victim support

find the strength

An evaluation of the Victim Awareness Course pilot within Hampshire

Commissioned by Victim Support

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Contents

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Summary

- The joining instructions issued by Victim Support were widely seen as clear, with 89% of course attendees knowing where to go and 96% knowing for how long the course would last. There was slightly less clarity on what the course would contain, with 24% being uncertain what the VAC was about.

- There is an evident need for police officers to be fully informed and aware of the course content. Where officers do not feel fully informed, they are less able to inform offenders about what to expect on the course leading to, in some cases, a degree of nervousness.

- Officers were also unable to fully explain to victims what the course is about and why it is designed to be an appropriate sanction. Of the 18 survey responses received from victims, 39% indicated that the purpose of the VAC had been not been explained to them.

- It is therefore recommended that in introducing the course into a new area, Victim Support are able to make clear to police forces the importance of officers knowing what the course is about.

- The uncertainty experienced by some offenders prior to the VAC appears to be addressed by the VAC trainer once the course begins, with 100% of attendees stating that they felt welcomed, 96% were made to feel relaxed and 85% felt supported.

- 89% of attendees stated that the course had helped them to think about the behaviour which led them to having to attend the VAC.

- 70% stated that they would ‘definitely’ behave differently in future as a result of having attended the course.

- 77% of VAC attendees either agreed or strongly agreed that the course helped them to look at the victim’s perspective on the crime/incident.

- 86% stated that the course had helped them to think about how the victim might feel as a result of their offending behaviour.

- 88% of VAC attendees indicated that the course had helped them understand the impact of crime in general on victims.

Introduction

How did the course originate?

Both Penalty Notices for Disorder (PNDs) and conditional cautions form part of the current suite of out of court disposals which are widely seen as an important means of freeing up court time for the prosecution of more serious offences as well as offering quicker, effective justice for the victim (Victim Support and Making Justice Work, 2012; Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses, 2014).

The desire to provide victims with swifter justice was echoed by the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) for Hampshire in his 2013–2017 Crime Plan. The PCC had as his priorities, the need to reduce re-offending, to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour in local communities and to "place victims and witnesses at the heart of policing and the wider criminal justice service" (Hampshire Police and Crime Commissioner, 2013). In seeking to help address these priorities, it was agreed between Hampshire Constabulary and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC), that a Victim Awareness Course (VAC) be piloted by Victim Support in two of Hampshire's cities (Portsmouth and Southampton)[1].

The VAC was designed by Victim Support as an educational and rehabilitative option for offenders who have committed low level volume crime and who have received either a conditional caution or have been given a PND. In instances where an offender has been served by police with a PND, they are referred to Victim Support and offered the (less expensive) option to pay for and attend a VAC, instead of paying the full £90 PND fine.

A VAC can also be considered where an offender is suitable for a conditional caution, and the police thus have the option of stipulating attendance on a VAC as the sole or one of the conditions that an offender must meet. PND non-attendance makes the offender liable for the full £90 PND fine, whilst for those referred as part of a conditional caution, failure to attend a VAC will result in a breach of the condition and referral back to the police for potential prosecution for the original offence.

[1] During the period of the evaluation, victim awareness courses also began running in Basingstoke.

The three hour course was introduced into Hampshire at the end of 2013, but the first numerically viable courses were undertaken in early 2014, with the emphasis being placed on offenders who had committed low level theft (predominantly retail theft), low value criminal damage, public order (section 5 of the Public Order Act), common assault offences, or for instances of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB). Both those referred as part of a conditional caution or instead of a PND in Hampshire pay a fee between £45 and £55[2] towards the cost of the course, with any surplus funds raised being invested to provide an enhanced service to victims of crime.

Courses are held on a week day evening or Saturday morning in the premises of the Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service, which are seen as cost effective, neutral locations.

What does the course consist of, and why?

It has been argued by some academics (see Wallis, 2014[3]) that not all those with low empathy are offenders nor that all offenders have low empathy. However, he considers that a loss of empathy can often lead to offending behaviour and that such a loss can be short lived. Triggers for such short term loss of empathy include drunkenness, tiredness, stress or boredom. When people are in such states of mind, he argues that their attention is far more on themselves than others, and that such a state may last after any crime committed as people seek to avoid the consequences of such action. The types of crime for which VAC referrals are made, often relate to such short term losses of empathy.

Wallis makes a case for the careful use of victim empathy work to encourage offenders to reflect upon their behaviours and develop greater insight into the impact of their actions on others (empathy being defined as “the ability to place oneself in another’s situation and comprehend his or her experiences” [Jackson, 2009, p. 8][4]). Indeed, Wallis believes there to be a “convincing argument” (Wallis, 2014 p. 95) for mandatory victim awareness courses for all those who show little understanding for the consequences of their actions. In attending such courses, it is suggested

[2] Where an offender is served with a PND by police, the current fixed penalty is £90.
[3] Wallis, P. (2014). *Understanding restorative justice: How empathy can close the gap created by crime*. Policy Press.
[4] Jackson, Arrick L (2009). The Impact of Restorative Justice on the Development of Guilt, Shame, and Empathy Among Participants in a Victim Impact Training Program *Victims and Offenders.* Vol. 4 Issue 1, 1– 24

offenders thus assume a degree of responsibility for their own actions. Such an assumption of responsibility for crime is associated with the development of empathy and between empathy and reduced re-offending (a view supported by Calhoun and Pelech, 2013[5]).

