



Qualitative research into the perspectives of stalking victim support service providers on the police response to stalking

**An annexed report to the super-
complaint investigation into the
police response to stalking**

September 2024

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Background

In November 2022, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust submitted a [super-complaint on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium about the police response to stalking](#). The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), College of Policing and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) jointly investigated this super-complaint and [published a report](#) setting out our conclusions and recommendations.

The IOPC conducted a focus group with five stalking victim support service providers as part of the super-complaint investigation. The purpose of the focus group was to gain insight into the police response to stalking from organisations that support stalking victims. The focus group discussion centred on the service received by victims after reporting stalking to the police, how risks to victims are managed, and how victims are supported. Its aim was to identify good practice, common concerns and areas of learning.

Summary of key findings

The themes raised in the focus group support the key claims made in the super-complaint. The experiences shared by the focus group indicate that the police are not consistent in recognising or understanding stalking behaviour. There was agreement that there is a lack of understanding about the complexities of stalking. This means risk assessments can be impaired and appropriate action is not always taken. For example, applying for the most applicable protection order for victims. Participants felt that some police officers did not understand enough about stalking protection orders (SPOs) to apply for them or make sure that those that were applied for were robust and had enough supporting evidence.

There was a shared feeling that victims are misadvised when police officers do not have a good understanding of stalking and feel unsupported when reporting stalking to police and during investigations. However, the group agreed that victims are better supported where multi-agency approaches are taken by the police to stalking investigations. Most positive examples reported by the focus group related to cases involving multi-agency approaches. Participants believed that the best chance of a conviction was in cases where stalking support services worked with the police and assisted both the police and the victim in making sure the victim was protected and supported.

All participants tended to agree with points and experiences raised by other participants in the focus group. There was little divergence from the key themes found in the super-complaint.

Recommendations made by participants focused on improving and developing police officer and staff training, the quality of investigations, and risk assessment tools to improve the police response to stalking. Increasing police officers' knowledge and

using stalking-related legislation, powers and protective orders (such as SPOs) was also recommended by the group. However, it was agreed by all that these recommendations would need to be implemented together, as part of a system-wide, holistic approach, for the police to achieve sufficient, positive change.

Methodology

In July 2023, the IOPC research team conducted an online focus group with representatives of five stalking victim support service providers. The organisations that the participants represented were a mix of local and national charities that provide support to victims of stalking. Participants for the focus group were identified through a request circulated to the National Stalking Consortium by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust on behalf of the IOPC.

Organisations from the consortium were invited to contact the IOPC directly to show their interest in participating. All organisations that expressed an interest in the focus group were invited to attend. One potential participant was unavailable at the time agreed for the focus group discussion.

A discussion guide was developed to guide the focus group. This covered the issues raised in the super-complaint, including:

- identification and misidentification of stalking by the police and the impact for victims where stalking was not identified
- police investigations into stalking, including cyber-stalking, and the quality of service received by victims
- police use of stalking protection orders (SPOs) and interim SPOs
- police response to breaches of protective orders
- overall service and protection of victims of stalking by the police

The focus group lasted two hours. It was recorded, transcribed and cross-referenced with notes taken during the session. Thematic analysis was conducted on the data by two members of the research team (one leading, one reviewing). They held further discussions as part of quality assurance to ensure the themes were valid.

Key themes

The views and evidence shared by the focus group participants have been analysed according to emerging key themes. The key themes from the focus group represent over-arching patterns or similarities emerging from the points and topics discussed by the participants. The key themes that were observed are:

- inconsistencies in the police response to stalking
- lack of understanding
- victim-blaming and negative attitudes towards stalking
- impact on victims
- police investigations and responses
- stalking protection orders
- police systems
- risks to victims
- training
- investment in change

Inconsistencies in the police response to stalking

The most common theme to arise from the focus group was inconsistencies in police actions and understanding of stalking. This crossed over with many other themes that emerged. Participants discussed inconsistencies in the quality of service received from police at all stages in the police response, which may also be made worse by inconsistencies in force processes.

Inconsistency in the overall police response

Each of the focus group participants highlighted inconsistencies in police responses. This ranged from inconsistent approaches by different police forces to inconsistencies between approaches taken by individual officers within the same force. Participants commented that no force responses to stalking were consistent in both the quality of service and the approach to responding to reports of stalking. Participants described that there appeared to be no national approach taken by forces towards stalking, which was challenging for national support services.

“...as a national charity, every police force will be doing things differently. There seems to be no consistency in in how they should be responded to.”

Participants explained that they had supported victims who had received very positive responses from some officers, while other victims had experienced poor responses from police. This included being told that what had happened to them was not a crime.

Participants all agreed that the most successful responses to stalking by the police were multi-agency responses involving close joint working with other bodies, such as stalking support services and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Participants particularly referred to the value where victims were able to receive support from the stalking advocacy services at an early stage. Involving specialist victim support services at an early stage meant that their support and expertise could be used by both the victim and police throughout the investigation.

The participants also made reference to multi-agency stalking intervention programme (MASIP) sites, including the Stalking Threat Assessment Centre in London, and other examples of the police working closely with Independent Stalking Advocacy Caseworkers (ISACs) as ‘best practice’ approaches to a multi-agency response to stalking. However, participants noted that specialist stalking advocacy services and multi-agency approaches are limited by geographical location and not available in all force areas. This further highlights the inconsistencies in forces’ approaches to responding to reports of stalking.

“Some of the best case examples we would have would be where a case has come into an area where there is a multi-agency response, the victim has been able to work with an advocate from day one to look at her home security and to negotiate with her employer about her routes to work and all of the things that she hadn’t thought of until an advocate, you know, told her that this might be an option for her. Then we’ve got the police in the same conversation, considering the stalking protection order at the earliest opportunity so we can get some intervention and mental health professionals saying “actually from what we’ve read here it sounds like maybe we need to get some intervention for this perpetrator” and then of course if we get it to a point where it’s progressed to a charge in a court case, we’ve got probation there writing a pre-sentencing report having been involved in all of these conversations. So all of our best examples really would be with that multi-agency response.”

