



Evaluation of Rape Survivors’ Experience of the Police & other Criminal Justice Agencies

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Summary of key findings

Introduction

This section is a summary of the key findings from the depth interviews with rape survivors. Readers are encouraged to consult the accompanying full report for a comprehensive account of the views expressed.

Pre-reporting views and perceptions

Survivors' motivations for reporting to the police included: a desire to protect potential future victims and for closure and justice; wanting incidents to be officially recorded; being empowered and supported to do so by individuals/organisations to whom they had disclosed the incident(s); and simply feeling it was "the right thing to do".

In terms of expectations of what reporting would achieve, some had not thought past making a statement, whereas others anticipated a timely arrest, charge, court case and eventual conviction. Several participants said that although they did not necessarily expect their case to be progressed, they thought they would be believed, supported and treated with kindness.

Despite ultimately making the decision to involve the police, nearly everyone had initial reservations about doing so. Survivors' main concerns were around:

- Worries about confidentiality - and a fear of negative reactions from others, such as blame and stigmatisation;
- The legal system and a fear of not being believed or taken seriously (survivors spoke of low conviction rates, witnessing or hearing about other rape survivors' experiences of the Criminal Justice System (CJS), and their own adverse past experiences);
- Having "left it too late" to report, as there was no longer any physical evidence;
- Not having the mental strength for a long and stressful criminal justice process;
- Not viewing the incident(s) as rape (a particular issue for those who were assaulted by someone they knew, and/or had participated in consensual sexual activity with the suspect at the time of the incident); and
- Fear of reprisals from the suspect – and the potential consequences for the suspect insofar as not wanting to be responsible for "ruining their life."

Experiences of making the initial report

Most participants were satisfied with how quickly they were able to officially report the incident(s) once they had decided to disclose to the police. However, a minority felt the process took far too long, ranging from days to weeks without good cause. A few others felt “rushed” into it and would ideally have liked more time to prepare.

In terms of survivors’ experiences of reporting, a number described the officer(s) they spoke to as kind, empathetic and respectful – which in turn made them feel believed and empowered. Other factors that made a positive difference to survivors’ experiences of reporting included: an initial meeting with the police to discuss the ‘official’ process; and having the choice of doing so to a female officer.

However, many survivors described negative interactions with the police during this stage of the process. The main issue was the officer(s) attitude, which was considered judgemental, disbelieving, “robotic” and lacking empathy. This resulted in survivors not only feeling unsupported and uncared for, but also re-victimised.

Another communication issue was raised by a non-binary participant: the officers they initially dealt with were apparently confused about some of the language the survivor used when describing the incident, and also misgendered them by failing to use their preferred pronouns. Inexperience was blamed and the participant acknowledged that the officers did not intend to upset or offend, but nonetheless it did impact on their perceptions of the police as well as their mental health.

Regarding additional support and safeguarding around the time of the initial reporting, the majority of survivors were allocated Specially Trained Officers (STOs) who, on the whole, were described as helpful, sensitive and supportive.

Around half of participants were signposted or referred to external support (such as a Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC), Rape Crisis and other specialist organisations, and services offering practical help) soon after making their initial report. Other safeguarding measures offered at this stage included: witness protection; non-molestation orders; and personal alarms.

The remaining half of participants received no safeguarding support or referrals to external support at the reporting stage, unless they decided to arrange it/them themselves. This typically heightened their feelings of isolation and vulnerability.

Providing a statement

Positive feedback around giving a statement mainly related to the information provided prior to survivors giving their statements, which was communicated clearly and sensitively. They found it particularly helpful to understand: the importance of the video-recorded statement (whilst also being given the choice to provide a written statement if they preferred); what would happen during the statement and the impact it could potentially have on them; and how the statement would be used.

However, several participants said that, in hindsight, they were ill-prepared for the length of time the statement would take, and about the types of questions they would be asked. Moreover, there were accounts of disorganisation around arranging statements, resulting in appointments being cancelled at short notice or constantly

rescheduled – whereas others felt pressured into making their statement immediately after their initial report, which they felt had adversely affected its quality.

Several survivors felt they were treated well when giving their statements. The officer(s) taking them were praised for being kind, asking questions in a sensitive way and offering regular breaks, whilst also making survivors feel believed and credible. The provision of additional support was also important, such as having an Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA), STO, or other specialist present for the statement.

In contrast, several survivors felt that certain lines of questioning were unnecessary, inappropriate and made them feel uncomfortable – an issue often exacerbated by the attitude of the officer(s) conducting the interview, who were described by some as judgemental, dismissive and cold.

Evidence collection and investigation

Participants were anxious about the collection of personal items (such as their mobile phones and clothing), medical records and forensic test results. However, they were more likely to be put at ease if the police reassured them in a clear, kind and supportive manner about why the items/information were required, what would be examined and how any evidence would be used.

Most experienced at least some issues during the evidence collection process. These included: not receiving an adequate explanation as to why certain information and items were required; the invasive and “unnecessary” need to access all of survivors’ medical records and mobile phone data – even that unrelated to the incident; mobile phones being kept for long periods of time; and feeling as though certain records and specific tests were being accessed or undertaken because the police disbelieved survivors’ version of events.

There was widespread dissatisfaction with how investigations were handled, primarily due to a perception that the police did not proactively investigate and failed to collect enough evidence. Some participants also suggested that they were treated unfairly or unfavourably compared to the suspect during the investigation.

Communication and timeliness throughout reporting and investigation

Many survivors were dissatisfied with the amount, type, and timeliness of the communication they received from the police during the reporting and investigation stage of their case. Some said they received very little or no communication, whereas for others it was irregular, inaccurate and dwindled over the course of the investigation.

Other reported shortcomings around communication related to: contact during antisocial hours; being refused face-to-face meetings; not having one consistent main contact; and a lack of discussion around communication preferences. There were also accounts of the police failing to provide detailed information about the CJS process.

Some survivors, though, were more positive about communication, especially valuing: frequent, relevant and accessible communication; having a responsive single point of contact; being asked about their communication preferences; and having CJS processes well explained.

Although a few survivors felt that the reporting and investigation stage was too quick, most said the process took too long and put their lives “on hold” for no good reason. Both scenarios impacted negatively on survivors, who were often not told or misinformed about the length of the process, whilst also being denied adequate explanations and support around the unexpectedly short or lengthy timeframes.

Three survivors withdrew from their cases, two because they did not feel supported enough by the police. The other decided not to proceed for several reasons, including: their belief that the suspect was unlikely to be convicted; not wishing to disclose the incident to friends and family; and a fear of suspect reprisal. All three said that they could have been encouraged to continue had they felt more supported, including by being referred to external support services and allocated an ISVA, and receiving more reassurance, information, empathy and kindness from the police.

Suspect identification, arrest, charging and bail

Arrests tended to be made quickly, which initially offered survivors a sense of security and hope that justice would prevail. However, the charging decision was criticised for taking too long – and frustration around these delays were exacerbated by the CPS’ apparent reluctance to communicate with the police and survivors about when a decision may be reached, and why it was taking so long.

Moreover, nearly all suspects who were arrested were initially released pending further investigation or on bail, mostly without any or inadequate safeguarding in place for the survivor. Moreover, there were reports of suspects continually breaking bail and release conditions without being reprimanded.

Experiences of court

In terms of participants’ experiences of the court process, three cases were scheduled to go to court but none of the survivors felt they were provided with adequate communication, information and support to prepare for the experience. The main issues were around: Witness Care Units (WCUs) failing to sufficiently advise and support survivors; not having a pre-trial visit and meeting with key personnel; not being offered adequate legal advice; and not being given important information about the details of the court case (dates and times etc.)

Only one survivor’s case eventually went to court. Other than having the option of giving evidence from behind a screen, they were not offered any other special measures or helpful advice around being on the stand and answering questions. Moreover, English was not the individual’s first language and they found it difficult to understand and follow what was happening – with no-one asking if they needed further support to do so. Importantly, the survivor believed that these factors impacted on how they came across in court, which in turn played a key part in the not-guilty verdict.

Views and experience of case outcomes

Most cases included in this evaluation received a No Further Action (NFA) outcome due to insufficient evidence, an outcome the majority disagreed with and one that resulted in them feeling let down, angry, upset, and that their time had been wasted.

In some cases, outcomes were communicated poorly. The main issues identified were around: inadequate explanations of the NFA; survivors only finding out about outcomes when contacting the police/CPS for an update; decisions being communicated via text, email or voicemail without any prewarning or the option for a face-to-face conversation; updates being delivered without sensitivity and empathy; and an overall lack of support for survivors when being informed of outcomes.

In other cases, the police explained the decision fully, informed survivors of it face-to-face, were kind and sympathetic, and offered follow-up communication and support. Despite being disappointed in the outcome itself, participants explained that feeling respected, cared about and understanding the reasons for it was imperative.

Most survivors did not have the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme explained to them unless they specifically enquired or were informed about it by an external support organisation. Several who were aware of the scheme were ultimately discouraged from pursuing it by the police, while a few others simply could not face another process that they felt would result in further disappointment.

Post-case support from criminal justice agencies

Post-case support from the police and other CJS agencies tended to be poor: most participants heard little, if anything, from them once their case was closed. Ideally, participants would have appreciated: follow-up phone calls or face-to-face meetings following the end of their case; the offer of support referrals; and important practical information about the Victims' Right to Review and other schemes.

Indeed, in support of these suggestions, the minority who did receive good post-case support said that their main police contact proactively offered regular follow-up contact without a time limit and signposted them to relevant support services.

Experiences of support services

Everyone had received at least some support from organisations outside the CJS – counselling and psychotherapy, peer support, advocacy and practical advice, and educational courses for example. Survivors' experiences of the support they had received were mixed.

The main elements and enablers behind the provision of good support included: responsiveness; the timely allocation of an ISVA; the provision of holistic, person-centred support that focused on overall wellbeing; being able to share experiences in a safe, non-judgemental space; feeling heard and validated; knowledgeable, well-trained, kind and friendly practitioners; and the provision of open-ended support.

However, a reasonable number of survivors were unimpressed with certain aspects of the support they received. For example, a minority had not been offered an ISVA –

and several noted access issues such as long waiting lists, insufficiently long and not enough sessions, inflexible and inaccessible meetings, and support not being available in certain areas due to lack of funding. Other issues were around: the “disinterested” and “unrealistic” attitude and approach of some practitioners; and support not being sufficiently specialised.

The main suggestions around improving support services centred around: increasing funding and resourcing; offering every rape survivor an ISVA; providing individualised, tailored support; and ensuring better training for staff, or only assigning highly experienced personnel to high-risk cases.

Overall views

Overall, many of the survivors who felt they had been poorly treated reiterated their earlier criticisms of the police and CPS – particularly around: insensitive attitudes; disorganisation and mishandling of their cases; not taking them seriously or being insufficiently proactive; taking too long to investigate and reach an outcome; failing to adequately safeguard or support; and victim-blaming. Moreover, those with protected characteristics based on their ethnicity, disability, sexuality, and gender identity said there were specific times at which they had felt unfairly treated as a result.

Feeling doubted, held responsible, and not being taken seriously or supported led the majority of participants to conclude that their perceptions of and confidence in the CJS – especially the police - had worsened as a result of their experiences. Indeed, in many cases, survivors regretted reporting in the first place, whilst also expressing reluctance to do so again or encourage any other survivors to do so.

However, the minority who felt they were treated well said that the care, sensitivity and “human” approach they had experienced had reassured them – and that they would feel more comfortable reporting any future incidents as a result.

Finally, survivors discussed the main factors that would have made a real difference in improving their experiences of the CJS and support services. These included:

- More support and empowerment to encourage people to report rape(s);
- Better organisation and proactivity around the reporting and investigation process, which could lead to more positive case outcomes;
- Ensuring that the whole process is quicker, with fewer unnecessary delays;
- More transparency about the process in terms of likely timeliness and barriers to achieving a conviction - without being defeatist or unnecessarily negative;
- More regular, detailed contact and communication throughout the case;
- More empathetic, compassionate, non-judgemental and ‘human’ approaches;
- The provision of more STOs who better understand the trauma caused by rape and sexual violence;
- Improved safeguarding and more support referrals;
- Better LGBT awareness and understanding;
- Better explanations around case outcomes and possible next steps, such as the Victims’ Right to Review scheme; and

- Reducing the alleged bias and partiality which results in victim-blaming in favour of more victim-centred approaches.

Ultimately though, it was felt that while small improvements can be made through better training, it is the way the CJS is designed that needs to change to ensure survivors feel believed, listened to, validated, and assured of their privacy and safety.

Conclusions

Survivors are seemingly receiving inconsistent responses to reports of rape, often depending on the individuals assigned to their cases – and so a more consistent approach that ensures all officers display the behaviours that contribute to positive victim experiences is required. Related to this, those who were allocated a STO were generally very positive about the sensitive and supportive way they had dealt with them and their case. It would thus be beneficial to allocate STOs to rape cases at the earliest possible opportunity.

Good communication, especially between survivors and the police, is key to ensuring the former have as positive an experience as possible of reporting a rape, any subsequent investigation and beyond. It is also crucial in fostering good relationships, which are undoubtedly aided by the provision of a single main point of contact for survivors.

Of particular importance is proactive, timely, and sensitively conveyed communication around: the CJS process; realistic potential timeframes; investigation progress; why certain items/information such as mobile phones and medical records are required and what any evidence collected will be used for; charging decisions; and case outcomes.

Communication with survivors with protected characteristics was problematic in some cases. This was not thought to be a result of malicious intent, but rather a lack of training and in some cases experience in dealing with survivors from a range of backgrounds.

The issue of safeguarding is evidently important, but offers of protective measures are often “inadequate” or even non-existent. Where survivors were satisfied with this aspect of the process, they described how the police had made them feel safe by arranging protective orders and ensuring the suspect was unable to come within a certain distance or attempt to make contact them – suggesting a need for consideration of such measures in all cases.

Positive interactions with support services are essential in enabling survivors to cope with and recover from their experiences. As such, it is essential that they receive a referral to an appropriate organisation as soon as possible. Of particular value is the wrap-around ISVA service, timely referrals to which wherever possible would be of great benefit.

The appropriateness of the support offered is important to consider, and knowledge of local, regional and national support services that cater for different demographics is important – as is the willingness to search for and signpost survivors toward this information if necessary.

More widely, there were reports of some generic barriers to accessing appropriate support, most notably that a “postcode lottery” exists in terms of availability and time limited versus open-ended provision. There were also some reports of rape survivors being directed toward more generic victim support provision rather than toward the specialist services equipped to deal with the unique impacts of sexual violence, which again illustrates the importance of knowing what crime-specific support is available.

The repercussions of statutory agencies not supporting survivors sufficiently during the criminal justice process are significant. Perceptions of poor experience not only affect survivors’ mental health, decrease their satisfaction with said agencies and increase the likelihood of them withdrawing from their cases, they also reduce the likelihood of survivors reporting future incidents and encouraging others to do so.

Finally, several victims said they had been struck by what they considered to be an imbalance in favour of suspects within the CJS. Indeed, there was a perception that the System does not have victims at its heart, and that all too often rape survivors in particular do not feel believed, listened to, and validated. This, coupled with the widespread knowledge of low conviction rates in rape cases, is a significant deterrent to reporting that must be addressed if more of those who suffer serious sexual violence are to receive justice in future.

Introduction

Background and commission

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspects police forces and fire and rescue services to promote improvements and make everyone safer.

In Spring 2020, HMICFRS commissioned Opinion Research Services (ORS) to undertake an independent evaluation of: the experiences of adult rape survivors who reported an incident (or incidents) of rape to the police; their subsequent journey through the criminal justice system (CJS); and their views on any support services they had accessed during that journey.

Specifically, the main aims of the evaluation were to explore survivors':

- Motivations for reporting an incident (or incidents) to the police;
- Experiences of the police response and the reporting process;
- Experiences of the rest of the criminal justice system (where applicable); and
- Experiences of witness care units, sexual assault referral centres (SARCs) and/or other support services (where applicable).

The findings from the evaluation will contribute to HMICFRS' inspection of the police and other criminal justice agencies' response to rape and will also build on recently published [reports by HMCPsI](#) and the [London Rape Review](#).

Methodology

Overview

The evaluation comprised 26 depth interviews (undertaken between October 2020 and January 2021) with adult rape survivors who self-identified as being a survivor of a rape. In all cases, the incident was reported to the police in England and Wales on or after 1st April 2017, while the investigation and any subsequent criminal prosecution or civil proceedings had been concluded at the time of participation.

Participants were identified and recruited via appropriate support service agencies, and were provided with an information sheet, privacy notice and consent form to complete and return either to the support agency or directly to ORS.

All participants were offered a £30 e-voucher as a small token of thanks for giving up their time and taking part, and to cover any expenses they incurred in doing so.

Most of the interviews lasted around 1.5 hours and were undertaken by ORS' experienced qualitative research team. Interviewees were assured of complete confidentiality and that they were free to be as open and as honest as they wished insofar as they would not be named in this report. Indeed, names, specific organisations and identifying comments have been removed from the verbatim comments that follow to ensure anonymity.

