

**MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW - SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS OF CRIME
TUESDAY, 8 DECEMBER 2009**

Councillors: Aitken (Chair) and Egan

Apologies: Councillor Davies

LC16. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE:

Received from Councillor Davies.

LC17. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

None.

LC18. LATE ITEMS OF URGENT BUSINESS:

None.

LC19. SUPPORT TO VICTIMS OF CRIME - EVIDENCE FROM STAKEHOLDERS:

The Panel welcomed six volunteers who worked locally with victims of crime. They all either worked for Victim Support or the Witness Service, who provided a service at the courts and were run by Victim Support.

They had been inspired to become volunteers for a number of reasons. In some cases, this was after they had become victims of crime themselves. They stated that liaison between the Police and victims could be improved, although matters had improved since the establishment of the Victim Focus Desk.

Victims had on occasion complained that, amongst other things, statements and crime reference numbers had not been taken. It was possible that front line officers were sometimes overwhelmed by the considerable demands that were placed on them and therefore occasionally remiss. It could also be difficult at times to get hold of relevant officers due to their shift patterns or them being out and about. Messages could be left for them but officers did not always respond.

The perception amongst some victims was that, whilst crimes were logged by the Police, there was not necessarily an interest in investigating all of them. In addition, victims occasionally felt that they were treated as if they were themselves criminals. However, it was acknowledged that the Police Service was a very large organisation with many different staff. Front line officers were different from community officers. Volunteers had a very high opinion of community officers, who were always very helpful. It was noted that a high percentage of front line officers were relatively young and inexperienced.

There could sometimes be language difficulties in dealing in communicating with victims. Victim support could arrange for interpreters but had to pay for them out of their budget. Not all interpreters were reliable but unfortunately the pool of interpreters for some languages could be very small. It was suggested that, in some instances, volunteer interpreters could be used from institutions such as the School of

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Oriental and African Studies. It was possible that, in particular, students studying law might be interested in assisting.

There were generally a good relationship between the Witness Service and the Police and, as far as was known, there had not been any complaints. The service from the Witness Care Unit (WCU) was variable. One particular issue was that the WCU did not always provide the information that Witness Service volunteers required, leaving them with little or no information on victims and witnesses that were attending the magistrates court and whether they were vulnerable or intimidated. The service received the list of witnesses to attend court (LWAC) documentation but this did not provide all the necessary details such as the charge. Sometimes the Witness Service was not informed by the Police when cases were dropped. Such occurrences could cause embarrassment and de-motivate volunteers. If the Witness Service was made aware of all the necessary information in good time, they could contact witnesses in advance. It was noted that the same problems did not exist at the Crown Court.

The WCU was responsible for ensuring that information was provided. There had been a number of meetings where concerns had been raised. Performance had improved but there was still some way to go. One particular problem was the high turnover of staff at the WCU.

When Victim Support volunteers first met with victims, they began by establishing what sort of assistance they needed and whether they required referral to other services. They also asked to hear the victim's story. Practical and emotional support could be provided but volunteers were not trained counsellors. It was felt that they needed access to taking therapies so that they could refer people onwards when appropriate. Although they only saw a comparatively small percentage of victims, many were very needy and becoming the victim of a crime could sometimes be the final straw for them. They could advise victims to go to their doctor if it was felt that they needed to be referred for counselling but there was a long waiting list for this.

Some volunteers specialised in more serious crimes such as murder, manslaughter and serious sexual offences. Dealing with cases such as this could emotionally affect volunteers. There was supervision of volunteers in order to ensure that they were coping and Victim Support was strengthening this system as part of its reorganisation. However, there was no direct access to counselling or specialist assistance.

All volunteers received comprehensive training. There were a number of younger volunteers including some law students. However, many were passing through and unlikely to stay. Sometimes younger people just got involved as they felt that it would look good on their CV. In addition, exams could get in the way of their work. There was now a contract for volunteers that required them to assist for a minimum of 18 months. The younger volunteers tended to be more ethnically diverse than the older ones. The hours that people put in varied enormously, from a few hours per month to several days per week.

There was a great level of variation in the quality of interactions between front line police officers and victims. It was recognised, however, that Police officers had difficult jobs. If victims were not happy with the way that they had been treated by the Police, they were normally advised to speak to the Citizens Advice Bureau. However, at least one victim had been given forms to lodge a complaint with the Independent Police Complaints Commission which appeared to be disproportionate.

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It would be far more preferable if issues could be resolved at an earlier stage. In particular, regular informal meetings between volunteers and the Police would assist in improving communications and highlighting any issues. Police Family Liaison officers had assisted with training of volunteers and were very effective in their role. The nature of such specialised roles tended to attract police officers who had a special interest and aptitude for such work.

Accommodation at Highgate magistrates court was felt to be inadequate. They were currently located at the foot of a stairwell, in a corridor. It was difficult to have a meaningful conversation in such surroundings. It was also cold. They used to have good accommodation at the court but the lease had run out and they were currently located adjacent to a large unoccupied office. Accommodation at Victim Support's offices in Commerce Road could also be improved as it only had two interview rooms which everyone, including staff, had to use for meetings. In addition, it was very difficult for volunteers to park near the offices. It was felt inappropriate for Victim Support to be co-located in the same premises with the Police.

It was felt that the plethora of different agencies and organisations involved in supporting victims and witnesses was a major source of confusion and did not work well. This was particularly true of domestic violence. There was no need for Independent Domestic Violence Advocates as this duplicated work already being undertaken by other organisations and added further to the confusion. Whilst they could fulfil a useful role in some areas, they lacked specific knowledge of court procedures. The similarity in the names between the WCUs and Witness Service was a particular problem. There was also overlap in the roles and, amongst others, the CPS had difficulty differentiating. However, this was less of a problem at the Crown Court.

The Panel thanked the volunteers for their kind assistance.

**Cllr Ron Aitken
Chair**