HM Inspectorate
of Prosecution in Scotland

Focused follow-up inspection: communication with victims of domestic abuse in summary cases



November 2026

Chief Inspector's Executive Summary

Domestic abuse is endemic in Scotland.[1]

Effective communication with victims throughout a case is essential to delivering a trauma-informed approach, improving safety, building confidence in the criminal justice system, and supporting engagement with the prosecution process.

In 2024, we carried out an inspection of the prosecution of domestic abuse summary cases[2] and made 27 recommendations. In particular, we found that communication between the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS) and victims was unsatisfactory in 80% of cases.

In subsequent annual reports,[3] we noted that, while COPFS had made some positive changes, several of the inspection's most urgent and practical recommendations remained unimplemented, despite their importance to victims of domestic abuse.

More than two and a half years later, this focused follow-up inspection[4] examines whether victim communication in summary domestic abuse cases had improved, in particular with the rollout of enhanced victim engagement (EVE) across COPFS. We sought to determine what practical difference has been made to how COPFS communicates with victims and examined how the prosecution service has responded to two of our recommendations.[5]

We understand that funding pressures have currently reduced third sector support for victims of domestic abuse in parts of Scotland. Our review of COPFS communication to victims predates these reductions. While third sector support is valuable to victims, it does not diminish the responsibility of COPFS to keep victims informed about their cases.

We have chosen not to make any further recommendations. This report should be read alongside our 2024 report, which provides more detailed information on COPFS domestic abuse processes and work, along with our findings and our recommendations.

Unfortunately, while there have been some positive developments since 2024, the overall standard of communication provided by COPFS to victims in summary cases remains poor. Significant shortcomings persist in the service that vulnerable victims of domestic abuse should expect to receive. COPFS must address the issues identified in this report and implement the outstanding recommendations from the 2024 inspection.

COPFS has demonstrated a clear commitment to improving communication with victims through the introduction of EVE. This entitles victims in summary cases to receive a telephone call from a prosecutor. Victims in cases involving a charge under section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 (DASA) should also be offered a meeting with a prosecutor before a trial.

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[1] In 2025-26, 34,586 charges of domestic abuse were reported to Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS). This is an increase of 14% on the previous year and the highest number of domestic abuse charges reported to the prosecution service since 2014-15. Domestic abuse and stalking charges in Scotland 2025-2026

[2] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' published 17 April 2024.

[3] Annual Report 2024-25, Annual Report 2025-26

[4] Terms of Reference

[5] **Recommendation 12** - "With regard to bail in domestic abuse cases, COPFS should: (b) work with justice partners, particularly the police and the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service, to ensure that victims are informed of the outcome of the accused's first appearance on the same day, and update all guidance and protocols accordingly". **Recommendation 19** - "In relation to communicating with victims in summary domestic abuse cases, COPFS should: (a) take immediate steps to ensure that victims are receiving basic information about their case, including its outcome, timeously".

COPFS promotes these measures as a key benefit of Summary Case Management (SCM), providing victims with additional support and information. However, this inspection found they were not always operating successfully. In 33% of cases where an EVE call should have been made, there was no record of any attempt to contact the victim. DASA meetings were also uncommon, with no evidence of meetings offered in 80% of relevant cases.

Prosecutors we interviewed were supportive of EVE and recognised its clear benefits for victims. However, a key barrier was the capacity required for prosecutors to undertake EVE calls and DASA meetings, particularly in Glasgow, where most cases prosecuted by the specialist domestic abuse unit require EVE. It appears that the resource implications of delivering EVE were not fully considered by COPFS before implementation.

We welcome the collaborative work undertaken by COPFS with third sector organisations and people with lived experience to improve the Victim Information and Advice (VIA) letter templates. The revised templates are more personal, supportive and trauma-informed, providing clearer information about court processes and outcomes.

This work is commendable. It was therefore frustrating to find that poor editing of these templates often resulted in letters that were inaccurate, confusing and repetitive. Our review found this was largely due to inadequate quality assurance, work backlogs, capacity pressures and a lack of national governance of VIA.

Victims have a right to receive information in a language they can understand. However, our review found that, despite COPFS providing tools to support communication with victims whose first language is not English, these were not being used consistently, resulting in some victims receiving letters they would not have been able to read.

From a victim safety perspective, it is essential that victims are updated promptly following the accused's first appearance at court, so they know whether the accused is at liberty and what bail conditions are in place for their protection. We found there was a record of VIA making a successful or attempted telephone call to a victim in 39 cases (65%) and creating an initial letter in 53 cases (88%).

There is often no routine communication with victims between a trial being fixed and the trial itself, a period that can last several months. This is particularly concerning in domestic abuse cases, where contact is important to maintaining victims' confidence and engagement in the prosecution process.

Communication following a verdict, plea or sentence was consistently the weakest stage and may reflect workload pressures and case backlogs. Common issues included the failure to communicate the outcome to victims after trials or deferred sentences. In some cases, it appeared that communication with the victim stopped altogether.

The overall quality of communication with victims following key court appearances was assessed as unsatisfactory in 78% of the 60 cases reviewed, providing a comparison with our 2024 findings.[6] Where EVE had occurred, this figure improved marginally, with 75% of cases being assessed as unsatisfactory.

Trust is a fundamental principle of trauma-informed practice. Throughout our inspection, we encountered too many instances where COPFS advised victims that they would receive a telephone call, information, or an update on their case, only for these commitments not to be fulfilled.

[6] In 2024 we assessed 20 cases from Glasgow, 20 from Dundee (an SCM pilot office) and 20 from the rest of Scotland excluding the remaining SCM pilot offices of Hamilton and Paisley.

While there has been some small improvement in communication since our last report, many victims of domestic abuse are still not receiving an acceptable standard of communication from COPFS and, in particular VIA. Without meaningful change, victims of summary domestic abuse are denied the timely, effective, and victim-centred communication they deserve and are entitled[7] to receive.

Deborah O'Brien Demick
HM Chief Inspector of Prosecution
November 2026

[7] Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014, Standards of Service for Victims and Witnesses 2026-27 and Victims' Code for Scotland

Methodology

1. The inspection methodology comprised a review of case records, interviews with COPFS staff and stakeholders, and analysis of relevant documentation.

2. A detailed review was undertaken of a random sample of 60 domestic abuse cases from the Dundee, Glasgow, Hamilton and Paisley offices. The cases were reported to COPFS between 11 July 2025 and 11 October 2025. Many of the cases were still ongoing in 2026. We examined case records in 15 cases from each office on COPFS systems to assess the timeliness, accuracy and quality of communication with victims.

3. Dundee, Hamilton and Paisley were selected because they were the three SCM pilot offices where EVE processes should be fully embedded. Glasgow was selected because it has a specialist Domestic Abuse Team. This provided a reasonable, although not direct, comparison with our 2024 case review and a snapshot of the level of basic communication by COPFS.

4. Following issues identified regarding the number of in person meetings being offered to victims of section 1 DASA offences, the scope of the review was extended to examine every available case involving this charge reported to COPFS within the four offices between 11 July 2025 and 11 October 2025. This increased the DASA element of the review to 98 cases. For these 98 cases, the review was limited to considering whether a DASA meeting should have been offered to the victim and, where appropriate, whether such a meeting took place.

5. To supplement the case review, interviews were conducted with COPFS staff from a range of grades and roles, including prosecutors, VIA personnel and COPFS management. Interviews were also undertaken with third sector representatives and stakeholders. We are grateful to all those who contributed to our inspection.

6. Our document analysis encompassed an examination of standard letter templates used by VIA, feedback received by COPFS regarding correspondence sent to victims, and any relevant COPFS policies, guidance and procedures relating to communication with victims.

7. The inspection encountered a number of challenges which caused us to adapt our methodology when record keeping was poor, incomplete or inconsistent. In some instances, information relevant to victim communication was not maintained on COPFS systems. We also found significant variation in working practices and terminology used by VIA staff and between offices.

8. Findings were drawn from combined evidence gathered through case reviews, interviews and document analysis to provide an overall assessment of the effectiveness, consistency and trauma-informed quality of communications provided to victims by COPFS.

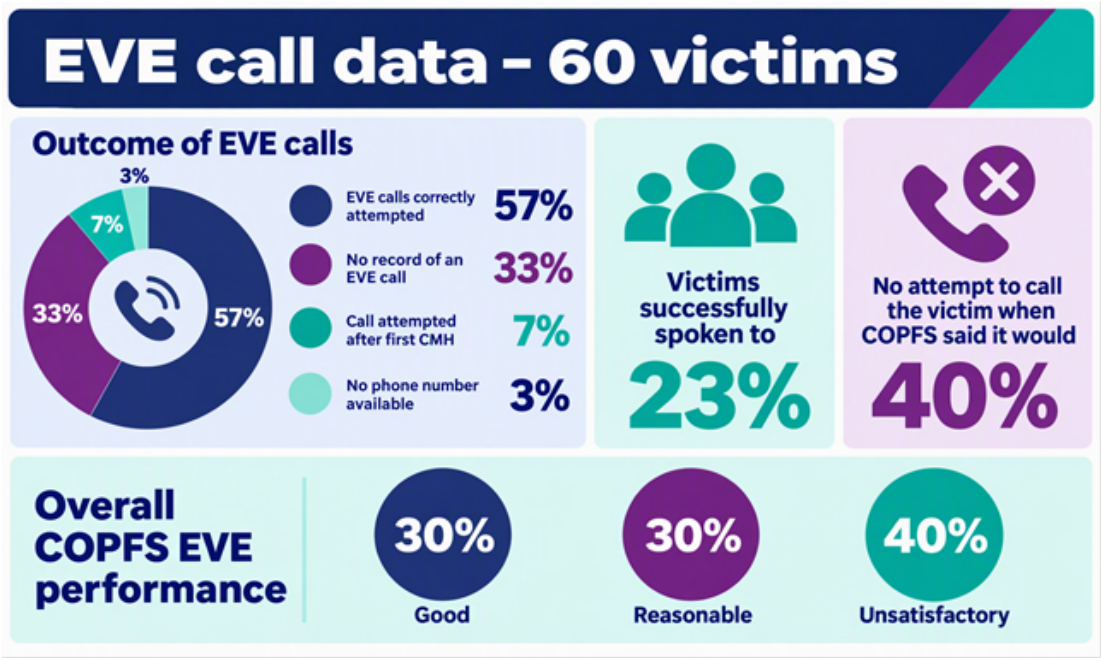
Enhanced Victim Engagement (EVE)

9. The EVE process was a pilot scheme at the time of our 2024 report and is now the national model rolled out in parallel with Summary Case Management (SCM).

