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Analytical Services Group

RESEARCH INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE/VIOLENCE:

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

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RESEARCH INTO THE EXPERIENCES OF VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE/VIOLENCE: SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

1. Qualitative research into the criminal justice experiences of victims of sexual abuse/violence was undertaken by the Department of Justice for Northern Ireland (DOJ) in partnership with the Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI) during the autumn/winter of 2015.
2. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 12 victims (five males and seven females) of sexual abuse/violence.
3. All cases covered by the research were historic child abuse cases. With the exception of one case, they had all been reported and processed through the criminal justice system in the past two years.
4. The interview questions covered the victim journey through the criminal justice system from the initial reporting of the crime to the police right through to the point of sentencing and beyond. Interviewees were asked to reflect on their most recent case of sexual abuse/violence which had been concluded through the courts and to identify those aspects of their experience with the various criminal justice and partnership bodies which had (i) had worked well, (ii) hadn't worked so well and (iii) could be improved.
5. It should be noted that the initial reporting of some of the incidents covered by the research would have pre-dated the province wide roll out of the Victim and Witness Care Unit (VWCU). As a consequence, it is possible that some of the issues raised by participants, particularly those in relation to information services are now actively being addressed through the VWCU service. This may partly explain why there appeared to be low awareness of the work of the VWCU.

EXPERIENCE OF THE POLICE

6. A range of views (positive and negative) were expressed by participants in relation to their experience of dealing with the police.
7. The majority of the interviewees were positive about the professionalism of the police in handling their respective incidents.
8. Many expressed relief that the police *'believed'* them.
9. A number of participants acknowledged their appreciation of the police having been sympathetic, having treated them with sensitivity and respect, having made them feel at ease, and more generally having been very helpful towards them. A small number felt that the police had been indifferent, showed a lack of empathy or tried to discourage them from taking their case forward.
10. The majority of participants spoke positively of police performance while taking their evidential statements; in this respect a number of participants commented on the soft gentle approach adopted by the police.
11. One participant expressed concern regarding lack of privacy with regard to where interviews were undertaken and where updates were provided.
12. Only a minority of interviewees recalled that the police had signposted them to support services.
13. There were mixed responses in relation to how well the police had kept victims updated on developments related to their incidents. While some interviewees were appreciative of the pro-active approach of the police in this regard, others were critical of the lack of communication on the progress of their respective cases.

14. One participant suggested that there should be greater publicity of who incidents of sexual abuse/violence should be reported to as she hadn't known who to report her incident to.
15. A few participants alluded to the importance of having a specialised service available within the police to deal with cases of sexual abuse/violence.
16. There was a suggestion made that it might be beneficial for police officers to work more closely with Nexus NI to gain a greater appreciation of what victims go through.

SUPPORT SERVICES

17. Research participants reported having availed of a range of support services; these included Victim Support NI, Nexus NI and Women's Aid.

Victim Support NI

18. Most participants reported having availed of the Victim Support NI's Witness Service at court. They spoke positively both in terms of preparation for going to court and also the service provided at court.
19. A number of participants availed of the pre-court familiarisation visit. They were especially appreciative for this opportunity with many commenting on how helpful it had been.
20. Most participants had also availed of the waiting room facility at court and spoke of its benefits; not only had it minimised the risk of them meeting their respective perpetrators in the court building but it also afforded them some privacy and helped put them at ease before their court hearing commenced.
21. There was acknowledgement among some participants of how busy Victim NI personnel at court had been and there was reference to the limited resources available to the organisation.

22. One victim identified the gap in affordable counselling that is available for victims of sexual abuse/violence and queried whether this might be a role Victim Support NI could take on.
23. A few participants commented that they hadn't appreciated what exactly the role of Victim Support NI was.

Women's Aid and Men's Advisory Project (MAP)

24. Two of the seven females interviewed had availed of the services of Women's Aid but none of the five males interviewed mentioned having received support from the Men's Advisory Project. The low uptake of these services possibly reflects the fact that most cases had not involved domestic abuse or violence.
25. Both females who had contact with Women's Aid reported a positive experience. They stated that, had this support not been available to them, they would have found it difficult to pursue their respective cases through the criminal justice process.

Nexus NI

26. All research participants reported having availed of the counselling service provided by Nexus NI. In most cases, participants had self-referred to this service.
27. Views of the service provided by Nexus NI were predominantly positive. A number of the interviewees spoke of how the counselling received had given them the courage they needed to pursue their cases through the criminal justice system.
28. The flexibility of the service provided by Nexus NI and the professionalism of the Nexus NI counsellors was highlighted by many.
29. A few participants identified the long waiting lists for counselling at Nexus NI as an area to target for improvement.

30. The importance of continuity of counsellor at Nexus NI was emphasised by a number of individuals.
31. One individual suggested the need for retention of victim records at Nexus NI after counselling ends; this would facilitate victims should they return at a later point for further counselling or should their records be required for a court case.
32. There was broad recognition among participants of how busy Nexus NI is and of the limited funding available to the organisation.
33. One participant commented on the need for the services provided by Nexus NI to be more widely advertised.
34. Another recommended the need for more locally based Nexus NI offices.

