

A qualitative study of a dedicated sexual assault investigation unit

Lauren van Staden and Jane Lawrence

Key implications

A dedicated rape investigation unit was set up as a pilot project in a police force in the south of England, supported by funding from the Home Office. The Unit included dedicated police and non-police staff and comprised:

- sexual offences investigation trained officers (SOITs);
- an independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA);
- an investigative team; and
- a Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) lawyer, who attended the Unit one day a week.

The Unit was responsible for the processing and investigation of all sexual assault cases reported to the station (previously these cases had been processed through the Criminal Investigations Department), the charging decisions of cases and victim care. The aim of the pilot was to establish whether or not a dedicated unit improved the service provided to victims of sexual assault. It began in September 2008 and continued for a period of six months.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on an individual face-to-face basis with members of the Unit. The aim of the research was to understand perceptions of:

- how the Unit worked in practice;
- what impact the changes were thought to have had; and
- any lessons for the future.

All of those interviewed believed the Unit had been a positive development. A majority described the existence of a dedicated sexual assault unit as an 'obvious' addition to the Operational Command Unit¹. Other units were dedicated to dealing with specific offences (for example, burglary); this made the absence of a dedicated rape investigation unit appear a strange omission. Perceived benefits of the Unit focused predominantly on the improved quality of investigations and enhanced victim care. Many perceived these improvements to have been facilitated by the creation of dedicated and co-located posts, which allowed for a faster and more focused service. However, despite the perceived benefits of a dedicated team, few of those working in the Unit felt that the team had contributed to improved case outcomes.

¹ An Operational Command Unit is a subdivision of a police force area. It has responsibility for a specific area of a region (sometimes a town or part of a town) and is based in a police station within this locality.

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Keywords

Sexual assault
Dedicated unit
Police
Rape
ISVA
CPS
Victim care
Investigation

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The report offers a number of recommendations, two of which consider the way future dedicated units might be organised.

- **The need for specialist training;** the specialist knowledge and understanding that was acquired by the team was largely internally generated through learning-on-the-job, drawing on the case-based experience of the dedicated CPS lawyer and observing the actions of others. No specialist training was provided on rape investigation for officers who were newly appointed to the Unit. Future dedicated units should provide specialist sexual assault investigation training (and where possible, mentoring) for newly appointed officers.
- **Repeating a pilot dedicated unit with emphasis on increasing the number of cases that proceed to charge;** for any future pilots, decision makers (involved in both the investigative process and the

decision to charge) should be encouraged to pay particularly close attention to cases initially proposed for 'no further action'. Opportunities to strengthen the evidential base for these cases should be fully explored to maximise the number of cases that proceed to charge.

- **Improving understanding of the existing evidence base on specialist units;** there does not appear to be any systematic attempts to review the social research evidence base around dedicated units (including those specialising in the investigation of rape offences). In particular the link between setting up dedicated units and improving case outcomes has not been clearly established. It is recommended that a systematic review of the existing evidence base on the use of dedicated units in the investigation of sexual assault and its impact on case outcomes/ victim care measures should be undertaken.

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Background

- A dedicated rape investigation unit was set up as a pilot project in a police force in the south of England, supported by funding from the Home Office. The Unit included dedicated police and non-police staff who worked solely on sexual assault cases referred to the Unit and comprised:
- sexual offences investigation trained officers (SOITs);
- an independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA);
- an investigative team; and
- a Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) lawyer, who attended the Unit one day a week.

The aim of the pilot was to establish whether or not a dedicated unit improved the service provided to victims of sexual assault. It began in September 2008 and continued for a period of six months.

Aims and methods

A team of three Home Office researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews on a face-to-face basis with 13 members of the Unit. These were transcribed and entered into a thematic matrix designed for the study. Systematic analysis was conducted both within and between individual cases. The research aimed to understand perceptions of:

- how the Unit worked in practice;
- what impact changes were thought to have had; and
- any lessons for the future.

Results

Sexual offences investigation trained officers

- The creation of a dedicated SOIT post within the Unit was perceived to have made three important changes to the delivery of victim care: quicker deployment of a SOIT after reporting an offence; more time for post-incident liaison; and, the consistent provision of one SOIT officer per victim.
- The SOIT officer became more broadly involved in sexual assault investigations (once the SOIT duties had been delivered).
- Although some SOITs were initially doubtful about the personal benefits of the new dedicated role, they ultimately viewed it positively. Not only did a dedicated SOIT officer provide a better platform for delivering victim care but also the role provided personal development opportunities.

Independent sexual violence advisers

- For the duration of the Unit the ISVA was relocated from the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) to the police station and co-located with the police staff.
- The core role undertaken by the ISVA was not perceived to have changed as a result of the Unit; focus remained centred on a combination of advocacy and emotional support for the victim.
- There were three main perceived benefits identified through co-location. First, it vastly improved police knowledge of the general role that ISVAs perform. Secondly, it brought the ISVA knowledge (and their perspective) on victims more readily into police consciousness. And finally, it was seen as improving the two-way flow of information between the police and victims.

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- Initially, the ISVA was not universally welcomed into the Unit although, over the life of the pilot, most police officers identified perceived benefits of co-location and the inclusion of the ISVA in the Unit. Some, however, remained sceptical as to whether this should become business as usual.

Investigative team

- There were some perceived benefits for particular aspects of the quality/nature of investigations (but officers were quick to emphasise that investigations prior to the set up of the Unit had always been conducted 'thoroughly').
- Perceived benefits could be grouped under six main headings: consistency of the lead investigator as cases progressed; knowledge of individual cases being shared more readily among team members; compressed time scales in the execution of time-sensitive investigative actions; reduced the risk of not collecting evidence; the development of specialist investigative skills within the Unit membership; and clear separation of investigative role from victim liaison.
- A dedicated Unit encouraged a team-based approach to investigations, which contributed to the development of a strong team ethos.
- The Unit was thought to have contributed to the development of good working relationships both within and between ranks.
- Some officers perceived that increased experience in being involved in particular types of cases encouraged the development of specialist skills and increased confidence; both personally and in other team members' ability to undertake the tasks assigned to them.

Crown Prosecution Service lawyer

- Improved relationships with the CPS were perceived to be one of the most significant changes that occurred as a result of the Unit.
- A dedicated CPS lawyer resulted in increased contact and an improved relationship between the police and CPS. It was also perceived as resulting in a more consistent evidential threshold.
- The Unit facilitated increased CPS involvement in the progression of cases, including in the direction of investigations and the development of strategies.
- Continuous CPS contact allowed for decisions on cases to be made at an earlier point in the investigative process.

Conclusion

All of those interviewed viewed the Unit and its achievements positively. A majority described the existence of a dedicated sexual assault unit as an 'obvious' addition to the Operational Command Unit.² It was observed that other units were dedicated to dealing with specific offences (for example, burglary); this made the absence of a dedicated rape investigation unit appear a strange omission.

Many of the findings of the research support previous studies within the area. A Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) report on Operation Sapphire Units concluded that: SOITs felt more supported in their work; officers valued the benefits of a team approach; and dedicated teams ensured investigator continuity.

These findings were replicated in the perceptions of those involved in the pilot. The results also mirror findings from research conducted on dedicated units more generally, specifically: improvement in the co-ordination of investigations; increased liaison between the police and external agencies; and sharing of complementary skills.

