

Scottish Government consultation on National Strategy for Community Justice: Review Social Work Scotland response

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Introduction

Social Work Scotland is the professional body for social work leaders, working closely with our partners to shape policy and practice, and improve the quality and experience of social services and as a result those who receive those services. As an organisation and across our members we are committed to service improvement and ongoing development based on evidence and research on how we can best meet the needs of those we work with and particularly those who experience the greatest challenges and barriers to their wellbeing and lives.

The social work profession is based on the principles of human rights, reflecting the value of all individuals and upholding their rights. We welcome the opportunity to offer views on the review of the National Strategy for Community Justice. This response was informed by a workshop held with members of Social Work Scotland and partners, reflecting a wide variety of roles and responsibilities in Justice Social Work and the wider community justice field.

Questions

Q1: How would you rate the clarity and accessibility of the strategy?

The National Strategy for Community Justice is generally clear, accessible and proportionate in length. The four national aims provide a coherent structure and make it relatively straightforward for partners to understand the strategic direction of community justice in Scotland. Its concise format is a strength and makes it easier to engage with than many comparable national strategies.

There are, however, opportunities to improve clarity and accessibility. The strategy would benefit from a stronger explanation of how it aligns with other key policy frameworks and reform programmes – such as strategies relating to Alcohol and Drug Partnerships (ADP); Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG); Getting It Right For Everyone (GIRFE) and Whole Systems Approach (WSA). More broadly, community justice intersects with public service reform, health and social care, housing, employability and wider inequalities, and these connections should be made more explicit to support a clearer understanding of community justice as a cross-system responsibility.

Social Work Scotland also considers that the definition of community justice could be strengthened. While the strategy outlines its purpose, there remains uncertainty about its scope, who it applies to, and how it relates to other approaches, particularly youth justice and whole-system approaches. A clearer and more consistent definition would support a shared understanding among partners, practitioners and communities. There is a particular need to clarify the definition in terms of young people and what age ranges the strategy applies to, which links with the above point about the strategy being clear with regard to its interaction with WSA.

Accessibility could be further improved through the use of clearer, less technical language and visual summaries that explain the role of community justice and the relationships between partners. This would make the strategy more accessible to people with lived experience, victims, families and communities as well as professionals.

The strategy would also benefit from a clearer explanation of how national priorities are translated into local delivery, including the relationship between the strategy, community justice partnerships and the wider performance and improvement framework. Strengthening this link would enhance its practical value and support implementation.

Q2. To what extent do you agree/disagree that the strategy provides sufficient information on the following aspects of community justice?

- Explaining what is meant by “community justice”

- **The evidence that supports the role of community justice within the justice system**
- **The strategic context, including interaction with other relevant strategies.**
- **How the strategy is delivered**
- **How lived experience informs priorities and delivery**
- **The importance of supporting victims of crime**
- **Examples of good practice from local Community Justice Partnerships**

The Strategy provides a helpful overview of community justice, but there is scope to strengthen several areas.

As outlined above, the explanation of community justice would benefit from a clearer and more consistent definition. There remains uncertainty about its scope, who it applies to, and how it relates to other approaches and frameworks, particularly youth justice and whole-system approaches.

The Strategy could also place greater emphasis on the evidence underpinning community justice. While it recognises the value of community interventions and rehabilitation, a stronger evidence narrative demonstrating their contribution to reducing reoffending, improving outcomes and enhancing public safety would help build confidence among partners, communities and decision-makers.

The strategic context could be strengthened by more clearly demonstrating how community justice contributes to wider policy agendas, including public service reform, health and social care, housing, employability and poverty reduction. This would reinforce that community justice is a cross-system responsibility rather than the sole concern of justice services.

The section on delivery would benefit from greater clarity about the relationship between the Strategy, delivery planning, local partnership activity and the Performance Framework. In practice, many partners rely more heavily on the Performance Framework on a day-to-day basis than the strategy itself, suggesting there is scope to better align national documents and reporting requirements.