“In the Stalking Threat Assessment Centre, for example, we have the police, probation, mental health services, the advocacy service and CPS sat in the same room so we can review every case as it comes in...”

Inconsistency in quality of the police response

Participants also highlighted inconsistencies with the quality of investigations. They noted that many of the victims they support do not have experiences of good quality or ‘best practice’ investigations. Areas where inconsistency in the quality of service was discussed included:

- The speed of investigations. Stalking investigations were generally seen as long and slow. Investigations were described as quicker where forces and officers were familiar with stalking and the related police processes.
- Differences between forces in quality and approach taken to risk assessment and the tools used to support risk assessments.

- Inconsistencies in the support given to victims. This was seen as reliant on individual officers and their awareness of support services, or their general attitude and approach to reports of stalking.

Lack of continuity in officer involvement in stalking cases

Inconsistencies in the service provided to victims was also linked to lack of continuity in the officers involved in investigating stalking cases, or officers holding specialist roles.

It was mentioned by participants that police officers appeared to move specialities every two or so years in some forces. This was seen to impact the continuity of the response to stalking in that force. Participants described officers moving into roles as stalking single points of contact (SPOCs), a go-to person for stalking-related matters within a force, or they moved into other specialist stalking roles and built knowledge around stalking and relationships with stalking support services. This was lost if the officer moved to a new position. The replacing officer then had to build this knowledge and relationships with other agencies. The support they provided could be hindered because of the time this takes.

Participants also raised concerns about the number of police officers involved in investigating a stalking crime, with cases being passed from one investigating officer to another. This can lead to victims repeatedly recounting their experiences, gaps or delays in the investigation, and inconsistencies in approach and advice between officers on the same case.

“Certainly one of the key issues for us is even if they begin an investigation there’s too many officers involved and they keep moving from one officer to another. And the impact on our clients is great because they’re having to repeat this story over and over and over again. And that leads to really, no consideration or even recognition of the impact on the victims.”

Inconsistent knowledge and understanding of stalking

Another area of inconsistency related to officers’ knowledge and understanding of stalking. Because officers’ understanding of stalking varied, police responses to reports of stalking were also inconsistent. This is explored further in the theme that follows.

Lack of understanding

Lack of understanding around stalking by the police was another prevalent theme. This theme intersects with other themes. For example, the lack of understanding of stalking was reported to lead to victims being misadvised by police officers and increasing the risks to victims' safety.

Lack of understanding and awareness

The focus group participants all reported that many officers lacked awareness of what constitutes stalking or how to deal with it. Participants described comments made by police that demonstrated misunderstanding. There was an appreciation that most officers want to do a good job. However, a consistent message was that officers who lacked understanding about stalking were more likely to only recognise stalking in cases where the behaviour was clearly high-risk or if the stalker was an ex-partner.

Participants spoke more positively about their experiences with officers who admitted gaps in their knowledge and showed a desire to learn more and work with stalking support services for the benefit of the victim and the investigation. However, focus group participants appeared frustrated at the lack of understanding displayed by some officers, including those that did not show initiative or 'professional curiosity' to improve their understanding. This was because they felt that lack of understanding meant that the victim's voice and the impact on the victim were not recognised.

Another point raised around lack of understanding was that some stalking SPOCs and stalking leads are given responsibilities without specific stalking training. It was suggested that even stalking specialists sometimes lacked understanding about the dynamics of stalking. Participants also raised concern that SPOCs did not become directly involved in stalking cases but passed them to other teams, such as safeguarding or vulnerability teams, with little ongoing involvement.

Complexities of stalking

The focus group participants all reported that they felt the complexities of stalking were not understood by officers. This included not recognising stalking perpetrators as stalkers, not recognising what behaviours (or pattern of behaviours) are considered stalking, and a lack of awareness of the legislation and powers police have in relation to stalking.

Response or frontline officers were specifically mentioned as not having sufficient understanding of stalking. Participants suggested that frontline officers were often incident-focused rather than victim-focused when attending reports of stalking. It was suggested they may not see the bigger picture of the stalking behaviour, such as any previously reported incidents. Stalking offenders were also described as harder to recognise as they may not have a criminal record or be known to the police.

“Stalking perpetrators often have absolutely no other criminal history. And I think that can be really difficult for officers to understand because we're talking about really serious crimes and the potential for really serious crimes where they are likely to not be known anywhere, may well be professionals, may well be great upstanding members of the community. And so in terms of kind of the perpetrators they deal with regularly, our stalking perpetrators can be very charming.”

Other challenges around the complexities of stalking focused on correctly identifying stalking. Participants discussed a range of circumstances where police sometimes failed to correctly identify stalking, including:

- Not recognising stalking by people living in proximity of victims, such as where the stalking is mis-identified as neighbour disputes.
- Not recognising behaviours that, on their own may not be an offence, but in the context of previous behaviour or as a pattern of behaviour would constitute stalking.
- Not recognising indirect stalking (such as through friends or family members).
- Not recognising breaches of protective orders, or repeated behaviour that comes close to breaching a protective order, as stalking.

One example involved an offender renting a property just outside of the area designated in restrictions imposed by a protection order. This could be a continuation of stalking even though the order was not breached. Participants reported officers not understanding or recognising how these behaviours could be stalking, or the impact on victims.

Cyber or online stalking was also suggested as an area where some police officers lack understanding. It was noted that this may be due to the particular complexity involved with cyber-stalking, where a number of different online applications or identities could be used. Participants also spoke about the lack of sufficient tools or support available for police to support victims when responding to reports of cyber-stalking.

"We conducted a research project a couple of years ago about the use of cyber elements of stalking and in 100% of our cases now there is some digital element. So whether that is basic things such as text messages or more complex hacking and tracking, every case will have something. Now we know that the technology exists that could assist officers, but most forces, you know, the officers on the ground responding don't have access to that."

When discussing the complexity of stalking, participants frequently related this back to challenges with understanding the legislation around stalking and, more specifically, the difference between stalking and harassment.