Most of the changes summarised above could be described as being broadly positive. However, it is worth reflecting on some changes that might be interpreted as either equivocal or, in some cases, negative:

- The provision of a single named individual throughout a victim's engagement with the process was thought, by some, to have increased the risk of a victim becoming dependent on specific members of the Unit (particularly the allocated SOIT and ISVA). However, this was largely counter-balanced by the recognition that this approach could have benefits for the victim, particularly the ability to develop a stronger rapport from more consistent liaison.
- The Unit was perceived to have provided a structure under which investigators were able to lessen their direct involvement in victim care, by feeling confident that contact was being mediated through the SOIT and ISVA. The obvious risk arising from this is that investigators may become disengaged from victims.
- Finally, in spite of the general perceived benefits of a dedicated unit, few of those working in the Unit felt that it had contributed to improved criminal justice system (CJS) outcomes (a view that appeared

² An Operational Command Unit is a subdivision of a police force area. It has responsibility for a specific area of a region (sometimes a town or part of a town) and is based in a police station within this locality.

to reflect the findings of statistical monitoring conducted by the force)³. This is mirrored by the research literature on dedicated units more generally, in which findings demonstrate improvements in investigative processes and victim care rather than in the number of cases that proceed to charge. (Klein 2008, Friday *et al.*, 2006)

It can be argued that improving case outcomes was not the main aim of the creation of the Unit. Indeed, the primary

³ Internal force evaluation (completed June 2009)

aim identified by the police was an improvement in the service provided to victims, while the CPS's main focus was on the provision of early investigative advice. Nevertheless, an irony remains. The increase in capacity and resources, which were key consequences of the creation of the Unit, allowed much more thorough rape investigations to take place. However, despite this, the perception was that this had not resulted in the more rigorous investigation of the subset of cases proposed for 'no further action' (i.e. cases that had less chance of success in court) in order to strengthen the evidential base for prosecution.

A qualitative study of a dedicated sexual assault investigation unit

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Introduction

Background

A dedicated rape investigation unit was set up as a pilot project in a police force in the south of England, supported by funding from the Home Office. The Unit became operational in September 2008, and continued for a period of six months. The pilot aimed to establish whether or not a dedicated unit improved the service provided to victims of sexual assault. This report summarises the findings from a qualitative study of this dedicated sexual assault unit.

Overview of the Unit

Prior to the set up of the Unit all sexual assault cases (except those of stranger rape cases) were processed through the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) within the Operational Command Unit (OCU).⁴ After a case was reported to the police, a sexual offences investigation trained (SOIT) officer would be deployed where possible to conduct the initial enquiries, after which the case was passed to an investigator within the CID. This detective would then be responsible for investigating the case alongside his/her existing caseload of other offences (for example, burglary, assault and theft offences). Once a case had been fully investigated, the investigating officer, where necessary, would make an appointment with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to review the file. At this meeting a decision would be taken to charge the suspect, conduct further enquiries or discontinue the case because of insufficient evidence.

⁴ An Operational Command Unit is a subdivision of a police force area. It has responsibility for a specific area of a region (sometimes a town or part of a town) and is based in a police station within this locality.

At the beginning of the pilot, a unit dedicated to the investigation of sexual assault cases was set up that included both police and non-police staff and was based in the OCU police station. The investigative team was led by a detective chief inspector (DCI) supported by two detective sergeants (DSs) who managed the day-to-day running of the Unit and supervised investigations. There were six detective constables (DCs) whose main responsibility was conducting investigations.

Detectives were recruited through a transfer process from other departments within the Constabulary and no specialist training was provided for these posts. Five SOIT officers, who were responsible for the initial victim interviews and subsequent victim liaison, were recruited from across the force. All officers had undertaken SOIT roles before and had undertaken the SOIT training provided by the force. In addition, two non-police officer members were included in the Unit: a dedicated CPS lawyer was available one day a week to provide legal advice and take decisions on cases; and a dedicated independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA), whose role was to provide impartial practical and emotional support to the victim, was permanently based within the Unit.

Summary of cases processed by the Unit⁵

Fifty-seven of the cases referred to the Unit during the pilot were subject to a full investigation.⁶ Five cases were 'no crimed', ten resulted in the accused being charged and 42 cases were not progressed.

⁵ Internal police force evaluation (completed June 2009).

⁶ Excludes 30 cases to which a SOIT was deployed but was then not subject to a full investigation (this includes seven cases where incidents occurred outside the force area, ten cases which were passed on to other units in constabulary, for example case transferred to child prosecution unit, and 13 cases where the victim would not make a formal complaint).

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Table 1: Summary of outcomes of cases referred to the Unit and subject to investigation

| Case outcome | Number of cases |
|---|-----------------|
| Not progressed, of which; | 42 |
| – Post report/ prior to examination (n=11) | |
| – Pre CPS advice (n=2) | |
| – After receipt of CPS advice (n=29) | |
| No crimed | 5 |
| Charged | 10 |
| Total number of cases subject to full investigation by Unit | 57 |

Existing research⁷

As part of the background to the study a short review of the research literature was undertaken to establish what evidence exists already on dedicated investigative units. The research literature can be grouped into two main categories:

- reviews of dedicated sexual assault units (either focusing on the investigation or on specialist prosecutions); and
- wider literature on specialist police units more generally.

The Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) undertook a review of Project Sapphire (2002), which specialises in investigating rape and sexual assault cases with dedicated teams operating across all London Boroughs.⁸ The report identified several benefits for both the officers involved in cases, and for victims:

SOITs felt more valued and supported in their work; officers valued the benefits of a team approach (where previously it was felt that investigations could be left to individual effort);⁹ and the report also suggested that dedicated teams assisted officers in gaining expertise and ensured investigator continuity; both were considered important to the provision of effective support to the victim and the chances of securing a successful conviction.

However, the review did not compare this approach with the outcomes achieved by non-specialist units.

The research on specialist sexual assault prosecutors is mainly US based and has produced varied findings. Abadinsky (1998) found that a specialised unit had the potential to improve the likelihood of victim retention by providing one attorney with continuous case responsibility. Battelle Memorial Institute (1977) found that providing a more streamlined investigative process allowed attorneys to become more involved at an earlier stage with cases. A more recent US study compared a specialist prosecution unit for charging of sexual assault cases in an area with a non-specialist legal team. This comparison suggested that case outcomes were not influenced by the introduction of a dedicated legal team (Beichner & Spohn, 2005).

A published review of the existing literature on dedicated domestic violence prosecution units also presents a varied picture in relation to outcomes. While increased victim satisfaction was found across a range of studies, the impact on case outcomes, namely successful convictions, was inconclusive when compared with non-specialist units (Klein, 2008). A US study of the impact on victims of a dedicated domestic violence police investigation and liaison unit suggested that there was no significant difference in the number of repeat incidence of domestic violence cases as a result of the creation of a dedicated unit (Friday *et al.*, 2006).

More wide-ranging reviews of dedicated police investigation units across a range of crime types highlight a number of general benefits arising from this form of organisation. (Humphreys, 1995, Lloyd & Burman, 1995, Matthews, 1996, Morgan *et al.*, 1996). Overall, dedicated units have been shown to:

- improve co-ordination in investigations;
- maximise detective skills;
- increase liaison between police and external agencies; and
- encourage the sharing of complementary skills across the team.

Evaluating the pilot

As part of an agreement between the Home Office and the Constabulary involved in the pilot, the force agreed to undertake an evaluation of the Unit, drawing largely on the resources of a force analyst. This force evaluation was completed in June 2009.

⁷ This review was not a systematic retrieval of the available literature.

⁸ More information on Project Sapphire can be found at <http://www.met.police.uk/sapphire/>

⁹ <http://www.mpa.gov.uk/downloads/scrutinities/rape-scrutiny.pdf>

It was also agreed that Home Office researchers would undertake in-depth interviews with staff working in the Unit to provide some qualitative information on how the pilot worked in practice. The research aimed to understand perceptions of:

- how the Unit worked in practice;
- what impact the changes were thought to have had; and
- any lessons for the future.

It is the findings from these interviews that this report presents.

Methodology

All of those who were involved in the Unit were invited to be interviewed. Of the 14 police officers in the Unit 11 were interviewed (the DCI, the two DSs, four of the six DCs, and four of the five SOIT officers). In addition, both the CPS lawyer and the ISVA were interviewed. In total 13 interviews were conducted. All the interviews were voluntary and no reason was needed for deciding not to take part.