Much of such thinking is reflected in the Victim Awareness Course as run by Victim Support. The course content includes an initial exercise, designed as an ice breaker in which small groups of attendees are asked to rank a series of offences from least to most serious, in part to show how different perspectives causes others to have differing views on the seriousness or otherwise of the type of activities for which the attendees are on the course.

A key part of the course consists of a number of short crime-based scenarios which attendees are required to undertake in small groups or on their own. In the exercises they are required to consider who the victim(s) were and what the impact of the crime might have been upon them from a financial/practical, behavioural or physical perspective. The scenarios are designed to enable the attendees to try to understand not just the views of victims but how other course attendees consider matters from differing perspectives.

Attendees (ranging in number from three to 15 in the majority of the courses run in Hampshire through this period) undertake the scenario-based work in small groups. They are then required to consider their own case from similar perspectives, including the extent to which they were responsible for what had happened, the extent to which members of the public would consider them to be accountable for what had happened, and to reflect upon what other decisions they could have made. In the latter few months of the research period, a final session was introduced onto some courses enabling attendees to consider whether they might wish to write a letter to the victim, as part of Victim Support's steps towards the introduction of a restorative justice element into the VAC.

[5] Calhoun, A., & Pelech, W. (2010). Responding to young people responsible for harm: A comparative study of restorative and conventional approaches. *Contemporary Justice Review*, *13*(3), 287-306

What is the purpose of the evaluation?

This evaluation was commissioned by Victim Support to examine the initial roll out of the course with the following success criteria to be considered:

- Positive feedback from victims of crime in instances where conditional cautions have been given - including a measure of their satisfaction with the terms of the conditional caution, their views on the VAC and, more specifically, the offender's attendance on the course.
- Absence of attrition from conditional caution/PND to course attendance.
- Positive feedback from the course attendees, including increased empathy with victims, and understanding of the impact of the offending behaviour on their victims.
- A qualitative assessment of the views of Hampshire police officers, notably from officers responsible for administering conditional cautions.

Research methodology

In designing the evaluation methodology, it was anticipated that the VAC would be rolled out to forces other than Hampshire who may wish to adopt or adapt some or all of the measures to assess the introduction of the VAC within their areas. However, this evaluation has been conducted purely within the confines of Hampshire's experience. This has the advantage of controlling for any variability in differing local police force policy and practice, and officer awareness regarding eligibility to attend the course. It was also been designed to allow for any early lessons to be learnt and potentially incorporated into the course as a form of action learning. Early results were fed back to Victim Support and an interim report provided in September 2014.

All materials sent to course attendees, victims and Hampshire police officers explained that the independent evaluation was being carried out by Portsmouth University on behalf of Victim Support.

The evaluation began in April 2014 with questionnaires being handed out to all course attendees from that date, and questionnaires sent to all those who were victims where the outcome was a conditional caution from the same date[6]. Data was collected from both course attendees and victims for a fourteen month period between April 2014 and June 2015.

VAC attendees

The questionnaires were developed following two non-participant observations sessions of the VAC, and completion of the pilot questionnaires was observed by the researcher on a third non-participant observation session. A number of amendments were made following the first two non-participant observation sessions and

[6] Victims in whose case the offender was given a PND were excluded from the sample on the grounds that they were unlikely to be have been informed of the sanction being applied and thus unable to comment on the suitability of, or process issues relating to, the VAC.

examination of the returned questionnaires (looking at the questions which were not completed or evidently misunderstood).

Respondents were unwilling or, in some cases, unable (due to low literacy levels) to complete any open ended questions asking for their views on potential course improvements. Virtually all open ended questions were thus removed and replaced by closed questions. In order not to appear off putting or too time consuming, the questionnaire length was confined to two pages (see Appendices 1 and 2). Despite having made the questionnaires as 'user friendly' as possible, throughout the research period, a substantial proportion of respondents failed to complete one or more questions on either the pre or post course questionnaire.

The questionnaire was given to attendees at the start and end of each course, which was then returned to the trainer in a sealed envelope. Although there was no obligation to complete either questionnaire, 120 course attendees did so. Questionnaires were completed anonymously with limited personal data collected (gender, age group and an indication of previous offending behaviour).

Initially, a three month follow up questionnaire was sent to course participants. However, the return rate for these was extremely limited, with three questionnaires returned from the 35 sent out by Victim Support (a nine per cent response rate). Given the administratively burdensome nature of this part of the research and its limited value to the evaluation, it was therefore agreed with Victim Support in December 2014 that the follow up surveys would be discontinued.

The difficulty in getting VAC attendees to complete this two-sided three month follow up survey strengthens any case to be made for seeking offenders' views on the day of the course. Any other police service seeking to introduce the VAC may wish to be mindful of the range of literacy and ability levels amongst course participants and take this into account in structuring any evaluation.

