Report on the effectiveness of video conferences in cases of domestic abuse

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1 Background

This report was commissioned by Sussex Police and funded by Liverpool University to examine the use of video conferencing in cases of domestic abuse between December 2020 and March 2021. Prior to the introduction of a video-conferencing platform, victims who reported non-urgent domestic abuse were invited to a face-to-face interview (F2F) by response officers at their nearest Police station. Officers would either take notes by hand during the interview, or, if this was felt to cause unease in the victim or a barrier to active listening, officers would make notes from memory after the interview.

The introduction of a platform coincided with the introduction of a specialist Local Response Team (LRT) to deal with reports of domestic abuse, and also the advent of COVID regulations which necessitated new ways of policing to ensure the safety and wellbeing of staff and service users. In this climate, the LRT have been offering victims the opportunity to speak with police in F2F interviews carried out by LRT officers, or via remote videocall with LRT officers. Calls are scheduled in advance, and both officers and victim dial in at a pre-arranged time. Both F2F and videocalls take the same time (approx. 2-4 hours) and they collect the same information. The same paperwork is filed.

We have used two forms of data to assess the impact of a videoconferencing platform for officers and for victims:

- a small comparative cohort study comparing two types of F2F interviews and videoconference.
- feedback from both victims and officers regarding the use of Visionable.

All data was generated and compiled by Sussex police, but independently analysed by Liverpool University. Visionable has only been utilised by Sussex Police for a relatively short amount of time, thus the amount of user-based data available is small. Preliminary analysis of interview data and survey data used here is indicative of possible broader trends, rather than wholly conclusive, and there remains scope for more comprehensive analysis of the impact of videoconference calls.

DASH

DASH forms are always completed during or following any domestic abuse interview. The forms record binary answers to questions regarding the reported incident, and also record details of personal/familial/and historical context of any relationship between parties. Questions such as ‘has the current incident resulted in injury?’, ‘Do you feel isolated from family and friends?’, ‘Have they ever threatened to hurt or kill the children/dependants’ sit alongside questions about financial problems, mental health and addiction. Officers enter binary answers to each question (according to victim response) and can also note any subsequent comments made by the victim in relation to each question. For example, to question 19 (‘Do they do or say things of a sexual nature that make you feel bad or physically hurt you or someone else?’) one binary answer ‘yes’ was supplemented by the comment ‘yes – tried to have sex after I had given birth. Incident reported and he was arrested 2012’. Whilst binary answers to each of the twenty-six DASH questions are always required, comments are only entered if offered by the victim. At the end of each DASH form, officers must fill out a small section regarding the accused’s antecedent history, they are invited to leave explanatory notes for the case in a relevant comments section, e.g. ‘This is the first reported domestic incident between the pair. The suspect has no previous domestic history and no history of violence’.

Our analysis was carried out on 75 anonymised DASH forms provided by Sussex Police, divided into three groups:

- 25 collected by the Local Response Team during F2F interviews with victims.
- 25 collected by general response units (officers not specialising in domestic abuse cases) during F2F interviews.
- 25 collected by the Local Response Team via Visionable.

1 The platform was Visionable
We compared the three groups to ascertain the impact the use of videoconferencing might have on the quality of Domestic Abuse victim interviews: the consistency of risk assignment; the active participation of victims at interview; and the quality of officer comments/assessments arising from interview.

All DASH forms end with an assessment of the risk of escalation (Standard, Medium, High). This risk assessment considers the number of ‘yes’ answers a victim has provided on a DASH form but is not solely a product of it. From our sample, standard risk could range between 0-11 ‘yes’ answers, Medium between 5-17 ‘yes’ answers, with the only high ranking risk assigned to a single case in which 15 ‘yes’ answers were given. From this we can conclude that the supplementary contextual information offered by victims plays a significant role in assigning a risk category to reports, rather than simply the total number of answers given.

**Risk**

Each of the 75 forms in our study were assigned a numerical value based on their risk ranking (3 = high; 2 = medium; 1 = low). One case was not given a risk level and was given a value of 0.