Stalking legislation

Participants unanimously agreed that there is a lack of understanding by the police around the difference between the less serious section 2A stalking offence and the more serious 4A offence and what was needed to prove each. There was a feeling that a lack of understanding of the two sections meant that proving the fear of violence and the impact on the victim was not considered early enough in the investigation, if at all.

Participants shared that officers not understanding what is required to prove a section 4A offence could mean that the necessary evidence was not collected. They explained that this had led to charges being dropped by the CPS as the impact on the victim was not sufficiently proven. Participants noted the significance of the correct offences and charges being looked at for offenders. They noted that if offenders that were not found guilty of the correct offences, they would not be managed through the process properly or receive the right support to prevent re-offending.

“Of course, we know that the impact has to be proven and the fear of violence has to be proven for a 4A. So that impact actually not being understood feeds into the fact that we're not getting charges.”

Participants also described a lack of understanding around the legislation relating to stalking protection orders (SPOs). This is explored further as part of the SPO theme.

Victims being misadvised by police

Participants also reported that a lack of understanding of stalking leads to officers giving bad advice to victims. Participants highlighted examples of victims being misadvised by police, with victims given poor advice that could compromise their safety. These examples included incorrect advice about what protection orders they could apply for (for example, a non-molestation order when this was not available as the stalker was not an ex-partner), and advice that victims should block stalkers or take themselves off social media when being cyber-stalked or harassed online.

Participants discussed their concerns that this type of advice can lead stalkers to escalate their behaviour in response to the victim taking action to avoid them. Similarly, it was raised that police officers who do not understand the stalking or related legislation may wrongly advise victims that the reported behaviour is not stalking. This can leave victims feeling that what they had experienced was not a crime or that it is up to them to protect themselves.

Victim-blaming and negative attitudes towards stalking

Another theme that emerged was that some police officers take a negative approach towards stalking cases and blame victims for not doing more to protect themselves, rather than investigate the behaviour reported. This led to victims and support services feeling like the victim had not been taken seriously or treated as a victim of crime.

Emphasis put back on victims

All participants spoke of instances where the emphasis was put on the victim to manage the stalking behaviour, rather than the police actively looking into the reported crime. Examples of victim-blaming included where officers questioned why victims had not performed life-altering actions to protect themselves, insinuating that the fault lies with the victim for not taking these actions. The focus group highlighted that this can lead to stalking offences being overlooked and risk not being managed by the police.

“There is almost an expectation that the victim should pick up their everything they own, leave their job, take their children out of school and just go somewhere else to keep themselves safe. Rather than seeking that SPO or giving bail conditions on many occasions.”

“Well, we've had victims being told, “you need to change your car. Why are you living in a ground floor flat? Why are you going out when it's dark?” [And] “why have you not changed your number? Why have you not come off social media? Why are you on that dating app?” So actually lots of emphasis being put on the victims.”

Reports not taken seriously

There were varying reports of the police not taking reports of stalking seriously. The participants shared examples where this appeared to stem from visibly negative attitudes by officers towards stalking victims. These included reports of officers rolling their eyes when victims reported the stalking, or giving the impression that they thought the victim was exaggerating if the stalker was not known to the police.

One example involved a victim who was considered high-risk by support services but not by police, despite reporting the stalking behaviour multiple times. The victim was then assaulted by their stalker and called the police. However, by the time the police responded the victim had fended the attacker off and was instead arrested herself as the offender. The focus group participant felt that the incident could potentially have been avoided had the stalking been taken seriously and advice from support services been taken earlier, as the victim could have been better protected.

“In terms of risk... We had a case where a young woman was being threatened to be stabbed via a message and then she woke up in the morning there was a knife in a property... that wasn't her knife. She reported it to the police. This happened on two separate occasions and on both occasions she was told by the officer, ‘what do you want me to do with that?’”

Police officers not recognising the victim

The focus group shared similar examples of the police not recognising the victim as a victim of stalking when reporting stalking behaviours. Participants explained that the perpetrators were given benefit of the doubt, rather than the matter being properly investigated.

In other cases, participants described officers not recognising the behaviours as stalking, especially if there was no domestic abuse element. Participants described these as examples of where the police failed to recognise behaviour as stalking or harassment, failing to hold the stalker to account for their behaviour or to give validity to the victim's experience. Another example was a victim being told that their stalker was “just a parent trying to see their child”. This example resonated with the rest of the participants.

Examples were also given of the police not recognising stalking when there was a mental health element to the reported stalking. Participants discussed a perceived hesitancy from the police about getting involved if the stalker was known or reported to have a mental health or behavioural issue, or not recognising stalking in these cases. Participants recognised that there may be reasons sometimes why the police respond in this way but were concerned that this failed to consider the impact on, or risk to, the victim. In an example shared in the focus group, a police officer dismissed the behaviours experienced by the victim because the stalker “would be in a home by the time he's 40”. This failed to take action to protect the victim in the meantime.

“The perpetrator might have a serious mental health issue or they might have a kind of condition that affects their behaviour. And then [the police] are kind of like ‘there's nothing we can really do because of that.’”

Police not taking action

Police not acting in response to reports of stalking was also shared as a concern by participants. In some of the instances discussed, there appeared to be conditions for the police to identify and respond to reports of stalking as stalking, such as the victim being followed, physical violence, or previous violence. The examples of requirements differed between participants. This may suggest inconsistencies between police forces and officers and a lack of understanding of stalking.

Participants describe this as leaving victims feeling like what they experienced was not a crime and that they were then without support from the police. This was shared as a reason why some victims sought out stalking support services themselves.

A further issue raised was that officers were unlikely to pursue an investigation into potential stalking behaviours if they felt it would not lead to a charging decision, leaving the victim at risk of further offending.

Negative attitude towards support services

Some of the focus group also experienced some police officers displaying a negative attitude towards their support services. Some participants felt like some police officers tried to ignore them where they could.

One example was given of the different experience they received when they contacted officers from a police email account compared with their charity account. The participant described that an account associated with the police was responded to quickly, while they were still awaiting a response to long-standing emails from their charity account. Other examples of negative attitudes towards support services included the police not taking advice or engaging in training, even when offered by the charities for free. This contrasted to examples of effective working between the police and support services where multi-agency working arrangements were in place.

