**Exploring individuals’ experience of volunteering with Essex Restorative and Mediation Service**

Research report: September 2020

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## Context of the research

The aim of this research report is to provide details of the research project, conducted as part of an MSc Forensic Psychology project, with individuals volunteering with the Essex Restoration and Mediation Service.

Ethical approval was gained for the research in May 2020 with data collection commencing following this. Although data was collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, phone interviews had already been planned as the method of data collection, thus requiring no changes to be made. It is recognised, however, that not all potential participants may not have felt able, or wanted, to take part during the pandemic, thus possibly contributing to the small sample size. If the organisation would like the University to extend this research next year, through advertising the project to the new cohort of MSc Forensic Psychology students, then please let the research team know and this can be arranged.

## Research aims

The aims of the research were:

* To explore the participants’ experience of volunteering with the Essex Restoration and Mediation Service
* To gain an insight into the participants’ perceptions of the different methods used within the service
* To explore the participants’ beliefs about restorative justice and its place within the Criminal Justice System.
* To identify any challenges and positive experiences the participants encounter during their role as a volunteer.

This was achieved via semi-structured interviews with 4 participants who were recruited via the Essex Restoration and Mediation services. Thematic analysis was conducted on the findings to identify re-occurring patterns and themes within the participants’ data.

## Research findings

The following findings consist of those reported within the MSc research project and additional themes identified by the supervisor of the project upon listening to the recordings. The extracts have been selected carefully to try to ensure anonymity. Due to the small sample size, however, full confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when using data of this kind. This was explained to the participants prior to them giving consent to take part.

### Previous experience/knowledge

It is unsurprising that the participants interviewed held jobs, interests and characteristics that already ensured positive perceptions of restorative justice and its place within the Criminal Justice System. Participants demonstrated an interest in people as humans and expressed a belief in the effectiveness of the services for both the volunteers and the perpetrators.

‘It is, it is, it is successful, and if it is successful it reduces crime, and it, and it can make the victims happier, hopefully it reduces the propensity of mental health issues. It has got so many positives, errr, and it must be cost effective’ P3

Many had previous experience either working or volunteering within the field and appeared to have the necessary skills required to remain neutral and unbiased whilst seeking a common understanding between parties.

‘I’d like to think I’ve got good people skills so I can perhaps identify why people are presenting in the way they are and what we need to do or what I need to do to, to erm, get them to engage again’ P4

Some have questioned the extent to which the volunteers are representative of the general community, instead representing a small pool of individuals who hold more positive attitudes than most (Clinks, 2007). Whilst it is important that a diverse range of volunteers are recruited where possible, it is vital that these volunteers embrace the principles of restorative justice (Souza & Dhami, 2007). It is understandable therefore that this profile of volunteers already held a passion for working/ interest in the criminal justice system. Whilst this can be of benefit, restorative justice programmes are signposted in the literature to the potential pitfall of becoming dominated by quasi professionals (Souza & Dhami, 2008). The relevance of this pitfall in relation to the organisation cannot be commented upon here, however, due to the small number of participants involved.

### Direct vs indirect communication

The organisation offers both direct and indirect forms of communication. However, a common theme within the findings was that the letters of apology were not always viewed as effective.

‘So, generally with that sort of age group I say you get less sort of interested I would say letters are often written as a way of writing them to get them out the way’ P2.

‘I don’t have enough experience of doing them however there is no conversation as far as I’m concerned and that’s what we do. It’s not the written word on the piece of paper, it’s saying to a perpetrator, as they, as they, as they talk to us about the other person… it’s like why are we doing this, erm the police could have done this, rather than yeah.’ P1

The participants appear to belief that the true value of the volunteers is in the services where the two parties directly communicate. The participants talk in detail about the work that takes place prior to bringing the two parties together and a real sense of achievement when this takes place is evident. In support of the participants’ view, Gold & Weiner (2000) highlighted how allowing the victim to directly see the expression of remorse increases the level of communication between the parties. More recent research however, concluded that letters of apology were significantly effective for both property and low-level offences (Wager, O’Keeffe, Bates & Emerson, 2014).

It may be, therefore, that although the volunteers may not be using the full range of their skills when facilitating a letter of apology this can still be beneficial to the victim and perpetrator involved. Due to the small sample size this theme could be explored much further in future research.

### Institutional ignorance

Another common theme presented in the data highlighted the perceived lack of support towards Restorative Justice from both political and law enforcement parties. The participants showed confidence in their views of explaining how Restorative Justice must be backed by these groups to enable it to continue to make a positive contribution in terms of criminal justice.

‘dare I say with particularly the longer serving [police] officers that “no Restorative Justice is not an answer”.’ P2.

Here the participant expresses the perception that police officers who have been in the job for a long time do not share the participants’ belief in the effectiveness of Restorative Justice.

