 12 years and is a member of the Law Centres Network. Harrow Law Centre
- A&O Shearman is an international law firm based in the City of London. Its involvement in the project was through pro bono legal assistance and other help in kind to draft, send and track the FOI requests and to process and analyse the responses, many of which have had to be challenged or requests resubmitted. Introducing A&O Shearman (aoshearman.com)
- Bell Foundation is a charitable foundation that funds charity projects in its priority areas, including on English as additional language and the justice system. It has funded the Law Centres' victims of crime project for the past four years. The Bell Foundation – Changing lives and overcoming exclusion through language education (bell-foundation.org.uk)

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