Considering the impact on victims

It emerged throughout the focus group discussions that participants felt the police often do not consider the impact on victims or provide sufficient support to those reporting stalking to the police. This included the police not being aware of the consequences of their actions on the victim during their initial responses or during investigations.

Keeping victims updated

The focus group noted that victims should be kept updated during an investigation and felt safer for it. Being kept abreast of the situation, even if the investigation did not go the way they expected, allowed victims to better deal with or move past the incident. Participants described how regular updates can be supported where advocates and police work closely together.

Examples were shared that demonstrated how regular updates as part of a multi-agency approach helped victims feel safer. This included examples of where victims felt that a number of invested people were involved in prioritising their safety. Participants felt this was best practice for stalking investigations.

“The person was allocated an officer. And he was brilliant. He kept in weekly contact because the perpetrator was about to be released imminently. He initiated a multi-agency professionals meeting to ensure that everything was in place. Panic alarms and things... He promised he would see the perpetrator when he was released from prison, and he did. And the victim now is feeling much safer because of this ongoing contact with police and support services and just feels that they're listening to what she's saying.”

However, victims not being updated about investigations was a frequently reported issue in the focus group, and not all forces take multi-agency approaches.

Participants noted that when victims are not updated, they are often not sure whether anything is happening or being investigated, and the victim may feel their experience is being invalidated. The impact on victims continually chasing for updates was also raised, leaving the impression that the victim is required to drive the investigation.

One participant described how positive action might follow after chasing an update. This leaves the victim thinking an investigation is progressing. Yet nothing is done on the case by officers until the next update is pushed for by the victim, and so on.

This lack of updates by the police also extended to the support services and ISACs. Participants agreed that if advocates are also not updated, it makes it harder to safeguard the victim as the investigation progresses. Safeguarding victims is also made more difficult when officers do not disclose information to victims that they may feel they need to know to keep themselves safe. One example concerned a victim who was informed by the police that her cyber-stalker was a co-worker. The police refused to give the victim or support services the name of the stalker to prevent a “vigilante response”. The participant suggested that it was in the victim’s interests to know who the stalker was to safeguard the victim and enable them to protect themselves. They explained that this negatively impacted the victim’s wellbeing as they were going to work worried that they could be sat next to their stalker.

Failure to recognise the impact on victims

The focus group participants agreed that there was an issue with the police failing to recognise the impact of stalking. Participants also discussed officers’ lack of awareness about the impact of police actions, or inaction, on victims.

A key issue was the police not recognising that stalking is usually life-changing for the victim, regardless of whether the police deem the behaviour to be high-risk. Participants discussed how victims often try to protect themselves before reporting the behaviour to the police or seeking out support from stalking charities (or other services). There is impact even before the police are involved, which may be overlooked.

As discussed under previous themes, participants gave examples of victims being advised to lock down their social media accounts to just a few friends or altogether. This impacted their social lives.

“She had four friends on Facebook because actually she felt they were the only people she could trust.”

Participants also discussed the impact on victims who are stalked by individuals living nearby, who may then feel frightened to go places. One participant discussed the impact that stalking can have on a victim’s ability to maintain relationships. This is especially true for victims of long-term stalking, and where stalking affects their daily life or poses a risk to other people in the victim’s life, such as a partner.

Participants also noted that the stress of dealing with stalking and any ongoing investigation can have other impacts, including how victims communicate with the police. It may mean they are harder to contact, or become forgetful. This may not be considered by investigating or response officers.

An issue raised was in relation to response officers being incident-focused and not victim-focused. The impact on the victim and the history of connected previous incidents can be missed.

Participants described that one impact of this was victims often being made to repeat experiences to officers, reliving the incidents. This can be hard for victims, but is even more difficult for victims whose first language is not English. They may have the additional pressures of not being able to explain everything they want to about the incident or the impact.

Participants highlighted that when impact of stalking is not recognised or is minimised by officers, it can leave victims believing what they are experiencing is not a crime. This may make them feel more vulnerable, powerless or at risk.

“Even in the cases where risk is not high, the impact on the victim can be absolutely life changing and where those behaviours are what somebody might struggle to understand. For example, we have victims receiving money in their bank accounts, flowers, gifts. We had a victim that was having the ice scraped off her car for her every morning. And the response from the officer was, “Wow, that sounds great. I need a stalker”. I mean, the impact on that victim, knowing that wherever she parked her car, wherever she stayed, that ice would still be scraped off in the morning and they were still there, was absolutely destroying everything about her ability to feel that she could access the world. So I guess there’s in a relation to whether it being serious, we really need to think about, you know, the way it changes those victims’ lives as well as those ones where they actually there could be something really serious.”

Support for victims

The participants explained that even when the police find that an offence has not been committed or cannot be proved, validating the victim's experience and being open with victims about the reasons for decisions is a good example of support. Similarly, recognising that stalking victims are usually coming to the police from a place of trauma and treating them as such is important to make sure that police officers offer an empathetic response.

It was raised in the discussion that "fantastic" practice by officers is out there. Examples of this include where officers are open with victims and understand (or try to) the impact on victims in their communication and actions. Using support services to support victims and to help officers understand stalking generally or in the context of specific investigations was also praised as good practice. However, appropriate support from police sometimes comes later than it should.

"...if you actually break it down, we advocate within that system because the victim's voice is being lost."

Police investigations and responses

A strong theme was that there were often failings in the police response to stalking, although the focus group did discuss examples of positive policing practice. Failures in the police response had been experienced by all participants in their work supporting victims.

These issues centred around police officers failing to identify stalking or recognise stalking behaviours, and extended to poor practices and missed opportunities during investigations. Participants also referred to the police failing to recognise the role and value of stalking support services, as well as failing to use stalking support services, even when prompted.

Failure to recognise stalking

Failing to recognise stalking was one of the most reported issues by participants of the focus group. Previous themes have covered the perceived lack of understanding and negative attitudes about stalking which were reported to contribute to stalking offences not being recognised, and stalking behaviours being dismissed.

