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Specialist policing units as a pathway towards procedural justice for domestic abuse victims

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ABSTRACT

The available research on specialist policing responses to violence against women and girls highlights multiple benefits. However, there is limited evidence about the key features of specialist units, the specific mechanisms that lead to improved outcomes, and the extent to which procedural justice theory can be seen to underpin specialist alternatives to 'business as usual' policing approaches. This paper advances knowledge on the topic of specialist policing units designed to improve the response to VAWG, with a specific focus on domestic abuse, by reporting findings from two interlinked mixed-methods research projects that took place in Wales during 2023–2024, including workshops with representatives from the four police forces and a case study from one police force. Several types of data were collected and analysed: focus groups with police ($n = 10$ participants), interviews with police and partner agencies ($n = 10$), domestic abuse cases referred to a specialist unit over a 9-month period ($n = 387$), and survey feedback from domestic abuse victims ($n = 413$). The workshops revealed strong consensus around specialist units having a defined remit and a clear mission of being victim-led, with dedicated time and resources including specialist knowledge and expertise and arrangements in place for working in close collaboration with partner agencies. The Operation Diogenel case study demonstrated how these underlying mechanisms generated a range of improvements when put into practice, including higher victim satisfaction, better safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes, and enhanced tradecraft, teamworking and morale amongst the officers involved.

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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 (Mawby *et al.* 2015). A common justification for specialism in policing is the unique knowledge and skill each type of crime investigation requires; once applied, this can have a positive impact on evidence gathering, crime recording, interviewing, timeliness, multi-agency working, communication with and support for victims (Dalton *et al.* 2022). Westmarland *et al.* (2012, p. 28) set out a working definition of specialist teams responding to rape as

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having ‘dedicated, trained staff working together in an integrated way to provide the highest quality victim care and investigative standards’. Friday *et al.* (2006) noted that effective investigation was just one part of the role of specialist domestic violence units, which also included training, liaising with other officers in the force, and interacting with service and treatment agencies to prevent further violence and to assist victims. Their goal of routinely and consistently offering support and advice to victims necessarily involves significant time and dedication to communication on the part of specialist units, as well as increased interagency cooperation (Walklate 1992). Alongside the identification of consistent themes in their rationale and working practices is the acknowledgement that ‘specialist unit’ is a generic term referring to a multitude of different policies and strategies taking place within different policing contexts with varying amounts of management support, staffing and resources (Farrell and Buckley 1999).

Nevertheless, 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 and 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, p. 205). 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 (2022), 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.

The predominance of, and overlap between, many forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) has been recognised as a challenge for policing. Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of the Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services defined as VAWG offences as ‘violent and high-harm crimes that disproportionately affect women and girls, such as domestic abuse, sexual violence, stalking and female genital mutilation’ (HMICFRS 2021, p. 1). It characterised the UK policing response to VAWG 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 (HMICFRS 2021). As noted in their 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 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 domestic abuse cases. In relation to sexual offences, a similar picture of decline over time was noted, with only 16 of the 36 forces surveyed having a dedicated unit for adult sexual offence cases (George and Ferguson 2021).

Research – both within the UK and internationally – has consistently produced evidence to support the use of specialist policing responses to VAWG, recognising the importance of placing victims at the

centre of the response and officers being equipped with sufficient skills and expertise (Segrave *et al.* 2016, Carrington *et al.* 2022, Fraser *et al.* 2024, Rodgers *et al.* 2023). Both HMICFRS (2021) and NPCC (2021) concluded that specialist trained officers generally conduct better investigations and that there was evidence of better supervision of investigations within specialist teams. 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 and Cauchi 2013, Robinson and Davies 2024a). 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, Rumney *et al.* 2020, Robinson and Davies 2024a). 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 (Lloyd and Burman 1996, Jolin and Moose 1997, Segrave *et al.* 2016, Martin *et al.* 2017, Rumney *et al.* 2020, Dalton *et al.* 2022, Robinson and Davies 2024a).

The international evidence base described above has established some key benefits of specialist policing units for tackling VAWG as well as some of their distinctive features. However, although specialist training or experience has been acknowledged as a mechanism through which aspects of the investigative process and victim engagement and care can be improved, Dalton *et al.* (2022) noted the dearth of evidence about the underpinning mechanisms by which specialist units produce the improved outcomes noted above. Procedural justice theory offers an explanatory framework for understanding why these changes take place.