A team of three Home Office researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews on a face-to-face basis. Interviews took place in January and March 2009, at the three and five-month stage of the six-month pilot. A topic guide was developed to direct the interviews and ensure consistency of approach across the interviewing team. The guide covered the following themes: set up and aims of the Unit; perceived impact on processes and outcomes; learning points and sustainability of changes; and views on the participants' own experience.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Each interview transcript was summarised using a thematic matrix designed specifically for the study. This allowed systematic analysis to be conducted both within and between individual interviews. An initial analysis of the

data allowed the wide-ranging views and experiences of individuals involved in the programme to be mapped, while further exploration identified key themes that appeared to be influencing perceptions.

Two interviewers independently coded the data, noting general patterns and themes that emerged from the interviews with participants. These patterns and codes were then refined and grouped into clear themes for each role within the Unit through discussions between the two interviewers responsible for the analysis. This iterative process allowed overall themes to emerge from the analysis and ensured consistency of approach.

Quotes are used throughout the report for illustrative purposes, to give a flavour of the language that respondents used during the interviews. They are not attributed to individuals nor have they been assigned pseudonyms in order to preserve the anonymity of respondents.¹⁰

Structure of the report

This report discusses the perceptions of those interviewed on what changed through the creation of the Unit and is structured around the four main components of the Unit. Chapter 2 focuses on the SOIT; Chapter 3 examines the ISVA; Chapter 4 considers changes to rape investigative teams; and Chapter 5 focuses on the CPS and case progression. The final two chapters outline the limitations of the research and the overarching changes or themes that were thought to have a more general impact on investigations and victim care overall. Each chapter draws on interview material from all interviewees, not just those undertaking the specific role or task considered.

¹⁰ Pseudonyms have not been used as it may be possible, though linking quotes and following individual stories through the report, to identify the role of a study participant. In some instances only one person undertook a specific role within the unit. It is possible therefore that this method would not allow the anonymity of respondents to be preserved.

Sexual offences investigation trained officer

The role of the SOIT

SOITs are police officers who are trained to be the initial point of contact between police and victims of sexual assault. This usually involves taking the victim's first account of the incident and attending the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC), where these are in existence, to provide support. Beyond this, they are usually the point of contact for liaison between police and the victim.

Prior to the setting up of the Unit, SOITs in the police force were not dedicated posts. Rather, front-line police officers would volunteer to be trained in SOIT duties and would perform this role in addition to their normal policing duties. Following the report of a rape, a trained SOIT working on shift would be deployed to the victim and would undertake the initial SOIT duties (including initial account, SARC attendance, collection of relevant items for forensic testing). The case would then be passed to the duty investigating officer. The SOIT officers continuing involvement in the case would be as victim 'link and liaison', with little involvement in the investigation itself. The SOIT officer would then return to normal duties and subsequent contact with the victim would be heavily constrained by other pressures.

"SOITs never worked with the investigators previously, SOITs were just deployed from uniform, they handed over a package to an investigator and that was the last they saw of this; there was none of that contact that we now have every day."

As a result of the pilot several SOIT officers were assigned exclusively to work in the Unit and were co-located with other Unit members. The number of SOITs assigned to the Unit was arranged to provide cover across all days of the week based on temporal analysis of previous cases through the Operational Command Unit (OCU). The Unit was staffed between the hours of 7 a.m. and 1 a.m. on a daily basis, with the exception of Fridays and Saturdays, when the duty was extended to 3 a.m. Outside these hours the SOIT officers on Targeted Patrol Team duties would be the first response to rape allegations.¹¹

One important impact of having a dedicated post was perceived to be the ability to undertake SOIT duties without competing pressures. This had three main

consequences. The first was speed of initial contact. Prior to the setting up of the Unit, a SOIT could be engaged in other duties and therefore be unable to respond immediately to the report of a rape. This could lead to an untrained response officer being the first person to respond to a victim once a report had been made. As a result of the new structure, in most cases the SOIT was the first person to respond to a victim's report, with initial contact often occurring soon after the offence. As one interviewee pointed out, this also minimised the likelihood of victims having to repeat their account of the event to a number of different police personnel.

"You have somebody there. It means you don't have to make a phone call, you don't have to find out who's available, you know, it could be because they're off on a job over here. They're there, available, which means that within 20 to 30 minutes, usually, or at the outmost, an hour, we can usually get a SOIT paired up with the victim."

"I knew the role, I knew, obviously, that the SOITs were dedicated SOITs, which was the difference; so, rather than being out doing something and then the phone comes in 'Can you come back to the station, and then go somewhere and deal ...' you are ready to go at the drop of a hat, effectively. So, I knew there was obviously a different emphasis on role, if you like."

The second main consequence of a dedicated role was that it was perceived to allow for increased contact with victims downstream of the initial response. The dedicated role meant that competing pressures did not limit the amount of time that SOIT officers could provide.

A third perceived benefit of having a dedicated role was the ability to provide the same SOIT throughout the investigative process and reduce the risk of 'multiple SOITs' being assigned to a specific victim. This in turn improved the likelihood of a stronger rapport developing between the SOIT officer and the victim. Although the general policy across the police force area was that one SOIT be provided consistently for each victim, some of those interviewed noted that prior to the Unit being set up the SOIT liaising with the victim did change during the course of an investigation.

"Previously SOITs would sort of often change throughout the course of an investigation; whereas this allows the luxury pretty much consistently for one SOIT to remain with one victim throughout ... and they're more like family liaison officers, for murders and things, rather than just SOITs, who just look after the victims, so I think that's good."

¹¹ Internal police force evaluation (completed June 2009).

One consequence of co-locating SOITs within the Unit was that the SOITs had increased contact with the detectives involved in cases, as well as with the independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA) and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Whereas previously SOITs involvement in a case would be limited to victim liaison, this changed as a consequence of the Unit. The combination of co-location and the time available for non-SOIT duties allowed them to become much more involved in other aspects of the investigative process. This ranged from picking up CCTV evidence to obtaining statements from witnesses. While the SOIT role became their primary role, these more wide-ranging investigative tasks were undertaken when SOIT duties had been delivered. SOITs' general police training and experience would normally have included such tasks (although not usually in a sexual assault investigation setting).

"I think it's ideal because we all know each other and, even though we just do the SOIT role, there's nothing to stop a detective saying '[SOIT], you're on days tomorrow and I'm on a day off. John Smith needs to be, needs to have an MGI I done, a statement; can you do it?' And there's nothing to stop me, because I'm still a police officer, I can still do the statement. Obviously, if I come in that following morning and a job comes in, that takes a priority."

The only perceived change to the role performed by the SOIT was an extension of their remit within the victim medical process. Following additional Forensic Science Service (FSS) training, SOITs based in the Unit were able to assist the doctor undertaking the medical examination by taking swabs, and fulfilling part of the role previously performed by the crime scene investigator.¹²

Perceptions of the introduction of a dedicated SOIT role

Overall, the SOITs' role was viewed positively by both the SOITs themselves and other team members. They were perceived to be critical to achieving improvements in victim care (through having more time to provide a victim-focused service) and to ensuring that victims were supported, encouraged, prepared and kept informed as investigations progressed.

While some officers were initially reluctant to undertake the role full time, once in post, most viewed the experience positively. There were two aspects to this. First, it was felt

that the ability to get involved in investigations provided opportunities for personal development. In particular, detective constables (DCs) noted that while working in the Unit, SOITs were seen to have improved their own understanding of investigations and investigative techniques.

"The SOITs have probably learned a lot more about investigation and broadened their skills base, definitely, and vice versa. I think the officers on the case have learned a lot more about how, what we do with victims before they get, before they deal with the suspects."

"Now I'm more involved because you're there all the time. So, it is quite interesting. I mean, from a career point of view, if you wanted to be CID or something; perfect, because you're getting involved, a little bit more, in the investigation. By definition, we're quite a small team and we will help, even if it's only going to pick up CCTV for someone or going to get a basic statement."