Participants also raised as an area of concern the misidentification of stalking as other offences. They noted that stalking was often misidentified as harassment, as well as other offences including malicious communications, neighbour disputes, assaults, and theft.

"[Offences are] getting misidentified, so we're getting a malicious comms, we're getting harassment... and they're not looking at what's behind that - they're just

looking at the initial, just the one incident that they're getting dealt with - but they're not looking behind that to see that there's a consistent and there's an ongoing issue that can then be escalated to a stalking offence rather than harassment."

A further concern was how repeat individual offences can add up to stalking when assessed collectively. Often police officers do not see the whole picture, or in some cases, even look for it. Participants described how wider information like previous behaviour or offences and baseline risk were not always considered by officers. Some participants felt that there was no early identification tool or process for stalking behaviours, and that risk assessment tools such as DASH would miss some stalking behaviours.

"So unless the victim is there ready to present to them their file of evidence that they've been gathering and/or their log that they've been keeping and the impact it's having, we often will see individual incidences dealt with based on what [the police] can see right in front of them without anybody joining the dots unless it warrants some further investigation. But somebody reporting something low level is not going to get that response further up for somebody to look at because 'there's nothing to see here'."

It was also discussed that sometimes stalking behaviours or offences are minimised or not looked at properly, which can lead to risks being missed. Particular examples included breaches of protection orders. Officers may be looking at breaches of orders individually and not recognising where multiple breaches are indicative of stalking behaviour and increased risk. Participants explained that treating breaches of orders as new offences of stalking instead of looking at them as individual breaches made the risk clearer to see.

Furthermore, it was expressed that charging offenders with breaches of an order rather than stalking excluded the offender from treatments that might help them cease their stalking behaviour, such as stalking intervention programmes.

"The perpetrator was actually in prison and he was stalking the victim whilst in prison and what he was doing was sending letters addressed to their child who was only 5-6 months old. But obviously when the victim received the letter she'd open them and the letter clearly was all for her, for the actual victim, the mother of the child. She reported this a number of times to police ... in fact there was a non-molestation order in place as well. So, they focused on the non-mol, but continued to say, "well it's not a breach of the non-mol because the letter's directed to the child, not you." ... of course, the stalking was continuing, but they weren't even thinking of that at that point."

Failure to work with stalking support services

The focus group felt that some police officers did not acknowledge or use stalking support services as often as they should. All participants mentioned the high number of stalking cases police forces report dealing with, while only a very small

comparable number actually get referred to the support services. There was a feeling that there were definitely more stalking cases than they see in a professional capacity each year, and concerns that victims in these cases were not receiving support.

“Considering we’re national we get one or two referrals a year... and they’re saying to us “we’re getting 3000 reports of stalking” – so who’s supporting those victims?”

One reason suggested for this was that some forces or officers are not aware of stalking support services or do not recognise the support they can provide to both the victim and the police. Another reason proposed for not receiving referrals was that some cases are simply not identified as stalking cases or are not recognised as this until later in the investigation. Some participants suggested that the police undervalued support services. They gave examples of having to ‘chase’ officers for updates, emails from the services not being seen as a priority, and officers not following through on what they were telling support services. For example, saying they will do certain actions they then do not or cannot do. This risked developing mistrust.

Poor investigative practices

There was a unanimous view in the focus group that the initial gathering of evidence by police officers in stalking cases is generally poor. Participants explained that victims are often expected to gather evidence themselves. They shared examples of helping victims gather evidence before it is asked for by the police so that it is not missed or requested by officers too late. One support service created a tool to help victims collect evidence to manage this problem. Situations were also described where victims have offered the police evidence they had collected or evidence on electronic devices and it had not been taken. When this evidence is asked for later by the police, the sources of evidence may no longer be available (for example, the victim no longer has the phone, or it is too late to retrieve CCTV footage).

The group also discussed the importance of gathering evidence on the impact on victims so that the police can prove an offence under section 4A. It was agreed that it can be particularly difficult to collect evidence of the impact on the victim that occurred before they contacted the police or a support service. Numerous situations were mentioned where the police had waited for a charge before collecting any evidence about impact, and subsequently they missed evidence. They explained that this led to cases not being charged as section 4A because there was insufficient evidence of the impact of stalking to prove the offence adequately.

Some participants also shared that they had seen, from cases with tragic outcomes and near misses, that early indicators of risk were present. However, they felt that police forces were not showing that they had learnt from these cases in future investigations.

For example, there was a mutual concern about police officers not delving deeper into behaviours and taking them at face value. This meant they were missing clear patterns of behaviours. There were reports of officers not being aware that they were looking at repeated breaches relating to the same case. This illustrated a lack of a joined-up approach. This could be related to a concern raised by one participant that police forces were not always allocating stalking cases to an appropriate officer to investigate.

“We are doing the job for the police at times because we have to say “you have to take this seriously. This is high risk ... don’t just see the picture that’s stood in front of you. You need to look. You need to delve deeper into the to the behaviours of what’s going on.”

Participants also raised concerns about investigators not collecting evidence of impact to prove the more serious section 4A stalking offence, even where this evidence was available. A further concern was raised around police not investigating breaches of protective orders in the context of stalking. This included victims with SPOs being told by officers that they do not exist and police not monitoring protective orders.

“There’s a lot of misunderstanding from the police about what [SPOs] are. We’ve had victims with SPOs in place being told when they’ve reported breaches there’s no such thing as a stalking protection order.”

Issues around charging were also discussed by the focus group. There were concerns that stalking was mischarged as other crimes or as a less serious section 2A offence when a charge for the more serious section 4A stalking would be appropriate.

Charging decisions are the responsibility of the CPS. However, mischarging was seen to result from mistakes in investigations or from not seeing the context of the behaviour in the bigger picture. Participants raised concerns that offenders not being charged with stalking meant that they may still be a risk to the victim and would not be eligible for help for their stalking behaviour. It was also highlighted that words of advice was a common outcome, rather than charging the perpetrator. This was discussed as ineffective.