Victims

Assistance from Hampshire Constabulary enabled questionnaires to be sent out to victims where the offence was dealt with by means of a conditional caution, and where full victims contact details were recorded by the Constabulary. In instances

where the crime had been committed against a retail outlet (mostly shop theft) and the victims details were recorded as the name of the outlet without any named individual, questionnaires were not sent. Both the questions asked and the author's previous experience of extremely low response rates from postal questionnaires to establishments without a named individual, made this an inappropriate evaluative method.

Questionnaires were sent to 62 individuals[7], and responses received from 19 – a 31% response rate.

Police officers

A small scale pilot of an on-line questionnaire to test the methodological approach resulted in very few responses from officers. Operational prioritisation and the volume of e-mails received by officers meant that either an on-line or paper based questionnaire would thus result in a very low response rate overall. Slightly counter-intuitively, a direct request for a face to face interview met with far more success. Thus face to face interviews were carried out with custody officers and crime investigators in Portsmouth and 'safer neighbourhood' officers in Southampton and Basingstoke.

[7] Questionnaires were sent to victims via Hampshire Constabulary to ensure data protection laws were adhered to, and the anonymous responses returned – in reply paid envelopes – to Portsmouth University. If the views of victims are needed by other police forces taking on the VAC, consideration will need to be given to the (albeit relatively minimal) resource implications of this being done in house by the police force concerned.

Key findings

Attrition data

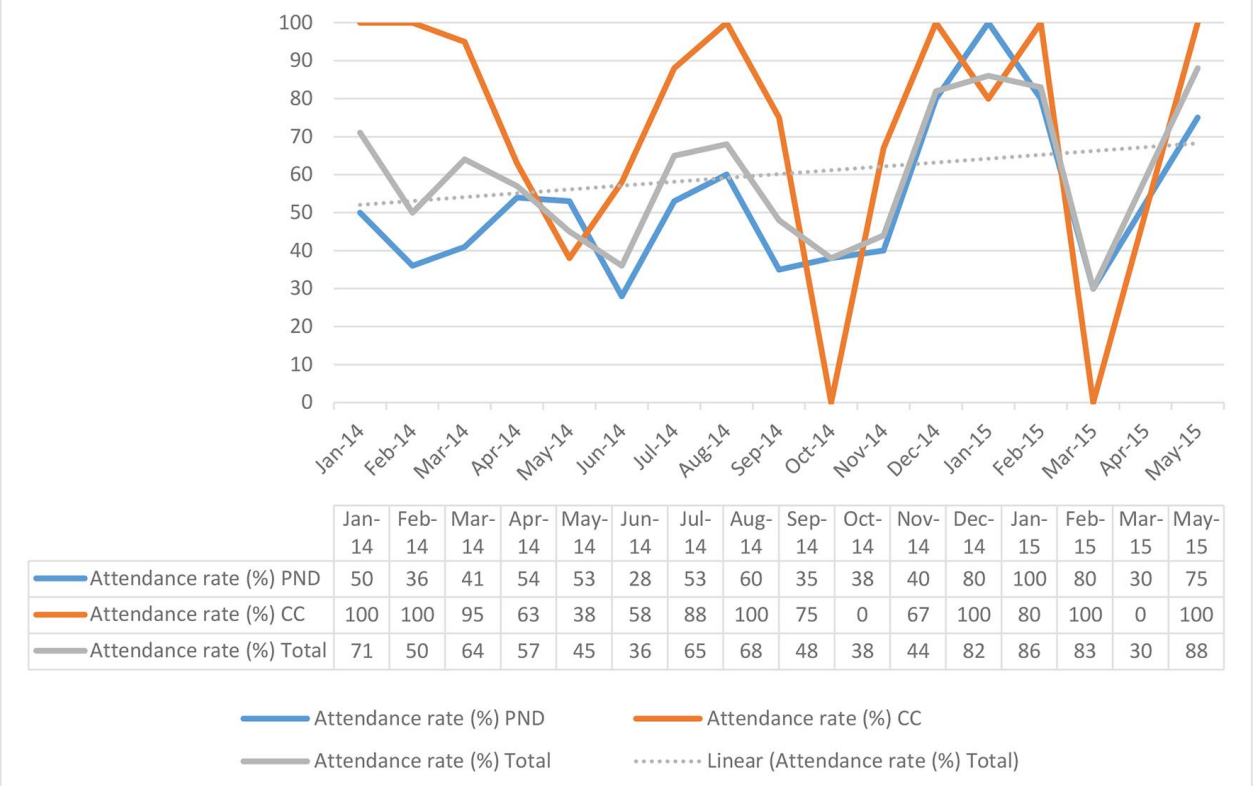
Attrition between referral to VAC and attendance on a course is shown in Table 1 on a month by month basis (note that no course was run in April 2015, and in October 2014 and March 2015, there were no conditional caution referrals – the 0 given in the table for these months does therefore not refer to zero attendance). These data are collated by Victim Support and more detailed analysis (undertaken by Victim Support) were included in September 2014's interim report.

