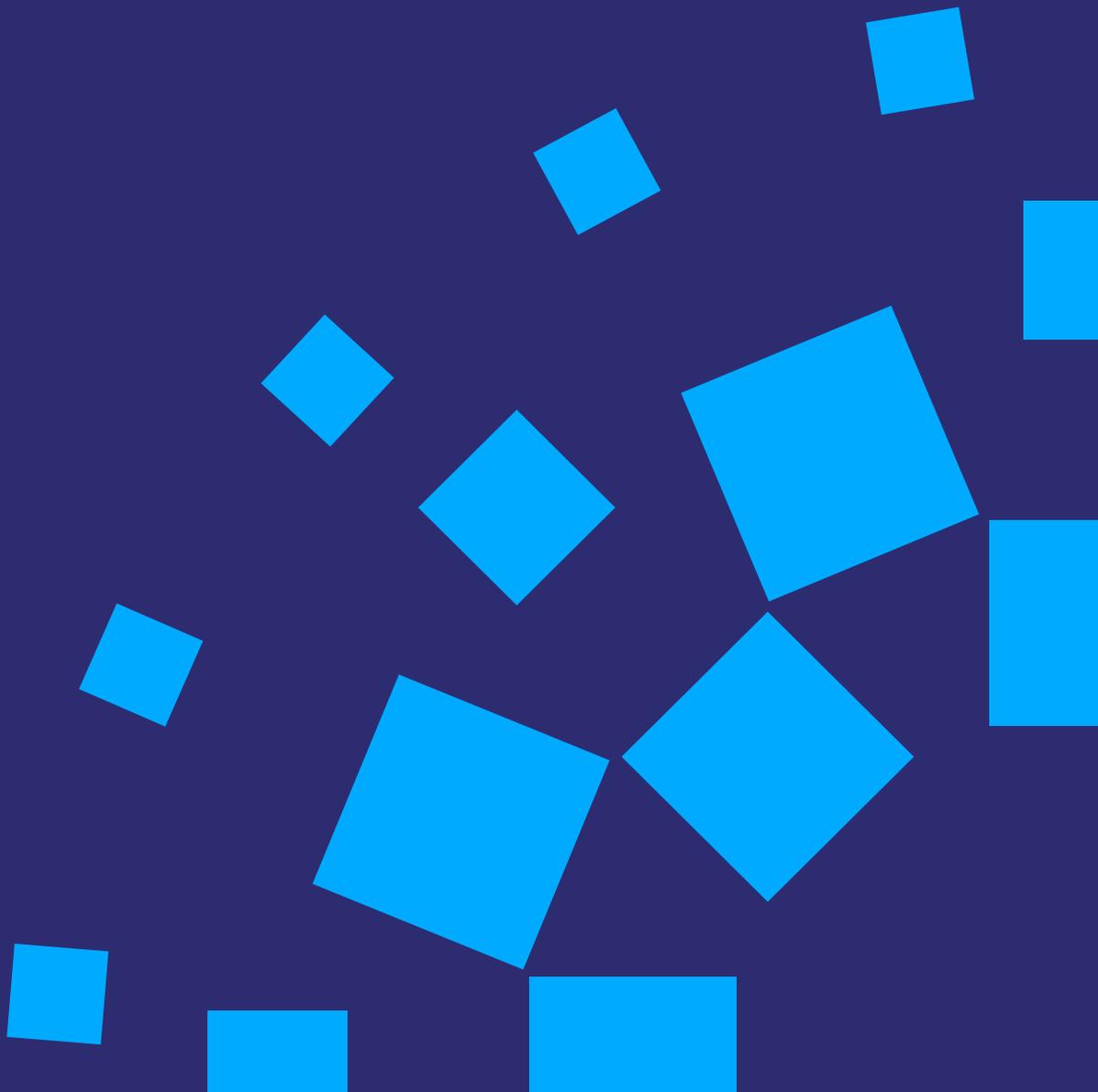




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Principles for telephone or video first response to domestic abuse



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Summary

- There is a strong theoretical case for adopting telephone first response (TFR) and 'emerging' empirical evidence base for video first response (VFR) to some incidents of domestic abuse (DA) that would otherwise receive a 'slow time' deployment.
- Evaluation evidence from two forces for TFR showed greater disclosure of abuse, permitting a more comprehensive identification of risk and better recording of crimes with TFR.
- The College has not heard of any issues or dissatisfaction with the approach from pilot forces, but there is a gap in the evidence base around victims' views.
- As forces have to make an initial investment in resourcing and training, lack of clarity on the long-term viability of the approach is preventing further uptake.
- The College finds that there is evidence to support TFR and VFR and we suggest a set of principles intended to ensure safe and effective implementation.