The theoretical premise of procedural justice can be summarised as follows: procedures (i.e. *how* people are dealt with) matter in their own right, as an equivalent if not even more important issue than the resultant outcomes (i.e. *what* decisions are made about them) (Tyler 1988). To understand people's attitudes towards authorities, it is necessary to assess their perceptions of the quality and fairness of the treatment they have received, rather than simply evaluating whether they perceived the outcome to be satisfactory. A review of nearly 1000 sources synthesised the key components of procedural justice in relation to policing specifically: explicit efforts by police to actively promote citizen *participation* during the encounter, clear efforts by police to be *neutral* in their decision making, police demonstrating *dignity and respect* toward the citizen during exchanges, and police working hard to communicate their *trustworthy intentions* (Mazerolle *et al.* 2013). The conclusion drawn by the authors was that these four components of procedural justice could and should form part of *any* type of police intervention, from routine police activity to defined crime control programmes. Adopting a procedural justice framework for rape and serious sexual offences was recently identified as 'a promising tool for assessing and improving police practice in engaging with victim-survivors' in the 'Project Bluestone' pilot study (Hohl *et al.* 2022, p. 253, see also Johnson *et al.* 2025). In large part due to the Home Office-funded research programme Operation Soteria Bluestone (see Stanko 2022), procedural justice is now prominently featured in the highest level of UK policing policy, with the NPCC (2024) calling for policing to seek 'procedural justice for all victims and all suspects' in cases involving any type of VAWG offences.

Alongside the procedural justice literature is long tradition of research illustrating that the needs of victims and the goals of the criminal justice system do not always match, are routinely misaligned and at times may even be directly in opposition to one another (Ford 1991, Lewis *et al.* 2000, Holder 2006, Robinson and Cook 2006). Victims of VAWG offences often 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.* 2025). Consequently, the purest form of procedural justice, which describes situations in which it is not possible to establish a universal criterion for what constitutes a just outcome, other than the procedure itself (Rawls 1971) is especially pertinent to VAWG cases. Research in a Specialist Domestic Violence Court found that the 'voice effect' was particularly important – being able to express their concerns to the court and explain their side of the story – leading to defendants

more willing to comply with sanctions and victims more inclined to make contact with criminal justice agencies in the future (Gover *et al.* 2007). This study aptly highlighted the contextual and individualised expectations and desires held by victims (e.g. some testified against defendants whilst others strongly defended them); procedural justice offers a useful lens to make sense of these diverse and seemingly contradictory positions regarding the desired outcome. Research shows that what matters directly to victims is having a positive experience, meaning they have been given recognition, respect, dignity and voice, rather than the outcome of their case *per se* (Wemmers *et al.* 1995, McGlynn and Westmarland 2019). Even in cases where victims choose to disengage from the criminal justice process, by retracting their statement, the outcome can still be considered a success when they have benefitted from advice, support, and opportunities (in terms of housing, welfare, education, and counselling) provided to help them move on following domestic violence (Robinson and Cook 2006). This underlines the importance of a more diverse response to domestic abuse that is not geared exclusively towards the criminal justice system and its prosecution outcomes (Carrington *et al.* 2022, Rodgers *et al.* 2023).

Research demonstrates that procedural justice, or the lack thereof, shapes victim perspectives of the police response. For example, analysis of 222 structured interviews with domestic abuse victims in Wales identified the importance they placed on the style and demeanour of responding officers: speaking to them separately from perpetrators, appearing courteous or respectful, being understanding, acting concerned, taking the time to listen, and taking the situation seriously (Robinson and Stroshine 2005). Police applying procedural justice components in their communications with victims yields improved ratings by victims about the quality of their interactions (Wheller *et al.* 2013). It is noteworthy that fairness of the process is more likely to be evident in specialist teams (Westmarland *et al.* 2012, Powell and Cauchi 2013) with specialist police acknowledging the importance of empathy, good communication, and open mindedness as key investigative qualities (Tidmarsh *et al.* 2021). Conversely, when VAWG victims routinely recollect the absence of procedural justice during their interactions with justice agencies, this is experienced as a form of institutional harm rather than simply a 'neutral' encounter (Robinson and Eisenstadt 2017).

In summary, the available evidence defines the broad contours of what is meant by 'specialism' for tackling VAWG offences in a policing context, but there is a need for more detailed understanding of the key components of these units, the specific mechanisms that lead to improved outcomes, and the extent to which procedural justice theory can be seen to underpin these alternatives to 'business as usual' approaches.

Methods

This paper advances knowledge on the topic of specialist policing units designed to improve the response to VAWG, with a specific focus on domestic abuse, by reporting findings from two interlinked mixed-methods research projects that took place in Wales during 2023–2024. The first explored police perceptions of specialist units set up to improve the policing of VAWG in Wales in terms of their key components, models of delivery, rationale, implementation challenges and performance metrics. Establishing how police understand 'specialist units' both conceptually and operationally was the focus of this study, which involved focus groups with representatives from the four Welsh police forces. The second involved a detailed examination of a newly established specialist domestic abuse unit in Wales through a case study into the new operational processes that were initiated and the difference these have made to victim satisfaction, safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes. We applied procedural justice theory to elucidate the mechanisms by which specialist units can generate more successful outcomes as compared to 'business as usual' policing approaches.

Data collection

Several types of data were collected over the course of 2023–2024 for this research, including different sources of qualitative and quantitative information that were either newly generated for

research purposes or routinely collected by police. Ethical approval was granted by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (Cardiff University) on 9th May 2023 (ref #328).

