

**MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW - SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME
MONDAY, 2 NOVEMBER 2009**

Councillors: Davies and Egan

Co-opted Member: Mr C. Hannington (Haringey CPCG)

LC6. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Aitken.

LC7. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST.

None.

LC8. LATE ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS.

None.

LC9. MINUTES

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meeting of 13 October be approved.

LC10. SUPPORT TO VICTIMS OF CRIME - EVIDENCE FROM STAKEHOLDERS

The Panel received evidence from Penny Rutter, the Heartstone Manager, and Tessa Newton, the Borough Manager from Victim Support.

Ms. Rutter reported that, whilst there was a Domestic Violence Co-ordinator which was a strategic role, Heartstone provided the operational side of the service. Heartstone was open from nine to five and staffed by a small team of five. The team comprised of a manager, deputy manager, two support workers and an administrator. The administrator role also included acting as receptionist and Sanctuary Officer, providing enhanced security for victims who were considered to be at risk. In addition, there was an independent domestic violence advocate who was seconded to work with them. It aimed to provide a one stop service for victims of domestic violence. The centre had recently been refurbished and demand had been growing ever since it re-opened. Heartstone worked in partnership with a range of agencies, including the police service, probation and the PCT, with eleven partners currently in attendance at the centre. They catered for males as well as females. Statistics from victim support suggested that more males were victims of domestic violence than actually came forward. However, it was difficult to persuade male victims to come forward. There were currently no male workers at the centre.

Current usage was in excess of 400 people for the quarter and 1600-1900 for the year. The number of clients had almost tripled since the service had moved back to the refurbished premises. The sessions provided were a drop-in in the morning with appointments in the afternoons. An emergency service operated all day. They had been given one additional support worker to help accommodate the additional demand but would benefit from another.

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Services were publicised through a range of activities. Two main publications had been produced. In addition, a lot of work had been undertaken in building links with hard to reach groups. Presentations had been given to a wide range of groups including community centres and mosques. They also held three major events every year including a bus trip around the borough, with leafleting and information on services. However, the majority of publicity was by word of mouth. 50% of people self referred. Referrals also came from the police. Physical violence was the main driver – the bulk of cases had some physical component. Ms. Rutter agreed to complete a manual pilot of files to determine the exact proportion. A risk assessment was undertaken on the likelihood of injury or physical harm.

Front line police officers ought to be aware of Hearthstone and its services. Recruits regularly visited the office as part of their training. However, there was a high turn over of police officers and senior police personnel in Haringey.

There was over representation of people from black and ethnic minority communities amongst clients of the service. In particular, there was a high number of African Caribbean, Black African, Turkish and, increasingly, white other European clients. The breakdown was very similar to that of people presenting as homeless.

Clients very often had concerns about their safety but the priority was not to move families unless absolutely necessary and the sanctuary scheme assisted with this. In addition to this, Hearthstone also provided therapeutic solutions. Particular efforts were undertaken to protect children. The service had a very good relationship with Homes for Haringey, with whom there were established protocols and procedures. The service had requested that Homes for Haringey adopt a perpetrator policy but this had not so far been successful. If perpetrators were made homeless this could sometimes encourage them to attempt to return to the family home. Reconciliation was nevertheless possible. There were programmes aimed at perpetrators which were run by the probation service and the Children's Service but these were expensive and could not accommodate many people. There was also a programme run by the voluntary sector called Respect that was aimed at violent people who wished to change their behaviour. The probation programmes were more likely to be successful as there was a stronger incentive for people to change due to the sanctions that could be applied if necessary to clients who failed to co-operate.

Clients were frequently scared of going to court. There was now a domestic violence court. In addition, there was also now the Witness Care Unit and the Witness Service to assist in providing support and reassurance, with a newly appointed dedicated Vulnerable and Intimidated Witness Support Officer.

There were a significant number of clients – around 8% - who had no recourse to public funds and were very difficult to assist although there were a small number of places in refuges available. People were generally provided with some legal advice and referred to the voluntary sector. Encouragement was given to them to stay with friends. It was very difficult to get perpetrators deported.

