



Minimum Standards for 116 006 Helplines

Introduction

In 2007, the European Commission adopted Decision 2007/116 on the introduction of additional reserved numbers beginning with '116'. The Decision set out the expectation for EU Member States to introduce harmonised services of social value, which were to be made available as a 'service meeting a common description to be accessed by individuals via a free phone number, which is potentially of value to visitors from other countries and which answers a specific social need, in particular which contributes to the well-being or safety of citizens, or particular groups of citizens, or helps citizens in difficulty¹.'

In 2009, the Decision was amended to introduce the harmonised number 116006 for victims of crime. The Decision set out the expectation for the victims' helpline to enable 'victims of crime to get emotional support in such circumstances, to be informed about their rights and about ways to claim their rights, and to be referred to the relevant organisations. In particular, it provides information about (a) local police and criminal justice proceedings; (b) possibilities of compensation and insurance matters. It also provides support in finding other sources of help relevant to the victims of crime².'

According to the Commission Decision – and rooted in the practice of victim support organisations, victim support helplines are basic societal services that are made available to all victims of all crimes with the aim of providing assistance, information, and emotional support. Helplines for victims of crime give victims the opportunity to talk about their experience, to ask questions and to be counselled on their recovery. Helplines, in general, offer non-judgmental confidential support and information for those affected by crime³.

Provision of this basic service through the harmonised EU number 116006 will provide a minimum level of support to all victims of all crimes across the EU. To achieve a uniform approach and ensure that victims across the EU have the same level of access to this service, it is necessary to ensure that all 116006 helpline providers meet and maintain the same minimum standards.

¹ European Commission (2007) *Commission Decision of 15 February 2007 on reserving the national numbering range beginning with '116' for harmonised numbers for harmonised services of social value* (2007/116/EC). Official Journal of the European Union, L49/30, 17 February. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu>

² European Commission, 2009. *Commission Decision of 13 May 2009 on the selection of operators of pan-European systems providing mobile satellite services (MSS)*. Official Journal of the European Union, L 149/65. C(2009) 3746. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32009D0449>

³ VSE: Establishing 116 006 helplines for victims of crime across the EU, p. 5

As the European umbrella organisation for victims of crime, Victim Support Europe, together with its member organisations providing support to victims through 116006 services, sets out these minimum standards which have been modelled on the requirements of the Victims' Rights Directive.

Aims and Vision

To ensure that as many victims as possible have access to support, it is important to establish a universally accessible entry point – one that enables the victims to reach out to support services at their own time and pace. Helplines offer a broad geographical coverage, an advantage for those living in rural areas or who cannot easily travel to victim support offices. Telephone and other means of distance counselling facilities provide convenient, accessible, and valuable sources of support for victims, and provide a flexible, credible, and cost-effective service⁴.

The purpose of these standards is to ensure that victims of crime receive appropriate information and support through the harmonised EU number 116006. The standards will also apply to other forms of distance support services – such as chat, video calls or use of social media and other instant messaging and voice-over IP providers that may be promoted as part of the 116006 service-pack.

Establishing minimum standards for 116006 services will ensure consistent, high-quality service provision across different jurisdictions within a national victim support framework. In that vein, the present standards aim to guarantee that all victims, regardless of the type or circumstances of the crime, or their own situation, have access to national 116006 services that can facilitate their right to criminal justice and compensation, as well as help them reach other types of support services they might need.

Definitions

116006 helpline service

116006 helpline service (also referred to as: 116006 helpline, helpline or helpline provider) is a free EU-wide public service that ensures the provision of support to all victims of all crimes across EU Member States, thus contributing to the well-being and safety of victims. The 116006 helpline service can be provided via telephone or other means of communication at a distance, such as chats, video calls or through the use of social media and other instant messaging and voice-over IP providers that may be promoted as part of the 116006 service-pack.

As a minimum, the 116006 helpline service serves as a compassionate and knowledgeable point of contact, offering victims emotional support, information and referrals to alternative providers. 116006 helpline services are established primarily to assist victims in managing their own response to crime as well as facilitating the reporting of crime to the authorities and navigating criminal justice systems, referring them to other support services and assisting them in accessing compensation.

⁴ Gribble et al., What is known about the effectiveness of social sector freephone helplines? Rapid evidence-based literature review (2018), Allen Clarke, available at:

<https://thehub.swa.govt.nz/assets/Uploads/Effectiveness-ofsocial-sector-freephone-helplines-FINAL.pdf>

116006 operators

The 116006 operator (also referred to: call taker or responder) is a physical person – 116006 helpline service employee or volunteer, who is assigned to responding to the contacts by the public.