Police focus groups

Two focus groups involving a total of $n = 10$ participants from the Welsh police forces were held during the spring of 2024, each lasting 2–3 hours. The focus groups were scheduled as hybrid meetings, allowing participants to attend online or in person, according to their preference. Audio recordings were made with prior consent, enabling more accurate analysis of the discussion. Each participant had professional experience in the area of policing VAWG offences. Roles represented in the focus groups included Sergeant ($n = 3$), Inspector ($n = 4$), Chief Superintendent ($n = 1$), Policy Officer ($n = 1$) and Survivor Engagement Coordinator ($n = 1$). All participants were currently working in roles relevant to the aims of the research, such as domestic abuse or rape investigation teams, public protection departments, or vulnerability/victim hubs.

A novel feature of the focus groups was the use of a Padlet task to systematically gather information from the participants. Padlet is a free real-time collaborative web platform that allowed the participants to upload content onto a virtual bulletin board (see padlet.com). At the start of each focus group, participants were invited to individually and anonymously write and share posts describing their perspective on key features of specialist policing units. They were instructed that each post should represent a single contribution, but that they could make multiple contributions to fully represent their perspective. 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 by applying a star ranking (1 star = least important, 5 stars = most important). The star rankings facilitated a group discussion over which were deemed to be the essential features of specialist units. The Padlet exercise was followed by a discussion structured around the following questions: (1) Why are specialist units for tackling VAWG 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?

Interviews with police and partner agencies

For the case study of one specialist unit for domestic abuse, we conducted semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative evidence about the role of the unit and their working practices. This offered an opportunity for participants to reflect both on what worked well, and those aspects of the new approach that posed a challenge. In total, $n = 10$ interviews were carried out with two groups of participants: officers assigned to the unit ($n = 6$) and representatives of partner agencies ($n = 4$). Interviews typically lasted around 30–40 minutes and were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. For both groups, an interview schedule was used to guide the conversation. For the officers’ sample, the main areas covered included: Establishing the unit and its remit; Differences between the new approach and ‘business as usual’; How the unit prioritises and contacts victims; What techniques are used to encourage victims to support prosecution and accept safeguarding support; Barriers and facilitators to victim engagement; Case examples; and Communication and collaboration with partner agencies. Interviews with representatives from the partner agencies offered an opportunity to gain insights that were more closely related to victims’ experiences, as well as to capture the agencies’ experiences of working with the new team. These interviews covered the following topics: Understandings of the unit and their remit; Referral routes into agencies; Barriers and

facilitators to communication and collaboration; Examples of joint working and collaboration with the unit; and, Feedback on the new approach and views on future working.

Police casefile data

Anonymised data was provided to the research team on all cases referred to the specialist unit ($n = 405$ cases, $n = 387$ unique victims) during the 9-month evaluation period. This included data input by the specialist unit into an Excel spreadsheet, which contained qualitative and quantitative information about key aspects of the case and their response (e.g. occurrence number, referral source, sector, investigators responding, method of contact, time spent with victim, comments about their willingness to support and reasons behind this, contact with partner agencies, etc.). This dataset was set up as an Excel spreadsheet to enable the Sergeant of the unit to maintain an overview of all cases and their progress as well as allowing the individual investigators involved to input relevant data about their cases at key points.

The dataset was supplemented with additional routinely collected data (matched by police occurrence number) to provide the following information for the evaluation sample: victim characteristics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, total number of previous occurrences, total number of previous DA occurrences, warning markers) and case characteristics (e.g. offence classifications, risk assessment grades, crime disposal codes representing outcomes such as charged/summonsed or evidential difficulties, etc.). The quantitative data enabled the identification of overall characteristics of the sample of cases being referred to the unit as well as understanding relationships between victim and case characteristics, tactics used, and disposal codes. Performance data was obtained from other areas of the force not served by the unit in relation to domestic abuse cases and disposal codes to enable statistical analysis and comparison.

Victim survey data

Victim perspectives on the specialist unit were gathered from the 'Insights' survey routinely administered by the force. The survey is designed to capture their experiences with all stages of the police response, from initial report through investigation and case finalisation. They are prompted through a series of closed and open-ended questions to give their feedback, over the telephone, in what is considered to be an 'independent' feedback exercise (although it is research undertaken by the force about the force's own performance, the Insights team have no part in the operational responses by officers to domestic abuse or any other crime, and as such are an 'arms-length' unit). For the purposes of this research, the Insights team provided responses obtained from all domestic abuse victims who consented to take part during the evaluation period ($n = 413$), which included survey responses obtained from those victims who were dealt with by the specialist unit ($n = 31$), who were (anonymously) identified as such through their occurrence numbers.

