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Operation Diogel

**& Specialist Units for Tackling Violence
Against Women & Girls Across Wales**

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Executive Summary

- 1.** HMICFRS recently characterised the national policing context in relation to violence against women and girls (VAWG) offences as a matter for ‘grave concern’ given the high proportion of cases that result in ‘no further action’ by police and the sparse and variable provision of specialist units in place to effectively investigate these crimes.
- 2.** With funding from AWPAC, Cardiff University conducted two hybrid knowledge-exchange workshops with 10 police participants from across the four Welsh forces to understand police perceptions of the key features, implementation challenges, effectiveness and barriers to success for specialist units set up to tackle VAWG.
- 3.** Participants’ views of the key features or ‘ingredients’ of specialist policing responses to VAWG were captured by a virtual bulletin board (Padlet) exercise which revealed nine themes. In order of importance, these were: Specialist knowledge and expertise; Partnership working; Resources and time; Victim-led approach; Clear mission and goals; Dedicated staff; Leadership; Good communication; and Innovation.
- 4.** The Padlet exercise revealed that having specialist knowledge and/or subject matter expertise was the top ‘ingredient’, having received more posts, ratings and stars than any other ingredient. Participants across the two workshops agreed that it was people-oriented ‘soft skills’ rather than technical skills *per se* that were warranted when working in specialist VAWG teams.
- 5.** Workshop discussion was organised around four key themes:
 - a. The *rationale* for establishing alternatives to ‘business as usual’ focussed on skills/role, trust and time. Unlike other officers, those working in specialist units have acquired relevant skills and expertise, have the time to engage closely with victims, as well as access to ‘bigger picture’ information and links with partner agencies.
 - b. The *implementation challenges* associated with setting up specialist units focussed on gaining ‘buy-in’ from chief officers and acquiring adequate resources and staffing.
 - c. Participants shared the view that *measuring success* of specialist units must include victim-focused outcomes and officer job satisfaction/wellbeing as well as more traditional performance metrics such as criminal justice outcomes.
 - d. Three main issues emerged from the discussion on *sustaining effective practice*: resources and backing, support for officers in specialist units, and approaches to sharing best practice.
- 6.** Finally, the workshops allowed participants to provide information which formed the basis for 5 case studies of specialist units/initiatives ongoing or planned in Welsh police forces. Together these illustrate the key ingredients and exemplify the potential of specialist units putting procedural justice theory into practice.
- 7.** Overall, the findings from this small-scale study contribute to the growing evidence base on the multiple benefits of specialist policing units for tackling VAWG, their common features and challenges, as well as examples of how these might be advantageously deployed across different policing contexts.

Introduction

The concept of ‘specialism’ within a policing context is multi-faceted and includes the advent of specialist units/teams to handle specific offences, victim groups, offenders (or a combination of all three), alongside the development of specialist training, and the acquisition of specialist skills and knowledge relevant to their specific remit (Dalton et al., 2022; Mawby et al., 2015). Specialist policing units have long been acknowledged as a method for improving the response to crimes for which the ‘business as usual’ or ‘generic’ police response has been found wanting and/or when going above and beyond general policing duties is routinely required. For example, specialist units for investigating child abuse were set up in Scotland in the 1980s (Lloyd & Burman, 1996) and Family Support Units were established by South Wales Police in 1990 as ‘a key site for bringing together and fostering expertise in relation to investigating the types of crimes now considered public protection issues – child abuse, domestic abuse and sexual violence’ (Robinson et al., 2023).

The research literature on specialist policing responses to violence against women and girls (VAWG) highlights multiple benefits. Perhaps most importantly, overall victim satisfaction during the investigative process is higher for those receiving a response from a specialist unit, which can be largely explained by the enhanced levels of communication provided to victims alongside better access to support services (Powell & Cauchi, 2013; Robinson & Davies, 2024). Specialist units can improve investigative outcomes even in cases involving victims with additional vulnerabilities, suggesting they may offer more careful investigation and better levels of victim care (Robinson, 2017; Robinson & Davies, 2024; Rumney et al., 2019). Finally, studies show that working in a specialist team affords officers higher status and job satisfaction from the support, communication and sense of common purpose that are distinctive features of specialist teams (Jolin and Moose, 1997; Lloyd & Burman, 1996; Martin et al., 2017; Robinson & Davies, 2024; Rumney et al., 2020).

The progressive reforms to initiate specialist units, in some forces dating back more than 30 years, unfortunately have not been sustained. Over time, due to various factors, they have given way to alternatives such as centralised investigative ‘hubs’ to manage the demand versus capacity challenge that continues to grow year-on-year. This is an understandable response to the significant staffing cuts and loss of experienced officers across UK police forces over the past decade. However, the limitations of this model, as articulated by South Wales Police, are that hub staff ‘are usually non specialist and often officers right at the beginning of their detective careers. This is not meant as a criticism of very hard-working hub officers; however, they deal with a wide variety of offences and don’t always know what support a victim could access, how to control an offender’s behaviour in the long-term, how to problem-solve for families and couples or know what organisations can do outside of the criminal justice process. These wider considerations therefore often come too late, when a Public Protection Notice (PPN) is processed and often when the victim has already withdrawn their support.’

HMICFRS recently characterised the national policing context in relation to VAWG offences as a matter for ‘grave concern’ given the high proportion of cases that result in ‘no further action’ by police and the sparse and variable provision of specialist units in place to effectively investigate these crimes. As noted in their 2021 inspection, not all forces had specialist teams to investigate either domestic abuse or sexual offence cases, and there were different approaches throughout the country in terms of providing a specialist policing response to these crimes. In relation to domestic abuse specifically, the 2021 HMICFRS inspection found that only one force had moved to specialist investigative teams (but the teams were not at full capacity); one force had plans to introduce specialist teams; one force had no specialist investigative teams but had a small central team that played an active part in supervising cases and providing guidance; and



one force used officers in criminal investigation departments and response teams to investigate DA cases. In relation to sexual offences, there is a similar picture of decline over time, with only 16 of the 36 forces surveyed having a dedicated unit for adult sexual offence cases (George & Ferguson 2021). This is despite both HMICFRS (2019) and NPCC (2021) concluding that specialist trained officers generally conduct better investigations and that there was evidence of better supervision of investigations within specialist teams.

