



Mind My Experience

The VSS Language Guide

February 2022

Background

Mind My Experience: the VSS Language Guide takes on the views of people that have come through crime to highlight appropriate language. The guide was created to assist external partners within the criminal justice system when talking with and supporting victims, witnesses, and their families.

The guide includes common phrases and words that are used in relation to our work at Victim Support Scotland (VSS) and how to communicate by using more sensitive language. This guidance is part of a trauma-informed approach that is being used across Scotland, encouraging a sense of safety, trust, working collaboratively, and providing choice and empowerment to people who have experienced crime.

The guide sets out best practice based on the views and preferences of people affected by crime with lived experience. The hope is we will use this not just for our external partners, but longer term as a guide for the public and the media when it comes to talking about victims and witnesses in a more appropriate way.

This is a live document that will be regularly updated and formatted which means the current content is not exhaustive. This guide was produced with the help of victims, witnesses and families with lived experience of crime.

If you have any queries or suggestions which may help inform future versions of this guidance, please contact:

comms@victimsupportsco.org.uk

Phrases or words we suggest you use

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All crime / more general:

'People affected by crime' – VSS' first choice to use.

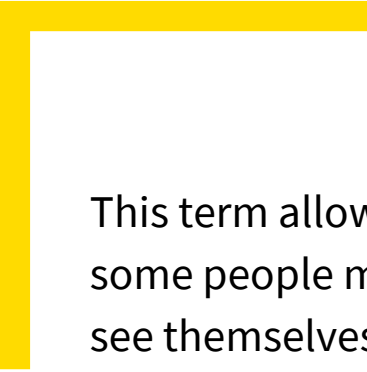
'Victims and witnesses' - if VSS has already said 'people affected by crime' in the sentence or recently in the paragraph - i.e., the preceding sentence. VSS also uses this term if it wants to highlight that it does not just support victims of crime but witnesses as well, or if it is talking about support in the court, too.

'Victims, witnesses and their families' - as above and if VSS is talking about the ripple effect of crime and the wider support it provides.

'Victims of crime' – VSS uses this sometimes, only when witnesses are not included in its messaging, and it has said 'people affected by crime' repeatedly.

'We work with' - VSS use the word working 'with' as opposed to 'for' or 'on behalf of people affected by crime'. Working 'for' can be experienced as patronising and disempowering.

You may want to use the term **'victim-survivors'** instead of victims on its own.



This term allows the person themselves to choose how to identify – some people may not like to be referred to a **‘victim of crime’** but see themselves as a **‘survivor of crime’**; or vice-versa.

Using warmer terms when labelling or describing anyone - **‘people, people using our/VSS services, people that we/VSS support’**, instead of service user, clients, individuals.

Murder and culpable homicide:

‘People bereaved by crime’

‘Families bereaved by crime’

Use **murder** and **culpable homicide** as these are the accepted legal terms in Scotland. (Manslaughter is not a terminology used in Scotland)

Empowerment

‘Move forward’ - VSS empowers people to move forward after a crime rather than move on or recover.

We use **‘move forward’** to acknowledge what people have experienced and show positive outcome of the work they put in themselves and the support we provide.

Person with problematic / harmful substance use & problematic alcohol/drug use is a better way to describe these challenges, rather than terms such as: substance abuse, substance misuse, substance use issues, addict, alcoholic dependency, relapsed.

'I'm here to listen and help in any way I can' - a simple phrase that anyone can use when talking to people affected by crime. It helps to show that you care for them and are willing to listen to their worries or concerns and provide the support that they require in the best way that you can.

'Undocumented' to be used instead of 'illegal' when referring to a person who is living in the UK awaiting an update on their immigration status. The term 'illegal' is rooted in suspicion that treats people as possible offenders.

'Reports' is preferred to 'alleges' or 'claims' which often has connotations to not telling the truth.

'Non-recent abuse' should be used rather than historical. While the event may be historical, the trauma from the event may be current.



Phrases or words we suggest you avoid using

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'Victims' – VSS does not use this term alone.

'Service users or clients' - do not use for external communications, media releases or when speaking to anyone you are supporting. The people we support have expressed that the term feels cold.

'Those affected by crime' – VSS does not use this phrase and is trying to correct all instances of use. 'Those' as a term can be perceived as 'othering' (us vs them) and ultimately VSS supports 'people' not 'those'.

When family or friends have been asked to identify the body of a loved one, Police Officers and pathologists should not use the term **'evidence'** to describe the body of their loved, because this is insensitive and they do not see them in this way. It is better to use the deceased's name or relationship to the family member (i.e., your brother/son), as a warmer way to describe them.

'It's not your fault' should be avoided as a standalone statement or conversation starter, because many people affected by crime need to feel some sort of control over their situation and feeling 'at fault' is sometimes how they do that. If someone says, 'this is my fault', then it is ok to say 'It's not your fault' in response and discuss with them why they would think that, but you should not initiate any conversation with the phrase.

'Non-compliant, hostile or unengaged' - a more positive terms to use are 'chooses not to' or 'doesn't wish to'.

'If you do not come forward, this could happen to someone else' - this puts responsibility on to someone for something that may or may not happen in the future and is almost blaming someone if they do not step forward to report or give evidence.

'You don't deserve this/you didn't do anything to deserve this' - are phrases that should be avoided as use of these implies that there are circumstances where someone did "deserve" what had happened to them.

'You're brave' is a phrase that should be avoided as it can imply that people who chose to not come forward are not brave.

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VSS is also trying to make the language it uses straightforward and accessible for people who do not use English as their first language and for those with low literacy, cognitive disabilities and visual impairments.

**Whoever you are
Whatever the crime
We're here to help**

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victimsupport.scot