10. EVE has two elements:
    - a telephone call from a prosecutor for all domestic abuse victims before the first case management hearing (CMH) where the accused does not plead guilty at first appearance – an EVE call
    - where an accused is charged with contravening section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 (DASA)[8] the victim should be offered a meeting in person with a prosecutor where the case is proceeding to trial[9] – a DASA meeting

11. SCM has delivered significant measurable improvements in reducing the number of trials being fixed and the number of witnesses being cited. Three reports have been published by the Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service (SCTS) as SCM moved from a pilot in 2022 to the national model in January 2026. These reports provide detailed statistics and analysis of many aspects of SCM but no statistics on whether EVE was taking place. The final SCTS evaluation report states that 'Legal staff now proactively make early contact with victims to reinforce understanding of the SCM process, the role of the Procurator Fiscal and what to expect as a case progresses'.[10] Our case review found that this is not always happening in practice.

EVE Calls



[8] Section 1 of the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 is the offence of engaging in a course of behaviour towards a partner or ex-partner that would be likely to cause the partner or ex-partner physical or psychological harm. Such cases are often examples of coercive and controlling behaviour by an accused.
[9] This meeting in person is only where the accused pleads not guilty and the meeting should be in the weeks prior to any trial.
[10] 'Summary Case Management National Rollout Report: A Shared Vision Shaped Through Collaboration', page 43, SCTS May 2026.

12. Introduced in Dundee, Hamilton and Paisley in September 2022, EVE calls should now be well embedded within routine business processes.[11]

> The purpose of an EVE call is:
> - To inform the victim that their case is currently being prepared by a legal member of staff, and for the role of the prosecutor to be explained to the victim
> - To provide the victim with an update on the stage that proceedings have reached
> - To provide the victim with an opportunity to articulate any additional support which they require to enable them to participate in court proceedings
> - To provide the victim with the opportunity to ask any questions which have occurred to them after the initial engagement with Police Scotland and VIA
> - To confirm whether the victim is being supported by a specialist domestic abuse advocacy service
> - To ensure that the victim is aware of the support that VIA can provide and how to contact VIA

13. An EVE call from a prosecutor should be made between the first and second calling[12] of the case. This is usually within the first three weeks of the case calling in court.

Overall EVE call assessment

14. We assessed the performance of COPFS in the EVE call procedure for all 60 cases as follows:
    - Good 30%
    - Reasonable 30%
    - Unsatisfactory 40%

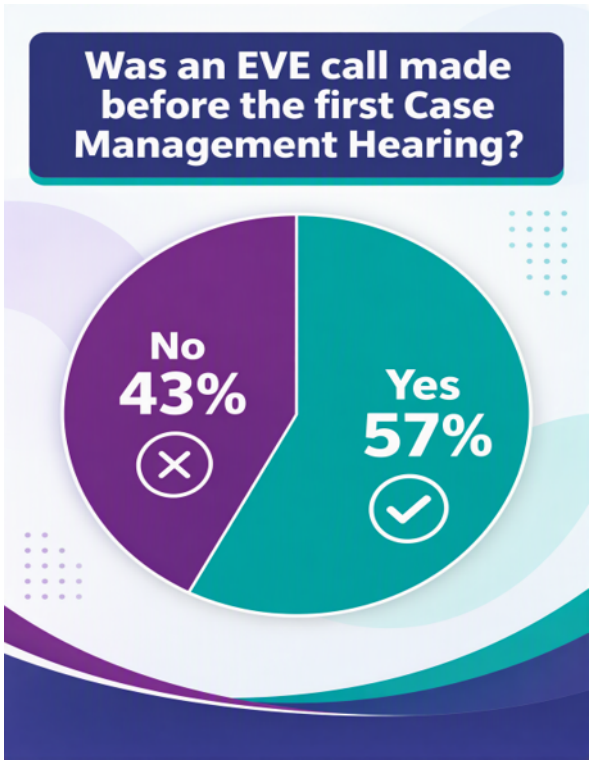
15. Where telephone conversations between prosecutors and victims took place, these were assessed overwhelmingly positively. The evidence available indicated that victims valued the EVE call process. We identified some examples of prosecutors successfully re-engaging victims who were at risk of disengagement. Prosecutors interviewed during the inspection were consistently positive about the benefits of EVE, particularly for victims of domestic abuse.

16. Where a prosecutor is unable to contact a victim because a telephone call is unanswered or no contact number is available, a letter should be issued to the victim advising that an attempt has been made and inviting them to contact COPFS by telephone. Our review found that such letters were rarely issued. We also observed uncertainty regarding responsibility for generating and issuing these letters, with differing views as to whether this falls to VIA staff, prosecutors or administrative staff.

17. Interviews with prosecutors indicated that the principal challenge in delivering EVE relates to resource constraints rather than a lack of commitment. While SCM has reduced the volume of cases proceeding to trial, it remains unclear whether this reduction has been enough to offset the additional demands placed on prosecutors by the SCM and EVE processes. Our findings suggest that resources are not always sufficient to support full implementation of the EVE model as originally envisaged.

[11] SCM was rolled out to the Glasgow office for domestic abuse cases in January 2024.
[12] This will usually be a CMH but can be a variation of such a hearing e.g. intermediate diet. For the purposes of this section of the report unless specifically stated a CMH will encompass all variations.

Are EVE calls being made?



18. In 57% of cases there was evidence of a call being attempted correctly. In 43% of cases there was no evidence, or some other failure of process, namely:
    - 33% of all cases in which there should have been an EVE call there was no record of any attempt at a call
    - 7% of cases there was evidence of an attempted call after the relevant CMH
    - In 3% of cases there was no telephone number available

    This means that the purpose of EVE calls is not always achieved and many victims are being left without prosecutor contact and important information about their case.

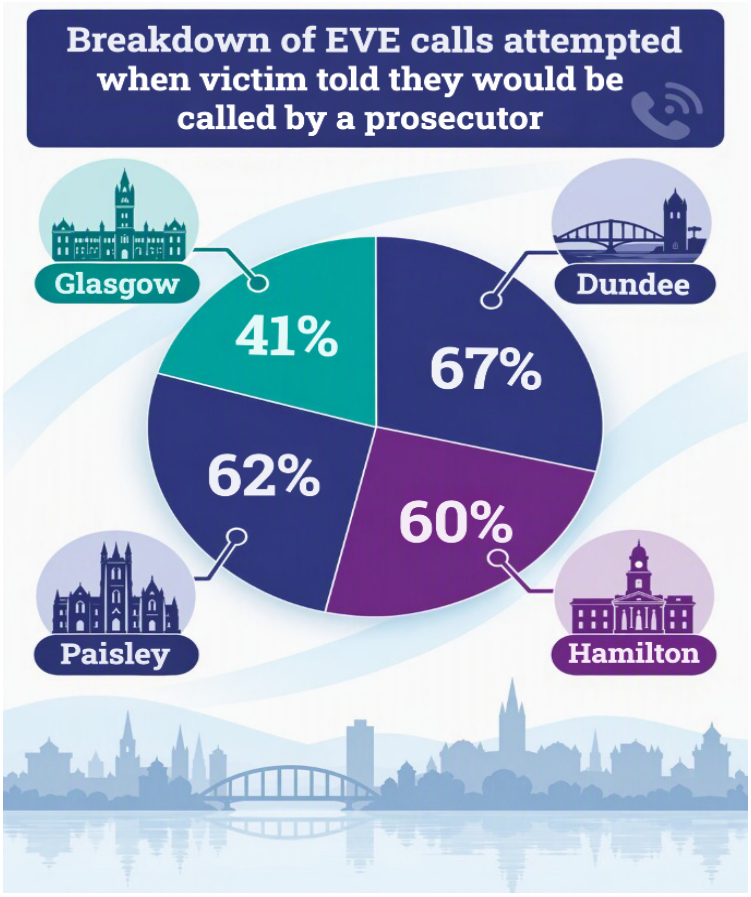
19. Trust is a fundamental principle of trauma-informed practice and is particularly important in supporting victims of domestic abuse throughout the prosecution process. Following the accused's first court appearance, VIA write to victims advising that they will receive an EVE call from a prosecutor in advance of the CMH. Our review found that 40%[13] of domestic abuse victims did not receive the promised call. Failure to deliver this commitment risks undermining victims' trust and is inconsistent with the trauma-informed approach envisaged by the Victims, Witnesses and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025.

20. In 2025-26, 34,585 domestic abuse charges were reported to COPFS. Proceedings were instructed in 91% of cases, and 73% were prosecuted in sheriff summary courts. This highlights the significant volume of victim engagement required of prosecutors and VIA staff. While SCM has reduced the number of trials, the number of domestic abuse charges reported continues to rise.[14] Against this backdrop, the time spent by prosecutors conducting EVE calls is a key consideration in managing summary domestic abuse prosecutions.

[13] 33% & 7%. We have excluded those cases in which there was no telephone number available to COPFS. 7% received a call later in the process but not before the date of the CMH date in the letter.
[14] Domestic abuse and stalking charges in Scotland 2025-2026

21. A recurring theme across the four offices for both VIA staff and prosecutors alike in speaking to victims of domestic abuse was that it can be, understandably, difficult and often inappropriate to limit the length of the call.

Why calls are not being made



22. In Glasgow, domestic abuse cases prosecuted at summary level are managed by a specialist Domestic Abuse Team and prosecuted in dedicated domestic abuse courts, arrangements which pre-date both SCM and EVE. Consequently, almost all cases handled by specialist domestic abuse prosecutors in Glasgow require an EVE call. We found no evidence that additional resources had been allocated to reflect this increased demand. Prosecutors reported that they are frequently required to prioritise either preparing to address the court on the state of case preparation or undertaking EVE calls, limiting their ability to do both effectively. While prosecutors remained strongly committed to the principles of EVE, the current arrangements present significant operational challenges.

23. It is apparent that the well-intentioned specialist prosecution model at Glasgow was not adequately considered when SCM was adopted as a national model. Unless additional resources are made available to give prosecutors in Glasgow time to make EVE calls, or the specialist team model is reconsidered, the standard of service to domestic abuse victims in Scotland's largest city may continue to be poorer than in the rest of the country. A further unintended consequence of SCM for Glasgow domestic abuse prosecutors and victims is that DASA meetings are not routinely being offered – this is discussed further below.

24. Dundee recorded the highest proportion of attempted EVE calls among the offices included in our case review. We noted that prosecutors in Dundee appeared to have more time allocated for case preparation and SCM-related court duties than their counterparts in the other offices examined.

