



Volunteer and Staff Conference 21 October 2010

CONFERENCE REPORT

On the 21 October 2010, Victim Support Northern Ireland (VSNI) held their annual Volunteer and Staff Conference in the Park Avenue Hotel, Belfast. The event was designed to focus on learning from the experience of staff and volunteers in working with victims and witnesses of crime and also to acknowledge the work of our volunteers, with particular appreciation being shown to some of our longest serving volunteers.

This report has been created to summarise and to highlight some of the most important points raised during the conference. It is hoped that this will also help to keep staff and volunteers informed of issues of relevance to VSNI's work in the future.

The Justice Minister, Mr David Ford attended the conference to address delegates and also launched the consultation on the Department's Code of Practice for Victims of Crime. Dr Stephen Coulter from Queens University Belfast (QUB) and David Lyttle, Clinical Practice Manager from NEXUS, were also invited to brief the conference on their experience of dealing with victims of crime and the importance of emotional support. It was felt that by doing so, staff and volunteers of VSNI would be provided with an important scene-setting opportunity, enabling us to reflect on the type of service VSNI provides and the importance of such services to the recovery of a victim of crime.

The first section of this report includes a summary of the conference agenda to help refresh those individuals who attended the conference and to inform those who could not attend. The second section includes a summary of the speeches made by the Chief Executive and guest speakers throughout the day.

The third section of the report highlights the workshop discussions and the feedback which was presented at the conference and the fourth section of the report includes a summary of the volunteer and staff recognition session of the conference. The fifth section provides a brief analysis of the conference evaluation comments received from participants.

The sixth section of this report provides a summary of the 'Next Steps' of VSNI's future work in the areas discussed at the conference. The Appendix provides a review of progress on last year's conference action points.

Section 1

Conference Programme

- 9.15 -9.45 Registration (tea /coffee)
- 9.50 Introduction and welcome (Susan Reid, Chief Executive Victim Support NI)
- 10.00 Guest Speaker - Department of Justice representative
- 10.30 Guest Speaker - Dr Stephen Coulter
"More than just nice? Emotional and Social Support for Victims of Crime."
- 11.00 **TEA / COFFEE**
- 11.20 Guest Speaker - David Lyttle (Clinical Practice Manager, NEXUS)
- 11.50 Introduction to workshops
- 12.00 **Workshops**

Workshop themes

- Restorative Justice: How can we maximise the benefit for the victim?
- Valuing emotional support throughout all of our services

- 1.00 **LUNCH**
- 2.00 **Volunteer Recognition**
- Recognition of volunteer long service
 - Presentation of core learning certificates
 - Retrospective attainment of accreditation
- 3.45 Feedback from workshops
- 3.30 Speaker: Susan Reid, Chief Executive
Summary of day's findings and exploration of the way ahead
- 3.50 Chair's closing comments
- 4.00 Conference close

Section 2 Speakers and Presentations

Mr David Ford, Minister for Justice

The Justice Minister launched the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime at the conference.

Mr Ford said: “The criminal justice system must improve the way in which it deals with victims. The Code of Practice sets out a minimum standard of service that criminal justice agencies will be expected to provide to victims of crime. In addition, victims will have recourse to the Assembly Ombudsman if they are unhappy with the treatment they receive.”

The Minister acknowledged the valuable role and services provided by Victim Support in assisting victims of crime. Speaking as a former Victim Support volunteer, he acknowledged the organisation’s history and noted how its work had evolved and developed.

“The commitment of the 200 volunteers within Victim Support is unquestionable and the fact that 96% of victims and witnesses were satisfied with the support you provided is testament of the character and professionalism of each volunteer.

“The voices of victims must be heard and it is crucial that all organisations work in partnership to meet their legitimate needs and deliver a first class service for victims and witnesses. In time, it is my hope that this Code will assist victims, not only during their engagement with the Criminal Justice process but also afterwards in their journey of recovery.”

He also referred to the pressure that would be felt on resources in coming years, the progress made since Devolution, the need for speedier justice and the development of a future Strategy.