There is a small but growing evidence base that has established some key benefits of specialist policing units for tackling VAWG as well as some of their distinctive features. However, the available evidence is heavily weighted towards specialist rape units. There is less evidence about specialist policing units

designed for domestic abuse specifically, even though this is a far more prevalent crime coming to police attention. Furthermore, the research literature defines the broad contours of what is meant by 'specialism' in a policing context, but a more detailed understanding of the common features of these units, as well as examples of how these might be differently albeit advantageously deployed would make an important contribution to scholarship in this area. This report presents findings from a small-scale study designed to address these gaps. It should provide timely evidence to assist police forces as they make policy and practice decisions in relation to VAWG, especially given the recent announcement that 'the national policing response to violence against women and girls should be on a par with terrorism and serious and organised crime' (NPCC, 2024).

Methods

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this research was to host two knowledge-exchange workshops with representatives from the four Welsh forces (21 Feb 2024 and 1 Mar 2024) to discuss the following questions:

- **What specialist units for domestic abuse (DA) and Violence against women and girls (VAWG) are currently in operation in Wales?**
- **What are specialist units meant to achieve, what do they achieve and what are the barriers to their effective practice?**
- **How are specialist units successfully established, utilised and sustained?**
- **What best practice examples and/or key learning points should be disseminated across Welsh police forces in order to improve the police response to DA/VAWG?**

The overarching objective of this research is to understand police perceptions of the implementation challenges, effectiveness and barriers to success for specialist units set up to tackle DA/VAWG.

Overall approach

Participants for the workshops were identified through their response to an 'expression of interest' form that was disseminated via email to police across Wales in two ways: (a) utilising the networks of South Wales Police, official partners to this research and (b) through contacts shared by the funder (AWPAC).

Participants were given an overview of the research project before volunteering to take part. They were provided with full information sheets and consent forms to sign at least one week before the workshop date. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Cardiff University) on 12th February 2024 (ref #328).

Both workshops were hybrid, allowing participants to attend online or in person, according to their preference. Audio recordings of the workshops were made with prior consent, enabling more accurate analysis of the discussion.

Participants

All workshop participants (n=10) are police officers/staff working in one of the four Welsh police forces, each of whom has professional experience in the area of DA/VAWG. All four forces were represented at the workshops.

Participant ID	Rank/Role	Department/Area
Participant 1	Detective Inspector	DA Investigation
Participant 2	Sergeant	DA Investigation
Participant 3	Detective Inspector	Vulnerability Hub
Participant 4	OPCC Policy Officer	VAWDASV portfolio
Participant 5	Detective Sergeant	Public Protection & Safeguarding Department
Participant 6	Chief Superintendent	VAWDASV
Participant 7	Inspector	VAWG Tactical Lead
Participant 8	Survivor Engagement Coordinator	Victim's Hub
Participant 9	Detective Sergeant	Rape Investigation Team
Participant 10	Inspector	Force Incident Manager

Data collection

Knowledge-exchange workshops. Two hybrid meetings (lasting 2-3 hours) were structured with the following format to facilitate information sharing and discussion from all participants:

- Padlet task and discussion: This real-time collaborative web platform allowed participants to upload content onto a virtual bulletin board. We utilised this service to invite participants to individually and anonymously write and share posts describing their views on the 'key ingredients' of specialist policing units. Instructions were as follows: *Think about how specialist units are different from 'business as usual'. What are their 'key ingredients'? Contribute by posting each 'key ingredient' as a separate post. Make as many contributions as you like.* Following this, participants were invited to view all of the posts supplied by the group and to indicate their perceptions of the importance of each 'ingredient' by applying a star ranking (1 star=least important, 5 stars=most important). The star rankings facilitated a group discussion over the key ingredients and which were deemed to be essential features of specialist units.
- Mapping specialist units: This part of the workshop provided an opportunity to share information about current or planned specialist units across Wales. The research team initiated knowledge-sharing by providing a short presentation on the findings from the evaluation of Operation Diogel. Participants were then invited to share any information they had about other specialist units set up to tackle VAWG.
- Discussion questions: Participants were invited to respond to a series of questions, each of which was presented on a PowerPoint slide and/or put in the 'chat' function on Teams. The questions and prompts asked of participants were as follows: (1) Why

are specialist units established? What is the **rationale** behind establishing something different from 'business as usual'? What problems are they meant to solve or address that the 'business as usual' approach cannot? (2) How are specialist units established? What are the **implementation challenges**? Who drives their implementation? How is their remit established? What role does technology play? What problems or issues arise from introducing a 'specialist' unit? (3) What are specialist units meant to achieve? How best to **measure 'success'** for these units? What performance criteria should be included when evaluating these units? (4) How can these units enhance police effectiveness in responding to VAWG? What is necessary to have in place to **sustain effective practice** over time? Are there best practice examples and/or key learning points that should be disseminated across Welsh police forces in order to improve the police response to VAWG?

Confidential Microsoft Form prior to the workshops. Participants were invited to provide brief background information on any specialist units or projects for VAWG that are currently/ have recently been in operation in their forces. Five responses were provided by participants from three of the four forces. This yielded some general comments about VAWG as a priority area, as well as some more detailed information about two specific units in one force, and this was expanded on in more depth during the first workshop.

Confidential Microsoft Form following the workshops. Participants were given an opportunity to share any additional views/ thoughts confidentially with the research team, outside of the workshop group context. One participant chose to complete this form, and their response broadly echoed the discussion in the workshops. They shared their thoughts on specialist units and provided some additional comments in relation to good ways of working in this context, which are presented in later sections of this report where applicable.