25. COPFS internal guidance is clear that EVE should be facilitated if an accused is in custody. In eight of the 60 cases in our review the accused was remanded in custody following first appearance at court. In only one of the eight cases was there evidence of an EVE call being attempted by a prosecutor.

26. The implementation of SCM appears to have also had unintended consequences for domestic abuse custody cases across Scotland. While the relevant practice note states that SCM does not apply if an accused is remanded in custody[15] COPFS has instructed that EVE should still take place. The implementation of SCM on these cases does not appear to have been adequately considered, given that remand cases are subject to different timescales and procedural requirements from those that apply to CMHs.[16]

27. It is often the most dangerous offenders, with a history of domestic violence, who are remanded in custody at summary level. The unintended consequence is that the most vulnerable and at-risk victims are likely to receive the least support under SCM.

Value of recording EVE calls

28. In 87% of cases where we found evidence that an EVE call was attempted at any stage it was correctly recorded in the VIA minute sheet. The quality of records varied from brief notes to more detailed accounts that could be informative for VIA staff and prosecutors as the case progresses.

29. We were advised that the outcome of some EVE calls may not have been recorded or that technical issues may have prevented calls from being captured on the relevant systems. However, such explanations should be treated with caution given the consistently high levels of non-compliance with the EVE process identified in our case review data.

30. We understand that COPFS introduced a process to collate statistics on whether EVE calls were being made. This system is labour intensive, inconsistently applied and as a result COPFS does not currently know to what extent prosecutors across the organisation are making calls to victims or whether victims are answering calls. It is important for COPFS to remedy this and track this data, not least given the findings of our case review and to ensure that victims are receiving this contact.

31. We found numerous instances where information obtained during EVE calls – often a rich source of information – was not effectively utilised throughout the life of the case. This was particularly evident where victims had advised prosecutors of their preferred special measures for giving evidence, yet VIA subsequently issued standard correspondence seeking the same information or did not implement the victim's wishes regarding special measures.

32. We observed repeated areas of inefficient overlap between the work of VIA and prosecutors conducting the EVE call.

[15] Practice Note No. 1 of 2025 - Summary Case Management paragraph 7

[16] When an accused is remanded in custody the case is not judicially managed through the CMH process and instead an "intermediate diet" is assigned.

Case study

A prosecutor took a detailed note of an EVE call and discussed the victim's wishes on a non-harassment order and how the victim would give evidence through a CCTV link. VIA staff did not see this record and applied for the victim to give evidence using a screen with the victim being in the same courtroom as the accused when giving evidence.

If a victim is asked a question and provides information, they should be able to trust that it will be recorded and considered. Failing to do so is not trauma-informed. It would be preferable for all concerned, particularly victims, if realistic responsibilities were clarified and adhered to.

Effectiveness of the EVE call process



33. Of the 34 cases in our case review in which an EVE call was attempted correctly by a prosecutor, 20 calls were not answered. On one view COPFS should not be judged negatively if victims are not answering telephone calls however, the low rate of successful telephone contact with victims was specifically highlighted in our 2024 report.[17]

34. There was variation between offices in the timing of EVE call attempts. In some offices, calls were made around one week before the hearing, allowing time for further attempts or for victims to return the call. There was limited evidence that this approach improved contact rates. In other offices, calls were typically made one or two days before the hearing, leaving little opportunity for further engagement where initial contact was unsuccessful.

35. Prosecutors are instructed to make EVE calls from their COPFS laptop, which displays a 0300 number, or to withhold their number when using a mobile phone. However, victims not answering calls from unfamiliar numbers remains a persistent challenge and was a recurring issue identified in our 2024 review. COPFS should provide clearer information on how victims can expect to be contacted and use feedback from third sector organisations and victims to better understand and address unsuccessful telephone contact.

[17] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at summary level', paragraph 289.

36. The effectiveness of EVE should be measured by the number of victims successfully engaged, rather than by the number of contact attempts made. We are aware that COPFS is considering changes to the summary VIA model, including greater use of telephone contact and fewer letters. While summary VIA staff now have mobile phones that can be used for calls and text messages, guidance on their use is still awaited. Given the low success rate of telephone contact with domestic abuse victims, with fewer than half of calls answered, we await the final proposals and evaluation of these changes with interest. In particular, we are keen to understand how COPFS intends to improve engagement and meet the communication needs of domestic abuse victims.

DASA meetings



37. DASA created an offence of engaging in a course of behaviour towards a partner or former partner that is likely to cause physical or psychological harm. Such cases frequently involve sustained patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour.

38. Since the offence was created the number of DASA charges reported has more than doubled from 1,022 prosecutions in 2019-20 to 2,616 in 2025-26. While there has been a significant increase in dealing with these charges at solemn level, the number of summary charges continues to grow. In the last year alone the number of summary DASA cases rose by 14% to 1,235 cases.[18]

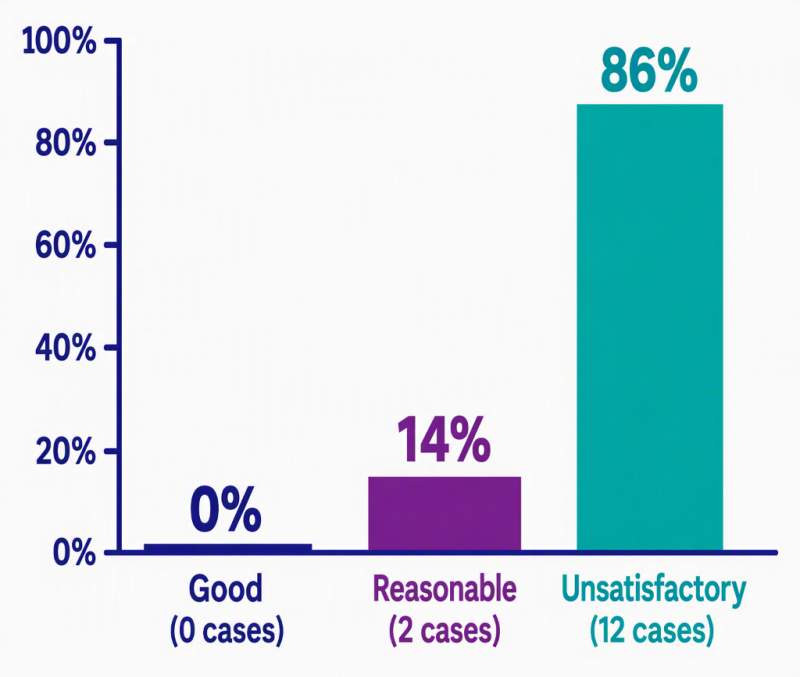
39. In support of its strategic priority to tackle violence against women and girls, COPFS introduced DASA meetings in 2022. This allows victims to meet in person with the prosecutor who will conduct the trial in cases involving a charge under DASA and is intended to take place approximately two weeks before a trial. The increasing volume of DASA cases is a relevant consideration when assessing prosecutorial capacity to facilitate these meetings and is considered later in this report.

[18] Domestic abuse and stalking charges in Scotland 2025-2026

The purpose of a DASA meeting is to:

- Allow the victim to meet the trial prosecutor before the day of the trial
- Provide the opportunity for any remaining concerns the victim has to be addressed
- Increase the confidence the victim has in the criminal justice process to handle their complaint competently, and with sensitivity

Overall DASA meeting assessment



40. Our initial case review examined 60 cases. Sixteen involved a charge under DASA, of which 14 progressed to a stage where a DASA meeting should have been offered.

41. In one of the two cases assessed as reasonable, a DASA meeting was offered. However, it was conducted by telephone rather than in person and took place only three working days before the trial.

42. In the second case assessed as reasonable, and the only case in which an in person meeting took place, the meeting was held the day before trial and lasted approximately one hour. Inadequate records meant it was not possible to determine when the meeting was offered or who attended, other than the victim and prosecutor. Although the victim provided details of a new address during the meeting, this information was not shared with VIA or updated on COPFS systems. As a result, correspondence was subsequently sent to an address at which the victim no longer resided.

43. In 12 of the 14 DASA cases in our initial case review where the victim should have been offered a meeting, there was no evidence of one being offered or taking place.

Widening our sample

44. Given the very low number of DASA meetings that took place identified in our initial review of 60 cases, we considered that the sample might not be representative of wider COPFS practice. We therefore expanded the review to include all available cases involving a DASA charge reported in the four review offices between 11 July and 11 October 2025. This increased the sample to 98 cases, including 61 in which a DASA meeting should have been offered. Owing to resource constraints, our wider

assessment was limited to whether a DASA meeting had been offered or had taken place.

45. There was no evidence that a DASA meeting had been offered or had taken place in 49 of the 61 relevant cases (80%). A meeting was therefore offered in only 12 cases (20%). Performance varied significantly between offices, with Dundee accounting for the majority of meetings offered. Excluding Dundee, a DASA meeting was offered in only 10% of eligible cases across the remaining three offices.

46. Of the 12 cases in which a DASA meeting was offered, the meeting took place with eight victims. This suggests that, when offered, victims are generally willing to engage with the process.

Reasons why DASA meetings were not offered

47. Interviews with prosecutors across all four offices demonstrated a clear understanding of the purpose and value of DASA meetings. Those with experience of conducting such meetings recognised their benefits. As with EVE calls, the low rate of DASA meetings does not appear to reflect a lack of commitment by individual prosecutors but rather constraints on capacity. These pressures are likely to be exacerbated by reductions in local court resources arising from the COPFS 'national stabilisation' programme. This has moved prosecutors and other staff from summary work to deal with solemn cases as a result of the Covid timebars coming to an end.

48. As noted previously, the Glasgow model does not adequately reflect the additional demands created by EVE. DASA meetings require significant preparation, time and sensitivity, particularly in cases involving prolonged domestic abuse. Our review of prosecutor court rotas in Glasgow indicated limited capacity to prepare for and conduct DASA meetings alongside other responsibilities. We understand that competing operational demands mean that such meetings are not routinely offered. Resource pressures across Local Court also affected the provision of DASA meetings in the other offices reviewed.

49. A further factor identified that prevented DASA meetings from being offered was the failure to allocate cases as Advance Notice or Advance Preparation trials. Practices varied between offices on this process, as did the time available for advance trial preparation, if any was given. In many instances, the process relied on prosecutors identifying DASA cases and alerting a legal manager following a not guilty plea. We identified cases where this did not occur, and others where cases were either not allocated or were allocated too close to trial to allow a meeting to be arranged. Unless these issues, which we previously highlighted,[19] are addressed, the DASA meeting process is unlikely to succeed.

