

Evaluation of the Domestic Abuse Safeguarding Trial (DAST)

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Introduction

Sussex Police

Sussex Police force covers the counties of West and East Sussex, and consists of three divisions, each led by a Chief Superintendent (West Sussex, East Sussex, and Brighton & Hove). These are further divided into the districts of Chichester, Arun, Horsham, Adur & Worthing, Crawley, Mid Sussex, Brighton & Hove, Wealden, Lewes, Eastbourne, Rother and Hastings). Within each district Neighbourhood Policing Teams conduct community policing work and Neighbourhood Response Teams respond to emergency calls from hub stations. Sussex Police have five custody suites, located in Brighton, Crawley, Eastbourne, Hastings and Worthing. Sussex Police has a Public Protection department for specialist investigations such as RASSO, child and adult abuse and neglect and high-risk domestic abuse.

Domestic abuse in Sussex

Figures from the Office for National Statistics show that in 2020-2021 Sussex had a slightly lower than average rate of recorded domestic abuse crimes (18,957 - 11 per 1000 population, compared to 14 per 1000 population for England and Wales). The rates for combined domestic abuse incidents and crimes show a similar pattern – 18 per 1000 in Sussex compared to 24 per 1000 in England and Wales. Sixty-one percent of the combined domestic abuse incidents and crimes were classed as crimes in Sussex, compared to 58% in England and Wales. Domestic abuse crimes comprised 17% of Sussex’s total crimes in 2020-2021.

In Sussex in the year 2020-2021 60 arrests were made per 100 domestic abuse offences, much higher than the England and Wales average of 32 per 100. Six percent of domestic abuse crimes in Sussex resulted in a charge or summons in the year 2020-2021, compared to the England and Wales average of 8%.

For 2020-2021, ONS statistics showed that domestic abuse prosecutions accounted for 13% of total prosecutions in Sussex, with 81% of these resulting in conviction. This is the highest rate in five years, with previous years being between 76-79%. The prosecution rate is slightly lower than the England and Wales average of 15% and the conviction rate slightly higher than that in England and Wales (78%). A high proportion of cases experienced evidential difficulties, the majority where the victim does not support the action (58%), and a smaller proportion with victim support (18%).

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/domesticabuseinenglandandwalesdatatool>

The Local Resolution Team (LRT)

The LRT was established in March 2020 and comprises approximately 40 specially trained officers. The core function of the LRT is to deal with non-urgent domestic incident reports via set appointments with the person reporting an incident. The Local Resolution Team have also recently taken over responsibility for the face-to-face meeting in the DVDS RTA (Right to Ask) process and look for opportunities to submit RTK (Right to Know) applications.

DAST (Domestic Abuse Safeguarding Trial)

The Domestic Abuse Safeguarding Trial was conducted for 7 days in Brighton, East division and West division between the hours of 0800 – 2000 hrs. One LRT officer was assigned in a dedicated callsign.

During the trial response officers attended reports of domestic abuse as normal. When a suspect was arrested, the response officers:

- facilitated a video call between victim and DAST/LRT officer (using victim's own device) having briefed them appropriately
- completed Demeanour Statements
- used body worn video following arrival at incident
- took photos of injuries/scene/damage
- obtained available evidence (Res Gestae)
- carried out house-to-house enquiries

The DAST/LRT officer engaged with the victim via video call, and then:

- obtained statement from victim
- obtained VPS as required
- obtained any electronic evidence
- correctly recorded any offences as required
- completed a comprehensive safeguarding plan
- completed SCARF, to include DASH, Child to notice, VAAR etc.
- identified and actioned/facilitated other enquiries

The aim of the trial was to assess whether DAST increases victim engagement/satisfaction, improves safeguarding, and increases positive CJ outcome.

What do we already know about video interviewing?

Research in courts found that jurors were comfortable with remote technology (Mulcahy et al 2020), as were barristers (IFG 2020), and the public (Townsend 2021). The benefits of remote hearings, in terms of reduced costs and reduction in number of ineffective cases (Terry et al 2010) led to His/ Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) recommending it use as one of their pillars to recovery of the court system (2020).

It could be argued that COVID-19 sped up the process of introducing remote technology in courts, and perhaps over-rode some of the concerns of court-users (IFG 2020; Rossner et al 2021). These concerns included poor technology and/ or connections, for both courts and users, and the disproportionate impact of this on vulnerable users (The Equality and Human Rights Commission ([EQHRC 2020](#))). A major concern was with witnesses' and complainants' engagement with remote hearings, again of concern for disadvantaged and/ or vulnerable groups (see Byrom 2020; Rossner and McCurdy 2020).