Limitations

There are certain limitations that are worth noting when interpreting the results that follow. Although representatives from the four Welsh forces participated in the workshops, the number was limited, and all forces were not equally represented. We were not able to include partner agencies in the workshops. Whether the perspectives of those providing services to VAWG victims align with those held by police is worthy of exploration. Similarly, for the case study we had relatively limited data from partner agencies. While several representatives of partner agencies participated in the interviews, and some were able to supply information about specific cases, systematically evaluating the level and type of safeguarding and support provided to victims was challenging. Consequently, we were not able to evaluate the level and type of safeguarding and support provided to victims and how this impacted on criminal justice outcomes, victim safety and satisfaction.

Due to the timescale of the evaluation, there was a relatively short follow-up period, making it difficult to establish criminal justice outcomes further down the line (e.g. convictions at court).

The current study was not able to include information about sentencing outcomes for those cases that resulted in a charge, nor how different criminal justice outcomes impacted upon victims’ longer-term safety and well-being.

Where partners were able to reflect on particular cases, this offered some valuable insights into the perspectives of victims, though this was not systematic. The case study mainly relied upon victim feedback obtained from the routinely administered survey carried out by the police force. Although this provided valuable information, it did not include bespoke questions designed to gather victim feedback on the Operation Diogel approach specifically. Although the survey was administered by staff from a different area of the force, this was still a routine internal force survey, which was not specifically designed for the evaluation of Operation Diogel and could be seen as lacking independence.

Results

Key features of specialist units

Figure 1 displays the results from the Padlet task, the aim of which was to understand the specific features or ways of working within policing approaches deemed to be ‘specialist’ as opposed to ‘business as usual’ with regards to tackling VAWG. The workshop participants shared a total of 63 posts, each one representing a single contribution from an individual participant. 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 as ‘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 and 5) combined for a total of 81 stars for the ‘victim-led approach’ category. Thus, this focus group task captured information about which features were most frequently identified by individual participants as well as their collective view as to the importance of each.

Overall, this exercise reveals that having specialist knowledge and/or subject matter expertise was the most important, having received more posts, ratings and stars than any other. The post-Padlet discussion revealed a coherent view from the participants that it was people-oriented ‘soft skills’

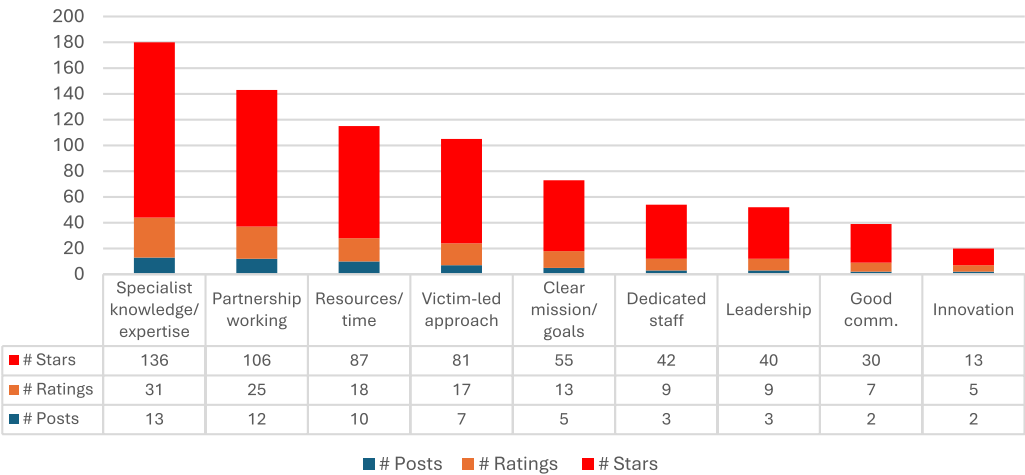


Figure 1. Key features of specialist VAWG policing units.

rather than technical skills that were warranted when working in specialist teams focused 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:

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

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 feature was partnership working; for example, participants noted that specialist units have the 'ability to pull on the support needed outside the scope of their own organisation' and more '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

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 were also considered by participants to be essential features of specialist units.

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

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 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 expectations of criminal justice must take 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 was 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

Working towards procedurally just outcomes

One illustrative example of such a specialist unit within Wales was set up by the South Wales Police in early 2023 and named 'Operation Diogel', 'diogel' meaning 'safe' in Welsh. Operating in the Cardiff & Vale Basic Command Unit (BCU), it aimed to improve victim experiences, safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes using a dedicated team of specially trained domestic abuse (DA) investigators (5 Police Constables and a Sergeant). The team worked in plain clothes and used an unmarked vehicle when visiting victims, collecting evidence, providing support, and making referrals to appropriate agencies. Operation Diogel was specifically tasked with responding to a more challenging