50. Our consideration of court rotas across the four case review offices revealed a clearer emphasis on protected preparation time for CMHs in Dundee than in other offices. It is at this stage that DASA cases are identified for allocation. There was also a marked difference in Dundee with 'trial preparation' being an assigned rota duty – the level of protected time for prosecutors to prepare for trials in Dundee by comparison to other offices assessed was stark, as was the consequential increased level of standard of service.

[19] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' page 47, Recommendation 5.

VIA letters



51. Currently, one of the main ways in which COPFS provides basic information to domestic abuse victims about their case is by letter. The VIA Modernisation Programme (VMP)[20] reviewed all VIA letter templates used by VIA officers to communicate with victims, witnesses and bereaved relatives at various stages of a case. This review was completed in July 2024.

52. The review was informed by contributions from VIA staff, COPFS personnel, third sector organisations, and a Victim Support Scotland reference group of victims, witnesses and bereaved relatives with lived experience. The Scottish Government's People at Heart style guide also informed the language and format of the letters.

53. The refinement of the letter templates remains an ongoing process. Further feedback from VIA staff and third sector organisations resulted in additional amendments being

[20] The VMP has now been paused as part of the refocusing of projects under COPFS 'Designed for Success' programme.

made to the templates in November 2025. We understand that further amendments were to be issued in October 2026.

54. Training and information on the revised letter templates were made available to VIA staff. This included a live webinar outlining the changes to the templates, which was recorded and made available for staff who were unable to attend to view at their convenience. Updates and briefings on the changes were also published on the COPFS intranet. Some of the VIA officers we interviewed had attended the training, while others were unaware that it had been available.

55. When the new letter templates were introduced in 2024, COPFS advised staff that they were:
    - Clearly designed and worded
    - Trauma-informed
    - Comprehensive

56. The aims of the project, the review methodology, and the collaborative work undertaken by COPFS and external organisations to improve communications with victims, witnesses and bereaved relatives are commendable.

57. We note that the revised letter templates are more personal and supportive in tone than the versions we examined in 2024. They provide victims with more information about court processes and outcomes and adopt a more trauma-informed approach. One example of this is the inclusion of a buffer page warning recipients that "the letter contains information about a criminal case which some people may find triggering".

58. The intention behind the revised templates is clear. VIA staff select the appropriate template for the relevant stage of the criminal case process and then choose from a range of pre-written paragraphs – essentially a ‘pick-and-mix’ approach to letter writing. Any sections that are not applicable can be removed, allowing staff to create a letter that ought to accurately reflect the progress of the case, explain the next stage of the process, and provide information on the support and services available to the victim.

59. Information such as the victim's name and address are automatically populated into the letter from the COPFS case management system. There is some information that VIA officers are required to enter manually, such as details of the date of the next court hearing, charges and any special bail conditions.

60. The intended outcome is a letter that is tailored to the specific circumstances of the victim's case which contains all required information in a nationally consistent format. However, our examination of VIA correspondence during the case review found that, in the vast majority of cases, this outcome had not been achieved. It is interesting to note that many of our findings mirrored those of our counterpart in England and Wales.[21]

61. In many cases, the letters issued to domestic abuse victims could only be described as ‘Frankenstein’ in style – a patchwork of mismatched paragraphs pieced together. The letters were often incoherent, included template headings that were irrelevant to the circumstances of the case or other errors. As a result, the correspondence was frequently confusing, nonsensical and inaccurate. In many instances, it fell well below the professional standard that victims are entitled to expect.

[21] 'Quality of Victim Communication and Liaison scheme letters' HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, 9 July 2026.

Template errors

62. We found that VIA staff often selected the wrong letter template for the relevant stage in the case. These templates have been specifically drafted to contain the information that a victim should receive after a particular calling of the case and are clearly identified by title on the case management system.

63. We could not fully understand why the wrong templates were selected by VIA officers. We could only conclude that this may have been due to a lack of understanding of the criminal court system, carelessness, or a preference for a particular letter style. In one office we noted that one experienced VIA officer often selected a case management style letter in place of an initial letter (letter to be sent to the victim after the first appearance in court by an accused).

64. Using the wrong template letter and/or poor tailoring resulted in:
    - important information being omitted
    - the same information repeated to victims
    - incorrect hearing types being referenced
    - irrelevant information being included
    - contradictory information
    - the victim becoming confused
    - victims being wrongly advised that they should have received a witness citation

    This is contrary to trauma-informed principles.

Case study

VIA repeatedly used the wrong letter template when writing to a victim. In one letter the victim was told that a trial had been adjourned when no trial had taken place and, in another letter in the same case, the victim was advised that she need not attend the next calling of the case when it was in fact a trial.

Poor tailoring and inaccuracies

65. During the inspection, VIA staff interviewed expressed mixed views about the revised letter templates. Some considered them a significant improvement – more intuitive and easier to complete. The reduction in the number of templates was also welcomed by most interviewees. Others felt that the templates contained too much information for victims to properly absorb. Some VIA officers were concerned that the length and complexity of the templates increased both the time required to prepare letters and the risk of errors. The style template letters are substantial documents; the template for the initial letter is currently 18 pages of standard paragraphs and sections to be edited by VIA officers. Despite these concerns, the overwhelming majority of VIA staff interviewed reported that they were confident in producing letters using the revised templates.

66. COPFS seeks to reduce the risk of errors in drafted letters by including the following instruction in bold within each template:

> "Keep relevant headings (those not underlined) and delete all headings and paragraphs that are not required. Information should not be duplicated, please proofread before sending."

Despite this guidance, our case review identified numerous examples where these instructions had not been followed and too many examples of letters that had not been edited with sufficient care or attention. This not only rendered the letters inaccurate but, in some cases, made them difficult or impossible for victims to

understand. VIA officers must be prepared to spend the time revising and refining the correspondence accordingly.

67. Further evidence of a lack of proofreading was heard during staff interviews, with one VIA officer stating that they simply did not have sufficient time to proofread the correspondence they prepared. In some cases, lack of care in preparing letters causes risk to the victim:

> **Case study**
>
> A victim was informed in a VIA letter that the accused had been remanded in custody when the accused had been granted bail and remained at liberty. This incorrect information was included in the letter despite the corresponding entry on the VIA minute sheet for the court hearing clearly stating, "bail continued".

68. VIA staff are required to provide victims with information about future court dates. While our case review identified a small number of factual inaccuracies on dates, we found that, overall, letters generally contained the correct dates for upcoming court hearings.

69. We also observed examples of good practice during our case review. Some VIA officers tailored their letters carefully to the circumstances of the victim and the case. In particular, the use of bold text to draw attention to key information was an effective means of improving the correspondence.

70. We found that in some cases, the same initial letter template was used throughout the lifetime of a case to provide updates, resulting in victims repeatedly receiving the same introductory information. In addition, victims were often sent the same two-page section explaining how to obtain a translated version of the letter, regardless of whether they had received this information previously. Not only does this highlight that COPFS is not tailoring their correspondence to individual victims as intended but it risks frustration and confusion for those who must repeatedly read, often lengthy, information which they have already received.

71. These issues with overuse of initial letters and poor tailoring were highlighted in feedback provided to COPFS by a victim, who commented:

> “I have now received 3 letters from you, so the first 5 paras are unnecessary as are the 2 pages of other languages”

72. While it is important that victims receive all relevant information and support options, this has resulted in letters that are often excessively long. We found that key information a victim would be most interested in, such as the outcome of a court hearing or a significant case update, was frequently buried several pages into the correspondence. As a result, key messages were not immediately accessible, and victims were required to search through lengthy sections of text to locate them. This concern was also reflected in feedback provided by a victim to COPFS, who commented**:** “The case update info should be on page 1”.

What causes difficulties with template letters for VIA staff

73. One clear contributing factor is the general lack of effective quality assurance within VIA of the letters drafted. There should also be regular quality assurance by managers to ensure that appropriate standards are being maintained and to identify any training or performance issues within teams. During our interviews, we heard of positive practice in one office, where a manager undertakes periodic dip-sampling of correspondence produced by staff.

74. A downside of this ‘pick-and-mix’ approach to letter writing is that it removes the need for the drafter to think critically about the content of the letter. The process becomes robotic, diminishing the drafter's role in considering whether a particular paragraph is appropriate to the circumstances of an individual case or in tailoring the letter to meet the victim's specific needs and circumstances.

75. From some of the letters we examined during our case review, it is possible that certain errors arose because not all VIA officers had a full understanding of the criminal justice process. This lack of knowledge can result in paragraphs being combined in ways that are procedurally inaccurate, illogical, or potentially misleading.

76. As we identified in our 2024 report,[22] the absence of any clear governance structure for VIA within COPFS has resulted in inconsistencies in practice, together with a lack of national monitoring and oversight of the service provided by VIA. The impact of this can be seen in the quality of letters which are being issued to victims. Our recommendation remains relevant and outstanding.

77. A further factor contributing to issues with correspondence is insufficient staffing levels within VIA and the resulting backlog of work. During interviews, VIA staff consistently reported backlogs and delays in communicating court outcomes to victims. The pressure to reduce outstanding work and issue letters to victims as quickly as possible may increase the risk of errors, carelessness and lack of attention to detail in this important correspondence.

Raising expectation and false promises

78. COPFS has stated that it will make trauma-informed practice a core expectation.[23] There is now a legislative requirement to embed trauma-informed practice across the criminal justice system.[24] As previously mentioned, a key principle of trauma-informed practice is the development and maintenance of trust. It is therefore important that organisations and their staff do what they say they will and deliver on commitments made to victims.

79. At the time of our review, the standard initial letter sent by COPFS to victims in many cases advised that the case had been continued to a CMH and that VIA would contact the victim thereafter to provide an update on the outcome. However, too often we found that this commitment was not fulfilled, with no such update being provided.

80. Similarly, one of VIA's key roles is to keep victims informed of significant developments in a case, including the outcome of a trial and any sentence imposed. As discussed below, we found that these updates were too often not provided. In some cases, victims were never informed of either the final outcome of the case or the sentence imposed. Of the 60 cases reviewed, 39 required victims to be informed of the final sentencing decision. This occurred in only 22 cases.

81. While there is a commendable ambition that VIA should communicate in a tailored way that meets victims’ wishes or needs this is simply not happening. Initial letters to victims invite them to contact COPFS to let it know if they want to be updated after every hearing or to explain how they would prefer to be contacted, but our review showed very few victims do this. Worryingly we also found clear evidence that when victims in summary cases did provide their communication preferences, they were often ignored. Standardised letters were issued despite requests for email

[22] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' paragraph 424 and Recommendation 20.
[23] COPFS Business Plan 2026-27
[24] Victims, Witnesses, and Justice Reform (Scotland) Act 2025.

correspondence, and victims who had specifically requested updates after all court hearings frequently did not receive these.

