

Are you using the free services available for defence witnesses?

The Citizens Advice Witness Service is funded by the Ministry of Justice and offers free, independent and impartial support for defence and prosecution witnesses in every criminal court in England and Wales. They provide practical information about the process as well as emotional support to help witnesses feel more confident about giving evidence.

Supporting defence witnesses - by understanding their needs

While the Witness Service supports defence and prosecution witnesses, many in the defence community haven't made use of the service available. The Witness Service wanted to understand why, so they worked with an organisation called Supporting Justice to find out.

They spoke to defence lawyers to learn what might be preventing them from referring witnesses for support. They found that many defence solicitors and barristers didn't know about the service or saw it as a prosecution-only service.

By speaking with defence witnesses, they understand their needs better too. Defence witnesses do need and want support, but weren't aware support was available.

There are real benefits to referring witnesses to the Witness Service

When witnesses feel informed and supported, they're more likely to attend court - and support can help them feel more confident and able to give their best evidence.

On the day of the trial Witness Service volunteers can also keep defence witnesses informed of proceedings, allowing defence lawyers to spend more time with their client.

What the Witness Service offers - and how defence lawyers can refer their witnesses

Referring witnesses in advance (using the [online referral form](#)) can help to reassure witnesses before trial. The Witness Service contacts witnesses in advance to offer support and talk them through the process.

Highly trained and dedicated volunteers can show witnesses around court before the trial date so they know what to expect on the day. They also offer a more in-depth 'outreach' service to vulnerable and intimidated witnesses - pre-trial support away from court, perhaps in their home, school or community centre.

Volunteers are there to support witnesses on the day too. They provide someone to talk to in confidence (but not about the evidence in the case), information about court and legal processes, support for special measures and emotional support in dealing with the impact and experience of attending court. In most courts they can provide a separate waiting room and meetings rooms for defence witnesses.

Key messages

- Citizens Advice Witness Service supports defence witnesses as well as prosecution witnesses.
- In most courts we can provide a separate waiting room and meetings rooms for defence witnesses and can keep defence witnesses up to date on the day of trial. Different volunteers will be assigned to support defence and prosecution witnesses.
- Witness Service staff and volunteers go far beyond offering witnesses and their families a cup of tea and a friendly face. They undertake intense training and show incredible commitment to ensure the service is free and independent of the police, prosecution agencies and courts, and is tailored to meet individual needs, including those who are vulnerable and intimidated.
- The Witness Service provides independent support and information to allow witnesses to give their best evidence. It offers:
 - a preparation service which includes contacting witnesses in advance of trial to talk them through the process of giving evidence
 - The opportunity to visit an empty courtroom before the trial day and familiarise themselves with what it will be like when they give evidence
 - Support and information while they're at court for the trial and help with claiming expenses
 - We offer an outreach service for vulnerable and intimidated witnesses who may need a higher level of preparation and support which includes preparation sessions at the witness's home or a community location as appropriate
- The service has significant benefits for defence solicitors. Their witnesses are likely to give better evidence and it may reduce the attrition rate of witnesses not attending as they feel supported and prepared. It can allow defence solicitors more time to spend with their client rather than having the constant distraction of trying to keep defence witnesses updated on proceedings when at court.
- Witnesses can be referred in advance via our [online referral form](#). Advance referrals mean that we can contact the witness in advance of the trial date to offer support.
- While advance referral offers significant benefits witnesses can also be referred on the day directly to the Witness Service who are based in every criminal court. Ask the court office where to find us.



For more information about the Witness Service, visit www.citizenadvice.org.uk/witness