Dr Stephen Coulter, Lecturer in Social Work, Queen’s University Belfast

Dr Coulter’s presentation, entitled ‘*More than Just Nice? Emotional and Social Support for Victims of Crime*’ explored the nature and significance of emotional support in the context of trauma. The presentation covered the following areas:

- Setting the context - a psycho-social model of trauma

- Defining emotional and social support
- The general beneficial effects of social / emotional support - its powerful stuff!
- Some interventions based on this understanding
- Not all intended supportive behaviour is experienced as supportive
- A description of some possible mechanisms by which social support may operate

Dr Coulter explained how:

- Crime shatters our assumptive world
- People are emotionally vulnerable following the experience of crime
- The court system is primarily about the law (not justice)
- People can be re-traumatised by the criminal justice system

He outlined the body of research which has demonstrated the effectiveness and importance of social support in relation to reducing mortality and morbidity associated with many medical illnesses including:

- cardiovascular illness
- stroke and cancer
- co-morbid depression in people with chronic illnesses including:
 - Multiple Sclerosis
 - Cancer
 - Rheumatoid arthritis

He also described how:

- Being listened to is one of our most valued higher human needs
- Much of society is organised in ways that militate against deep or active listening.
- Today we tend to have fragmented families - relationally and geographically
- We live in a 'hurry' society - who's got the time?
- Older people may have narrow social networks, and feel vulnerable in multiple ways

In validating the approach adopted by Victim Support, Dr Coulter emphasised the value of our work which:

- Encourages victims to talk about the incident and then express empathy without any critical remarks about the victim's behaviour
- Offers information
- Offers moral support
- Offers practical assistance

Mr David Lyttle, Clinical Practice Manager, Nexus

Mr Lyttle described the work of Nexus in relation to victims and survivors of sexual abuse and reflected on the importance of Victim Support's services.

Nexus provides counselling and support services, including one to one counselling, client therapy groups, client workshops and family / partner

support groups. It has lengthy waiting lists, with clients waiting for up to 3 months for initial assessment and up to 6 months for ongoing counselling.

Only around 5% of Nexus clients enter the judicial system. That is approximately 90-100 per year, from a total of 1,800-2,000 survivors. Many victims do not report sexual abuse because of:

- Fear of being blamed
- Fear of disbelief
- Fear of Perpetrator
- Fear for family
- Loyalty to perpetrator
- Don't have the words
- No one to tell
- Shame
- Confusion
- Denial
- Sex is a taboo subject

The skills used by counsellors when working with victims of abuse are very similar to those used by Victim Support when talking with our clients. In both settings it is important to:

- Talk privately
- Listen and believe
- Stay calm and reassuring
- Acknowledge difficulties in telling
- Indicate that you are glad that they told you
- NOT press for details
- Be non-judgemental in your attitude
- Show warmth and respect
- Confidentiality (with limitations)
- NOT panic or overreact

Mr Lyttle reflected on the importance of compassion, stating that the healing properties of compassion have been written about for centuries. For example, the Dalai Lama stresses that if you want others to be happy, focus on compassion. Professor Paul Gilbert has discovered that while people with high levels of shame and self-criticism have enormous difficulty in being kind to themselves, the human affect regulatory system is 'hot wired' to respond positively to compassion.

Susan Reid, Chief Executive, Victim Support Northern Ireland

Ms Reid's presentation centred on a celebration of the work of the organisation. She reviewed the presentations made which had validated the importance of the support we provide to people affected by crime.

Some statistics demonstrate the extent and reach of our work:

- 27,562 victims referred
- 3,446 people emotionally supported

- 7,000 witnesses supported
- 5,608 pre-trial court visits
- 184 volunteers
- 3,816 volunteer hours available per month
- £½ million of volunteers' time
- 2,107 compensation applications
- £4.5 million compensation won

We have a high satisfaction rating - over 87% for all services, with our clients stating that the best thing we did for them included:

- Listening
- Providing help and support
- Being believed and not judged
- Being kept informed

We are building up a picture of the experience of our clients through a portfolio of case studies. We need to build on this in the future to ensure that we gain a real life understanding of what it means to be a victim of crime. We also need to reflect the experience of those who choose not to report a crime and those who will not see any outcome through the criminal justice system.

All of us in Victim Support have a responsibility to raise awareness about what we do and ensure that the criminal justice world is aware of what the impact of crime is on our clients. That is our challenge and our responsibility. We must also recognise and celebrate the fact that emotional support is part of all that we do in Victim Support. Our clients are not simply victims or witness or claimants, they are people. We must all be constantly focusing on how best we can help the person who has come to us for assistance.