cohort of DA cases. Notably, their work was focused on those cases where, following initial contact with the response officer, the victim was classified as ‘unsupportive’ (365 of 387 victims). A daily routine was instituted whereby eligible cases were handed over directly from the investigative ‘Hub’ in the morning and then prioritised and allocated by the Diogel Sergeant. The 24-hour ‘PACE clock’ or ‘custody clock’ was a key factor driving prioritisation decisions, with those cases with suspects having the fewest hours remaining in custody generally seen first (although geography, team staffing levels, offence type and risk posed to victim were also considered). Once deployment orders were finalised, Diogel investigators then (where safe to do so) spent time with victims, primarily in-person. The Diogel sample, comprised predominantly of women (331 of 387 victims), tended to have significant prior histories of police contact (on average, 13 occurrences of any type, 5 of which were for DA-related offences). Additionally, most were flagged with at least one ‘warning marker’ and on average they had three each. Warning markers indicate to police issues they should be aware of prior to attending the incident, such as a history of using violence, mental health problems, suicidality or self-harming behaviour, substance misuse, etc. Such issues were prevalent in this sample. For example, 30% of victims in this sample had a warning marker for violence, 36.5% for mental health/suicidality, and 20% for substance misuse. Furthermore, the majority of victims referred to Operation Diogel had been assessed as medium or high risk of experiencing further violence or abuse via the DASH risk assessment (351 of 387 victims).

The positive outcome rate for those cases referred to Operation Diogel (85 of 369 cases finalised, 23%) was higher than achieved in other areas of the force (less than 15%). Most of these positive outcomes were for a charge/summons (64 of 85, or 17% of all cases coming to the Op Diogel team). For context, the percentage of domestic abuse-related crimes that result in a decision to charge the suspect is 7% for police forces in England and Wales (ONS 2024). Notably, the majority of these charge decisions were achieved in cases where the victim was initially unsupportive (49 of 64). High risk victims were more likely to have a positive outcome than those classified as standard or medium risk: 52 of 173 or 30.1% (chi-sq. = 5.97, df(1), $p = .017$). Victims with 10 or more prior DA-related occurrences were more likely to have positive outcomes than those with less prior police recorded DA: 23 of 58 or 39.7% (chi-sq. = 12.81, df(2), $p = .002$). Victims with 6 or more warning markers were more likely to have positive outcomes than those with fewer warning markers: 27 of 81 or 33.3% (chi-sq. = 6.39, df(2), $p = .041$). Looking at these three measures combined reinforces the point: more positive outcomes were achieved for high-risk victims who also had 10+ previous DA occurrences and 6+ warning markers (41.4% compared to 21.5% of Operation Diogel victims who did not meet all three criteria (chi-sq = 5.97, df(1), $p = .017$)). Overall, results point to the Operation Diogel team achieving positive outcomes in those very cases that would be classed as least likely to succeed within a ‘business as usual’ policing approach. Certain tactics employed by Operation Diogel help explain these positive outcomes and will be discussed further in the next section. Victims who received support from a partner agency (chi-sq. = 2.24, df(1), $p = .135$), who had interactions with Operation Diogel investigators lasting more than 30 minutes (chi-sq. = 4.16, df(1), $p = .041$) and who accepted face-to-face contact (chi-sq. = 9.35, df(2), $p = .009$) were more likely to have a positive outcome for their case [Full details of all statistical analyses available in Robinson and Davies 2024a].

However, as previously discussed, we cannot assume that positive criminal justice outcomes translate into what would be considered a ‘procedurally just outcome’. Distinguishing those outcomes requires some insight into the victim’s own viewpoint about his/her interactions with the police. Here, the victim satisfaction data is instructive. Victims responding to the Insights survey were asked for their level of satisfaction about key stages of the police process. A 7-point Likert scale of response options was available: completely satisfied, very satisfied, fairly satisfied, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, fairly dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, completely dissatisfied. For the purposes of this research, we focused exclusively on ‘completely satisfied’ as the least ambiguous measure of satisfaction. Results show that those receiving support from the Operation Diogel team were significantly more satisfied, at every stage of the process: the way in which their initial report to the police

was dealt with (chi-sq. = 14.73, df(8), $p = .065$); the actions taken by the police following their report (chi-sq. = 17.34, df(7), $p = .015$); the way they were treated by the police officers and staff who dealt with the investigation (chi-sq. = 16.29, df(8), $p = .038$); the way they have been kept informed of the progress of the case (chi-sq. = 27.16, df(8), $p < .001$); the way they were treated by the police officers and staff who were involved overall with the report and investigation (chi-sq. = 23.21, df(8), $p = .003$); and their overall experience with the service provided by the South Wales Police in this case (chi-sq. = 16.52, df(8), $p = .035$).

For victims of crime and domestic abuse victims specifically, a key underlying factor for their (dis)satisfaction with the police response is the extent to which they feel they have been kept up-to-date about the status of their case. Results show that a significantly higher proportion of victims who had their cases handled by the Operation Diogel team felt well informed compared to their counterparts receiving 'business as usual' elsewhere in the BCU. Specifically, more Operation Diogel victims answered affirmatively when asked whether officers 'Kept you up-to-date as agreed' (chi-sq. = 20.27, df(3), $p < .001$); 'Updated you throughout the investigation' (chi-sq. = 14.55, df(3), $p = .002$); 'Updated you at key stages (e.g. arrest of bail)' (chi-sq. = 22.90, df(3), $p < .001$); and 'Told you the final result of the investigation' (chi-sq. = 25.94, df(3), $p < .001$).