A minority did, however, suggest that the lack of training in interview techniques hindered them in their undertaking of these new tasks. In most instances though, it was felt that this was addressed through on-the-job training and mentoring.

Secondly, there was more scope to provide what was perceived to be important improvements in the quality of victim care.

"Victim focus, definitely for me. I've been providing a far better service. We're in touch with our victims on a weekly basis, which wouldn't have happened before, and I can say that counts, definitely ... we're providing a much better service for the victims."

Overall, it was felt that the Unit improved the care provided to the victim by the SOIT, by improving the quality and increasing the frequency of communication between SOITs and the rest of the Unit (in particular, the investigative team). This provided an opportunity for the SOITs to learn more about the specifics of each case. This information could then, where appropriate, be fed back to victims so that they were kept up to date about the progression of their case as information became available.

Few negative perceptions were offered on the ways in which the SOITs fitted into the Unit. Some interviewees, however, highlighted that increased contact between a single SOIT and a victim had the potential to result in this victim becoming dependent on their SOIT. This might result in an unwillingness to engage with other members of the team.

¹² While this was a new addition to the SOIT role within the pilot OCU, this extension had already been implemented in some police forces nationally.

Summary

- The creation of a dedicated SOIT post within the Unit was perceived to have made three important changes to the delivery of victim care: quicker deployment of SOITs after the reporting of an offence; more time for post-incident liaison; and, the consistent provision of one SOIT officer per victim.
- SOITs became more broadly involved in sexual assault investigations (once their SOIT duties had been delivered).
- There was a broad consensus that dedicated SOITs had improved the quality of victim care. This was thought to be the result of a combination of the benefits of a dedicated post, and, the ability to feed back relevant information from the co-located investigative team.
- Although some interviewees were initially doubtful about the personal benefits of the new dedicated role, SOITs ultimately viewed them positively. Not only did the role provide a better platform for delivering victim care, it also provided personal development opportunities.

Integrated independent sexual violence adviser

The role of the ISVA

ISVAs provide an independent (non-police) service to the victims of sexual violence. The support that they provide to victims will depend on individual circumstances but can range from addressing emotional needs to more practical support around legal issues or housing difficulties. Unlike sexual offences investigation trained (SOIT) officers, their contact with the victim will continue past the point at which a decision on whether or not to proceed to charge is reached.

Before the pilot, ISVAs for the area were located within the Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC). Following the conclusion of the victim interview, the ISVA would be responsible for co-ordinating victim care and support. The SARC ISVAs operated on a rota basis with victims having contact with different members of staff throughout their involvement with the service. This model was thought to help reduce the dependency of victims on individual ISVAs. Following the setting up of the pilot, an ISVA from the SARC was based within the Unit and provided a dedicated service to all cases referred through the Unit. In addition, all sexual assault victims in the area covered by the Operational Command Unit (OCU) who attended the SARC would be referred to the Unit ISVA. This individual would then be solely responsible for advising and supporting the victim.¹³

The nature of the tasks performed by the ISVA based within the Unit was not thought to have changed extensively as a result of providing a single dedicated post. The post continued to be focused on providing an advocacy role on behalf of the victim (for example, writing letters of support, referring to counselling agencies, liaising with housing bodies) and offering emotional support.

“It has been pretty much normal to what I would do if I was up at the centre... It’s not been an awful lot different. It has been a mixture of advocating on their [victim’s] behalf and offering emotional support.”

The main change identified was around the way a larger number of ‘no further action’ (NFA) cases generated higher demands for emotional support from the ISVA.

Perceptions of the integrated ISVA role

While the majority of interviewees perceived the relationship between police staff and the ISVA positively, a minority held negative views. Prior to the Unit being set up, it was generally felt that communication between the police and the ISVA was poor. Police officer knowledge of the ISVA role (and the SARC) was limited, with many officers admitting that they only became aware of its role and purpose after the establishment of the Unit.

“I mean, I, I came to this from somewhere I didn’t know about people like ISVAs and Early Intervention Project and SARCs. and people like, it’s a whole new thing for me. I think it’s brilliant because they sit in our office as well.”

“Well, we’ve got the independent sexual ISVAs, whatever they stand for, but, yes, working with them, it’s ... that was new for me. I’ve never, I didn’t know about it and that’s part of the project as well that we’ve got the contact with them. So, yeah, that’s worked well.”

The co-location of an ISVA in the Unit also provided scope for discussions about the different agendas that each party was working to. While these did not always end in consensus, it was felt that the discussions provided an opportunity to develop relationships and gain a better understanding of each partner’s role.

“We dealt with a lot of people ... but not someone, not people like [ISVA] who are dealing with our victims every day ... so I’ve learnt an awful lot from working with them and understanding their viewpoints on things, which is obviously not always the same as the police’s way.”

As with other components of the Unit, benefits were felt to have resulted from the greater opportunities for face-to-face contact and the consequent increased flow of information. In this way the relationship with the ISVA was seen to benefit both the investigation and victim care. The ISVA could provide information from the victim on the case (where appropriate) and feedback/views on the service that was being provided by the Unit. One example given was of the police drawing upon the ISVA’s detailed knowledge of victim circumstances to help decide upon the optimal approach to informing the victim of key decisions. By the same token, the police were able to give timely information on the case to the ISVA, which in turn could then be fed back to the victim. This was perceived to be a marked improvement on the system that existed before the Unit was set up.

¹³ Occasionally staff absences made it necessary for another worker from the SARC to contact victims on this caseload.

“So that’s one of the things, that’s one of the reasons why I believe the victims are still with us, is the speed, and second, at the end of the day, the contact that they have between us, the ISVAs, the SOITs, in the investigations team is just exemplary, I think, you know, and they’re updated constantly.”

The co-location of the SOIT and the ISVA was also perceived to have enabled a more flexible, tailored approach to victim care after the initial report. Although the SOIT and ISVA undertook distinctly different roles in victim support, having these two roles co-located allowed discussions to take place about who would be best placed to address individual victim need on a case-by-case basis. Some of this simply reflected judgements on the personalities involved.¹⁴

Co-location of the police and the ISVA was, however, on some occasions, thought to have led to tension because of the different agendas that each party worked to. A handful of officers highlighted that while the ISVA’s role did not require any critical appraisal of the account or the evidence available, these were inevitably important aspects of the police approach to the case. This tension was felt to have been exacerbated by the exposure of the ISVA to discussions held by the investigative team. These were sometimes thought to be quite clinical in their focus on the strength of evidence and the possible directions of investigation.

“I think it works, it’s really working quite well, you know. They’re not here all the time we’re here and I think that’s nice because police still like to talk amongst themselves, because we still like seeing to jobs over in a very clinical kind of way sometimes, but we have to because that’s, you know, we have to sit and, you know, kick jobs around and sometimes we can, it can be very uncomfortable for the ISVAs because we will speculate about things and, I think sometimes that doesn’t quite work for them.”

Almost all officers acknowledged the benefits arising from co-location of the ISVA, particularly their increased knowledge and understanding of the role of the ISVA and the benefits of the service that the ISVA provided to overall victim care. However, a minority remained sceptical about integrating partnership staff into a police setting

on a permanent basis. Those officers who expressed this perception had also been initially sceptical of integrating ‘partnership’ staff into a police setting when the pilot began.

“They’re independent, they’re nothing to do with us, we’re the police and we know best ... that’s our job, we know best and having other people in there, is quite strange for us. CPS we can just about deal with, but someone from a voluntary, you know, someone utterly independent ... I’m not too sure about that.”

While acknowledging some of the difficulties that had been involved in integration into a police setting, the ISVA was on the whole positive about the Unit and what had been achieved. The main recommendation from the ISVA’s self-assessment of their role in the Unit (which was also discussed in the interview) was an alteration to the structure of the ISVA’s attendance to victims at the police station. It was suggested that this be changed to a rotating role (so that all ISVAs within the SARC team spend a period of time at the police station in order to decrease the possibility of victim dependency).