Background and theory

Policing has for some time been concerned with using resources efficiently and providing a proportionate and (more) effective response to specific calls for service (Flanagan, 2008). One question relating to efficient and effective use of resources is whether a physical deployment of a first response officer or officers is required for every call for service, or whether a TFR may be preferable in certain circumstances. In relation to DA specifically, there will always be calls for service that require either an immediate or priority response. These are cases where there are immediate safeguarding and/or investigative imperatives. There may, however, be other calls where a TFR may be acceptable, or even preferable to an officer deployment.

The College believes the theoretical case for TFR/VFR for certain DA calls for service is sound.

- Some victims specify a preference for a scheduled appointment/to speak with officers at a time that is convenient for them.
- ‘Grade 3’/‘slow time’/scheduled officer deployments (‘diary car’) can take place, in some cases several days after the original call to police.
- Is more reflexive and call-backs frequently occur much faster than slow time officer deployments.
- College research¹ suggests (some) response officers view slow time DA deployments as low-priority work and question the wisdom of pursuing reports that are, in some cases, several days old.
- Deployment does not necessarily remove risk and it is not possible to remove risk entirely from the system. With appropriate training and supervision, telephone first responders may develop a better and more specialist working knowledge of DA and risk assessment than has been observed in some first response officers.

¹ This view has been expressed during observations with frontline officers both in research to review the DASH risk model (Robinson and others, 2016) and an ongoing project.

- By providing a timely, proportionate response to specific DA calls, frontline resources can be maximised and deployed more efficiently and effectively to cases that require officer attendance. A risk-averse approach to deployment results in inefficient use of resources and dilution of the effectiveness of response for cases across the board.
- Safeguarding officers and staff in forces, and specialist support services in the charity sector, conduct some of their risk assessment and safety planning work by telephone.

Implementation and evaluation in Hampshire

From April 2015, and following consultation with partner agencies, survivor groups, and the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), Hampshire Constabulary introduced TFR for a tightly controlled cohort of DA calls for service. These calls were drawn from a pool graded, through an initial risk assessment, as suitable for a 'slow time' or scheduled response, as opposed to those assessed as requiring an 'immediate' or 'priority' response. This process of initial risk assessment and prioritisation of calls for service is undertaken across forces. An additional triage process was implemented in the force's Resolution Centre (a specially resourced telephone response unit of investigators) to identify cases deemed unsuitable for a TFR: reports of physical assaults, stalking or harassment; cases with existing 'high risk' warning markers; breaches of bail conditions or protective orders; and cases where the victim and perpetrator cohabit. In addition, the telephone first responder could refer the case back for a priority deployment if further information emerged suggesting a deployment was required.

If, following triage, a case was deemed suitable for a TFR, the Resolution Centre would initiate a priority call-back and a telephone first responder would record full details of the report, undertake a domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence (DASH) risk assessment and make appropriate safeguarding referrals. They would also record a crime or non-crime incident, as appropriate. Crimes with no immediate safeguarding issues were tasked to local investigation teams. Where no offences were identified, or where there was a minor offence with no complaint or opportunity to prosecute, the report was closed in the Resolution Centre (in the same way it would be by a response sergeant if there was a deployment). All cases closed in the Resolution Centre were reviewed by a detective sergeant.

Following concerns expressed by HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) that the quality of risk assessment and subsequent investigation may be inferior with a TFR as opposed to a traditional deployment, Hampshire ceased the practice (Robinson, 2017). This introduction and subsequent suspension of TFR to DA in Hampshire provided an opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach with a 'natural

experiment'. Cases from the first three months of 2016 that received a TFR were compared with cases from the first three months of 2017 that would have been eligible for a telephone response but received a deployment. The evaluation suggested that TFR was more effective in a number of ways, for the specific cohort of calls it was applied to.