In looking forward we must:

- Be innovative in seeking to address new issues and problems that arise in the course of our work.
- Be dedicated to and responsive to the evolving and changing needs of victims.
- Be flexible and adaptive as an organisation so that we are always fit for purpose as the environment changes

Section 3 Workshop Discussions & Feedback

There were two questions or themes for conference workshops and ten workshop groups in total. Five groups discussed theme 1 and five groups discussed theme 2. Each group was allocated one facilitator to guide the workshop discussion and one scribe to take notes. One hour was allowed for the workshop discussions. To help facilitate the discussions within the two themes, attendees were asked to categorise their suggestions into three main areas as follows:

- 1 The benefits
- 2 The issues / difficulties
- 3 The solutions

The views of each of the groups' were gathered together at the end of the session. The most common suggestions were then collated and presented to the conference in the format below.

Theme 1 - Restorative Justice: How can we maximise the benefit for the victim?

The BENEFITS of Restorative Justice to victims of crime

- Victims voice is heard/empowered
- Seen as good practice internationally
- Allows victims to get answers - "Why me?"
- Includes victims in a process where they may never have been included

The ISSUES/DIFFICULTIES we are currently experiencing

- Re-victimisation
- Current lack of experience and knowledge of how it works in practice
- Sincerity/honesty of offender

- Follow up with victim may not occur, this may lead to dissatisfaction

The SOLUTIONS to these difficulties

- Good communication and accountability between the agencies to cover all stages including the outcomes
- Raise awareness of the schemes
- Training on how to support a victim through the process

Theme 2 - Valuing emotional support throughout all of our services

The BENEFITS of emotional support to victims of crime

- Objectivity and confidentiality outside the family
- Flexibility to provide the kind of support people need
- Signposting to other organisations
- Non-judgemental

The ISSUES/DIFFICULTIES we are currently experiencing in recognising, understanding and communicating the value and benefits

- Need to explain to ourselves and others the importance of emotional/social support
- Lack of information of police/prosecution action continues to traumatise and impair recovery
- Some clients view us as a counselling service

The SOLUTIONS to these difficulties

- Define and expand on emotional support and promote it throughout all Victim Support NI services in order to convey the value of what we do
- Continue to promote value of service with Criminal Justice agencies
- Enhance information exchange with criminal justice agencies to support victim recovery
- Develop out thinking internally regarding the information supplied by our speakers today

Section 4 Volunteer & Staff Recognition

The conference provided a valuable opportunity to recognise and celebrate the central role played by our volunteers in Victim Support. In doing so, we also recognised the organisation's continued commitment to providing the majority of our direct services to victims and witnesses through carefully selected, well trained and managed volunteers.

Volunteering is a core value of victim support and we value our high calibre volunteers.

Core learning accreditation

Since October 2007, Victim Support has had its core learning programme accredited through the Open College Network. This has been both internally and externally validated and is accredited at Level 3 which is a commendable achievement.

A total of 18 staff and volunteers have completed the accreditation process and many more are in the process of completing their portfolio of experience. 4 staff and volunteers were able to be present at the conference and received their certificates. These were:

- **Dermot McCabe** - volunteering with Omagh Community Service
- **Chris Heatley** - volunteering with Witness Service Belfast
- **Kathryn Crane** - working in Belfast Community Service
- **Karen Tallon** - working in Belfast Community Service

Volunteer long service awards

Last year we recognised our 7 longest serving volunteers. This year, 5 more people who have been volunteering with us for over 10 years each were celebrated.

These were:

Eithne Wilson who joined Victim Support over 16 years ago, helped set up the Community Service within North & West Belfast and became volunteer Coordinator.

Now a volunteer with Witness Service Belfast Eithne hopes to be able to continue volunteering for many more years to come.

Sheila Graham has been providing emotional and practical support to victims of crime for 25 years since first joining Victim Support NI (VSNI) as a Branch Co-ordinator. Following the decision to retire from employment, Sheila rejoined the organisation as a volunteer and now volunteers with both Lisburn Community Service and Downpatrick Witness Service.

Martin Finlay is a Dual Volunteer in Lisburn Community Service and Downpatrick Witness Service and has been offering his support to victims of crime for 10 years. Martin executes his volunteering duties with energy, efficiency and professionalism. Many victims/witnesses who Martin has supported have expressed their gratitude and some have even stated that they feel they could not have got through their court experience without his support on the day.

Sammy Wilson has been providing emotional and practical support to victims of crime for over 10 years, currently volunteering in both Lisburn and Omagh Community Services and in Dungannon Witness Service. Sammy first joined Victim Support when there was a local branch in Cookstown. As the organisation has changed and moved locations, Sammy has come along with us. He has also played an active role in both the Management Committee and the Volunteer Forum.

David Fullerton has been a volunteer with Community Service Belfast for over 10 years. David recently represented Victim Support in the 4 Tier project within the Newtownabbey area, working closely with the police and other key partners.