Summary

- The core role undertaken by the ISVA was not perceived to have changed within the Unit; focus remained centred on a combination of advocacy and emotional support for the victim.
- There were three main perceived benefits identified through co-location. First, it vastly improved police knowledge of the general role that ISVAs perform. Secondly, it brought the ISVA knowledge (and their perspective) on victims more readily into police consciousness. And finally, it was seen as improving the two-way flow of information between the police and victims.
- Initially, the ISVA was not universally welcomed into the Unit although, over the life of the pilot, most police officers identified perceived benefits of co-location and their inclusion in the Unit. Some, however, remained sceptical as to whether this should become business as usual.

¹⁴ In the interviews there was little reference to SOIT/ISVA duplication of effort.

Investigative team

The role of the investigative team

The role of the investigator is to collect evidence in order to build a case against a suspect or suspects (or to initially identify a suspect in offences committed by strangers). Before the establishment of the Unit, sexual assault investigations would have been undertaken like most other more serious offences. This would have entailed the case being allocated to detectives in the Criminal Investigations Department (CID).

Generally speaking, an investigating officer would be allocated to an offence and would be responsible for managing the entire investigation (alongside his/her existing caseload of offences). This detective would be responsible for carrying out most enquiries and evidence gathering for the case. With the competing demands of other cases, the timing of key investigative tasks would often be determined by the suspect's bail date (which had the potential to extend investigations) and, in some instances, cases would be passed on to other investigators within the Operational Command Unit (OCU) if workload demanded.

"If it's just me working on a job, and I've got to get 15 statements, get CCTV, analyse phones, all that kind of stuff, I've got to fit that in my day along with all my other jobs that I'm doing ... before, it just kind of rumbled on and on, because you'd got to balance it with so many other things."

Under the pilot sexual assault investigations (of adult victims) were all handled by the new dedicated investigative team and investigations were undertaken jointly by all members of the team rather than a single individual.

Investigative officers working in the Unit came from a variety of backgrounds. Some officers had gained investigative experience while working in major crime and child protection units (although it was felt that not all of these experiences mapped across to the skill base required for the tasks undertaken within the Unit). The main direct route for experience for investigating officers was through a previous posting within CID.

While there was no specific training provided for those who joined the Unit, some officers believed that the Unit adopted a 'learning on the job' approach to staff development. This resulted in a steep learning curve for many involved about how rape investigations were conducted. Each case was perceived as providing an

opportunity to learn about what worked, what did not work and how things might be done differently when conducting the next investigation.¹⁵ As such the process used by the Unit to investigate cases was developed on a case-by-case basis.

"I mean, there might be a plan behind the scenes, which I wasn't privy to, but I felt that's how it worked. Come in, wing it a little bit if you like, don't like that saying but it was a bit like that, and see how we went, and see what we could do."

The method of working adopted by the Unit was described as being essentially 'team-based'. This perceived change is arguably the main difference when comparing the 'sole investigator' approach adopted previously. The general approach was to tackle any new case as a whole team rather than officers being assigned cases individually. This method involved all available investigating officers, in addition to sexual offences investigation trained (SOIT) officers, assisting a lead investigating officer with enquiries and evidence gathering. The main consequence of this was that each team member was involved, to varying degrees, in almost every case that came through the Unit.

"It was, nearly every case that we've had has been a situation where the whole team attacks it from, on the first day; and are allocated different enquiries and go out and do different things; and then one person puts it all together."

Perceptions of a dedicated investigative team

Understandably, when asked about investigations prior to the set up of the dedicated unit, almost all police officers were clear that they felt that sexual assault investigations had always been conducted 'thoroughly'. In this sense the Unit was not thought to have improved the investigative process.

"The investigation was always done thoroughly, no DC, no policeman, would want to be in the position where they've, because of something they haven't done, a job's fallen down in court, particularly rape. The investigation hasn't changed. It's just the fact we can do it so much quicker and the victim, survivor, gets support all they way."

"I don't think we are investigating them any better, don't think we are doing anything different within the way that we investigate it. I wouldn't suggest we were being better police officers, you know, who were doing it before are just as good"

¹⁵ No views were expressed on any additional training or development that might have been desirable for those working within the Unit.

as we are, but they've got other things going on. And we've been able to prioritise ... instead of working toward a bail date."

However, when the same individuals were asked to identify any aspects of investigations that they thought had changed as a result of the Unit, several discrete areas were frequently offered. These changes covered almost every aspect of the investigative process, including the involvement of outside agencies, the actual investigation itself, the use of forensics, and the development of interview techniques. Overall, areas of perceived improvement could be grouped under six main headings:

- consistency of the lead investigator as cases progressed;
- knowledge of individual cases being shared more readily among team members, including SOITs and independent sexual violence advisers (ISVAs);
- compressed time scales in the execution of time-sensitive investigative actions;
- reducing the risk of not collecting evidence;
- the development of specialist investigative skills within the Unit membership; and
- clear separation of investigative role from victim liaison.

Each of these is explored briefly in turn.

Some officers perceived dedicated posts as allowing for greater consistency in the allocation of investigators to cases. The traditional way of managing sexual assault investigations had given scope for investigating officers to change in response to work pressures. During the pilot, in most cases, it was felt that the lead investigator in the case would remain in place throughout the course of an investigation.

"The normal CID officer ... because of different things that happened, and leave and things like that, they, jobs can be passed from one person to another. In our office, pretty much if I picked up a job, I'll stay with that job until the end."

Officers also suggested that consistency throughout the investigative process was assisted by the chosen working method of the Unit, which meant that most of the team were involved in varying degrees in almost every case that was investigated. This method of working evolved as cases were processed through the Unit. This was perceived to have created a safety net of understanding ensuring that at any one point multiple officers, as well as the ISVA and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) had a good working knowledge of the details of each case.

Shared knowledge was also perceived to have had an impact on the progress of investigations. As multiple officers were involved in conducting enquiries, officers felt that they were able to have discussions about which lines of investigations to pursue. This was felt to decrease the possibility that evidence relevant to the case might not be collected.

"Because we've had the people to do all the necessary enquiries within a very short space of time, we've managed to probably get more evidence than we could do if it's only one officer dealing with it ... and with only one person's brain working on it some things may well have been missed."

"I would say every job that's come into the office, we've all had a bit of knowledge or a little bit of work involved ... Generally, I would know what everybody in my office is investigating, what their job is, or some knowledge, small knowledge even, about their jobs."

Shortened timescales in the execution of key tasks were also perceived to be another improvement to investigations. It is widely accepted that, in sexual assault investigations in particular, the timing of evidence recovery can have a critical influence on case building and case outcome [Feist et al., 2007].

The organisation of the Unit was seen as one way to limit the loss of evidence or the late pursuance of lines of enquiries. Previously, where one officer was working alone, much evidence gathering was undertaken in a more linear fashion. The breadth of the team tackling any particular case enabled evidence to be collected simultaneously.

"It's amazing that when a job comes in, the SOIT goes out, we get the information back very quickly about what it's all about and who the offender is/what isn't. And then very quickly we get a plan together, you know. We go and arrest, the statements, the enquiries, blah de blah, and it's all done and dusted very quickly."

Staff in the Unit also suggested that their increasing experience in dealing with rape investigations had encouraged the development of specialist skills over time. Given the range of types of cases that officers would personally become involved in, and the open discussions that would take place on the cases under investigation, some perceived that this had provided an opportunity to develop specialist skills.

"It's about balancing all that is quite difficult, where you can just concentrate and specialise. It's about specialising and having the time to do that."

In particular, an increased understanding of the processes involved in the investigation was perceived to have increased the speed and productivity of the investigative team. Officers often felt that this experience had empowered them to provide a more professional service as personal confidence in their ability grew as a result of their continuing involvement in sexual assault investigations.