82. For victims of domestic abuse, many of whom will already have experienced significant trauma, such unmet commitments can be re-traumatising and are likely to undermine their confidence in both COPFS and the wider criminal justice system.

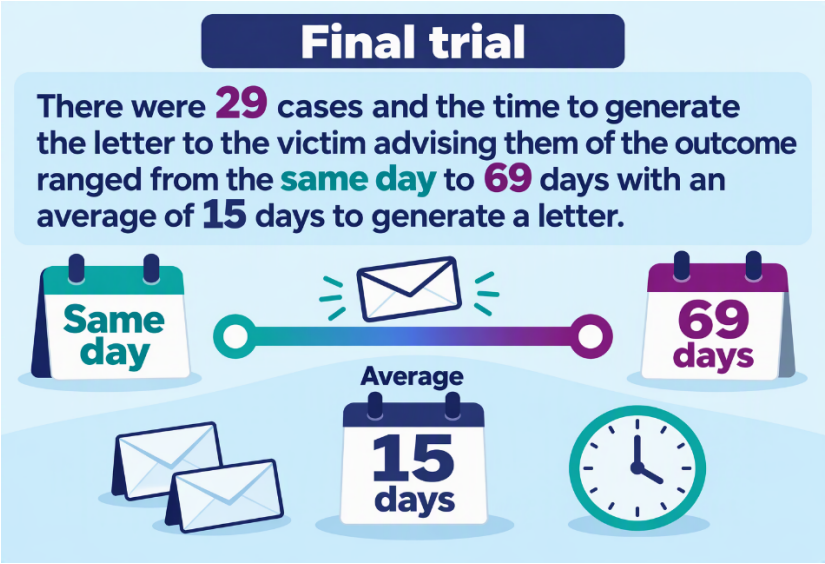
Delay in letters being sent

83. At the time of our inspection, VIA staff generally operated a hybrid working pattern, spending part of the week in the office and part working from home. Most offices used a rota system to ensure that members of the VIA team were present in the office each day. As VIA officers frequently prepare correspondence while working from home, they are often unable to print and post letters directly to victims.

84. We found that a variety of processes were being used across VIA offices to manage correspondence, with limited consistency or formal oversight. In most cases, VIA staff working from home emailed the letters they had prepared to colleagues who were working in the office. These letters were then printed and posted either on the same day or the following day. In some offices, letters were sent directly to a colleague's email account, while in others they were saved to a shared folder for printing. This approach can result in staff working in the office spending a significant proportion of their time printing letters and preparing them for posting. We also found that some VIA officers adopted a different approach, retaining letters they had prepared while working from home and printing and posting them only when they next attended the office.

85. In some offices, we found home working contributed to delays in correspondence being issued to victims. When combined with the practice of sending all letters by second-class post and the limited service by Royal Mail,[25] victims may not receive correspondence until up to a week after it has been prepared. These delays, combined with backlogs, often result in victims receiving important information about their case some significant time after the relevant court hearing or the victim telephoning COPFS to find out the information themselves.

86. Another aspect of the delay in victims receiving letters was captured in our case review. The number of days from the case calling in court taken until a VIA officer generated these letters is shown below:



[25] 'Royal Mail given go-ahead to scrap second-class post on Saturdays' BBC News, 10 July 2025.

87. The limitations of COPFS case management systems, combined with the current processes adopted for printing correspondence, means there is no reliable audit trail to provide COPFS with assurance that a letter has actually been printed and posted to a victim. During our case review, we were able to verify that letters had been generated on the case management system; however, there was no visible record within the system, nor any user-generated note, confirming that the letter generated had subsequently been printed or posted.

Contact information

88. We noted that many letters sent to victims were either unsigned or only partially signed by the author. Practices varied between offices and among VIA officers within the same team. Some VIA officers included only their first name, others used their initials and surname, while some did not include any name at all. On occasion an illegible jpeg image of a signature was added.

89. We were told that some VIA officers do not put their names on letters because of safety concerns and the risk of being identified on social media. Others were concerned that including their name might give victims the impression that they have a designated officer whom they can contact directly to discuss their case.

90. As an organisation committed to improving communication with victims and witnesses, VIA correspondence should be appropriately signed, with at least an initial and surname. Alternatively, there should be a clear and consistent policy on the use of names in correspondence that all staff are required to follow. Considerable time has been invested in ensuring that the new letter templates are trauma-informed and personable. The letters are written in the first person and contain phrases such as, "Please let me know," "I am here to support you," and "You can also contact me for help". This style of communication is inconsistent with an unsigned, anonymous, and generic sign-off such as "Victim Information and Advice" which is unlikely to foster trust or encourage victims to contact COPFS.

91. We also noted a lack of consistency in the contact information provided to victims in VIA letters. Corporate guidance instructs staff that, while the letter templates contain the National Enquiry Point (Enquiry Point) telephone number as standard, VIA officers should also add their local team hunt group number. This enables service users, particularly victims, to contact the local team directly. However, we found that some officers and offices included only the Enquiry Point number in their letters. We were unable to establish whether this was a deliberate decision or the result of a lack of awareness of the corporate guidance. One VIA officer told us that they routinely add the VIA hunt group telephone number to letters and believed that, where staff include only the Enquiry Point number, this may be an attempt to reduce the number of telephone calls received by VIA teams. One office also appeared not to have a hunt group facility.

Bail

92. When an accused is granted bail by the court, VIA should advise the victim of the bail conditions in the initial letter issued following the accused's first appearance. In subsequent correspondence after further court hearings, VIA should inform the victim whether those bail conditions remain in place or have been amended by the court.

93. We found that VIA officers always included this information in their initial correspondence. Standard bail conditions are prescribed by legislation,[26] and the

[26] Section 24(4)(a) and 24(5) of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.

court may also impose further conditions[27] tailored to the circumstances of a particular case. These are commonly referred to as 'special conditions' of bail.

94. Overall, information relating to special conditions of bail was accurate in the letters reviewed. However, we identified occasional instances where a condition had been omitted or inadequately described.

Charges

95. VIA officers are required to advise victims of the charges faced by the accused and of any charges to which the accused has pled guilty or been found guilty. In our 2024 report, we recommended[28] that COPFS develop guidance for staff to ensure a consistent approach to the information provided to victims regarding charges and accepted pleas. We understand that this guidance remains under development.

96. Our case review found that the issues identified in 2024 persist. Practices vary both between offices and among individual VIA officers. In one office, interviews confirmed what we observed during the case review: victims were often not advised of the specific charge or plea outcome and were instead told only that the accused had been "charged with an offence" or had "pled guilty to an offence". In other offices, victims were provided with at least the name of the charge, for example threatening or abusive behaviour.

97. There was also considerable variation in how victims were informed about amended pleas accepted by prosecutors. Practice ranged from providing a full explanation of amendments to giving no information beyond stating that the accused had pled guilty. In some offices, victims were told the charge to which the accused had pled guilty but were not advised of any charges in respect of which a not guilty plea had been accepted. As we saw in our case review, this created a risk that victims would believe the accused had been convicted of more offences than was actually the case.

98. Concerningly, we were told that some officers would provide additional details about a plea if a victim telephoned the office to enquire but were reluctant to include the same information in written correspondence. We found no clear rationale for this distinction.

99. The absence of national guidance, clear instructions, and effective quality assurance has resulted in geographical inequality for victims in obtaining full and accurate information on charges, pleas and amended pleas. COPFS should ensure that any guidance developed to address our 2024 recommendation fully covers these issues.

Translation

100. Police officers should identify within the Standard Prosecution Report (SPR) any victim or witness for whom English is not their first language. COPFS has put in place a number of tools and services to assist staff in communicating effectively with these victims. These include:
    - an initial letter containing two pages of instructions in a range of languages, advising victims what action to take if they require the letter to be translated. This acts as a safeguard in cases where the police have not communicated the victim's language needs within the SPR
    - access to a telephone interpreting service that enables a professional interpreter to facilitate real-time communication between a COPFS staff member and a victim or witness
    - a facility to have correspondence translated into the required language before it is issued to a victim through a contracted translation service provider

[27] Section 24(4)(b) of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.
[28] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' Recommendation 19(c).

- the ability to arrange interpreters for victims and witnesses attending court hearings

101. During our case review, we observed that VIA officers were not always making effective use of these tools when communicating with victims whose first language is not English. This created a risk that important information was not being communicated in a manner the victim could understand. Two examples are set out below:

Case study

The SPR recorded that the victim required a Romanian interpreter. However, the VIA officer contacted the witness without arranging an interpreter and was surprised when the victim indicated that they could not understand the conversation. Rather than using the telephone interpreter service to facilitate communication, the VIA officer sent the witness a text message in English and did not update the VIA minute sheet to record the language barrier or the action taken. No initial letter was subsequently issued in any language. Throughout the case, VIA did not arrange for correspondence to be translated or use the telephone interpreter services. Communication continued on the assumption that the witness was able to understand English.

Case study

The SPR recorded that the victim did not speak English and required the assistance of an Arabic interpreter. This information was noted on the VIA minute sheet and highlighted for attention. Despite this, there was no evidence that VIA officers took any steps to have correspondence translated or to communicate with the victim through the telephone interpreter services. There was an avoidance of telephone contact with the victim throughout the case. The only translated correspondence identified was issued following a prosecutor's instruction to seek the victim's views regarding a non-harassment order. This was noted on the VIA minute sheet but there is no copy of the letter on the case management system. No other translated letters were sent, and interpreter services were not used. No correspondence was issued to inform the victim of the sentencing outcome.

102. In both cases we were unable to determine from the case records whether these failures resulted from conscious decision-making, a lack of training or awareness, workload pressures, or a combination of these factors. However, the victims' identified language needs were not met in either case.

103. In accordance with section 2 of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 (the 2014 Act), Standards of Service for Victims and Witnesses (the standards) have been published by COPFS in partnership with other justice agencies.[29] The standards state not only that a victim or witness should be able to obtain information in relation to their case but should also:

> "be able to understand the information you get – so the language should be easy to understand, and the information should be available in alternative languages or formats if you need them."

[29] Standards of service for victims and witnesses 2025-26

This reflects a fundamental principle of the 2014 Act: the victims' right to understand and be understood.[30]

104. From the evidence in our case review, victims' identified language needs are not being appropriately addressed. COPFS should consider this issue as a matter of urgency.