These same concerns that exist in the court context for vulnerable complainants in the use of digital technology can also be seen in the context of conducting police interviews. Dando (2020), for example, comments that 'in normal times, highly trained police interviewers conduct interviews with groups of vulnerable and traumatised witnesses and complainants, guided by well researched accepted guidance and principles. Other research points to the importance of the approach of the interviewer, for example, in sexual assault cases (see for example, Webster and Oxburgh, 2022; Webster et al, 2021); the need to build rapport (for example, Meijer et al, 2021); and the role of empathy (for example, Jakobsen, 2021).

The changes precipitated by COVID-19 raised questions about whether a remote setting is as effective as face-to-face for reporting and/or investigating crimes. Rothwell *et al* (2022a) conducted a trial of offering callers to 999 or 101 an immediate phone call as an initial response. Results were positive, although domestic abuse was specifically excluded from this trial (see Rothwell et al 2022b for an evaluation of a trial of offering domestic abuse callers the option for an immediate video link rather than waiting for a face-to-face response officer). A report written by Transform Justice, the National Appropriate Adult Network and Fair Trials (2021) found that the provision of remote legal advice to children and vulnerable adults in police stations during COVID had a negative effect on their ability to understand what was happening, on whether they understood what they were consenting to, and on the legal advice given. Smith (2021), in a review of the literature on using remote technology to conduct investigative interviews, draws attention to using video links when the complainant or witness is in the family home, due to the risk of distress when recounting a traumatic incident from a place that is usually safe (although it could be argued as to whether a complainant of ongoing domestic abuse considers their home as a safe place – however, this does not remove the need for caution). Smith also reports that the quality of evidence is unlikely to be compromised by use of a remote link, but that care should be taken with how initial interviews are conducted. His conclusion is that more research is needed into this area.

Rothwell et al (2022) carried out a trial of Rapid Video Response for complainants of domestic abuse contacting Kent police. The option of video response was only available where the perpetrator had left the scene. Seventy five percent of eligible complainants were willing to participate in a video call, without any education or information about this option. They found that the response time of three minutes for those calls was 656 times faster than deploying a police car to the location. The video group also had a higher arrest rate for suspects. There was high complainant satisfaction among female complainants of intimate partner violence, and a higher level of confidence in the police. The findings of this study led to Kent Police implementing Rapid Video Response as part of their standard offering for complainants of domestic abuse.

Previous reports by Liverpool University (Godfrey, Richardson, Williams, Walklate, 2021), analysing the work of the Local Resolution Team, found that:

- more victims who undertook videoconferencing were satisfied with the experience compared to those whose interviews were face-to-face.
- the LRT were more consistent than response officers in assessing risk, whether via F2F or via videoconference.
- the expertise of the LRT in handling interviews with domestic abuse victims was key to understanding incidents and evaluating risk.
- victims were more likely to speak at length about their circumstances and experiences to the LRT officers than to response officers.
- the flexibility and efficiency of the videoconferencing system enabled better allocation of staff time and allowed victims to be attended to sooner than with face-to-face interviews.
- victims emphasized the importance of having a choice of how and when they shared information with the police, and the importance of the attitude and approach of the police officer regardless of the platform used.

Aims and objectives of this study

To evaluate the trial of DAST carried out by Sussex Police.

Method*

We used a mixed methods approach to evaluate the DAST pilot:

- Interviews with LRT officers who were involved in DAST (we interviewed one LRT officer about their experience of taking part in DAST. We were unable to interview response officers due to time and shift patterns).
- Data provided by Sussex Police comparing criminal justice outcomes pre-DAST and post-DAST (specifically for people dealt with during DAST trial).
- Interviews with people reporting domestic abuse who were part of DAST (six victims of DA agreed to be interviewed: four did not respond, one no longer wanted to be interviewed, and one agreed to be interviewed but did not respond to the phone call).

Findings

Communication with victims

The LRT officer's perception was that the victim of DA was comfortable with communicating by video link:

"The response for doing the video appointments has been really positive. And I think that's because firstly, they're still in their home address, so they probably feel a little bit more comfortable. I feel like most of the time, they open up a bit more as well. Sometimes, if you've got a police officer in front of you, for people that haven't had much experience of police being around to their address, maybe it can be a bit intimidating. People can feel nervous, victims can feel nervous. Certainly, back in the day, when I was on response, if I asked a victim of domestic violence to come into a police station, they're already nervous before they get into police station, then when you sit down with them in front of you're dressed up in uniform, and you sit down and ask them to go into .. disclose certain things that have happened, they tend to, it's almost like they tend to close up and they won't disclose everything whereas on the video calls, if they're in their own environment, they're comfortable. They can see me on a screen, they can interact with each other, it almost allows them the opportunity just to open up a little bit more, I think. So you can have a really good chat with them. You can assess what their home environment's like, who's at risk in the house, what the risk is associated to them. So I think it's in a way it's been a positive reaction ..."

This is confirmed by the data from the victim satisfaction surveys conducted by Sussex Police. Victims reported that they felt listened to, safer, extremely satisfied, and happy with the convenience of the system, due to the way in which the LRT officers did their job and the fact that action was taken.