Support and safeguarding

ORS and HMICFRS were aware that taking part in an interview of this nature could potentially be retraumatising and/or triggering for participants. Therefore, to protect and support participants as much as possible, the following measures were put in place:

- A family member, friend or support worker was allowed to attend the interview in a supportive capacity, either to sit in or provide post-interview support (while being clear that they should not contribute unless explicitly asked to by the interviewee);
- Participants were offered regular breaks and continually reminded that they did not have to answer any questions they didn't feel comfortable with throughout the interview; and
- It was ensured that follow-up, post-interview support was arranged – either with the participant's support worker or in the form of contact details for relevant support organisations.

Impacts of Covid-19 on the methodology

The original proposal was to undertake 32 face-to-face interviews with a wider range of survivors. However, due to the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on both support service agencies and travel restrictions throughout the UK during the fieldwork period of the evaluation, this was not feasible. Instead, slightly fewer interviews were conducted, which were offered via telephone, Zoom, Skype or Microsoft Teams instead. 25 of the participants were willing to take part virtually, while the one face-to-face interview was undertaken following a full risk assessment, with both interviewer and participant following all health and safety government guidelines in place at the time.

It should also be noted that the pandemic directly impacted on some of the cases reported here, most notably in relation to delays, communications and the availability of pre-trial visits and support services. While these impacts inevitably had an adverse effect on survivors, they were generally recognised as being outside the control of the CJS.

Participant profile

ORS sought to recruit a broad cross-section of survivors from a range of police forces across England and Wales, while also meeting a range of demographic and specific case criteria. A breakdown of participant characteristics can be found below.

Police force area:

- Dorset: 5
- Hampshire: 5

- Hertfordshire: 1
- Lincolnshire: 1
- Metropolitan Police Service: 5
- Northumbria: 5
- Nottinghamshire: 2
- Sussex: 2

Gender identity:

- Female: 23
- Male: 2
- Non-binary: 1

Protected characteristics:

- BAME: 2
- Learning disability: 1
- LGBT: 4

Survivor/suspect relationship:

- Partner/ex-partner: 11
- Other known: 13
- Stranger: 2

Case outcome:

- No further action (NFA) without proceeding to trial – survivor supported action: 4
- NFA without proceeding to trial – survivor did not support action: 20
- Case proceeded to trial and did not result in a conviction: 1
- Case did not proceed to court due to guilty plea and resulted in a conviction: 1

As an in-depth qualitative evaluation, the intention of this project was to gather the experiences of as broad a range of survivors as possible within a relatively small sample size. As such, the issues reported here, while comprehensive, cannot be certified as statistically representative of the views of all UK-based rape survivors.

Report

This is an independent report of the 26 depth interviews, complete with a short overall summary of the main issues raised. ORS' role is to report participants' experiences and opinions as accurately as we can – without judging them or arbitrating between different points of view – so the chapters that follow detail the interview outcomes.

The interviews considered a wide range of important issues that are reported fully in the following chapters and this report has been structured to address each of the areas of discussion in some detail. The views of interviewees have been merged to give an overall report of findings – but significant differences in views have been drawn out where appropriate.

The views expressed by participants may or may not be supported by available evidence; that is, they may or may not be fully accurate accounts of the facts. ORS cannot arbitrate on the correctness or otherwise of people’s views in reporting them, and this should be borne in mind when considering the findings. Where possible, any such issues are noted in the report.

Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them – but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of views. ORS does not endorse the opinions in question but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. While quotations are used, the report is obviously not a verbatim transcript of the sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions.

Acknowledgements

ORS thanks HMICFRS for commissioning this important evaluation, and we hope the findings will prove useful in understanding and improving rape survivors’ experiences of the CJS. We are particularly grateful to Ruth Boyle, Jacquie Hayes and Sally Hasselby at HMICFRS for their assistance in developing and managing the project.

We would also like to thank the support service gateway agencies for their invaluable help and support with identifying and recruiting participants on our behalf – and of course the participating survivors for sharing their experiences so openly and candidly.

Glossary

The table below offers a plain word definition for the acronyms and other CJS and research terminology used throughout the report.

Table 1: Acronyms

Acronym	Full Name
CJS	Criminal Justice System
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
CICA	Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority Deals with compensation claims from people who have been physically or mentally injured because they were the victim of a violent crime in England, Scotland or Wales.
DA Team	Domestic Abuse Team Teams that offer confidential, practical and emotional support to female and male victims of domestic abuse.

Acronym	Full Name
HMCPSI	Her Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate Inspects the Crown Prosecution Service and the Serious Fraud Office, providing independently assessed evidence to help drive improvement and build public confidence in the prosecution process.
HMICFRS	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services Inspects police forces and fire and rescue services to promote improvements and make everyone safer.
IDVA	Independent Domestic Violence Adviser A specialist professional who works with a victim of domestic abuse to develop a trusting relationship as well as helping them to navigate the criminal justice process and working with the different statutory agencies to provide wraparound support.
ISVA	Independent Sexual Violence Adviser An impartial adviser who works with people who have experienced rape and sexual assault, irrespective of whether they have reported to the police.
LAGLO	Lesbian and Gay Liaison Officer Police officers and staff who have received additional training and are dedicated to supporting lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities.
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender
MARAC	Multi-agency risk assessment conference A meeting where information is shared on the highest risk domestic abuse cases between representatives of local police, probation, health, child protection, housing practitioners, Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (IDVAs) and other specialists from the statutory and voluntary sectors.
NFA	No Further Action
NMO (or non-mol)	Non-molestation order Typically issued to prohibit an abuser from using or threatening physical violence, intimidating, harassing, pestering or communicating with the person applying for the Order.

Acronym	Full Name
Participant/survivor	For the purposes of this report, the terms 'participant' and 'survivor' are used interchangeably to refer to those who self-identify as having been subjected to a rape(s) and participated in this evaluation.
SARC	<p>Sexual Assault Referral Centre</p> <p>A special facility where recent victims of rape or sexual assault can receive immediate help and support. This includes access to a forensic medical examination and the opportunity to speak to the Police about what has happened to them if the client wishes to do so. SARC clients also receive help and advice from Crisis Workers who can offer to support them and stay with them throughout the process.</p>
SOIT officer	<p>Sexual Offences Investigation Trained Officer</p> <p>Responsible for acting as a first responder to allegations of a sexual offence, to gather evidence and information from the victim in a manner that contributes to the investigation, preserves its integrity, and secures their confidence and trust. Officers also provide support and information, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, to victims of sexual crime, ensuring they are given timely information about other police departments and support agencies, where available.</p>
STO	<p>Specially trained officer</p> <p>As above.</p>
Suspect	In most cases, the term 'suspect' is used to refer to the person accused of committed the rape.
VRR Scheme	<p>Victims Right to Review Scheme</p> <p>Provides a victim with a specifically designed process to exercise the right to review certain CPS decisions not to start a prosecution or to stop a prosecution.</p>
WCO	<p>Witness Care Officer</p> <p>A member of police staff who is part of the WCU. They act as a single point of contact between victims/witnesses and relevant agencies.</p>
WCU	<p>Witness Care Unit</p> <p>These units manage the care of victims/witnesses who are due to attend court. They get involved when someone is charged and will continue to support victims/witnesses until the end of the case, guiding them through the criminal justice process.</p>

Pre-reporting views/perceptions

Survivors' motivations for reporting the incident(s) to the police

Survivors' main motivations were around seeking justice, closure and safety

When asked why they reported an incident or incidents to the police, participating survivors discussed a range of factors that had influenced them – the main one being their concern that the suspect may hurt someone else and the duty of care they felt to protect others.

“A few weeks after ... I knew it wasn't right and I didn't want him to do this to someone else, so I decided to report it to the police. That's been the main thing that's kept me going throughout – to stop this person from harming others – and I feel that it is my duty, as someone who is mentally able to, to report it and go through the process”

“[The suspect] is training for a role that involves caring for other people. When I told [my support worker] about this, it really hit home”

“I was in a relationship with the guy and it took me a few months to realise what he did, that it wasn't right and that I needed to report it to stop it from happening to someone else”

Several survivors felt compelled to report to the police because they were seriously concerned for their own – and in some cases their children's – safety. This was usually the case when the suspect was a partner/ex-partner and the relationship was also domestically violent, and/or the survivor was being stalked or harassed.

“As well as raping me, he was also stalking me, which was almost more terrifying, knowing he was watching me”

“... He kept sending me messages and ringing me. I also have two children with him, so the communication would start off about the kids, and then it would go onto things about me. He also broke into my new house”

Survivors also hoped that justice would be served and that the suspect would face the consequences of their actions, while others considered it important to have the incident officially recorded and acknowledged in order to gain a sense of closure.

“I thought that reporting would get some kind of justice”

“I felt that the incident was holding me back from moving on with my life. So, I sought some support for it and off the back of that I made the decision that I wanted it acknowledged and wanted to report it”

Informal and formal support networks – including family, friends and support services to whom some survivors had already disclosed the incident to – played a key role in motivating and empowering them to report the incident. Specifically, support services were particularly praised for holding impartial conversations with survivors about the potential pros and cons of reporting, advocating on their behalf by making anonymous enquiries to the police, and supporting them through making the initial call/visit to the police station.

“My mum wanted me to report it straight away so that it was off my chest”

“Straight after it happened, I went to my flatmate’s room. I was very distressed, agitated, struggled to speak. She offered to call the police which I hadn’t even thought of until that point, but when she asked, I felt it was the right thing to do”

“Having supportive friends helped and motivated me to report”

“I probably wouldn’t have reported if I hadn’t been in touch with [my support worker]. Being able to get the first meeting through [support service] was the first baby steps in encouraging me to go through the whole process”

Several others, however, had not made a conscious decision to report the incident, and only did so during contact with the police about separate matters relating to the suspect – usually related to stalking, harassment and domestic violence.

“So initially, I rang the police to report these issues, not the rape ... It wasn’t until I went through a checklist with them to determine how dangerous he was, and she asked me about sexual abuse, violence and rape...”

“I got in touch with the police to do with harassment and stalking and just asked for some help as to what I could do to stop him contacting me, and when the police officer was here looking through my phone ... they came across a message mentioning the rape. And it went from there”

Expectations of reporting the incident to the police

Expectations varied based on motivations to report, knowledge of the CJS and prior perceptions and experiences

Expectations and hopes of what reporting would ultimately achieve varied. Some had not thought past making a statement, whereas others anticipated a timely arrest, charge, court case and eventual conviction.

Conversely, several participants admitted that although they did not necessarily have much faith in the justice system in terms of their case being progressed, they thought they would be believed, supported and treated with kindness.

“I hoped they’d be respectful and helpful and conscious of what I’ve been through”

“I expected it to be acknowledged that being raped is one of the most horrific things that can happen to a person. I expected them to listen, to offer some support”

Reservations about reporting the incident(s) to the police

Nearly everyone had at least some concerns about reporting the incident(s) to the police, all of which are outlined below. Nevertheless, on balance, the motivations and potential benefits outlined previously outweighed these reservations for our participants – although they do provide important insight into why so many people may decide not to report incidents of rape.

There was concern around shame, stigma and victim-blaming

Some participants were concerned about the impact reporting would have on their privacy. Specifically, they initially wished for the incident(s) to remain a completely private matter and did not want others to know about it. This desire for secrecy was seemingly linked to stigma around being “labelled” as a rape victim, the incident being perceived as “their fault” and/or the police failing to understand their situation.

“I didn’t want to be pitied. It’s a label I’d have to live with forever. I’d always kept what was going on in my relationship very private. People had their suspicions but never knew for sure”

“I didn’t want to tell anyone. I didn’t tell my best friends or family. The only person I spoke to for six months was my [former] therapist. She blamed me for being drunk and didn’t understand what I was talking about. I kind of believed her”

“I was only worried about a male officer being allocated to my case and not understanding me and judging me”

“My only reservation was that they wouldn’t understand and that they’d judge me for taking so long to report it, and for being in a relationship with him in the first place”

Survivors feared not being believed or taken seriously, resulting in police inaction

A reasonable number of participants were sceptical about how seriously the police would take the incident – especially in cases lacking hard evidence – which they felt could lead to inaction. These views had mainly formed as a result of: knowledge of low conviction rates for rape; concerns about waiting “too long” before reporting; witnessing or hearing about other rape survivors’ experiences of the CJS; and adverse past dealings with the police.

“My preconceptions of the police was pretty much what you see all the time. When they say you need to come to us and we will help you, but it never goes anywhere. That is probably why I just wasn’t that fussed”

“I also knew, statistically, that it would be very unlikely that the suspect would be convicted”

“I just thought if I went to the police, there’s no evidence, there’s no proof, other than the messages...”

“I was scared he was going to get away with it. I’ve looked online and seen that a lot of people get away with it, and that not many girls even report it”

“I was scared I wouldn’t be believed. I had reported similar incidents in the past and they didn’t seem to care”

However, a few participants explained that their preconceptions were due to “internal anxieties” or portrayals of the police and CJS they had seen via television and film rather than “anything objective.”

“At the time there was general negativity towards the police, because it was around the time of the Black Lives Matter protests. The spaces and community [LGBT] I am involved with are critical of the police. I identify as trans and I am aware of the possible prejudice”

A few others felt conflicted about their perceptions of the police and explained that although they had some reasons not to trust them as a result of past experiences (in some cases in their home countries), they ultimately chose to believe they would work in their best interests in this case.

“It’s been a very mixed bag in terms of my prior relationship with the police. He [the suspect] had previously been arrested [for a non-rape incident], which was the first experience I had dealt with the police and don’t think was handled correctly. But this was just something I wanted to do regardless”

“Women will say ‘it’s not worth the hassle, they’re not going to believe you.’ But in England, I always believed the police were better and that it was different here. So, I would say I had a distrust of them, whilst simultaneously almost having faith in them to keep me safe”

Survivors had doubts about being able to cope with the CJS process

There was apprehension about the process of reporting the incident(s) and the subsequent journey through the CJS, which some participants thought would be daunting and frightening – a perception partly arising from a lack of understanding around what it would entail and what would be expected of them, as well as how long it could take. This was especially the case among those with concerns about their mental health, and who were uncertain as to whether they had the strength to undertake what they anticipated would be a stressful, emotional and difficult journey.

“I was also nervous that I didn’t really understand the process or what the repercussions would be”

“I knew it would be a long process. I was at university and didn’t want it hanging over me”

“I kind of saw the police as an emotionless organisation and that once I reported, everything would be out of my control. I was worried the demands that would be put on me would be too much for me to see the case the whole way through. I didn’t know if I had the mental capacity to re-live it”

There was a fear of reprisals on the part of the suspect

Despite being identified as a key motivator for reporting incidents to the police, safety was also raised as a barrier. Specifically, there was a fear of reprisals on the part of the suspect, particularly among those who were survivors of domestic abuse/violence as well as rape. Others were less concerned about their physical safety but scared that the suspect may “turn it all around onto me”, resulting in them being the one reprimanded or accused of lying.

“I was scared because of the threats from my ex-husband. The police had been involved five years ago. He was arrested for assault, but I was very isolated and controlled, particularly by his family ... they made it very clear that if I was ever to get the police involved again, it would be the last thing I ever did. The threat of my safety was really high”

“I was very scared of retaliations, including indirect ways of retaliation”

“I was really scared the whole thing could fall apart, and that he would turn it all around onto me and say that I raped him. I didn’t understand my rights”

“I’m being labelled now as lying...I feel like if I go out I’m just waiting for someone to call me a liar. Because I’ve accused him of all this stuff”

There are additional complications when rape happens within a relationship or is perpetrated by someone known to the survivor

An additional factor that appears to influence delays and uncertainty around reporting is the wider societal misconception that rape is ‘classically’ a violent attack perpetrated by a stranger. This stereotype meant that survivors who had been assaulted by someone they knew well, and/or had participated in some consensual sexual activity with the suspect at the time of the incident were more likely to describe being in a state of shock and denial - and also unsure as to whether they had been raped.

Moreover, participants who reported an assault by their partner often faced additional complications such as domestic violence, which meant they delayed reporting until they felt physically safe and/or had made arrangements to leave the relationship permanently.

A small number of participants had misgivings around reporting due to the impact it could have on the suspect. Essentially, they did not want to feel responsible for them going to prison and/or losing their home/employment.

“Initially I was quite confused. I almost didn’t want to get him in trouble or send him to prison. I didn’t want to be responsible for that”

“I don’t agree with prisons. He did an awful thing, but I wanted him to be rehabilitated and I don’t think prison does that”

Concerns around the CJS are most prevalent

The above demonstrates that although some survivor concerns stemmed from perceived societal stigma and additional complications when rape was perpetrated within a relationship or by someone they knew, much of their trepidation was seemingly influenced by scepticism about, and poor perceptions of, the police and CJS. Indeed, those who possessed such negative views expressed more caution around reporting an incident having been mainly discouraged by low conviction rates, witnessing or hearing about other rape survivors' experiences of the police and CJS; as well as adverse past dealings with the former.

Delays reporting the incident to the police

The reservations outlined above often (but not always) meant incidents were not reported right away, with delays ranging from a few weeks to months. However, participants highlighted other reasons why they took some time to report to the police, which are summarised below.