‘But erm, you know you have got to convince the politicians.’ P3

‘First of all I see this as being a, erm going in the opposite direction to the way I see a lot of aspects of society going… [you] see a lot of adversarial comments with people you know are like your either for us or against us comments, certainly from politicians.’ P1

Likewise, the participants feel politicians are not always in favour of restorative justice. This pattern perhaps adds further credit to the role of the volunteers, who give up their time to work for something that is not always supported by those in perceived positions of power.

‘I think some people have heard of us but haven’t got a bloody clue about what we do you know haha. So, if we can go out and do, do that sort of stuff like promotion, and when we talk to the police of course we can work with you and reduce some of your work you know.’ P4

Some of the participants spoke in detail about the importance of sharing the work they do with organisations such as the police and probation services. Within the literature, a study looking at restorative justice programmes in the US reported that services should aim to educate and inform organisations and businesses in the local community to develop awareness and support of the service (Dhami & Joy, 2007). Although focusing on individuals convicted of sexual offences, previous research has suggested that, due to the positive attitudes discussed previously, volunteers may be the ones best placed to provide this community education regarding their role and the service they provide (Richards & McCartan, 2017).

### Team support

All of the volunteers described the organisation positively. In particular, the benefits of working in a pair was expressed.

‘I think everything I have done so far is working with a colleague, so it’s a conversation of preparation, before we erm meet one of our clients or participants. Erm, what are we expecting, what are we going in, what are our prejudices, erm what what might, what might baggage personally will we be carrying into this conversation and then, erm, afterwards as part of the what just happened, what did we get what did you hear what did I hear? Erm there’s a, well I know how I felt. Whatever, sympathy, bias, err, aggrieved, angry. Erm to be able to pull out all that, stuff for yourself and putting it out there and saying this is, this is, a biased viewpoint. To do with that with someone else is a lot more beneficial than trying, trying to think of that yourself. And then also in the moment with the client, erm having 2 people and balancing the conversation, such that you speak for a while then you ask a question and then you stop speaking. You partner then talks and then what have they spotted that I haven’t’ P1

The extract here highlights in detail how working in a pair, and the planning and debrief sessions this produced, enabled the participants to perform within their role more effectively. In addition, working with a more experienced ‘buddy’, along with the larger events for all volunteers were discussed in a positive light. Finally, all participants discussed the supportive nature of the entire team.

‘the team base are really really good, very friendly, very helpful, they are always there, with an email, or a phone call, whatever all that so yeah, I, I find them very good.’ P4

‘we’ve got a really really good organisation, and that has made a massive impact’. P3

Within the literature volunteering within the criminal justice system is reported to increase feelings of connectedness within the volunteers, involving a sense of belonging, perceived positive support and a commitment to one another (Höing, Bogaerts & Vogelvang, 2015). Whilst the participants appeared to allude to this feeling of connectedness, further research with more volunteers would be required to determine if volunteering with the Essex Restoration and Mediation Service specifically results in this outcome.

## Summary

In summary, the participants who took part in the research held a prior understanding, interest, and often direct experience, of working within the Criminal Justice System. They appeared to show a preference who direct face to face interventions, possibly due to a belief that they were more effective and utilised their role as a volunteer to its potential. Finally, they discussed the perceived lack of support from external agencies such as the police and politicians but spoke strongly of the support that existed internally within the service.

Due to the small number of participants who agreed to take part in the study, however, it cannot be presumed that the findings discussed here represent the views of all the volunteers who work with the service. Further research, including a wider group of volunteers is recommended to build upon and explore the existing findings further. To this end we are asking whether you would like two additional MSc students to collaborate with you this year to continue this research further.

## Practical Implications

As with all applied research, the findings can produce tangible action points for the organisation. We have therefore, outlined some possible suggestions for future practice. These are tentative, however, due to the small sample size and issue of generalisability. We are also mindful, that the suggestions made below may indeed already be being carried out by the organisation.

* The findings and literature suggest the importance of balancing the need for volunteers who embrace restorative justice with recruiting a diverse range of individuals. This is an issue for all volunteer organisations working with the Criminal Justice System, however, and is therefore likely to already be on the organisations radar.
* To explore the participants’ view of the letters of apology further. If the view held by the participants in this study is representative of a larger volunteer pool, then statistics/ research that demonstrate the effectiveness of the method and why it is important could possibly be distributed. Again, we are mindful this could take place already and this view could be representative of only the volunteers involved.
* The literature highlights the benefits of using volunteers to educate local organisations, businesses and public in the purpose and benefits of Restorative Justice. Several of the participants alluded to this already taking place and the benefits of which could be explored in further research.
* Feelings of connectedness were reported by the volunteers, with positive outcomes in terms of well-being and productivity. Encouraging and facilitating this further would continue to produce benefits to both the individual volunteers and the organisation.

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