According to these Victim Support figures, average attendance on the courses between January 2014 and May 2015, has been eight people. However, the data in Table 1 shows the considerable variability between 28% and 100% for PND attendance and between 38% and 100% for conditional cautions. The variability in attrition for conditional cautions is greater which is reflective of the lower numbers of conditional caution referrals.

As can be seen, a greater proportion of those with conditional cautions attend the course. As noted earlier in this report, PND non-attendance makes the offender liable for the full £90 PND fine, whilst for those referred as part of a conditional caution, failure to attend a VAC will result in a breach of the condition and referral back to the police for potential prosecution for the original offence. This may ultimately prove to be more of an 'incentive' to attend the course.

Table 1 also shows the slight upward trend in attendance. Throughout the fourteen month research period, the structure and administrative elements of the VAC became considerably more developed. Course attendees were initially able to pay for the course in cash on the day, but by late 2014 became required to pay in advance of attendance. Whilst this was partially to prevent the holding of large cash sums at the outset of the course, it appear to have also had an effect on overall attrition rates.

Table 1: VAC attendance rates by PND and CC



	Jan-14	Feb-14	Mar-14	Apr-14	May-14	Jun-14	Jul-14	Aug-14	Sep-14	Oct-14	Nov-14	Dec-14	Jan-15	Feb-15	Mar-15	May-15
Attendance rate (%) PND	50	36	41	54	53	28	53	60	35	38	40	80	100	80	30	75
Attendance rate (%) CC	100	100	95	63	38	58	88	100	75	0	67	100	80	100	0	100
Attendance rate (%) Total	71	50	64	57	45	36	65	68	48	38	44	82	86	83	30	88

Knowledge about the course and its contents

Findings indicate that whilst 41% of respondents to the VAC attendees' survey were told by police officers what the course was about, a similar percentage (39%) indicated that they were not told anything at the time of the offence, with the remaining 20% being unable to remember.

This is echoed by feedback from the police officer interviews with officers indicating that they felt that they needed to find out more about the course. The officers said that they were not able to offer as much information to the offenders at the time of arrest as they wished to, due to a lack of information on course content. Although Hampshire Constabulary appointed a single point of contact (SPOC) for the introduction of the course, when the officer concerned went on maternity leave, this left a gap. It is recommended that police forces have, if not a SPOC, then informed officers who are able to advise colleagues on course content and presentation and for whom it may best be suited.

The finding that 11 of the 19 (58%) victims (of those sent on the course as part of a conditional caution) were not involved in discussions regarding the terms of the conditional caution, and 50% were offered no explanation by the police of what the VAC was and thus had no knowledge of the course. This may relate to the point raised by officers themselves who noted that they wished to be better informed about the course and its content[8].

Although the considerable majority of those attending the VAC knew from the joining instructions where the course was located and how long it would last prior to coming on the course (89% and 96% respectively), there was slightly less clarity about what the course would contain, with 20% stating that they were uncertain. This lack of certainty is reiterated in some of the responses to specific questions asking respondents what they felt the course would address, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Pre course views on course content

Do you think the course will cover any of the subjects listed below:	Yes (%)	No (%)
That I will have to explain what I did and why	55	45
That I will be told why crime is wrong	92	8
That I will be made to feel guilty for what I did	53	47
That I will be helped to understand the impact of my behaviour on others	97	3
That I will be helped to understand how to change my behaviour in future	94	6

Note: n=120

Respondents were asked, before the course began, what they hoped to get from it. A variety of different answers were given ranging from those relating to wishing for a clean start (*" a clean look on life", "piece of mind and to be able to put this behind me"*) to those who wanted to learn from their behaviour (*"to be told how to make better decisions", "an understanding of how not to re-offend")* or to learn about the impact of their crime on others (*"to get a better understanding on (sic) how my*

[8] A short explanation of the purpose and content of the VAC was sent to victims with the questionnaire to enable them to offer a view (given the proportion unaware of what the VAC contained, this was particularly useful for evaluative purposes).

victims felt", "knowing how shoplifting impacts on others", "the consequences of my behaviour on others"). The majority of those who expressed a view, wanted advice, information and guidance on how to prevent a repeat of the behaviour which led to their attendance on the course.

Other attendees indicated that had already learnt their lessons prior to the course and were less certain that they had anything new to absorb (*"nothing. I know what I did was wrong", "just to clear my fine, I have done all the learning I need")*. This latter view was echoed in comments made by some observed by the researcher in courses attended as part of the non-participant observation sessions. Where first time offenders, in particular, had spent a night in police cells or had to explain to their family or employers what had happened, this was perceived as being "punishment enough" and more impactive than the course was seen to be at the outset.

Views on the course and its impact

Police officers

From a police officer perspective, the course was seen as valuable in part due to the delay between the offending behaviour and the course, in that it extended the time in which the offender was required to reflect on their actions. Many, though not all offenders sought to 'reconfigure' the events of the offence and subsequent arrest "*to the extent that apparently they should never have been arrested at all as they're innocent*" (police officer interviewee). In the view of this officer, a course six to eight weeks later gave them the opportunity to rethink their behaviour with a group of people and course trainer who would not excuse their behaviour in the way that friends and family might.

