

SURREY POLICE AND CRIME PANEL

VICTIM AND WITNESS CARE UNIT UPDATE

22 MARCH 2021

1. Introduction

- 1.1 On 1 April 2019 Surrey Police opened its new Victim and Witness Care Unit (VAWCU), based out of Guildford Police Station. This professionally trained team has been established by the Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner (OPCC) and Surrey Police to help victims of crime cope and, as far as possible, recover from their experience, putting in place care plans tailored to the needs of the individual.
- 1.2 All victims of crime in Surrey are automatically referred to the Unit at the point a crime is reported, with subsequent contact based on an individual's need and vulnerability. Individuals can also self-refer, or use the Unit's dedicated website (<https://victimandwitnesscare.org.uk>) to find local specialist support services.
- 1.3 The team also provides support to witnesses of crime, linking with other criminal justice agencies, departments and charitable organisations in order to obtain information and ensure individuals are kept informed about their case and possible attendance at court. At its heart, the new VAWCU is designed to allow a truly end-to-end service for victims of crime, from initial contact through to court, and beyond if needed.
- 1.4 The OPCC's Head of Policy and Commissioning chairs the bi-monthly Victim and Witness Care Unit Governance Board, which oversees and supports the continued development and performance of the Victim and Witness Care Unit, ensuring that the service is meeting the needs of victims and complying with the requirements of the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime.
- 1.5 The Police and Crime Panel previously received an update on the VAWCU at its June 2020 meeting, which provided an overview of governance arrangements and the outcomes of recent formal reviews commissioned to ascertain Unit performance. The purpose of this paper is therefore to look at further developments that have taken place since this last update, and to highlight current demand pressures created by the pandemic.

2. Current Demand

- 2.1 The following data outlines throughput for the Unit for the first six months of 2020/21. The Unit triages new cases based on a combination of crime-type and vulnerability, creating two main cohorts – enhanced and standard. Those identified as requiring enhanced support are contacted by telephone by a Victim & Witness Care Officer, who will work with an individual to identify any required support. All other victims of crime receive a text, letter or email (depending on the contact details available), letting them know that support is

available, if required, and providing contact details of the Unit, including its dedicated website.

2020	Enhanced	Standard		Summary
		SMS	Email / Letter	
April	1412	1233	367	3012
May	1619	1486	442	3547
June	1424	1815	548	3787
July	1167	2328	685	4180
August	1175	2332	669	4176
September	996	2234	729	3959
Total	7793	11428	3440	22661

- 2.2 Whilst direct comparisons are somewhat complicated due to a change in the Unit's counting methodology, the Unit has seen a drop in total referrals during 2020/21 compared to the previous year of around 20%. This reflects a general crime reporting decrease during lockdown due to less social interaction and people spending more time inside.
- 2.3 However, the amount of ongoing support and the percentage of individuals requiring has increased. Many victims are suffering the effects of both a crime and issues that have been exacerbated as a consequence of the pandemic – such as mental health issues, financial issues, loneliness and bereavement. Therefore VAWCU caseworkers have seen an increase in both caseload and case complexity.
- 2.4 It has been widely acknowledged that the pandemic has created an unprecedented backlog of court cases in England and Wales, negatively impacting on victims of crime. Just this month (February) Surrey Police saw a complex trial involving 55 victims rescheduled to January 2022 due to the Crown Court being unable to secure a jury capable of hearing a 10-week trial. Work is ongoing to identify an earlier trial date across courts within the South East network, but with all areas struggling there is no guarantee this will be possible.
- 2.5 To illustrate the impact on the VAWCU, in January 2020 the Unit were supporting witnesses from across a total of 438 trials. Comparatively, in December 2020 the Unit had a trial total of 824, representing a near doubling of workload. Combined with the added complexity of supporting individuals over a longer period, this has placed the Unit under significant pressure.
- 2.6 Whilst this reflects a wider national problem, the Unit has nonetheless taken proactive steps to mitigate against this additional workload, bringing in five additional staff members on temporary contracts to support the wider team. The VAWCU continues to monitor the situation month-by-month and this area remains a recognised risk within the force, with appropriate oversight in place.

3. New Fraud Case Workers & Volunteers

- 3.1 Operation Signature is the Force campaign to identify and support vulnerable victims of fraud. The Operation Signature work focuses on the protection of

the vulnerable members of our communities, preventing them from becoming victims of fraud and/or further financial loss.

