

VANDALISM – YOUNG OFFENDERS

In the early hours of the morning, three young men aged 17 and 18 broke multiple car windscreens and in five instances took items from the cars. The Judge asked that a restorative meeting be explored. It was the young men's first appearance before the Court. All car owners were written to and 12 agreed to attend and chose to bring family or support people with them. The three young men were also approached and had the support of either parents or a social worker.

The three young people and their significant others first attended an individual meeting and they discussed the circumstances of the offending and their thoughts and feelings now. They expressed a willingness to meet with the car-owners and said they would like to be able to answer any questions the car-owners had, and acknowledged that whilst that might help the car-owners, it may also help them. They indicated that whilst they anticipated that the victims may be angry with them, they wanted to make it clear that they now regretted their actions and that they felt they amounted to more than these actions. They said they felt ashamed of what they had done and a little confused as to how it had all come about.

A local community hall was hired for the meeting and a large circle formed with the three young people, one of their sets of parents and one of their social workers around one side of the circle. The policeman who collected the offence statements was there, the 12 car owners and their support people and the two Restorative Justice facilitators.

The meeting began with the victims being invited to share their experience of the impact of the offending. Whilst at the victims' individual meeting, they had stated that they wished to take the floor first in sharing their experience, they had now changed their mind and loudly demanded that the young people explain why they had behaved in this way. The young people slunk down in their chairs and muttered that they didn't know and that they had been bored. The more vocal of the victims said that response wasn't good enough.

The car owners then began to relate their experiences of loss of possessions, inconvenience, penalty insurance payments and in one case, the fear of a young child who repeatedly told his mother that he feared the person who had broken the car window would now be coming to break his bedroom window. As the stories circled the room the young people sat very still, looked more engaged, anxious and concerned at what they were hearing and when asked to comment on the stories one said 'we didn't think it was you guys, we thought it was just cars.' His tone was one of shock and disbelief.

The room quietened at that point and the car-owners absorbed this statement and then commented that their distress and loss was indeed real, and that they expected more from the young men than this type of behaviour. One woman commented that they were only 17 and 18 and that they had their whole lives ahead of them. The mother of one of the young people leapt to her feet at that point and said that she was tired of people saying they were only 18 and that she wasn't behaving like this when she was 18.

The conversation turned at this point with the victim group appearing to be more at ease and they leant into the circle and began asking the young people about themselves. Each of the young people discussed their experience in education and their aspirations, one stating that he likes trucks and hoped to become a truck driver. One of the car-owners stated that he knew about that line of work and made some suggestions about relevant study and practical experience. Other car-owners encouraged the young people to pursue study, to stay out of trouble and to make something of themselves. One of the young people then spoke to the mother of the little child. He said he wanted to buy the child a teddy bear and hoped that the mother could convey the message to the child that he promised he wasn't coming back to break any more windows. The mother was moved by this suggestion and agreed to convey that message. The three young men each in turn made a full and sincere apology, which was accepted by the victim group.

The group then worked on a way forward, incorporating any small amounts of monies the young people could contribute to losses, some commitment to charity work at charities nominated by the car-owners, and a further commitment from the young people to keep to agreements regarding study and career planning. The meeting was brought to a close and the car-owners all stood up and moved towards the young people. They

grasped them in hugs and held them, and shook their hands and wished them well. The young people appeared initially bewildered and then thrilled and humbled with this show of reconciliation and goodwill.