The Strategy appropriately recognises the importance of lived experience but provides limited detail on how lived experience influences priorities, decision-making and service delivery. Future versions should more clearly set out how the voices of people with lived experience, victims, families and communities will inform the development, delivery and

evaluation of community justice. This could be achieved by building on existing structures that exist to involve those with lived and living experience – for instance through ADP's.

The importance of supporting victims is recognised, particularly through references to person-centred services and restorative justice. However, there is scope to further highlight victims' experiences, recovery and participation within the wider community justice system.

Finally, the inclusion of examples of good practice from Community Justice Partnerships would strengthen the Strategy. Practical examples of successful partnership working, service integration and innovative practice would help translate national priorities into local delivery and support learning across Scotland.

Q3. i) To what extent do you agree or disagree that, taken together, the four national aims capture the most important aspects of community justice?

Taken together, the four national aims continue to capture many of the key aspects of community justice and provide a broadly coherent framework for planning and delivery. The focus on early intervention, effective community-based interventions, access to services and partnership working reflects the core elements required to reduce reoffending, support rehabilitation and improve outcomes for individuals and communities.

However, there is an opportunity to refine the aims to better reflect current policy and practice. In particular, greater emphasis could be placed on prevention, addressing unmet need and tackling inequality through a whole-system and public health approach. Community justice is influenced by a range of factors that exist outwith the justice system including poverty, trauma, health, housing, education and social exclusion, and the Strategy should more explicitly recognise these wider determinants.

The aims could also more clearly reflect that community justice is a shared responsibility across public services. Many of the factors contributing to justice involvement sit beyond the direct control of justice agencies and require coordinated action across local and national partners.

In addition, future versions of the Strategy should place greater emphasis on tackling stigma, supporting community integration and ensuring meaningful participation by people with lived experience. The distinct experiences and needs of groups such as women, young adults and people with multiple and complex needs should also be more clearly reflected.

Q3. ii) Of the four aims, are there any that you consider to be either particularly important, or unimportant, with regard to capturing the most important

aspects of community justice?

Social Work Scotland considers that the first three aims remain particularly important in capturing the core purposes of community justice.

Of the four aims, the first aim is particularly significant. Strengthening prevention, early intervention and diversion recognises that many people who come into contact with the justice system have experienced trauma, poverty, exclusion and unmet needs long before any justice intervention occurs. A stronger focus on prevention across the life course, including for children, young people and young adults, should remain central to future community justice activity.

The third aim is also especially important as successful rehabilitation and reintegration depend on access to housing, health care, social care, education, employability support and wider community resources. Many of the barriers faced by people involved in the justice system arise from difficulties accessing mainstream services rather than justice-specific interventions alone.

While the fourth aim remains important, Social Work Scotland is less convinced that leadership, engagement and partnership working should sit as a standalone strategic aim. These are essential enablers of effective community justice and may be more appropriately framed as cross-cutting principles that underpin the delivery of all aims.

Future revisions should also place greater emphasis on themes that cut across all aims, including tackling stigma, promoting community integration, addressing inequality, embedding lived experience, and strengthening whole-system and public health approaches.

Q4. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 1 (Optimise the use of diversion and intervention at the earliest opportunity)?

The priority actions associated with Aim 1 continue to reflect important elements of an effective community justice system. The focus on diversion from prosecution, early intervention and identifying underlying needs at the earliest opportunity aligns with the evidence on reducing further justice involvement and improving outcomes. The emphasis on person-centred support and access to services following arrest remains particularly relevant given the complex and often unmet needs experienced by many people who come into contact with the justice system.

