

VSS Language Guidance

This guide is to assist external partners within the criminal justice system when engaging or interacting with victims, witnesses, and their families.

The guide includes common phrases and words that are used in relation to our work at VSS and how to communicate in a trauma informed way by using more sensitive language.

It will provide the 'do's and 'don'ts' of common language that is used in connection with victims, witnesses and families. The hope is we will use this not just for our external partners, but longer term as a guide for the public and the media when it comes to talking about victims and witnesses in a more appropriate way.

This is a live document that will be regularly updated and formatted which means the current content is not exhaustive.

Phrases or words we suggest can be used

All Crime / more general

'People affected by crime' – VSS' first choice to use.

'Victims and witnesses' - if VSS has already said 'people affected by crime' in the sentence or recently in the paragraph - i.e., the preceding sentence. VSS also uses this term if it wants to highlight that it does not just support victims of crime but witnesses as well, or if it is talking about support in the court, too.

'Victims, witnesses and their families' - as above and if VSS is talking about the ripple effect of crime and the wider support it provides.

'Victims of crime' – VSS uses this sometimes, only when witnesses are not included in its messaging, and it has said 'people affected by crime' repeatedly.

'We work with' - We use the word working 'with' as opposed to 'for' or on behalf of people affected by crime. Working 'for' can be experienced as patronising and disempowering.

You may want to use the term **'victim-survivors'** instead of victims on its own. This term allows the person themselves to choose how to identify – some people may not like to be referred to a 'victim of crime' but see themselves as a 'survivor of crime'; others were vice-versa but saying 'victim-survivor' gave them back some of the autonomy to choose.

Using warmer terms when labelling or describing anyone - **'people, people using our/VSS services, people that we/VSS support'**, instead of service user, clients, individuals.

Murder and Culpable Homicide

'People bereaved by crime'

'Families bereaved by crime'

Use **murder and culpable homicide** as these are the accepted legal terms in Scotland.
(Manslaughter is not a terminology used in Scotland)

Empowerment

'**Move forward**' - VSS empowers people to move forward after a crime rather than move on or recover. We use 'move forward' to acknowledge what people have experienced and show positive outcome of the work they put in themselves and the support we provide.

'**Building a life around their grief**' - VSS Supporting Families Bereaved by Crime advises when talking about family members / families this acknowledges that they never 'get over' this bereavement.

Problematic substance use & problematic alcohol/drug use is a better way to describe substance abuse, substance misuse, substance use issues, addict, alcoholic dependency, relapsed.

'**I'm here to listen and help in any way I can**' - a simple phrase that anyone can use when talking to people affected by crime, shows that you care for them and are willing to listen to their worries or concerns and provide the support that they require in the best way that you can.

Communities

'**Undocumented**' to be used instead of 'illegal' when referring to a person without status. The term 'illegal' is rooted in suspicion that treats people as possible offenders.

Words or phrases that we would suggest you do not use

'Victims' – VSS does not use this term alone

'Service users or clients' - do not use for external communications, media releases or when speaking to anyone you are supporting. The people we support have expressed the term feels cold.

'Those affected by crime' – VSS does not use this phrase and is trying to correct all instances of use. 'Those' as a term can be perceived as 'othering' (us vs them) and ultimately VSS supports 'people' not 'those'.

When family or friends have been asked to identify the body of a loved one, Police Officers and pathologists should be mindful of using the term **'evidence'** to describe the body of their loved one because they do not see them in this way and feel that the term is insensitive. You may wish to consider using the deceased's name or relationship to the family member (i.e., your brother/son) as a warmer way to describe them.

'It's not your fault' should be avoided as a standalone statement or conversation starter, because many people affected by crime need to feel some sort of control over their situation and feeling 'at fault' is sometimes how they do that. If someone says, 'this is my fault', then it is ok to say 'It's not your fault' in response and discuss with them why they would think that, but you should not initiate any conversation with the phrase.

'Complainant' in a court setting is often used to describe the victim of a crime/witness, however out with the court room this term should be avoided, especially in the presence of the witness. It has negative connotations of complaining, causing trouble etc. Using the term witness, which they are, is a more neutral term.

'Non-compliant, hostile or unengaged' - a more positive terms to use are 'Chooses not to' or 'doesn't wish to'.

'Battling addiction, fighting addiction' - use sensitive recovery focused language, avoid using language that attributes blame such as this implies winners & losers and that the people who are still in active addiction 'aren't fighting hard enough'.

'If you do not come forward, this could happen to someone else' - this puts responsibility on to someone for something that may or may not happen in the future and is almost blaming someone if they do not step forward to report or give evidence.

'You don't deserve this/you didn't do anything to deserve this' - implies that there are circumstances where someone *did* "deserve" what had happened to them.

'You're brave' implies similarly to the above, implies that people who chose to not come forward are not brave.

VSS is also trying to make the language it uses straightforward and accessible for people with low literacy, English as an alternative language, cognitive disabilities, and visual impairments.