

National Strategy for Community Justice: review consultation

Scottish Government Consultation 2026

Victim Support Scotland is a national organisation dedicated to supporting victims and witnesses of crime. As Scotland's largest victims' organisation, people impacted by crime have access to our services right across the country. We are a listening ear when people need to talk to someone about the impact of crime, we provide practical support such as when people need a safety plan to feel secure in their home and we give access to critical crime-related emergency funds in their time of need.

We play a crucial role in delivering victim-centred support, and this in turn drives our forceful and successful lobbying and campaigning for change within the criminal justice system. As an organisation rooted in the experiences of victims and witnesses, we aim to ensure that their voices are central to the development of policy and practice.

Background to the consultation:

[National Strategy for Community Justice: review consultation - gov.scot](https://gov.scot/national-strategy-for-community-justice-review-consultation)

A consultation to support the statutory review of the National Strategy for Community Justice.

***Please note:** VSS did not answer every question in this consultation. This is because we do not have expertise in all areas of community justice, particularly its operation.



Question 2: To what extent do you agree/disagree that the strategy provides sufficient information on the following aspects of community justice?

- Explaining what is meant by “community justice”
- The evidence that supports the role of community justice within the justice system
- The strategic context, including interaction with other relevant strategies.
- How the strategy is delivered
- How lived experience informs priorities and delivery
- The importance of supporting victims of crime
- Examples of good practice from local Community Justice Partnership

Response options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly agree.

- Please explain your response further.

Answer:

Neutral.

Explaining what is meant by “community justice”

Victim Support Scotland is one of the leading organisations in Scotland which supports victims of crime. In our experience of supporting victims of all crime types, we have found that community sentencing and community justice are not well explained or understood by victims, their families, or the wider public.

We welcome the definition provided in the strategy as an explanation for organisations and agencies. However, if this definition is to be conveyed to members of the public, and victims in particular, it requires further explanation of what is required of an offender during a community sentence.

Victims tell VSS support staff that they view community sentences and community justice as a 'slap on the wrist' rather than as a serious sentence. Support staff outline that it would be beneficial for victims and families to be told what a community sentence entails, particularly in relation to what the offender will be doing and which services they may interact with during the course of the community sentence.

We therefore contend that the strategy should outline the importance of providing a clear and trauma-informed explanation of what community justice is, and the specifics of sentencing in relation to their case. This supports a transparent, trauma-informed justice system as well as the victim-centred approach, by keeping victims and families informed.

How the strategy is delivered

In addition, we suggest a targeted awareness campaign to explain community sentencing and community justice. If the Scottish Government wish to strengthen community justice and increase its use as an alternative to custodial sentences (as outlined in the [Prison population and penal reform - working towards a sustainable prison population: consultation - gov.scot](#)) work must be done to promote its purpose, how it operates, and its positive outcomes. This could be done via online web pages, social media posts, dedicated information within courts and police stations, or through targeted sessions with victim support organisations who can relay the information to the people they are supporting.

Not only will this support transparency for victims and support feelings of safety, but it will also demonstrate the importance and involvement of community services within community justice.

How lived experience informs priorities and delivery

We are supportive of ensuring that lived experience informs priorities and delivery. At Victim Support Scotland we see the greatest benefits arise when we listen to and include the experiences of people who use our services.

It may be useful to outline how lived experience (of victims as well as people serving community sentences) should be sought and how it will be used to inform priorities and delivery. In our experience, victims and families who wish to participate are keen to understand how best they can contribute to making positive changes within the justice system.

The importance of supporting victims of crime

As a victim support charity, Victim Support Scotland will always advocate on behalf of victims. Protecting victims and the public from further harm should remain an absolute priority. Ensuring that they are supported at every step of the justice process, including where community justice is the route taken, is integral to a trauma informed justice system and the victim-centred approach to justice.

Victim-Centred Approach to Justice

Victim Support Scotland is and always will be steadfast in our belief and support of the Victim-Centred Approach to Justice, which is designed to ensure that victims, their families and witnesses are treated with fairness, compassion and in a trauma-informed manner, where their safety and wellbeing is the priority.

Under this approach, victims, families of victims and witnesses will have access to consistent, appropriate and timely information and support. They are supported to understand their rights and have confidence that these rights will be upheld, and they will be able to participate effectively. The provision of this support is underpinned by effective collaborative working across the justice system and sector.