Limitations

This was a small-scale study to identify police perceptions of specialist operational units designed to improve the response to VAWG in Wales. We utilised a ‘snowball’ sampling method to identify potential participants, which had to take place over the Christmas holiday period given the short timescale of the funding/ research. Although representatives from the

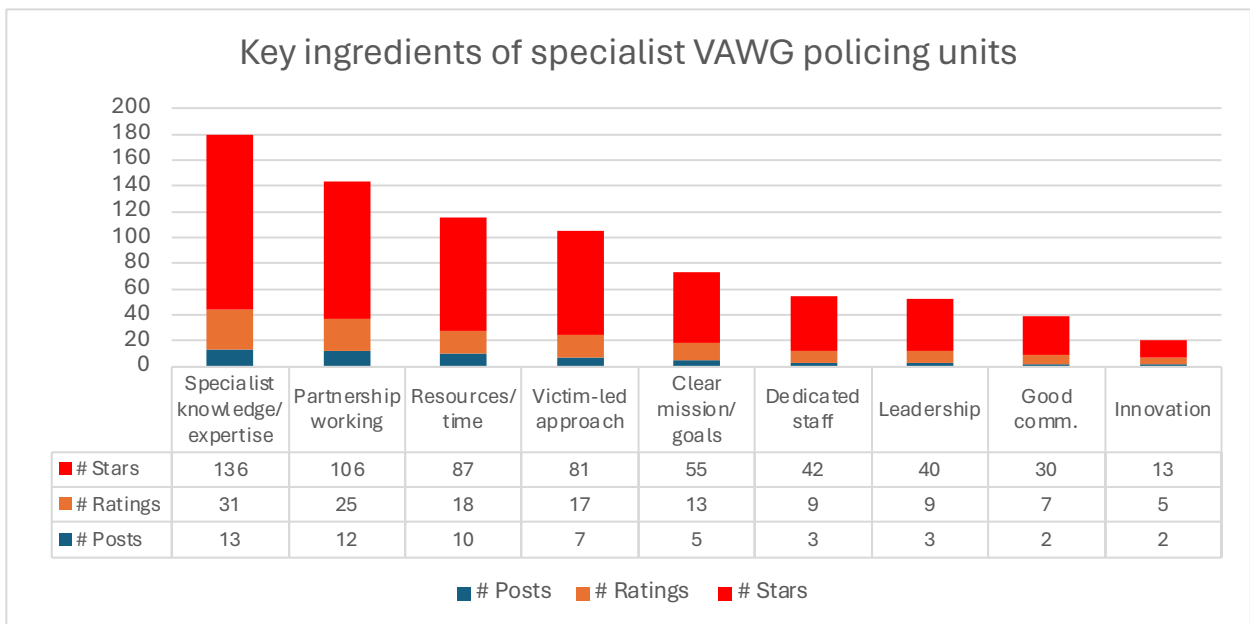
four Welsh forces participated in the workshops, the number was limited, and all forces were not equally represented. Although all participants had relevant experience and expertise in relation to policing VAWG, ideally we would have had a similar spread of operational vs strategic and junior vs senior roles from each of the forces. Given these limitations, the findings presented here should be considered preliminary.

Findings

Key Ingredients

Figure 1 below displays the results from the Padlet task, the aim of which was to understand the features or aspects of policing units deemed to be ‘specialist’ as opposed to ‘business as usual’ policing approaches to tackling VAWG. Recall that participants were invited to write and share posts on a virtual bulletin board. In total participants shared 63 posts across the two workshops, each one representing an individual participant’s view of a single ‘ingredient’. These were analysed and condensed into the 9 categories displayed in Figure 1 (along with the category ‘other’, which has not been included). For example, 7 posts were categorised into ‘victim-led approach’:

Safe spaces and a welcoming environment for victims to talk; Voice of the victim; Ability to build trust with victims and survivors through effective communication; Tailored approach - specific to the individual; Ability to capture and describe what matters to victims, and what their needs are; Dedicated point of contact; Continuity of care for victims. These 7 posts received a total of 17 ratings from workshop participants. These star ratings (each of which could range between 1-5) combined for a total of 81 stars for the ‘victim-led approach’ ingredient. Thus, the Padlet task captured information as to which key ingredients were supplied independently by the most participants as well as their collective view as to each ingredient’s importance.



Overall, this exercise reveals that having specialist knowledge and/or subject matter expertise was the top ingredient, having received more posts, ratings and stars than any other ingredient. The post-Padlet discussion revealed a coherent view across the two workshops that it was people-oriented 'soft skills' rather than technical skills that were warranted when working in specialist teams focussed on VAWG. Furthermore, the necessary expertise was seen to derive from the characteristics of officers coming to the team and/or the craft skills developed while working in the team rather than what could be solely imparted by a formal training or accreditation programme. As these participants explained:

“ I think as far as [having] dedicated people that want to do the job... they learn. If they want to learn, they'll become specialist. That's what I think anyway. – **Participant 5** ”

“ The ability to be able to speak, to be able to be empathetic, to be able to reason and to communicate with people should be a skill that all police officers have, but we all know it isn't. I think having the right people there [is most important]. And the training sometimes comes secondary to that. I think the primary one is having the right people there in the first place. – **Participant 1** ”

“ I think enhanced knowledge of the subject is important...[but] I don't necessarily believe that accreditation gives you that. [Instead], it's appropriate expertise and knowledge for the role that you're in. – **Participant 6** ”

“ You want people there on a team that want to be there. They need to have a passion for being there... [it's not] necessarily accreditation [that matters most] but you know that the staff want to help survivors of DA and have a passion for that is I think really important. – **Participant 8** ”

The second most important ingredient was partnership working; for example, specialist units having the 'ability to pull on the support needed outside the scope of their own organisation' and 'opportunity to work with partner agencies'.

“ So, a specialist team should be able to communicate and understand in a way that they're thinking about the whole system and the whole needs of that victim and not just their own organisation's response to what they think is required. So, the multidisciplinary aspect and ideally, you know, shortcutting the pathways to that support are critical features of any specialist unit. – **Participant 6** ”

“ My view would be that obviously the partners that we would generally work with they enhance and bolster our ability to deliver the service that we do. You know, we can do our best as a police service to deliver what we need to deliver with trained and experienced officers. But I think it's a given that partner agency involvement certainly enhances that response, and in most cases is an essential element to it. – **Participant 3** ”

“ Partners are absolutely vital because from a safeguarding point of view, we can't do everything. And also, the police aren't responsible for everything either. If those links with those partners are there and you've got those clean and clear lines of communication, working with partners is absolutely critical. – **Participant 1** ”

Dedicated ring-fenced resources, particularly additional time from being 'abstracted from core demand' was also considered to be especially important. Adopting a victim-led approach and having a clear focus and defined remit are other important features of specialist units discussed by the workshop participants.