Feedback

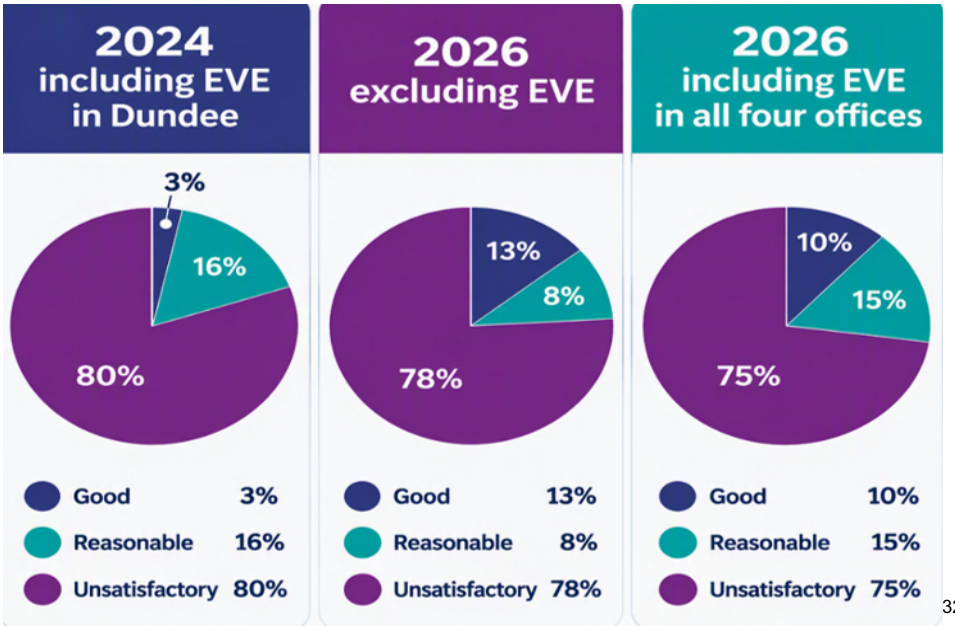
105. We were pleased to note that COPFS now seeks feedback from victims about the letters they receive. Feedback can be provided either by completing a form on the COPFS website or by scanning a QR code included in the correspondence. However, we found that scanning the QR code does not take users directly to the feedback form; instead, it directs them to the COPFS homepage. From there, the feedback form is difficult to locate. We were unable to understand why the QR code does not provide a direct link to the relevant form, as is common practice in many other organisations. Victims who are willing to provide feedback may become discouraged by the challenging steps required and may ultimately abandon the process.

106. Since the introduction of the feedback process, COPFS has received four responses, although two of these were submitted by the same victim. The low level of engagement may, in part, be attributable to the difficulties users encounter when attempting to locate the feedback form. The feedback received indicated victims value the information provided and found the tone of the communication from COPFS appropriate. A recurring theme was that the letters are overly long, repetitive and do not sufficiently prioritise key case updates. This reflects many of our own findings during our inspection.

107. A further source of feedback for an organisation is from complaints received from service users. Between 1 January 2025 and 14 October 2026, COPFS received 31 complaints regarding lack of communication in VIA summary cases and 11 of these related to domestic abuse cases.[31] The most common themes identified from these complaints reflected what we found in our own review, namely failure to provide court updates, delays or failures in responding to victim enquiries, and failures to keep victims informed about important developments in their cases.

[30] Section 3E of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014. In particular section 3E(4)(b) "take into account any personal characteristics of the person which may affect the person's ability to understand the communication and be understood in responding to the communication".
[31] 10 of these complaints were upheld.

Overall communication between COPFS and victims of domestic abuse



[32]

108. In 2024 we recommended that in relation to communicating with victims in summary domestic abuse cases, COPFS should take immediate steps to ensure that victims are receiving basic information about their case, including its outcome, timeously.[33]

109. While there has been some small improvement in communication since our last report, it remains the case that most victims of domestic abuse are not receiving an acceptable standard of service from COPFS and, in particular VIA.

110. In 2026, EVE also contributed to communication with victims. When EVE communication from our case review is taken into account, the overall communication assessments are:
    - Good: 10%
    - Reasonable: 15%
    - Unsatisfactory**:** 75%

111. EVE improved the overall standard of communication in some cases, raising it from an unsatisfactory to a reasonable assessment. However, in other cases, the absence of EVE communication reduced the overall assessment from good to reasonable. A key issue was that VIA communication was, in many cases, so poor that it could not be remedied by an attempted or completed EVE call by a prosecutor, nor by the small number of cases in which a DASA meeting was offered or conducted.

112. In the small number of cases assessed as demonstrating good communication, there was still evidence of some shortcomings, particularly in the quality of VIA letters, as discussed above. However, we also found examples of VIA officers taking account of victims' needs and engaging directly with them.

[32] Figures do not always add up to 100% due to rounding.
[33] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' Recommendation 19(a).

Case study

In one DASA case, VIA sought clarification from prosecutors after requesting Police Scotland update the victim on the initial outcome, as no instruction had been provided by the prosecutor on whether the victim should be cited. Once clarification was received, an initial letter was issued. The victim was subsequently updated by telephone following the CMH, with a voicemail left requesting a return call. A further letter was sent after the continued CMH advising of the trial. These were clear and appropriate template letters. Thereafter, VIA promptly issued letters following the acceptance of a plea at trial and again after sentence was deferred and a non-harassment order imposed.

113. We found a clear link between the number of court hearings and our communication assessments. Cases with fewer court callings were more likely to demonstrate positive communication, as there were fewer opportunities for backlogs to develop, updates to be missed, or poor-quality letters to be issued. However, we still found examples of inadequate service in some cases with only a small number of hearings.

Case study

The accused appeared from custody and was remanded pending trial. There was no evidence that VIA attempted to telephone the victim after the accused's first court appearance; instead, Police Scotland was asked to provide an update. An initial letter was issued the day after the custody appearance. No EVE call was attempted. Due to COPFS policy, VIA was not required to update the victim following the intermediate diet. The accused pled guilty at trial, resulting in only three court hearings. VIA issued a letter three days after the trial advising the victim of the non-harassment order. However, the letter did not mention the custodial sentence that had also been imposed, and the explanation of the non-harassment order was unclear. The victim later contacted COPFS to seek clarification regarding the sentence. The final letter also referred to the victim by the wrong name.

114. We also found that victims who proactively contacted COPFS often received a poor standard of service. Responses were frequently delayed or absent, and information provided by victims was not always taken into account as cases progressed. Several such cases were assessed as unsatisfactory, relevant case studies are provided below.

115. A recurring theme in 2024 was lengthy backlogs in VIA work.[34] Such backlogs remained prevalent in our current inspection.

116. Staff in three of the four offices reported significant backlogs, which some described as "overwhelming" and "demoralising". We heard that some VIA officers relied on letters rather than telephone calls because they could process more cases in less time. Our case review identified updates issued weeks or months after hearings, and in some cases no updates at all. Staff told us that delays had become so significant that some VIA officers chose not to issue updates they considered no longer relevant. As a result, victims were not always receiving the timely updates to which they were entitled. There has been little change since 2024.[35]

[34] For similar reporting see our 2024 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' report at paragraph 403 et seq.
[35] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' paragraph 407.

117. As part of the VMP, COPFS introduced the VIA Workload App (the App) to bring VIA work into a single system, support workload management and provide management information on caseloads. The App was piloted in February 2025 and has since been rolled out nationally.

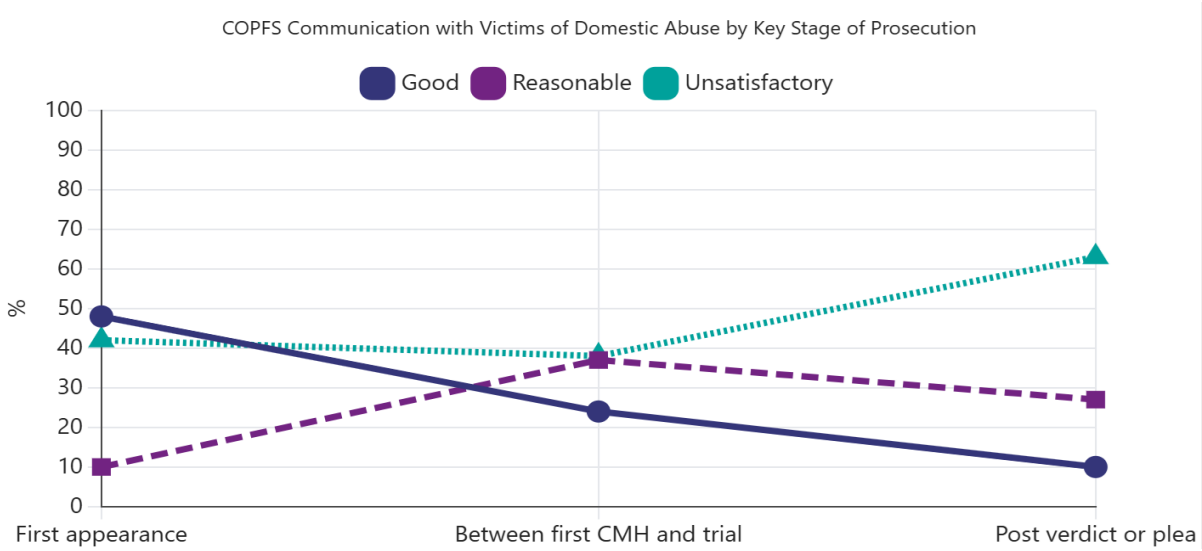
118. At the time of our inspection, use of the App was inconsistent across offices. Although intended to replace local diary systems and provide a single platform for managing VIA work, some offices continued to rely on local methods.

119. In one office, overtime had been used to eliminate backlogs before the App was introduced. This included overtime for legal staff to carry out VIA work. Early in our inspection period this office reported that backlogs had been eliminated as a result. We learned that four weeks later a backlog of a week had grown due to staff absence.

120. VIA staff consistently reported that current resourcing levels and the prioritisation of first appearance updates made backlogs inevitable. Annual leave and staff absences were said to exacerbate delays and make recovery difficult. We heard of a recurring pattern of using overtime to reduce backlogs at the end of the financial year. Reliance on overtime risks masking underlying resourcing issues and can mean victims receive updates only when additional resource becomes available.

121. While the App is a positive development, its benefits will only be realised if it is used consistently across all offices and the information it generates is actively monitored and acted upon. We were advised that senior managers are not using the management information available from the App. This lack of oversight places additional pressure on VIA staff and, more importantly, risks failing victims of domestic abuse.