Information

Providing information in the context of the 116006 helpline service refers to the act of providing the victim with clear and concise factual explanations to ensure that they understand their rights and to facilitate the identification of their needs, with the aim of supporting them in making informed decisions. Provision of information involves responding to inquiries from victims and offering factual information about, as a minimum: their rights in the context of criminal proceedings, the pathways to reporting criminal offences to the authorities, the services that are available, and the pathways to compensation.

Emotional support

Emotional support in the context of the 116006 helpline service refers to the compassionate and empathetic assistance provided to victims of crime, with the primary aim of addressing their emotional well-being and promoting healing. It involves creating a safe and non-judgmental space where victims can freely express their feelings, fears, and concerns, while receiving support to overcome or minimise the negative effects of the crime. Emotional support provided through 116006 helplines is of a limited scope and duration and should not be seen as a replacement for therapy that some victims may need or confused with psychotherapy that can sometimes be provided to individuals via phone, chat or other means of communication at a distance.

Practical support

Practical support in the context of the 116006 helpline service refers to the provision of assistance via phone, chat or other means of communication at a distance, which is aimed at addressing the practical needs and challenges faced by victims of crime. It involves sharing practical resources, such as recommending tips to victims on how to stay safe, how to block their bank account or giving other advice of practical nature that can help victims resolve issues within the framework of a phone conversation, video call or a chat.

Individual Needs Assessment

Helpline providers will conduct an individual needs assessment of the victim at first contact, in order to establish follow-up actions such as referral.

Referral

Referral in a context of the 116006 helpline service pertains to the process of ensuring that victims are brought into contact with and provided support by other victim support professionals to address specific needs or concerns that have been assessed during the call and that fall outside the scope of the services that the helpline can provide to the victim. It involves identifying the needs of the victim and recommending appropriate resources or personnel who can provide them with more targeted support, minimising, as much as is within the control of the helpline provider, their waiting time and formalities regarding their access to support.

Referral can be internal – when the support is provided to the victim through the resources available within the organisation providing the 116006 helpline service, or external – when referral is ensured through collaboration with other organisations and/or professionals who are not part of or employed by the 116006 provider.

Standard 1: 116006 services are accessible to all victims

1.1 116006 helpline service is provided to all victims. The helpline must have national coverage, without any geographical limitations, to enable victims to contact the service wherever they find themselves on the sovereign territory of a country.

1.2 116006 helpline service should be provided without any requirement of prior registration. Victims should not need to go through any identification, registration or screening process before accessing the service. Dialling the 116006 number allows them to reach someone who can help. Automated questions to identify the accessibility needs of the victim will not be considered as being contrary to this requirement.

1.3. 116006 helpline service must be accessible to everyone, including to persons with disabilities and cross-border victims. To this end, the helpline service will be made available in different formats: via phone, chat and other means of distance communication, able to accommodate the use of sign language or assistive technologies and available in easy-to-read format. The 116006 helpline service will be made available in the official language(s) of the Member State. Where possible, the helpline will be made available in English to at least provide to the victim with information. When a victim has specific language requirements, helplines can make use of interpretation services.

1.4 116006 helpline service must be available free of charge, without the victim incurring any charges from the helpline provider.⁵

1.5 116006 helpline service is provided to all without any distinction or discrimination. Victim support helplines must not restrict the scope of their activities by declining to assist victims on the basis of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religious belief, political opinions, culture, disability, the nature of their complaint or for any other reason unless they can demonstrate that another existing organisation already provides an effective service for the group of victims which has been excluded.

1.6 116006 helpline service is made available to all direct and indirect victims. The helpline is made available to persons who have directly experienced crimes (direct victims), as well as those who might have been affected by the crime by being related to the direct victim or by having been exposed to the impact of the crime by suffering other consequences (indirect victims). Helpline organisations should make it clear in all their documentation, including their constitution and incorporation regulations, and communications that they serve all victims, without exception⁶.

Standard 2: 116006 services are available to all victims

2.1 116006 helpline service should be open for victims' calls at least 40 hours per week. However, an effort should be made for the opening hours to not coincide with the Member State's usual working hours and should include options such as: opening early in mornings, later in the evenings or during the weekend. Unless the helpline is open 24/7, opening hours must be well publicised and

⁵ Victims in the EU with a non-EU telephone number may face additional costs depending on the telecom provider. It is worth noting that if a victim calls 116 006 from outside the EU, the call may incur additional fees.

⁶ VSE: Establishing 116 006 helplines for victims of crime across the EU, p. 18

strictly abided by. During periods of unavailability, victims must be advised as to when the service will next be available.

2.2 When 116006 helpline services are unavailable, victims must be offered other options, including online resources and the possibility to request being contacted during opening hours. The automated message shall also direct callers in immediate danger to contact emergency services and explicitly clarify that the 116 006 helpline is not a crisis line.