Course attendees

Findings from the survey undertaken on immediate completion of the course tend to support this view. Eighty nine per cent of respondents stated that the course had helped them to think about the behaviour which led them to having to attend the course. A sample of comments from the attendees – gained from both the questionnaire and from comments made during the course – are given below:

"I only have enough money to make ends meet. But the one stupid mistake has left me embarrassed of what I did and even more ashamed of (sic) family and friends hearing about it. Should have thought before doing it"

"I've learnt not to react on instinct and to calm down"

"It makes you think you're not the only one suffering, it's everyone else around you as well"

"Being a bit more understanding. I should have stopped and thought more"

"It doesn't just affect one person, it's everyone around you"

"You may feel the victim is invisible or doesn't exist, but you don't realise the people it affects. There is always a victim"

"I was just trying to defend myself but I was a bit stupid in what I did"

When asked whether the course would impact on their future behaviour, 101 course attendees answered the question with 70% of these stating that they would 'definitely' behave differently as a result of having attended the course. A further 20% indicated that they may 'possibly' behave differently, five per cent stated that the course 'probably or definitely' would make no difference to future behaviour and a further five percent stated that they were not sure.

The table below further suggests the largely positive impact that the course has had on the attendees.

Table 3: Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements

(N=120)	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	Don't know/ not sure (%)
I know the incident was my fault	44	37	7	9	3
I tried to understand the victim better by imagining how things look from him/her perspective	35	41	10	4	9
I wish I had never harmed the victim	36	25	10	10	18
I think it's important to make up for what I did	29	32	16	12	12

I put the victim and the people close to him/her through a lot	28	26	24	12	11
I feel I can say "it's over now, I can leave it behind"	37	45	7	3	8
It helped me understand the impact of crime in general on victims	43	45	2	4	3
It helped me think about how my behaviour affects others, not just victims	38	51	3	5	3
It helped me think about how the victim might feel as a result of my behaviour	42	43	3	7	5

Responses to two of the statements with higher percentage disagreements – 'I think it's important to make up for what I did' (28%) and 'I put the victim and the people close to him/her through a lot' (36%) may possibly be correlated with the fact that when, prior to the course, they were asked who they perceived the victim to be in their crime, a number of respondents either stated that there was no victim, or that they had been the victim and not the offender, or felt that they had been left with 'no choice' but to behave in the way that they did.

When the statements above are looked at by factors such as age, gender or the type of offence committed, the results suggest that:

- Those on the course for shop lifting offences (who accounted for 32% of all attendees[9]) were less likely to consider that they had "put the victim through a lot" compared to those on the course for more personal crimes such as assault. They were however, most likely to wish that they had never harmed the victim and were as likely as those committing other offences to consider that it was important to make up for what they did.
- There were no marked differences by age.
- Those who had (by their own admission) been in trouble with the police a few times before, were less likely to agree with the statements than those for whom this was their first offence. This was particularly the case for the

[9] See Appendix 4 for a further breakdown of offence types.

statements ‘I wish I had never harmed the victim’ (where there was a 16% difference in the proportion which agreed with the statement) and ‘I tried to understand the victim better by imagining how things look from him/her perspective’ (an 11% difference.)

- Attendees for public order offences were least likely to think it was important to make up for what they did.
- Female respondents were less likely to consider that the incident leading to their attendance on the VAC had been their fault, but more likely to wish they had never harmed the victim, and to consider it important to make up for what they did – this is irrespective of the offence committed.

These findings are in line with those undertaken at the time of the interim report with a smaller data set (n= 70) and suggest that the pattern established then continues to hold true.

Victims

Where the victims were asked for their views on the course (to which they could give more than one response), a limited number (two) felt that it would deter offenders from future crime, and a further six felt it would help them understand the impact of crime. The predominant answer given by those victims surveyed was that sending the offender in their case on the VAC would not make any difference to future offending behaviour (eight) or that they were simply unsure of what impact it would have (five).

That having been said, 11 of the victims stated that they were content with the offender in their case having been sent on the VAC. Some suggested alternative outcomes that they would have wished for such as a face to face or written apology. Those who were not content felt either that the offender should have been sent to court or that their repeat offending behaviour (the offender being known to the victim) should have made them ineligible for such an option.

These findings mirror those found by Victim Support and Making Justice Work (2013) which concluded that “victims are broadly open to the use of community sentences and the principles that underpin them but there is a lot to do before they

see them as an effective form of justice in practice" (Victim Support and Making Justice Work, 2013, p. 7).

The scepticism from victims was echoed by the police officers interviewed. From a policing perspective, this in part related to the referral criteria for the course itself. The need for offenders to admit their guilt, and show some degree of remorse coupled with the fact that it is not deemed suitable for 'serial' offenders, suggested to officers that it may not have a direct impact on the likelihood of re-offending: "*for some, the very fact they've come to our attention at all means they never will again*" (police officer interviewee).

