

# HEARING THE VOICE OF PEOPLE AFFECTED BY CRIME

**Victim Support Scotland update  
on service user involvement**

**February 2020**

## Background

Victim Support Scotland is the leading charity dedicated to helping people affected by crime across Scotland.

We support victims of crime, witnesses and their family members, regardless of who they are and their circumstances. Our service is independent, free, non-judgemental and confidential. We offer bespoke support, personalised to the needs of each individual.

Victim Support Scotland represents the voice of people affected by crime. We influence key national policy decision-making to champion victim and witness rights and improve support services.

We advocate for positive improvements within the criminal justice system, working alongside our partners in the key criminal justice agencies, the third sector and local organisations.

## Why consult with our service users?

Listening and responding to the voices and experiences of those impacted by crime is one of the best ways we can push for positive change within Scotland's criminal justice system. It is therefore important that we involve those who have used our support services ('service users') in all that we do.

We want people to feel empowered and to have their voice heard as a victim or witness of crime.

Service user involvement includes people whether they have or have not been a direct service user of Victim Support Scotland. Some people want to tell us about our services, or about the impact of crime, or about their experiences of the criminal justice system. Others might have not been a direct victim of crime but want to make services better for people in their community.

**"To be heard by the people who have the power to implement changes in order to improve the system for victims and their families in the future is crucial."**

Feedback about involvement

## **Our approach to service user involvement**

The needs of service users are at the core of VSS's ethos of Victim Support Scotland. This is captured in the organisational vision as stated in the 2018-2021 strategic plan *Victims and Witnesses First*: 'all those affected by crime who need it receive high quality support to recover from their experiences'. Hearing the voices of service users is also central to the campaigning and policy work of our organisation and links in with our mission: 'Victims and witnesses of crime are at the heart of justice in Scotland'.

The lessons we learn from involvement are essential for Victim Support Scotland. We can improve and develop our own support services around this valuable feedback. Our policy and communications work is directly informed by what we learn about the experiences of people affected by crime in Scotland.

Victim Support Scotland has also been engaging with victims and witnesses as part of the *Victims Taskforce*[1]. This brings together the leaders of Scottish criminal justice agencies and support organisations to improve support, advice and information for victims of crime. Victim Support Scotland and Rape Crisis Scotland have set up 'Reference Groups' to get the valuable input of individuals.

People have given their feedback as part of the Reference Groups in lots of different ways: in one-to-one meetings, over the phone, via email and in group

[1] <https://www.gov.scot/groups/victims-taskforce/>

settings. Participants have expressed the importance to them of their voices being heard and their insight used to make a difference across the system.

## Key themes raised through involvement

### 1. Information and communication

The way information is communicated – or sometimes not communicated – to individuals in the aftermath of a crime has been a key theme across discussions. Some individuals have highlighted good practice where they were kept updated to the extent that they expected at different stages of the criminal justice process. Knowing where to turn with any questions was seen as valuable.

**“You are bombarded with so much info, and so much jargon, it is very hard to explain to others around you even if understand it yourself.”**

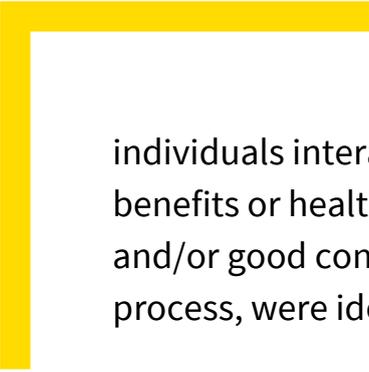
Feedback about the criminal justice process

For some individuals, however, they felt unaware of what was happening at different stages of the justice process, or were given information in a format that they did not understand. For other individuals, the court process as a victim and/or witness of crime was a time of uncertainty around issues such as timescales and what would be expected of them within the court.

**“I wanted just a wee phonecall, just a wee email...”**

Feedback about court date update

Some individuals have highlighted barriers they found in the communication flow between agencies in the aftermath of crime, meaning they had to explain themselves or tell their story multiple times. This also included agencies



individuals interacted with outside of the justice system such as housing, benefits or health. Having systems that communicated well across agencies and/or good contact with an individual who could guide a person through the process, were identified as ways to navigate this complicated system.

**“If it’s not the same person' you are explaining everything again.”**

Feedback about liaising with different agencies

## **2. Trauma informed support**

Individual feedback highlights the importance of support that understands an individual’s needs and is truly trauma informed. This applies to agencies within the criminal justice system directly, but also wider services that somebody might need to access as a victim or witness of crime.

**“I was actually excited when I went in with my form, but came out like 'Wow, they must not read the forms, because if they did, they wouldn't treat me like that' ... You're not putting yourself through all this to have the door shut on your face.”**

Feedback about accessing wider services

**“Two years to get counselling, and then they are tearing up... They walk out saying they can't handle this, and I think, try living with this.”**

Feedback about accessing specialist support

As well as examples of support that people did not feel was trauma informed, some people have given examples of support where the person understood them and the services that they received fulfilled their needs.

**“I can talk for hours at a time if I want to...she never leaves me with me thinking that she’ll not be back...she calls me up at key times.”**

Feedback about accessing services in the community

### **3. Victim and witness rights**

A considerable amount of discussion with people affected by crime has also focused on the rights that people possess as victims or witnesses of crime. Several individuals have highlighted a feeling that they as a victim or witness have no rights within the criminal justice process. For other individuals, they knew there might be entitlements to things such as information. However without appropriate support they faced barriers in finding out what their actual rights were, or how to put these rights into practice.

**“People think you can’t challenge it. If you haven’t got connections, you don’t know how to start.”**

Feedback about the criminal justice process

An important role for Victim Support Scotland is helping people to know the rights possessed as victim or witness of crime, as written down in the Scottish Victims Code.

Our Victims Awareness Week 2020 campaign #kenyourcode has been the start of our awareness campaign to raise awareness of the rights that victims have to minimum standards of service, to information, to participation, to protection, to support, to compensation and expenses, and to complain.

**“Within the system, as a victim, you have to have a voice.”**

Feedback from an individual about being criminal justice system

## **Looking ahead: Our involvement plans**

At Victim Support Scotland we recognise how powerful involvement is to drive improvement and change in our own services and across the criminal justice system.

**“When families begin to see their voice has been heard by people who have the power to implement changes it will give them the confidence and courage to continue.”**

Feedback from someone supported by Victim Support Scotland

### **Victim Support Scotland will continue to:**

- Spread the word about service user involvement opportunities.
- Invite people who use our Victim Support Scotland services to give feedback on their experiences of using our support.
- Welcome all people to share their stories about the criminal justice system to inform service delivery and system change.
- Encourage people to have an input on the way we do involvement in Victim Support Scotland.

Our service user engagement work has the potential to produce considerable benefits for people affected by crime, the criminal justice system, and for Victim Support Scotland to adapt its services based on victims’ needs. We aim to see service user involvement embedded at the heart of Victim Support Scotland by 2021.

## Get involved

We would welcome your views on the criminal justice system, support services or on service user involvement opportunities, whether you have used Victim Support Scotland services directly or not.

- Visit our information page: [victimsupport.scot/share](https://victimsupport.scot/share)
- Email us at: [getinvolved@victimsupportscotland.org.uk](mailto:getinvolved@victimsupportscotland.org.uk)
- Call us: **0131 668 4486**



Whoever you are  
Whatever the crime  
We're here to help

**0800 160 1985**

[victimsupport.scot](https://www.victimsupport.scot)