“When on the first day of the Unit, when a rape came in I was thinking ‘Oh please don’t give it to me, because I’m not too sure what I’m going to be doing’. Now I’d say ‘Bring it on, just give it to me’. Because I’m very confident in my role.”

“Yeah totally; you’re taught confidence, you’re confidence of dealing with the job.”

Of course, increased investigator confidence does not necessarily equate to high levels of investigator competence. No specialist rape investigation training was provided for those joining the Unit. The specialist knowledge and understanding that was acquired by the team was largely internally generated, through learning-on-the-job, observing the actions of others and, as is explored in Chapter 5, through the extended input of a CPS lawyer.

Several officers also believed that the additional investigative capacity had improved their ability to correctly identify false allegation cases (by finding substantive evidence that challenged the basis of the allegation). Previously officers felt that because of limited capacity to conduct investigations, this was often not possible.

Finally, those within the investigative team highlighted the impact that the allocation of dedicated SOITs and ISVAs had on investigations. Many felt that as there were clear roles that focused on victim care, investigators were able to concentrate on conducting the investigation itself rather than on victim liaison. In addition, the increased victim contact, by the ISVA and SOIT, was also thought to have allowed for an increased range of information relating to the victim and their particular circumstances, which could assist with investigations.

“[Victims] have that continuity of a person dealing with them, and it will still allow whoever’s investigating it to have the time to investigate, rather than having to nurse the victim as well.”

Relationships

Overall, relationships within the Unit were viewed positively and many felt that it had encouraged the

development of relationships both between staff working on the investigative team and also between officers and other members of the Unit. Co-location and team working were perceived to be key to these relationships as they provided opportunities for better communication and understanding of the roles of Unit members within the investigative process. In many cases it was felt that these relationships had not existed before the Unit had started, but had come about as a result of the team-based approach to tackling cases, which helped to develop a strong team ethos.

“Investigation’s much slicker, much quicker, everybody’s much more focused on that one specific job that may have come in; everybody has got a role to play, and everybody works really well within the team.”

The development of relationships was also considered to have resulted in additional benefits to those working in the Unit. Some of those interviewed felt that strong team relations encouraged an informal setting within the Unit, which enabled officers to use the team as a forum for debrief sessions for officers, negating the need to ‘take work home’.

“I feel I’ve not taken jobs home so much ... we’re all talking about the same things, it’s a good way of offloading, whereas on shift you wouldn’t be able to do that because it’s not appropriate to talk about some things that we, deal, you know, deal with.”

Prior to the set up of the Unit it was acknowledged that structural arrangements within the police would prevent close working between ranks. It was felt that the Unit had gone some way to breaking this down and that these relations would continue even after staff had moved post.

“So I’ve got a network of contacts that I didn’t know I had ... In any job you can have them and us, whether it’s managers and staff or detectives and uniform, or whether it’s response and beats teams; you will have them and us. So anything that will cross that bridge is obviously very useful.”

Relationships were also perceived to have contributed to an increase in confidence in the team’s ability to undertake investigations. A key aspect to developing this confidence was ‘shared learning’; as those within the Unit had learnt together about investigations they had increased confidence in the each other’s ability. It was felt that this was enhanced by the overall personal support those in the Unit had for the aims of the project, which meant that everyone was keen to get involved in the work of the Unit and bought into its overall objectives.

“We know what we need to do. We just, you do that, and you do that, and you do that, and it gets done. And everybody knows what to do and everybody’s comfortable with each other to know that they’ll do the job properly.”

As such, officers identified two types of commitment: commitment to the Unit and its overall objectives; and commitment to individual members of the team. Both of these manifestations of commitment were thought to have had a positive impact on relationships within the Unit.

While relationships within the investigative team were viewed in a wholly positive light, many felt that other colleagues within the OCU had negative perceptions of the Unit overall. This was thought to be for several reasons. There was a perception that the pilot had benefited from over-staffing, a perception held even within the Unit, resulting in officers being under-occupied. This was understandably thought to have generated some animosity from fellow police colleagues. Additional concerns were highlighted over the removal of work that should have been destined for the Criminal Investigations Department (CID), the perception being that this had occurred because the main office was unable to deal with these types of cases. However, it was acknowledged that the diversion of these cases away from CID would have made a small impact on the overall CID workload.

“Everybody would have to accept that what we’ve done is successful but I think that people just see it as a luxury, and, actually, the office, the general CID office have said you’ve taken all of our work.”

Summary

- There were some perceived benefits in particular aspects of the quality/nature of investigations, but officers were quick to emphasize that investigations prior to the set up of the Unit had always been conducted ‘thoroughly’.
- Perceived benefits could be grouped under six main headings: consistency of the lead investigator as cases progressed; knowledge of individual cases being shared more readily among team members; compressed time scales in the execution of time-sensitive investigative actions; reduced risk of not collecting evidence; the development of specialist investigative skills within the Unit membership; and clear separation of investigative role from victim liaison.
- A dedicated Unit encouraged a team-based approach to investigations, which contributed to the development of a strong internal team ethos between members of police staff.
- The Unit was thought to have contributed to the development of good working relationships both within and between ranks.
- Some officers perceived that increased experience in being involved in particular types of cases encouraged the development of specialist skills and increased confidence; both personally and in other team members’ ability to undertake the tasks assigned to them.

Crown Prosecution Service

The role of the CPS

An important part of the changes encompassed by the Unit was the way in which the CPS provided advice on sexual assault cases. Prior to the pilot CPS advice was given to the police through an appointments system or over the phone through CPS Direct. The police would often conduct a full investigation prior to CPS involvement. Once a full evidential file was assembled the police would then make an appointment for the case to be considered by the CPS, who would be responsible for a caseload made up of a wide range of offences. There were several perceived weaknesses with this traditional model.

First, when police officers sought CPS advice they did not always liaise with the same lawyer. The lack of a single source of advice meant that the police felt that there was a variable evidential threshold. Investigators also felt frustrated that they often had to reiterate information about the same case to different lawyers, which was thought to have been a time-consuming process.

“[CPS] you see a different person every day, every time you go. Some jobs you have to explain to one person, then you don’t see them the next time you go with further information, so you have to reiterate that.”

Second, officers were highly critical of the delay in receiving decisions from the CPS on whether or not to progress a case. The time taken for a decision to be reached was dependent on CPS workloads; some officers stated that under the old system it could take up to three months for a decision to be reached.

“The old model, if you like, is the suspect is given a long bail date, the police do the investigation as far as possible without involving the [CPS], and then [police] submit a full, what [police] regard as a full file ... what happens then is much later down the line, because inevitably by virtue of workloads [of CPS] they don’t look at them until very close to that bail date.”

The setting up of the Unit brought with it the arrival of a dedicated CPS lawyer. This individual attended the Unit one day per week to provide CPS advice to investigators on the progression of cases. Investigating officers would prepare cases to present to the CPS lawyer, who would then speak directly to the lead officer in the case. In addition to the CPS attending the police station, investigating officers were also able to contact them by phone to seek immediate advice when necessary. In short,

the change in the structure, and the proximity of the contact with the Unit, was seen as fundamental to changing the nature of the police-CPS relationship.

“[Relationship has changed] purely because we’ve had someone run alongside us all the way ... [CPS] comes in every, once a week, Mondays usually, to review jobs and then that’s when [the CPS] can give their steer on we might need this, we might need that, that one’s definitely not going anywhere, we’ll NFA it now ... the alternative is, with the CPS here in XXX, you are looking sometimes up to three months to get an appointment.”

Some officers felt that this was the most significant change within the Unit. As one member of the Unit remarked:

“The CPS of it [the Unit] is an absolute must, absolutely. If you’re this, these sorts of Units are going to succeed, you have to have one CPS lawyer once a week, or whatever, the decision is dependent upon the caseload, but without CPS, it falls, falls apart.”

