

Victims' Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird's Press statement following Prime Minister's roundtable about the role of the criminal justice system in deterring and preventing crime held on 12 August 2019.

Victims' Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird QC, was pleased to attend the roundtable to represent the interests of victims and witnesses.

Although there were some announcements this weekend about policy direction from the government the discussion was wide ranging and the PM made clear that he was interested in outcomes which cut crime and improve public confidence

Dame Vera believes that building public confidence in the criminal justice system is crucial. The Crime Survey for England and Wales shows more than 90% of crime of all kinds does not result in a charge or a prosecution. This means most victims have no redress for the wrong that has been done to them. Sometimes this can be significant harm, including financial loss and emotional or psychological injury from which it may be more difficult to recover if there is no outcome or result to rectify the wrong in any way.

In cases where there is an investigation, a key reason for failure is that victims will not support a prosecution because they are not kept up to date with progress, suffer delay and inconvenience and are not treated with dignity and consideration. As the Public Accounts Committee found in an important inquiry, 46% of people who have given evidence at court say they would never do so again.

Thus, we have a double-edged loss of public confidence in the criminal justice system: many victims see no reason to report crime since they expect that nothing will happen, whilst others do their best to help prosecutions but end up dissatisfied with their treatment.

Dame Vera raised a number of important steps we need to take to build public confidence.

The increase in police numbers is important and neighbourhood policing should feature for its intelligence value as well as building community confidence

The Government announcement on increases in funding for police, prison capacity and the CPS needs to be match by additional funding for high quality victims' services, which have not seen an increase in the four years since they were devolved to local Police and Crime Commissioners.

The PM and Dame Vera were both on the House of Commons Bill committee which introduced the legislation for the Victims Code of Practice. Yet, we know that victims' entitlements under the Code are not being observed; for instance, last year only 14% of victims were offered a Victim Personal Statement, yet this is a key entitlement giving victims the opportunity to feel they have been listened to and have played a part. Enforcing the entitlements of the Code is critical.

It is important that sentences handed down by the courts are understood by victims and are open and transparent. This will help victims to feel confident the courts have taken the right course. To help make this happen, she wants to see victims being offered a written copy of the judge's sentencing remarks (free of charge) in all cases of serious sexual or violent crime.

Dame Vera welcomed today's announcement of a review of sentencing for sexual and violent offences, which is not only about which sentences are imposed but how and why some potentially dangerous offenders are released early, perhaps thus failing to benefit from important behavioural change prison programmes.

Dame Vera recently met with Abigail Blake, whose violent partner broke her back and neck and severed her spinal column but only served six months of a 40 month prison sentence. The Commissioner says victims are not out for vengeance, but they do want justice. This means perpetrators serving sentences commensurate with the harm they have caused.

The Prime Minister made clear he is open to tough community sentences, replacing some short prison sentences which can disrupt social and domestic re-integration without bringing change. Dame Vera welcomes this.

The Commissioner also called for a public awareness campaign to accompany the Domestic Abuse Bill, which will help the public to understand its symptoms and be empowered to offer support for victims. She referred to the overlap between victims and defendants in some cases especially where victims of coercive control commit offences at the behest of their perpetrator.

The Prime Minister asked to meet the attendees again