

Justice Committee

Community Justice (Scotland) Bill

Written submission from Victim Support Scotland

Victim Support Scotland (VSS) is the largest organisation in Scotland supporting people affected by crime. We provide practical help, emotional support and essential information to victims, witnesses and others affected by crime within each local authority and every Sheriff and High Court in Scotland. The service is free, confidential and is provided by volunteers. VSS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to any future structural arrangements for the delivery of community justice in Scotland.

As stated by the Scottish Government, “a successful community justice system is one which delivers positive outcomes for victims, for offenders and their families and for communities”.¹ Victim Support Scotland’s primary interest in considering the best approach to community justice is to identify ways in which community justice arrangements can be most effective in delivering positive outcomes for victims and to ensure their interests are a central and consistent consideration.

We look forward to the development and improvement of community justice arrangements in Scotland, and hope that this facilitates the continuing decline in reoffending rates, and most importantly, reductions in victimisation in Scotland. We hope this information, along with our continued engagement, will help ensure that improved outcomes for victims and communities are a shared and central priority for the delivery of community justice in Scotland.

We believe that public confidence in community justice is linked to the visibility of justice and to how the community justice system informs and engages with the public and with victims. Victims should be a visible and central part of the process. It is important that victims are acknowledged, respected, informed, supported and protected, and that they have their voices ‘heard’ by any structural arrangements for delivering justice in the community.

Victim Support Scotland has concerns that the definition of community justice within the Bill (section 1) neither clearly identifies the public protection and risk management aspects of community justice, nor has reference to community reassurance or victim safety. Furthermore, the definition does not allow for a greater focus on prevention and early intervention in line with the recommendations of the Christie Commission.

It is our view that an effective model for community justice will have in place effective mechanisms and procedures for providing information to, and closely engaging with, victims and local communities, ensuring they understand and can input their views in relation to community sentencing. In particular, a detailed mechanism is required to enable victims to have input into the unpaid work carried out by offenders. All those

¹ *Redesigning Community Justice: A Consultation on Proposals*. Scottish Government, December 2012
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0044/00440516.pdf>

involved in the delivery of community justice services, particularly those in direct contact with victims, should receive standardised training on victims' issues and on how to treat victims appropriately. VSS recognises the work undertaken by the South West Scotland Community Justice Authority as part of the Victim Strategy Group, and would like to see the continuation of this type of work on a national basis.

In addition, risk assessment frameworks should be developed and implemented to ensure victims' safety and protection requirements through close engagement with third sector organisations such as Victim Support Scotland and Women's Aid. As and when it is appropriate, case information should be freely shared between community justice partners to ensure that the victim's security and protection needs are considered at each stage of the process. The assessment and safeguarding of victims' safety should be an element of the National Strategy for Community Justice, and in turn, the national performance framework.

In relation to the rehabilitation of offenders, Victim Support Scotland considers the community justice landscape to be an important forum in which to represent the impact of crime on victims. Consideration should be given, where appropriate, to incorporating an element of victim impact awareness (e.g. within community payback orders), whereby the offender is made aware of the general effects of offending behaviour on victims of crime. The individual victim does not need to be involved in this, with generic victim awareness training packages provided by organisations working in the field of victim support.

Victim Support Scotland remains a statutory partner on each of the eight community justice authorities (CJAs) and wishes to continue playing an active part within the community justice landscape, both nationally and locally. On a national level, VSS would welcome appointment to the Board of Community Justice Scotland as part of the third sector representation. VSS has a crucial role in helping to make CJS successful in shaping policies for victims and communities, working towards an effective service with which the community has confidence. Our aim would be to ensure that a victim-centred approach is routinely used in the development of community justice policies and programs, and that the national body is committed to supporting victims as well as reintegrating offenders.

In our report 'Do you know'² we demonstrated how our work can help local authorities reduce the impact of crime and reach local targets to create a more successful Scotland. Maintaining our close partnerships with local authorities and community justice providers helps ensure the interests, needs and rights of victims are represented and consistently integrated into Scotland-wide strategic and operational policy, planning and practice. It would however be a significant challenge for VSS to engage with community justice partners across 32 local authority areas, in comparison with our present commitment to engage with only 8 regional CJA areas; this would be not only in

² *Do you know how supporting victims of crime is helping Scotland?* Victim Support Scotland, 2009
<http://www.victimsupportsco.org.uk/lib/liDownload/575/Do%20You%20Know.pdf?CFID=13280005&CFTOKEN=75301572>

relation to financial resources, but more fundamentally as regards to time and personnel availability. We believe that this will exclude third sector organisations from meaningful engagement with community justice services, and would like the Bill to provide for opportunities for regional engagement.

VSS views the establishment of a national hub for innovation, learning and development as a positive step in sharing best practice and commissioning research to achieve better outcomes in community justice. We believe the hub could be an effective medium for dissemination of the work of the current research institutes such as the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research (SCCJR), the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice (CYCJ) and the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS). We also welcome the Hub's ability to commission research, which we see as an opportunity to explore what can be done to reduce both reoffending and re-victimisation. In addition, VSS would be happy to assist in the development of training, such as in relation to victim awareness.

Victim Support Scotland
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