

Street Weapons Commission – Liverpool

Sue Younger

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Welcome Sue. Sue you've been working with Victim Support in Nottinghamshire with their young witness service.

Sue Younger

Yes that's right.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Can you tell us a little bit about the sort of work you do with these young witnesses who have been victims of gun and knife crime?

Sue Younger

Yes we work with youngsters from very young children, five years old up to the age of 17. The ones that have been involved with gun and knife crime are usually older teenagers. Perhaps 14 or 15, 16 years old. And the main problem that we find with these young people is the actual fear of going to court and the actual fear of being a witness. And I have a team of 30

volunteers. And they work with the children and the young people and we do home visits where we prepare them. We talk to them about court. About what it's going to be like. Who does that. The different ways that they can give their evidence. A lot of the questions that we get from them are concerning safety. How they're going to be kept safe. How they're not going to see the

defendant or the defendant's family or friends. And we explain to them that the witness service has various measures in place that will help them. Once we've done the home preparation we then take them to court and we do a visit with them so that they can experience the actual building, the place where they're going to wait. They will see that it's usually a separate

entrance that they can go in which will mean that they don't have to walk through the main concourse and be anywhere near the defendant or the defendant's friends and family. They will also look at the way they give their evidence. So they will be able to play with the live link

from the courtroom and from sitting in the live link room. They will look at screens round a witness

box if that is the way that they're going to give their evidence. We're there on the court day. We give them all the emotional support that they need. Getting them there usually is quite an easy process once they've gone through all our preparation. And then we do a post trial visit with them as well just to make sure that once the trial is all over that they're OK. We see if they

need to be referred to another agency. If they need further help we would signpost them to one of our partner agencies. And basically that's the service that we offer to children and young people.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Now in relation to the young people specifically with the gun and knife crime of course sometimes the young people you're working with who are the victims can also on other occasions been perpetrators themselves that particularly with guns and knives and gangs. These victims may well have been part of the gang how does that play out in your discussions with them?

Sue Younger

If they have been part of a gang they are very reluctant to speak out against other members of their gang. Again this is the fear of reprisals, not just for them, but their families can be threatened. They can be bullied in a school or college situation by other members of the gang. And again we really emphasise to them the safety aspects. How they will be kept safe in

court. How they will be kept away from the other people who are maybe the defendant's friends and family there that they would know. We also talk to them about the measures that the police can take should they be intimidated. We would encourage them to report all instances of intimidation. We would be in constant touch with the police officer in charge of the case. Information

would flow backwards and forwards about things that the young people and their families are experiencing. And in our experience the police are very, very helpful in Nottinghamshire. They will visit the families. They will help in any way that they can.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Because one of the things about gun and knife crime it often isn't a stranger that you find yourself facing at the other end of that gun or that knife. It is in fact somebody you know. And of course that poses particular challenges not simply about safety but also feelings of loyalty and not grassing on your friends. How do you deal with those sort of issues?

Sue Younger

Again we talk through how the children and young people are feeling. A lot of the work that we do revolves around really spending time with the children and young people. Talking to them about how they feel. Finding out what their particular fears are. And addressing them. And a lot of the children that we work with they do have to give evidence against defendants that

are not only maybe people that they know that they've been on the end of a knife with but also family. We work with children facing evidence in sexual crimes as well. So our volunteers are very much used to talking these issues through with the young people and helping them to get through. And it is we find quite amazing that when we have started to talk to the children

and young people and we do sort of pick apart what it is that's worrying them and address each issue as it comes up they are much more likely to want to go to court. They're much more likely to turn up. We worked with 343 children last year and four of them didn't turn up to court and the rest did.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And before your service was in existence in Nottinghamshire would there have been a higher level of non attendance?

Sue Younger

Yes there would. There was the victim service. The witness service, which is part of victim support, works in every court in the country and they do support children and young people nationally. But this service of ours which is an enhanced service is only available in a few places in the country. It's as a result of funding really because we're not nationally funded by the

money that victim support gets from the government. So we have to sustain the service ourselves. But we have found that there are a lot more children and young people going to court. They don't all necessarily give evidence because we also find that once the children and young people actually turn up in court.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

They plead guilty?

Sue Younger

Absolutely.

Commissioner

I'd like to find out a bit more what you do with children who are or young people who are acting as witnesses in gun and knife crime in particular rather than the wider stuff. Here in Liverpool the Reece Jones stuff one of the police's difficulties is no one wanted to give evidence. And it's not just fear it's based on reality isn't it that actually they could be, as a result of

giving become a grass, that they will lose status in their community and that they will actually be, them and their families will be at risk. What do you think you can add to that kind of situation to help reduce that? Have you got some examples of something similar?

Sue Younger

Yes. In that all the work that we do with children in gun and knife crimes it all hinges around the safety aspect. And that is the thing that they're most worried about we find. And as I've said before you know the steps that we take are steps to help them to counteract their fears. And the work that we do with children in violent crime is no different to the work that we do with

children in all crimes because we've found that our approach is the approach that works.

Commissioner

Which is what?

Commissioner

How do you assure them that this kid who literally does know where they live isn't going to get their mates to come and beat them up or torch the place?

Sue Younger

We can't. We can't.

Commissioner

What do you say then to this witness? What do you appeal to to make them stand up and put themselves at that risk?

Sue Younger

We give them the information that they're going to be kept safe in court and that the police will be able to help them if there's any intimidation or if you know if the house is firebombed or whatever might happen to them. But it is the work that the volunteers do and it is talking the issues through. We often come across children who say I'm not going to court. I'm terrified. I'm frightened to death they're gonna get me, they're gonna get me mum, you know those kinds of statements come to us on a regular basis. And we find that talking it through is the thing that helps because once we've worked with the children they go to court.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

But is that because the fears are groundless?

