

SPEECH FOR APCC EVENT ON 5 JUNE 2013 AT THE JURY'S INN, BIRMINGHAM

Introduction

Since I started this role as Victims Commissioner at the beginning of the year I have travelled up and down the country speaking to many of you and hearing about your aspirations for the communities that you serve.

And the new approaches and ideas have been coming thick and fast, for example:

- Sharing staff in Surrey and Sussex
- Resetting of expectations of how your forces and other agencies work in Merseyside and Manchester
- Innovative use of social media to speak with and inform communities in Northumbria and across the country
- And the catalyst for community working in South Wales
- Groups coming together to influence changes from tagging to changes to probation
- And many of you speaking out for your electorates in Whitehall and in village halls

You know what needs to happen in your force areas. You know where the police and courts and victim services work well together, and where they can improve.

But I also know how many of you share my concerns about the way victims and witnesses are treated by the system and the fact that that system often feels so disjointed. And you share my frustration that many of these victims need not have been victims at all if the opportunities to protect them had been taken.

The police, courts, prison and probation are all links in the chain of justice. But victims of crime will tell you that those links have been broken for sometime. And we are in the middle of far reaching changes to all of those areas of the criminal justice landscape.

So I want to take the opportunity today to:

- Explain the principles that I am applying in my role and to hear more about your plans and priorities.
- Understand more about what you are trying to achieve.
- And provide whatever support I can.

A health warning

But, first, I need to tell you a bit about where I'm coming from. My understanding of the criminal justice system has not been learnt from

text books or from briefing notes from officials. I'm the wrong person to give you advice about the system in theory. I'm more interested in how the system works in practice.

I started my career as a Copy Typist in Manchester Magistrates Court. I was a Committal Court Assistant for many years. But my experience of the criminal justice system has – sadly - not just been professional. My late husband Garry was murdered outside the family home by a gang of drunken young men in 2007.

Garry went to check on the sound of breaking glass and the safety of our young neighbour alone with her baby. Drunken marauding gangs of teenagers had been plaguing our streets. They had been successfully removed from a nearby area by an active group of concerned citizens.

It turned out to be a sticking plaster to cover a gaping wound. Instead of surgery to deal with the underlying causes of binge and underage drinking and the anti-social behaviour that followed, they just moved the problem along, with devastating results for Garry. They kicked him to death suffering 14 blows to the head and 40 internal injuries to his body – all of this practically on our doorstep.

The crime was devastating. But I was also shocked by the way my young daughters, Zoe 18, Danielle 15, and Amy 12 were treated by the courts. And since then I have spoken to hundreds of victims of crime in England and Wales. **Put simply: I have learnt the hard way that the needs of victims and witnesses are often easily forgotten.**

Let's not forget the courage of victims and the traumatic experience of being a witness. Or the strength that is required to face someone who has harmed you and your family. The case of April Jones brought that home to me again last week as her family showed such strength and courage.

I believe that we must work together on behalf of every family like April's so that each person working within the system never stops thinking about the interests of victims. They are the ones who suffer when the police and their partners do not succeed in tackling crime.

My principles and my promise

And I am determined to do this, working independently of any political partiality or vested interest group.

I have heard some people say that as I am a Conservative Peer, I am providing a biased view. That's simply not true: I am committed to working for all victims – because I am a victim myself, - including the

most vulnerable. My job is to hold the Government to account, however uncomfortable that might be for whoever is the Lord Chancellor.

And I will encourage responsibility in all criminal justice agencies to ensure that the voices of victims are heard and that each organisation takes responsibility for victims and witnesses. In fact, when I was interviewed for this role, I made two commitments.

- A **personal commitment** to roll up my sleeves and make a difference to the lives of people blighted by crime, whose voices need to be heard.
- And a **professional commitment** to ensure that Police and Crime Commissioners have the information and structures they need in order to commission services effectively when funding for these services is devolved in 2014.

I will also work to ensure that victims have the information they need. To do this I will focus on updating the outdated Victims' Code to make it less prescriptive. **To focus it around the victim rather than the offence.** And that the code takes advantage of changes in technology that will enable us to ensure that victims have the information they need in a format that best supports them as they move through the CJS.

The challenge

So, where political divisions were expected to divide, a common purpose has brought you together. Those who said that the PCC candidates weren't up to the job have been proved wrong.

But it has been just over six months since you began in office and together we need to show victims and witnesses what we have done and what we will do to make such a difference. Despite the progress you have all made there's absolutely no room for complacency. The public still do not understand your role, or the changes that you have made already. And I do not underestimate the complexity and scale of the challenges that you face, and the difficulties you will have in communicating your impact to the public in a more compelling way.

Part of this is about changing the language we use: I know that many people don't understand what we mean by restorative justice. If they do, perhaps they think it might be a slap on the wrist - an easy option. And while we all "want to put the victims at the heart of the criminal justice system", turning that ambition into a reality is extremely challenging. So, I'm here to ask you how I can help. I hope that you will tell me what support my team and I can give.

Next year, commissioning powers for victim and witness services will transfer to PCCs. This is a crucial opportunity and a challenge as well.

The opportunity

This is your chance to define standards of care more clearly - in partnership with victims themselves. It's your chance to fix the gaps in the system and ensure that everyone - from the local police force and court to small specialist charities - works together and never stops raising their game.

For victims, it's a chance to know that someone with real authority – **YOU** – is on their side. You'll have the job of ensuring that the help they get matches up to what they need and **have a right to expect**.

The challenge

Opportunities like these don't come without challenges. With hundreds of existing providers, working with different groups to different standards the most **basic challenge** is knowing what to commission, from whom, how and when? And resolving this presents its own challenges: what will we need in future, how does this compare to what we have now, and what are the barriers to improvement?

Your commissioning strategy for victim support services should be starting now. You'll need an approach which is structured, strategic and collaborative to resolve questions like this.

How I can help

I am keen to do what I can to help – **and not just because many PCCs have asked me to do that**. As the independent champion of the interests of victims and witnesses, I see it as my job to help provide a challenging and objective assessment of existing arrangements and to ensure that the voices of victims and witnesses are heard as plans are prepared for next year.

So I have asked my team to prepare a support package that can provide a PCC with an objective strategic assessment of current arrangements and future needs. And just to be clear, my team are not providers of services themselves so the review will not be coloured by vested interests or outdated thinking.

The support package will combine a review of existing reports, with interviews and surveys of stakeholder organisations, victims and front-line professionals. Good commissioning always starts with work to really understand current arrangements, performance and future need.

By focusing on this, I aim to help PCCs establish the foundations needed to do right by victims and witnesses next year by providing a report that is objective and **actionable**.

Finally

I continue to be impressed by the innovation and ambition in your offices and in the offices of those whom you hold to account. Your dedication to work for the people in your communities does shine through.

Thank you for having the courage to stand up for victims in your force areas by standing for election yourselves. Thank you for making such a powerful start. And thank you for asking me to speak to you today.