Impact on investigations

Regular contact with a single CPS lawyer was perceived to have had several effects on the investigative process. First, it allowed the CPS lawyer to become more closely involved with police investigations, including the direction of the investigative strategy (for example, influencing the framing of forensic and interview strategies).¹⁶

“As the investigation progresses and becomes a full evidential [file], the advantage of [the CPS] being at the police station as part of the team is huge, because [CPS] can be directly involved in developing forensic strategies.”

“[The CPS lawyer] literally comes in, we present our evidence, but we have built a rapport with [CPS]. And I now know when I pick up a case, that [CPS lawyer] is going to look for certain points there ... For me especially, I think it’s given me direction in an investigation.”

Second, having a single lawyer to liaise with was welcomed for the certainty it brought in understanding the evidential threshold. Officers felt that under the old system, the likelihood of a case being charged was as much dependent on the lawyer who was assigned to the case, as the strength of the evidence gathered. With the advent of the

¹⁶ It is worth highlighting that in the interview the CPS lawyer identified the primary aim of CPS involvement in the Unit to be the provision of early advice in investigations to save both CPS and police resources.

dedicated lawyer, an opinion on evidential thresholds was provided solely by a single lawyer. This threshold ended up setting boundaries within which officers could conduct investigations. As investigators gained more familiarity with what types of evidence the CPS lawyer would accept, they began working within these parameters when conducting an investigation. Clarity of evidential threshold was seen as a positive development because it reduced doubt.

“Everybody’s lives are a lot easier because you never knew what CPS were going to say.”

The majority of investigations were based on this single interpretation of the evidential threshold. In most cases, officers interviewed indicated that they were content with CPS decisions regarding case direction and continuation. In most instances, interviewees provided no evidence of challenging the conclusions reached by the CPS. In effect, the investigative team complied with the investigative direction and decisions offered.

“The CPS lawyer has been the best thing, even when a job comes through the door, and I had one of these jobs, right, this has happened, I’m going to speak to [CPS lawyer] directly on the phone now, with the limited information that I’ve got, I’m going to speak to [CPS lawyer]. And [CPS lawyer] said to me, ‘Okay, during your investigations don’t forget to cover these points, because they’re going to be vital.’ Great.”

“We do understand why [CPS] does NFA certain jobs and there’s not many that I would have argued the toss.”

The investigative team, overall, described this change positively. Officers felt that it ensured that they, and the CPS, were applying their minds to the same aspects of a case rather than the police independently pursuing avenues that the CPS would ultimately reject. At its most extreme, the CPS ended up being able to determine both the direction of investigative strategies and the decision to progress a case (or not).

“We’ve had CPS alongside us as well, that’s been good because they can: well, you might need to do that, you might want to go down, you’re struggling a bit there, is there anybody we might be able to get some evidence off’ – it helps and strengthens in that particular bit, which is good because they are one’s who’ve got to prosecute at the end of the day.”

“All the decisions the CPS has made have been good decisions, CPS have made good very good decisions. We’ve never gone ‘What, my God, I really thought’, we’ve always said ‘Yeah, [CPS lawyer] right, we wouldn’t have charged him either’”

The availability of earlier CPS advice was also thought to have shortened the length of some investigations. In some instances, officers stated that the provision of early advice (particularly in cases that were deemed by the CPS lawyer to have a low chance of success) meant that a decision to take ‘no further action’ (NFA) could be made quickly. This meant that, in some cases, ‘low’ return lines of enquiry could be abandoned (and resources saved) as a result of an early decision to NFA. This resulted in the perception that the Unit had resulted in a larger number of NFA decisions being taken early on in the investigative process.¹⁷ Officers in the Unit viewed this approach positively.

First, officers felt that it allowed the Unit to focus resources on new cases being reported (which could have a greater chance of success) rather than expending resources on cases that the CPS (and by default, the investigators) had identified as having little chance of success. For instance, the Unit saved money by not submitting some forensic evidence in these cases.

“There would be some [cases] dropping off quite quickly, if you like, because the investigation couldn’t be progressed any further, and they weren’t ever going to meet the evidential test for prosecution, whilst new cases which might require much more work were coming in.”

“CPS have come on board and they’ve looked at that, and they said ‘We agree with you on that, okay let’s move on’. So we’re not wasting months and months on jobs which, clearly, to all involved, have not been proper jobs.”

Secondly, many officers interviewed felt that the victims’ understandable disappointment at an NFA outcome was at least tempered by the speed with which enquiries were undertaken (ensuring that victims were not kept waiting for lengthy periods). Officers in the Unit perceived this to be linked to a correspondingly lower number of victim withdrawals.

“Well, from the beginning, the speed at which things were going through. And that’s fantastic, because even if, you know, it’s not ideal, but a case has been NFA’d, at least that person knows that that’s been done and it’s quicker, so that they’re not kept waiting to find out what’s going on.”

¹⁷ The internal force evaluation reported that 42 of the 57 cases (74%) investigated by the Unit were discontinued.

Perceptions of case progression

Victim withdrawals are generally thought to account for a high proportion of 'lost' rape cases (Feist et al., 2007). Although victims can withdraw at any point in the progression of the case – from the point of making the initial allegation up until the case reaches court – the majority are lost at the investigative stage. Most of those interviewed perceived that the Unit had a positive impact on victim withdrawals; the majority of officers and SOIT officers suggested that the Unit had managed to keep almost all victims engaged in the process until a decision by the CPS had been reached.¹⁸

“We haven’t had any victim withdraw at all ... as far as that goes, so even if it is, keep them in the process for three weeks whilst we do the investigation, and then the CPS take no further action, we’ve kept them in the process.”

Most officers perceived that the primary reason for keeping victims engaged in the process was the speed with which investigations were conducted.

“We’re moving the process along so much quicker that the victims, it sounds bad, but don’t get a chance to drop out of the system, because we aren’t dragging it out for them.”

Indeed, SOITs and investigators generally equated quicker investigations (and decisions on case progression) as a key component of improving victim care (irrespective of the case outcome).

¹⁸ It was not possible to undertake interviews with victims within the scope of this research. All views on victim care are from the perspective of those involved with the Unit.

“The fact that you can get a decision in a matter of weeks is miraculous, really, compared to what it used to be. And, even if it’s not what the people want, at least they can move on.”

The speed with which investigations were conducted was also believed to have contributed to victims’ confidence in the organisation, which again was thought to have had a positive impact on the number of withdrawals.

“We’re turning jobs round really, really quickly and I think that, actually, the victims have more faith in us as an organisation.”

Summary

- Improved relationships with CPS were perceived to be one of the most significant changes that occurred as a result of the Unit.
- A dedicated CPS lawyer resulted in increased contact and a better relationship between the police and CPS. It was also perceived as resulting in a more consistent evidential threshold.
- The Unit allowed increased CPS involvement in the progression of cases including in the direction of investigations and the development of strategies.
- Continuous CPS contact allowed for decisions on cases to be made at an earlier point in the investigative process. This was perceived to have had an impact on sustaining victim engagement in the process and also resources (which were not expended on cases that were perceived to have little chance of success).

Limitations of the research

This small qualitative study draws together the perceptions of individuals working in a dedicated sexual assault unit. As with all qualitative work, the findings of this report outline the views and perceptions of those within the Unit; they may not be repeated in other similar dedicated units.

There may, in practice, be a difference between the results achieved by a dedicated team drawn from across a Constabulary and a specialist team trained specifically for the purpose of a role within a unit. It has not been possible to draw a distinction between this within the research, although the perceptions of those working within the Unit and the recommendations from the analysis have been presented throughout the report.

The aim of the research was to understand how the Unit worked in practice; the processes it used in the investigation of rape and support of victims. It did not collect data from the perspective of the victim. It is therefore not possible to provide a measurement of perceived satisfaction of victims whose cases were processed by the Unit. It is only possible to present the perceptions of those working within the Unit as to the impact the Unit had on victim care.