Ms Rutter felt that services could be improved by better co-ordination. The Education Welfare Service was excellent. Schools varied but some were very good. In general, there could be better links with internal partners and, in particular, the interface between strategic and community housing and the police/courts.

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Tessa Newton from Victim Support outlined the services that Victim Support Haringey provided. They worked with a wide range of victims of crime irrespective of when the crime had taken place and whether the crime had been reported. The support that they provided covered both practical issues and emotional support. In addition, they also provided advocacy and liaison. Victim Support also ran the Witness Service that operated in all of the local criminal courts. Victims and witnesses could visit courts in advance of trials or on the day to familiarise themselves with the surroundings. There was also support available on the day and a separate waiting area away from people connected with the defendant. Recruitment would soon start for a specific anti social behaviour witness support worker in the county court which had been funded as part of the Justice Seen, Justice Done campaign.

Most of Victim Support's work was undertaken by volunteers. Their ability to provide a service could be limited by their availability. During half term, only one third of the volunteers were available which had restricted services. In addition, they only had two client meeting rooms. However, they did not turn clients away although people had to occasionally wait longer than was ideal. This was especially true for victims of some types of serious crime. Volunteers required six months experience of case work before they were able to take on more serious crimes. There was also quite a high turn over of volunteers. The net result of this was that volunteers qualified to deal with particular sorts of crime – especially the more serious offences such as domestic violence, sexual assault – could get booked up very quickly. However, some other victims could be offered appointments quickly, such as those who had suffered actual bodily harm (ABH). The team's administrator had been trained to provide support on these particular types of crime.

Referrals had grown – over 90% of these were from the Police. There was quite a mix of people who were referred. The majority of domestic violence victims were women but there were an increasing number of men referred - approximately 20% in quarter 2. A larger percentage of ABH and grievous bodily harm (GBH) victims were men. A large number of referrals from the police were classified as "non crime" which they were unable to deal with. Such cases could lead to crime though. Referrals were dealt with centrally by Victim Support, who made three attempts to contact people. Cases were then referred onwards to the local branch. Front line police officers were supposed to ask people if they wished to be referred but she suspected that this did not always happen. In such cases, it was likely that the police officer would refer anyway. There had been no instances that she could recall where people had complained about lack of contact from Victim Support. Ms. Newton agreed to give the Panel a list of crimes that the service dealt with.

The Witness Service received its referrals from the Witness Care Unit. Enhanced support was available to vulnerable and intimidated witnesses. This support was automatically provided for cases of domestic violence, sexual assault and young people aged 17 and under. It was more difficult to determine if people might require enhanced support due to mental or physical health issues.

Clients were frequently frightened and a lot of personal alarms were therefore given out. Witnesses who felt intimidated could apply for special measures – in such cases, the decision rested with the court. However, in cases of domestic violence, the defendant's family always were aware of the victim's role as a witness. Around 20% of victims wished to withdraw their case. Ms Rutter added that withdrawal was common in domestic violence cases.

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Ms. Newton stated that Victim Support was interested in using restorative justice. However, the service needed to get funding for its work and this had not been forthcoming so far for restorative justice projects. It was therefore not currently part of the core work of victim support in Haringey. Victim support in Tower Hamlets had a specific restorative justice worker although she was unclear about where the funding for this came from.

In addition to funding received from the Office for Criminal Justice Reform, Victim Support's local service was currently funded by Safer Communities and the Children and Young People's Service. There had been problems with funding from the Children's Service which had provided grants for only six months. The service had received confirmation of the funding very late and the uncertainty had led to recruitment and retention difficulties with the two posts that the funding paid for. The Witness Service was paid via the criminal justice system.

It was agreed that the Panel would request an explanation of the funding position from the Children and Young People's Service.

The Panel thanked Ms Rutter and Ms Newton for their assistance.

Cllr Matt Davies
Chair