Shock, denial and uncertainty

Not everyone initially realised or accepted that they had been raped, and some survivors said they were in shock and/or denial for some time. Others simply did not understand what had happened to them was rape, particularly if they were in a relationship with the suspect and/or had participated in consensual sexual activity with them prior to the incident(s). Indeed, it was explained that societal myths had led them to believe that rape was usually a physically violent act perpetrated by a stranger and as such could not relate their situation to this stereotype.

However, as mentioned earlier, opening up to close friends or family about the incident, doing their own research, or seeking advice from a support service or sexual health clinic enabled survivors to understand the seriousness of the situation. Similarly, a few others began to accept what had happened when they decided to report other incidents such as stalking, harassment and domestic violence to the police.

“There was a delay in reporting because I was in shock and in a relationship with the suspect; it took me a while to realise what had happened”

“I was taught that rape is someone with a knife who grabs you down an alleyway. So, although I felt like something very wrong had happened, I didn't realise what happened to me was illegal and that it was rape until I went to the Sexual Health Clinic to get tested, which a friend urged me to do. It was there I explained the situation to them, and they said it sounded like rape and referred me to [a SARC] to collect forensic evidence”

Additional complexities when the suspect is a partner

Another issue that mainly affected those survivors who were raped by a partner was that they did not want to report the incident(s) until they had left their relationship and processed the complications and logistics around doing so, which often took some time.

“It took me a long time to report it; he was my partner and I left him, and it wasn’t something I was ever planning on reporting. It was a very domestically violent relationship”

Other personal reasons not relating to the incident nor the suspect

A few participants had other (unrelated) personal issues to contend with around the time of the incident. One, for example, said they were adjusting to the Covid-19 pandemic and a family bereavement, which delayed their decision to go the police.

Reporting and investigation

Making the initial report

For some survivors, it was a well-organised process that saw them being treated with respect and kindness

Feedback around making the initial report to the police was mixed, but several survivors were positive about their experiences because:

- They had been given the opportunity to meet with a police officer before officially reporting (usually via a support service), who explained the process and what to expect, making them feel more at ease and informed

“It was really helpful having a meeting where I could ask a few questions and leave if and when I wanted to. It felt informal and not like I was trapped. It was nice that they let me take the time to decide when I felt comfortable enough to disclose what had happened. I wasn’t pressured into disclosing when I wasn’t ready”

- Initial action was prompt insofar as they were able to report very soon after making initial contact with the police (usually within 24 hours, and in some cases within a few hours), and the attending officers appeared to take the case seriously from the outset

“They arrived really quickly and seemed to want to move it along quite quickly and do something about it, which was reassuring”

“They did come to my house straight away ... Then they contacted the person that was involved”

- They felt believed and taken seriously by the police during their initial report, which validated and empowered them

“I felt very believed, which was an important factor in me carrying on”

“They did take me seriously. They didn’t think I was making it up”

- The overall manner of the officer(s) was professional, kind, supportive and empathetic, which enhanced survivors’ confidence in them

“The initial response guy was really nice. He told me a little bit about himself and that he and his fiancé had just had a baby. We just had a really nice, human conversation and he treated me like a normal person”

“The police lady that came over was so nice and lovely. She took her time with me, didn’t intimidate me and put me at ease. I felt that she respected me and was understanding about what I’d been through. She made sure I was alright after

asking every question. They did everything they could at this stage, and I thought it was done well. At this point I thought that maybe things were going to go well”

- Being able to report to a female officer made them feel more comfortable and confident. Indeed, the majority – whether they were offered the choice or not – said they their preference would be to speak to a female at the outset

“The fact that she was a woman made a huge difference. Maybe not always, but it made a difference for me, but maybe in her case she was particularly sensitive and aware”

There was some proactivity around support and safeguarding

Some participants were offered safeguarding measures at this stage, such as witness protection, non-molestation orders and personal alarms. More than half were also allocated a STO, who were – on the whole – described as sensitive, supportive and non-judgemental.

“The two women [SOIT officers] had a good balance of being friendly and compassionate, but also professional. I felt a lot more comfortable with them, which I think is because they were specialised. They also stayed took me to the SARC and stayed with me the whole time”

“[The STO] gave me a lot of confidence because I didn’t feel like I was being judged at all, which was a bit of an initial concern for me. I felt really safe and supported”

Two participants who identified as LGBT were particularly impressed that they were offered LAGLOs, who were praised for being relatable, empathic and easy to communicate with. Moreover, the police referred or directed around half of participants to specialist support, including: SARCs; Rape Crisis and other specialist services, where in some cases an ISVA was allocated; and services offering practical help.

“The safeguarding and support was good. I was offered LGBT specific support and they sent me some alarms, so if my ex ever turned up I would be protected. They also put me in touch with domestic abuse services, who put me in touch with a legal organisation which helped me with a restraining order”

“They [police officers taking the initial report] asked for the LGBT officer to come along to speak to me, which was good. Straight away we had a better rapport; he seemed more conversational and friendly than the other two officers. He was very personable with me, very much related to what I was telling him, and I think that comes down to him being an LGBT officer as well as his natural character”

“They told me about the counselling which was available, as well as other things like help with housing and financial help if that was an issue for me”

There were also some negative attitudes and inappropriate approaches

Despite the positivity reported above, more survivors recounted poor experiences, which were mainly centred around some police officers’ disbelieving and judgemental attitudes. Indeed, these participants said officers had implied they were “making it up”, treated them as if they were under investigation, and victim blamed.

“She questioned me about everything. I felt like she was judging me”

“[The police officer] was quite rude to me. That wasn’t very nice. She was implying that I was making it up. It was just her whole attitude to things”

“I felt more like they were investigating me. I just thought, ‘Why am I the one that is being judged?’ After a while, I kind of lost faith. They even described the [suspect] as ‘an upstanding member of society’”

“The attitude of the officers was very, very victim-blaming. To be told by another female (not that it should matter if it is a female) that I had to take responsibility and should have left sooner, even though I said I had nowhere else to go...”

A few participants also thought that the police had dismissed the case straight away because the suspect was a spouse/partner, and they were already resigned to an NFA outcome.

“I felt like it was very quickly dismissed because of who the offender was. They told me it was a hard enough crime to get a conviction as it is and that the conviction rates are really low”

Similarly, in some cases the officers were described as insensitive, disinterested, cold and lacking empathy – which for several participants included the retraumatising experience of being asked to repeat their experiences multiple times.

“I felt quite nervous and a bit pressured. Also, she wasn’t kind; she was very cold. She had no empathy”

“Their attitude towards me wasn’t very reassuring, which is why I didn’t want to report it in the first place. The police officer who came out, it didn’t feel like she wanted to be there – it didn’t seem like she was interested’

“They weren’t hostile, but I was expecting more compassion. They were very matter of fact; not very human, quite robotic”

“They offered no emotional support to help me digest it all; they just asked about what happened continually”

“[The police] asked me what happened three or four times, and it was tiring for me to have to go over it again and again”

Moreover, a few survivors described the male officer(s) to whom they reported to as “awkward” and unsure of how to deal with the situation. Another felt that the officers were too “casual” in their approach because they chose to undertake the initial report on an outdoor park bench, rather than taking the survivor to the local police station.

“They sent two male officers to attend after I had reported by phone; they were very awkward and uncomfortable. Also, while driving me to the SARC, they went as if to drive into the address where it had happened, as though they were about to go and knock the door. I got quite distressed and asked them to keep going, so they did”

“Two male officers spoke to me at that time – a detective and a normal officer – which made it a bit harder, especially as I didn’t know them. It made me feel uncomfortable. I was very upset and was crying; they tried to comfort me, but it didn’t really work. They didn’t really know what to do”

Specifically, a non-binary participant said they had encountered miscommunication and insensitivities relating to their gender identity, sexuality and the associated nature of the incident, which made them feel uncomfortable and concerned that perceptions of their identity would impede the case.

“There was some miscommunication around some of the language I used in terms of the same-sex nature of the incident ... there was continual crossed wires ... I told them that I was trans and which pronouns I use, which he went and told the other officers, but I think that was a bit too much for them and it wasn’t respected. The misgendering was an issue because it didn’t really make me feel comfortable. At this point I didn’t feel very happy because I knew identity was going to be a big problem”

There were also instances whereby the police gave false hope at a very early stage about what might happen, including in relation to the outcome of a case. Although affected participants acknowledged officers’ good intentions, they explained that their promises resulted in much disappointment and damage later on.

“[The initial police officer] said they were going to go and arrest him straight away, make sure he is taken into questioning that day ... I think the officer told me what he wished would happen, as opposed to what probably would happen. After that day I never heard from [him] again”

It was suggested that some of these reported shortcomings could have been alleviated had a STO been present at the point of first contact (rather than being allocated after the initial report had been made, which was the case for several participants).

“I would have expected the police to have specialists in sexual violence – almost like a mediatory and more focused on wellbeing rather than wanting to go into what happened straight away”

A lack of support referrals and safeguarding was an issue for some

Another key issue for survivors was a perceived lack of support from the police once the initial report had been made, including referrals and signposting to external support services. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, around half said they did not receive any such support, even when they explicitly enquired about it.

“No. It [safeguarding] wasn’t even mentioned ... I felt a bit wary living in the local area. What if I go [to] the shops and I bump into him? I felt uncomfortable ... and I did bump into the suspect ... I did have a panic about it. It was not the most pleasant experience”

“I went away, initially, thinking she [the officer who took the initial report] would get in touch with Survivors’ Network, but she didn’t. She didn’t give me any support or information. I was just sent home with no help and told to come back a week later

to do the video interview, which I didn't go to because I didn't feel I had received enough support. I wanted to wait until I had been referred to the support networks”

“I remember they continually said that that if I wanted emotional support, they couldn't help with that; they were adamant that they weren't the ones to go to, which was really difficult because at the time they were all I had. I did contact the LGBTQ officer quite a bit but when I did meet with them, they again went over the fact that I couldn't rely on them for emotional support. Same with the SOIT officer. I was looking for more emotional support because at that point they hadn't referred me to a support service”

In other cases, the referrals and signposting offered felt inadequate – for example, a non-binary participant was signposted toward support services designed exclusively for male survivors. Moreover, although several participants were already receiving support by the time they reported the incident, they stated that nothing further was offered by the police, which they did not consider good practice.

“They offered me support around male survivors of sexual assault (after the report), but obviously that wasn't relevant for me! And they offered it to me after I told them about my gender identity. If they weren't sure about my gender identity, they could have found an LGBT specific resource. I don't think the intention behind it was malicious but...”

Those who were being stalked and harassed by the suspect felt particularly let down by a lack of safeguarding. Indeed, instead of arranging protective orders, survivors were given personal alarms and leaflets or told to call 999 in an emergency, which was considered inadequate considering the severity of their situation.

“He was breaking into my house and harassing me ... They gave me a leaflet for Rape Crisis, which also included Women's Aid's number. There was also a leaflet about sexual health. It felt like I was given some generic leaflets”

“They sent me a couple of alarms because this person kept turning up at the door and sending his family. Other than that, they didn't really do a lot”

This led some participants to arrange their own safeguarding and support in lieu of not being offered anything by the police, including non-molestation orders, ISVAs and IDVAs.

“Whilst I was waiting to make my statement, I went to social services myself and got a non-mol put in place. Social services put me in touch with an IDVA. Social services could see that me and my children were at risk from serious harm”

“If I hadn't found myself an ISVA I would have felt very unsupported emotionally. They never referred me to Victim Support or anything”

Overall, participants affected by a lack of safeguarding and support said they felt alone and unsafe, a feeling exacerbated by the apparent lack of concern for their wellbeing on the part of the police. Indeed, two individuals chose to withdraw from their cases altogether (the details of which are covered in Chapter 5) as they felt so unsupported at this stage of the process.

Arranging the initial report either took too long, was too rushed or generally disorganised

Another criticism – although to a lesser extent – was around timeliness. Although most were pleased to see prompt action, a few participants felt that the police took too long to arrange for them to report the incident(s). For example, one individual waited a month between making the initial phone call to the police and making their report because no-one followed up with them, while another encountered delays due to disorganisation and a lack of communication between the two police forces with whom they were in contact about the incident (as the incident had occurred in a different part of the UK to where they lived).

“I decided I did definitely want to go ahead so we [the participant and a support service] made a report to the police. We initially called them and was told someone would get back to us, but we had to chase numerous times to get them to call me”

“There was so much disorganisation between the police forces. I originally phoned 101 to say I wanted to speak to the police about reporting a rape, but because the incident happened in a different place to where I live, which covered different police areas there was so much dilly-dallying and all I wanted to do was report it”

In contrast, several others would have liked more time to prepare for making a report rather than having to speak to officers within hours of making the initial call. In most of these cases, the police also arrived at survivors’ homes at antisocial times, which in hindsight was considered inappropriate.

“I reported the stalking as well as the rape to 101 and they said they would send someone to take an initial report the next morning, which only gave me six hours to prepare”

“They didn’t give me enough time to prepare myself and think about it. I didn’t have any time for myself. The police came straight away, and then two more officers came shortly afterwards, and then another two after that. I didn’t really realise what was going on; I was still in shock”

Another survivor described a disorganised and anxiety-inducing process whereby the officer was called away mid-way through the reporting, and it was not made clear who would be replacing them.

“I called the 101 non-emergency line and spoke to them there. And then an officer came, but I’d only half started reporting something when they were called away. On top of that, when I called I was told one person was coming, and then I had a call to say a different person was coming, and then when he turned up it was someone else, then they were called away and it was somebody else who came back! I had asked to know who was coming because I wasn’t prepared to open the door to just anyone. My anxiety at the time was just so heightened”

Providing a statement

The police offered good pre-statement information and support to some survivors

Participants had varying perceptions of the information, communication and support provided to them by the police to help them prepare for their statement. A few were impressed that the process was fully explained by their STO/main contact clearly and sensitively, and particularly that they had been informed about the demanding nature of giving the statement, why it was necessary, and how it would be used in the case. This helped them feel ready, confident and equipped.

“They explained what the questions would be and how long it would last. They also gave me some booklets to go away and read which was quite helpful”

“They communicated with me about it really well. Lots of emails and she reiterated that I didn’t have to do it if I didn’t want to”

“They explained where and when it would be used, and generally the nature of what it would be like to record”

Other participants explained that although the police were keen to take their statement as soon as possible, they were encouraged to go home and rest beforehand, which demonstrated to them that their wellbeing was a priority.

“They were going to see if I could do it that day, but became concerned by how little sleep I’d had, so they booked it in for the afternoon of the next day”

“They gave me time to go home and get a good sleep [so] that I could mentally prepare. They were very clear it was an intense process. I felt like the way it was explained and their duty of care was good”

The majority gave a video-recorded statement, but those who did not valued being given the choice to provide a written statement instead. They explained that this option better suited them and their individual situation and found the police to be supportive of their decision.

“They gave me the choice of doing a video or a written statement. I opted for a written for two reasons: one, I feel quite uncomfortable on video and I didn’t know how I was going to react talking about it. They also said it would be played in court which made me even more self-conscious. I also wanted to have a written transcript of what they’ve noted so we could go back and add detail if we needed to, which you can’t really do with video”

“I did a written one due to the previous voyeurism charges – I feel uncomfortable being on video. I explained these reasons to the police, and they were fine with it”

Being treated with sensitivity and compassion when undertaking the statement was important

Providing a statement was described as an overwhelming, lengthy and draining experience, made easier in some cases by the officer(s) conducting the interview who were described as considerate, kind and supportive, and considered to have communicated clearly whilst maintaining professionalism. Indeed, having difficult questions asked in a sensitive manner, feeling believed, and being offered regular breaks were approaches that participants particularly valued.

“It was really intimidating, overwhelming. The detective that I had, she was really sensitive and gentle but ultimately, having to sit there knowing you are being recorded and someone else is watching you while you talk about lots of horrific things, it’s just a really awful experience”

“It was very ‘care-focused’ and compassionate. It was done with one of the police ladies who had driven me to the SARC. I felt really comfortable with her, she let me take plenty of breaks and I always knew what was happening”

“The lady who questioned me was very lovely and I did feel believed”

“It took a really long time. I was there from 10am to 3pm. They asked me quite a lot of detailed questions. But they were sensitive and set some ground rules which I understood”

“I was very nervous; after what had happened, I was scared of coming into the station ... But it was great ... it went as well as it could have. I felt nervous but supported”

“The people who did the statement with me were very well trained. I have no complaints at all about this part of the process”

Moreover, the provision of additional support was highly appreciated, with some survivors noting how they were permitted to have an STO and/or ISVA present at their interview, or allowed a family member to accompany them to the police station. Another participant with learning disabilities was grateful that the police arranged for a speech and language therapist to be present to support them.

“They let me take someone with me, not into the same room, but they did let me have someone there. That helped”

“I had my ISVA and STO there with me, which was good”

“I had a speech and language therapist attend when I gave my statement, which the police arranged. It made me feel relaxed that there was someone in the room who understood and knew why I was struggling with certain words”

For others, perceptions of inefficiency, mismanagement and errors led to lack of trust in the police

In contrast to the reports above, some survivors were less positive – in part due to practical issues such as lengthy delays between report and statement and appointments being cancelled at short notice or continually rescheduled.