“ What we've learnt is the importance for victims and survivors to have time and space to talk and to be able to build trust with professionals and so that's why it's really important that if we're going to put a specialist resource that adds additional expertise up front then they need to have time and space and the facilities to provide a safe space for victims to disclose. – **Participant 6** ”

“ If you don’t create the specialist unit, you become swamped by too much demand that might be outside what you actually intended to try and deliver. And then you end up being just like ‘business as usual’ because you’re dealing with all sorts of areas, you know, all types of work. So, by having that clearly defined remit, you can focus your attention and efforts on delivering excellent service just for that one area of work. – Participant 3

It is worth noting that the ‘other’ category included a post stating ‘dedication to positive [CJS] outcomes’ but this received low ratings (average of 1.75). In the workshop discussion sessions, it was clear that many participants recognised that having a ‘victim-led approach’ required acknowledging that all victims will not necessarily want to pursue a criminal justice route and that paying attention to victims’ individual needs, concerns and expectation of criminal justice must take priority.

Workshop discussion

Rationale for establishing alternatives to ‘business as usual’

“ It’s all about providing a better service to the victim, ultimately. – Participant 2

There was consensus among workshop participants that specialist units provide an opportunity to improve the service offered to victims in cases of VAWG when compared to ‘business as usual’ policing. This was seen as linked to multiple factors: skills/role, trust and time.

Skills and role. Participants considered VAWG to include many serious offence types that are likely to fall beyond the skills and experience of a traditional response officer, justifying the use of specialist units/teams. As Participant 1 explained, the primary role of a response officer is to attend an incident, undertake ‘golden hour’ enquiries (e.g., immediate safeguarding,

collecting physical evidence and taking initial witness statements), and then respond to other emergencies. While this is a vital policing role, it does mean response officers may not have acquired specialist skills in responding to VAWG offences:

“ In policing, we’re very often jack of all trades, and master of none. And I think there are certain crimes where having that specialism or being a specialist team is required to provide that best response. – Participant 3

“ An officer’s first reaction is to deal with what they see, so they’ll deal with the assault. Then after that, you have the secondary offences that then start to come through, serious sexual offences and stalking, harassment, which, as an individual officer, they do not have the capacity to be able to deal with. – Participant 7

The emergence of secondary offences often happens in cases of domestic abuse, and participants agreed that having specialist teams in place would ensure victims go on to receive the best support and investigation for their case. The “superb job” (Participant 9) already being done by response officers was widely acknowledged in the workshops, but the complex nature of VAWG offending and victimisation was also recognised. Here, while response officers are faced with the competing demands and priorities of the ‘business as usual’ approach, specialist officers have a unique ‘vantage point’: they have expertise in relation to VAWG, space to engage closely with victims, as well as access to ‘bigger picture’ information, such as risk assessments and case histories.

Trust. The capacity to develop trust with victims of VAWG was another feature of specialist units seen as differentiating them from ‘business as usual’ ways of working. There was widespread agreement that building trust and rapport with victims is difficult for response officers who “turn up to put the fire out” (Participant 6). Participants also described how this pressure for officers to respond and move on to the next emergency could impact interactions with victims:

“ They often say [in feedback] ‘I knew straight away as soon as the officer walked in that they weren’t interested, so why would I tell them my deepest darkest secrets? Because I know they don’t, and pardon my French, they don’t give a ****’ – **Participant 8**

“ Put yourself in a position of somebody who suffered abuse for years, has only called us out of desperation and we turn up and we’re switching our body worn video on and immediately thinking ‘right, OK, how long have I got to spend here?’ A person is effectively going to tell you their life story, aren’t they, if this is done properly ... I think that’s the key for me... building trust. – **Participant 6**

As these examples show, developing trust with victims is seen as vital in VAWG cases, but the ability to do so is limited when working under the operational pressures of the ‘business as usual’ approach. Specialist units, however, offer an opportunity to address this. Beyond trust itself being a positive outcome, wider advantages were also highlighted. For instance, where a victim’s phone that “contains their whole life” is needed as evidence in a digital investigation, trust and confidence in investigators was seen as an enabler (Participant 7). Another perceived advantage was that officers who have developed rapport with victims can be more ‘robust’ when engaging with them about their victimisation. In the example below, with knowledge of past incidents and expertise in responding to VAWG, a specialist officer may feel more able to encourage a victim to engage with the criminal justice process:

“ Just try to break down ‘what’s going on here now? When we spoke last time, you made the decision you didn’t want to go forward but you said next time it happens, I will. Now we’re here again, and you’re saying you don’t want to go forward. Can we just explore that a bit?’ – **Participant 10**

Time. Many of the examples described in the skills and trust sections above point to time as a key enabler, and across the workshop discussions, this was repeatedly highlighted as

a feature of specialist units that differentiates them from ‘business as usual’. Reflecting on the traditional response model, one participant described how “the demands of frontline policing may leave the victims feeling rushed” (anonymous post-workshop form). Another noted how the noise of police radios stayed with victims:

“ Survivors will often say, you know, they just remember the radio going off, the ‘bee-boo’, and that they can hear that going round in their brain afterwards. – **Participant 8**

This participant went on to describe the importance of officers sitting down with victims, rather than standing over them, listening to the radio, and giving the impression that they are ready to leave to go to the next emergency.

In contrast, specialist units with dedicated resources and time are not having to respond to calls on the radio in the same way, alleviating some of the pressures of traditional policing models. As the Operation Diogel evaluation highlighted, in one case, officers were able to take an 18-page statement over two shifts, capturing a lengthy history of abuse. Participants in the workshops also linked time to reviewing cases, risk assessing, offering victims care and support, signposting, making referrals, and undertaking broader partnership work, which were all seen as important in tackling the problem of VAWG. The positive impact of time on victims’ experiences was widely recognised:

“ Whenever I do get positive feedback from survivors, whether they’ve engaged or not, the overarching theme will always be that the officer cared, that the officer took the time, that they listened. – **Participant 8**

“ We’ve seen such a difference in relation to victim satisfaction in the small year and a half that that team has been running, and that’s purely to do with dedicated officers who can do that engagement, whereas your detectives, your frontline officers, they don’t have the time. – **Participant 9**

Implementation challenges

Workshop discussion included the process of setting up and implementing specialist units, including the drivers and challenges. Two related elements were identified: 'buy-in' from chief officers and resources/staffing.

