

Victims and Courts Bill – House of Commons Committee Stage

Evidence submission by Catch22

20 June 2025

Introduction

For over 200 years [Catch22](https://www.catch22.org.uk) has designed and delivered services that build resilience and aspiration in people and communities. We deliver a range of victims' services, offering emotional and practical support to people affected by crime and anti-social behaviour. In the past year our victims' services provided direct support to 6,204 victims. We further support thousands of young victims of violence, criminal and sexual exploitation annually through out criminal exploitation, county lines and violence prevention services.

Alongside this, we work across the criminal justice system, providing offender management, rehabilitation, resettlement, and gangs intervention services in both custodial and community settings.

Catch22 is uniquely positioned to provide evidence on the Victims and Courts Bill due to our dual role in supporting both victims and those who have committed offences, offering a holistic view of how the Bill will impact people on both sides of the criminal justice system.

Executive Summary

We welcome many of the measures in the Victims and Courts Bill, which we believe have the potential to improve the experience of victims by offering greater autonomy, support, and transparency. However, we also think that the Bill falls short in several key areas, particularly in the absence of restorative justice, and the lack of reference to the exploitation of children.

We have outlined below our support for specific provisions, proposed amendments, and recommendations to strengthen the Bill.

Clause 1 – Compulsory attendance at sentencing

Clause 1 inserts new sections 41A–41B into the Sentencing Code. Section 41A empowers the Crown Court to order an offender to attend their sentencing hearing; failure to appear “without reasonable excuse” is contempt.

Catch22 supports the principle: being able to look the offender in the eye can give many victims a stronger sense of closure and ensures the emotional effort they invest in the hearing is not wasted.

But the measure must also consider the mental-health profile of people in custody:

- Personality disorder is diagnosed in about 65% of prisoners, compared with roughly 4% of adults in the general population¹.
- Up to 30–50% of those on probation caseloads also meet the threshold for a personality disorder².
- Suicide risk is highest during remand: in 2024 the self-inflicted-death rate was 1.8 per 1,000 remand prisoners, more than double the 0.8 per 1,000 among sentenced prisoners, and 28% of self-inflicted deaths occurred within the first 30 days of custody³.

Given this evidence, “reasonable excuse” must include acute mental-health crises. **We therefore think that this new legislation should be clearer to:**

1. Ensure that no additional penalties (e.g. sentence extensions) are applied where non-attendance is attributable to verified mental-health emergencies.
2. Ensure publication of a clear clinical exemption protocol, with decisions rooted in qualified psychiatric assessment.

Such safeguards protect vulnerable defendants while preserving the Bill’s aim to support victims’ confidence in the justice process.

Clause 5 – Extending victims’ rights to information

Clause 5 of the Bill extends victims’ statutory rights to (a) make representations about an offender’s release and (b) receive the offender’s release date and licence conditions.

¹ PubMed Central, PMID: [37725548](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10414335/), (2021) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10414335/>

² NHS England and HMPPS, (2020) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619e6dbb8fa8f5037e8ccb2c/6.5151_HMPPS_Working_with_Offenders_with_Personality_Disorder_accessible_version_.pdf

³ MOJ and HMPPS, (2025) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619e6dbb8fa8f5037e8ccb2c/6.5151_HMPPS_Working_with_Offenders_with_Personality_Disorder_accessible_version_.pdf

Funding and resourcing

Catch22 supports this principle, because prompt, reliable updates help victims regain a sense of control and safety. A 2025 process evaluation of the Victim Notification Scheme (VNS) concluded that while most victims valued the VNS and support from Victim Liaison Officers (VLOs), many still experienced “frustration and dissatisfaction” when information was delayed or incomplete⁴. Expanding eligibility without additional investment risks worsening these very problems.

If the new scheme retains the VLO model, it will require significant funding to recruit and train more officers. If it moves to a lighter model – such as a digital portal and helpline – it must still be properly staffed and technically robust to guarantee prompt, reliable notifications. We therefore urge the government to link Clause 5’s expanded rights to a clear, costed resourcing plan so that every eligible victim receives timely, accurate information rather than a diluted service.

Multiple stages to opt-in

Also, our frontline experience shows that victims’ willingness to engage with support services changes over time; a single opt-in point is often missed. This means that a single “opt-in” opportunity is often insufficient. We therefore recommend that clause 5 of the Bill mandates that support be offered at appropriate stages throughout the process.

Clause 16 – Grant the Victims’ Commissioner the power to act in individual cases that are relevant to public policy

Clause 16 of the Victims and Courts Bill amends the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004 so that the Victims’ Commissioner may make recommendations on individual cases. It further requires public bodies to respond to recommendations within 56 days of the report’s publication. Ministers must also consult the Commissioner before any “notification of non-compliance” is issued, and all criminal justice bodies must respond publicly to the Commissioner’s recommendations, which adds welcome transparency.

We welcome the clause in principle: we, alongside many victim organisations, see that often the central problem is the routine breach of victim’s rights: in the Victims’ Commissioner’s 2023 survey of 3,048 victims, only 19% had heard of the Victims’ Code and fewer still received the entitlements it sets out⁵. However, while Clause 16 of the Bill makes progress in highlighting when victim’s rights are not met, it still does not seem to

⁴ MOJ, (2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-september-2024/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-december-2024-assaults-and-self-harm-to-september-2024>

⁵ Victims’ Commissioner, (2023) <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/document/2023-victim-survey/>

address the lack of legal or other consequences for statutory agencies that fail to uphold victims' rights. While duties are now statutory, there is no enforcement mechanism beyond political or reputational pressure.