Results indicate that the Local Resolution Team are more consistent than the Response Unit in assessing risk, whether via F2F or by video. Risk assessment following Response Unit F2F interviews was more varied and had a greater proportion of cases ranked medium risk (2).

**Fig 1. Rate of risk ranking by cohort**

There was virtually no difference in the scoring of risk between the LRT F2F cohort (mean 1.24) and the videocall cohort (1.28).

**Fig 2. Mean Average risk score by cohort.**

These results suggest that the expertise of the Local Response Team in handling interviews with domestic abuse victims is key to the quality of understanding incidents and evaluating risk, with relatively little difference made as a result of how such interviews are conducted. Videoconferencing maintains the quality and consistency of case risk assessment, and has no negative impact on how officers gather, understand, and rank this information.
3 Engagement

Victims

We carried out an analysis of victims' engagement by measuring how many words victims spoke, as well as what they said. The word count of every comment recorded, for each of the twenty-six binary questions per DASH form, was totalled and averaged for each group of 25 DASH forms. Results indicate that victims are more likely to speak at length about their circumstances and experiences to the Local Resolution Team than the Response Unit.

Figure 3. Total of words of victim comments recorded per cohort.

DASH forms resulting from the LRT F2F interviews recorded a total of 3618 words, the RU F2F 2460 words, and video interviews resulted in a total of 3378 words spoken by victims. The difference between LTR interviews and RU interviews amounts to between 35-50 extra words spoken by each victim per interview, a not insignificant amount of speech.

Figure 4. Average words spoken by victims per interview by cohort

On average, for the RU F2F interviews, victims spoke 98 words in commentary, victims undertaking LRT F2F interviews spoke an average of 145 words, and for video interviews they spoke 135. From this we can surmise that, again, it is the expertise of the Local Response Team in dealing with victims of domestic abuse, rather than the mode of interview, which determines victim engagement with questions.
On average, victims in LTR F2F interviews gave around 6 ‘yes’ answers per interview, roughly the same as victims speaking in RU F2F interviews, however, for videocall interviews victims gave an average of 7 ‘yes’ answers per interview. The number of ‘yes’ answers is not the sole factor that helps officers rank risk or determine the nature of a case and the twenty-six DASH questions are not all equal in severity or significance. An extra ‘yes’ answer indicating the victim suffers from depression may not alter perception of risk. However, additional ‘yes’ answers may provide officers with information on the use of weapons in abuse, previous attempts to choke or strangle, or threats to kill (all known to be indicators of violence escalation) that can improve the understanding of a case and improve risk-management, protection of victims, and arrest/charge decisions. In this regard, our ‘average yes’ results indicate that videoconference interviews are conducive to victims offering more affirmative answers to DASH questions.

A small team of Sussex officers have pioneered research into better understanding the root causes of vulnerability to domestic abuse and identified key factors to predicting future risk of DA incidents. ‘Operation Grain’ highlighted how important contextual information regarding victim relationship histories can be for risk assessment. Therefore, the benefits videoconference calls can provide in facilitating greater victim engagement may prove an important consideration in DA case management.

**Police Officers**

DASH enables officers to leave additional comments offering assessment of each case or important information not captured elsewhere.

**Fig 6. Total words written in officer comments by cohort (averaged).**

The difference between both F2F cohorts and videocalls when it came to recorded officer observations is stark. Interviews conducted by video recorded three times as many comments made by officers than F2F interviews. Although many of the DASH forms across all cohorts contained no officer comments at
all, Video interviews were four times as likely to result in a form with police officer comments. There are three potential explanations for this significant difference.