This view highlights the difficulty in establishing the extent to which the course content acted as the principal motivator to desist from future crime, given that all attendees also experienced other consequences of their behaviour. A group of attendees observed during one non-participant observation felt that such additional penalties resulting from their behaviour had been "enough punishment and some" (VAC course attendee); for example spending a night in a cell and having to explain their absence from work or home to an employer or partner, the cost of having to take a day off (often unpaid) in order to attend the course or the travel costs incurred to reach the course venue (in some cases, from other parts of the UK outside Hampshire.

None of the police officers interviewed however, saw this as being the primary aim of the course. For some it related to the ability to reduce pressure on the court system, for others, it was more about showing the victim that "*the police will not always act like a wet lettuce*" and take action that appears to have "*more teeth*" than a simple caution. Equally, for three of the four officers interviewed it was entirely related to the need to show offenders that their actions have an effect on victims that the offender may not have ever considered.

Structure and delivery of the course

In addition to being asked about the impact of the course upon their behaviour, attendees were also asked about the structure and delivery of the course. Table 4 indicates clearly that attendees felt welcomed, put at ease and supported throughout the course.

Table 4: Did the trainer make you feel

	Yes (%)	No (%)	Not sure (%)
Welcome	100	0	0
Relaxed	96	3	1
Guilty	12	78	10
Ashamed or embarrassed	13	81	6
Supported	85	9	4

NOTE: Percentages are rounded so may not sum to 100. N=120.

When asked for their views on how the course could be improved, far fewer respondents answered the question. The responses given are thus actual number of responses and not percentages in order to avoid presenting a potentially misleading picture.

Opinions were divided with 11 respondents suggesting that the course could be longer, with 32 requesting that it be made shorter. Forty one respondents (just over a third of all respondents) suggested that hearing the views of victims affected by crime would have been beneficial. Sixteen respondents felt that the course could be improved by having to do more work on their own (seven held the contrary view and wanted to do less work on their own).

A small number (nine) of respondents also indicated that they would prefer a course closer to their homes; both to reduce travel costs and time. This feedback came primarily from courses run in Portsmouth and Southampton only but at a time when referrals were being received from elsewhere in the county, and in a few case, different parts of the country (but which related to offences committed in Hampshire).

Conclusions

The current focus on determining 'what works' both in policing and the wider criminal justice service suggests the need to try to determine the extent to which the VAC reduces re-offending or increases empathy. This evaluation was not designed to provide a definitive answer to this question. The piloting of a small scale programme within one non-metropolitan police service over the course of a year cannot meet such an objective. Rather, it sought to give an indication of the views of those involved and to suggest conditions in which such a course can be introduced and embedded.

The evaluation shows that the majority of those attending the course had thought about the behaviour which led them to having to attend the VAC; would 'definitely' behave differently in future as a result of having attended the course and had been helped by the course to think about how the victim might feel as a result of their offending behaviour.

In austere times and with an increasing emphasis on the rights of the victim, a course in which almost eight in ten believe that the course helped them to look at the victim's perspective on the crime/incident, and where almost nine in ten indicated that the course had helped them understand the impact of crime in general on victims suggests that there is considerable potential for embedding the course more widely.

In conclusion, it has been suggested that there is increasing evidence that diversionary schemes are less expensive than more established routes and conclude "there seems little reason to abstain from adopting a strategy that is more effective than traditional processing and considerably cheaper" (Wilson and Hoge, 2013, p. 514[10]). At a time of considerable public sector resource constraint, initiatives such as the VAC that are both cost effective and deliver the desired outcome, or have the potential to do so, need to be explored.

[10] Wilson, H. A., & Hoge, R. D. (2013). The Effect of Youth Diversion Programs on Recidivism: A Meta-Analytic Review. *Criminal Justice and Behaviour*, *40*(5), 497–518.

Recommendations

1. That in rolling out the VAC to new police force areas, it is emphasised to senior personnel that front line officers likely to refer offenders onto the course need to be fully informed and aware of the course content.

It may therefore be appropriate to consider a “dummy run” course that referring officers could attend at the outset. This could assist in embedding the course within the police area and ensure that officers can better explain the course both to victims and offenders, potentially reducing pre-course attrition, and helping to build public confidence in the course as an appropriate and suitable out of court disposal.

2. That pre-course material sent to those required to attend a VAC makes it clear that they will not be required to state the offence committed and hence the reason they are on the course. This has been shown to be the single largest area of uncertainty in pre-course knowledge and a clearer explanation may reduce any pre course attrition.

3. That consideration be given to introducing a ‘victim’s voice’ session – either in person or via recorded clip in response to feedback from course attendees.

4. Further research and a longer term evaluation is suggested once the course is fully established across a number of police force areas. It is recommended that any future research could adopt one or more of the suggested alternative approaches:

(a) With the developing roll out of the VAC to other police forces and an attendant increase in referrals and potential course attendees, future evaluations have the opportunity to follow a larger cohort, over a considerably longer period of time.
A large enough sample tracked over the course of two to three years (a period of time suggested as appropriate by the Australian Institute of Criminology[11]) could provide some measure of re-offending behaviour[12].