Our recommendation:

1. We recommend the Bill goes further by setting out clear consequences when statutory agencies fail to meet their duties under the Victims' Code with clearer lines of accountability – for example, through regulatory action or financial penalties. This would help ensure victims' rights are not just written into law but properly delivered in practice.

Absence of Restorative Justice

We are disappointed that the Victims and Courts Bill 2025 makes no mention of Restorative Justice (RJ), despite strong evidence of its benefits for both victims and offenders.

Government-commissioned research has shown that 85% of victims who participated in RJ were satisfied with the process, and that RJ reduced reoffending by 14%⁶, making it one of the most effective interventions for long-term crime reduction. Moreover, a cost-benefit analysis by Why me? found that every £1 invested in RJ delivers £14 in social value⁷, primarily through reduced reoffending and improved victim wellbeing. The Catch22 restorative justice services receive increasing numbers of referrals from victims, also indicating demand.

Restorative Justice empowers victims by giving them a voice, helping them regain a sense of control, and encouraging meaningful accountability from offenders. With court delays at record levels and a growing reliance on out-of-court disposals, RJ offers a timely and constructive alternative that can help victims feel seen and heard, even when a traditional trial is not possible.

Recommendation:

1. We urge the amendment of the Bill to ensure inclusion of provisions to support, fund, and embed Restorative Justice schemes within the wider framework of victims' services. This would give more victims the opportunity to choose a process that is proven to support recovery and reduce future harm.

⁶ Restorative Justice Council, (2011)

<https://restorativejustice.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/files/Ministry%20of%20Justice%20evaluation%20of%20restorative%20justice.pdf>

⁷ Why Me?, (2022) <https://why-me.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Why-Me-RJ-Economic-Evaluation-Technical-report-2022-v3.pdf>

Missing protection for exploited children

The Bill misses a crucial opportunity to address better protection and support for victims of both child criminal and child sexual exploitation.

Child victims of child criminal exploitation (CCE)

We welcome the new stand-alone offence of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) in the Crime and Policing Bill and the recent concession of government to introduce a statutory definition of CCE. These are positive steps forward in gaining justice for young victims of exploitation.

However, from our frontline services and other evidence, we would like to emphasise that there currently is:

- Insufficient protection of prosecution of child victims of criminal exploitation who have been forced to commit offences as part of their exploitation; criminal activity that could not consent to⁸.
- Insufficient support for child victims of criminal exploitation⁹.

It is essential to recognise that these children are victims themselves, and their involvement in criminal activities is not of their own free will but rather a result of manipulation and exploitation by older individuals or criminal networks. We would therefore like this Bill to be strengthened by:

1. An amendment that would include child criminal exploitation in the meaning of relevant exploitation in the Modern Slavery Act 2015. This would better safeguard child victims from prosecution for acts they were forced to commit as part of their exploitation.
2. An amendment that would place a duty on local statutory agencies to commission specialist support services for victims of child criminal exploitation (see below)

Child victims of sexual exploitation and abuse

We strongly support the recommendation put forward by the NSPCC and other leading organisations supporting women, children, and victims of abuse and exploitation. New proposed New Clause 2 (NC2) would “place duty on relevant local statutory agencies to

⁸ HMICFRS, (2020) <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/national-child-protection-inspections-2019-thematic-report/>

⁹ Action for Children, (2024) <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media-centre/criminally-exploited-children-jay-review-2024/>

commission specific support services for victims of abuse and exploitation, including tailored services for those with special needs, informed by strategic assessments of the needs of victims in their local area”.

This is a vital and evidence-based proposal, as clear from the [joint submission of evidence to this Committee](#)¹⁰.

We believe this amendment would help close the current gaps in provision and ensure that all victims of abuse and exploitation, including children, are recognised as victims and supported accordingly.

Conclusion

Catch22 welcomes the Victims and Courts Bill as a step toward a more victim-centred justice system. We support key provisions, such as compulsory attendance at sentencing, extended information rights, and enhanced oversight by the Victims’ Commissioner. However, we believe the Bill must go further to deliver real impact.

To strengthen the Bill, we recommend:

1. **Mental health safeguards** – ensure “reasonable excuse” for non-attendance at sentencing includes acute mental health crises, supported by a clear medical exemption process.
2. **Accountability for victims’ rights** – introduce enforceable consequences when agencies fail to uphold the Victims’ Code.
3. **Restorative Justice** – fund and embed RJ schemes, which are proven to support victims and reduce reoffending.
4. **Child Exploitation and Abuse** – introduce better protection to ensure that criminally exploited children are safeguarded, not criminalised, and that all child victims of abuse and exploitation receive adequate, specialist support – as specified in amendment NC2.

Adopting these changes will ensure the Bill delivers not just rights in law, but meaningful support in practice.

¹⁰ NSPCC, Action for Children (2025) <https://bills.parliament.uk/Publications/61572/Documents/6719>