Sue Younger

No absolutely not. No. But the fact that somebody is listening, somebody is addressing their fears, and somebody is telling them what precautions are there to help them. We've had cases where children haven't even gone into the court building. We've had cases where children have given evidence over a live video link from another building. We had a case in Nottingham with a lot of children giving evidence and that was relayed to the Birmingham Crown Court

so they weren't even in the same city. They can do things like disguising voices. You know if you take it to the extreme the police have the witness protection programme that you know can come into force. But we aren't there to address the issues of intimidation as such and give

solutions as such. We are there to give the information to the children about what's going to happen in court. How it's all going to work. How they're going to be kept safe. The fact that somebody is going to be there with them throughout the whole journey. The same person. And this seems to work. It counteracts their fears. I can't tell you exactly how it works but the volunteers are experienced. They are trained. And it does work.

Commissioner

Could you give us a typical profile of a volunteer? Who are they and what sort of training is on offer and are there people in it with experience of say being a victim or a perpetrator?

Sue Younger

Some of our volunteers have been victims of crime and that's why they want to volunteer. Our volunteer base really reflects our community. There are people of all ages. Both sexes. From all different cultures. We have students who are taking criminology degrees. We have a grandpa who wanted something to do when his son emigrated to Australia. We have young mums who's kids have gone back to work and they want to give something back to the community. We have retired probation officers. We have a retired magistrate. People from all walks of life. They receive victim support's basic witness service training which is a national training available in the whole of the country. And then they received three days of specialised training from the young witness training in Nottinghamshire.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Specialised about how to deal with young people?

Sue Younger

Yes. The effects of crime on young people. How young people react. Young peoples development. How being a victim of crime can affect that development. Things that they might come across when they go into the home to support the children. Odd behaviour or

things like that that are as a result of the crime. They also learn about child protection. They learn about confidentiality. They learn about all the different ways children can give evidence. The special measures that are available. All those kinds of things that they're going to need. They also learn about what we call our volunteers toolkit which is a DVDs and videos, games, jigsaws, books, all kinds of things that are relevant to ages five up to 17 but the volunteers use to explain the court process to the children.

Commissioner

Do you think knife crime is different when you're dealing with young witnesses?

Sue Younger

I think ... young witnesses can be frightened of going to court for lots and lots and lots of different reasons and I think gun and knife crime is one of those reasons. But the fears that the young people have are very similar across the board no matter what type of case it is.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

How many of your cases in fact do involve guns and knives as opposed to sexual abuse and violence without weapons if I can put it like that?

Sue Younger

65% of the cases that we supported last year were violent crimes. And they ranged from actual bodily harm up to homicides. And everything in between. That's the only figure I can give you because it's not broken down any less than that. But a lot of the cases are violent.

Commissioner

One might surmise that if the offence is pretty serious and the penalty if found guilty or pleading guilty is also quite significant then retribution could also be quite heavy and so following an earlier question really about what happens down the track? Do you know anything about retribution in the communities towards young people who are known to have

been witnesses in cases of conviction? Do you have that information?

Sue Younger

We don't have that information. The police ...

Commissioner

But surely that's pretty critical to be able to offer further reassurance that usually these threats don't come to fruition?

Sue Younger

Yes I suppose it would be but we can't offer that reassurance because we don't have that information. The information that we have from a report that victim support has commissioned called Hoodie or Goodie is that children and young people who have received a positive image of the criminal justice system are less likely to go on to be offenders. And sometimes

if you've been a victim of a violent crime a lot of young people see the only way out of it as violent retaliation and hopefully the work that we do with them will give them that positive image and they won't go on to be violent themselves.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Presumably if they see that if the system works in that the person who is found guilty and in these cases would be sent to prison or some youth custody option then that may well lead to some confidence in the system and presumably as well if they are sent into custody then less likely to be roaming the streets and danger to the witness.

Sue Younger

One would hope so.

Commissioner

Your confidence building measures must be fantastic if you don't know whether any of your

previous clients have been intimidated or not after they've given evidence.

Sue Younger

Well we don't support them past the post trial visit at court. So our job ends there. And that's where we signpost them onto further agencies. So we don't keep that information because our job doesn't go that far. Our job is to inform them about the court process. To support them through it. And have a visit with them afterwards and signpost them to where they need help from.

So we don't go that far.

Commissioner

So they must ask you the older ones particularly have people in my situation before been beaten up or stabbed having given evidence and your answer has to be we don't know.

Sue Younger

We don't know. We don't know.

Commissioner

The DVD must be great then.

Sue Younger

Well LAUGHING well I think it is but I would. But we do do an evaluation with the children and young people that we've spoken to and worked with and last year 92% of the ones that returned the forms said they would recommend the service to a friend. 85% said they would report crime again. And 93% said they would go to court again if they had to. So I think our success rate

you know speaks for itself. And we've also won two justice awards for outstanding care for witnesses as well. So I think that speaks for us.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And the cost of your service?

Sue Younger

About 80 thousand pounds a year to run. It's some money from the local authority but we have to do a lot of fundraising ourselves to keep the service going.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And the 80 thousand pounds a year supports 340 was it?

Sue Younger

343 children last year. That was a 31% increase on the year before. Every year the number of children that need our help goes up.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

And to replicate that across the country?

Sue Younger

It would be good if our service could be part of the witness service. Part of the core service of victim support. That's what we would look for because the witness service has been supporting people in court for years and years and years and they do support children and young people but it's only where we can raise the extra funding that we're able to offer this enhanced service. So there are very few throughout the country. There's Nottingham. There's one in Greater Manchester. There's one in Kent that are the victim service ones and that's it.

Cherie Booth (Chair)

Well thank you Sue for coming and telling us about that work. Thank you.