[11] Australian Institute of Criminology (2002). *What works in reducing young people’s involvement in crime?* Canberra
[12] Consideration would still need to be paid, however, to the possibility that low level first time offenders may have been put off crime by factors other than the course (peer/family disapproval, employment implications, greater self-generated awareness of the impact of their behaviour, to name a few)

(b) The running of a sufficiently large control group of low level offenders receiving PNDs or conditional cautions (and with the same referral criteria) but not referred to the VAC would better allow for any 'VAC specific' impacts to be identified. When combined with a long term follow up, this could be a powerful research design.

(c) Any future research could also benefit from a nuanced and in depth study of offender motivation and understanding of their expectations of the course content and personal outcome, and of the views of victims (both quantitatively and qualitatively). This could require considerable resource but could add greatly to the development of community based victim empathy courses for low level offending at a time when fewer resources are available to adopt traditional approaches.

Appendix 1: VAC participant pre course questionnaire

Study Title: An Evaluation of the Victim Awareness Course

Questionnaire 1: **Pre course survey**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions, and **none** of your individual answers will be shared with Victim Support or anyone else. I would just be very grateful for your open and honest answers.

1. Have you come on the course today as:

   Part of a conditional caution from the police ☐

   Instead of a 'penalty notice for disorder' ☐

   I am not sure why I have been asked to come on the course ☐

2. What was the reason you received either a PND or a conditional caution?

   Shoplifting/theft ☐ Antisocial behaviour ☐

   Criminal damage ☐ Public order offence ☐

   Assault ☐ Other ☐

3. Did the police officer who dealt with you explain what the course was about?

   Yes ☐ No ☐ I can't remember ☐

4. Did the joining instructions you received make clear:

	Yes	No	Can't remember
Where the course was being held	☐	☐	☐
How long the course would last	☐	☐	☐
What the course would be about	☐	☐	☐

PLEASE COMPLETE THE QUESTIONS ON THE OTHER SIDE

4. What would you like to get from the course today?

5. Do you think the course will cover any of the subjects listed below? (please tick all that apply)

	Yes	No
That I will have to explain what I did and why	☐	☐
That I will be told why crime is wrong	☐	☐
That I will be made to feel guilty for what I did	☐	☐
That I will be helped to understand the impact of my behaviour on others	☐	☐
That I will be helped to understand how to change my behaviour in future	☐	☐

6. If none of the options given above describe what you think the course will be about, please can you say what you think the course will cover?

7. Thinking about why you have been asked to go on the course, please can you say who the victim was in the crime you committed? _____

8. Are you: Male ☐ Female ☐

9. Are you: 18 – 24 ☐ 25 – 34 ☐ 35 – 44 ☐ 45 – 54 ☐ 55 – 64 ☐ 65+ ☐

10. Please tick the box which you think best describes your situation:

I have never been in trouble with the police before this course ☐

I have been in trouble with the police a few times but nothing serious ☐

I'm often in trouble with the police & have been arrested on several occasions ☐

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Study Title: An Evaluation of the Victim Awareness Course

Questionnaire 2: Immediate post course survey

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this study. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions, and none of your individual answers will be shared with Victim Support or anyone else. I would just be very grateful for your open and honest answers.

1. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't know/ not sure
I know the incident was my fault					
I tried to understand the victim better by imagining how things look from him/her perspective					
I wish I had never harmed the victim					
I think it's important to make up for what I did					
I put the victim and the people close to him/her through a lot					
I feel I can say "it's over now, I can leave it behind"					
It helped me understand the impact of crime in general on victims					
It helped me think about how my behaviour affects others, not just victims					
It helped me think about how the victim might feel as a result of my behaviour					

PLEASE ANSWER THE QUESTIONS ON THE OTHER SIDE

2. Did the course help you think about the behaviour that led you to being here today?

Yes – completely ☐ Yes – a little bit ☐

No, not really ☐ No, not at all ☐

3. Did the trainer make you feel:

	Yes	No	Not sure
Welcome	☐	☐	☐
Relaxed	☐	☐	☐
Guilty	☐	☐	☐
Ashamed or embarrassed	☐	☐	☐
Supported	☐	☐	☐

4. Thinking about the whole course, from what you were told by the police, to the joining instructions to the actual course today, how do you think it could be made better? (*you can tick more than one box*)

If it was shorter ☐
If it was longer ☐
By hearing the views of victims affected by crime ☐
If there was more work to be done on our own ☐
If there was less work to be done on our own ☐
If it was held in a different location ☐
(*Please say where and why)* ☐

_____

Other ☐

5. Thinking about the reason you are here today, do you think you will behave differently as a result of the course?

Yes – definitely ☐ Yes – maybe ☐

No – probably not ☐ No – definitely not ☐ I am not sure ☐

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THE QUESTIONNAIRE.

Appendix 3: Victims letter and questionnaire

Dear

I would be very grateful if you could spare me a few moments of your time.