Nevertheless, the absence of a large volume of research literature on this area makes this a useful addition to gaining an understanding of the subject area.

Conclusion

The paper has, so far, examined the pilot in terms of the main components of the Unit. The principal changes perceived to have resulted from the creation of the Unit can, however, be grouped under three headings:

- the creation/re-configuring of posts dedicated to rape cases;
- the co-location of Unit staff; and
- the speed of actions and decision-making within the investigation.

Table 2 below lists the perceived consequences of these changes. It is important to note that most of these benefits were perceived to be interconnected (for example, it was felt that quicker investigations were dependent on both the creation of dedicated posts and co-location).

All of those interviewed viewed the Unit, and its achievements, positively. The majority described the existence of a dedicated sexual assault unit as an 'obvious' addition to the Operational Command Unit (OCU). Some observed that other units were dedicated to dealing with specific offences (for example, burglary); this made the absence of a dedicated rape investigation unit appear a strange omission.

Many of the findings of the research support previous studies within the area. A Metropolitan Police Authority (MPA) report on Operation Sapphire Units (MPA, 2002) concluded that: SOITs felt more supported in the work, officers valued the benefits of a team approach; and dedicated teams ensure investigator continuity.

The results also mirror findings from research conducted on dedicated units more generally, specifically around the improvement in the co-ordination of investigations,

Table 2: Perceived consequences of changes as a result of the Unit

| Changes as a result of Unit | Perceived consequences on investigations/victim care/relationships |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Creation of dedicated posts | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Results in team-based approach to investigation of cases. ● Greater capacity for extensive/intensive victim support. ● Greater capacity for in-depth investigations. ● Single point of contact for victims (improved flow of information). ● Consistent lead investigator throughout case. ● Consistent Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) advice (and improved understanding of evidential threshold). ● Development of 'specialist' skills of investigative team. ● Clarity in evidential parameters across different cases. |
| Co-location | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Results in new and/or improved relationships between members of Unit (between and across ranks and with outside agencies). ● Development of a strong team ethos. ● Allowed the development of a shared understanding of cases. ● Provided greater opportunities for discussion of investigative approaches. ● Greater understanding/knowledge of other specialist roles – independent sexual violence adviser (ISVA) and sexual offences investigation trained (SOIT) officers. ● Permits opportunities for case debrief. ● Increased confidence in personal/team abilities. ● Created opportunities for SOITs' personal development. ● Possibility of tailoring victim care to individual preference. |
| Speed of actions and decisions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Earlier deployment of SOITs. ● Shorter timescales for key actions (especially important for time-sensitive investigative actions). ● Quicker decision on case progression ('no further action'/charges). ● Likely reduction in victim withdrawals. |

the increased liaison between the police and external agencies, an improvement in relationships between and across ranks and the sharing of complementary skills. (Humphreys, 1995, Lloyd & Burman, 1995, Matthews, 1996 and Morgan *et al.*, 1996). However there were perceived tensions between officers in the Unit and those working in other departments, notably the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), within the OCU.

Many of the improvements identified by officers were felt to have developed over the life of the pilot. This was particularly true of improvements in relations with external agencies (especially the ISVA and CPS, both of whom were part of the Unit) as well as in relations between and across ranks. In particular, many officers perceived their 'specialist' knowledge to have developed over time. They perceived this knowledge was internally generated, through learning-on-the-job, drawing on the case-based experience of the dedicated CPS lawyer, and, through observing the actions of others. While many described confidence in both their own personal ability and that of their colleagues working within the dedicated team, this often occurred much later in the pilot period.

The perceived improvements in victim care, notably victim retention, also complement previous findings from reviews of dedicated units, both those of the CPS and the police (Abadinsky, 1998, MPA, 2002, Klein, 2008). In these studies victim retention was attributed to the continuity of victim care provided by dedicated officers or lawyers. While this was the perception of those interviewed, it was not possible to test this hypothesis from the perspective of the victim within the scope of this study.

Overall, perceptions of the integration of the ISVA into the Unit were positive. Previous research has identified how co-location can risk influencing the independence of the ISVA (Robinson, 2009). However, this was not a concern raised by either the ISVA or those within the Unit. Rather a dialogue was seen as improving communication and understanding between the different parties involved in the Unit as well providing an opportunity to feed back on the service being provided.

Most of the changes summarised above could be described as being broadly positive. However, it is worth reflecting on some changes that might be interpreted as either equivocal or, in some cases, negative.

First, the provision of a single named individual throughout a victim's engagement with the process was thought, by some, to have increased the risk of a victim becoming dependent on specific members of the Unit (particularly the allocated SOIT and ISVA). However, this was largely counterbalanced by the recognition that this approach could have benefits for the victim, particularly the ability to develop a stronger rapport due to more consistent liaison.

Second, the Unit was perceived to have provided a structure by which investigators were able to lessen their direct involvement in victim care, by feeling confident that contact was being mediated through the SOITs and ISVA. The obvious risk arising from this is that investigators become more disengaged from victims.

Finally, in spite of the general perceived benefits of a dedicated unit, few of those working in the Unit felt that it had contributed to improved criminal justice system (CJS) outcomes (a view that did appear to reflect the findings of statistical monitoring conducted by the force). This is mirrored by the research literature on dedicated units more generally, in which findings demonstrate improvements in investigative processes and victim care rather than in the number of cases that proceed to charge (Friday *et al.*, 2006, Klein, 2008).

It can be argued that improving case outcomes was not the main aim of the creation of the Unit. Indeed, the primary aim identified by the police was an improvement in the service provided to victims, while the CPS's main focus was on the provision of early investigative advice. Nevertheless, an irony remains. The increase in capacity and resources, which were key consequences of the creation of the Unit, allowed much more thorough rape investigations to take place. However, despite this, the perception was that this had not resulted in the more rigorous investigation of the subset of cases proposed for 'no further action' (i.e. cases that had less chance of success in court) in order to strengthen the evidential base for prosecution.

"I've been disappointed by the number of NFAs... that because we have this, you know, six-month pilot and we've got all these experts under one roof, that we could perhaps try and push these boundaries a little bit more."

Recommendations

This small-scale study provides some evidence on the perceived benefits of setting up a dedicated unit to investigate sexual assaults. The overall findings are generally in line with the types of benefits identified in previous similar studies. Overall, each component of the Unit was perceived to have had a role in improving the investigation of sexual assault during the pilot period.

Several recommendations have emerged from this study.

The need for specialist training

- The specialist knowledge and understanding that was acquired by the team was largely internally generated, through learning-on-the-job, drawing on the case-based experience of the dedicated Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) lawyer, and observing the actions of others. No specialist training on rape investigation was provided for officers who were newly appointed to the Unit.

It is recommended that dedicated specialist sexual assault training should be provided to investigative officers on their appointment to newly established dedicated sexual assault units. This should assist in strengthening officers' specialist competence in understanding effective investigation of sexual assault investigations.

Repeating a pilot dedicated unit with emphasis on increasing the number of cases that proceed to charge

- For any future pilots, decision makers (involved in both the investigative process and the decision to charge) should be encouraged to pay particularly close attention to cases initially proposed for 'no further action'. Opportunities to strengthen the evidential base for these cases should be fully explored so as to maximise the number of cases that proceed to charge.

It is recommended that any future pilot should include as one of its primary aims a focus on strengthening the evidence base of cases so as to increase the number of cases that proceed to charge.

Improving our understanding of the existing evidence base on specialist units

- There does not appear to have been any systematic attempt to review the social research evidence base around dedicated units (including those specialising in the investigation of rape offences). In particular, the link between setting up dedicated units and improving case outcomes has not been clearly established.

It is recommended that a systematic review of the existing evidence base on the use of dedicated units in the investigation of sexual assault and its impact on case outcomes/victim care measures should be undertaken.

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