Enhancing communication, collaboration and the sharing of knowledge between volunteer restorative practitioners in the UK: An array of possibilities

The author previously wrote about the potential benefits of establishing a national association of volunteer restorative practitioners in the UK. Based on feedback subsequently received, this article argues that there are in fact a number of ways to achieve the ultimate objective of enabling these volunteers to organise, namely to increase communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing between them.

My recent article outlined some of the reasons why it might be beneficial to establish a UK-wide organisation to represent volunteer restorative practitioners (hereinafter ‘volunteers’). I wrote this article following a number of conversations with volunteers in different parts of the UK over a period of several months. These revealed that their enthusiasm for their work was often coupled with feelings of isolation. Even in areas where groups of volunteers had created thriving micro-communities, many expressed the feeling of being separated from people involved in similar activities in other parts of the country. They gave a number of reasons why they wanted to open communication with equivalent groups elsewhere, namely to learn from the experiences of others, to coordinate national and regional events, to share delivery capacity and to socialise, among other objectives. This is what led me to think that the field would benefit from the creation of a national association of volunteer restorative practitioners.

I am grateful to the many experienced practitioners, volunteers and researchers who responded to the article on social media and by email. Opinions on the idea were undoubtedly mixed: while some expressed a keenness to take it forward immediately, many others questioned whether such an organisation was necessary, pointing to alternative methods of achieving the key objectives in a simpler and less resource-intensive manner. Respondents to the previous article were right to stress that the creation of a national association of volunteer practitioners should not be seen as an end in itself. Discussions subsequently revolved around both the purpose of organising volunteers and the best method of doing so. My feeling now is that the purpose of the exercise would be to create opportunities for communication,
collaboration and the sharing of knowledge between groups of volunteers, and that there are many methods of doing so beyond the creation of a formal organisation.

Of course, if volunteer practitioners were to set up their own organisation, this would afford them the opportunity to create a democratic and representative group, and to ensure that it would respond to their unique needs. But its establishment and maintenance would be time- and resource-intensive, and many of those who gave feedback to the previous article advocated alternative ways of achieving some of the same goals. Suggestions included:

- lobbying the Restorative Justice Council to cater more to volunteer practitioners by, for example, offering free or heavily subsidised membership, funding and organising volunteer-focused events or training courses, and assisting in the development of local or regional volunteer practitioner networks;

- approaching existing organisations, such as the Association of Panel Members (or even the College of Mediators), to broaden their remit to include the representation of volunteer restorative practitioners;

- setting up an informal 'network' (rather than a formal organisation) using existing, free internet-based infrastructure, such as Facebook, LinkedIn and/or ‘Restorative Solutions’ new online ‘Restorative Forum’;

- creating local or regional groups of volunteers in the first instance, before organising opportunities for them to come together in a (loose) national ‘network’ or ‘coalition’ of groups.

Of course, each of these ideas has its advantages and disadvantages. What I like most about them is that they can be implemented in tandem, and that volunteers could engage in most of them straight away, either as individuals or as groups. I certainly think that anybody who is interested in enhancing communication between volunteers would do well to lobby the Restorative Justice Council to increase its work in this area. Equally, the creation of regional groups could begin immediately, as could the establishment of an online group or network (and please let me know if
anybody does the latter, as I have been compiling a list of expressions of interest). Finally, the idea of approaching an organisation such as the Association of Panel Members to expand their remit could be viable; as you can see from evidence presented to the justice committee a couple of years ago, the Association of Panel Members is committed to restorative justice. Perhaps those who facilitate restorative conferences in a voluntary capacity might be able to find a comfortable home alongside Panel Members (whose role is to participate in Youth Offender Panels as volunteer representatives of the community).

Irrespective of the methods eventually chosen, I think it is time to recognise that some form of additional infrastructure or activity is required in order to enable volunteer restorative practitioners to organise. This would not be about orchestrating a ‘top-down’ approach to the development or delivery of restorative practices, nor would it involve holding volunteers and professionals to different standards regarding the safety and quality of the practices they deliver. Rather, it would be about enabling those volunteers, who wish to do so, to learn from and collaborate with each other.

Of course, my argument presupposes that creating social bonds between volunteers in different parts of the country is desirable. I am also assuming that the need for restorative justice to be developed from the ‘bottom-up’ does not preclude a volunteer or group of volunteers from learning from the experiences and innovations of others. While these assumptions have not undergone specific empirical verification, I do not think that these are particularly wild assumptions to make, given what we know about the development of this field.

In England and Wales, we are currently going through a rapid period of expansion in the use of restorative justice, and there seems to be a trend towards the use of volunteers in delivery. Two pieces of legislation have been passed on restorative justice in recent years: first, the Crime and Courts Act 2013, which made reference to the use of restorative justice at the pre-sentence stage; secondly, the Offender Rehabilitation Act 2014, which made reference to the use of restorative justice as part of a Community Order or Suspended Sentence Order. The implementation of both of these Acts is likely to involve significant recruitment of volunteer restorative
practitioners. Moreover, in April 2014, Police and Crime Commissioners in England and Wales were allocated almost £30m from the Ministry of Justice to invest in building the capacity to deliver restorative justice in their area. Police forces, councils, Community Safety Partnerships, non-profits and other organisations across the country are currently having to decide what to do with this money, and much of it is being spent on recruiting and training volunteers to deliver restorative justice as a diversion from arrest or court.

There are certainly many in this field who make credible, persuasive arguments in support of alternative approaches to how RJ should be delivered. But whatever one’s perspective on this question, the reality seems to be that the involvement of volunteers in the delivery of restorative justice in the UK is a phenomenon which is likely to endure. Given this, my desire is that all of us in this field should be as proactive as possible in ensuring that these volunteers are provided, and are able to provide each other, with the support and knowledge they require to deliver safe and effective restorative justice.

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