

Press release: Awards ceremony honors unsung heroes who support victims and witnesses

Giving evidence can be a painful and difficult experience, which often involves people having to recount one of the most horrific moments in their lives.

The inaugural 'Celebrating Services for Witnesses' awards ceremony, held in Nottingham on Friday night, has honoured the unrecognised people and agencies who spend their day to day lives supporting victims and witnesses to perform their invaluable role.

This can include a Witness Liaison Officer in a court who can advocate for the witness and make sure the court is doing all it can to make the experience easier, a court operations manager who makes sure the waiting rooms for victims and witnesses are comfortable and reassuring, or a volunteer for the Witness Service charity who offer a source of emotional support and practical advice.

The ceremony was held at Nottingham Trent University, and was supported by the university's Law School, the Crown Prosecution Service, defence lawyers including members of the independent bar, the British Transport Police and the Citizens Advice Witness Service.

There were six award categories:

- unsung hero award (individual)
- specialist support award (team or individual)
- frontline services award (individual)
- significant improvements award (team or individual)
- partnership award (team)
- the Victims' Commissioner's award (team or individual), presented by Baroness Helen Newlove, the Victim's Commissioner.

Susan Acland-Hood, CEO of HMCTS, said:

I am delighted to have been at the first 'Celebrating Services for Witnesses' awards, to honour those who support some of the most vulnerable in the courts system. It's vital that we make sure victims and witnesses feel as comfortable and confident as possible, allowing them to give their best evidence and help to make sure justice is done.

Mr Justice Haddon-Cave, Presiding Judge of the Midlands, said:

These awards are a wonderful opportunity to thank, honour and encourage the many volunteers, professionals and agencies who do vital work in our courts up and down the country helping and supporting victims and witnesses.

Professor Janine Griffiths-Baker, Dean of the Law School at Nottingham Trent University, said:

We are delighted to have sponsored such a momentous event and to have hosted so many distinguished guests from across the justice sector.

As a Law School which prides itself on playing an active role in the legal community, we recognise that the justice system only works when those who give evidence are provided with support from a wide range of agencies. The nominees for these awards have displayed enormous determination and innovation in championing the rights of witnesses.

The safety and security of citizens is a theme that the Nottingham Law School centres much of its research around; the work that those who have been celebrated by these awards does is a crucial part of a justice system which keeps the public safe and secure.

The Government is investing over £1 billion to reform the courts and tribunals system – this will make sure it is providing targeted care to those who need it, by reducing stress for victims and the most vulnerable, and lessening the emotional turmoil experienced through crime.

It has put in place a range of measures to help reduce the anxiety of attending court, including: the use of video links to give evidence; giving evidence behind a screen; the use of a registered intermediary; allowing more vulnerable and intimidated victims of sexual offences to have their cross-examination pre-recorded before trial, so they do not have to face their attacker in live court; and plans to ban men with a record of violence or sexual abuse from cross-examining vulnerable partners or children in family courts.