Justice Sub-Committee on Policing

Impact of police reform on local policing

Written submission from Victim Support Scotland

Victim Support Scotland is the lead voluntary organisation in Scotland helping people affected by crime. We provide emotional support, practical help and essential information to victims, witnesses and others affected by crime in every Scottish local authority area, and in every Sheriff and High Court in the land. The service is free, confidential and is provided by volunteers. With the interests of victims and witnesses at heart, Victim Support Scotland welcomes the opportunity to convey our experiences on the impact of police reform on local policing to the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing.

We note that Police Scotland’s priorities for 2013-14 includes an aim to ‘maintain high levels of public confidence in policing’, which incorporates ‘continued engagement with local communities and communities of interest’¹. The importance of public confidence in the police cannot be understated, as it is a general prerequisite for victims and witnesses in feeling able to report a crime. Many victims and witnesses are often scared of repercussions if they do come forward, and need reassurance from the police that they will be kept safe from harm. It is therefore important that the police are visible to local communities, which is evidenced by the Scottish Government’s fourth strategic priority for policing, which is to ‘make communities stronger and improve wellbeing by increasing public confidence and reducing fear of crime, making the new Police Service of Scotland an exemplar of visible, ethical and responsive policing.’²

However, the visibility of the police (and resulting public confidence) has potentially been threatened through police reform, with the closure or planned closure of local police stations in several areas of Scotland. Furthermore, it has been reported that some local police stations have had their opening hours reduced. Victim Support Scotland is concerned that these changes may threaten the accessibility of the police for victims and witnesses, particularly for those who live in more rural areas of the country and may wish to speak to police officers in person. We believe there should be no restrictions on how victims report a crime to the police, and that individuals should be provided with adequate access to the police regardless of where they live.

Victim Support Scotland has long established and highly valued working relationships with the police service in Scotland, both nationally and at a local level. Maintaining these close partnerships is important for ensuring the interests, rights and needs of victims and witnesses are represented and firmly integrated into consistent Scotland-wide strategic and operational policing policy, planning and practice. For instance, Victim Support Scotland often liaises with local police to receive information on behalf of victims. The importance of the provision of information to victims is made clear through

¹ Police Scotland (2013), Annual Police Plan 2013/14
Article 6 of the *EU Directive establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime*. Furthermore, section 3 of the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill will soon provide a statutory right for victims and witnesses to access information pertaining to their case, and as the investigating agency of the criminal justice system, Police Scotland will have a duty to provide such information. Victim Support Scotland is happy to continue working in local partnership to ensure this vital role is fulfilled. We note, however, that in some areas communication with local officers has become more difficult since 1 April, through a lack of availability of local officers to discuss cases. We recognise the importance of Police Scotland’s Local Policing and Multi Member Ward Plans, which provide an opportunity for partners such as Victim Support Scotland to engage with the police at both divisional and ward level, allowing consideration of local needs. We welcome dialogue on how we can work together through aligned plans, both nationally and locally.

Victim Support Scotland believes that the interests of victims and witnesses should be a main priority for Police Scotland and would therefore welcome discussion on how we can support the police in providing an effective and efficient service for victims and witnesses of crime, with particular regard to support and information provision as outlined in the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Bill.

Victim Support Scotland
9 January 2014