Two participants felt so frustrated, upset and unsupported as a result of this that they almost withdrew from the process.

“I didn’t hear anything until the following Friday. Someone rang and said they wanted me to come in the next day for a statement. But she called the next day and changed it to the following Tuesday. By the Tuesday they said they still couldn’t get me in and said they would ring me back on Friday. A different police officer called on Friday and said they could probably re-arrange for the next day! At this point, I said that if this didn’t happen, I was going to drop the whole thing ... I felt so angry. I am very lucky I had a very strong support network around me... [the police] didn’t make me feel supported. I was just left to feel like another number”

“The police didn’t get to me for a few months after I reported it! At that point I almost dropped out completely because I thought they saw me as stupid and didn’t care enough to respond. It made me feel like maybe it wasn’t serious enough or that they thought I was lying”

“I started to be a bit more out of the loop. I had the video recorded interview set up but felt really anxious about it. The evening before I had an email saying, ‘Sorry, we’re going to have to rearrange it.’ It wasn’t great. It did get rearranged within a week – so not too long – but it’s the added anxiety it caused”

A few participants discussed administrative errors made by the police prior to and during their statement. One individual discovered that some of the details in their initial report were incorrect, and another found that the official write-up of their statement (they chose not to be videoed) omitted a key piece of information, which was later used as a reason to cast doubt on the survivor’s credibility and undermined the whole case.

“I found that during the interview statement, they had got a few of the details from my initial report wrong, and things I had to re-clarify during the interview ... I think there had been a miscommunication and the officer had taken the information down incorrectly. I was quite shocked and it threw me off a bit. It made me wonder if I had said it, but then thought about it and knew I definitely hadn’t”

“[The written statement] wasn’t without issues, because in the first draft of the initial statement they left out an action...which was later used against me to try and make out that I was not a credible witness. I assumed they had left it out because it was not relevant, because why would I know? But a year later they came back and suspected me of lying...They had to go back and check their original notes and apologise”

Others found the actual process of providing a statement rather disorganised, heightening their stress and anxiety. This ranged from the line of questioning being “a bit improvised”, to the officer conducting the interview not realising it was a rape case.

“The officer who was there had no idea I was there to make a statement about rape! She thought I was there [to] talk about the harassment! It’s obvious she hadn’t read my file including the reason for the non-mol at all”

Some noted a lack of preparedness for making their statement

Several participants were encouraged to undertake their statement either in conjunction with or shortly after their initial report. Although they had reservations about doing this, most “went along” with it without question – and the one individual who made it clear they needed more time said they continued to feel pressured by their detective. In this circumstance, survivors not only described feeling anxious and ill-equipped, but also felt that, in hindsight, the rushed process impacted on the overall quality of their statement.

“I didn’t like it. I didn’t have any time to prepare and I was exhausted. I was in bits”

“When he said, ‘We’ll do it now’, I just kind of went with it, because he seemed nice. I didn’t even know I could say no! ... They also asked me fill in all the court documents then and there ... I question whether things would have been different if I’d had more time to prepare for the statement”

“After the forensics were taken, I went home and just wanted to sleep, but the detective kept calling me to arrange a statement. When I didn’t call back, he started calling my parents. I felt like they were harassing me”

Others felt unprepared for how long the statement would take and what would be asked and expected of them. This was generally attributed to a lack of or inaccurate communication and information from the police in the period between the initial report and arranging the statement. Indeed, for some, the statement was only briefly mentioned without full explanation, while one participant was not even pre-warned that they would be video recorded. All of this, it was said, was a “shock” and took its toll mentally.

“I wasn’t prepared for how long it would take and for some of the questions, such as, ‘How did I know that this was what he was doing?’; ‘Was he threatening me?’; ‘What was he saying?’; ‘What happened afterwards.’ I had to go over everything, right from the start. It wasn’t just about talking about the rape. It was a shock and it hit hard”

“I didn’t really know how it was going to be structured. Also, I felt quite unprepared about the level of detail of some of the questions. The person from LAGLO said it would be quite a structured conversation, whereas when I got to the interview they said it wouldn’t be quite like that. It threw me a bit”

“[I felt] very shocked and self-conscious because I wasn’t pre-warned about it being videoed. It was very hard because after what happened I had really low self-esteem. I didn’t feel ready to be videoed. I had just come from work, it was summertime, you could see on my face that I was exhausted. I didn’t like it, but I did it because I thought it might help the case”

“I wasn’t even told that the statement would be observed”

As alluded to above, survivors were surprised about the level of detail they were required to go into, which was deemed unnecessary and inappropriate in some cases. This issue was often exacerbated by the attitude of the officer(s) conducting the interview, who were perceived as judgemental, dismissive and too “clinical”.

“It was quite horrible. It felt like they were asking questions about unnecessary things. They asked the same things and [it] felt like they weren’t accepting my answers. I felt judged. I walked away feeling worse and heavier, like I shouldn’t have reported it”

“It was awful, horrendous because you have to be so graphic ... I wasn’t made to feel more comfortable about it ... When it got to the part about the rape it was very clinical and formal in terms of terminology”

Several others additionally found specific CJS terminology and terminologies used during the interview difficult to understand

“I suppose their terminologies and shortening of things also made it harder. And their expectation that you’re meant to know what these things mean”

Evidence collection & investigation

The majority of participants gave their mobile phone to the police for evidence, and around half had their medical and other records accessed. Several others had given their consent for the police to access this information but were unsure as to whether it had been collected. A small number also had items of clothing and/or photographs of any physical injuries taken.

Co-operation with physical evidence collection results from trust and good communication

Unsurprisingly, survivors reported anxiety around forensic examinations and the collection of their data and personal belongings, but there was general agreement – at least initially – that it was critical for the investigation. Most were thus keen to expedite the process in any way they could. Several participants felt more comfortable with the process because they ultimately trusted the police to only look at information directly related to their case, while there was also a sense of “having nothing to hide.”

“I had nothing to hide, so I gave them the go ahead. I tried to do everything I could. I don’t think I said no to anything”

“It wasn’t nice handing it over, knowing I’ve got photos and videos on there of my kids. There were things on there that were really personal. But I knew they wouldn’t go through looking at that kind of stuff and by this point I was happy to hand it over, if it meant they could arrest and charge him”

“I felt a bit anxious and uncomfortable about the police trawling through my camera roll. But I trusted them to only look through what they needed to, and I thought it would help with the case”

Furthermore, some participants said that being told why this evidence was needed in a clear, empathetic and sensitive manner helped them feel more accepting and amenable to providing it.

“There were text messages on there where he had apologised for raping me and all the other things he had done, so the police told me it was really important I handed it over so that they could access that information. I understood why they needed the phone”

“They were quite sensitive about it and made it clear that I didn’t have to hand in my phone and even when they did they reassured me that they would only look through what they needed to”

“They were very thorough and gave me a leaflet about what was going to be taken and how it would be used. They were very clear about it. I had questions about other unrelated messages in there, but they made it clear they would only harvest relevant information although they would go through it all. That was a bit stressful. But it was good because I had what I perceived as incriminating evidence on my phone. It was all very proportionate and apt”

However, physical evidence was often collected insensitively, inappropriately or without enough explanation

A much larger number of survivors faced difficulties at this stage of the process. For some, the lack of explanation and reassurance around why certain physical evidence was required and how it would be used increased their nervousness and distress. These individuals were, in turn, more likely to conclude that the collection of such evidence was unnecessarily invasive and excessive, impacting on their compliance with the process.

“They collected things like my clothes, photos and things, but never explained why”

“It is more of the fact that they had my phone and they extracted all of the info off it, all the social media and texts. I wondered whether they also did that with [the suspect]”

Moreover, one participant was initially told that giving the police their mobile phone was voluntary, but later felt coerced into doing so when they expressed reluctance. Indeed, they were allegedly told that if they did not comply, the case would be closed with no further action taken. Another reported that their personal mobile phone was collected even though it not been used in connection with the incident at all.

“Initially I was told I wouldn’t have to give over my phone and that it was completely voluntary. But then they started saying that the CPS wouldn’t even touch my case unless I give over my phone. They didn’t even tell me what they were going to do with all the information from my phone in terms of storage and what they’re going to look at. It’s so violating and but then they make out I’m the one being shady or lying for not wanting to hand it over!”

“They took my personal mobile phone when I did the recorded statement, which I don’t think they should have done. I made it clear I was referring to my work phone. They should have asked whether it was my device that I used. Taking my

personal phone made me feel like I was under investigation, although I didn't do anything wrong"

Similarly, several others felt that the police wanted specific tests run and access to their medical records because they did not believe them, rather than collecting evidence to help build a case against the suspect.

"I was told they needed my medical history to see if I was crazy and therefore a liar. The way it was handled was really bad. I think they assessed all of my records from the age of 14, which is crazy because I'm now 34! They already had DNA and forensic evidence from the Sexual Health Clinic and SARC – they didn't need all of that. I did sign a document saying I gave my consent, the only time that I knew for sure they had accessed the records was when one of my police liaisons threw in my face that I have a history of depression!"

"I signed a document giving my consent, and I thought it was just in case they wanted to have a look further down the line. But then I find out that they wanted to specifically check if I was on the contraceptive pill. They didn't believe that I was on it, although I don't think they needed to know anyway really. It made me feel quite violated"

"I was also shocked that they took three blood samples; they did it because they didn't believe I hadn't taken drink or drugs"

A number of survivors also complained about their mobile phone being kept for an overly long period of time without adequate explanation, ranging from a few months to several years (several still had not had theirs returned at the time of the interview). This meant that they either had no mobile phone at all during this time, had to buy a new one themselves, or were provided with a "cheap" replacement that was "not fit for purpose." Participants discussed both the financial impact of buying a new phone and the inconvenience of not having one at all, whilst others described the emotional distress it caused. For example, one person found it difficult to contact their family living outside of the UK at the time they needed them most.

"It's been three years and I've still not got it back. It's cost me a fortune because I had to go and get a new phone. But I was warned that it would be kept for a long time and I probably wouldn't get it back until after the trial"

"They did tell me to make sure I got a replacement phone but didn't tell me exactly what they were going to look at. So, I didn't know what to expect. It was really upsetting to have my personal belongings taken like that. A lot of people can't live without their phones and I had to. I didn't get it back for months"

"They took my phone for evidence and instead gave me a £10 phone to use which made it all even more confusing for me. I asked them when I would get it back and they said 12 to 16 weeks – so almost four months! But I never got it back then; they gave it back two years later. There was nothing I could do with the replacement phone. All my family contacts were in my original phone, and they had no way of contacting me. It was very hard because I didn't know anyone in this country. It made me very anxious and they didn't do anything to help the situation"

Survivors reported mixed experiences of SARCs

Around two thirds of participants said they had not been or did not think they were referred to a SARC, probably due to the aforementioned delays between the incidents and reporting.

The consensus among those who had attended a SARC was that it had been a daunting and overwhelming experience – especially as survivors were often “rushed off” the centre with little explanation as to what to expect. Moreover, the physical examination to collect DNA and other forensic evidence was considered invasive: for most, it was “retraumatizing” to undergo such a procedure so soon after a rape, and one individual was particularly triggered by being examined by a male doctor without prior discussion or warning. Again, some of the questioning and additional tests undertaken at the SARC were deemed disproportionately intrusive.

“It all felt very rushed. The incident happened and I was sent straight to the SARC – but I understand that it was important to get the DNA evidence as soon as possible”

“I guess I could have had a bit more information about what the SARC was about from them or the other police officers. I was kind of just taken away in a car and not told much”

“It was very odd and intrusive having to show someone my whole body, especially after what had happened”

“When I was being examined, they didn’t even ask me if I wanted a male or female officer. I was just given a male doctor. I didn’t really want to be touched by a male again...”

“I was quite shocked at some of the areas they wanted swabbed; it made me feel a bit worried”

“They also asked lots of very intrusive questions which felt a bit counter-intuitive and weird, such as, ‘How many times have you gone to the bathroom?’ It was all very confusing and felt even more intrusive and stressful. I felt like I had no dignity or privacy”

That said, a similar number of participants – especially those who had been allocated a STO – praised the police and SARC staff for helping them to prepare for their visit, which included explaining what to expect, and allowing them time to sleep/rest before attending. The staff at the SARC were also described as kind, friendly and supportive of survivors during medical examinations and tests – and a few welcomed the opportunity to shower straight afterwards (and were particularly appreciative of receiving a ‘care package’ for washing).

“They did support me in terms of sitting me down, discussing what would happen. When it was time to shower, they gave me a care package to help me look after myself, which I think was a nice thing to do at the end of something so horrible”

“Everyone was very kind, very nice and easy to speak to. It felt like a safe environment. The female doctor who did all the swabs was nice, talked me through

everything, explained what she was going to do which was really important, because to be touched, poked and prodded straight after being violated is very odd and violating to come to terms with. It was handled really well”

“The staff at the SARC were very understanding. They warned me that what they were going to ask of me would be quite invasive and told me that I could stop or say no. They had a job to do and were very compassionate about it”

“They were really happy people, always asked for my consent, talked me through all the different things I could agree or not agree to”

There was some lack of organisation and proactivity during evidence collection and investigation

Although several participants were initially impressed that the suspect was identified and called in for questioning fairly quickly, on the whole there was widespread dissatisfaction with the way in which investigations were handled.

Specifically, there was frustration that the police did not sufficiently utilise digital information, CCTV footage, witnesses, and physical or written material – despite participants directing them toward these potential sources of evidence. There was also disappointment that past incidents involving the suspect, for example domestic violence and other rape allegations, were not considered evidence of poor character.

“There was very minimal evidence collection of any kind. I offered to give them my laptop and they said no. They didn’t take any CCTV of him entering my building, didn’t take the pyjamas I was wearing that night. I ended up sending them data from Facebook but didn’t even get a reply”

“I asked them to look at the CCTV and they claimed there wasn’t any, which I find hard to believe”

“I think they should have asked me more information about the witness”

“They didn’t speak to my work or my colleagues ... there were several avenues they could have looked at but didn’t. They just took the written statement and said they were going to look at a folder full of evidence that I had, which they never did”

Another individual said they were not referred to a SARC for the collection of vital DNA and other physical evidence, despite reporting to the police right away and not having showered. Moreover, in some of these cases the police were suspected of wrongly using an apparent lack of evidence as “an excuse” to drop the case.

“No, I wasn’t sent there [a SARC] which, looking back, seems completely mad to me now because I told the police about it [the incident] straight away and I hadn’t showered! I just don’t think they could be bothered”

“They actively did not bother collecting evidence, and then turned around and said the case would be dropped because there was no evidence! It doesn’t make any sense”

More generally, some investigations were criticised for being poorly organised with little planning or forethought, exacerbated by the apparently indifferent attitudes of

investigative teams and, to a lesser extent, the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (though the latter were recognised as being outside police forces' control).

"With the current situation [Covid-19], people were short staffed, working from home. I don't know if it was usually like that, but I think it was disorganised and so improvised"

"It was so disorganised ... just general apathy from the whole organisation aspect of things"

"There was a delay gathering visual evidence, which meant that the photos showed very little, when initially there had been obvious marks and bruises. Which was very frustrating"

There were complaints about more preferential treatment of suspects relative to survivors

There was significant dissatisfaction around how suspects were approached and treated during investigations. The police were criticised for the length of time it took to question suspects, and for "just taking their word" rather than arranging follow-up questioning and/or looking for evidence to dispute or support their claims. Survivors were also aggrieved that almost everything the suspect was asked to do was, in their view, completely voluntary and undertaken "on their terms."

"It was like everything was down to him. When he's ready to come and give a statement he'll come and give one"

"Everything on his side was very voluntary. They just invited him in for a chat. Considering he was under investigation of such a serious a crime, I find that quite disgraceful. I'm also pretty sure they didn't test the DNA because he said the sex was consensual"

"It was basically 'give over all your data or have the case dropped'; that's not voluntary. I find that particularly disgusting because my rapist was not asked to give the amount of information over"

There were also reportedly stark differences between the way survivors and suspects were managed during investigations. For example, it was said that suspects were often given longer notice periods to attend police stations to answer questions and had fewer of their personal records accessed. In one case, the suspect was interviewed before the survivor gave their statement which, it was felt, coloured the police's line of questioning.

"My investigating officer told me that [the suspect] would be given four days' notice to come in and give a statement, whereas I was given six hours! I told her that by then he would have got rid of some of the evidence. And by the time he gave his statement his phone was 'broken'"

"They interviewed him first, rather than me (which I didn't find out about until I had made my statement). He disagreed with everything that happened, and I feel like they interviewed me off of the back of what he said"

“The one thing I really disagree with is that they didn’t question him again. They felt that he wouldn’t have anything different to say. But in that interim period, I’d had my phone analysed”

Moreover, several participants reiterated that they were made to feel disrespected and as though they were the ones who had transgressed - and alleged that rather than being impartial, the police visibly took the side of the suspect.

