

Executive Summary



TRANSFORMING HOW WE COMMUNICATE WITH VICTIMS

MOVING BEYOND INFORMATION PROVISION
TO A SYSTEM OF COMMUNICATION

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Victims of crime are often left feeling stressed or traumatised. However, while still suffering from the emotional, psychological, physical, and social consequences of a crime, **victims are required to undertake many tasks**, which range from filing a complaint to navigating complex criminal proceedings. In this context, the appropriate provision of relevant information may enable their access to justice and support, help prevent secondary victimisation, and empower their participation in proceedings.

Since the publication of the UN's Basic Principles of Justice (1985), it has been recognised that information is both a **fundamental need and a victim's right**. In 2012, the European Union (EU) Victims' Rights Directive established a set of rights to enhance victims' access to information; for example, the victim's right to receive information from their first contact with the authorities, their right to receive information about their case, or their right to access translation and interpretation.

Under current EU legislation, Member States are obliged to grant victims **effective access to information**, which must be readily available, simple and easy to understand, accessible, offered in a timely manner and adapted to individual needs. Essentially, information should be clearly understood by all victims for them to act on it.

Despite the progress made, professionals working with victims still acknowledge that **current mechanisms for information provision are inefficient** and fail to address the needs of all victims; a situation which has not changed over the last four decades.

In many cases, victims do not receive any information following a crime carried out against them; it may not exist or it may not be widely available or it simply may not be offered to them. When information is provided, quality issues (the information may be incomplete, inconsistent, complex, not accessible, etc.) can impede a victim's ability to understand and to act on it.

Often, information is not adapted to the victim's needs: it is standardised rather than individualised, reducing its relevance and usability. Furthermore, information provision is inconsistent and uncoordinated which leads to confusion: a lack of clarity, for example, prevents a victim from knowing which authority is responsible for what information; there may be a lack of State engagement; and the quality of information provision may depend on the individual providing the information. Such challenges result in a fragmented system of information provision, with victims often being unable to access, understand and/or act on the information they receive.

As a result, our current approach to information rights does not work; a shift is therefore necessary if the exercising of their right to information is to be made a reality for victims. To **extend victims' access to information** we must:

- ensure, through **effective communication**, they effectively understand the information provided and can act on it; and
- achieve **consistency and coordination** in the way it is provided, to avoid any lack of availability and confusion.

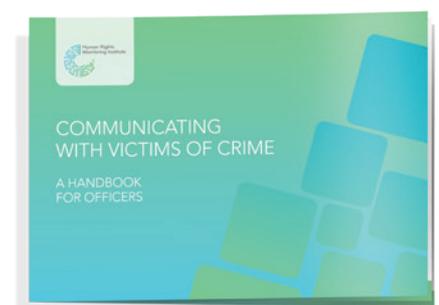
Effective communication focuses on the successful transmission of a message, an idea, in a two-way interactive process that relies on (an individual or organisation's) ability to deliver and to interpret messages. It integrates the provision of information within a broader system of message exchange. Changes in communicating information to victims must be carried out at two levels:

- the individual level, relying on effective communication skills;
- a systemic level, aiming to tackle any challenges observed (availability of information, quality and coordination issues) by establishing a clear framework for cooperation.

At the **individual level**, stakeholders working with victims, either directly (law enforcement, justice sector, victim support) or indirectly (health sector, social services, etc.), should enhance their awareness and communication skills to ensure that victims not only receive the correct information, but can understand it and are able to act on it.

The provision of information through effective communication must take into account the following **victim-centric communication principles**¹:

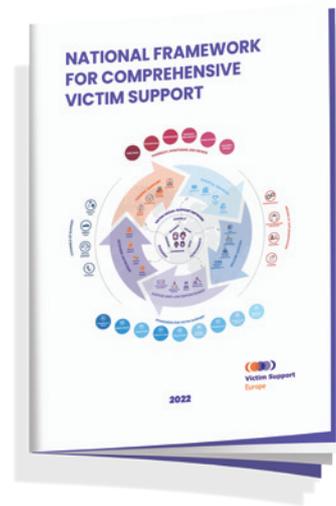
- **Show respect**; treat all victims equally, take into account – as far as possible – the victims' wishes and needs, practice active listening skills;
- **Ensure safety**; address concerns linked to the perpetrator that might destabilise or frighten the victim;
- **Allow victims to express emotions**; understand the range of responses that may result from a crime and any associated trauma, and know how to address them;
- **Provide information**; help victims regain a sense of control and alleviate any stress associated with the crime and with unfamiliar situations.



The development of **verbal and non-verbal communication skills, active listening skills, writing skills and empathy** should be prioritised, as should knowledge on **tackling the key barriers** to effective communication (for example, physical or physiological barriers, language, semantic or cultural barriers).

¹ Communicating with victims: A Handbook for Officers, Human Rights Monitoring Institute, 2018, available online: <https://hrmi.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Handbook-for-Officers-HRMI.pdf>

At the **systemic level**, an arrangement which formalises and organises strategic cooperation can ensure all communication with victims is harmonised and consistent. Integrated into a broader national victim support framework², it can define what information should be provided by whom with which objectives, when and how. Such cooperation relies on long-term strategic planning and the establishment of mechanisms and procedures which support coordinated and effective communication.



To that end, planning and implementation structures, along with an associated communication strategy that sets out the organisation's vision, objectives and implementation plan, should be established. Using research, a needs analysis should be carried out to identify any existing gaps and needs at the national, regional, and local levels. The results of this research should direct the strategy's implementation and those of any mechanisms, protocols and procedures associated with it. The strategy should ensure its implementation is coordinated and consistent, and that a continuous evaluation of results informs further development and implementation requirements.

² National framework for comprehensive victim support, Victim Support Europe, 2022, available online: https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1669047428NationalFrameworkforComprehensiveVictimSupport.pdf



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