

**OBTAINING EVIDENCE FROM VULNERABLE WITNESSES**  
**Wednesday 15th October 2008**

**Good Morning and welcome to Aberdeen. Grampian Police is pleased to be able host today. I would like to start by making a few thanks:**

**Firstly I would like to mark my appreciation to the Scottish Institute for Policing Research (SIPR) for providing the umbrella organisation for the event. It bodes very well for Scotland and the UK that such a valuable collaboration from the Scottish Government, the Scottish Funding Council, ACPOS and our 12 leading Universities, has been created to assist, develop and challenge thinking around policing and policing issues. Today is an excellent example of the real value of the organisation.**

**Thanks also to Dr Derek Carson, Professor Amina Memon and Dr Penny Woolnough for organising the event. We will all understand the personal effort required to turn an initial 'good idea' into the first-class event that is presented today and I am grateful to them for their very considerable work.**

**Key to the success of today are of course the speakers. I know each will be introduced so I will not pre-empt any detailed introduction. Suffice to say that with your speakers you will have the benefit of being able to engage with some real experts in this field. It would be invidious to allude to an order of merit earned by travel from glamorous far-off locations, but I am aware that your speakers have bases as far afield as Canada, London, Wales and even Dundee and Aberdeen. On your behalf I would wish to thank your speakers for helping us develop in this critical area.**

**This is an area where progress is vitally supported by a partnership approach and one of our Partners, Aberdeenshire Council has made this excellent venue available to us for today, so many thanks to them.**

**From personal involvement with them, I know just how busy some in the audience are and I know you all have similar diaries. So lastly, I would wish to end this list by thanking you the audience for making the time in your hectic schedules to**

**come and participate today. As in all things, we can all learn from each other and I am delighted to see you have so positively supported this event.**

**So why is it important to increase our knowledge and improve our practice in this area?**

**You will be aware of the topics to be covered and no-one can have worked in academia, law-enforcement or our partner agencies, without realising how important it is to make every effort to simply 'get it right' when dealing with vulnerable people.**

**Most of the audience will, I suspect, be aware of The Vulnerable Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2004, which became fully operational this year. The Act has been a leap forward in making the potentially awesome, threatening or simply confusing, process of giving evidence more humane, appropriate and capable of being coped with. This is intended to have benefits for not only the witnesses but also for justice itself as the changes are designed to allow witnesses to provide their best evidence.**

**But what of our role? Before the formal element of giving evidence in court takes place, it is essential that the professionals who have the duty to interview and obtain statements do so in a manner that respects and supports the vulnerable witness, that helps them cope with their situation. We must never forget that one enquiry completed in a professional career of many enquiries may well have a devastating, or at least, very intrusive effect, on the witness. It may well be a life-event for them. We must be able and equipped to do this in a way that allows the witness to give their best evidence with the minimum impact on them.**

**Equally, we must be aware the effect our own techniques and approach may have on specific witnesses. Are we influencing or swaying a witness in ways that we do not appreciate? I am sure you will be helped to address some of these issues today.**

**I am genuinely delighted to open this seminar as I have a passion for trying to**

**provide the best possible quality of service to the public. That is what today is about – how can we use our understanding, skills and support to enable others to play their part? To help us work with and protect witnesses and victims.**

**We have come a long way in this but we are definitely on a journey. To show how far we have come I can advise that in the 1980s I was the first male DC in the Grampian Police Female Enquiry Unit. Even the unit name says something as it neither described the work or the staff! But without the benefit of specific training, I can recall laying on the floor with my jacket and tie off to get under the eye line of a 3 year old, or spending an afternoon simply walking on the beach with a 6 year old victim of the most serious sexual abuse to build a connection with them. I thought then that we needed all the help, guidance and skill development we could get, and the learning continues.**

**As society, and therefore the police, widens its appreciation, the remit gets wider and we are now, quite properly, equally concerned to provide an excellent service to not just children, but to others with vulnerabilities.**

**To have the quality of speaker, research and input we have today indicates a recognition of the complexity and importance of the task.**

**The challenge now is to make sure all those involved seize this opportunity to really make a difference for those witnesses and the system as a whole.**

**I commend all involved and wish you a successful seminar.**