“It felt like they spent most of their time investigating me! They didn’t actually investigate anything other than constantly bullying me. They had access to information from the beginning and just wasted time getting it, asking the wrong questions, recording things incorrectly”

“I didn’t feel respected at all. I felt like they took his side more than mine. I felt very judged by the questions there were asking and not believed. I wish they’d actually investigated properly and not gathered evidence that wasn’t necessarily needed”

Communication throughout reporting and investigation

Many survivors reported a lack of communication, updates and support

Communication from the police during the reporting and investigation phase was an issue for many participants, though to varying degrees.

Some received no or very little communication while their case was ongoing, whereas for others it was irregular and/or inaccurate. It was reasoned that even in the absence of specific updates, the police could have made the effort to undertake regular ‘welfare checks’ and sought to reassure survivors that their case was still being investigated.

“They didn’t really update me a lot, so I wasn’t sure what was going on. There was a month where I was waiting to find out the outcome and they only got on touch once or twice”

“When I was told little bits here and there, quite often it wouldn’t be correct, for example telling me I won’t have to hand over my phone and that my rapist definitely would, but it was the other way around”

“I feel like their communication wasn’t very good. It would have been nice for them to check in with to see if I was ok, to have a bit more of a personable approach”

On the other hand, one individual said that they received incessant phone calls from the police, which unnecessarily worried them.

“Other times they would ring and ring me, and then send a follow up text asking me to call them back straight away. So, I’d start feeling panicked thinking that something serious had happened, but it would just be ‘oh there’s no update, we’re just checking in.’ They could have emailed me that”

There was particular disappointment around the lack of timely feedback at important stages of the investigation, meaning participants felt uninformed, unsafe and uncared for. This included not being told when the suspect would be interviewed about their version of events, and other information about them that may have come to light – previous allegations for example.

“Sometimes the way in which they would communicate was just stressful and ridiculous. For example, when they decided to interview my rapist, they didn’t give me a head’s up. They just left a voicemail on my phone at 9pm at night saying that they’d spoken to him. At the time I lived alone and was alone in my house when I listened to the voicemail; it made me feel terrified. I really didn’t know how they were going to respond, whether they were going to retaliate. They should have made me aware this was going to happen and that I was with someone so that I could make sure I was in a safe space. I found it appalling and very traumatic”

Furthermore, the frequency and quality of communication was said to dwindle over the course of the investigation, especially after an official statement had been made. As such, some participants felt responsible for “all the chasing” for updates on their case.

“She called initially, and she was lovely. There was then silence for one to two months. She emailed then asking if I’d like an update. She didn’t call when she said she would. She would promise information then she didn’t have it. There were times when she said we had murders which were live cases and had taken priority. That was rubbish”

“I would go months not hearing anything from her and I would leave emails and voicemails for her, but she’d never reply ... she just couldn’t be bothered”

“It [the communication] was quite full-on at the beginning but after six weeks it almost stopped, and I was the one who then had to contact them”

Survivors reported some impersonal and inappropriate communication

The way in which information and updates were communicated was problematic in some cases, with much of the dissatisfaction stemming from survivors:

- Being contacted during anti-social hours (late at night or very early in the morning for example);
- Not being offered or refused face-to-face contact with the police, even when this mode of communication was requested;
- Only being communicated with via text, which was deemed impersonal and unprofessional; and
- Having several points of contact throughout, which lent itself to disjointedness and inconsistency.

There were also issues noted in the way participants with protected characteristics were communicated with. An individual with learning disabilities said that the police only directly corresponded with their mother, and that they would either find out about updates second-hand or not at all. This was frustrating as they were fully capable of receiving and comprehending information about their case. In contrast, a BAME survivor whose first language is not English struggled to understand the information they were given but did not feel confident or comfortable to say so.

“I thought it was quite inappropriate because there was information passed on to my Mum that I didn’t want her to know. It wasn’t done very sensitively. I understood everything I was told, but sometimes my mum withheld information from me to try

to protect me. I only found out about it afterwards, but I wish she'd told me at the time because it would have been really useful"

"I didn't grow up here...I often couldn't understand what they were saying. It was very confusing"

It is worth noting that in some cases, difficulties around communication were exacerbated by the survivors' main point of police contact working part-time or shifts, having time off due to illness, or leaving their post and not being replaced. However, they were mostly thought to be the result of apparently unsupportive, dismissive, and somewhat aggressive attitudes, which often led to fractious relations.

"A big issue was that my main contact worked part-time and had three young children. She didn't seem to have time for me ... it was just a job for her"

"They were also quite aggressive towards me, which would cause me to be aggressive towards them. I am still traumatised by it"

"I didn't even meet my detective until a year or so after I first reported, and she was very derogatory about me ... She made a remark about me not asking to meet with her, but I didn't even know this was something I could do"

"The communication came in peaks and troughs, but I found dealing with them so stressful and triggering (due to victim-blaming, their aggressive attitude) that I would rather not have heard from them unless it was an emergency"

Survivors also reported a lack of information about CJS processes

There were also accounts of the police failing to provide detailed information about what each stage of the CJS process would entail, including the responsibilities of the different agencies. Some participants said they were left in the dark about what to expect and from whom, while others put the onus on themselves to seek out the required information, which was both time-consuming and confusing.

"They kept making me out to be this difficult, reluctant person, but no, it was that I didn't know the process"

"Something I really want to point out is that there is not a clear protocol of what happens after you give the statement"

"Overall, I felt really uninformed. No-one seemed to be able to give me any knowledge about what to expect, about how certain things would be used in the case ... I look back on it and blame myself, feel like I somehow did myself wrong"

It was thus suggested that the police should provide rape survivors with an all-encompassing information pack (available in paper and digital formats) whereby "everything is one place."

"I don't feel the police did a good job of providing information or support at all. It would have been good to have some form of document which explains the next steps, or even just an email. Obviously, there is stuff available online, but it shouldn't be up to the victim to source all of that. There should be a pack provided on what to expect"

“It would also be useful to have all this information in one place which tells you the process, what to expect, average timelines, what the police should be doing – but also resources to support and self-help. I had to research a lot of this myself and what is provided is not a true picture of what really happens”

There were several examples of supportive and responsive main contacts within the police

Despite the negativity reported above, there were several accounts of satisfactory communication from the police. In most of these cases participants were given a consistent main contact, which was useful not only for receiving and asking for updates, but also rapport-building. Indeed, several survivors described their main contact as supportive, caring, responsive, and genuinely invested in their case.

“You could tell she wanted him to be caught just as much as I did. It was really good to have that mutual drive for that. It felt like we were in it together”

“I always felt I could call her when I felt unsafe after I’d seen him drive by my house. She never made me feel like I was hassling her”

“One of the good things they have is if you get a liaison officer who you stick with, regardless of if they go to another role. I can talk to her at any time. If I need any advice, I email her. They are always brilliant”

The provision of regular, transparent and clear communication makes a positive difference to survivors

The police were also praised by several survivors for providing regular, clear, transparent and timely updates – thus keeping them informed about how the case was progressing and when something important had happened. Frequent contact also involved general welfare checks, which reminded participants that they were supported and cared for.

“When he was brought in and interviewed, my officer would ring me periodically to update me. For example, he’s just come out of the interview for a break but will be going back in shortly. She told me when the case was sent to the CPS. I was told when he was bailed and what his bail conditions were”

“Up until the charge, they were very good with contact. It would either be the detective constable or the SOIT who could contact me. Every time there was an update, they would call me within 24 hours of anything happening”

“They would also do a courtesy check in every so often – say every six weeks – even if there weren’t any updates”

Some participants were also pleased that the information they received was communicated in a way they understood and that suited them, which was enabled by them being asked how they would prefer to be contacted at the outset.

“I had a discussion with her about how I like to be contacted, and I told her that I’m one of these people who likes to know exactly what is going on when it’s

happening. So, she'd always ring but ask if it was ok for me to speak – she knew I had kids I had to get to school. She was very thoughtful”

“My case officer gave me the choice; I could either have regular phone calls (every few weeks) or just be contacted if something is actually happening or developing”

“She would never sugar coat anything; she would always be blunt and tell me how it was which is what I wanted. She really helped set my expectations around stuff, like not necessarily expecting him to be reprimanded for breaking his bail conditions (because it was hard to prove)”

There was a feeling of unpreparedness around the future stages of the case and the CJS process

As reported above, only a minority of participants felt that each stage of the CJS process was well-explained to them. However, those that did receive good communication in this area commended the police for explaining what would need to happen for the case to continue to court, as well as the roles of the different CJS agencies. This helped them feel less daunted and more prepared for the next steps.

“Once I was given a new officer and she was very upfront with me. She said if there was enough evidence then it would go to court and I would have to attend to give evidence. Everything was laid out pretty clearly. She said that it would go to her sergeant, who would decide whether to NFA it then and there or send it on to the CPS. I was also told that the CPS take a while to make decisions and not to expect anything in a few weeks. She was really good”

“Once the case was a bit further on and it had gone to the CPS their roles were explained”

“[The police] explained what would happen and handed me a load of leaflets so that I could understand the process a bit better, which was helpful”

“My SOIT officer explained process of the CJS and what it would entail but always caveated that they may not get there”

“[My main contact] told me all about each part of the process and who does what bit. So, what the CPS does, what the high court does, and what would happen if I went to court. I preferred to know it all upfront; if I didn't, I would have been so scared”

Timeliness of reporting and investigation

The majority felt the reporting and investigation process took too long

Consideration of an acceptable length of time for reporting and investigation was largely subjective, but for the majority this stage was too long, often taking many months, or in some cases years, to complete. What is more, most survivors were either not forewarned or misinformed about the likely timescales.

When asked what they thought had contributed to the lengthy timeframe of their case, participants gave the following reasons:

- Delays between initial reports and statements;
- Delays in questioning suspects;
- The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (though, again, this was recognised as being outside the control of the CJS);
- Suspects giving false or misleading information to the police and derailed investigations;
- The police sending incorrect documentation to the CPS;
- Understaffing within the police; and
- Poor or inconsistent communication between two police forces, where incidents took place outside of a survivors' resident area.

Moreover, one participant's case was put on hold for 12 months because they were later accused of a crime by the suspect, which was prioritised over the rape allegation.

Many survivors described feeling disappointed, unsafe, de-prioritised, and that their lives had been "put on hold" while their case was ongoing. Others simply did not feel prepared to have to wait so long for their investigation to conclude. The situation was often made worse by aforementioned issues around poor communication, which in many cases offered little explanation as to why the process was so protracted.

"[The police need to] take immediate action. It is too long of a process. I wasn't leaving the house for months on end because I was so scared for my life ... There needs to be more immediate action and they need to look at the bigger picture of what's going on to keep women safe"

"The whole process in general took a lot longer than I anticipated, every single element of it. I know that when the police passed the case over to the CPS, maybe three or four different people picked it up which is why it was really drawn out"

"I'd ask why there were delays and would just be told these things do take a long time. When I'd ask about estimated timeframes, they'd say, 'How long is a piece of string?' The whole thing dragged out for so long means it's constantly with you"

"I really wasn't prepared for the scale or the length of the whole process, which makes it very hard to move on or gain peace. It caused a lot of ongoing stress and trauma. The police did somewhat apologise saying they'd been really understaffed, but does that really justify a case to be open for three years before it is NFA'd?"

A handful thought the timescales were too short

For a small number of participants though, the process felt rushed. In these cases, the reporting and investigation stage was completed within a few weeks, which led survivors to feel that the police had not taken it seriously, not investigated fully and/or 'cut corners'.

“I felt like the whole case was too quick; I felt like they just wanted to get it out of the way”

“It all happened really quickly, which wasn’t necessarily a good thing, because it seems the police expected it to be NFA’d from the outset, and there was minimal investigation”

A timeframe of three to four months was generally deemed acceptable

Ultimately, only a few participants felt that length of the reporting and investigation stage (usually around three to four months) was acceptable in their case – and in the main these survivors had had their expectations managed at the outset, having been forewarned about the potential for a long, drawn-out process.

Experiences of withdrawing the allegation

The main reasons for withdrawing were around a lack of support and information from the police

Although a number of participants considered withdrawing from their case due to frustrations with the police, only three ultimately did so – all during the reporting and investigation stage.

Two participants decided they did not feel sufficiently supported to continue. For one individual, withdrawal was a consequence of the police failing to refer them to appropriate external support, despite asking them to do so on numerous occasions. The other was specifically disappointed by the attitude of their detective, who was considered judgemental and disbelieving. For both survivors, this came to a head when they did not feel supported enough to make a video-recorded statement, which was at the point at which they dropped out of the case.

“From the moment I got into the police car I didn’t feel supported. I felt judged by them. I went to meet with the detective before arranging the statement and I didn’t like his attitude; I didn’t feel comfortable with him ... I didn’t feel believed. A lot of it was focused around how much alcohol I had drunk, when to me that was irrelevant. It felt like he kept trying to catch me out on things and making out I was lying about really small things”

“I went away, initially [after the initial reporting], thinking she would get in touch with Survivor’s Network, but she didn’t. She didn’t give me any support or information. I was just sent home with no help and told to come back a week later to do the video interview – which I didn’t go to because I didn’t feel I had received enough support. I wanted to wait until I had been referred to the support networks and felt I had that the support to do the interview. I felt really let down”

Neither survivor felt that the police proactively explored why they were withdrawing from their case and whether anything would help change their minds, nor could they remember signing a withdrawal statement: they instead received an email asking them to confirm their decision. Moreover, both suspected that the case continued without their consent as they later found out the suspect had been questioned/arrested, which, for one, caused anger and a feeling of betrayal.

“The officer just emailed me saying, ‘Just to confirm, you are withdrawing?’ and I replied saying, ‘Yes I am’ ... I didn’t sign any statement. There was nothing. They should have pressed on why I wanted to withdraw. They could have at least questioned it”

“I also heard through word of mouth that someone had been arrested and released, but no-one had talked with me directly about it and I felt like that was something I should have been told”

“I think they must have carried on without my consent. Because they called him in for questioning. I had no idea they were continuing with it until I got arrested. It made me feel very betrayed. I had decided that I hadn’t continued with it, so how dare they? I was very angry”

Importantly, both survivors said that they probably would have continued with their case had they felt better supported.

“I would have continued with it if I’d had the support, but I didn’t. If I’d know about Survivors Network, where my ISVA is from, if I’d known about all these charities who could help ... I was completely clueless about it because this had never happened to me before”

“The police could have done so much more to support me right from the offset ... Having a kinder person in charge would have made the biggest difference; someone who was non-judgemental, who made more of an effort. It’s a very lonely place to be when something like this has happened and you want someone to look after you, but to them it’s just a process”

The third participant decided not to proceed with their case once they had given their video recorded statement, for which they gave several reasons that mirrored some of the main reservations around reporting mentioned in Chapter 2. Firstly, they had previously been victim-blamed by a therapist and were concerned about others sharing the same view. Secondly, they felt scared for their safety as a result of possible retaliation on the part of the suspect in their case. Lastly, they did not think they were emotionally strong enough to go through the CJS, especially as they were convinced that justice would not be done because of the well-documented low conviction rates in rape cases, a lack of hard evidence and concern about their rights due to not having UK citizenship.

“I didn’t want to have to go forward with something that a lot of people might consider something that I made up ... I don’t want to be exposed to this. The culture in general is very biased in those terms ... I didn’t want to tell anyone. I didn’t tell my best friends or family. The only person I spoke to for six months was my [former] therapist...She blamed me for being drunk and didn’t understand what I was talking about. I kind of believed her”

“I didn’t go forward with it in the end because of what I learned during the testimony ... I asked what my chances are; what does going forward with the accusation entail? ... It is very low, the percentage of convictions, even when you have evidence, and I didn’t have evidence”

“The fact that I don’t have evidence, the fact that he is from a good family and has connections and he is British, and I am an immigrant. I don’t have citizenship in the UK, I don’t have the same rights...”

There were various factors that possibly could have persuaded this survivor to continue with their case, which included more reassurance from the police around how their privacy and safety would be protected, as well as being offered an ISVA from the outset. That said, the survivor was very complimentary about the way in which the police treated them in general and appreciated that officers accepted their decision to withdraw without “pushing” them to continue.

“I would have appreciated more information on my options, also in terms of requiring an ISVA. I was never informed of that, and it could have made a difference”

“I didn’t feel pushed or pressured...She was very matter of fact and not cold at the same time. She was very clear and straightforward at explaining to me what my options were”

It is also worth noting here that a few participants (who continued with their cases) felt the police had attempted to encourage them to withdraw their allegations by continually reminding them about the low conviction rates in rape cases.

“Throughout the whole process, they said the likelihood of getting a conviction is really slim as a way to get me to drop the investigation”

Investigation actions & outcomes

Suspect identification, arrest, charging and bail

A suspect was identified in all cases included in this report, but only arrested in just over a third, and charged in a handful.

Arrests were generally timely, but there were delays around the decision to charge

Arrests tended to be made fairly quickly, which satisfied survivors and initially provided them with a sense of security and hope that justice would prevail. However, the decision as to whether the suspect would be charged or not was heavily criticised for taking far too long, making it difficult for survivors to move on with their lives.

