

Facilitator Guidance: Making the Initial Approach to Participants

The method of approaching potential participants of an RJ conference must be decided on an individual basis, having investigated the details of the offence and the circumstances of the participants. Exactly what words you use will depend upon personal style and what you consider appropriate based on your research of the case.

The 'Restorative Justice in NOMS: Guide for Practitioners' Tips for Contact underline that method of initial contact should be considered carefully;

“an unexpected letter to a victim can shock, distress and contribute to secondary victimisation by having reference to the offence or incident coming through the letterbox into their home. We recommend first contact via a careful and cautious telephone call.... Explain who you are and why you are calling without going into details of the incident.”

Where the prospective participant is engaged with a support service arising from the incident, it may be appropriate to ask the case worker to make an initial introduction for you. Where this is not appropriate or possible, facilitators may find it helps to reassure participants early on in your first conversation that the Sussex RJ Partnership is made up of various organisations including Sussex Police, SSPT and Victim Support.

Where first contact is made by phone (or less likely, in writing), always offer to meet the participant face to face in order to talk in detail rather than continuing communication by other means. Conferencing can be a daunting prospect so to avoid participants opting out without learning how the process is managed, you may want to avoid mentioning this at all during your first conversation. One approach that has proved successful in securing a face to face meeting, is to call and explain that you are working for a team which looks at how the criminal justice system can work with offenders to try to get them to take more responsibility for their crimes and the harm that they have caused, and you would like to seek their views and needs.

Once the prospect of RJ is raised, you must emphasise from the outset that the process is voluntary for all involved. Reinforce that they can take time to think things through and talk it over with you and/or people close to them. A conference is an opportunity for them to have their say if they wish to do that and not to accommodate anyone else's expectations or needs. Where an offer to engage is declined, consider discussing other options such as indirect conferencing or shuttle mediation.

Following up phone or face to face contact by letter will reinforce and summarise important points that have been discussed. Where a participant has declined to engage, a follow up letter gives them a further opportunity to get in touch with you should they change their mind after a period of reflection.

Preferred method and frequency of ongoing contact will be discussed with participants and agreed on an individual basis.