First, at present all face-to-face meetings require officers and victims to wear facemasks as a safety precaution, however via video, masks are not required and thus vital facial expressions and body language (so important in both measuring victim responses and conveying approachable officer attitudes) are accessible. This improves the quality of victim experience and officer information gathering. Second, victims participated more fully in video interviews and offered officers more contextual information which can inform such additional comments. For example, in one DASH form, completed through videoconferencing, an officer noted:

“I think at the moment whilst the suspect is in the Isle of Wight is medium risk but as soon as finds out that is serious about the relationship ending or when he realises that police are involved she will immediately be high risk. Also the risk will increase as it gets closer to 10th December as believes that he will be spending the day with and the children doing Christmas things”.iv

This crucial additional information for evaluating the case was obviously ascertained from conversation with the victim, however, due to the nature of DASH forms, was not captured elsewhere and shows the importance of well utilised additional officer comments. Likewise, a video interview from another case resulted in the following officer comment:

“Please note there is DV history between both parties but the victim for this report [Redacted] is the suspect for a CCB offence and a Rape offence which was reported in 2019 but took place in 2010. Both allegations were supported by the victim [redacted] but evidential difficulties led to NFA.”v

Similarly, this was information obtained by the attending officer from either conversation with the victim or police checks, not captured elsewhere but clearly relevant to the evaluation and onward progression of the case. The third explanation for why officers record so many more additional comments via video interviews than F2F interviews is that the videoconference format allows officers to take written notes more discreetly during interview, without breaking ‘eye contact’ with the victim via a computer screen, and without visibly doing so, thus avoiding putting the victim on edge or creating a barrier to the free flow of conversation. Thus, officers make more detailed and relevant notes at the time of interview.

4 Satisfaction with videoconferencing

The practical implications of videoconferences on information gathering and case assessment are an important metric in assessing its future utility to Sussex Police. However, the satisfaction of both victims and officers in using the system is essential to understanding its viability as a replacement for F2F interviews.

Victims

The 115 victims who engaged with Sussex Police on non-urgent DA cases between 14th December 2020 and 15th March 2021 were questioned about their experiences of the process as part of their interviews.

The respondents to the survey were self-selecting – by being part of the group of domestic violence victims who report crime – and they were primarily white British women.

- 76% of victims were asked about the safest and preferred method of police contact going forward, and 68% of victims were asked for the safest times of contact
- 99% of victims reported discussing safeguarding with officers.
- 89% of victims reported that they understood what would happen following their initial call
- 99% of respondents confirmed that they were contacted back by the police following their initial report
Victims were offered a variety of ways of conducting follow up interviews with Sussex Police following their initial report, 64.3% (74/115) chose to conduct their interviews by booking a Visionable video call.

Fig 7. Progression of survey cases after initial victim report.

A victim’s reasons for opting for videoconference interviews were mixed. Many felt that the current public-health climate made a non F2F interview preferable. The next biggest group were offered video interviews and either did not know they had the option to ask for an alternative interview type or were happy to follow officer recommendation. A small number of victims specifically opted for videocalls, citing convenience issues such as ‘Childcare’ or ‘I don’t have a car’ ‘I live far away’ or discretion ‘didn’t want officers at the house’. Some of those who decided not to be interviewed via video were not aware they had the option to choose an alternative, and some cited technical issues that made video calling impractical.

- All victims reported themselves as either completely or fairly satisfied with the service received from Sussex police, the vast majority being completely satisfied.
- 90% of victims who undertook video interviews described themselves as completely satisfied with the experience compared to 87% of those who were interviewed F2F.
- Following their interview victims strongly agreed that they had confidence in Sussex Police.
- 80% of those who interviewed by videocall strongly agreed that they had confidence in Sussex Police, compared to 65% of victims who undertook phone or F2F interviews.

Overall, victim satisfaction with reporting DA incidents and follow up interviews was high. Victims undertaking non F2F interviews remain clear on how the process will progress, who to contact if any issues arise, and have multiple opportunities to discuss safety and safeguarding with officers. While in general the reliability of non F2F interviews and victim satisfaction is high, there is a marked improvement in victim confidence in the police and satisfaction with the process following video interviews when compared to standard phone and F2F interviews.