- There was less missing data on DASH risk assessments undertaken by telephone first responders and more comprehensive free text data was recorded.
- Telephone first responders achieved greater rates of disclosure than deployed first response officers across the majority of DASH questions, especially in relation to sensitive questions such as sexual victimisation.
- As a consequence of greater disclosure, telephone first responders identified twice as many 'medium risk' cases and three times as many 'high risk' cases.
- TFR resulted in more DA crimes recorded (telephone first responders were more likely than first response officers to uncover offences, or have offences disclosed to them, during the initial investigation).
- Cases dealt with initially by telephone were more likely to result in formal police action (such as charges, summonses, cautions and penalty notices).

College-supported pilots

Following publication of the positive findings from Hampshire, the College supported forces to further pilot and evaluate TFR to DA. An advisory group was convened in early 2018 comprising police practitioners, academic subject experts and representatives from the charity sector groups SafeLives and Solace Women's Aid. The group raised no major concerns with the approach. Specialist support services confirmed that they undertake some risk assessment and support work by telephone.

Hampshire, West Midlands, Northamptonshire, Staffordshire, Greater Manchester and Northumbria have been involved in the piloting. The College specified strict criteria for the piloting and which cases were suitable for a telephone response, drawing on the criteria used in Hampshire.

Evaluation

Hampshire has not conducted further formal evaluation. Internal monitoring has not suggested any significant issues with the TFR approach since it was reintroduced.

Staffordshire partnered with a local university to evaluate its pilot. The evaluation considered around 1,000 cases, split between TFR and deployment. The evaluation replicated the findings in Hampshire in that a TFR was timelier, secured greater disclosure from victims and recorded more crimes. Cases dealt with by telephone resolution during the evaluation period did not generally result in formal police action, and a higher proportion were classified as 'Outcome 16' (suspect identified; victim does not want to proceed). Due to the evaluation design, however, it is not possible to know if the difference in outcomes was a direct result of TFR. As Staffordshire introduced TFR alongside grade 3/slow time deployment, it is likely that the sample of grade 3 cases from before the introduction of TFR was qualitatively different to the TFR sample to which it was compared (and likely contained a greater proportion of cases where formal police action was more likely, such as violence with injury).

West Midlands conducted analysis on around 450 cases, split between TFR and deployment. The evaluation did not consider disclosure of abuse or crime recording, but it did examine formal police action. West Midlands used a comparison group drawn from cases otherwise eligible for TFR but where there were lines of enquiry that favoured deployment. This design overcame a key limitation of the natural experiment design in that outcomes would not be affected by factors associated with differing time periods (such as differences in resources between the time periods). A disadvantage of the design was that the samples were not equivalent, with the deployment sample perhaps favouring cases that were more easily solvable. Despite the non-equivalent samples, the evaluation found no difference between the groups in relation to outcomes. The evaluation also found TFR cases were marginally less likely to result in further police contact.

Greater Manchester (who implemented the pilot in specific areas of the force) and **Northamptonshire** both indicated that the strict criteria for calls being eligible for the pilot meant they had insufficient cases to undertake formal evaluation.

Northumbria implemented TFR later than the other forces and is currently planning an evaluation.

VFR has been evaluated to some extent in **Sussex** and **Kent**.

Implementation during the pandemic/first lockdown

Following feedback from forces, the College convened a second advisory group in February 2020 to discuss making the criteria for including cases in the pilot less restrictive. In addition to the participating forces, the group again had representation from charity sector support services (Women's Aid and SafeLives) and HMICFRS. Specifically, it was agreed that there was no reason to restrict the use of TFR to cases involving ex-partners (when there is generally no such restriction for grade 3/slow time deployments).

Shortly following this meeting, the first COVID lockdown was imposed and significant concerns were raised within policing about forces' ability to respond to calls for service with a workforce depleted by officers falling ill and/or self-isolating. As it became clear forces may have to initiate emergency protocols, the College issued guidance to all forces on TFR to DA in exceptional circumstances. During the first lockdown, at least two of the pilot forces extended TFR to 'priority' DA calls for service and/or calls that did not meet the original criteria for inclusion. We do not know about arrangements in forces outside the pilot but, anecdotally, it is likely that non-pilot forces adopted the approach to varying degrees (and possibly beyond the original pilot criteria) during this time.

Summary and next steps

The pilot forces have been operating TFR to DA for more than two years. During that time, there have been no reports to the College of issues or problems with the approach, save for the restrictive nature of the original criteria. The College has received no reports of serious incidents directly following a TFR and no reports of victim dissatisfaction with the approach. One pilot force has replicated the positive findings around greater disclosure of abuse and better identification of risk and criminal offences that were observed in the original evaluation in Hampshire.