Section 5 Summary of Evaluation Comments

	Agree	Disagree	Unsure
Venue The venue and catering arrangements were satisfactory	71	1	0
Conference Programme The overall content of the day was informative and useful	71	1	0
The speakers were well informed and presentations were interesting	72	0	0
Workshops The workshop themes were relevant and prompted useful discussion	70	1	1
The workshop facilitator helped stimulate discussion	70	2	0
Overall The conference has improved my knowledge and understanding of the services Victim Support NI provides	66	5	1
The conference has provided opportunity to feel part of Victim Support NI as a whole	71	0	1

The table above is a summary of the comments provided on the conference evaluation forms. In total, 72 individuals attending the conference completed and returned the conference evaluation form. Out of these 72, 71 individuals

agreed that the venue and catering arrangements were satisfactory and one individual disagreed with this statement.

Of the 72 respondents 71 agreed that the overall content of the day was informative and useful. One individual disagreed with this view. All respondents agreed that the speakers were well informed and the presentations were interesting.

Out of a total of 72 respondents, 70 agreed that the workshop themes were relevant and prompted useful discussion. One individual disagreed with this statement and one respondent was unsure. Seventy respondents agreed the workshop facilitator helped stimulate discussion and 2 individuals disagreed with this statement.

Overall, 66 respondents agreed that the conference improved their knowledge and understanding of the services Victim Support NI provides. Five respondents disagreed with this statement and 1 individual was unsure. Finally out of the 72 respondents, 71 agreed the conference provided them with the opportunity to feel part of Victim Support NI as a whole. One individual was unsure of this statement.

The evaluation form also gave respondents the opportunity to express any other comments they had regarding the Staff and Volunteer Conference. These are summarised below.

Comments on presentations and workshops

“Guest speakers were excellent.”

“Guest speakers were interesting.”

“Very informative, enjoyable and all speakers very impressive, can’t wait to get copies.”

“Suggestion for next year - maybe a speaker on Youth Conferencing e.g. Youth Justice Agency, to better inform discussion and knowledge of restorative options. Thank you for inviting me.”

“I was in the second workshop. Think I would have benefited from the one on Restorative Justice as well.”

General Comments

“It would have been nice to get some feedback talks from volunteers in each service; to help new comers and those in other sections of the service.”

“Informative, enjoyable meeting.”

“I felt this conference was extremely beneficial and I really enjoyed it, thanks.”

“Very well worth the day’s attendance - excellent.”

“Very good. Better than last time.”

“A thoroughly enjoyable and informative day. Well organised and smooth running.”

Section 6 Next Steps

From the discussions which took place during this year’s conference workshops, a number of solutions were identified to the difficulties/issues raised in each of the workshop themes. With regards to the Restorative Justice themed workshops, these are:

- Raise awareness of Restorative Justice Schemes both internally with Victim Support NI staff and volunteers but also externally with the victims of crime we support
- Good communication and accountability between the agencies involved in Restorative Justice Schemes is vital. This should include all stages including the outcomes of the Restorative justice process
- Training on how to support a victim through the Restorative Justice process so staff and volunteers feel confident in their role

The common solutions identified within the Emotional Support themed workshops are:

- Define and expand on emotional support and promote it throughout all Victim Support NI services in order to convey the value of what we do
- Continue to promote value of service with criminal justice agencies
- Enhance information exchange with criminal justice agencies to support victim recovery
- Develop our thinking internally regarding the information supplied by the speakers at the conference

Victim Support NI as an organisation will strive to incorporate these solutions into our planning activities for the coming year.

Appendix 1

Progress from Last Year's Action Points

The two workshop themes from VSNI's conference last year were, '*What do victims of crime need that is not currently or readily available?*', and '*What do we need to convey to our stakeholders regarding issues encountered by victims of crime?*'

A number of relevant and important suggestions were made in last year's workshop discussions. These suggestions have been taken forward at all levels of the organisation through the following areas of work:

- Contributed towards the development of a Victim Support NI Manifesto for Victims and Witnesses of Crime
- Assisted in the development of a Campaign Strategy and Victim Support NI's campaigning themes
- Facilitated Senior Management in their meetings with other criminal justice agencies. During their meetings Senior Management has drawn on specific

examples of good and bad practice highlighted by staff and volunteers in the conference workshops

- Provided an evidence base to assist Victim Support NI in the formulation of a number of consultation responses relating victims and witnesses of crime. For example, the consultations on the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime and Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings

Victim Support NI will continue to incorporate these issues into future areas of work.