One Visionable interviewee said:

‘I am told this is a relatively new dedicated team and I think it shows. I reported the same issue of harassment nearly 2 years ago but I had a very different experience. Although the officer who interviewed me in 2019 was helpful and understanding I felt I was possibly down a long list of other cases they were dealing with so I was not kept informed or updated and for over a year didn’t feel like it was worth reporting to the police further harassment. I finally reported this again when it was too much this year and this experience has been really positive with the swiftness it was dealt with and just being kept updated was reassuring that I had not been forgotten.’

There was no negative feedback associated with method of interview or outcome in any of the videoconference cases.
Police Officers

Police officers found Visionable to be a “perfectly good alternative” which presented “less risk” to all involved. Staff found that the flexibility and efficiency of the videoconferencing system enabled better allocation of staff time, strengthening the department as a whole and, most importantly, allowed victims to be attended to sooner than with face-to-face interviews. Officers were also able to recognise the benefits for victims of using videoconferencing. Victims were able to participate in interviews from the privacy of their own homes, had the benefit of familiar surroundings, the ability to arrange comforts for themselves like cups of tea and could be at home to manage other obligations like deliveries, childcare, and appointments. Reduced anxiety due to any of these issues was felt by officers to ‘encourage honesty’ and increase responsiveness during interviews.

Being able to conduct interviews with victims in their own homes via video was also felt by staff to be a more effective way of engaging service users. Videocall appointments are missed less frequently by victims than face to face appointments. Victims unsure of whether they wish to make a formal report may be deterred from doing so by the prospect of a journey to the Police Station (whether due to lockdown specific reasons or other), or indeed the idea of being in a Police Station at all. Officers felt that ‘completing the appointment in their own home negates this’ and was responsible for a higher incidence of kept appointments. Officers specifically highlighted the benefit of videocalls to victims with limited time or flexibility. Videocalls can be completed in a car, or outside space, on a lunchbreak or any time and place to suit the victim. F2F meetings might require a significant investment of time and effort for a victim and can lead to days of delay in reporting. A videocall in the victim’s home also provides several operational benefits. Officers can see any children or dependents discussed in a report, as well as the physical dimensions and details of the residence. Such opportunities are felt by officers to “provide vital information for the completion of SCARFs for us and partner agencies”. Officers also observed that videocalls were preferred by service users, noting ‘Visionable is a great system for our victims and one that they are very happy using’, a conclusion supported by the LRT victim survey.

5 Conclusion

The expertise of the Local Resolution Team is clearly central to maintaining quality of care and victim satisfaction. Our analysis of DASH data has shown that video interviews were just as effective in managing cases as F2F interviews. Videoconferencing preserves all the benefits of LRT interviews - communication conducive to victims speaking more freely and more comprehensively about their experiences – and may even offer some benefits over F2F interviews in this regard. Similarly, the Visionable system has also given officers more opportunity than F2F interviews to record detailed contextual commentary on each case. Moreover, the system has proved popular with both service users and officers. Victims have found videoconferencing an entirely acceptable replacement for F2F interviews during the Covid-19 crisis, with some also preferring the method on grounds of convenience and discretion. Those who have experienced videoconference interviews report both satisfaction with the process and confidence in Sussex Police, with analysis possibly indicating that video interviews are more likely to produce this result than other interview types. Visionable has also proved popular with officers, who feel they are able to give the same quality of service to victims through interview while feeling there are additional benefits. Officers felt videoconferencing made them use time more effectively, encouraged victims to be more at ease during interview, and more likely to speak honestly and openly. It also provides officers with the opportunity to see victims in their home environment, and to potentially visualise the location of previous incidents. The option of using videoconferencing was an advantage during the COVID lockdown period, but it also has subsequent high levels of effectiveness and victim/officer satisfaction when regulations were relaxed.

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1 DASH Visionable Cohort Case ID 47200195876
2 DASH Response unit F2F Cohort Case ID 47200189840.
4 DASH Visionable Cohort Case ID 47200195705
5 DASH Visionable Cohort Case ID 47200194831