

A day in the life... of a Community Justice Panel Volunteer



Rachel Wright is a Community Justice Panel Volunteer Facilitator. These Panels are a new initiative operating in Sheffield.

They deal with cases referred to them initially from organisations such as the Police, Registered Social Landlords and when the process becomes more established by Private Landlords and Educational Establishments.

The panels are based on the premise of Restorative Justice and are non-judgmental and unequivocal, this hopefully gives all parties involved a feeling of trust in the process. Rachel has to contact the harmed person, the wrongdoer and any supporters they may have, she meets with each of them individually before they all get together to discuss the incident and its consequences.

Both parties are allowed to bring along a „supporter“ to the Panel, normally for young people it is a parent/carer. The arresting Police Officer or other referring officer is normally present as well. Rachel has to arrange a meeting room, ideally somewhere in the community where the incident occurred, such as a council or community building.

“Those involved in the Panel sit in a circle, without anything that may cause a barrier, with the two main parties sitting opposite each other,” explains Rachel. “The meeting ideally should take place within 2 weeks of the facilitator getting the case. Each person in the circle is then given chance to make comment on the incident, with the facilitator making sure it runs smoothly and calmly.”

At the end of the session participants are given a questionnaire to feed back how they felt the session went, while the facilitator writes up an Agreement stating what the reparation, suggested by the harmed person, is going to be. Both parties have to agree this as the way forward. This is then referred back to the Youth Offending Service (YOS) to arrange the reparation.

Rachel works full time as an Assistant Manager in a Jewellers“ in Wakefield. She graduated last year from Hull University with a degree in English Literature. The main reason Rachel got involved in volunteering was to help her gain experience as she is interested in a career in justice.



“I would like to find paid employment in the Youth Offending Service. I’d like to work as a coordinator for the Community Justice Panels or as a Trainer, training the other volunteers. I am also interested in getting involved with further mentoring with young people,” Rachel explains.

Rachel has been advised that although she has the required qualification requirements, she needs more experience in this area. Volunteering to work for the Community Justice Panel seemed like a great way to do this.

“I find reward in seeing individuals on both sides of the incident coming together, discussing and sorting out a problem. Rather than it leading to someone having a criminal record, it gives people a second chance to mend their ways” she says. This was highlighted when she observed at the end of one of her Panels the „harmed person“ and „wrong doer“ shaking hands.

One of the main challenges of the Facilitator role is having enough time to organize the Panel. Rachel works full time, so only has one day during the week to organize the parties involved, as she finds people do not want to meet at the weekend.

“You need to be very well organized and a diary is useful. I have to spend time doing a risk assessment and the Police advise me about personal safety when considering home visits.” Rachel undertook a four day Facilitator training course delivered by the coordinators from the initial project that successfully ran in Somerset. The course is accredited by the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP). It involved 3 days of presentations and role play and exam on the fourth day.

Rachel believes you need good communication and people skills to be an effective Facilitator. “You have to be able to deal with people from varied backgrounds. You have to gain respect from those involved in the Panel and be able to be calm and deal tactfully with those involved.”

Rachel advises people to “work closely with your coordinators to ensure you are clear on what you need to do. You need to be prepared to read through a lot of e-mails. When you are on the training ensure you should pay attention to what is being said as there is a lot to take in. It is worth doing some background reading to find out as much as you can about what you are letting yourself into. It is good to network with the other volunteers to get their opinions on the project.”

Find out more about community justice panels at

<http://www.sheffieldfirst.org.uk/your-sheffield/september-2009/community-justice-panels>