2.3 At least 85% of 116006 helpline calls/contacts received within opening hours must be dealt with. For calls that cannot be immediately responded to within the opening hours, a system must be in place to ensure that the callers will either have the opportunity to wait, leave a message, or reach the service by means of a different communication channel.

2.4 All calls received during the opening hours must be picked up not later than within 30 minutes, subject to staff capacity, call durations, and the availability of call transfer mechanisms to other operators.

2.5 The call/contact will last as long as is required for the victim to get the support they need. However, helplines may limit the duration of the call in exceptional situations. This limitation should never be less than 45 minutes. Any limitation in the duration of the call will be notified to the victim in advance.

2.6 116006 helpline service providers can temporarily restrict access to the helpline to disruptive, disrespectful and abusive callers. The rules regarding this restriction will be made publicly available, and each restriction and its duration will be announced to the victim in advance. Temporary restrictions cannot last longer than 3 months.

2.7 To ensure support to cross-border victims, each national 116006 helpline will strive to provide at least basic information regarding the rights and services to victims in all EU Member States. In addition, 116006 helpline service providers are required to facilitate cross-border referrals, either by referral to the victim's national helpline or by using cross-border referrals to other services that the victim might need.

Standard 3: 116006 services provide support to all victims

3.1 116006 helpline service must be offered using a victim-centred approach. To achieve this, helpline providers will engage with victims in a way that prioritises listening, avoids re-traumatisation, and systematically focuses on their safety, rights, well-being, expressed needs and choices, in this way giving back as much control to the victims as is feasible and ensuring the empathetic delivery of services in a non-judgmental manner⁷.

3.2 The primary task of the 116006 helpline support provider is to ensure the victim's safety, before addressing any of their other needs. It should be made clear from the outset that this is not an emergency helpline. When it has been established that the victim's physical safety is jeopardised, they

⁷ UNHCR, A victim-centered approach, available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/how-we-work/tackling-sexual-exploitation-abuse-and-harassment/victim-centred-approach>

should be referred to the appropriate emergency services. In certain situations, or specific crimes in question (e.g.: calls by children, or domestic violence calls), a risk assessment may be required.

3.3 116006 helpline service will provide victims with emotional support, delivered by phone calls and other means of communication at a distance.

3.4 Helplines must offer comprehensive information and should be able to provide victims not just with detailed information about their rights and how to apply them, but also on police and criminal justice proceedings. The helpline should provide time-sensitive information such as guidance on compensation, evidence gathering or support in contacting the authorities. This also includes information on referral to organisations better placed to cater to the needs of the victim's specific situation.

Standard 4: 116006 services are confidential

4.1 Helplines protect victims' data and ensure confidentiality while respecting the requirements of national legislation, such as reporting obligations in cases of, for example, contact with children in need of protection. They must ensure transparency as to how and to what extent their services are confidential.

4.2 The helpline can offer multiple options to safeguard victims' privacy. Services provided by the 116006 helpline will never be conditional to the victims' disclosure of their identity or personal identifiers (e.g. location, detail of the crime etc.). This guarantee of privacy may include the guarantee of anonymity either by default (when helpline is designed to ensure anonymity for all callers) or by choice.

4.3 116006 services are provided in full compliance with GDPR and any other data protection legislation and obligations. GDPR rules will ensure that only the most essential personal data is processed and that access to such data is strictly controlled. Processing of personal data will be collected in a manner that will minimise secondary victimisation, including through relying on all legal bases for the collection of personal data, and not exclusively on victim consent.

4.4 Calls to the 116006 helpline may be recorded only with victims' full consent. Provision of support cannot be conditional to a request to record the call. Recordings should only be kept for quality control and complaint handling requirements, and – in the case of compulsory referral – for evidence. Recordings cannot be kept for longer than three months, and access to the recording should only be available to the victim, the helpline supervisor and the call operator.

4.5 116006 services will collect a standardised minimum of anonymised data from the victims, following a unified data collection methodology, to ensure pan-EU implementation of the service. This data might include, as a minimum, information related to the victim and to the call itself. Victim related data to be collected might include at least: the type of crime, victim's gender, age and prior experience with the criminal justice system. When it is not appropriate to ask the victim about their age and gender, the helpline operator will be trained to either assume or not respond to these elements. Data related to the call might include at least: waiting time, duration of calls, and any referral or follow-up done post-call.

Standard 5: 116006 services are provided by professional organisations

5.1 116006 services are provided by legal entities that are able to effectively provide this type of service to all victims of all crimes and have the support of all victims of all crimes as one of their core missions. Provision of 116006 support does not have to be the sole purpose for which the legal entity is set up.

5.2 116006 services cannot be provided by entities set up with the purpose of profit-making. This requirement is related not only to the provision of 116006 support, but to all other services provided by the legal entity.

