

Evaluation of the Witness Intermediary Scheme Pilot



What is the Witness Intermediary Scheme Pilot?

- The Witness Intermediary Scheme Pilot (WISP) is a Tasmanian Government initiative that aims to ensure that children and vulnerable witnesses are supported to effectively participate in the criminal justice system.
- The state-wide program does this by introducing the use of witness intermediaries to help children and adults with communication needs better participate in the criminal justice system.
- A witness intermediary is a trained professional with specialist skills in communication.
- Witness intermediaries act impartially and assist with communication between vulnerable witnesses and courts, lawyers, and police.
- The Witness Intermediary Scheme makes witness intermediaries available to eligible witnesses in matters relating to sexual offences and homicide.
- WISP was established in March 2021 in response to recommendations from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

What did the evaluation focus on, and who did it?

- An evaluation of the first 12 months of the WISP was undertaken by Sprout Labs and independent researcher, Dr Miriam Vandenberg.
- The evaluation focused on the activity and quality of the implementation of the WISP with the view that learnings to date can be incorporated into improving the service.
- The evaluation consisted of collecting and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data for the first year of WISP. Data for 469 referrals was analysed, 30 stakeholders participated in a questionnaire and 12 interviews were conducted.
- Participants in the evaluation were drawn from the following stakeholders: Tasmania Police, judicial officers, magistrates, prosecutors, defence lawyers, witness assistance officers and witness intermediaries. Participation in the evaluation by stakeholders was voluntary.

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What did the evaluation find?

“I think it’s a great scheme. I think that it’s innovative justice, it’s smart justice.”

- The findings indicate a high level of support for WISP among evaluation participants and its positive contribution to the criminal justice process in Tasmania.
- Most stakeholders think WISP is an important and necessary program in the interests of accessing justice and 79% said that the WISP should continue beyond the pilot phase.
- 62% of stakeholders agreed that witness intermediaries contribute important skills that other stakeholders do not generally have, that allow for more effective questioning techniques of vulnerable witnesses. 92% said they were satisfied with the quality of recommendations provided by witness intermediaries.
- The skills and strategies most commonly valued related to particular engagement and communication techniques, identifying ways to question a witness so as to obtain detailed and categorised evidence, regulating a witness and contributing to the overall level of calm in challenging circumstances.
- Witness intermediaries were generally considered essential for child witnesses but stakeholders were divided on the need to involve intermediaries when interviewing or questioning teenagers with good communication capabilities.
- Stakeholders also expressed the view that the use of intermediaries should be considered in relation to other vulnerable groups.

“I cannot speak more highly of the value of Witness Intermediaries during interviews with children/vulnerable persons. The assistance that they are able to provide the vulnerable person and police interviewers has been extremely valuable.”

What happens now?

- The findings and recommendations from the evaluation are being considered and implemented by the intermediary liaison team, including how we can support and further develop the skills of the witness intermediaries. Eligibility criteria will be considered at the end of the pilot.
- The evaluation is publicly available on the Child Abuse Royal Commission Response Unit [website](#).