

# A Reforming Vision

Home Office Minister **Baroness Scotland** describes the Government's criminal justice reform programme.

**A**ll of us who work in the criminal justice system want our work to contribute to a fairer and more just society. We want to tackle the shocking levels of crime suffered by the poorest groups and communities and give law-abiding citizens the power to fight back.

The aim of the government's criminal justice reform programme is to help achieve this vision. From the creation of local criminal justice boards to the criminal case management programme, all have been designed to make the system work better.

The reforms will have affected everyone working in the CJS at some point. The dedication of so many people at the front line has meant that they have already made a real difference to the service which the CJS provides to the public. I am constantly struck by this when I am out on visits around the country.

However, the reforms themselves are only half the story. We also realise the pressing need to build the public confidence in the criminal justice system. Without this confidence, there is no power for the public to fight back.

All our communities must have confidence that the criminal justice system responds to their problems but also that justice is done in a fair and proportionate way.

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Victims of crime are members of these communities just like everyone else. Any injustices and trauma that they suffer reverberate in their wider community.

For too long, victims have felt let down by the system and this has eroded general public satisfaction with the CJS. Three-quarters of the public think the system respects the rights of the defendants. Yet only a third are confident it meets the needs of victims. This is why improving victim and witness care is a key part of the government's current agenda.

Central to this is the £36 million *No Witness, No Justice* project. For the first time, dedicated witness care units will offer personal support for victims and witnesses, including arranging transport and childcare, from the moment a suspect is charged through to sentencing.

We will also be ensuring there are separate waiting rooms and facilities for victims and witnesses in all crown and 90 per cent of magistrates' courts. Victims will feel that they are an integral part of the system, not simply another case-number to be dealt with.

The Government is also introducing systemic changes through our Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Bill which is currently before Parliament. Amongst other things, the legislation will make wider use of court compensation orders easier and place surcharges on fines and fixed penalty notices. The money will go to help victims. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority will also be able to recover money from offenders.

In the most severe cases where victims and witnesses face serious threats we will provide a greater level of protection, ensuring they can give evidence without endangering their life. In short, victims and witnesses can expect a better service from the justice system.

But we need to go further than this. If we are to restore lasting confidence in our communities then we must also reassure the public that offenders are dealt with appropriately.

This does not mean stripping away civil liberties, as many critics would have us believe. Nor does it mean letting offenders get away with it scot-free. Instead, it is about creating the right solution for the communities of which offenders are also a part.

Drugs are a good example. They not only harm individuals, but also the communities who suffer from

the crimes addicts commit. By tackling the addiction we will reduce crime. We have recently expanded the criminal justice interventions programme. The programme screens for drugs and refers them into treatment. They are then followed at every point through the justice system to ensure they don't re-offend and their dependence on drugs is broken. And treatment places will increase to 200,000 in future, doubling the number since 1998.

We are also ensuring young people don't fall into a life of crime in the first place. Sure Start places which offer extra support to children and families will be built on by establishing Children's Centres providing early education, childcare and health support under one roof. And there will be at least 50 per cent more programmes for young people at risk of offending.

This twin approach of punishment and support is central to the Community Justice Centre pilot in Liverpool. The centre will offer community-based solutions all together in one place. It will be housed under the same roof as services such as drug and alcohol treatment, family counselling, housing and financial advice.



*Baroness Scotland with Merseyside police*

Its holistic approach will focus around the needs of the community in which it's based. The centre, and the judge who leads it, will have to respond to those requirements.

The Community Justice Centre is an exciting project. It truly brings victims, offenders and communities together to work towards joint solutions. This is also shown in our restorative justice programmes where victims and witnesses can receive an apology, tell offenders what impact their crime had and get answers to their questions.

For offenders restorative justice is a chance to take responsibility, face the consequences of their actions and make amends to their victim. For victims and witnesses it gives an explanation which is something a prison term can never do. It helps people get on with their lives.

Our vision is clear – a system which cares about victims and witnesses and delivers justice fairly and properly. We have made already made great progress. Crime is down by a third so your chance of being a victim is at its lowest for more than two decades, seven per cent more cases are brought to justice and law reforms have made sentencing more appropriate for today's world.

Now our task is to build on successes to produce a system which makes a vision reality and promotes confidence among all. In particular, I am looking

forward to two events in October which very much represent the next stage.

Inside Justice Week in from 11-16 October is opening up justice to the public so that communities can find out more about the CJS in their area. Local Criminal Justice Boards across the country will be putting on fun, interactive events and telling people of the progress that has been made. We hope the week will help people find out more and encourage them to get involved in the CJS in some way.

The Justice Awards winners will also be announced in October. I know how much hard work people put in across the country to make the criminal justice system function from day to day. However I don't think we celebrate our successes and dedicated people enough. Judging by the amount of nominations coming in, a lot of people agree with me.

I look forward very much to being part of the judging panel and to meeting the winners. I'm sure that their stories will tell us that the success of the criminal justice system depends on hard work and also partnership working: between agencies, with victims and witnesses and, most importantly, with the community.

***Baroness Scotland QC is Minister of State, Criminal Justice System and Law Reform, Home Office.***