122. We found there to be a significant deterioration in the standard of communication as cases progressed with clear evidence that VIA is prioritising communication following first appearance to the detriment of subsequent updates.



123. To inform our overall assessment of communication we assessed the standard of communication between COPFS and victims of domestic abuse at three key stages in the life of each case:
    - After first appearance at court by the accused

- Between the CMH[36] and the trial
- Post verdict or plea

Communication After First Appearance

124. Following the accused's first appearance in court, VIA should advise victims of the outcome of the hearing including whether the accused was granted bail, and the nature of any bail conditions imposed on the same day. In our 2024 report,[37] we made a recommendation that COPFS should work with justice partners to ensure this happens. Implementation of this recommendation is one of the key considerations of this focused follow-up inspection.

Did VIA telephone victims on the same day as the accused's first court appearance?



125. COPFS has committed to VIA telephoning domestic abuse victims to provide this information. In 2024, if VIA was unable to contact a victim, Police Scotland was asked to make contact instead. In order for Police Scotland to carry out welfare checks as part of their support to victims this referral from COPFS to the police now happens in every domestic abuse case. From a victim safety perspective, it is vital that victims are informed promptly following the accused's first appearance in court so that they know whether the accused has been remanded in custody or is at liberty and what bail conditions have been imposed for their protection. Given the potential risk to victims, and the likelihood that many will be anxiously awaiting this information, we wanted to know whether there had been any improvement since our 2024 inspection.

[36] Or other diet at which the trial was assigned if not a CMH.
[37] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' paragraphs 276-290 and Recommendation 12(b).

126. Overall, we found an improvement in communication following first appearance. During interviews, we were reassured that VIA teams place a strong emphasis on making these calls following the accused's first court appearance. This work was prioritised daily. Unlike some other aspects of victim communication, it was not significantly affected by backlogs. We also gained a clear sense that VIA officers recognised the importance of ensuring victims receive this information. Since our 2024 report there has been a move towards VIA making this contact on the same day as the court hearing as we recommended.[38]

127. However, an issue identified in our 2024 report remains unresolved. COPFS guidance and public-facing protocols remain inconsistent as to whether VIA officers should contact victims on the same day as the first appearance or within 24 hours of the accused appearing in court. COPFS must provide greater clarity about what is expected and ensure that practice is aligned with victim safety considerations.

128. As in 2024, we encountered different understandings by VIA officers regarding whether they should wait until court results have been "validated" on the SCTS Criminal Online Portal before advising victims, or whether they may rely on information contained in the prosecutor's court minutes, either alone or together with corresponding unvalidated information from the portal.

129. It is disappointing that this fundamental lack of consistency has not yet been addressed by COPFS since our 2024 inspection. The reality of this lack of clarity means geographical inequality for domestic victims across Scotland.

Police contact

130. At the request of Police Scotland, VIA now provide details of all summary domestic abuse cases calling in court on a particular day, regardless of whether contact has been made with the victim by COPFS. This information is provided to Police Scotland using an AD75 form.

131. The AD75 forms are sent each day to Police Scotland. Local policing resources are then tasked to attend the victim's address. In addition to updating the victim on the court outcome, officers will check whether the accused has returned to the property where bail conditions prohibit this and will assess whether the victim is safe. These checks should be carried out within 24 hours. If they remain outstanding, they are passed onto the next police shift until completed.

132. We examined cases to determine whether this information had been passed to the police and whether there was an effective COPFS audit trail. In 36 of 60 cases (60%), the VIA minute sheet recorded that this action had been taken and there was a supporting audit trail.

133. Of the 24 cases where there was no record on the VIA minute sheet that the case had been referred to the police, we found a corresponding entry on the AD75 form in nine cases. In 11 cases the AD75 records were insufficient to allow us to determine whether the information had been passed to the police. In four cases, there was neither an AD75 entry nor an entry on the VIA minute sheet recording an attempted call to the victim. Our inspection was hindered by inconsistent naming conventions used by VIA officers both in and across offices.

134. Another example of inconsistent approach was that the Glasgow office operated a different process by using a separate "contact sheet" for recording telephone contact with victims following first appearance. These records are completed instead of

[38] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' paragraphs 276-290 and Recommendation 12(b).

updating the VIA minute sheet. The contact sheets are not uploaded to the case management system. Unfortunately, it was often unclear from these records whether a VIA officer had successfully spoken to the victim.

135. We also identified significant variation in the completion of AD75 forms, both between offices and between individual VIA officers within offices. The form requires completion of key information which was not always achieved. It was also uncommon to see important information recorded in the notes section, including whether VIA had successfully informed the victim of the bail conditions. This information would be of benefit to Police Scotland.

136. There should be further discussion between COPFS and Police Scotland about the information VIA should record on AD75 forms to ensure that officers carrying out victim welfare checks are fully informed. COPFS should standardise completion of the form by VIA officers nationally. From a risk management perspective, COPFS should also recognise and address that there is currently no audit trail confirming whether Police Scotland has successfully informed the victim.

Initial communication – letters

137. In our case review, VIA created an initial letter to the victim in 53 of the 60 cases examined (88%), a slight increase from the 84% recorded in our 2024 report. The initial letter is VIA's first written communication with the victim and contains important information, including an explanation of VIA's role, the victim's right to choose whether to receive further contact, their preferred method of communication, and details of available support services. Where relevant, the letter also explains any bail conditions imposed on the accused at their first court appearance. As the letter provides victims with a written record of measures put in place for their protection, it is important that it is issued promptly. In the remaining seven cases (12%), no initial letter was generated.

138. During our case review we noted initial letters for victims following the first appearance by the accused, are being created promptly by VIA officers. 91% of these letters to victims were created on the same day or the day after the first appearance. There is a risk that this prompt work could be undone by delays in posting letters as previously described.

Overall assessment of initial communication



139. Where we assessed communication as "good", this reflected cases in which VIA achieved, or came close to achieving, the expected standard of service. This included when VIA made successful contact or attempted a telephone call following first appearance, referred the case to Police Scotland on the same day, and issued an accurate, or substantially accurate, initial letter to the victim. This is the minimum standard.

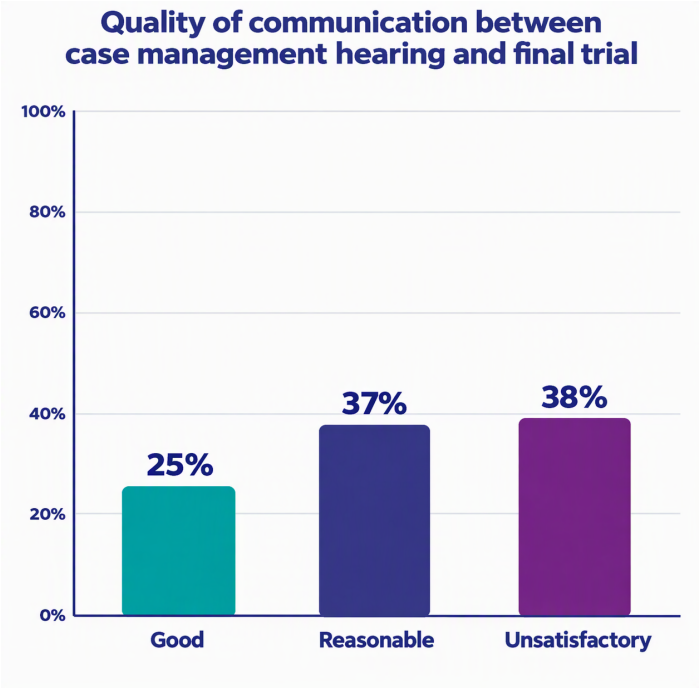
140. We concluded that 42% of victims received an unsatisfactory standard of communication following first appearance. An example of this is:

Case study

The first calling date of an undertaking case was changed several times. The victim repeatedly contacted COPFS by email to express their views about the prosecution, prior to a prosecutorial marking decision being made. The case was overlooked entirely by VIA until it had called in court on four occasions. The victim received no communication following first appearance and the police were not informed to make contact. The victim was not advised of the bail conditions imposed in the case, nor informed that these special conditions had later been removed following a bail hearing. VIA first contacted the victim only after a trial diet had been fixed. No apology was made for the previous lack of communication. Two separate letters were generated on the system by different VIA officers. One contained incorrect information advising that the victim should not attend the trial diet. It is unclear which letter, or if both, were sent to the victim.

141. The initial communication required following first appearance is not a complex process. It involves three key actions: contacting the victim by telephone, notifying Police Scotland and issuing an accurate initial letter. It is therefore disappointing that in 52%[39] of cases either this minimum standard was not achieved or there was insufficient evidence available to demonstrate that it had been achieved.

Communication between the first CMH and the trial



[39] 10% reasonable and 42% unsatisfactory.

142. A recurring issue that often resulted in an unsatisfactory assessment was the failure to update victims following CMHs.[40] We found numerous examples where victims had been told they would receive an update after a CMH but were not subsequently provided with any information.

143. Across the 60 cases reviewed,[41] there were 145 hearings between and including trial assignment and trial that were not final trial diets. Evidence that the outcome had been communicated to the victim was found in 84 instances (58%). In the remaining 61 hearings (42%), victims were not updated, either because of COPFS policy or because the required update was not provided. We were aware of the change in COPFS policy to communication after CMHs and did not negatively assess communications affected by that change.

144. Other recurring issues that contributed to negative assessments included victims repeatedly contacting Enquiry Point for information that should have been provided by VIA, and the use of poor-quality VIA letter templates, as discussed above.

145. The period between first appearance and trial is critical to maintaining victims' confidence in the prosecution process, particularly in domestic abuse cases where there is a recognised risk of victim disengagement. We observed an apparent correlation between poor communication and victims disengaging from the prosecution.

Case study

A victim contacted VIA after receiving an initial letter. They provided an email address and telephone number and asked to be updated after every court appearance. No update was provided after the first CMH. No EVE call was made by a prosecutor. The victim then called to seek an update, clearly seeking support. They called again on the day of the second CMH stating how much of an impact the prosecution was having and expressing a lack of confidence in the system. The victim received a standard VIA letter advising that a trial had been fixed. The victim did not attend the trial and there was no further communication from COPFS. They also failed to attend a second trial. A plea was accepted to charges other than the domestic abuse reported. A VIA letter was issued two weeks after the second trial which did not inform the victim that a not guilty plea was accepted to the domestic abuse charges. This final letter was poorly drafted with incorrect headings throughout and was unsigned.