“They were actually looking at a breach initially because there was a non-mol in place. When the evidence went to the CPS, the CPS [decided on ‘no further action’]. When we [challenged the decision through] a ‘right to review’, 999 calls had not been submitted. Client was recorded as drunk when they didn’t drink, and there was inconsistencies with the statement. CCTV wasn’t collected. There was no impact record in any of the statements... The client was completely, significantly failed. We advocated for an SPO that wasn’t considered. There was no feedback on why...”

Stalking Protection Orders

The focus group were positive about the benefits of Stalking Protection Orders which were seen as an effective tool to help protect victims while awaiting a prosecution. However, some issues with the implementation of SPOs were also raised, including awareness of these orders across policing and the processes involved with obtaining them.

Positive interventions

Participants all described SPOs as offering positive interventions in stalking cases. They were considered the best form of protective order in stalking cases by the focus group. The most frequently mentioned reason for this was the additional mechanisms available for managing offenders in SPOs compared to other protective orders. SPOs were deemed to be more thorough, allowing tailored positive requirements for offenders which protected victims and putting the onus on offenders to actively comply. There was agreement that, when monitored and applied effectively, SPOs can be more effective in helping perpetrators stop their behaviour due to the positive requirements that can be included.

“We know that when we have Stalking Protection Orders in place, actually they can stop the behaviour. We’ve got many examples of perpetrators who have ceased stalking once that order is in place because then the impact is on their life, because they can no longer go to the cinema in that area and all of the things that they might want to do. So they can be really effective when they’re in place.”

Another advantage to SPOs that was described was the ability to apply for interim or full orders to protect victims while an investigation was ongoing or while awaiting court dates. This gave victims more protection while the case and charges were resolved. The positive requirements contained in such orders also resulted in “better management” of the offender.

Participants also described a general benefit for victims where an SPO was in place. This included increased contact with the police, with more regular updates and designated people to speak to report breaches or concerns.

The focus group felt that SPOs could also help to support police investigations. They suggested that, in their experience, SPOs can help officers in their investigations as SPOs set limits on the perpetrator’s behaviour, making it easier for police to detect ongoing stalking. Participants also reported that when SPOs are monitored, they generally saw a prompt response by police to breaches. They described this as good for both the police and victims.

“The things that perpetrators are expected to do, which can include so many things that are very basic, such as, you know, providing the officer with access to their social media so they can clearly see that they have tracked and followed, or

providing them access to devices that mean that they can see that they've Googled her name 45 times already today. Very simple things that just help with policing and help make the job of the police officer much easier when trying to investigate further crime.”

The management of perpetrator behaviours was another area which was seen to work well with a multi-agency approach, particularly the protection this gave the victim.

Limitations in the effectiveness of SPOs

Participants also discussed a range of concerns which they saw as limiting the effectiveness of SPOs, despite strongly supporting the benefits. SPOs were considered to be effective, but only when they included robust conditions. One participant described SPOs with limited conditions as “pointless bits of paper”.

Participants experienced issues with how SPOs were considered by the courts. An example was given where a magistrates court would not approve an SPO in case the Crown Court pursued a restraining order following conviction. Participants also shared examples of SPO applications that took a long time to get to court and then were not approved, with magistrates saying that this was because there had not been an incident for three months. It was noted that this may have been due to other conditions on the offender, such as bail conditions, but that this should not prevent an SPO from being issued. The approach taken by the courts was also reported as filtering down to “battles between the CPS and police” over whether to pursue an SPO.

Another limitation agreed by the participants was the time taken to get an SPO. One support service discussed data they had gathered that suggested that, on average, it takes six months for an interim order, but it can take up to a year. The time taken was said to be longer when preparing for full orders.

It was agreed that this is largely time taken to gather the evidence needed to apply for an SPO. However, participants explained that delays also resulted from the decision-making around applying for SPOs, and in some cases, forces applying for full orders without considering interim orders to protect the victim in the meantime. A further possible reason for delays was too many handovers between officers involved on a case when applying for an SPO.

Participants stated that, in their experience, some forces had still not applied for any SPOs since their introduction. Participants also detailed the continued use and preference of alternative protective measures, when SPOs may be appropriate, as a limitation to SPOs being used effectively by forces. They raised concern that relying on different types of orders, such as non-molestation orders, could leave victims vulnerable and without sufficient protection.

It was noted that if the stalking perpetrator challenged a non-molestation order, this provided an opportunity to continue contact with the victim. The focus group also noted that there was not the same positive requirements and offender management available in other orders, such as non-molestation orders and restraining orders, compared with SPOs. Participants discussed forces recommending that victims apply for non-molestation orders instead of seeking SPOs. Participants saw this as inappropriate for stalking victims. They also referred to forces using harassment warnings in 2023 when they had been advised against this after the 2017 [Living in Fear report](#).

Police processes

Inefficiency in, or caused by, some police processes and systems was another area of concern discussed by the focus group. This related to issues caused by poor information sharing between different police IT systems, and gaps in officers' knowledge about investigating stalking police procedures.

Police systems

Focus group participants expressed frustration that, in their experience, police systems appear not to talk to each other. Instances were discussed where offences have been committed or orders have been breached but there has not been anything to help police 'marry up' these offences and behaviours on their systems to recognise stalking. This issue with police systems extended to how reports of stalking are recorded on systems, and more critically, how these systems and information can be accessed by other forces.

One example illustrated how reports of stalking incidents that have not yet been recognised as a crime by the police can impact a victim's safety as other forces are not able to see this information. If incidents were to occur in three different force areas and the victim lived in a fourth force area, from their experience, the police in the victim's force area would not know about the incidents in the other force areas. This is because they were not recorded as crimes and would not be recorded on a national database. The feeling was that stalking behaviours and breaches of orders could be missed because police systems were not able to talk to each other properly.

Police knowledge about internal procedures for investigating stalking

Concerns were also raised about some police officers' knowledge of policing procedures for investigating stalking. Participants recalled cases where officers had not known how to apply for protection orders such as SPOs or where to access forms and resources needed during the investigation. It was discussed that information that

may have helped officers was sometimes shared in ways that could be missed by officers, such as only sharing the information on the force intranet.