Triangulating these data sources provides a useful reminder that 'positive outcomes' from a victim's point of view cannot simply be equated with certain crime disposal codes. Victims may not have a 'positive' criminal justice outcome but can still feel positive about their experiences with the police, as well as report satisfaction with the safeguarding and support they received from partner agencies. For example, of the victims who reported being 'completely satisfied' with the way they were treated by officers who dealt with their investigation (21 of 31 respondents), only 5 of these had a positive criminal justice outcome (e.g. a charge/summons or caution made in their case), whereas 16 did not. Comments typically centred around the way officers treated them and illustrated the relevance of procedural justice theory; for example, *'they listened to my concerns regarding this incident and treated me fairly'*, *'they listened to what I wanted'*, *'they were very professional with the way they dealt with the whole incident'*.

Specialist ways of working

Through the interviews with officers and partner agencies for the Operation Diogel case study, as well as the workshop discussions, four elements of specialist approaches were identified as playing a key role in producing better results in terms of victim satisfaction, safeguarding and case outcomes: (1) time, (2) victim-focused approach, (3) links to partner agencies, and (4) a defined remit and ways of working with a specific cohort of domestic abuse victims. These can be understood as the mechanisms by which these improvements were generated.

Time

With dedicated full-time officers, the Operation Diogel team was not faced with the delays often involved in the 'business as usual' policing approach, which would typically see victims being left alone for some time between response officers taking suspects into custody and returning to take their statement. For example, those officers may be tasked with responding to other incoming emergencies in the meantime, as well as facing time pressures when they are able to return to victims, given the nature of the response role. The specialist team were not subject to the same pressures, instead reviewing suitable cases each morning and prioritising according to the amount of time left on the 'PACE clock' for those in custody. When the team then visited victims, they were able to be more responsive to their individual needs, sometimes spending hours with them and taking extended statements or facilitating contact with specialist domestic abuse agencies. Relatedly, when the time came to leave, there was a sense of satisfaction that they had done all they could to support victims: *'you're walking away from there knowing that you've given them everything they need'* (Officer 5). This additional time is conducive to officers being able to show respect to victims

(Mazerolle *et al.* 2013), which is particularly important given their experiences of trauma and abuse. This can be contrasted with perceptions of the 'business as usual' approach, with participants in the focus groups sharing examples of negative feedback they had received from victims. Time pressures were sometimes conveyed to victims, with some reporting feeling 'rushed', and others getting an impression of officers being disinterested: *'straight away as soon as the officer walked in [the victim knew] that they weren't interested'* (Participant 8). As evidenced elsewhere, the traditional pressure to respond to 'jobs' quickly is not conducive to an effective approach to domestic abuse (Segrave *et al.* 2016).

Victim-focused approach

Central to the 'Operation Diogel' specialist DA unit, and in many ways enabled by the increased time available for specialist officers to perform their roles, is the victim-focused approach. Victims were offered a more flexible process to suit their individual needs, with investigators taking the time to understand their particular circumstances. While this is likely something all police officers would like to do, the pressure of the response role makes this difficult. The practices used by the specialist team included asking open questions about incidents, encouraging victims to tell their story in their own words and helping to establish rapport: *'Rather than be very specific, I leave it a lot more open and ask "Okay, last night looked like absolute chaos on the officer's body worn, I had a look this morning. What on earth happened?"'* (Officer 2). This was underpinned by a recognition that it may take time for a victim to feel comfortable sharing their story, and that they may lack confidence in the police as a result of previous experiences.

Another related practice, as noted earlier, was attending in plain clothes and an unmarked car. This was a purposeful decision made to distinguish their visit from the initial response as well as affording victims some confidentiality during the interaction, as a visible police presence at home can be a barrier to engaging with police. The team felt this had a positive impact, increasing victims' willingness to see the investigators and allow them into their homes. Despite the challenges of sourcing an unmarked vehicle they faced at times, the team persevered with this approach, again reflecting the focus on victims and their trust and confidence in the criminal justice process. At the same time, there was respect for how much – or how little – victims wanted to share, particularly where they did not want to pursue prosecution: *'We have to understand that some people are not ready to tell us. [...] I think it is just a case of reading readiness, and we have to be prepared that people aren't ready sometimes'* (Officer 5). This approach points to a recognition of the cyclical nature of domestic abuse, shown to be key in effective policing responses to this crime (Carrington *et al.* 2022). In a 'business as usual' context, without support from the victim in the form of a statement, police contact would usually be brought to an end (either resulting in outcome 15, evidential difficulties, or 16, victim does not support further action). However, echoing the view that procedures matter as much as if not more than outcomes (Tyler 1988), contact with the Operation Diogel team did not simply cease if a victim decided not to pursue prosecution. Instead, viewing them as active participants in the justice process and respecting their needs and wishes (Mazerolle *et al.* 2013, Carrington *et al.* 2022), the team were able to support and safeguard victims in other ways.