146. While COPFS is committed to informing victims following an accused's first appearance in court whether the accused is at liberty and of any bail conditions imposed, the same priority is not given to subsequent changes in bail conditions or to the release of an accused from custody as a case progresses. During our case review, we found examples where special bail conditions had been removed, meaning there was no longer a condition preventing the accused from entering the victim's property or contacting the victim. In some of these cases, the victim did not receive a telephone call or a letter within a reasonable timescale to advise them of the change. Given the backlogs in processing court outcomes, other than at first appearance, outlined above, there is a risk that victims may not be informed of such significant developments for several weeks, if at all.

147. This risk is heightened where an accused is held in custody and subsequently released during the course of proceedings. Current VIA processes do not provide a

[40] COPFS has now changed their policy on this.
[41] As at 22 May 2026.

mechanism to ensure that victims are informed of such a release on the day it occurs. We identified an example of this during our case review.

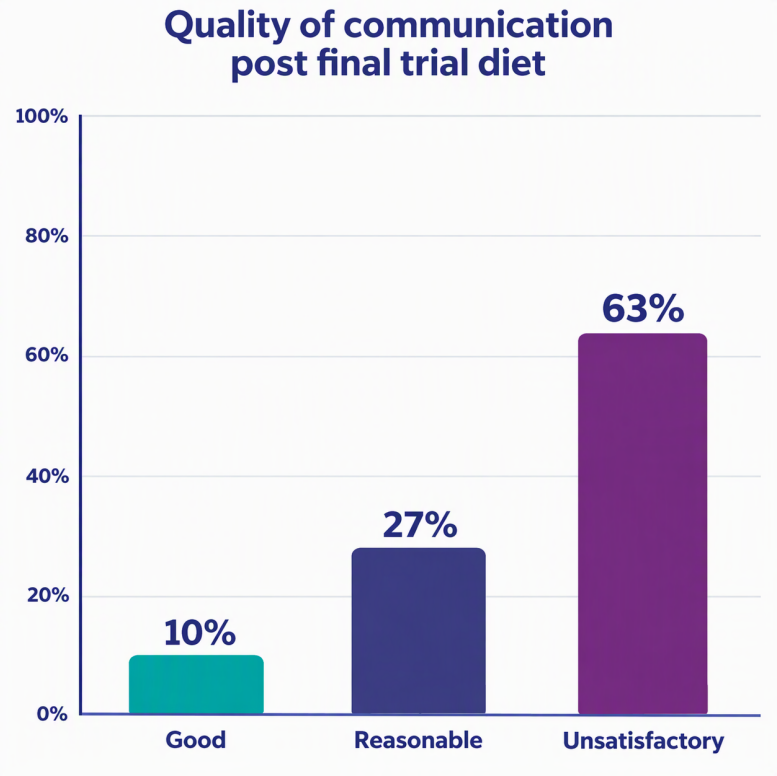
Case study

A trial took place on 24 September, following which the accused was released from custody. No attempt was made to inform the victim of the release at that time. The case was not reviewed by VIA until 2 December, when a letter was generated. As a result, there was no contact with the victim between the initial correspondence following the accused's first appearance and several months after the conclusion of the trial.

148. We heard of excellent practice by one VIA officer who routinely checks cases where an accused has been remanded in custody on the day of each court calling to ensure that the accused has not been released. COPFS should, as a minimum, require VIA staff to adopt this practice in order to reduce the risk to victims and ensure they are informed promptly of any change in the accused's custodial status.

Communication post-verdict, plea and sentencing

149. We assessed communication between COPFS and victims of domestic abuse after the final trial diet:



150. Communication with victims was weakest following a verdict, plea or sentencing. This appears to be linked to VIA case backlogs, which often worsened as cases progressed. We frequently found no VIA correspondence following trials or deferred sentences and, in some cases, it appeared that communication with the victim had ceased after they had been advised a trial was set.

151. Across the cases reviewed,[42] there were 87 hearings from the final trial onwards. We found evidence that victims had been notified of the outcome in 38 instances (44%). In the remaining 49 hearings (56%), victims were not updated, either because of COPFS policy[43] or a failure to communicate.

152. Although responsibility for notifying victims of the imposition of a non-harassment order rests with SCTS, we found that COPFS often took no steps to ensure this important information, which is critical to victims' ongoing safety, was communicated timeously.

153. While COPFS focus on communication following first appearance is both necessary and commendable, particularly when considered through a risk lens, inconsistent communication throughout the life of a case can pose significant risks. We found many examples where bail conditions were removed at trial[44] but this was not communicated promptly, or at all, by VIA. As a result, victims may mistakenly believe they remain protected by bail conditions and make decisions about their own safety planning that are based on a false premise.

Guidance

154. VIA staff reliance on local desk instructions on when and how victims of domestic abuse should be contacted remains unchanged since 2024.[45] We would have hoped that by now clear instruction to VIA officers on this most fundamental of processes had been issued. It is astonishing that there is no national document that sets out a standardised process for communication at each stage of a domestic abuse case. None of our interviewees could tell us of the existence of such guidance and explained that they tended to rely on local desk instructions. Almost all interviewees would welcome such guidance.

155. We found that the inconsistency of approach was not just between offices but between VIA officers within offices. One notable example was the contrast of the use of voicemail. In one office we noted VIA minute sheets repeatedly referring to ‘voicemails being left’ when a victim had not answered a call. At interview other VIA officers advised that they would never leave a voicemail due to security and welfare concerns. COPFS guidance to prosecutors on arranging EVE calls suggests voicemails should be left but case specific information should not be provided. It was also clear across our case review that some VIA officers were more prepared to try and provide an update by telephone than others.

156. The consequence of a lack of clear national guidance resulted in a level of service that was worse than a postcode lottery for victims of domestic abuse with VIA officers following their own policies on when a call should be made or letter sent and how the template should be amended. We noted with VIA that the only consistency was inconsistency. We found that this extended to all VIA communication with victims.

Reduction of the VIA workload

157. We noted various attempts by COPFS to mitigate the strain on VIA staff. Some of these were designed to free up time to deliver better communication; however, some have reduced the level of service to victims.

[42] As at 22 May 2026.
[43] We were aware of the policy on updating the victim after deferred sentencing and this was not interpreted negatively.
[44] As a result of a case not being called, discontinued or sentencing.
[45] 'The prosecution of domestic abuse cases at sheriff summary level' paragraph 53.

158. From 27 June 2025 legislation[46] allowed for a semi-automated process for the transmission of vulnerable witness notice applications to courts. The benefit for VIA staff is that in most cases they no longer require to manually produce a vulnerable witness notice and then have it signed by a prosecutor. We reported in 2024 that this was a significant source of backlogs. We heard a variety of views from VIA staff on the new procedure with most suggesting that it had freed up significant resources.

159. Prior to the rollout of SCM almost all cases had an intermediate diet assigned. One of the principles of SCM is that intermediate diets should only be assigned in bail cases where the presiding sheriff feels it necessary. Despite this, intermediate diets continue to be assigned, repeatedly in some cases. In our review of 60 cases there were 25 intermediate diets assigned in 18 cases. Intermediate diets must be assigned when the accused is remanded in custody. Of the 25 intermediate diets assigned 16 took place when the accused was not remanded in custody. The VIA communication model is designed around SCM and CMHs. COPFS needs to do more to ensure that EVE or basic communication does not fail when an intermediate diet is assigned.

160. We are aware of longstanding COPFS policies that:
    - if an intermediate diet is continued to another intermediate diet without a plea or change to the accused's bail conditions that VIA do not require to notify the victim about the continued calling of the case
    - victims are not contacted when a case is deferred further for sentencing if there is no substantive change e.g. further reports are required

161. A similar approach has now been adopted in CMHs. In our case review we assessed 12% of cases as falling under such COPFS policies of not requiring victims to be updated. This percentage is likely to increase substantially due to a further change in approach to CMHs.

162. This policy change on communication in some CMHs occurred during our case review period. COPFS amended its template letters, moving from a commitment to update victims after CMH to providing updates only where there had been a change in the accused's plea or another significant development, such as a change to bail conditions. This represents a significant reduction in communication with victims. This change is particularly important given the evidence that court churn, previously concentrated around intermediate diets and trials, has increasingly shifted to CMHs.[47] This is an issue COPFS may wish to explore further. For many victims, the result is longer periods with little or no information about their case, which is inconsistent with a trauma-informed approach.

163. We learned that the decision to reduce communication at the CMH stage was driven by the inability of summary VIA teams to keep pace with demand, resulting in the backlogs and communication failures discussed above. While intended to manage workload pressures, the change reduces the level of service provided to victims. We are unaware of any consultation with victims or third sector organisations on whether this approach meets the needs of domestic abuse victims. Third sector organisations acknowledge that victims would benefit from receiving updates during repeated court continuations rather than experiencing lengthy periods with no information.[48]

[46] Section 271AA of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995.
[47] 'Summary Case Management National Rollout Report: A Shared Vision Shaped Through Collaboration', SCTS May 2026, page 50, 'Workflow challenges'.
[48] 'Summary Case Management National Rollout Report: A Shared Vision Shaped Through Collaboration', SCTS May 2026, page 50, quote from Fiona McMullen, ASSIST.

164. During our inspection, we found that victims often experienced long periods with little or no communication from VIA or the wider COPFS throughout the lifecycle of a case, creating what could be described as "communication deserts". These gaps in communication were particularly evident during periods involving multiple continued CMHs or deferred sentencing hearings.

Case study

In one case, there were 11 court hearings over an 11-month period, including five trial diets. Despite the length of the case, the victim received updates from VIA on only three occasions. The first was the initial letter. There were two subsequent CMHs for which no updates were provided, despite the commitment to do this outlined in the initial letter. A letter was issued following the first trial diet, but it was sent three weeks late. Thereafter, the victim received no further communication from VIA for six months, until a letter was sent following a plea at a trial diet. This letter advised that sentencing had been deferred and that the victim would be informed of the final outcome. This did not occur.

165. As we have noted, by contrast, there was a strong focus on communication at the outset of a case, including contact from the police, a VIA telephone call following the first court appearance, an initial letter, contact from an advocacy or support service, and an EVE call from a prosecutor. While this level of engagement is commendable, it can result in victims receiving repeated information and may create expectations of ongoing contact that clearly VIA cannot sustain throughout the case journey. COPFS may wish to consider the victim's experience across the entirety of the case journey and identify opportunities to provide regular updates, either through VIA or by exploring automated means.

166. Given the ongoing failures to provide victims with timely communication and case updates, as highlighted throughout this report, COPFS should consider practical options to address these issues as a matter of urgency.

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ISBN: 978-1-0655692-0-6 (web only)

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Produced for HM Inspectorate of Prosecution in Scotland by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1805706 (11/26)