Participants also discussed problems with police procedures when a victim and their stalker resided in different force areas. One participant explained how, if a victim was to report stalking to their local force, but the stalker resided in another force, the local force would have limited options to protect the victim. They would not be able to apply for a protection order as that would fall to the stalker's force.

"It's very difficult when we have cases where perpetrators and victims live in different areas. The area that the perpetrator lives in is the area responsible for managing that perpetrator and they're the only area that could seek a Stalking Protection Order. But the victim might live 100 miles away and she'll be reporting her crimes to the area that she lives in. But the [force] area she lives in don't have the power to seek an order in relation to the perpetrator, which makes no sense. It's often down to the ISAC to be trying to encourage those conversations. And ... let's say we haven't got to the point of [recording a] crime... [the local force area] have no idea what we're talking about, have no access to [the previous] instances that have been reported elsewhere because they're not a crime."

Risks to the victim

A recurring theme throughout the focus group discussion concerned issues with police identification and assessment of risk in stalking cases. Participants suggested that the risk to the victim was increased when not properly managed. This was seen as because of police officers' lack of understanding of stalking and poor risk assessment – two areas which impact one another.

Understanding risks

One prevalent theme of the focus group was that some police officers do not understand the risks associated with stalking and the nuances of stalking behaviours. Participants experienced a lack of priority by the police in acting and responding to reports of stalking, usually until "something quite big happens". There was a feeling that police officers do not recognise when stalking presents a high-risk to a victim unless the risk is obvious. It was mentioned that the police often do not understand how far a stalker will go to contact a victim.

"We've got obsession and fixation, we've got a really concerning individual that will escalate and go to great lengths as well to have contact with the victim."

"It's about the priority because they don't understand it is so different. We're talking about really high-risk offending behaviour which can lead to very tragic circumstances and it's very different to investigate than other types of crime that police have to go out to."

Participants also spoke about risks associated with incorrect advice offered to victims, which could put them at risk of further harm. For example, they explained that blocking a stalker on social media or changing phone numbers could cause the stalker to escalate their behaviour to try and contact the victim. However, participants discussed that this type of advice was given to victims by the police.

It was also shared that even where the police acknowledge the risk to the victim, officers do not always take action to investigate properly or to consider the appropriate offence the stalker could be charged with.

Participants also spoke about concerns with the police understanding and response to risk where the stalking perpetrator was suffering from mental health issues. Participants shared experiences where police officers had downplayed stalking behaviours because the stalker was perceived as 'harmless' due to their mental health status. They suggested that police officers also did not recognise risks associated with mental health issue(s), and did not assess the impact of the behaviours on the victim.

Risk assessment

It was felt that the lack of understanding around stalking contributed to the police not properly assessing the risk to victims. Participants suggested that police officers focus narrowly on what is happening at the time an incident is reported, and do not properly consider the baseline risk of behaviours when risk assessing reports of stalking.

They also noted that the risks indicated by individual stalking behaviours are not always obviously high-risk, but were still high-risk within the context of stalking. The focus group shared that they felt the police do not always agree with the experience of support services in recognising high-risk behaviour. Participants gave examples of instances where they felt the police did not appreciate that the actions or behaviours of offenders indicated a high level of risk, particularly if they were not previously known to the police.

One issue that was agreed on by all participants was that there is no formal risk assessment tool specifically for stalking used by the police.

"We're working with a victim currently who was kidnapped by her stalker and abused over a long period of time. But prior to that she had reported to the police on multiple different occasions low-level stalking that hadn't been risk assessed using any tool that we would recommend. And that nobody had really thought it would escalate to the point that it did."

It was largely felt that Domestic Abuse, Stalking, Harassment and Honour Based Violence Assessments (DASH) and the S-DASH tools used for risk assessment were domestic abuse-led and were not fit for purpose for stalking. However, one participant stated that officers working in their multi-agency setting were trained in

using SASH as a requirement (alongside stalking risk profile training), a tool which most participants agreed they use in their multi-agency settings.

Training

The training that police officers receive regarding stalking was agreed to be inadequate by the focus group in their collective experiences. There were also concerns that the police did not treat stalking training as a priority.

Issues with existing initial training

All participants agreed that the initial training police officers received about stalking was insufficient. They noted that some officers had described stalking training as a small part within a two-hour domestic abuse input in core training. Participants were concerned that minimal training on stalking missed the nuances and complexities of stalking and its related legislation.

Participants explained that they had regularly been told by officers that they had not been trained on stalking investigations or aspects of stalking, and were not aware of resources and options that were available or how to access them. This extended to stalking SPOCs, who had sometimes been allocated the role without specific training on stalking. Members of the focus group also mentioned that clearer guidance on stalking investigations for police officers might help to improve outcomes.

Accessing training

Participants were positive about police officers wanting to learn more about stalking for their investigations and being open with support services about their lack of experience with stalking cases. It was also positively received when officers sought advice and assistance from specialist support services where they knew this support was available for their investigations.

It was discussed that not all forces buy in to or seek the training offered by stalking support services. The training that is delivered does not catch all officers or police staff that the focus group felt it needed to. Participants felt that the right people are not always trained to recognise stalking behaviours, such as call handlers and control room staff.

Participants were also concerned that training was not being delivered properly. This included issues such as training being delivered through the intranet, emails, or in briefings, and officers being asked to use risk assessment tools without being trained on their use.

Investment in change

The focus group felt that there had been a positive change by police forces in the ten years since stalking was made a specific offence. They acknowledged that police forces had tried to make improvements in relation to stalking. This was evident in some forces seeking specific stalking training, the increase in referrals to stalking support services (though still a small proportion of stalking cases) and the introduction of specialist stalking teams and stalking SPOCs across some forces. While some SPOCs were put in position without stalking training, it was discussed that the newer SPOCs appeared to be investing more into understanding stalking and their role. This was positively received by the group.

The introduction of multi-agency stalking intervention programme (MASIP) sites and other early intervention programmes was discussed as a further indicator of positive investment in change. The MASIP sites were seen as facilitators of good multi-agency responses, which were highly valued as the best approaches to stalking cases by the participants.

