Restorative justice at the level of the police in England: Encouraging the use of restorative justice supported by safer schools officers (SSOs)

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What, where and when?

• Encouraging the use of restorative justice by SSOs – one of the two pilots in West Yorkshire, commenced 1 January 2017.

• The Safer Schools programme involved:
  – 27 SSOs working across 30 schools (and two universities)
  – Match funded (50/50)
    • Some SSOs full-time in one school, others a proportion of their time dedicated to particular schools i.e. one day per week.
  – Focus on incidents in schools, not usually those outside schools
  – Have a wide remit – preventing young people from becoming victims of crime or being involved with anti-social behaviour and crime.
Aim of pilot

- Promote the delivery of restorative justice (for suitable cases) by the 27 SSOs
- Foster more extensive delivery of restorative justice
  - At a consistent level
  - In accordance with principles and best practice
  - Sensitive to the needs of victims & providing them with a voice
  - While highlighting to offenders the impact of their behaviour – reinforcing responsibilities and holding individuals to account.
- Do so in a more strategic, consistent and comprehensive way, underpinned by targeted support
- Part of a wider aim to avoid criminalising young people
- A means of dealing with (often minor) incidents before they escalate into more serious offending.
Methodology

• Data collection period: 1 Jan-31 Mar 2017
• Observation of two training events
  – Awareness day
  – 2 day restorative justice facilitation.
• Shadowing of a SSO
• 10 face-to-face interviews
  – Police (including SSOs), school and YOT staff.
• Two focus groups with SSOs (18 officers in total)
• Analysis of data
  – SSO’s ‘Occurrence Enquiry Log Report’
  – Survey with focus group participants.
Key components of pilot

Training
• Police-run awareness day for all SSOs (Jan 2017)
• 2 day restorative justice facilitation training for new SSOs (Feb 2017).

Recording
• Prior to pilot, recording of restorative justice varied and inconsistent
• All SSOs asked to record all restorative justice work in the same way – electronically, on an ‘Occurrence Enquiry Log Report’.

Staff
• A police sergeant oversaw all SSOs (governance and compliance)
• A police constable recruited to post of Youth Crime Prevention Officer
  – Included advising, and working across, the SSOs and driving forward the delivery and use of restorative justice
  – Opportunity for the police to look at what could be done differently and how the role could be developed in ways that support the promotion of restorative justice.
Outcomes

Use of restorative justice

• Most SSOs said they used restorative interventions ‘all the time’
  – Restorative justice done in the school corridor (the school version of ‘street RJ’) to formal conferences.
• One SSO had used restorative justice three times in the previous week
• High levels of confidence undertaking all forms of restorative justice themselves.

Recorded incidents - Occurrence Enquiry Log Reports

• Data received from 27 secondary schools (1 Jan-31 Mar 2017)
• A total of 124 incidents of restorative justice recorded.
Outcomes (cont’d)

Recorded incidents (cont’d)

• Vast majority restorative conferences
  – Small number of verbal apologies (n = 16), letters of apology (n = 9).
• Most common incidents resulting in restorative justice: fighting (17%), assault (15%), arguments (15%), verbal abuse (10%), theft (7%), threats (6%), and inappropriate comments (5%)
  – Other incidents included harassment, bullying, online abuse/arguments, vandalism and general anti-social behaviour.
• More serious crime generally dealt with either by other police officers or the YOT, or with the aid of more formal criminal justice disposals and/or temporary or permanent exclusion from the school.
Views of restorative justice

*Police*

- SSOs overwhelming in favour of using restorative justice in schools
  - Real belief in it as an appropriate way of dealing with incidents involving young people
  - Could see the positive impact it can have
  - More of a connection to the environment – a ‘community’
  - Had a more balanced view of its value and benefits.
- Restorative justice in schools seen as a central and vital element in attempts to avoid criminalising young people and enhancing a victim-focused approach to policing
- Senior police officers viewed SSOs as very competent at delivering restorative justice with young people.
Views of restorative justice (cont’d)

Schools

- Generally, teachers and other school staff (including senior management teams) seen as in favour of restorative justice
  - Permeated throughout, from head teachers down – an essential philosophy and everyday practice of some schools.
- Approaches to pupil behaviour/discipline that are conducive to problem solving/restorative principles, rather than punishment
- However, not all schools are supportive of restorative justice
  - Head teacher buy-in essential
  - Must fit with the school’s ‘ethos’/‘responses to discipline’.
Lessons and reflections

- If you can get children working restoratively (‘high challenge, high support’), it can have a massive impact on them beyond school
  - Skills to bring up families, be successful in work, work better with authority
  - The more young people exposed to, and involved in restorative justice, the more established and culturally accepted it becomes as a means of dealing with conflict and crime in the future.

School buy-in

- Not all schools promote restorative justice or have SSOs
- Getting buy-in can be difficult (sometimes impossible) – getting the head teacher on board is critical
- Some SSOs felt unsupported by the school (e.g. those with a zero-tolerance approach to discipline) or that their time was not always used effectively e.g. ‘lunch duties’.
Lessons and reflections (cont’d)

**Funding of SSOs**

- The current funding model:
  - Not based on risk or harm-based need or demand
  - Some schools have a lot of problems with SSOs overwhelmed, others have hardly any problems
  - Some argued for a more effective and rational distribution
    - More problematic schools, more than one SSO
    - Schools with less problems having a PCSO or a part-time officer.

**Community policing**

- Different ways of dealing with incidents in and out of school can cause confusion for young people
- Restorative justice training for local neighbourhood police could help.
Lessons and reflections (cont’d)

Incidents and impact
• Some SSOs felt that they should have their own (uniform) system for recording incidents – a ‘safer schools police officers system’
• Measuring the impact of restorative justice is a difficult task
  – it is often subtle things (‘a look’) that are hard to record
  – Prevention – you would never know if something would or would not have happened.

The future of restorative justice
• The continuation of the support provided during the pilot is vital
• Essential that restorative justice becomes an ‘obsession’, for police leaders, the organisation and schools.