Links to partner agencies

One of the ways the team offered better support to victims was through links to partner agencies, specifically local specialist DA services. Towards the beginning of the team's operation, a 'Diogel Team Induction Day with Partner Agencies' was organised with the aim of improving the team's understanding of the services on offer, as well as to establish working relationships. Through these links, many examples of joint working and collaboration emerged throughout the pilot, ranging from sharing case updates and conducting joint visits, to organising refuge spaces and transporting victims to their new accommodation. For example: *'We persuaded her to have some contact with [partner agency]. We stayed with her for a good few hours and persuaded her to both*

request and accept a refuge space' (Officer 1). While far removed from 'traditional' criminal justice outcomes, the safeguarding implications of this work are significant, and this again reflects both the victim-focused nature of the team's work and a clear understanding of the need for partnership working. Recognising the value of collaboration and having a shared sense of responsibility for victims was essential and is supported by evidence from multiple studies across several jurisdictions (e.g. Rodgers *et al.* 2023). On some occasions, as a result of victims' support and safeguarding needs being better responded to, this did in fact lead to engagement with the criminal justice process:

She was already involved with [partner agency], so she'd already contacted them herself. So, we had a joint meeting a week or two later where I took a further statement because she had mentioned stuff about her car being damaged. (Officer 4)

This highlights the connections between victim-focused practices and criminal justice outcomes, which may not be feasible within a time-pressured 'business as usual' approach.

More specific caseload

As a specialist unit, the Operation Diogel team had a specific caseload, working in one area of the force and predominantly focusing on victims who did not want to provide statements or pursue criminal convictions for perpetrators. In contrast, in the 'business as usual' approach, those cases would have gone to the investigative 'Hub', which deals with a high volume of reports and a wide range of offences. Hub officers – including some who would go on to join the Operation Diogel team – typically have very high and diverse caseloads, with no specialist expertise in relation to supporting DA victims. Yet soon after moving to the new team, the skills of individual investigators quickly developed through joint attendances, sharing expertise, and working as a team with continuity of leadership provided via the Sergeant. While a positive experience of such a specific caseload cannot be guaranteed, and the challenges of sustaining such units remain (Fraser *et al.* 2024), the benefits revealed here cannot be overlooked. For the specialist team in this study, there was a clear sense of purpose and better working knowledge of partner agencies, facilitating the kinds of collaboration and safeguarding described above. As well as being able to follow cases through and maintain regular contact with victims, officers developed their 'tradecraft' and skillset in dealing with the most complex DA cases. Reciprocity between support agencies and policing teams, as demonstrated by examples of co-location and closer working in Australia and beyond (Rodgers *et al.* 2023), offers an invaluable knowledge and skill development opportunity. For the Operation Diogel team, disclosures of long histories of abuse were common, and with both the investigative skills and additional time facilitated by having a specific caseload, cases such as the following emerged:

[My colleague] took an 18-page statement that took two days to take. He took it for six hours and then went home, then went back to the victim and was there for another six hours. Response physically don't have the time to be able to do that. (Officer 6)

Discussion

Although the available evidence on specialist units for VAWG indicates that they vary in their scope and delivery model, our research has elucidated police views as to the key features which set them apart from the 'business as usual' police response. The workshops revealed strong consensus around specialist units having a defined remit and a clear mission of being victim-led, with dedicated time and resources including specialist knowledge and expertise and arrangements in place for working in close collaboration with partner agencies. It is notable that these findings were triangulated by the qualitative and quantitative evidence collected for the Operation Diogel case study. Specifically, it revealed how these underlying mechanisms generated a range of improvements when put into practice, including higher victim satisfaction, better safeguarding and criminal justice outcomes, and enhanced tradecraft, teamworking and morale amongst the officers involved.

Our research highlights that the overarching police ‘mission’ adopted by specialist units for dealing with VAWG offences is to facilitate a shorter and smoother journey to safety for victims. Accordingly, they must 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 and build this into the design of specialist alternatives to the ‘business as usual’ approach. Crucially, these designs carve out ‘safe spaces’ for victims to disclose and enable them to have some ‘voice’ about what they want from the criminal justice process. These ‘safe spaces’ can take many forms, and whether they are considered as such will be dependent on the victim’s needs and wishes. For some, in-person interactions are preferred (e.g. Operation Diogel) but research also indicates that other alternatives (e.g. telephone, video calls) can be both acceptable to victims as well as effective (Robinson 2017, Rothwell *et al.* 2022, Robinson and Davies 2024b) as long as victims have ‘the opportunity to express their concerns and feel that their wishes are not ignored’ (Erez and Tontodonato 1992, p. 395). The key is that the police operating within a specialist context are courteous and respectful, take the time to listen in order to gain understanding of the issues involved from the victim’s perspective, and take the situation seriously (Robinson and Stroshine 2005). In so doing, the work of specialist units can be seen to align with, and create a pathway towards, procedural justice: police demonstrating dignity and respect, actively promoting opportunities for citizen participation and giving ‘voice’, signalling neutrality rather than judgment by their actions, and working hard to communicate their trustworthy intentions (Mazerolle *et al.* 2013, Hohl *et al.* 2022, Johnson *et al.* 2025).