A key advantage of TFR is that victims generally receive a much timelier response than an equivalent grade 3/slow time deployment. In the worst cases, a slow time deployment can take place several days after the initial call to police; a prioritised TFR is undertaken generally within 24 hours. A TFR is also undertaken by somebody who has enhanced training and supervision, and views these DA calls for service as their priority. It is possible that this combination of factors is reflected in the greater levels of disclosure of abuse and better identification of risk documented by evaluation in two forces.

There are a few obvious concerns with the approach. One possible concern is that evidence may be lost as a result of not physically attending the scene. This concern is diminished by the fact that incidents eligible for TFR are generally those that would be deployed to slow time. Forces can triage out cases where there is a specific requirement to pursue lines of inquiry by physical deployment. The evaluation in Hampshire suggested in fact that investigative outcomes were better for TFR. Another possible concern is knowing whether a perpetrator is present at the time of call-back. This concern is mitigated to a large extent by the scheduled nature of the calls. Forces can use code words agreed with the victim as a further means of determining whether it is safe to proceed. A further concern is that, even in the absence of a perpetrator, by not attending, a first responder may miss, for example, vital clues in victims' body language indicative of minimisation or withholding information. This concern is mitigated by the finding that evaluation in two forces showed victims disclosed more on average to telephone first responders than to officers deployed.

At the second advisory group meeting in early 2020, it was agreed that the criteria for the pilot could be relaxed, subject to caution and a staged

approach. The advent of the pandemic made TFR ‘business as usual’ for many forces, for a period of time at least. The College’s view, based on the experience of implementation in forces to date, is that TFR to DA in a controlled, risk-based setting is a valid approach. The existing pilot process has frustrated wider take-up of the approach as some forces have struggled to generate enough cases to enable robust evaluation. To commit to resourcing and upskilling call centre staff, and maintaining the infrastructure required for telephone or video response to DA, forces have suggested there needs to be some certainty about the ongoing viability of the approach.

We believe, on balance, that further delaying wider uptake of the approach is not proportionate to the cost associated with further developing the evidence base at this stage. In addition, it is possible that forces who adopt the approach will seek to and/or can be encouraged to evaluate such that the evidence base will develop alongside implementation.

Victim satisfaction

No evaluation to date has included an assessment of victims’ experience of TFR. Although pilot forces have not informally reported dissatisfaction with the process from victims, victims’ views on the approach remain a gap in the evidence base. If there was further evaluation of the approach, formally assessing the views of victims should be considered a priority.

Video first response

The College is aware of two forces testing VFR to DA. The principle appears similar or identical to the TFR approach, but using Zoom or similar technology. The VFR approach would mitigate further any concerns surrounding perpetrator presence and assessing the body language of the victim. Forces testing the approach plan some degree of evaluation. The College will keep informed of this work, as it develops.

Conclusion

Having drawn together and considered the evidence from existing piloting of the approach, the College finds no reason for forces not to use TFR or VFR to DA in a risk-informed way.

While acknowledging that local circumstances may vary, the College suggests a set of core principles that can be followed to ensure the approach is implemented safely and appropriately.

A key principle, recognised throughout the piloting, is that TFR to DA should be victim focused and informed by risk. It is not a means to manage down demand by not undertaking appropriate and proportionate risk assessment, investigation and safeguarding.

Suggested principles for implementing telephone or video first response to DA

- Telephone or video first response to DA should be risk informed and victim focused. It must not be used to manage down demand by not undertaking appropriate risk assessment, investigation and safeguarding.
- Forces should train telephone or video first response in DA and risk assessment, including coercive control and stalking.
- Officers and staff undertaking TFR to DA should have appropriate supervision.
- Forces should conduct an initial assessment of risk (using the THRIVE model, or equivalent). Telephone or video first response is not appropriate if there is an identified risk to safety.
- Forces should have a robust triage process, involving comprehensive intelligence and history checks, to determine calls suitable for telephone or video first response, and a clear route to reinstate officer deployment if appropriate.

- Telephone or video first response is not appropriate if evidence may be lost as a result of not attending, or if there are lines of enquiry that require attendance.
- Cases should not be deemed suitable for a telephone or video first response if the initial report suggests there is controlling or coercive behavior, or behavior that amounts to stalking (as opposed to harassment or malicious communications).
- Forces should have safeguards relating to the potential for perpetrators to be present during call-back, and for ensuring safety of children/voice of the child.

References

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