“The CPS took their merry time over it. They also asked for stupid things which caused further delays, like asking for another statement about how long I’d had a certain phone number for, but that had to be done in four days, yet they’d had all this information for months and months and didn’t seem to go anywhere”

“It put my life on hold, I couldn’t move on. I felt like I was the one in prison”

“It took a lot longer than I thought it would. It impacted on me a lot. I started developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was very anxious and so unsettled. I was very depressed. I felt like I couldn’t live my life while waiting for it all to be over”

“What worries me, if this happens to someone vulnerable, doesn’t have a good support network around them, doesn’t have fight to chase for updates and to drive the case forward, what would happen?”

Indeed, some participants discussed having to wait between 12 months and two years to find out about the outcome of the charging process – and one said that the only reason their case concluded when it did was because they “pushed” the CPS for a decision “every single week”.

There was also dissatisfaction with the updates provided to survivors while waiting for a charging decision. Many issues seemingly stemmed from a lack of communication between the CPS and the police, which in turn left survivors uncertain as to likely timescales. Indeed, some said they had to chase the CPS for news about their case, but often heard very little, if anything, in response – and that their main police contact could seldom help because the CPS apparently refused to pass on any information.

“Every week I contacted the police to ask if the CPS decision had been made for two years. Every time I would be told, ‘No, not yet, but we’ll email them.’”

Apparently, the police aren't allowed to pester the CPS, but I wasn't prepared to wait. The police officer I was given after I did my statement was amazing! I could not fault her! But her hands were tied, there was nothing she could do anymore. She was just as frustrated as me. The lack of communication the CPS give the police is disgusting and shocking; they're told nothing"

"The police were quite frustrated with the CPS and explained that the inaction wasn't their fault"

Lack of safeguarding appears to be an issue

Participants also described feeling unsafe during this period. Indeed, nearly all arrested suspects were initially released under further investigation or on bail without any or inadequate safeguarding for the survivor, which was a particular issue against the backdrop of delays in decision-making.

In most of these cases it was felt that the police either did not see the suspect as a risk (despite the survivor – and sometimes social services and the MARAC – advising otherwise) or were too disorganised to ensure survivors were receiving the required safeguarding. For example, the police failed to refer one individual to their local Domestic Abuse Team, which was going to help acquire a non-molestation order. Moreover, several survivors said that the suspect continually tried to make contact with and/or stalked them during this time yet were not reprimanded for breaking their release conditions – and others were not told about any bail or release agreements.

"Under his conditions he wasn't allowed to contact me or go near me. But he messed about on his bail and didn't do what he was supposed to. He kept driving past my house, but because it couldn't be proved it was him, he was bailed again. He wasn't staying at the address he was meant to be staying at"

"I was never told anything about his bail. I never received a 'court warn' letter, which tells you the details of the trial and the bail, although the witnesses in the case did. It was only when I was querying about where my letter was and what information was in it that I found out he was on unconditional bail. I hadn't been told that by any officer ... Because the bail was unconditional, there was nothing in place. I was worried about him trying to make contact with me, and I did speak to them about my concerns – especially as he was a friend of my partner's – but they said because he hadn't attempted contact up to that point, they didn't deem him to be a risk as such"

For some survivors, the extent of the 'safeguarding' offered to them amounted to being asked if it would be possible for them to move home or avoid certain locations. Whilst most were unsure of what else they could do, a few managed to arrange non-molestation Orders themselves.

"I had to sort out getting the non-mol order renewed because I felt like I didn't have any protection. I was just asked if it was possible for me to move to a new house!"

"No, there was no offer of safeguarding; they just told me not to go back to the area where it happened. I couldn't go back and see my neighbours. They didn't say I couldn't, but they advised me not to. They said that if I get any contact from him, to contact the police"

“I had a nightmare because I was told that the DA team would help me with a non-mol, but I didn’t have anyone in place, so I had to chase it and do it all myself. No guidance”

It should be noted, though, that a few survivors were very satisfied with how well the police had supported them by ensuring the suspect was unable to come within a certain distance or attempt to make contact. This, together with ensuring their place of work had protective orders in place, made them feel safe and protected.

“He was released under investigation on the condition he didn’t come within a certain distance of me and didn’t contact me. They also made sure my place of work had protective orders in place. I was told by the female detective. It was communicated sensitively and in a way I understood”

“They asked me if I felt protected and made sure provisions were in place. They also liaised with my work to make sure they also put protective order in place as well”

“They offered me lots of protection, and although I didn’t take them up on most of it, knowing I had the options there and they seemed to care made a big difference ... I definitely felt safe”

Views on the case outcome

NFA outcomes were disappointing, frustrating and typically blamed on police failings

The vast majority of participating survivors received an NFA outcome, which most disagreed with. However, some were not surprised by the decision, considering it somewhat inevitable in light of the perceived poor handling of their case. Indeed, nearly all cases were dropped due to insufficient evidence, which participants felt was mainly a result of a failure to collect key information.

The police were also criticised for predetermining the outcome of the case from the outset, especially when there was no DNA or physical evidence – and others were disappointed that neither the police nor the CPS took past incidents and allegations against the suspect into consideration in building their cases.

“I don’t think they really looked into it properly; it sounds like they based the decisions on one text message on [the suspect’s] phone”

“I was furious. I feel like they’d made the decision pretty much as soon as I first walked through the door. I felt like they’d wasted years of my life for nothing ... They didn’t really investigate it at all. They just invited him for a chat, basically”

“There were several avenues they could have looked at but didn’t. They never even questioned him about it ... they said they were going to look at a folder full of evidence that I had, which they never did”

“I wasn’t surprised because they didn’t investigate – they just asked him in for a few questions, took his word for it and closed it”

“I didn’t feel happy with it at all. I think they should have considered that this wasn’t the first rape allegation made against him”

Several, on the other hand, were surprised about the outcome, arguing that enough evidence had been collected to justify a charge. Again, it was suggested that the suspect’s version of events was given precedence over the evidence, and others had been explicitly told that a jury would fail to understand the situation/incident, or that there were concerns around their capacity to cope with the court process (an assessment with which they disagreed).

“They just said there wasn’t enough evidence. They said that he said it was consensual and that was it. They just sort of took his word for it. They said there was no evidence even though a DNA test provided that the baby that I fell pregnant with was his”

“She said we believe you, but a jury won’t as they don’t understand the psychology behind what has happened. I don’t know how this could be changed”

“They also said they were concerned about putting me on the stand because at the time I was going through a lot emotionally and they were worried about my strength as a witness”

One survivor was particularly shocked by their outcome: they had been assured they had “a strong case” with enough evidence, yet it was dropped a few weeks before the trial date. This they described as “cruel and devastating”. Although the reasons as to why this happened were outlined, they did not support them and described the decision as “the decriminalisation of rape.”

“All the way through the three and a half years I’d been told it was a strong case. I had been given a false sense of security because there was evidence and it was going to court, so the decision shook me. And it had impacted not only me, but also family, partner, friends (some of whom were witnesses) ... They explained all the reasons behind it, but it sounded like nonsense to me. It did hurt to come that far, and it all be for nothing. It made me wonder if they’d made a mistake with charging him in the first place and dragging me through all of this. It felt cruel and like they’d given me a false hope”

In terms of how an unsupported NFA made them feel, several survivors described a lack of closure, as well as feeling angry, upset, let down and that the whole process had been a waste of time and energy. Some also said they felt unsafe as the suspect was free to do as they pleased, and that they were viewed by others as “a liar” due to the lack of a conviction. The general feeling was that:

“I feel so let down and disappointed that I didn’t get my day in court. There was absolutely no sense of justice”

More specifically, two participants who were going through family court proceedings with the suspect at the time of their interview explained that the NFA outcome had left them with no protection for themselves and their children. As part of the conditions of family court, they were also obliged to have regular communication and shared counselling sessions with the suspect (who, in the eyes of the law, was innocent); a deeply traumatising experience.

“Because of [the lack of criminal charge], I’ve had massive issues in the family courts. All I get is ‘why don’t you want him to see the children?’ and I’m not allowed to say because there hasn’t been a conviction ... they’re not acknowledging it. So effectively, my voice has also been taken away within that realm. It has a knock-on effect. Now I’m forced to break my own non-molestation order because the family courts say I have to see and speak to him. It’s been very upsetting”

Survivors noted poor communication and support around outcomes

Communication and support around case outcomes was reportedly lacking, further adding to participants’ frustration and distress. For some, adequate explanations of NFA decisions were not forthcoming until the police/CPS were pushed for them, either by the survivor themselves or by a support organisation on their behalf. However, responses – if indeed there were any – were apparently often minimal, victim-blaming and condescending.

“My support worker at [support service] warned me that it would probably just be a boilerplate letter with very little information, which is not right, and that I had to push to make sure I got an explanation. So together we wrote a letter to the police asking why they had dropped the case and they sent back the most condescending email. It basically said it is unfortunate that sometimes sex between two consensual adults ends up in rape! It then said that I wasn’t a credible witness ... After three years I was victim-blamed”

“To be honest, I wasn’t even sure what the official tagline was ... I knew it wasn’t going any further, but I didn’t really understand what that meant. It was when my ISVA started asking me about the outcome that I realised that I hadn’t really been given any information about it and the official term ... I mean, they may have told me, but at the time my head was spinning and if they did it certainly wasn’t clear”

“They just said there wasn’t enough evidence. They didn’t really explain why”

“I didn’t really find out until I got a letter, which didn’t really explain anything”

There was also widespread dissatisfaction among survivors about the way they were informed about the case outcome - in many cases via a short letter, email or voicemail. This was considered impersonal and unsupportive, and there was a clear preference for a two-way conversation over the phone or face-to-face.

“I found out via a short email, with no information about how to appeal. They even spelled [the suspect’s] name incorrectly, which just shows [the officer’s] complete lack of care”

“The investigating officer called me one day whilst I was in a lecture, so I missed it. Within 10 minutes of the missed call, I got an email saying that the CPS had decided not to progress due to lack of physical evidence ... That day I had an awards ceremony for uni that I just couldn’t go to, I was just too sad. I expected to be communicated with about this not via email”

However, some of those who did talk to the police/CPS directly about the outcome of their case were unhappy with the way it was approached. There were accounts of

survivors receiving a phone call with no pre-warning and the news being communicated in an insensitive manner.

“I was just walking the dog one day and the third police liaison officer I had called me, made some small talk and suddenly dropped into conversation that the case was NFA’d”

“I was devastated. I found it very robotic. She said to me that you are not in the minority. That is the worst thing you could ever say. It didn’t make it any easier knowing that nearly every other woman who experiences this has to go through it, too”

“When the officer rang me to tell me they weren’t pursuing it I said, ‘So, I have just gone through months of absolute hell ... for what?’ and she said, ‘But at least you’ve had a little bit of a break from it all when he was on bail’. It was like I’d had a holiday!”

Moreover, a participant who had a face-to-face meeting with their detective inspector and SOIT officer had the impression that it was a “box-ticking” exercise to appease them rather than a genuine attempt to offer explanation and support.

“I do think that the intentions of having that meeting to tell me were good, but it did come across as quite fake and insincere. I felt like they were ticking boxes to make sure it didn’t come back to bite them...”

We spoke to one survivor whose case was due to go to court but did not as the suspect pleaded guilty beforehand: they only found out about this when they phoned the CPS to ask for an update. Furthermore, the sentencing hearing was postponed due to delays to the pre-sentencing report – which was frustrating and upsetting in itself – but once again the survivor only found out about this by calling the Crown Court for information.

“It was late on the Friday and I called the CPS to ask a few questions about the court case and they told me he has pleaded guilty – so again it was me making the first move”

“I hadn’t heard anything from the WCU, so just on the off chance, I rang the crown court, to ask what time it was [the sentencing] listed for on the Monday, and she just said ‘it’s been dropped until [date], if you want to know anything else ring CPS.’ So it was postponed, leaving me waiting another two and a half months ... I was so annoyed because it has only been delayed because Probation haven’t done a pre-sentencing report. Which is ridiculous, because sentence can go ahead without it, and they knew that this report was needed to be done. The whole thing has taken 26 months, and that’s if the sentencing hearing does go ahead in 2 months”

There were some positive experiences around how outcomes were handled

The individual whose court case was cancelled because the suspect pleaded guilty commended the police officer in charge for being proactive, passionate and “the driving force” behind the plea change. Another was confident that although their case did not make it to court, the experience of being arrested and charged has been sufficient to deter the suspect from reoffending in the future.

“My police officer had been amazing and said to the CPS and [the suspect’s] team not to bother putting in a plea unless it’s for rape and that we were not taking anything else ... Overall, it was a very good outcome. It felt like justice”

“They put pressure on offender in other ways. It hasn’t resulted in a court case, but it has given them a short, sharp shock to stop them from offending again”

Furthermore, a minority genuinely believed that the police and/or the CPS did all they could and although disappointed about the NFA outcome, acknowledged it was difficult to present a convincing case and accepted the decision.

“There wasn’t loads of evidence that he committed an offence ... I was under no illusion when the police came out that they probably couldn’t do very much about it”

“I now know that you need a lot of concrete evidence to get a conviction and I was made aware that the evidence just wasn’t there”

“I felt the police did their job, but it was the CPS that had let me down and disbelieved me”

Some participants praised their main point of contact within the police for their handling of the situation, insofar as they fully and sensitively explained the decision in person, with offers of follow-up conversations once the survivor had digested the outcome.

“My officer asked me to come to the station...which I much preferred over receiving an email or a text, which I think would have been really impersonal. She explained why the evidence wasn’t deemed to be enough ... she explained it really well. I got it. She said I could come back and go through it again if I needed to”

“I felt quite comfortable about how they went about it ... my point of contact said she was working the whole of the next week, and if I had any questions or concerns, I could still phone her”

“My detective was adamant that he would not give me the news over a text message and insisted on calling on me and offering a follow-up meeting, which I took him up on”

“I had the meeting and they explained there wasn’t enough evidence beyond reasonable doubt. I asked questions about some of the evidence which I felt was strong enough and they explained why it wasn’t. All of this was fine, and I understood”

A final participant was pleased with the follow-up CPS letter they received (following a face-to-face meeting about the outcome), which comprehensively explained why their case had been NFA'd. However, they were also of the view that their experience was atypical because they “demanded answers”, and that most survivors receive a generic letter, which should not be the case.

“They said they would follow it up with a CPS letter. I had heard that these letters are usually really bad but mine wasn't; it was a really extensive, seven-page letter. I felt like I was given VIP treatment because I asked questions and demanded answers”

The Victims' Right to Review Scheme and Appeals

Explanations of the Right to Review scheme were rare, and some survivors were discouraged from using it

Most of the survivors whose cases were NFA'd were not offered information about the Victims' Right to Review (VRR) scheme unless they specially enquired about it or were informed about it by the support organisation they were in contact with at the time. A few others also complained about not being proactively informed of other schemes such as that run by the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (CICA), nor how to go about making a formal complaint relating to their case.

Several participants said they were dissuaded from using the VRR scheme by the police, whereas another was never re-contacted about it after expressing interest.

“The detective explained what would happen if I chose to do so, but I said no. I felt that he was saying, in so many words, that there was no point without new evidence”

“[The police officer] did explain it but said it wouldn't make any difference because they had already made their decision. I couldn't face putting myself through the disappointment again”

“No one contacted me once within the three-month time frame to see what my decision was around whether to review or not - even though they said they would. It made me feel like they didn't care about the case. My ISVA even tried to contact my detective but heard nothing back”

Similarly, another individual – with the help of their support organisation – appealed their case decision via email, to which they had received no response at the time of their interview.

“I forwarded the letter to [support service], who agreed that the reasons given for the NFA did not sound right and drafted an email ... This was months ago, and they've not responded, but [support service] has chased them every week!”

There was general resignation that outcomes would remain unchanged

A few survivors said they simply could not face going through another process that, they felt, would likely result in the same outcome and ultimate disappointment.

“I was given the Right to Review, but I didn’t think I could cope with doing the process and ultimately, I didn’t think he would end up being charged, so I decided against the review”

“They said I could appeal it, but I didn’t feel like I wanted to. I had lost faith, to be honest”

“[STO] said there wasn’t enough evidence to charge him, but if I wasn’t happy with the outcome, I could go to the police website and ask for my case to be reviewed by an independent of eyes. I didn’t ask for it to be re-reviewed because in my heart of hearts there was not enough with no forensic evidence”

There was one particularly negative experience of the scheme

One participant who did decide to use their Right to Review described it as a generally very negative experience because: they and several witnesses were contacted for the Review without any pre-warning or time to prepare; and ultimately being told that the case had once again been NFA’d was traumatic, especially as they were required to go to a police station they had not been to before to receive the news, which was “frightening and exposing”. The survivor also described the detective who delivered the news as disbelieving and aggressive, and alleged the use of “inappropriate comments” about their sexuality that demonstrated a complete lack of understanding, if not actual discrimination. Moreover, it took four months for the Review to conclude, during which time the survivor could not access required therapy due to the case being ongoing.

“It did drag it out and meant I couldn’t have the counselling I wanted because I wasn’t allowed to talk about it!”

Experiences of court

Three cases included in this evaluation had been scheduled to go to court but two did not proceed due to the suspect pleading guilty beforehand in one instance, and the CPS deciding to drop the case in the other.