However, Social Work Scotland considers that the priority actions could be strengthened through a broader understanding of prevention and early intervention. While diversion

remains an important component, greater emphasis should be placed on preventing justice involvement in the first place through earlier identification of need, improved access to universal services and stronger links with wider prevention agendas across health, education, housing and social care.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen alignment with wider approaches to supporting children, young people and young adults. Future iterations of the Strategy should build more explicitly on the principles of the Whole System Approach and recognise the benefits of greater continuity between youth and adult justice services.

The current priority actions are heavily focused on specific interventions. A stronger focus on outcomes could provide greater flexibility for local partnerships to respond to local need and emerging evidence while maintaining a clear emphasis on prevention and early intervention.

Q5. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 2 (Ensure that robust and high quality community interventions and public protection arrangements are consistently in place across Scotland)?

The priority actions associated with Aim 2 remain important and reflect key components of an effective community justice system. The focus on alternatives to remand, community sentences, public protection arrangements and restorative justice supports the safe management of individuals in the community while promoting rehabilitation and reducing reoffending. These priorities remain particularly relevant given ongoing pressures on the prison population and the ambition to use custody only where necessary.

The priority action relating to community sentences is especially significant. High-quality, trauma-informed and evidence-based interventions are fundamental to supporting desistance, improving outcomes and enhancing public safety. There is, however, scope for a stronger emphasis on the relationship between addressing need, reducing reoffending and achieving public protection outcomes.

Some of the priority actions are focused on specific interventions rather than the broader outcomes and principles they seek to achieve. For example, references to electronic monitoring may benefit from being reframed around effective, evidence-informed risk management and supervision, allowing greater flexibility as practice and technology evolve. Similarly, restorative justice should be recognised as relevant across the justice journey, including diversion, rehabilitation, victim support and reintegration, rather than being viewed solely as a post-conviction intervention.

Social Work Scotland also considers that public protection could be more clearly reflected throughout the priority actions. Future iterations of the Strategy should articulate more clearly the relationship between rehabilitation, reintegration, risk management and public protection as interconnected objectives.

Q6. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 3 (Ensure that services are accessible and available to address the needs of individuals accused or convicted of an offence)?

The priority actions associated with Aim 3 address many of the key factors that support successful rehabilitation and reintegration. The focus on health and social care, housing, employability and throughcare reflects the reality that many people involved in the justice system experience multiple and interconnected needs. Access to these services is fundamental to improving outcomes, supporting desistance and enhancing community safety.

Social Work Scotland particularly welcomes the emphasis on housing, health care, education, training and employment support, as well as continuity of care following release from custody. These priorities recognise that community justice outcomes depend upon effective engagement from a broad range of statutory and third sector partners rather than justice services alone.

However, many of the services referenced within this aim are mainstream services facing significant resource pressures and competing demands. Community justice partnerships often have limited ability to influence their availability despite their importance to successful rehabilitation and reintegration. Future iterations of the Strategy should therefore place greater emphasis on shared ownership and accountability across public services.

There is also scope to strengthen the focus on identifying and responding to unmet need. People involved in the justice system are disproportionately likely to experience trauma, mental health difficulties, substance use issues, neurodiversity, communication support needs, poverty and social exclusion. A stronger emphasis on early identification and intervention would support a more preventative and person-centred approach.

Future versions of the Strategy should place greater emphasis on improving access to mainstream services rather than creating separate justice-specific pathways. While local innovation is often necessary, there is a risk that bespoke arrangements become workarounds for wider systemic barriers. The focus should therefore be on reducing those barriers and ensuring equitable access to services. The Strategy should also continue to recognise the importance of tackling stigma as a key factor in supporting successful reintegration.

Q7. How useful do you think the current priority actions are in contributing to the achievement of national Aim 4 (Strengthen the leadership, engagement, and partnership working of local and national community justice partners)?

The priority actions associated with Aim 4 address important enablers of effective community justice. Strong leadership, partnership working, meaningful engagement and inclusion of lived experience are essential to improving outcomes for individuals, victims and communities. Community justice is inherently dependent on collaboration across organisational boundaries, and the Strategy has helped reinforce the importance of collective responsibility and shared ownership.

