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KAREN PATTERSON

Now a scheme which sees young offenders being made to apologise to their victims here should be extended across the rest of the UK. The Prison Reform Trust in Britain says ministers should look at Northern Ireland's Youth Restorative Justice Scheme as a way of reducing the number of youths who reoffend. Well I'm joined now, on the line, by the director of the Youth Justice Agency here, Dr Bill Lockhart. First of all, how does your scheme work?

DR BILL LOCKHART

We receive referrals from either the Prosecution Service or the court for young people who have admitted that they have committed an offence and who have voluntarily agreed to meet with the victim, in what we call a youth conference. That means they come along, with their parents or carers and the police, and, if possible, the victim or a victim substitute, and they talk about the offence, they ask why they committed the offence but, perhaps most important, the victim has an opportunity to explain the effect of the offence on him or her, that makes a big difference. They have to look the victim in the eye, they have to talk about what happened, they have to say how they're going to make amends.

KAREN PATTERSON

And if the offender takes part in one of these youth conferences, is his or her sentence reduced accordingly?

DR BILL LOCKHART

No, they actually, most young people now who come to the youth courts get what they called a Youth Conference Plan Order, it actually is an Order of the Court and can be quite rigorous. It can have various things where, they first of all might be asked to make an apology to the victim, to make reparation, to do community work, to do, to undertake some form of treatment or to involve themselves with mentors and so on. So it's quite a rigorous, it can be up to a year, and sometimes a little bit longer in terms of the programme which is set out for them.

KAREN PATTERSON

Sceptics listening in might say, saying sorry, well that's the easy option, isn't it? What's been your experience?

DR BILL LOCKHART

Well the experience is, having to say sorry to someone, face to face, particularly if parents or grandparents are at the meeting, that means that they have to sort of admit, look I've done something which is wrong, they can find that very difficult to do in the presence of their, as I say, their parents and so on, because they've betrayed trust of the parents and the family, they've betrayed the trust of the victim and that's very difficult for young people to do and can have quite a big emotional affect on them.

KAREN PATTERSON

Well Juliette Lyon is the director of the Prison Reform Trust and she joins us on the line now. Listening there to what Dr Lockhart has to say, it's perhaps not surprising that you're attracted to the scheme that operates here in Northern Ireland?

JULIETTE LYON

I think it's got so much going for it, you know, whether you're looking at the way in which young people really wake up to what they've done and the reduction in reoffending rates as a result. Whether you're looking at not locking up children and young people as much and consequently reducing the risk of their becoming the kind of adult prisoners of the future, you know, on every measure, and then particular the victim satisfaction which is so great. I think it's got a real lot to offer.

KAREN PATTERSON

Is it the fact that the level of reoffending seems to be so much more reduced that attracted you most?

JULIETTE LYON

Well I think that that's obviously particularly attractive because, you know, otherwise it won't convince people that it's worth trying. I mean there's been a tendency in the past to dismiss restorative justice and say, oh it's just saying sorry, whereas we're actually, what we're learning from what's going on in Northern Ireland that this is far more than just saying sorry, this is really waking up to the impact you've had on someone, the harm you've done, and really asking a lot of you to make amends and asking a lot, I think, of courageous victims who've come forward and participate in this process.

KAREN PATTERSON

What sort of reaction has there been where you are to the notion of introducing restorative justice, because a lot of victims will have a perception that so much is being done to aid the perpetrators recovery, why is more not being done for us?

JULIETTE LYON

Well I think that's, again, where restorative justice scores, you know, because this is focused on the victim and this is about what's happened to the victim, what does the victim think needs to be done to make amends? And so it is a victim focused crime measure, much more than any other I've come across. And I think it is being taken very seriously over here in England and Wales. We've got a roundtable meeting in Parliament later today, which is, will be addressed by your Minister, the Northern Ireland Minister Paul Goggins, and also by Maria Eagle, the Justice Minister here, and it's attended by senior policy makers, who are looking very seriously at what has this to offer. You know, we're doing it in a rather piecemeal way over here at the moment and in Northern Ireland it's fully integrated.

KAREN PATTERSON

The director of the Prison Reform Trust, Juliette Lyon, and the director of the Youth Justice Agency here, Dr Bill Lockhart.