- 3.2 In July 2020 two fraud caseworkers, funded by the OPCC, joined the VAWCU to provide practical and emotional support to vulnerable fraud victims flagged by Operation Signature.
- 3.3 There has been a 16% increase in demand between 2019 and 2020 in Surrey Operation Signature cases (an increase of 101 cases). Overall all areas of reported fraud are steadily rising in line with national trends. This is reflected in the increase in Surrey Action Fraud victims in the past 12 months. For example between 1st January 2020 and 30th November 2020, there was a 71% increase in reported 'Romance fraud' alone (147 reports).
- 3.4 Between July 2020 and November 2020, the fraud case workers received 283 Operation Signature referrals for action. With the Caseworkers being embedded in the Victim and Witness Care Unit, they can also receive referrals through additional channels, such as from Witness Care Officers directly or through self-referrals. As the knowledge and awareness of this role increases we envisage that this demand may also increase.

	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Total
Referrals Op Sig	35	60	69	71	48	283
Referrals Internal	0	1	2	1	0	4
Self-Referrals	0	1	1	5	4	11
Total	35	61	72	77	52	297

- 3.5 In January the VAWCU had been due to introduce 11 new Fraud Prevention Volunteers to the team, with each working a minimum of 10-12 hours a month. However, due to the pandemic it has not been possible to deploy this resource, although volunteers have been recruited and are ready to commence delivery once lockdown rules have been relaxed and training completed.
- 3.6 The purpose of the Fraud Prevention Volunteer role will be to provide protective messaging to victims of fraud (individuals and businesses) who have reported their crime to Action Fraud and not received a police response. This includes victims who were not identified as vulnerable at first point of contact or treated as a 'call for service' for the purpose of Action Fraud reporting guidelines.

4. New Case Management System

- 4.1 At present staff within the Unit predominantly use NICHE – Surrey Police's main case management system - to manage new victim cases and record contact. Whilst this approach allows for safe management of cases and has the added benefit of allowing police officers access to some VAWCU records, identification and triaging of new cases, tasking of staff and extraction of performance and management data has proven problematic, necessitating the use of additional Excel spreadsheets and custom macros. However, such

mitigation has added additional burden on the already stretched team, and has only partly addressed the core data deficit.

- 4.2 Whilst some interim work is currently being undertaken by staff in the VAWCU and IT to explore how NICHE can better export the required data to ensure ongoing provision of performance data, the consensus is that the Unit will need to deploy a dedicated Case Management System.
- 4.3 A number of potential systems have therefore been identified, and VAWCU staff are in the process of meeting with suppliers to demo platforms and liaising with appropriate procurement and IT leads within Surrey Police. With most platforms being cloud-based and requiring no local installation of software or hardware, deployment can take place relatively quickly once a software solution is chosen.

5. Additional support for VAWCU staff

- 5.1 Every day in policing, those working to care for victims of crime and/or to investigate offences are likely to be at risk of experiencing 'vicarious trauma'. Vicarious trauma is a process of change resulting from empathetic engagement with trauma survivors. Anyone who routinely engages empathetically with survivors of traumatic incidents and material relating to their trauma can be affected.
- 5.2 The nature of work undertaken by staff within the VAWCU can naturally put staff at risk of vicarious trauma, an issue that can be compounded by the recent transition teams have made to a home-working model of delivery and greater isolation from the wider team.
- 5.3 Through the Unit's formal governance process, gaps were identified in the support available to members of staff and the Head of Policy & Commissioning for the PCC and the VAWCU Departmental Head subsequently presented a paper to the Force's Health & Wellbeing Board, setting out proposals to expand support. Based on this, a pilot is now due to be launched whereby in-house Mental Health First Aiders will provide wellbeing support by phone to those that require it. Where any concerns are subsequently identified, these will be escalated to ensure staff are fully supported and appropriate HR processes followed.
- 5.4 The results of this pilot will be assessed and, if successful, there is potential to extend this initiative outside the VAWCU into Surrey Police teams.

6. Embedded Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (IDVAs)

- 6.1 One of the ambitions at launch was that the VAWCU would progressively become a place where external specialist service providers, such as those supporting rape & domestic abuse victims, could locate staff – either on an ad-hoc or more permanent basis. This would help victims with the highest needs access specialist support faster, whilst also allowing shared learning between VAWCU staff and specialist services.
- 6.2 Whilst the pandemic has slowed the speed at which the Unit has been able to realise this vision, it has made some steps with our local DA Outreach services (jointly funded by Surrey OPCC), and two IDVAs now regularly co-located out of the VAWCU office, providing direct support and guidance to the

team. The intention is to continue developing this model of delivery, subject to COVID-19 restrictions.

7. Recommendations

7.1 The Panel is asked to note the content of this report.

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