As stated earlier in our answer, we have heard that it is often the case that some victims may feel as though a community disposal is a 'slap on the wrist' for an offender, compared to a custodial sentence. This not only impacts feelings of safety for victims but can also impact their confidence in the criminal justice system. Community sentences can leave victims and families feeling heightened fear, alarm and distress at the prospect of the offender not being in prison.

Victim support services are an important part of supporting victims in situations where community justice is pursued. We feel that this National Strategy could be more explicit mention of how victims can receive support and where to find it.

Question 5: How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 2 (Ensure that robust and high quality community interventions and public protection arrangements are consistently in place across Scotland)?

3. Support the use of robust alternatives to remand **by** ensuring high quality bail services are consistently available and delivered effectively.

4. Strengthen options for safe and supported management in the community **by** increasing and widening the use of electronic monitoring technologies.

5. Ensure that those given community sentences are supervised and supported appropriately to protect the public, promote desistance from offending and enable rehabilitation **by** delivering high quality, consistently available, trauma informed services and programmes.

6. Ensure restorative justice is available across Scotland to all those who wish to access it **by** promoting and supporting the appropriate and safe provision of available services.

Response options: Not at all useful, Not very useful, Neutral, Quite useful, Very useful.

- Please explain your response further.

Answer:

Neutral.

The premise of the priority actions set out for Aim 2 are useful. VSS contends that they have not been fully recognised and we offer the following comments.

Aim 2 states - '*Confidence in community interventions among the judiciary, prosecutors, victims of crime and the general public*'

As mentioned in previous answers to this consultation, it has not been the experience of Victim Support Scotland that awareness of and confidence in community interventions have been improved, therefore we cannot agree that Aim 2 is being fully achieved.

Some victims and their families continue to report to us that community sentences cause them fear, alarm and distress. This could be argued to be underpinned by the belief that community sentences are not as harsh as custodial sentences, and a potential feeling that victims and families have not received justice. There must be assurances for victims and their families that community sentences are addressing the punishment aspect for the offender, as well as the necessary steps for rehabilitation - this will contribute to feelings of safety. As such, we welcome the Scottish Government's current consideration via the 'Prison population and penal reform - working towards a sustainable prison population' consultation to strengthen community sentences.

- It is vital that this information – what rehabilitative measures are in place and how the punishment aspect is fulfilled in a community sentence – is communicated to victims in a clear and trauma-informed manner.

Priority Action 3: Support the use of robust alternatives to remand **by** ensuring high quality bail services are consistently available and delivered effectively.

Victim Support Scotland notes that there have been cases in which further offending has been committed whilst an offender has been on bail. We have also heard from victims the huge amount of fear they feel when an offender is released on bail, because they feel that some offenders are not deterred by bail conditions and will reoffend despite them.

We welcome the new suggestion that GPS monitoring could be used for people on bail. We caution that this must be rigorously enforced by police and sufficiently resourced. Victims often tell us that breaches of exclusion zones or electronic tag conditions are not responded to.

Priority Action 4: Strengthen options for safe and supported management in the community **by** increasing and widening the use of electronic monitoring technologies.

Victim Support Scotland supports victims of all crime types, meaning we see various different disposals imposed on offenders and the impact these can have on victims.

Some victims have told us that they think offenders breach conditions of electronic monitoring without fear of repercussion.

We welcome the renewed prospect that electronic monitoring may be bolstered by GPS technology. However, we highlight that breaches of conditions must be dealt with more efficiently. Electronic monitoring provides the location of the offender at any point in time - it does not necessarily prevent further offending.

Priority action 4 has therefore not been so useful so far, but there is the prospect of improving it to achieve Aim 2.

Priority Action 5: Ensure that those given community sentences are supervised and supported appropriately to protect the public, promote desistance from offending and enable rehabilitation **by** delivering high quality, consistently available, trauma informed services and programmes.

Victim Support Scotland raises concerns about the lack of current resources for provision of rehabilitation as part of community sentencing. The Scottish Government has indicated a desire to continue to expand the use of community justice measures to achieve a sustainable prison population. However, community resources are already stretched without additional numbers of community sentences being handed out.

We have heard from our support workers in more rural areas, such as the Highlands and Islands, that it is often the case that aspects of a community sentence cannot be carried out by an offender because of limited local resources. This not only impacts the offender's ability to complete their sentence and potentially access the rehabilitation/reintegration support they require, but it also impacts upon feelings of safety for victims, ultimately affecting their confidence in the criminal justice system as a whole.