Buy-in from chief officers. As participants reflected on what drives the implementation of new specialist units, leadership was mentioned repeatedly. This includes those in leadership roles that are proposing new units and models, either based on practice they have seen working elsewhere or in response to pressing local issues/tensions, as well as those able to support and 'sign-off' on such proposals. In terms of the factors driving this willingness to change, national pressure was seen as particularly influential:

“ I think if there's national pressure, Home Office, HMICFRS etc., if they're coming in and saying 'changes need to be made, improvements need to be made,' that certainly focuses the mind of chief officers to try and drive change. – **Participant 3**

“ The momentum of change when it comes from a HMICFRS 'required to improve' notice or something like that, the wheels turn a lot faster than an innovative PC or Sergeant spotting a problem and saying, 'I think this could be solved by a team'. – **Participant 1**

Leadership was also highlighted as an important aspect of implementation by the Operation Diogel evaluation, particularly in terms of how changes in senior management in the early days of the pilot impacted the team's working practices. Though changing roles and moves to different departments are not uncommon in policing, it is worth noting that it can create new challenges when trying to establish coherent aims and 'remit' for new units, given new managers are likely to bring different ideas and expectations. Participants in the workshops echoed this, emphasising that the process of defining clear 'remits' for specialist units can take some time.

Resources and staffing. Closely linked to buy-in from police leadership was the issue of staffing levels provided to any new team.

Although existing limitations on police resources were widely recognised by participants, sufficient staffing levels for specialist units were considered essential:

“ I'd say that the driver has to come from the chief officers to be able to support it, implement it and really push it through so that we're getting that response that we want to have... It needs to fit in with the whole strategy so it fits across all of the districts and divisions and then you're able to give it that overall support and coverage. – **Participant 7**

“ I think if you're developing a new unit, then having chief officer buy in helps, because obviously resourcing [is an issue]. If you create a department, you're taking the resource from somewhere else. So that's important to have the backing to be able to resource the department properly. – **Participant 3**

As these quotes suggest, chief officer buy-in is not only required in the initial stages of signing-off on new unit proposals and in agreeing their 'remits', but also in ensuring a supply of ongoing resources to deliver them. At a BCU level for example, one participant suggested this might involve BCU Commander (Chief Superintendent) sign-off. Creating a specialist unit typically requires resources to be pulled from other duties and roles, which may in turn create different pressures elsewhere:

“ In terms of problems and issues of specialist units, it is that dilemma of where does the resource come from with shrinking budgets? Because the trade-off is you tend to draw from the front line 24/7 response teams, that's a major dilemma. – **Participant 6**

Establishing and maintaining a clear remit becomes even more important in this context. Where teams are already small, if their remit is either too large or 'creeps' wider, it is likely they will struggle to achieve their aims. One participant reflected on a previous specialist domestic abuse team, which was tasked with covering an entire force area with a team of 60 officers. As different shift patterns and officer abstraction left only 6-7 officers on each shift,

the team's focus quickly narrowed to dealing with perpetrators in custody rather than spending time with victims.

Beyond staffing, the Operation Diogel evaluation also highlighted the potentially significant impact that physical resource issues could have. In this case, when the lease on the team's dedicated unmarked vehicle expired, they were not provided with a replacement, immediately impacting their ability to visit victims in their homes in a timely manner.

Measuring success

For specialist units tackling VAWG, participants saw multiple ways to measure success, some of which fall beyond traditional police and criminal justice outcomes. The prosecution of offenders remains important, and engaging victims in the criminal justice process continues to be a driver of interventions such as Operation Diogel. In this context, prosecution is seen as a significant part of 'breaking the cycle' of abuse and violence. However, two further measures of success have also been highlighted: victim-focused outcomes and officer job satisfaction/wellbeing.

Victim-focused outcomes. Workshop participants shared the view that for specialist units in particular, victim-focused outcomes are central. This reflects that what is best for one victim may not be the same for another, and so responding to individual needs and concerns is the priority:

“

You may have one victim who wants justice and wants a day in court, and you may have another victim who has rung the police because there was nowhere else to turn, and they didn't know where to go. What they ultimately wanted to feel safe at home, so a referral to support services to be able to get safety measures on the home is a positive outcome, isn't it?

– Participant 8

“

The outcomes are different for different victims, and [they can tell us] how they found the experience of dealing with the police and whether the outcome was what they wanted, regardless of whether it was a criminal justice outcome or not. – Participant 4

While other, more traditional 'performance' aspects such as timeliness, charges and summons were acknowledged in the discussions, the focus was upon victims, and separating criminal justice and victim-focused outcomes was a point of clear consensus in the workshops. This echoes findings from the Operation Diogel evaluation, where safeguarding was itself identified as an important outcome. Even where victims are not ready or willing to pursue a prosecution, specialist officers can still offer helpful support. Examples include providing information packs about partner agencies, arranging joint visits agency staff, and transporting victims to refuges.

The victim-focused nature of these outcomes also link to a broader point emerging from both the workshop discussions and the Diogel evaluation about victims' 'readiness' to engage with criminal prosecution processes. This points to the 'victim journey' in domestic abuse and violence cases, and the subjective nature of an individual's 'readiness for change' in this context. Members of the Operation Diogel team felt that an ability to 'read readiness' is required by specialist VAWG roles, a view that was shared by those in the workshops. Respecting victims' wishes was also seen to impact confidence to come forward to police, as one participant explained:

“

But survivors, if they have a positive experience, they may still say 'oh, no, I don't want to support a statement.' But if it did happen again, then maybe they would be ready to because they know they've had that positive experience, you've put that support in place haven't you? – Participant 8

In other words, even in cases where traditional criminal justice outcomes are not immediately achievable, specialist units providing a victim-centred response can still engage positively in a way that may, in the longer term, lead to support for prosecution. The crucial point here, however, is that the victim-centred approach takes precedence for a specialist unit. One participant felt strongly about this, stating that any organisational measure of improvement “means nothing without being able to link it back to improvement of outcomes for the people we're here to help and support” (Participant 6).

Job satisfaction and wellbeing. There was consensus that job satisfaction for those officers working in specialist VAWG units can also be a measure of success. Findings from the Operation Diogel evaluation indicate that working in the specialist team was rewarding for officers, including for those who did not apply to be moved to the team. This was because by spending time with victims and offering all forms of support, even if they did not want to pursue a prosecution, officers had a sense that they were ‘walking away from there knowing that you’ve given them everything they need, if they are ready the next time’. The sense of satisfaction was also linked to seeing cases progress, building rapport with victims, and helping to establish safeguarding measures, a contrast to many experiences in other departments with high demand and case turnover.