Pre-trial support and communication

All three participants experienced issues prior to their scheduled court dates and did not feel they were provided with adequate communication, information and support to prepare for the upcoming process. The principle issues encountered were: a lack of written information about the trial, despite witnesses having received such; non-responsiveness to questions raised from neither the police, CPS nor Witness Care Units (WCUs); being denied or not offered pre-trial visits – or having them cancelled; a lack of practical legal advice; and changes in key contacts within the police, which further exacerbated poor communication.

“In the run up to going to court there was key information I wanted to know ... I had lots of questions, but my SOIT wasn't answering my calls or texts. I ended up calling the 101 number to get the email address of the detective ... There was also a change in detective constables after the charge. I was informed about this but wasn't given any contact details. They did arrange a meeting, but it was cancelled two hours before it was due to take place”

“I was going to go into court completely blind ... I wasn't told about what to expect. I was just told I'd meet all the personnel on the morning of the trial”

An additional complication was that two of the three planned court cases were scheduled to run during the Covid-19 pandemic, adding to survivors' anxieties – particularly with respect to possible delays. However, while recognising that the impact of the pandemic was out of the CJS' control, the survivors said there was little, if any, reassurance and support offered around the implications for their cases. Unfortunately, these concerns were founded insofar as one case was postponed for six months (and eventually dropped altogether), and while the other did go ahead as intended, the new health and safety regulations meant the survivor's pre-trial visit was cancelled. No alternative, such a virtual tour, was offered, which left them feeling unprepared and especially nervous about attending court for the first time.

Further specific issues were raised around a lack of support from WCUs at the pre-trial stage. One participant said the WCU had “assumed” their SOIT officer was offering them support (which they were not) and therefore focused their attentions on the witnesses. A second was disappointed they were not given a single point of contact within the WCU, that the team seemed disinterested and that no-one was able to provide them with meaningful advice there and then. The third participant criticised

their Witness Care Officer (WCO) for using what they considered to be insensitive and unprofessional language during a pre-trial visit.

“I did go for a walk around the court so that I could see what it was like inside. But some of the language which was used during that walk around ... I wasn't sure about it. For example, I was told, 'You will stand there and give your side of the story.' It's not a story!! I think they need to learn how to speak to people a bit. Refer to it as evidence not a story”

“If I wanted to speak to the WCU it was me ringing them. So, it was a week before the trial was going to start and I was ringing them because I hadn't heard from anyone, to ask what was happening and where we go from here, to check if everything was in place and going ahead. But all you seem to get is, 'I'll have to e-mail someone and let you know'. No-one seems to be able to tell you in the same phone conversation what you need to know. They always have to go away and do something, and then they'll come back to you”

Experiences of court

The one participant whose case went to court outlined a very negative experience. Due to the aforementioned issues around pre-trial support and communication, they said they felt ill-prepared throughout the trial. Indeed, they highlighted “not really knowing what was going on” and described the whole experience as “terrible”, partly exacerbated by English not being their first language and the lack of support offered around that.

“I really struggled to explain myself and to work out what was going on. Back then my English was not as good as it is now, and it made it more difficult. No one ever asked whether I understood or not”

Giving evidence was a particular struggle for the survivor because the only advice they were offered was to provide yes or no answers to questions, which was not considered helpful. They explained that they often use inappropriate verbal responses to cope with stressful situations, which was probably misconstrued by the court – but could have been avoided if some support or help with managing these reactions had been offered. Moreover, other than being asked whether they would prefer to give evidence from behind a screen – which they decided against – no other special measures were discussed or offered. There was further disappointment that their Victim Impact Statement was not read out in court, as this was considered their best opportunity to have their voice heard.

“I don't know why they even asked me to do [the Victim Impact Statement] if they weren't going to use it. This also may have impacted on the verdict because in the statement I did explain that my way of dealing with the trauma is that instead of crying sometimes I [give inappropriate verbal responses]. The court may have thought that ... I wasn't taking it seriously”

The outcome was a not guilty verdict, which the survivor felt was directly linked to their lack of preparedness and the subsequently poor impression they made on the witness stand.

“I think this is why the guy was declared not guilty. If I was given the information, I would have prepared it in a way that even the barrister would have been shocked”

Furthermore, news of the verdict was delivered over a “four-minute phone call” which was “hard to take in.”

Post-case support from criminal justice agencies

Contact and support greatly reduced or removed altogether

A number of participants described being “dropped” abruptly by the police and other CJS agencies as soon as they received an outcome, and heard little, if anything at all, from anyone again which they found very difficult. Indeed, most would have welcomed a follow-up phone call or face to meeting once they had time to gather their thoughts, as well as a referral or signposting to external support. However, a few others explained that although they disagreed with the lack of post-case follow-up in principle, in practice they felt relieved because they no longer wished to have any contact with the police or other CJS agencies due to the poor treatment they received.

“There hasn’t been any [contact] since. There has been nothing. I haven’t heard from them; they have offered no other support...I have literally just been dropped. It has been quite difficult to process”

“There was no post-case support at all; I just received a short email saying the case had been NFA’d and that was it: no offer of a face-to-face meeting or any signposting to services”

“There was no information about appeals, follow-up support, nothing like ‘I’ll try to ring you again later to see how you feel about it’”

“In a way I was glad because I hadn’t had a very good experience with them and wanted them out of my life!”

Some did receive post-case contact from their main contact within the police and/or the CPS but had to wait for some time before hearing from them. Moreover, it was not always felt that this communication was particularly helpful and did not provide much in the way of support; although several participants rationalised that there was not much that could be said or done by that point.

“There were two people I was in contact with about the case: one of them was a man who I didn’t have much to do with, but the woman, who I spoke to more, went on holiday right after the trial so I didn’t have contact with her until she was back”

“I’ve also had a follow-up CPS-meeting more recently and I have another booked in ... However, they haven’t really ensured that I have anything in place. I think because they know I have an ISVA they’re just passing the buck onto her”

There was also frustration around the lack of responsiveness and communication about post-case queries raised by survivors in relation to practical matters, such as

when they could expect to receive personal items which had been taken as evidence, for example, clothes, their mobile phone, as well as other personal information relating to them and the case.

“I asked if I could get my clothes back but heard nothing back, so I had to chase that. They haven’t really kept me in the loop about it but I do know that they’ve requested that the physical evidence is sent back to [the local police station]”

“I’ve also put in requests with the police and CPS to access my personal information relating to the case and it’s taking a long time for them to get back to me”

In some cases, good follow-up support was offered

However, there were a minority of positive comments, which were mainly around survivors being able to get in touch with their main police contact at any time with questions, to have a general chat, or discussion around support referrals. Several discussed the importance of the long-term nature of this communication and support and explained that months later they still considered their STO to be an important part of their support network.

“I’m still in touch with the LAGLO. His main role now is to set up support for me”

“I felt that [officer assigned to the case] really cared, and that was nice. It never felt like she had forgotten about me after 1.5 years of investigation. She still kept in touch. I still feel I could get in touch with her now if I wanted to”

“[STO] said I could come back in at a later date to discuss the outcome more, which I did the next week. She made me a cuppa and took me through everything. She was really there for me. She said if I ever needed anything, she was only a phone call away. A month on, I still feel supported by her”

“She keeps in touch to see if everything is alright, to check whether I need any help with the impact statement. So, yeah, I still have a really good dialogue with her”

Experiences of support services

Accessing support

The type of support accessed and how survivors found out about it varied

Everyone had received at least some support from organisations beyond the criminal justice agencies. These mainly included (but was not limited to) voluntary sector services such as: Rape Crisis; Survivor's Network; GALOP; and Women's Aid. A small number of participants also accessed support via statutory partners such as social services and Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs).

The type of support participants sought varied from individual to individual, but included:

- Counselling and psychotherapy (for example, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy [CBT]; Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing [EMDR]; and other types of trauma-based therapy);
- Peer support whereby survivors could safely talk to others with similar experiences;
- Advocacy and practical advice (for example, legal support, help making the initial report to the police, preparing for court, applying for protective orders and appealing case outcomes); and
- Assertiveness and preventative courses.

Crucially, though, there were inconsistencies in terms of how participants came to access this support. Only around half were referred to external services by the police (and even then, only after being asked to do so in some cases), whilst others found out about and accessed them through their own research, via friends/family or other organisations such as social services.

“[Support service] has been wonderful, really brilliant. But I was only referred to them because I kept asking the police if there was anyone, they could put me in touch with. In the end, they said that they maybe knew of somewhere, and eventually I was sent to them”

“The police probably should have been the ones to refer me, but I'm very much a sink or swim person which means I made the strength to survive and do what I needed to do to make sure I didn't sink. I knew I was the one who needed to do all these things because no one else was going to do it for me”

Whether participants were assigned an ISVA also varied; some expressing disappointment that they were never told about the service and how to access it, while

others regretted that it took so long to acquire an ISVA due to the lack of timely referral. Likewise, some were unaware of SARCs when asked, suggesting that greater efforts are needed in explaining these services to survivors.

“I would have appreciated more information on my options, also in terms of requiring an ISVA. I was never informed of that, and it could have made a difference. At no point was I told about this”

“I didn’t know about the ISVA ... If there was a protocol, they would have known what to tell people, and I would have known”

Positive experiences of support services

Support services helped and advised survivors in a range of ways

Encouragingly, a reasonable proportion of participants were positive about their experiences with the support services they had accessed, and had found the following particularly helpful:

- Sharing their experiences in a safe, non-judgemental space, which reduced feelings of isolation and fostered recovery

“The woman was so lovely, and I had 26 [counselling] sessions. It helped me not feel alone with everything I was dealing with, which was lifesaving at the time. After everything I dealt with, with the police, I was so relieved for somebody to be nice to me”

“I was feeling safe in the actual physical space. I wasn’t feeling like I was meeting up with people in the meeting room. That is also a sensitive issue, having to go to a place when you are traumatised and have PTSD, you don’t want to meet to share physical space with other people”

“The group of women there are amazing. It’s a safe non-judgmental place to talk about anything. The person who runs it is so down to earth. They are amazing”

- Having their experiences and feelings heard and validated

“They knew what to say. It felt good to have my feelings validated. I was confused about what happened and it was nice to have someone saying, ‘It’s not you”

- Receiving specific advocacy around reporting the incident, the investigation and the court process, as well as generally good practical support around legal advice and understanding the process and survivors’ rights

“I was so lucky to have [support service] because they’ve really fought my corner and helped me. They told me what was right and what was wrong. You assume that what the police says and does is right and in your best interests, and so many times this has not been the case. They have really helped me fight for my rights”

- Receiving support and advice from knowledgeable, well-trained and prepared practitioners

“[Support service] really met my needs. They were helpful, proactive and a pool of knowledge. I had more faith in them than the police!”

- Receiving holistic, person-centred support that focused solely on the survivor and their overall wellbeing, rather than only the criminal case and/ or incident

“[Support service] sent me documents, rang me on a weekly basis for counselling for a 6-month period, which reduced to fortnightly when they thought I was getting a bit better. It was really good. She emailed me anything she thought would help, such as therapy care information, hints and tips on getting better sleep. One of the best aspects of it is that they didn’t really care about the case or the investigation; they just wanted to know how I felt. I felt so much stronger from them supporting me”

- Having support workers who were genuinely on the survivors’ side and separate from the CJS

“These people connected with me better; they had really good interpersonal skills. Their communication was also really good compared with the police; even during Covid. It really felt that I had an impartial person who wasn’t from the police or CPS who was completely on my side”

Moreover, the majority of survivors who were allocated ISVAs were very impressed with and appreciative of the wrap-around service they provided, which included emotional support during key points in the survivors’ journey; explaining the CJS process; actively helping them to report an incident and appeal outcomes; and advocating on their behalf. Survivors also described having a close working relationship with their ISVA and feeling genuinely cared for. This support was considered invaluable by those able to access, which emphasises the importance of referring all rape survivors who are known to the police to the service.

“My ISVA explained the whole process to me of what happens when I go to the police, what happens afterwards. She was so good at explaining what I can do, and how she can support me through it”

“I didn’t even know what an ISVA was before the police put me in touch with the service. They were very supportive at the SARC, sat me down and spoke to me for 10 to 15 minutes to try to distract me from what was happening ... She was the most important part. Never questioned me about the case; they were just there to support me. If I hadn’t been updated about the case by the police, they would get in touch with them for me to try to get some quick updates. She always kept in contact with me. They just cared about me and my welfare. They highly met my needs. She was always friendly and cheerful”

“What I really needed more than anything was support around the process (of reporting) and what that would look like, and that’s where my ISVA helped. They have been the saviour through the whole process to be honest. I always know they’re just a text away and will always tell me when they’re on annual leave so I know when I can contact them. They never just dealt with the police case; if I was having a bad day, he was happy to talk to me about that, which was really lovely”

“MY ISVA was great. She helped me file a compensation request. She also signposted me to how make a complaint against the police, which I chose not to.

She was like the middle person for me, and step in on my behalf for all sorts of things”

The open-ended aspect of the support was also important; several participants continued to receive support after their case had ended or were told that they were welcome to re-contact the service in future if needed.

“I decided when it was time to stop using them, but they said they were always on the end of the phone if I need it”

“My ISVA is still willing to support me even though the case is over, and is keen to help me fight the CPS decision and has put me in touch with the Women’s Centre for Justice”

Negative experiences of support services

There were also a number of barriers to accessing the right support

Some survivors (a similar proportion to those reporting positive experiences) raised some issues with and limitations of external support, possibly as a result of under-resourcing and underfunding. These included:

- Long waiting lists and delays responding to initial requests for help, especially for counselling and psychotherapy

“My only concern around support services are that they are way over capacity; they don’t have the time for the amount of people they deal with. It means they can’t give everyone the perfect experience. They’re overstretched and underfunded. It’s the same with Victim Support and the Victim Care Unit. They don’t have the tools to manage the caseload and therefore everything is really fragmented”

“Once I realised the police weren’t getting me any support, I contacted Rape Crisis via email. No-one got back to me, which is not uncommon because they have so many people to get back to. They want to help but they don’t have the resources”

“I keep having to go on waiting lists, and whilst I wait I’m on my own, which is not good because I self-harm quite badly and have suicidal thoughts”

- Insufficient length and number of sessions

“My only regret is that I didn’t see her privately [rather than through support service] so that I could have had more sessions ... People who have been through trauma like this are not going to get over it in six weeks, or 20 sessions”

- Access is a ‘postcode lottery’ (for example, one participant explained that due to a lack of funding in South London [where they live], the support service they approached encouraged them to pretend they lived in North London in order to receive a referral)

“When I accessed [support service], they said there was no funding in South London and asked if there was a friends or family North London address I could use to get support! I felt very uncomfortable about lying about my address!”

There was also some negative feedback about practitioners' attitudes, approach and/or understanding of working with rape survivors, including:

- Coming across as insincere or disinterested, with little effort made to build a rapport

"I think for something like this, you need to feel like there is a connection, that they genuinely care. And I don't think I really got that with her. I think it was a personality thing rather than anything else"

"A lot of people offered me help, and it's well and good talking about it, but if you don't know the person, how can you help? It's also easy enough to offer help but not being genuine about it and not meaning it"

- A lack of understanding around trauma recovery, which was expected to be a linear process

"I can have a good month, followed by a really crap two weeks. But too often, counselling does see it as linear and sometimes fails to acknowledge that sometimes you can't completely heal or take away the memories"

- Support workers and services lacking flexibility – for example, insisting that survivors travel long distances for sessions and arranging meetings in the area where the incident happened

"I was very lucky that my work is flexible as the ISVA wanted very fixed times"

"My support worker was frightened of the perpetrator turning up at her house, possibly due to lack of experience in dealing with these types of cases, so insisted we meet in a coffee shop, which was difficult for me because she didn't drive"

"Because the rape happened in North London, all the support came from there ... By the point of the investigation I had moved out of North London and it was really time-consuming and draining to keep travelling. Something available for me in my area would have been good rather than feeling tied to an area. Also, if this is the area where the rape took place, how triggering to have to access support from that same area. It's extra stress on top of an already traumatic situation"

- Support groups lacking diversity and so not suiting survivors from BAME backgrounds

"[The group sessions] were good but ... it felt that some of the victims and the facilitators grew up in a sheltered middle-class environment and don't understand"

- Minimising language and inappropriate advice (from GPs especially)

"I think that GPs need to be more informed around how to deal with rape and sexual violence. I had a really bad experience with them. They just put me on diazepam for 18 months. They said, 'it is very addictive, but I think you'll be alright!' I also asked them to provide medical records and information to the police and they never referred to the incident as rape – they described it as 'problems at home.' It's like they can't bring themselves to say the 'r-word'"

In addition, several participants experienced barriers to accessing support due to the status of their case. For example, some could only receive 'pre-trial therapy' which

meant not talking about the incident(s) at all as anything they did say could be subpoenaed. In contrast, another said that a support service rejected them because the incident had happened more than 12 months prior.

“I could only have ‘pre-trial therapy’ which meant that I couldn’t talk about the assault at all! Being someone who was traumatised from the rape, I wanted to talk about it, so it was pointless. They said that every session would be written up, which the police could access if they subpoenaed it. It doesn’t really make you want to talk to someone, and I wasn’t offered the kind of therapy I would have found beneficial, so I decided not to attend ... I paid for private therapy instead and asked my therapist not to keep any private information about me”

“I later contacted the [support service] once the charges were made to ask if they could signpost me to relevant support and they shot me down immediately. Because the rape had happened over 12 months ago, I was told they couldn’t help me”

How could support be improved?