Victim engagement

The LRT officer felt that victims were more engaged, due to the immediacy of the interaction with a specialist officer:

"....because it was it was straight after the incident. They obviously don't get a huge amount of time to reflect on the situation, whether that's a good thing or a bad thing. I would say that it's because it's fresh in their mind what's happened. They just get they're able to get to the point straight away and tell you exactly what's happened. Whereas again, when I was on response, in past days, we would arrest the suspects, take them to a police station, put them in, come back and then by the time you get back around to visiting the victim is sometimes like a two, four hour gap. And then by the time you get back to see the victim, they turn around and say I've actually thought about it. And I'm just happy that he's gone now and I don't want to provide a statement. Whereas if we contacted them within 10 minutes of that suspect leaving it's fresh in their mind if they're not providing the statement, but you can see that they're emotional. You can do demeanour statements about how they were presenting and how they were coming across."

This is reflected in the data on evidence provided by victims for Grade 1 cases:

- 19 victims gave a MG11 witness statement during DAST, compared to 2 prior
- 15 victims provided other evidence, compared to 1 prior

- 15 cases had victim-provided evidence uploaded on NICE Investigate, compared to previously where only 1 case had this evidence uploaded
- 21 cases had officer evidence uploaded during DAST, compared to 9 previously
- 6 victims provided details for other witnesses, who provided statements to support the prosecution case, compared to none prior to DAST
- 19 victims supported a criminal prosecution and engaged with police, compared to 2 prior to DAST
- The better victim engagement and evidence collection during DAST led to better outcomes in terms of more arrests and fewer NFAs. More perpetrators were charged (4 vs 0); more were bailed (6 vs 0); and more were sent to CPS (4 vs. 2). These figures are small and the final outcomes of those bailed or sent to CPS are not yet known – however the trend appears to be positive.

Safeguarding

There is a stark contrast in safeguarding before and during DAST.

- During DAST, all safeguarding templates contained the RARA model, compared to none prior to DAST
- During DAST, safeguarding advice was given and correctly documented in all cases, compared to prior to DAST, where no safeguarding advice was given in over half the cases
- During DAST, around 95% of DASH forms had further contextual information in regard to risk assessment, which allowed risk to be mitigated more effectively. This allowed necessary referrals to be completed by SIU or MASH teams for victims who required it. Prior to DAST, only 10% of DASH forms had further contextual information in regard to risk assessment. Due to poor risk assessment in majority of forms, no further support or referrals made by SIU or MASH teams noted for any victims. Every DASH form was marked as “Standard Risk”, with minimal safeguarding and information.

These findings for safeguarding echo those of our two earlier reports on the use of video calls by the LRT, where we found that DASH forms completed by LRT officers had more contextual information, allowing a better assessment of risk to be made. The perception of the LRT officer was that response officers were pleased that safeguarding was completed and aware of the time saved:

“I did get phone call back from the officer who I took the statement who was actually the arresting officer, she phoned me back afterwards and she went, ‘you know, you’ve saved me a load of time, can I just say thank you very much’. That’s fine. That’s what we’re here for. It’s what the trial was for. So I think they, the two officers I helped on that occasion were really grateful because it meant that the safeguarding had been done, the DASH had been done with the risk assessment questions - they didn’t have to revisit that after taking the suspect to custody, they didn’t have to come back and do it themselves. So it saved them probably the best part of two, three hours of their shift.”

There is also recognition that the dedicated time from the LRT officer means that they can spend the necessary time with the victim:

“And there's always that thing that the response guys, that even if they get back to the police station, and get back to the victim, to speak to the victim and do the risk assessment, they could be called out again, halfway through doing a risk assessment with the victim, they could be called out to another emergency incident. And they've gotta go ... So they were really grateful that I had the time to spend with that person to take the statement and secure the evidence.”

Again, this reflects our earlier findings, that victims appreciated having the time and space with a dedicated officer to give their evidence in full.

What could be improved?

Communication to the Response officers about the availability of LRT could be improved. The LRT officer who took part in DAST felt that, on a small number of occasions, the response officers did not contact LRT because they had overlooked the LRT availability or were focused on their response.

In terms of evaluation data, the evidence would be more robust if interviews had been carried out with a greater number of LRT and response officers and with victims who had experienced DAST.

Recommendations

Victim satisfaction with DAST was high and safeguarding procedures were much improved. Significantly, albeit based on a comparatively small data set, criminal justice outcomes were greatly improved, with a large jump in the number of cases which resulted in charge.

On the basis of the evidence we have assessed, we recommend that:

- **DAST be rolled out across Sussex as soon as possible.**
- **The availability of DAST is communicated to all officers.**
- **Further evaluation on a larger set of data be carried out within six months.**

* We would like to thank the officers who contributed to this evaluation.

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