




Victim Support NI

The SOLA Service: Experience of SOLAs and Victims



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- **WHO** have we assisted in our role as SOLAs
 - **HOW** do we assist victims
 - **WHAT** difference has it made – SOLA and victim's experiences and feedback
 - The **FUTURE**????

WHO?

Anyone who has been a victim of a “serious sexual offence” (Sexual Offences (NI Order) 2008 and Gillen Review)

- As of end of March 2023 we have received 1312 referrals to SOLA service.
- Year 1 – 376
- Year 2 – 936
- 82% engagement rate
- We assist all adults who are currently 18+
- 57% of victims in the 25-49 age bracket
- Age range 18 – 82 years

WHEN?

- Service available to those who have reported a sexual offence to police and those who are considering reporting.
- Currently limited support – ends when the trial commences.
- Majority of referrals pre-ABE but support available at all stages of a victim's journey.

HOW?

- 2 types of clients with the same thing in common – fear and uncertainty around the legal process.
- [Just eight people convicted of rape in NI in the last year - BelfastTelegraph.co.uk](http://www.belfasttelegraph.co.uk)
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-61870080>
- [Commissioner warns rape victims 'forced to choose between healthcare and justice' - BBC News](http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-61870080)
- Approx 1 in 6 never report crime to police
- 40% attrition rate
- 3 qualified lawyers with a background in criminal law who can offer free, confidential, timely and honest legal advice and support.

HOW?

- Answer specific legal questions and provide general advice re the legal system
- Make victims aware of their rights under the Victims Charter, HRA and the ECHR (Art 3 & 8)
- Increasing the voice of the victim by being their voice. Ultimate aim is to help them find their voice

HOW?

- How the service is delivered:
- Initial phone/email contact to arrange consultation.
- Work around needs and preferences of the victim
- Not a one-off service, there throughout the entirety of their journey
- Follow up contact at various junctures
- Provide victim with SOLA contact details

FAQs

- You don't know what you don't know
- Many victims have no knowledge or experience of the criminal justice system:
 - What happens between reporting a crime and the perpetrator being brought to trial?
 - How long will this take?
 - How much will it cost?
 - Do I have to hand over my phone?
 - Do I have to hand over my GP notes and records?
 - Will I have to give evidence in front of a packed courtroom?
 - Role of the PSNI (Police Service Northern Ireland)
 - Role of the Public Prosecution Service (PPS)
 - The offence happened a long time ago – is there any point reporting it?
 - Will my name be in the newspapers?

WHAT?

- Initial consultation - outline the SOLA role and the criminal justice process:
- Roles and responsibilities of key players – PSNI, PPS, Legal Counsel
- Roadmap and signpost
- ABE interview/ written statement of evidence
- Test for Prosecution
- Victim is a Witness
- Court process – Magistrates' and Crown
- Special Measures
- Anonymity
- Third Party Disclosure
- Criminal Injury Compensation
- Manage expectations

WHAT NOT?

- **NEVER** ask victims to discuss the specifics of offence – avoid re-traumatization
- **NEVER** comment on the strengths and/or weaknesses in the evidence
- **NEVER** give our opinion on whether there will be a prosecution/conviction
- **NEVER** discuss likely sentences/outcomes
- **NEVER** liaise with stakeholders, make representations without victim's consent

FURTHER ACTION REQUIRED

- Following initial consultations and at various stages SOLA intervention is required to ensure victims are kept informed
- Chase progress with Investigating Officer/PPS
- Link into live court hearings and update victims
- Advise and assist victims lodging No Prosecution Reviews
- Make representations to the court re third party material and applications re Previous Sexual History
- Arrange and attend Pre-Trial Consultations

TRENDS

- Delay
- Lack of knowledge and understanding
- Poor communication
- Disclosure of third-party material
- Anonymity
- Vulnerable victims

REFLECTION

- Vulnerability of victims
- Delay
- Lack of knowledge of Criminal Justice System
- Poor communication
- Impact of historical sexual offences on family relationships
- Victim's rights not being enforced in courts – third party material, PSH
- Defendant's right to a fair trial

- Nature of a pilot
- Referral mechanisms confirmed from the outset
- All key players to be fully trained on the role and scope of SOLA prior to launch
- Every victim to be informed when third party application lodged by defence
- Administrative role created for contacting referrals and data input

Voices of the Victims.....



What difference have we made?

- Increased victim's knowledge and confidence
- Managed expectations
- More informed victims
- Improved communication
- Act as the voice of the victim
- Helped victims find their voice
- Key support for victims
- Reduced attrition rates (?)
- Assisted PSNI and PPS by assisting victims
- Victims involved in focus groups and press reports

“Without you I feel like no progress would have been made in my case, I did not have the strength to fight to get my voice heard, you have done this for me and I am so thankful. After all these years I can finally see some light at the end of the tunnel.”

“You have been amazing, you talk to me in laymans terms and let me see through the jargon. You have always been there.”

“The best thing you said to me was to expect the unexpected. I had steeled myself for that and would have found it much harder to accept had those words not been running around my head”

“Thank you so much for your help. As you know, I have lost faith in the system but it great to have someone to explain why this is all happening.”

“Your support and advice has been so helpful. I am so frustrated with how long everything is taking but at least now I understand why.”

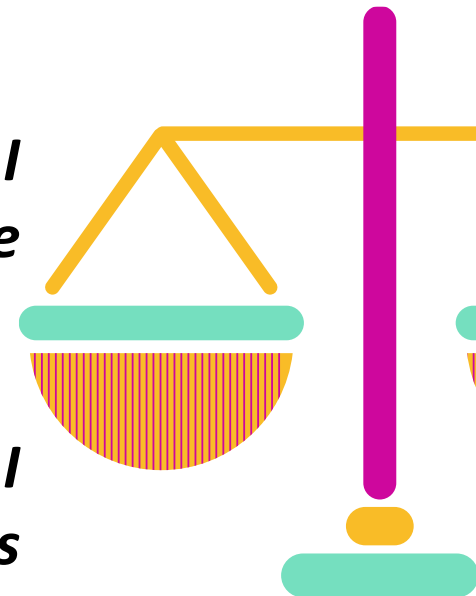
“We got a guilty plea today - to all charges. It has been a morning and afternoon of tears and smiles. I actually cannot believe we reached this point. I will be able to form words better in the coming days and weeks but for now, thank you. Thank you for everything - the advice and support you have given me cannot be measured in terms of the impact it has had. You have been brilliant and I will be forever thankful”

“I am truly grateful for all your help. I am overwhelmed by the help & support I have from all involved in my case”

“Without you I feel like no progress would have been made in my case, I did not have the strength to fight to get my voice heard, you have done this for me and I am so thankful. After all these years I can finally see some light at the end of the tunnel”

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The future for SOLA Pilot????

- Permanent
- On a statutory footing
- Every victim to be automatically referred to a SOLA
- Victims have opportunity to obtain advice prior to signing police consent forms for release of private information
- SOLAs providing direct representation in court
- Additional SOLAs on board as numbers increase
- CSOLA

Ignorance is bliss.....



Our new world.