5.2 116006 services can be provided by professionals employed by the service provider and/or by volunteers. Both employees and volunteers should be recruited using a process that will ensure that they demonstrate possession of the empathy and resilience required to work with victims of crimes.

Standard 6: 116006 helpline operators undergo professional training

6.1 116006 providers will ensure that both professionals employed by the service provider and volunteers are adequately trained. Call takers will be trained to handle the different and complex situations, such as handling communication with people in various distressful situations, they may encounter in their work.

6.2 Training will ensure that the helpline operators develop and maintain the skills needed to treat victims appropriately. These skills will include treating the victim in a respectful, empathetic, professional and non-discriminatory manner when using distance support means – the telephone, chat or other channels of communication used by the 116006 service. The skills to be obtained will include at the minimum: active listening and empathetic communication, how to act in emergency situations, and how to handle inappropriate calls.

6.3 Training will ensure that helpline operators obtain the knowledge that is needed to provide victims with the minimum level of support. This knowledge will enable the operator to appropriately comply with the present standards, notably Standards 3 and 4, and will enable the operator to find for and provide the victim with relevant information, to assess their needs and to provide them with a referral as appropriate.

6.4 116006 helpline operators will receive a basic induction training of at least 40 hours of effective learning. The basic training will at least include the five essential elements of support delivered by the helpline: Practical Support, Information, Emotional Support, Compensation, and Referral. This basic training can be provided over a period of several weeks and can include supervised practice calls with victims.

6.5 After having received their basic training, 116006 helpline operators will attend at least four hours of refresher training every year. This training can be organised for a range of topics, based on a training needs assessment that will be regularly conducted with staff and volunteers.

6.6 116006 helpline services will ensure that the knowledge and the skills of helpline operators are verified. This will include reviews of both professional staff and volunteers on completion of their initial training, as well as during their career as a helpline operator. Verification of specific criteria may take place periodically or on an *ad hoc* basis.

Standard 7: 116006 service providers conduct regular monitoring and evaluation

7.1. 116006 helpline services must establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the quality of their victim support by use of internal and external evaluation and monitoring mechanisms. Internal and external monitoring and evaluation mechanisms may include a range of measures including appointing internal and/or external evaluators or service auditors, conducting surveys and otherwise collecting feedback from victims, helpline operators and other stakeholders (e.g. referral partners, criminal justice system etc.). Monitoring and evaluation may also include the engagement of external 'mystery' callers.

7.2. Monitoring must be carried out continuously, and an evaluation of the 116006 helpline services must be conducted at least once a year. Annual monitoring will result in the delivery of a regular monitoring and evaluation report.

7.3. Victims will be provided with opportunity to give feedback on the services received; such feedback should be used to continuously improve helpline services. Victim feedback can be collected by asking callers to rate their call; inviting callers to complete surveys, when appropriate; recording and analysing calls for quality control purposes, without compromising victims' privacy and confidentiality etc. Mechanisms, such as surveys and a system for their use, should be easily identifiable and able to collect victims' feedback.

Standard 8: 116006 service providers provide a path for complaints and grievances

8.1 Every caller to 116006 helpline services is able to file a complaint or grievance against the service provided. The grounds for complaint may be limited, within reason, to the type of service provided and the quality of call received.

8.3: Grievance mechanisms will be transparent and readily identifiable to callers through appropriate channels of communication. This will include at least the ability to send a written grievance by post; easy access to an online grievance form on the 116006 helpline website and by scheduling a call with the assigned 116006 service provider point of contact.

8.4: Complaints and grievances will be subject to objective consideration and should be responded to within a period of not more than 30 calendar days upon receipt. This consideration will be provided either by internal or external controllers and will result in a reasoned reply to the complainant.

8.5 Justified grievances must result in meaningful outcomes for the victim and/or the 116006 helpline provider. The consequence can be to investigate the situation responsibly, accept the complaint, or to set out other measures deemed appropriate by the grievance mechanism.

Standard 9: 116006 helpline service providers ensure visibility and awareness-raising

9.1 116006 helpline service must be easy to access, visible and well-publicised. This is achieved by means of promoting the helpline through multiple online and offline channels via a multi-sector approach. This includes trying to ensure that the national helpline is easily found when using common search engines.

9.2 116006 helpline services proactively provide information on their existence and availability, and the services they offer. This is carried out using a variety of channels, including partnerships with the police, healthcare providers, criminal justice institutions, support organisations and services.

9.3 116006 helpline services regularly reach out to potential victims of crimes by means of campaigns and programmes. These activities are conducted using the data collected through Standard 4.5 and based on results of evaluations conducted through Standard 7. In conducting these activities, special attention will be paid to those who are underserved.