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 to address the shortcomings in the policing of VAWG identified by recent inspections. As HMICFRS (2021) noted,

The help that victims need may depend on their feelings about supporting prosecution. Victims who do not support police action from the start may have different needs to those who withdraw at a later stage. Equally, victims who indicate a lack of support from the outset may change their minds if they then receive support that is targeted to their specific circumstances. [emphasis added]

As a specialist team, Operation Diogel had the time and expertise necessary to make significant headway in those cases where victims indicated at the outset that they did not want to engage with police to take the case forward. By making timely, in-person contact, in plainclothes and an unmarked car, offering information and reassurance, they were able to shift many of these cases from the category of ‘no further action’ into the ‘positive outcome’ category. Although we could not assess the longer-term outcomes for these victims and their families, what is certain is that they received time and attention from specialist officers, which would not have been available to them under the ‘business as usual’ approach. Instead, with that approach, the most likely outcome for unsupportive victims is that their cases are closed with ‘no further action’ taken. For these victims, their understanding of and engagement with the police response is almost entirely based upon their interactions with control room staff and response officers, neither of which are acknowledged as policing roles that typically allow the fostering or utilisation of specialist knowledge and expertise in relation to domestic abuse. Furthermore, for these victims, accessing support from partner agencies must largely rely upon their own wherewithal and ability to act on any information (e.g. phone number or pamphlet) provided by the response officer to proactively make contact with support agencies themselves at some later point. For victims of domestic abuse who are already reluctant to engage and may have complex needs, taking this practical step to obtaining support may be experienced as an insurmountable obstacle.

If specialist teams can provide benefits to victims, as the available evidence demonstrates, then ideally this comes without a high ‘price’ to be paid by the officers involved. Although responding exclusively to sensitive and complex public protection cases such as domestic abuse could reasonably be expected to cause stress and burnout, this came through our interviews mainly in relation to *other* ways of working with these types of cases (e.g. in the Hub). This echoes evidence from Australia, showing feelings of being hurried, despondent and frustrated among non-specialist officers

responding to domestic abuse calls (Segrave *et al.* 2016). In contrast, the Operation Diogel team had a wholly positive view of their role and responsibility, regardless of whether they initially volunteered or were assigned to the team. This finding aligns with other research, which showed that working in a specialist team affords officers higher status and job satisfaction (Jolin and Moose 1997, Dalton *et al.* 2022). Another benefit to the officers involved was that they were able to develop in their role, enhance and utilise their investigative skills, better understand how to help and see for themselves the consequences their actions had for victims. The 'victim's journey' became their own journey to some extent, because they were able to understand it and engage with it more fully rather than the typically brief involvement in one part of the process that comes with working in other roles.

Our research contributes toward the evidence-base on the key features of specialist units, what they are able to achieve and the underlying mechanisms by which changes in policing practice translate into improvements across a range of outcomes. Further research is needed to build on these findings, particularly with regard to the longer-term impacts of specialist policing approaches on victim safety, satisfaction and well-being. In particular, longitudinal research is needed to assess victims' needs and intentions at the initial police contact and follow this throughout the investigative and criminal justice process in order to better understand the drivers and barriers to achieving procedural justice (i.e. from the victim's point of view, to what extent are the specific components of voice/participation, dignity and respect, neutrality in police decision-making and trustworthy intentions evident at each stage and how does this enable or compromise achieving their desired outcome?). Research over a longer period of time would also provide an opportunity to explore broader issues already highlighted by studies of specialist units in other jurisdictions, specifically how to overcome implementation challenges and the importance of sustained organisational support and funding for such units (see for example Fraser *et al.* 2024). The transformational impact of Operation Soteria Bluestone for police investigation of rape and serious sexual offences in the UK highlights the importance of coherent leadership and investment at a national level, as well as the value of police-academic collaboration for identifying solutions to longstanding policing problems. In early 2025, the 'Soteria' coproduction framework was applied to domestic abuse in one pilot force (Operation Bright Light), which has the potential to generate further significant reforms within the policing VAWG context. Early findings from that project highlight the value of different models of specialism for improving the police investigative 'system' and how it is organised in response to domestic abuse (Robinson *et al.* 2025). Yet, due to the recency of Bright Light alongside on-going challenges to UK policing in terms of budget constraints, recruitment and retention issues, and low levels of public trust and confidence, it remains to be seen whether its key recommendations will be implemented, let alone sustained. Finally, there is a need to build on existing evidence about the positive impact specialist service providers have on victim safety and wellbeing independent of the police to gain better understanding of how certain models of co-working as part of specialist policing approaches can extend and deepen their beneficial impact.

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