“There have definitely been some changes. Some of that is very positive... we will always praise that good work, we always actively try and ask officers who have done a brilliant job to share that with their colleagues and we'll use them [as good examples] - because we're so excited normally that someone does a good job that we want for that to be replicated... across the board.”

Recommendations by the focus group

The participants of the focus group were asked about any suggestions or recommendations they would make to improve the police response to stalking. Participants also discussed potential solutions, or areas that need addressing throughout the discussion of other topics.

Suggestions for best practice in investigations

Focus group participants recommended that the police should start all stalking investigations with the assumption that the case is section 4A stalking. They suggested that this would mean that opportunities to gather the best evidence are not missed, especially evidence of the impact on the victim.

The group also made suggestions about possible legislative change, questioning the need for a separate section 2A offence. It was argued that possibly all victims of stalking experience fear of violence or serious alarm and distress as required in section 4A. It was suggested that removing this distinction would also remove confusion for officers and enable them to gather the evidence required for a section 4A charge earlier.

Participants also suggested that it should be mandated for cases involving stalking to require expert input, through multi-agency working. This would help ensure that officers have support during stalking investigations to raise the quality of these investigations.

The focus group also emphasised that officers must be open to considering the bigger picture and look at all of the evidence when stalking is reported. This was discussed as particularly important given that individual incidents may not be considered a crime, but in the wider context would demonstrate stalking behaviour.

Another recommendation was for the police to use multi-agency approaches during stalking investigations, specifically working with stalking support services to utilise their specialist knowledge. Participants were clear that the police should work in partnership with advocacy agencies to make sure the victim's voice is not lost and the impact on them is recognised. Similarly, it was discussed that stalking SPOCs could be used better and forces should make sure that they were fully trained on stalking to assist investigations.

Victim-focused approaches that considered the impact on victims were discussed as another feature of 'best practice' in investigations. This would involve acknowledging that the victim is likely to have experienced the stalking for a considerable time before reporting it to the police, including that they will often have already tried to take action to protect themselves.

Participants also emphasised the importance of continuity in the officers involved in a case. They suggested that minimising the hand-over of cases would alleviate the impact on the victim having to repeat their experiences to multiple officers. It would also help with consistency where an officer already knows the victim's background and what has happened. Prioritisation was also mentioned as an area the police could improve in stalking investigations recognising the risk to the victim.

The focus group unanimously recommended that police use SPOs in stalking cases. This was due to the positive requirements and the specific conditions that can be added, noting that some offenders ceased their stalking behaviour as a result of the orders. Other protection orders, such as non-molestation orders, were less supported as they lacked the same protection.

Participants also suggested that SPOs should include specific and robust conditions. They also suggested that forces should have officers and staff who know how to complete applications for SPOs, as well as officers to manage offenders with SPOs. The experiences shared by participants would suggest that the police should use interim orders more to better protect the victim while an application for a longer-term full SPO is put together.

Participants suggested that police processes, forms and tools relating to stalking investigations should be clear and easily accessible for investigating officers. Officers moving positions was mentioned often as an issue by participants. It follows that

ensuring continuity in officers with stalking experience within forces would help to address this issue.

Risk assessment tools

The creation and use of a stalking-specific risk assessment tool was strongly recommended by participants to improve risk assessment by the police and to support officers to recognise stalking more easily. Sufficient training on any new tool and existing risk assessment tools was also mentioned.

One suggestion for improving risk management was to improve access to cyber tools and digital evidence support for officers when responding to a report of potential stalking. This could lead to early recognition of stalking and evidence gathering.

Other suggestions to improve stalking identification and risk assessment related to improving police systems. Specifically, the focus group recommended that police systems should allow the police to more easily track stalking or incidents that amount to stalking across forces. This was described as particularly important where individual incidents did not amount to crimes, but the behaviours collectively demonstrated stalking or escalated risk. This was especially true when these behaviours took place across force areas. Tracking this information could help illustrate the risk and impact on the victim.

A further recommendation was to create a system for managing SPOs so that the police could more efficiently manage offenders subject to SPOs. Participants suggested that an effective management system could also aid police in detecting and managing breaches across force areas.

Training

Another area of recommendations that participants discussed in detail was police training around stalking. They advised that current police training around stalking was insufficient and suggested that further work was required to make sure that training was thorough and prioritised. They also recommended the introduction of an accredited training package for the police, specifically around stalking. This would ideally cover identifying and investigating stalking, understanding the complexities of stalking, as well as the different protection orders available, breaches of orders, and providing advice to victims. It was discussed that training should also be updated regularly with refresher training.

All participants agreed that training should include all control room staff as well as police officers. This would assist call handlers to be able to recognise where there may be a possible stalking crime.

Different levels of training were discussed. Senior officers and call handlers were mentioned as roles that could receive further training than that currently offered.

Stalking SPOCs and specialist stalking officers were also recommended to have detailed stalking training. It was recommended that training should be delivered by the appropriate people, involving stalking experts and advocates. It was also suggested that there should be a clear national decision about what stalking training is required, to help ensure consistency on content and to make sure training is kept up-to-date.

Participants advised that specific guidance on stalking should be made more easily available for police officers handling stalking cases and protection orders. It was suggested that further guidance could be helpful in areas such as understanding subtle stalking behaviours, best practice in investigations, and advice on which orders to apply for and how to apply for them. A specific recommendation was made for improved guidance on responding to breaches of orders. Another suggestion was for statutory guidance to be introduced about multi-agency working and when to involve other professionals in stalking cases.

System-wide change

Participants suggested a wide range of specific recommendations and areas for improvement. Yet the key point, agreed by participants, was that a system-wide, holistic approach to improvements was required.

“We talked about tools, we've talked about impact, we talked about training, we've talked about investigations. None of these things are going to solve the problem on their own. They need to all work together so you can have all the tools in the box... If you haven't got the staff expertise to complete [protection orders] and understand them, they're a useless piece of paper. You need to have the training, you need to have the tools, you need to have the multi-agency working. You need all of the things together to be able to make a good investigation and hopefully a good outcome.”

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