Some participants in the workshops shared their own related experiences, including in relation to a former specialist unit. This particular unit focused on exploited children, and the team dealt with this demanding and traumatic subject matter on a daily basis:

“ *But those officers were some of those passionate officers who had some of the highest levels of job satisfaction than anybody I’ve ever met, because of the nature of the work they were doing, which is about engagement building trust, rapport, building relationships that over time will improve outcomes for people.* – **Participant 6**

The potential for improvements to wellbeing is especially noteworthy in the current context of growing absence from work due to psychological ill health, trauma, and stress among those working in policing (Cartwright and Roach, 2021). While there was recognition that specialist teams can face burnout and other negative impacts due to the sensitive nature of their work, there do seem to be aspects of working in such roles that can be rewarding. This is another measure of success beyond ‘traditional’ criminal justice and reputational outcomes, many of which were seen as quite detached from practice:

“ *I think we’re really bad as police in general for just looking at the bigger*

picture, how it makes the organisation look, as opposed to... I’ve never been asked what my job satisfaction is like.

– **Participant 2**

Sustaining effective practice

Having identified key ingredients and discussed the potential benefits and challenges of specialist units, participants were asked to consider how effective practice can be sustained over time, and what can be done to enhance the police response to VAWG. Three main issues emerged from this discussion: resources and backing, support for officers in specialist units, and approaches to sharing best practice.

Resources and backing. Reflecting some of the implementation challenges highlighted above, both sufficient resourcing and backing – from specialist officers, management and partner agencies – were seen as key to sustaining effective practice in specialist units. This moves beyond the challenges of initial implementation, where units have to be established and resourced accordingly, with participants emphasising the need for resilience to be embedded in the resourcing:

“ *I think if you’re having a specialist team, there needs to be resilience built into it, as in resource resilience. Otherwise, you end up running on minimal staff and don’t actually achieve the aims of your team, and obviously, those ones that are still working get burnt out.*

– **Participant 3**

There was agreement that in order to maintain effectiveness for specialist units, ongoing and appropriate resourcing is vital. As this particular quote suggests, if resourcing is insufficient or falls away over time, this can have a knock-on effect for staff based in those teams, increasing demands and pressures. This points to a wider issue of sustaining staff and management support for units over time. On an ongoing basis, this “*buy in from the people that are involved, the staff, SMT, partner agencies*” (Participant 2) is key.

As this suggests, because specialist units for VAWG are dealing with a complex issue that often involves making referrals to or working

with partner agencies, getting the backing of those agencies is also an important aspect of sustaining effectiveness over time. Where police and partner agencies do work well together, this supports the positive, victim-centred outcomes that participants saw as such an important measure of success. Regular meetings was one suggestion for developing and maintaining the necessary relationships between police and partner agencies:

“ [For the new project] there'll be weekly dial-ins with the ISVA service. I know the Detective Sergeant working on it will be linking in with the service manager, because for this to be a true success it does need the ISVA service engaged. The ISVA service are aware that if they feel there's tweaks that need to be made to our process, they can come forth with those as ideas and we'll be receptive. – Participant 3

In this sense, involving the partner agencies in the early stages of implementation for the new project team was also seen as a route to ensuring their 'buy-in'. Similar engagement with partner agencies took place at Operation Diogel's 'partner day' held in February 2023, which saw local support agencies invited to meet the new team in-person. This provided an opportunity to raise awareness of the new pilot with partners, as well as for the agencies to outline the support they could offer to victims, with the overall aim of facilitating collaboration going forward. With a recognition that interactions over time can facilitate relationships with partner agencies, regular changes in personnel were seen as a potential challenge in this context, and efforts to “keep that partnership active” (Participant 1) all the more important.

Support for officers in specialist units.

Another factor participants considered important in sustaining effective practice over time in specialist units was the support in place for officers. Although there are some indications that improved job satisfaction may come from working in specialist teams, participants did also emphasise the serious and complex nature of VAWG cases:

“ You can't help with DV, I think you get personally invested, and especially

when you build up rapport with victims, you get know people, you know about the past incidents. You could even look into what they were like growing up on the police system and you could see them sadly go in this cycle. So I think there is an impact, perhaps it doesn't hit you straight off, but longer term, definitely. – Participant 10

“ It is great to have satisfaction from the role that you're doing and knowing that you're making a difference. But I think there also needs to be the care of officers' wellbeing when they are dealing with some of the most traumatic things. – Participant 8

Parallels with other kinds of incidents were also drawn, such as child abuse and fatal road traffic collisions, and there was agreement that appropriate support measures cannot be ignored if specialist units are to prove successful over time. One participant summarised this as:

“ The answer is doing a meaningful job and having appropriate psychological support for when people need to sit down and take a breather and chat to somebody about their experiences. – Participant 6

Approaches to sharing best practice. There was consensus among workshop participants that knowledge exchange and sharing best practice across Wales (and beyond) is positive, helping to sustain effectiveness over time. However, rather than stipulating specific ways of working or universal models for specialist units, a need for balance was emphasised:

I think every force needs to have some autonomy to implement what suits their force and their geography. I don't necessarily think anything should be a mandated kind of stipulation, because it won't always suit every force due to geography and the makeup of the force. – Participant 3

This is particularly the case in Wales, where some forces cover very large geographic areas including significant rural space, and others cover smaller but far more densely populated

areas. As such, a model that works well in a south Wales city may not translate particularly well to a rural area of mid Wales. Yet, this is not to say that certain aspects of models could not be trialled and implemented elsewhere, as the participant continued:

“ *But one thing I do think is when forces are coming up with good ideas, or a team for this, or a team for that or a concept for this, that there is a forum and a platform to share it, because it may suit another force.* – **Participant 3**

An authentic example of this kind of knowledge exchange did in fact happen during the first workshop, when one participant was describing a particular piece of video technology being used to facilitate remote contact with victims

as part of a new specialist response. Learning about the technology for the first time, another participant from a different force saw a potential use for the tool as part of his specialist team and was able to take the details, enabling him to explore the option further post-workshop. It was clear from the discussions that while this did not necessarily require any formal mechanisms, sharing knowledge about ‘what works’ is inherently valuable. Describing a current example of a collaboration between two forces in different parts of the country, one participant captured the overall essence of this discussion:

“ *We recognise that we both want the same results, and if we can help each other then that’s what we’re going to do.* – **Participant 7**



Case Study

Operation Diogel

“It is more likely that dedicated officers in a Specialist Investigator capacity will be better placed to problem solve arising issues with partners and reflect better the concerns and challenges experienced by victims.”¹

In early 2023, South Wales Police commenced ‘Operation Diogel’ in Cardiff & Vale BCU with the aim of improving victim experiences, safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes (note: diogel means ‘safe’ in Welsh). The new approach involves a dedicated team of specially trained domestic abuse (DA) investigators (5 investigators plus Sergeant), who collect evidence, support the victim, and make referrals to appropriate agencies without the usual delays involved in the ‘business as usual’ approach. Operation Diogel was tasked with responding to a more challenging cohort of DA cases, as the overwhelming majority of victims were unsupportive prior to Operation Diogel contact, were on the higher end of the risk spectrum, and had lengthy histories of police contact and prior DA occurrences. They also had multiple warning markers (e.g., mental health, substance misuse, violence, etc.). Independent evaluation found that the team produced a significant increase in the proportion of cases resulting in a positive outcome such as charged/summonsed or cautioned. Furthermore, positive outcomes were more likely for those victims with most challenging profiles (e.g., high risk, 10 or more previous DA occurrences, 6 or more warning markers). Insights data demonstrated that victims receiving the Operation Diogel approach were significantly more likely to report being ‘completely satisfied’ at every stage of the police response, from initial report through investigation and case closure, compared to victims receiving the ‘business as usual’ approach. This was due to being offered a more flexible process to suit their individual needs, investigators understanding their particular circumstances, having the time to keep in regular contact, and liaising with partner agencies on their behalf. Attending in plain clothes and in an unmarked car was also considered beneficial. The skills of individual investigators were developed through joint attendances, sharing expertise, and working as a team with continuity of leadership provided via the Sergeant. Partner agencies also commented on the team’s willingness and ability to adapt their investigative approach based on the partner agency’s assessment of the victim’s specific needs or concerns. Overall, the evaluation demonstrated the positive difference achieved by this new specialist team, especially amongst those victims who, due to their unwillingness to support prosecution and more challenging profiles, were least well placed to benefit from the ‘business as usual’ approach.

¹ <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/167246>

Case Study

Domestic Abuse Virtual Response Unit



“DAVRU can offer a better service to the victim by investing more time with the victim. From my experience victims are more ready to talk and feel more comfortable when speaking about complex and historic domestic abuse cases.”²

In April 2023 Dyfed Powys Police commenced a pilot based in Carmarthenshire where victims of standard THRIVES-graded domestic abuse incidents are offered a service which allows them to engage there and then with a police officer via a video call. The new approach is called the ‘Domestic Abuse Virtual Response Unit’ (DAVRU) and consists of six Police Constables and 2 Police Sergeants working between 9am and 8pm, Monday to Friday. The video call is recorded and during the call the officer completes a statement with the victim, obtains images of any evidence, and completes a DASH risk assessment. The team identifies the risk, provides safeguarding advice and makes referrals to relevant agencies. Since the pilot commenced, officers have engaged with over 300 victims of domestic abuse. Internal evaluation of the pilot found that many victims expressed a preference for this new service as it is more private (as opposed to a police car being outside their address) and also enables them to describe their lived experience of abuse from the comfort of their own house. Early evidence shows that victims who engaged with police via video call did lead to suspects being arrested and, on some occasions, remanded in custody.

² <https://cysur.wales/media/kbohiblf/autumn-newsletter-mid-and-west-wales-safeguarding-board.pdf>

Case Study

Operation Bluestone

“In the case of outcome 14 [evidential difficulties – suspect not identified], half of all reports were made by a third party only or involved a disclosure that was not intended to constitute a formal report (‘telling not reporting’).”³

In March 2024 Dyfed Powys Police commenced a pilot focussing on third-party reports of adult rape, specifically non-acute cases (more than 7 days from reporting) where the victim does not wish to engage. Recognising that the ‘business as usual’ approach to these cases has tended to result in few positive outcomes or opportunities to provide support to victims, the new Bluestone team aims to address this. Their approach involves contacting the third-party to obtain more information in respect of the victim’s potential vulnerabilities, then contacting the victim by telephone to explain the purpose of their contact and introduce the option of further virtual contact by method of video calling. During the initial discussion they will also introduce the support available from New Pathways (rape crisis centre) and explain the role of an Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA). If the victim consents, a referral will be made. If they wish to have further virtual contact, an appointment will be made to speak via video link at a mutually convenient time. With the victim’s consent, the meeting will be recorded and there will also be the option of an ISVA to be dialled into the video call. The aim of the online discussion is to establish whether the victim wishes to ‘report’ or ‘tell’ the officer about a rape offence(s). Making a formal report will trigger the case being referred to CID. In circumstances where victims do not wish to ‘report’, but rather only to ‘tell’, the new approach means that a series of actions will take place, including investigating any reasonable lines of enquiry; completing a subject access request and reviewing the suspect’s history (e.g. to identify whether they are someone eligible for an SRO); liaising with Legal Services regarding civil order options; and submitting the occurrence for finalisation review. Thus, in contrast to ‘business as usual’, the new approach prioritises linking victims with specialist services, regardless of whether they wish to formally report and pursue a criminal case. It also capitalises on the opportunity to gain actionable intelligence to target repeat suspects and prevent repeat victimisation. The pilot will be evaluated and a report produced in February 2025.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/operation-soteria-year-one-report>

Case Study

Operation TABW



“One of the key challenges levelled at the police is the need to effectively manage internal issues regarding misogyny, harassment and domestic abuse.”⁴

In 2023, the Police and Crime Commissioners in Gwent and South Wales Police agreed to co-fund a specialist advocacy service for victims who are dealing with the specific risks and vulnerabilities associated with police perpetrated domestic abuse (PPDA). The OPCC are funding the Independent Domestic Violence Advisor (IDVA) post specifically for PPDA victims in recognition that their needs are very different. For example, they might need to engage with the criminal justice system as well as the police complaints and disciplinary system. The service commences for an initial two-year pilot in April 2024. This project builds on the All-Wales Policing and Academic Collaboration (AWPAC) project ‘Addressing domestic abuse within the police – exploring Welsh police forces’ response to victims and offenders as employees,’ which has been co-produced by University of South Wales, The Open University, South Wales Police, Gwent Police, Vale Domestic Abuse Service and Cyfannol Women’s Aid. Further research will explore: how the PPDA IDVA role developed, how is it working in practice and the impact on victims and the police; the experiences of police employees who are victims of DA and their experiences of disclosing to their employer; and how the experiences of police employees compare/differ to other public sector employees (such as ambulance staff and nurses)?

