

Minutes of the West Belfast District Policing and Community Safety Partnership

Public Meeting

St Mary's University College Belfast
Thursday, 26th September, 2013

Political Members

Councillor Tim Attwood
Councillor Steven Corr
Councillor Matt Garrett

Independent Members

Harry Connolly (Vice-Chair)
Breige Brownlee

Statutory Designated Organisations

Sharon Beattie, NIHE
David Harbinson, NIFRS
Eithne McIlroy, PBNI
Aideen McLaughlin, YJA

John McLaughlin, BELB
Angela McKeown, BELB
Inspector Alan Swann, PSNI

Attendee

Malachy Turley, West Belfast 50+ Forum

Staff Present

Glenn Thomas, Safer City Co-ordinator
Michelle Bagnall, Project Sponsor
Michael Burns, Project Officer
Katharine McCrum, Partnership Support Officer

Apologies

Councillor Máire Hendron (Chair)
Bernie Reilly
Carol Carville, PBNI
Tommy Boyle, H&SCT

1. Welcome and Routine Matters

- i. The Vice-Chair welcomed Members to the meeting in the absence of the Chair. On behalf of the DPCSP he expressed his sadness at hearing of the drug related death of Kevin Doherty and the hospitalisation of others. He supported the words of MP Paul Maskey in calling for drug dealers cease and called for a multiagency approach to tackle the scourge of illegal drugs.

2. A Journey Through The Criminal Justice System

- i. The Vice-Chair introduced the four speakers who then described their role within the Justice System; Constable Darren Quaile of the PSNI, Roger Davidson the lead prosecutor for Belfast from the Public Prosecution Service, Aideen McLaughlin from the Youth Justice Agency and Eithne McIlroy of the Probation Board.
- ii. The speakers provided an overview of their role and the services they offer as well a practical example by working through a notional burglary case file.

3. Questions from DPCSP Members in relation to the Criminal Justice System

- i. A Member of the DPCSP questioned the use of a joined up approach, particularly given the frustration following extensive police work that does not result in a conviction. She welcomed the information provided by the Youth Justice Agency and asked about interventions carried out with parents.

- ii. Aideen McLaughlin, YJA, advised that parents were always engaged with and that support groups were available to assist them in developing their parenting skills. She also advised that therapeutic interventions, drug awareness and peer issues were also dealt with.
- iii. A Member commended the multiagency approach taken as part of the Lower Falls/Divis intervention but stated that families found the system mysterious and archaic once a case was passed on from the police. He added that community suspicions regarding plea bargaining remained and that agencies should invest in relationship building with victims.
- iv. Robert Davidson, PPS, accepted that people often felt let down by the system and accepted that contact with victims following a Judge's decision regarding bail could be improved. He advised those present that the prosecuting barrister should always meet with victim before and after the case is heard. He went on to explain that a statement of guilt by one party can often have an impact on the chance of convicting another defendant as the case can be weakened, therefore in these circumstances a lesser charge may be accepted if the case is at risk of being lost altogether. He added that such a decision should be explained to the victim.
- v. With regards to partnership working, Mr Davidson advised that each area of the system had its own expertise and that training between the PPS and the PSNI took place in order to discuss aspects of law and review scenarios.
- vi. Members agreed that it would have been useful for a Member of the Courts Service to attend the event and asked for this to be auctioned at a future meeting. The Safer City Coordinator advised that no one was available to attend on this occasion and undertook to contact the Courts Service again regarding a future meeting date.

4. Questions from DPCSP Members in relation to the Criminal Justice System

- i. A Member of the public asked how the panel would suggest that confidence is maintained within the community following the release of a perpetrator back into the community, whether on bail or following a short sentence, causing fear amongst those who spoke up and reported the crime.
- ii. Mr Davidson gave his own personal opinion that certain sentences should be lengthened for the safety of society, however he added that judges were provided with set sentencing tariffs and so their hands were tied in that respect. He stated that often a case was not successful due to the fears of witnesses however defendants would frequently plead guilty if a witness was prepared to testify, adding that repercussions against witnesses was very rare.
- iii. Eithne McIlroy added that the Probation Board operates its programmes as a way to change offending behaviour and as part of this, offenders were monitored in the community. She added that probation officers would act on information received regarding their clients who could then be returned to prison if an offence had been committed.
- iv. In response to a question regarding positive stories regarding offenders in the community, Ms. McLaughlin advised that community meetings were held to inform people of such examples however details were not specific due to confidentiality issues. She added that youth workers were often good at taking the risk of working with young offenders and that such opportunities were always being sought.

- v. In response to a query regarding the power of the Health and Social Care Trust to override decisions made by the PSNI, Constable Qualie advised that they may be contacted in order to obtain information about a vulnerable person, however they would have no input or overriding powers in relation to an arrest or charge.
- vi. A Member of the public questioned the notion that reoffending was unusual, stating that longer sentences would be welcomed by communities, and asked if prolific offending was taking into consideration when sentencing.
- vii. Panel members advised that a criminal record could be used to secure a conviction and to lengthen a sentence, and in the case of a young person, could be the reason for requesting a custodial sentence.

5. Closing Remarks

- i. The Vice-Chair thanked the panel for their presentations and the audience for their attendance. He advised those present that the next public meeting of the West Belfast DPCSP would be held in November and advertised in the local press.