EXPERIENCE OF THE PUBLIC PROSECUTION SERVICE

35. Participant views regarding the service provided by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) were mixed.
36. While most interviewees recalled that they had received notification regarding court dates from the PPS, a number expressed frustration with the lack of updates provided in relation to the status of their respective cases.
37. While most participants reported having had the opportunity to meet with the PPS barrister before the commencement of court proceedings, more often than not such meetings took place on the day of the court and many described these meetings as *'brief'*, *'stressful'* and /or *'impersonal'*.
38. Some participants had been concerned that their barristers hadn't appeared to know their respective cases very well and this had left them anxious about how adequately they would be represented in court.

39. Interpersonal interactions with PPS barristers were mixed with some participants expressing satisfaction but others being critical of their experience.
40. Words used by some participants to describe PPS barristers included '*arrogant*', '*bullyish*', '*intimidating*' and '*rude*'; in addition, some participants felt that the PPS barristers had shown a lack of sensitivity towards them, had made them feel stupid and/or treated them as if they were just a number.

EXPERIENCE AT COURT

41. Most participants recalled having found the court experience difficult. Words used to describe it included '*daunting*', '*devastating*', '*challenging*', and/or '*intimidating*'.
42. There were no issues identified in terms of knowing where to go on arrival at court. Participants spoke of having received adequate information on this or of being accompanied to the court room by either a Victim Support NI or Women's Aid representative.
43. A number of participants recalled that they had felt anxious and/or intimidated while at court. This was largely due to their close proximity to the perpetrator and/or his or her supporters.
44. Other difficulties experienced at court included a lack of understanding of the legal jargon used by the barristers and of issues related to juries at court.
45. Seven of the twelve participants reported that they had been offered special measures at court. Two of the seven had availed of these measures and they spoke of how helpful they had been.
46. Reasons for declining special measures included feeling strong enough to go to the stand, wanting the perpetrator to see and hear about the abuse they had experienced and wanting to see the perpetrator's reactions in court.

VICTIM PERSONAL STATEMENT/VICTIM IMPACT REPORT

47. There was a low awareness among participants as to what a Victim Personal Statement was. A few participants remarked on how they hadn't known about the option to make one.
48. Neither of the two participants who had made a Victim Personal Statement had been positive regarding the experience. One individual felt that the process had been very intense with insufficient privacy at the Victim Support NI location where she had made her statement. She mistakenly believed that it was compulsory to make such a statement (which is not the case) and that she had been making it for compensation purposes. She suggested that it might be better if victims themselves were to draft the statement and subsequently take it to Victim Support NI for their advice.
49. The other participant felt that it would have been helpful to have had a more experienced Victim Support NI facilitator assist her to make her statement.
50. From participant accounts, it would appear that Victim Impact Reports had been prepared in seven out of the twelve cases.
51. Some participants were especially appreciative of medical experts visiting their homes in order to prepare these reports.
52. A number of participants commented on the intensity and the duration of the process.
53. A few participants questioned the benefit of the Victim Impact Reports to victims, particularly given the stress that victims can experience in recalling traumatic events such as sexual abuse/violence.
54. One participant expressed the view that Victim Impact Reports should be read out in court so that the perpetrator can hear about the impact of the sexual abuse/violence on the victim.

SENTENCING

55. In 11 out of the 12 cases covered by the research, the perpetrator either pleaded guilty or had been found guilty. Of the 11 cases with a guilty verdict, five resulted in a custodial sentence, a further five resulted in a suspended sentence and one resulted in a probation order.
56. Many participants referred to what they perceived as the inadequacy of the sentences imposed in their respective cases, especially given the impact that the abuse/violence had on them personally. Where a suspended sentence had resulted, participants argued that it would have been preferable for the perpetrators to have spent at least some time in custody.
57. A few participants voiced the view that there should not be scope for perpetrators of sexual abuse/violence to get 50% remission on their custodial sentences.
58. There were views expressed that perpetrators get off too easily and should not be given credit in terms of a reduced sentence for pleading guilty.
59. Some interviewees also expressed the view that perpetrators can '*play*' the system in order to get a lesser sentence e.g. due to health related issues, family circumstances or public image.
60. Many participants felt that the sentences imposed in their respective cases hadn't been proportionate to the seriousness of the crime. This was especially perceived to be the case given the impact the abuse had on them personally and on their lives.
61. A few participants were critical of PPS in relation to the sentencing process; one felt that not all relevant evidence had been presented at court while another perceived that the PPS were just glad to have secured a conviction regardless of what the sentence was.

VICTIM INFORMATION SCHEMES

62. The Victim Information Schemes would not have been applicable for most of the cases covered by the research as only five out of the 12 cases involved a custodial sentence. Most participants reported that they had been unaware of these schemes.
63. Two participants reported having registered with the Prisoner Release Victim Information Scheme. One didn't express any view of the scheme, the other was critical of the lack of information provided regarding her perpetrator's impending release from prison.
64. The one participant whose perpetrator got a probation sentence claimed to know nothing at all about the Probation Board for Northern Ireland Victim Information Scheme.

LENGTH OF CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROCESS

65. While the majority of participants recalled that they had found the criminal justice process to be long and drawn out, some were nonetheless appreciative of the amount of time taken by the police to gather all the necessary evidence.
66. A number of participants were critical of the delays experienced once their respective cases got to the court stage.
67. Most participants had experienced at least a couple of adjournments.
68. The main reasons for adjournment were to contest the evidence, to get expert reports or to enable barristers to reach an agreed position.
69. A number of participants alluded to the stress and uncertainty they had experienced as a consequence of delays in the criminal justice process.