

# Volunteer Panellist Conference 2006

Youth Offending Teams  
**reducing crime**  
serving leeds, bradford, calderdale, kirklees and wakefield

West Yorkshire YOTs hosted a conference for Community Panel Members in Brighouse on Saturday 18th November 2006. Over 70 volunteers from across the county met to consider how they could improve their role with young offenders, their families and victims of crime.

## Introduction

"I can think of nothing that improves public confidence more than by taking justice back into the communities most affected by crime and bringing offender and victim together around a table. In my view, Youth Offending Teams and Referral Panels are at the forefront of repairing some of the damage caused by youth crime, holding young people accountable for their actions, giving victims a voice in the process and answers to their questions and giving all concerned the opportunity to move on. This conference provided a forum for 70 volunteer panellists from across West Yorkshire to share experiences and best practice and learn new skills. The event was also an opportunity for the YOTs to acknowledge the invaluable work volunteer panellists do for their local communities."

**Richard Smith - Manager, Kirklees YOT**



The main speakers at the conference - (left to right) Adam Wallace, who spoke as a victim of crime, Malcolm Potter, Regional Manager of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, Superintendent Ian Whitehouse, Head of Community Safety for West Yorkshire Police and Richard Smith, Kirklees Youth Offending Team Manager.

## The view from West Yorkshire Police

Superintendent Ian Whitehouse is the recently appointed Head of Community Safety for West Yorkshire Police. He described his role and identified areas where the Police, YOTs and, in some cases, Referral Panels can build closer links.

Supt. Whitehouse acknowledged that the Police and YOTs have conflicting targets which can sometimes create tensions. The Police and partners are tasked to increase the number of Offences brought to justice (Reprimand, Final Warnings, Summons, Charge, TIC, FPN), whereas the YOTs targets are around reducing the numbers of Juvenile offenders entering the Criminal Justice System, and reducing the numbers of re-offenders.

The Police respond to calls and are pressurised to record, arrest, detect. As a consequence young people can enter the justice system much earlier. Added to this, the media brand 'Teenagers' as thugs, and a danger to the Community and, as a result, the public feel unsafe around groups of teenagers. Teenagers feel isolated from the Community.

Supt. Whitehouse said that there are many strategies for helping young people avoid getting into trouble which, as a consequence, will mean less need for Police intervention - a desired outcome for everyone concerned. Shared aims are stronger communities, better engagement with young people and reduced crime.

He praised the work of the Referral Panels and said that the role of volunteers in general in the youth justice system was an invaluable asset in the efforts to achieve these shared aims.

## The view from the Youth Justice Board

Malcolm Potter, Regional Manager of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, opened by reminding delegates that Referral Order Panels were set up as part of a wide range of measures aimed at reducing re-offending by young people. The work of Panels was designed to help guarantee that:

- Victims had a better opportunity for their views to be heard and considered
- Interventions helped the young person to understand the consequences of their offending
- Community engagement with the criminal justice system was improved.

These 3 components feed into wider government targets in regard to improving outcomes for young people, improving victim satisfaction and general confidence in the criminal justice system and meeting a Home Office target for greater voluntary and community engagement. Panels themselves form part of a growth in restorative justice interventions that include work to expand victim/offender mediation, restorative justice conferences and family group conferences.

Malcolm summarised the work of the Panels through the 3 R's principle:

Help offenders take  
Require offenders to make  
And assist in the offenders

**RESPONSIBILITY  
REPARATION  
REINTEGRATION**

He continued by stating that, nationally, there has been a reduction in reoffending rates of 3.8% since 2000 and that young people dealt with via panels have the lowest reconviction rates of all sentences including fines and discharges. However, he also identified areas for concern and improvement. He said referral orders might not be appropriate for some serious first time offenders; some magistrates have been concerned about delays between sentence and first panel; shared frustration in tackling some key causes behind offending particularly reengaging young people in education, training and employment.

This region has also demonstrated considerable innovation e.g. one area has won Investors in Volunteers status and others have persuaded local authorities to consider being a panel member as legitimate paid time-off for their staff. Some areas however are required to do more in terms of the retention of volunteers and generally more work is required to improve the overall representation of the whole community.

In terms of the challenges ahead the Home Office recently restated its view that victims needed to be put at the heart of the criminal justice system, and it seems clear that other policies will bring more young people into the criminal justice system than previously. There is some concern that this may lead to greater pressure within the system including higher numbers in court for the first time. So the challenge in the future may well be in managing more rather than less cases.

In summary though the overall assessment from the YJB is that the introduction of referral orders has been largely successful in terms of the 3 R's. The order is leading the way in the effort to reduce re-offending and the numbers of victims engaged is slowly increasing and there are good levels of victim satisfaction. It is also gratifying to see members of the public have chosen to volunteer for this task in high numbers. Malcolm closed by thanking the delegates, and their colleagues who were unable to attend, for their continuing hard work.

## The Victim's View

Adam Wallace addressed the conference and described his experience as a victim of crime. He was very honest and expressed how it was both frightening and frustrating, and that coming to terms with what had happened to him and his family had been difficult. Adam also described how involvement with the Referral Panel has helped him personally and he'd been impressed with how the case had been handled and that the problem had been resolved. He also added that a negative has become a positive because he is now training to become a panellist himself, bringing some of his experience to finding ways of resolving other people's difficulties with being a victim of crime.

## The Young Person's View

Tom, a young person from Calderdale, also spoke to the conference to give his perspective on being on 'the other side of the table'. He impressed the audience with his confidence and honesty as he described his experience. He had been nervous but had felt reassured by his panel and was determined to complete his programme and keep his contract. Tom also took questions from the floor which he handled very well, a young man clearly determined to make amends and turn his life around.

## The Parent's View

Christine McMahon, Calderdale YOT's Restorative Justice Co-ordinator, read out a statement by the mother of a young person given a Referral Order:

*"I think my son has had a fantastic opportunity to try things and meet different people that he wouldn't normally do. His attitude to life seems to have changed as well, just little different ways, but I have noticed. Yes, he is still a 14 year old boy and no angel, but in a way getting into trouble has been a bonus to me and my son in all the good things that have come out of it. He has had great people helping him on his way. They do a fantastic job. It's just a shame that he had to get into trouble in the first place before finding this out."*

## The Workshops and Discussion Groups

The purpose of the conference was to enable the panellists, through the workshops and discussion groups, to explore as many new ideas as possible, develop and practice new skills and learn from each other. The workshops covered the following topics

### Workshop 1 Communication skills for the panellist

Practical techniques for panel members to improve their levels of communication with young people, parents, victims and fellow panel members.

### Workshop 2 Young People with Learning Disabilities

What panel members need to bear in mind in planning for the meeting, helpful hints and pitfalls and what can be put in place to ensure a positive and successful outcome.

### Workshop 3 The Victim's Perspectives

An exploration of the key issues which impact on victims before, during and after their involvement with panels.

### Workshop 4 Wrestling with Words

An entertaining and interactive exploration of how encouraging young people to express themselves through creative writing and poetry can help with addressing the causes of youth crime.

The Discussion Group covered five topics (Reparation, Training, Final Panel Meetings, Contract Building and Managing Difficult Behaviour). Each group, led by a facilitator, discussed what they felt were the key issues, and then fed back the key points to the whole conference when they reassembled in the main room. This session was led by Craig Bradley. **The comments/findings from each group have been collated and a separate report will be prepared and circulated by the Referral Order teams in the near future.**



Dave Gann, a communications trainer, with a group of panellists in the communications workshop.

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