

VSE Conference 25-26 May 2016 Utrecht, Holland

Sitting on the plane on the runway of Dublin Airport my thoughts of what to expect from the VSE Conference in Utrecht were suddenly interrupted by an announcement from the pilot. We had a nail stuck in the wheel of the plane so it required changing before take-off. Out came a work crew and proceeded to jack up the plane and change the wheel. I am sure any nervous fliers were in a state of panic at this stage!!

The Muntgebouw Museum Building where the conference took place is a fantastic building with so much history seeping from its walls and floors.

Registration took place on the first morning and you could feel the air of anticipation. Following the opening speeches it was time to start "work" as the individual workshops commenced. There was something for everyone ranging from Restorative Justice to Victims' Rights, from Fundraising to Compensation for victims.

As my role as Victim Liaison Officer I am constantly dealing with the victims of crime or their families. The vast majority of my interaction with them is providing bad news and invariably I'm informing them of a prisoner getting some form of release.

One thing that struck me over the course of the conference is that countries invariably do things differently and there is no consistent approach to informing victims or engaging with victims re restorative justice practices. The EU Victims Directive has and will put more of a structured approach in a number of areas in this regard.

As an organisation the Irish Prison Service is somewhat ahead of the Directive in terms of notification of prisoner releases/escapes from custody. We have been doing this since the year 2000. My experience of the two days suggests that very few member states are undertaking this course of action but it appears other member states have more going on in Restorative Justice areas.

In terms of Restorative Justice we have some practices that are already in place but most are offender led rather than victim led. One very successful example is where a prisoner is released early from their sentence on weekly reviewable temporary release with the condition that they complete unpaid work in the community. This could entail the painting of a school/church, undertaking work in the community etc.

During my workshop in conjunction with my Dutch counterparts Daria, Janneke and Annemieke it was obvious that we approach things with the one goal in mind. The example Janneke detailed of the young boy stealing the bag from the old lady and the rationale that was applied to the Restorative Justice practice was very simple but yet practical and effective. Janneke replaced the older lady with his grandmother for the theory exercise to let the boy understand the consequences of his actions.

As with anything early intervention is key to solving/diagnosing an issue. One area I would like to see developed is statistics in the area of Restorative Justice. This would give us an insight to the facts of whether it is a success in reducing recidivism. Questions may then be raised regarding same as to whether should it be age specific, offence specific and so forth.

Listening to some of the victim groups in terms of victim issues some felt that Restorative Justice should not be an option for cases involving homicides. On reflection there is some merit in this point as the majority of homicide cases sentenced will have a structured sentence management plan under a Parole Board process. Prisoners will have the opportunity to engage with the various

services ie Probation and Psychology and can also address any addiction issues they may have. Of course there are exceptions to every rule eg cases of road traffic accidents, domestic violence. Perhaps an educational programme of deterrence could be inter linked to any prison sentence.

As a victim liaison officer dealing with victims or their families directly, 50% of my cases involve a life sentence for murder/sexual offence. Is Restorative Justice an option for these type of cases? Victims at some stage will enquire to see if remorse is evident and then their emotion turns to anger. As stated in my presentation at the workshop victims' families in a murder case feel "they are also doing a life sentence and the prisoner can get out of prison but they can never get out". Powerful stuff and until you have first-hand experience of that situation it is impossible to decide what is the best course of action.

Daria demonstrated an excellent technique of a group interaction. I have actually seen this technique used in a sporting environment at a very high team level known as the "circle of truth".

Overall though I have to say that my conference experience was truly informative, educational, enlightening which was very well organised and presented. At the end of the two days your mind is challenged and opened to different ways of thinking. This can only enhance the whole victims' area but the key is striking a balance for victims with sentence and rehabilitation.

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