However, Social Work Scotland considers that leadership, governance, engagement and partnership working are best understood as foundations for successful delivery rather than outcomes in themselves. There is a strong case for embedding these themes as cross-cutting principles throughout the Strategy rather than framing them as a standalone aim.

The priority action relating to victims, people with lived experience, families and carers remains particularly important. Future versions of the Strategy should place greater emphasis on how participation and co-production will be embedded in decision-making, service design, implementation and evaluation. Meaningful involvement requires sustained commitment and should move beyond consultation towards genuine influence over priorities and delivery.

The focus on reducing stigma and improving understanding of community justice is also valuable and could be given greater prominence. Stigma remains a significant barrier to rehabilitation and reintegration, affecting access to services, housing, employment and community participation. Public confidence in community justice is strengthened when rehabilitation, reducing reoffending and public safety are presented as complementary objectives.

Q8. Thinking about the role the strategy has in the planning, delivery and reporting of community justice services, do you think the current number of priority actions is too low, about right, or too high?

The key issue is not the number of actions, but their coherence, alignment with related frameworks and their usefulness in supporting planning, delivery and reporting.

A consistent theme across local areas is the complexity of the wider community justice landscape. The National Strategy, Performance Framework, delivery plans, improvement tools and reporting requirements can overlap significantly, requiring partners to navigate multiple documents that often describe similar ambitions in different ways.

Future iterations of the Strategy should therefore focus on greater alignment across these frameworks. Consideration should be given to presenting priority actions, nationally determined outcomes and reporting requirements in a more integrated way, reducing duplication and allowing partnerships to focus more clearly on improving outcomes.

There would also be value in adopting a more outcomes-focused approach. Several priority actions closely mirror outcomes within the Performance Framework, and greater integration between these elements would improve clarity and reduce reporting burdens. The emphasis should be on achieving meaningful improvements in public safety, rehabilitation and reintegration, while allowing flexibility for local areas to respond to local need and circumstances.

A streamlined framework built around a small number of clear outcomes, supported by enabling principles such as partnership working, lived experience involvement, trauma-informed practice and tackling stigma, would strengthen the Strategy and provide a clearer link between national priorities, local delivery and performance reporting.

Q9. Which elements of the strategy do you find most useful relative to your interest in community justice?

For Social Work Scotland, the most useful element of the Strategy is its articulation of a shared national vision for community justice and its recognition that improving outcomes requires coordinated action across a range of partners and services. It reinforces the principle that community justice extends beyond statutory justice interventions and depends on collaboration across health, housing, social care, employability and third sector services.

The Strategy is also valuable in recognising the wider factors that influence involvement in the justice system, including health, housing, employability, trauma and inequality. This supports a more holistic and person-centred approach to community justice.

Its emphasis on partnership working, lived experience, trauma-informed practice, support for victims and tackling stigma is also welcome, providing an important foundation for improving outcomes and strengthening confidence in community-based approaches.

More broadly, the Strategy has been useful in providing a common national framework within which Community Justice Partnerships can develop local priorities and improvement activity. However, in practice its greatest value lies in setting a shared strategic direction, with local planning and reporting being driven more directly through the Community Justice Performance Framework.

Q10. Which elements of the strategy do you find least useful relative to your interest in community justice?

The least useful elements of the Strategy are those that duplicate or overlap with other components of the community justice framework without adding significant clarity or direction. In practice, there is considerable overlap between the Strategy, the Community Justice Performance Framework, delivery plans, improvement tools and reporting requirements, which can make the wider landscape difficult to navigate.

In particular, the relationship between the priority actions and the nationally determined outcomes is not always clear. Several priority actions closely mirror outcomes within the Performance Framework, resulting in similar concepts being described in different ways across separate documents. Greater alignment between these frameworks would improve clarity, reduce duplication and support more proportionate reporting.