For the National Strategy to be effectively implemented, the Scottish Government must give consideration to the current strain on resources across the country. Desistance cannot be achieved if offenders are not set up for success in the community – this includes not fulfilling rehabilitation and support programmes due to a lack of resources. There should be detailed planning to outline how the Scottish Government expects services to meet this increased demand if community sentencing is to work effectively for both offenders and victims.

Priority Action 6 - Ensure restorative justice is available across Scotland to all those who wish to access it **by** promoting and supporting the appropriate and safe provision of available services.

Victim Support Scotland supports the implementation of victim-led restorative justice.

We suggest that crime type exclusions be considered when using restorative justice as a potential route, for example in cases of domestic abuse.

In parallel to this, it is essential that agreeing to participate in restorative justice by an offender should not result in lesser sentences being imposed. It is pertinent that we do not equate agreeing to and participating in restorative justice to lessened risk. It is important that offenders who engage in restorative justice continue to fulfil the punishment part of their sentence in full.

Finally, for safe and successful restorative justice there must a consistent risk assessment framework which is implemented from the outset and routinely monitored throughout the restorative justice process. This is an essential step in ensuring victims remain safe throughout.

Question 7: How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 4 (Strengthen the leadership, engagement, and partnership working of local and national community justice partners)?

11. Deliver improved community justice outcomes **by** ensuring that effective leadership and governance arrangements are in place and working well, collaborating with partners and planning strategically.

12. Enhance partnership planning and implementation **by** ensuring the voices of victims of crime, survivors, those with lived experience and their families are effectively incorporated and embedded.

13. Support integration and reduce stigma **by** ensuring the community and workforce have an improved understanding of and confidence in community justice.

Response options: Not at all useful, Not very useful, Neutral, Quite useful, Very useful.

- Please explain your response further.

Answer:

Priority Action 12: Enhance partnership planning and implementation **by** ensuring the voices of victims of crime, survivors, those with lived experience and their families are effectively incorporated and embedded.

At the heart of a victim-centred approach to justice is ensuring the voices of victims of crime, survivors, people with lived experience and their families are effectively incorporated into decisions about changes to the criminal justice system.

Consequently, Victim Support Scotland welcomes priority action 12, but makes the following observations.

Priority action 12 offers little detail on how victims' voices should be systematically gathered and considered. The strategy should outline the trauma-informed ways that lived experience should be sought and how different groups of victims should be engaged. Further to this, clarity must be given as to how victims are informed that they have a right to have their voice heard and how this will be achieved.

Central to this is consideration of whether there must be legislation in place to enshrine and protect information gathering from victims. This is important so that the option to input is always offered and fully understood by victims.

As stated, input from victims, survivors, people with lived experience and their families is integral to supporting a trauma-informed and victim-centred criminal justice system. Inclusion of input from victims with lived experience can help to identify the gaps between policy intention and practical reality.

In our experience of working with victims, witnesses and their families, listening to and considering their experiences has allowed us to identify previously unconsidered aspects of policy and practice, as well as areas of good practice. In order to achieve priority action 12, we suggest more explicit mention of the involvement of victim support organisations in supporting and helping to gather experiences and input from victims, survivors, people with lived experience and their families. For priority action 12 to be useful in achieving Aim 4, there needs to be appropriate information sharing agreements in place and a robust, joined-up working approach between agencies.

Priority action 13: Support integration and reduce stigma **by** ensuring the community and workforce have an improved understanding of and confidence in community justice.

Victim Support Scotland reiterates the comments we have made in relation to feelings amongst victims that community sentences feel more like a 'slap on the wrist' rather than a serious sentence and that community sentences often contribute to a feeling of reduced safety.

Question 12: Do you have any other comments on the National Strategy for Community Justice that were not captured in the previous questions?

Answer:

In line with the Scottish Government's proposal to expand the use of community justice as a step in achieving a sustainable prison population, there must be in-depth consideration of the additional pressures that will be placed on community justice partners in the delivery of this. The Scottish Government must look to expand recruitment and increase funding for these aims for community justice to be realised beyond 2026.

There are a number of concurrent consultations with shorter than usual timelines and similar submission dates, all of which are relevant to victims and Victim Support Scotland, and which merit a response. Consequently, we have answered this as fully as time has allowed. We would be happy to provide further comment and explanation if required.