⁴ <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/police-response-to-violence-against-women-and-girls/>

Case Study

Operation Blue Silver Birch

“By identifying domestic abuse early, we are able to carry out a more thorough investigation and intervene earlier to implement safeguarding measures that are ultimately going to keep the victim safe and give them a voice.”⁵

In early 2021, analytical work began to understand repeat domestic abuse demand in North Wales Police. One of the drivers of this was that high footfall areas such as supermarkets and nightclubs tend to dominate the ‘volume’ statistics, making other repeat calls appear relatively low in number. While repeat calls may not be ‘high risk’ or involve violence, there was a concern that this was part of a pattern of escalating behaviour that could become more harmful in future.⁶ Following the analytical work, Operation Blue Silver Birch was implemented in one area of the force. By separating repeat domestic abuse calls from other demand, this provided a better understanding of the repeat victims and offenders, who could then be proactively visited by officers. This included visiting when domestic calls were most likely to be made to police, and then exploring what support officers could provide – for instance, helping a victim to go somewhere else, returning to the address later, or doing nothing at all. Between February and April 2021, the number of arrests in the area rose while the overall number of incidents fell, as did the number of negative outcomes (e.g., police unable to bring a charge).

	Domestic Incidents	Incidents of Violence	Arrests	Negative Outcome
February 2021	76	57	11	26
April 2021	57	23	14	9

Following this early indication of success, Operation Blue Silver Birch has spread, and the principles are now operating across the force. With this repeat demand set as a priority for local teams, they can focus on specific relationships, proactively contacting and visiting victims as above, building rapport, and exploring what support can be provided. The model is also responsive to changes in demand, and with festive periods (such as Christmas) typically seeing increases in domestic calls, this can be prioritised within local teams accordingly. The operation benefitted from learning input from other specialist teams and officers, who shared their expertise in responding to domestic calls and the ‘golden hour principles’, improving understanding among officers undertaking the proactive work. This has also raised awareness of possible measures that could be used beyond arrest, such as DVPNs, CPNs, and stalking orders, as well as safeguarding and health support available locally for victims.

⁵ <https://www.northwales.police.uk/news/north-wales/news/news/2023/april/initiative-launched-to-tackle-domestic-abuse-and-protect-victims-in-wrexham/>

⁶ <https://www.northwales.police.uk/news/north-wales/news/news/2023/april/initiative-launched-to-tackle-domestic-abuse-and-protect-victims-in-wrexham/>

<https://www.leaderlive.co.uk/news/19111704.north-flintshire-police-operation-prioritise-domestic-violence/>
<https://www.leaderlive.co.uk/news/19130596.operation-tackle-domestic-violence-launches-flintshire-north/>

Discussion

Each of the specialist units described in this report varies in their scope and delivery model yet they all reflect a shared objective of making a victim's journey to safety shorter and smoother. Importantly, they all recognise and respect the fact that the police and criminal justice system may not always play the primary role in every victim's journey to safety. This shared understanding, repeatedly expressed by police in the workshops and put into practice in the case studies, aligns with the research evidence on victim's perceptions of justice. For example, that victims hold notions of justice that go beyond 'formal' justice system outcomes (Holder & Robinson, 2021) and that these relate to different points in their journey following abuse and the various individual, agency and society responses they have experienced along the way. Research has shown that they can hold multiple 'justice needs' simultaneously, which can include accountability; fairness in outcome and process; protection from future harm; recognition; agency; empowerment; affective justice; reparation; and social transformation (Hester et al, 2022). This complex, multifaceted, and fluid understanding of what justice means to victims has been conceptualised as 'kaleidoscope justice', which involves criminal justice-based outcome justice alongside procedural justice components such as recognition, dignity, voice, and connectedness (McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019). Adopting a procedural justice framework has been identified as 'a promising tool for assessing and improving police practice in engaging with victim-survivors' (Hohl et al., 2022). Conversely, when victims routinely recollect the absence of procedural justice components during their interactions with agencies this amounts to institutional harm (Robinson & Eisenstadt, 2017).

The clear commitment to recognising victims' individual needs, concerns, and expectations around the involvement of justice agencies in their lives and building this into the design of alternatives to the 'business as usual' approach has been a key finding from our research. The implementation of specialist units, all of which explicitly prioritise being 'victim-led' and are underpinned by principles of procedural justice, represents a concerted effort in many areas of Wales to address the serious shortcomings in the policing of VAWG identified by recent inspections. The types of interactions that matter to victims are more likely with dedicated officers with specialist knowledge and expertise, who have both the time and necessary skillset to create 'safe spaces' for quality, in-depth conversations and are not beholden to the pressures of the control room. Police in this study have shown initiative by creating a range of 'safe spaces', in recognition that some interactions are best in-person (e.g., Operation Diogel, Operation Blue Silver Birch) but that digital alternatives to face-to-face contact can also be effective (e.g. Operation Bluestone, DAVRU) (see also Robinson, 2017; Rothwell et al., 2022). If any police initiative is truly 'victim-led', then it will facilitate victim preferences being understood and accommodated.

Demonstrating the success of these initiatives must include 'an equal focus on safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes to measure performance' (NPCC, 2024). This was a point of clear consensus our research, with safeguarding itself recognised as an important outcome for police to pursue, separate yet equal to criminal justice outcomes. As noted nearly 30 years ago, police intervention should not be measured in terms of prosecution but in terms of protection (Lloyd & Burman, 1996). The next stage for these initiatives is to set up systems to routinely monitor the impact they are having on victims' journeys to safety and the extent to which they are meeting the NPCC's (2024) call for policing to seek 'procedural justice for all victims and all suspects'.

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