Social Work Scotland also considers that some intervention-specific priority actions are less useful than a stronger focus on outcomes and principles. References to particular interventions or service models can become dated and may not reflect evolving practice or local circumstances. A clearer emphasis on the outcomes community justice seeks to achieve would provide greater flexibility while maintaining national direction.

The Strategy could also do more to explain how community justice relates to wider policy frameworks and planning structures, including community planning, public service reform, health and social care, housing and employability. A stronger articulation of these relationships would reinforce community justice as a whole-system endeavour rather than a distinct policy area.

Finally, the Strategy would benefit from a clearer explanation of how it is intended to influence delivery in practice. For many local partnerships, the Performance Framework is the primary reference point for planning, measurement and reporting. Strengthening the connection between strategic ambitions, implementation and performance reporting would increase the Strategy's practical relevance and impact.

Q11. Taking into account the likely resources available over the next 5 years, what do you believe are the three main community justice priorities over the next 3-5 years?

Social Work Scotland considers that three overarching priorities should shape community justice over the next three to five years: strengthening prevention and early intervention, improving access to mainstream services through a whole-system approach, and reducing stigma while supporting successful community integration. These priorities reflect both the evidence on what supports desistance and rehabilitation and the practical realities of delivering community justice within constrained public sector resources.

The first priority should be prevention and early intervention. This requires a stronger focus on addressing unmet need at the earliest opportunity, including trauma, mental health, substance use, poverty, homelessness and other factors associated with justice involvement. Greater alignment with youth justice and whole-system approaches for children, young people and young adults should form part of this agenda.

The second priority should be improving access to mainstream services and strengthening shared accountability across public services. Many of the barriers experienced by people involved in the justice system relate to housing, health care, social care, education, training and employability. Community justice outcomes cannot be achieved by justice services alone and require stronger partnership working and integration with wider public service reform and community planning arrangements.

The third priority should be tackling stigma and supporting community integration. People with convictions continue to face barriers to employment, housing, services and community participation, which can undermine rehabilitation and increase the risk of further justice involvement. Future efforts should promote a strengths-based approach that recognises people's capacity to change, supports positive community connections and reinforces the contribution rehabilitation makes to public safety. Meaningful participation by people with lived experience, victims, families and communities should underpin this work.

Across all three priorities, community justice should be guided by a whole-system and public health approach, recognising that long-term improvements in public safety are achieved by addressing the underlying social, economic and health factors associated with offending and justice involvement.

Q12. Do you have any other comments on the National Strategy for Community Justice that were not captured in the previous questions?

Social Work Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this review. The current Strategy has provided an important national framework and has helped maintain a focus on prevention, rehabilitation, reintegration and partnership working.

Looking ahead, there is an opportunity to develop a more streamlined and coherent community justice framework. Future arrangements should seek to reduce duplication, strengthen alignment between the National Strategy and the Community Justice Performance Framework, and provide a clearer link between national priorities, local delivery and improvement activity.

A revised Strategy should also provide a clearer articulation of what community justice is, what it seeks to achieve, and how it contributes to wider national outcomes. Presenting

community justice more explicitly as a whole-system and public health approach would help reinforce its relevance across policy areas and public services.

Social Work Scotland believes there should be a stronger emphasis on shared responsibility across public services. The needs of people who come into contact with the justice system are closely connected to health, housing, social care, employability, education and wider inequalities. Future success will depend on stronger integration with community planning, public service reform and other population-based approaches.

The next Strategy should also place greater emphasis on meaningful participation and co-production. The voices of people with lived experience, victims, families and communities should inform strategic priorities, service design, implementation and evaluation.

Finally, greater emphasis should be placed on reducing stigma and promoting positive narratives around rehabilitation, recovery and reintegration. Public confidence in community justice is strengthened when the links between addressing need, reducing reoffending and improving public safety are clearly articulated.

For further information, please do not hesitate to contact:

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