I am an MSc student at the University of Portsmouth and, as part of my degree, I am undertaking some research for Hampshire Constabulary. Please be assured that I have I have not been given direct access to the details of your crime. I have supplied the letter and questionnaire to Hampshire Constabulary who are sending this out on my behalf.

I understand from the police that you were a victim of crime recently, and that the offender in your case was given a conditional caution by Hampshire Constabulary. One of the conditions imposed on the offender was that they were required to attend a Victim Awareness Course.

Hampshire Constabulary is currently piloting the Victim Awareness Course as an option for some offenders. They have asked Portsmouth University to seek the views of everyone involved to evaluate this initiative.

The Victim Awareness Course (VAC) is a three hour course for attendance by offenders who have committed theft, criminal damage, public order, or assault offences or involved in antisocial behaviour (ASB).

The aim of the course is for offenders to reflect on the impact of their crime. The topics covered in the course include:

- Understanding how people react when they have been a victim of crime, including the emotional, behavioural, physical, social, financial and practical effects it can have on the victim;
- Getting the offender to reflect on the ways that are used to justify criminal behaviour and for them to understand their own attitudes in relation to this;
- Enabling offenders to consider the impact of their behaviour on victims of crime;
- Thinking about the reasons why they committed the offence.

I would be extremely grateful if you could spare a few minutes to complete the short questionnaire sent with this letter, so that your views, as a victim of crime, can be taken into account. There is a pre-paid envelope enclosed to return the questionnaire.

Thank you very much.

Yours sincerely,

Clare Simkin

University of Portsmouth

1. Please tick to indicate the kind of crime that you were a victim of.

Theft ☐ Criminal damage ☐

Assault ☐ Antisocial behaviour ☐ Other ☐

2. Did you know the offender before the crime was committed?

Yes – very well ☐ Yes – a little bit ☐

No – not at all ☐ I'm not sure ☐

3. After the crime, did the police let you know that the offender was being given a conditional caution?

Yes ☐ No ☐ I can't remember ☐

4. Did the police involve you in deciding the conditions being placed upon the caution?

Yes ☐ No ☐ I can't remember ☐

5. Was the concept of a Victim Awareness Course (VAC) explained clearly to you?

Yes ☐ No ☐ I can't remember ☐

PLEASE TURN OVER AND ANSWER THE QUESTIONS ON THE OTHER SIDE

6. Does this description of the Victim Awareness Course match what you were told by the police?

Yes – completely ☐ yes – mostly ☐ No, not really ☐

No, not at all ☐ I can't remember ☐ I wasn't told about the VAC ☐

7. Please tick the boxes which best describe your views of the Victim Awareness Course (you can tick more than one box)

I think it will help deter them from committing further crime ☐

I think it will help them understand the impact of crime on the victim ☐

I don't think it will make any difference to their behaviour at all ☐

I am not sure what difference it will make ☐

Other _____ (please specify)

8. Were you content with the offender in your crime being sent on the VAC?

Yes ☐ No ☐ I'm not sure ☐

9. If you said No to Q. 8, what alternative do you think would have been an appropriate punishment in your crime? (please tick all the options which apply)

To have apologised to me face to face ☐ To have paid a fine ☐

To have apologised by writing to me ☐ To have had to go to court ☐

Other _____ (please specify)

10. Are you: Male ☐ Female ☐

11. Are you: 18 – 24 ☐ 25 – 34 ☐ 35 – 44 ☐

45 – 54 ☐ 55 – 64 ☐ 65 + ☐

THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. PLEASE RETURN IT IN THE PRE-PAID ENVELOPE PROVIDED.

Appendix 4 – VAC attendee survey demographic data

62% of respondents to the pre and post course questionnaires were male, and 28% female (ten per cent declined to answer the question), with the majority aged either 18–24 (44%) or between 25 and 34 (23%).

As may be expected given the referral criteria, of the 106 respondents who chose to answer the question, 42% indicated no prior criminality. 52% indicated that they had been in problem with the police on a few occasions previously, with the remaining seven per cent indicating that they had been arrested on several prior occasions.

32% of attendees indicated that they were on the course for a shoplifting offence. This comprised the single largest offence type. Table 5 provides a breakdown of the offence for which attendees were referred to the VAC.

Table 5: Offence committed for referral to the VAC

	N	%
Shoplifting or theft	38	32
Assault	17	14
Public order offence	13	11
Antisocial behaviour (ASB)	12	10
Criminal damage	10	8
Other	9	8
Declined to answer	21	18
Total	120	101

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Respondents were almost equally split between those who had received conditional cautions (51%) and those who had received PNDs (48%). It should be noted that these data may not tally with Victim Support data on attendees. One possible reason for this could be that VAC attendees may not be certain about the disposal they received. Indeed, two per cent of attendees indicated that they did not know why they were attending the course.

From the survey data alone, it appears that those who had no prior criminality were as likely to receive a conditional caution as a PND. However, those who indicated that they had been in trouble with the police on a few previous occasions were more likely to have received a conditional caution.

If you have any queries regarding this research, please contact:
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