Most of the suggestions for how support organisations could improve the support provided to rape survivors related to improved third sector funding to increase access to specialist services in a timely manner.

Other key areas for improvement were:

- Better training for staff, or only assigning experienced personnel to high-risk cases;
- Offering survivors a choice of psychotherapy/counselling;
- Ensuring survivors are offered specialist support, rather than generic victim services;
- The provision of better legal counsel/intervention from the outset to ensure survivors “understand their rights”; and
- Spreading wider awareness of the type of support which is available for rape and domestic abuse survivors, and how exactly they can help – both generally and specifically in relation to refuges.

Overall thoughts

Have survivors' experiences increased or decreased their confidence in the police and other CJS agencies?

Overall, survivors reported a decrease in confidence in the police and other CJS agencies as a result of their experiences

For most, their experiences had negatively impacted on their perceptions of and confidence in the police and other CJS agencies, mainly due to:

- Being treated insensitively and with a lack of care, not taken seriously, and/or being victim-blamed

“It’s as if the police don’t care about these cases at all”

“I was dismissed, minimised, shouted at by the police”

“Ultimately, people don’t feel believed”

“I felt like my case was only being submitted to boost the numbers and make the statistics on how many cases are sent to the CPS look better. It was just going to make them look good”

“To the CJS, you’re just another case, another victim”

- A lack of support and safeguarding

“I don’t feel that there was any protection there at all. Even afterwards, the non-molestation order only lasts for so long...”

“I understand innocent until proven guilty, but to have all that evidence smacking you in the face, and he can still go around doing what he wants (on bail), including doing this to someone else...”

- Perceptions of poor case handling

“The investigation was handled so badly”

“The disorganisation. The lack of detail about things. It made me feel like I was wasting police time”

- The generally “distressing” and overly lengthy process

“It is mainly just the whole process thing. The time and how long it took and how they dragged it all out. You are waiting to hear something and then you don’t. It is just disappointing”

“The whole process is very distressing, and I felt a bit of relief when I was told it wasn’t going to go any further”

- The sense of a lack of justice

“It was a whole year of my life being constantly reminded, bringing it up and trying to process all of it not knowing what is going to happen, and then for it just to be thrown out. It just feels a bit unnecessary”

“I don’t think there’s any justice for people who get raped. It’s a crime that’s very hard to prove unless you report it as soon as it happens”

However, it was acknowledged that the system as it stands often fails survivors by design because rape is so difficult to prove and criminal justice agencies so under-resourced. As such, several participants reasoned that the police’s and CPS’ “hands were tied” to a certain extent.

Poor experiences have wide-ranging repercussions

In many cases, participants’ experiences of the CJS were described as “retraumatising” and several said they better understood why so many rape survivors choose not to report.

“Decreased. I completely understand why so many people choose not to go through with it. If I knew what I know now I probably wouldn’t have reported”

“If that is the response that people get when they report it, what is the actual point? ... People don’t want to report them because this is what happens”

Indeed, one individual even stated that they “feel more anger and hurt towards the police than I do my actual rapist.”

Some said they themselves regretted reporting the incident(s), while others had come very close to withdrawing from their case due to the way they felt they were treated. Worryingly, a high proportion of interviewees considered it unlikely that they would report such an incident again, nor would they actively encourage other survivors to do so.

“I was shocked, angered and disgusted in the way I was treated – to the point that I was almost done with it all”

“If I didn’t have such a good support network around me and if I wasn’t such a strong person, I would have thrown the towel in with the whole thing. I now know why a lot of people don’t bother reporting rape”

“I know they have a job to do, but I completely understand why people don’t report it. Had I known what I was going to have to go through with the police ... I don’t know if I’d even recommend people to report because it’s just a complete waste of time unfortunately. My experience with the police has been really negative...”

Poor treatment and a lack of support from the police and other CJS agencies also has wider impacts, such as contributing to survivors’ deteriorating mental health. This manifests as increased anxiety, depression and PTSD, suicide attempts, and a reliance on strong prescription drugs as a coping mechanism.

“It was such a long, drawn-out excruciating process. During the first 18 months I was a mess. I had been prescribed diazepam by my GP, but I was also taking street Valium and alcohol as well to try to cope with it all”

“It took a lot longer than I thought it would. It impacted on me a lot. I started developing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I was very anxious and so unsettled. I was very depressed. I felt like I couldn’t live my life whilst I was waiting for it all to be over”

A few were pleasantly surprised about some aspects of their experiences

On the other hand, a minority of participants were reassured by the way they were treated, especially by the police. These comments mainly related to the interpersonal skills and attitude of individual officers, who were described as caring, sensitive, personable, and more “human” than expected. This in turn had made these survivors feel more comfortable and confident about reporting any future incidents.

“I would now feel more comfortable about reporting to them in the future if it happened again”

“Knowing that they’re sensitive about the cases, making you feel it’s not completely out of your control, and you can talk to them when you need to”

“I was really surprised about how sensitive the police were in reality. They made me feel like I was in control”

“The police exceeded my expectations, especially in the way they supported me through the report and the statement”

“They were much more supportive than I thought they would be”

Moreover, a participant who was engaged in sex work when the incident happened praised the police for treating them with respect and without prejudice, whilst also taking their case seriously (although they also acknowledged that this does not always happen with respect to sex workers).

“I am also happy that if it did happen again, I could ring the police and they would come around and they will be absolutely fine with me ... They gave me respect in one sense because I was a decent person ... I know from speaking to other sex workers, especially male ones, I know in other police force areas they are really not very good at all. They don’t really spend the time and they don’t really know what is going on. But this police force are completely different”

Did the police and the CJS treat survivors fairly and equally?

Most did not feel they were treated fairly and equally compared to the suspect and survivors of other crime types

As previously discussed, there was a general perception among many participants that they were treated unfairly as a result of perceived victim-blaming, feeling disbelieved not taken seriously, and police officers seeming to be biased towards the suspect.

“The whole thing was so unfair. I was handcuffed when I was arrested, and he was just asked to come in for questioning and given a cup of tea”

“I was treated equally compared with other victims I think, but not compared with the perpetrator. We are not treated equally”

“The police do not treat victims of rape fairly and something needs to be done about it”

“The fact it was my husband and I didn’t fight back; I was made to feel like I almost let it happen”

Moreover, one participant’s case was put on hold for 12 months because they were later accused of a crime by the suspect, which was prioritised over the rape allegation. Another felt it was “appalling” that the suspect was able to take them to court regarding child arrangements whilst being on release under investigation for rape and harassment and having a non-molestation order against them. Both situations were deemed both unfair, which further exemplified the lack of protection in place for survivors compared with suspects.

Several participants also reiterated that they felt disadvantaged because of a particular protected characteristic, including in relation to:

- Not being offered an interpreter or additional support in the event of English not being a survivor’s first language

“I think that the fact that I’m not British. I think that really affected things. Nowadays I still struggle with my English but back then it was a lot worse; I’d only been here a year when it happened. I really struggled to explain myself”

- Not communicating directly with a survivor because they had a learning disability

“Just because I have learning disabilities, they treated me like a child”

- Misgendering a non-binary survivor (who, though, was keen to point out that they did not feel they were treated unfairly due to their gender identity)

“I feel like I was treated fairly by the system, but there was misgendering so maybe I was treated unequally”

- Ill-informed attitudes towards a survivor’s sexuality, which they believed had influenced the case outcome (the rape was the survivor’s first and only sexual encounter with a male, and the investigating officer allegedly demonstrated a complete lack of understanding of the nature of their previous relationships and the implications of the rape)

“It just showed a complete lack of understanding, if not actual discrimination, against the fact I had only had sex with women before [the incident]”

A few also cited other characteristics such as being a young female or coming across as “strong”, which they felt might have impacted on how they were treated.

“I feel like I wasn’t treated fairly by the detective because I’m female and young”

“I think that I’d always come across as a really strong person and I don’t think they thought I needed any help. But when I’m on my own it’s very different. I think they took that for granted and that’s why they never gave me much information or enough emotional support”

Interestingly, one participant suspected they had been on the receiving end of positive discrimination based on their demographic. Specifically, they felt that they sometimes received preferential treatment from the police, CPS and other legal representatives as an educated, confident white woman.

“I feel conflicted. I don’t think the outcome was fair, but I feel I have been treated well in this process, which I have trouble with because I feel like it could be because I’m a white female. That eats me up”

What would have made a real difference in improving the whole experience?

Survivors gave several suggestions for how the police and criminal justice agencies could improve the experiences of rape survivors

The majority of participants acknowledged some of the barriers around achieving a conviction in rape cases and rationalised that feeling cared for by the police and the CPS and knowing these agencies had done all they could for them would have had the biggest impact. Others, though, were more justice-focused and wished their case had at least proceeded to trial.

Participating survivors also offered the following suggestions around what would have made a significant positive difference to their views and experiences – and in turn how their feedback could be used constructively in making future improvements:

- More support and empowerment to encourage people to report rapes;
- Better organisation and proactivity around the reporting and investigation process;
- Ensuring that the whole process – from the point of reporting to the outcome – is quicker with fewer unnecessary delays;
- More transparency about the process in terms of likely timeliness and barriers to achieving a conviction, without being unduly negative or defeatist;
- More regular and detailed contact and communication throughout a case;
- Better explanations around case outcomes and possible next steps, such as the Victims Right to Review scheme;
- Better overall support for survivors from within the CJS, including: more empathetic, compassionate, non-judgemental and ‘human’ approaches; the provision of more STOs/SOIT officers who better understand the trauma of sexual violence; and giving survivors the choice of being assigned a female police officer/STO;
- Improved safeguarding by ensuring timely referrals and signposting to external organisations, allocating ISVAs and arranging injunctions to protect survivors; and
- Improved LGBT awareness.

Another key issue about which participants felt passionately was reducing partiality within the CJS, particularly in relation to victim-blaming, treating survivors worse than suspects, and biased investigations and decision-making.

“If the system was designed around victims. At the moment it’s a very victim-blaming system. It’s not designed to protect the victim: the communication, the way things are handled ... I think I got very lucky when I was given [my main point of contact at the police] and it shouldn’t be like that. It’s designed around the suspect and their rights. Lots of things don’t happen because apparently, it’s against their human rights yet mine have already been violated. I lived in a mental prison the whole time he was out on bail. Everything is geared up for them. He’ll get a third off his sentence because he decided on his own terms to plead guilty right at the last minute. The suspect is asked nicely if they could come for questioning at a time to suit them, yet I’m demanded to give information in a matter of days. It’s not fair. It’s not victim based”

“The victim is so heavily investigated; every part of their body, of their life, their sexual history is prodded and delved into after they’ve already been through so much. But it’s not the same for the rapist; they’re just asked whether it was consensual, and they say yes! ... They don’t ask the right questions. The investigation also needs to be more balanced: if they’re looking into my medical records to see if I’m crazy or a liar, then surely, they should do the same to him”

Some suggested this could be addressed via improved training, but others felt that these issues are indicative of deeper organisational problems within the CJS and that an overhauled system that is “designed around victims” is needed. Indeed, one participant suggested that specialist rape courts are required to improve conviction rates and preventative action.

“I think that there should be specialist courts which deal with sexual assault and rape. It’s such a nuanced area and the average person you speak to on the street is so misinformed and hold so many myths. I didn’t even understand consent when this was done to me. Asking a jury of peers to understand such a nuanced legal process is ridiculous. You need specialist courts and juries. I don’t even think my rapist thinks he’s a rapist; he’s just ignorant and doesn’t understand consent, which is dangerous, and he needs to be rehabilitated through education...”

Ultimately then, survivors were strongly of the view that the way in which the CJS is designed must change to ensure survivors feel believed, listened to, validated, and assured of their privacy and safety.

Conclusions

An inconsistent response

In taking the decision to report an incident or incidents of rape, several survivors said that while they had little hope of their case progressing to the stage where they could expect formal justice, they did expect to be believed, supported and treated with kindness by the police. However, the extent to which this expectation translated to reality varied among those spoken to during this review.

There were good experiences throughout the reporting and investigation stages, which survivors largely attributed to: being given explanations of what each stage of the process would entail; officers believing and taking them seriously from the outset; responsiveness and the proactive provision of updates; officers' professional, compassionate, supportive and empathetic (i.e. "human") manner and their concern for survivors' wellbeing; and being offered the choice of reporting to a female officer. Moreover, the provision of information about and support when giving their statement was especially valued by those receiving it.

Conversely, those relaying poor experiences chiefly spoke of: being doubted and disbelieved; victim-blaming and a lack of empathy; insensitive, judgemental and dismissive attitudes on the part of some officers; disorganisation and administrative errors; and poor communication and information provision around, for example, what would be required of them when giving their statement.

It would seem then that survivors are receiving inconsistent responses to reports of rape, oftentimes depending on the individuals assigned to their cases – and that a more consistent approach that ensures all officers display the behaviours that contribute to positive victim experiences is required. Related to this, it should be noted that those who were allocated a Specially Trained Officer (STO) were generally very positive about the sensitive and supportive way they had dealt with them and their case. It would thus be beneficial to allocate STOs to rape cases at the earliest possible opportunity.

Good communication and information provision is key to good relationships

As alluded to above, good communication, especially between survivors and the police, is key to ensuring the former have as positive an experience as possible of reporting a rape, any subsequent investigation and beyond. It is also crucial in fostering good relationships, which are undoubtedly aided by the provision of a single main point of contact for survivors.

Of particular importance is proactive, timely, and sensitively conveyed communication around: realistic potential timeframes (to manage expectations); investigation progress (to counter perceptions of insufficient thoroughness and 'corners being cut'); why certain items/information such as mobile phones and medical records are required and what any evidence collected will be used for (to mitigate against privacy concerns); charging decisions (to alleviate worries in the event of a lengthy process); and case outcomes (to 'soften the blow', especially in the event of an NFA or not guilty verdict). As regards outcomes especially, face-to-face contact was preferred, and the offer of follow-up post-case support gratefully received - but not always offered.

Another communication piece that would make an especially positive difference to the survivor journey is the provision of information about the CJS and its key agencies. The CJS is adversarial, daunting and often very frightening to those with no experience of it – and having some knowledge of what the process entails can help people overcome their fear to some extent. Indeed, several participants suggested an 'information pack' to help survivors navigate the system, which is worthy of consideration.

The importance of offering such information is highlighted by the reported experiences of the three survivors whose cases were due to go to court (albeit only one ultimately progressed to trial). None felt that they had been suitably prepared for the process by the police, WCU and CPS – which led the survivor who attended court to describe the experience as "terrible". Key to this was the cancellation of the survivor's pre-trial visit due to Covid-19 restrictions, and while this was recognised as outside the control of the courts, the lack of any offer of a virtual alternative was criticised.

Communication with survivors with protected characteristics was problematic in some cases, for example: an individual with mild learning disabilities said that the police only directly corresponded with their mother, even though they were fully capable of receiving and understanding information about their case; a BAME survivor whose first language is not English struggled to understand the information they were given throughout the Criminal Justice process but did not feel confident or comfortable to say so; and a non-binary participant said they had encountered insensitivities relating to their gender identity and sexuality – including frequent misgendering. None of these examples were thought to be a result of malicious intent, but rather a lack of training and in some cases experience in dealing with survivors from a range of backgrounds.

Safeguarding is important but inconsistent

The issue of safeguarding is evidently important for all survivors, but especially so for those suffering sexual violence and domestic abuse at the hands of the same person, and for those being stalked and harassed by the suspect in their case. Several, though, described the measures they were offered as "inadequate" – with some even arranging their own protection orders for example in lieu of not being offered anything by the police.

It would seem that a particularly vulnerable time in relation to safeguarding is that between a suspect being released pending further investigation/on bail (almost always without any or inadequate safeguarding for participating survivors) and an often very delayed charging decision. Where survivors were satisfied with this aspect of the process, they described how the police had made them feel safe by arranging

protective orders and ensuring the suspect was unable to come within a certain distance or attempt to make contact them – suggesting a need for consideration of such measures in all cases.

A good support service is crucial to the cope and recover process

It is clear that positive interactions with support services are essential in enabling survivors to cope with and recover from their experiences. Indeed, being able to access, for example, therapy, practical and emotional support, and advocacy services in a safe, non-judgemental environment was considered by many to be a key component in helping them heal.

Given the value of such support to survivors, it is essential that they receive a referral to an appropriate organisation as soon as possible (which is, in fact, one of their rights under the Victims' Code of Practice). Of particular value is the wrap-around ISVA service, timely referrals to which wherever possible would be of great benefit.

The appropriateness of the support offered is also an important factor to consider, as highlighted by the experience of a non-binary survivor who was signposted toward a service designed exclusively for male survivors, and the views of BAME participants that some support groups can lack diversity and so not suit their needs. Knowledge of local, regional and national support services that cater for different demographics is thus important – as is the willingness to search for and signpost survivors toward this information if necessary.

More widely, there were reports of some generic barriers to accessing appropriate support, most notably that a “postcode lottery” exists in terms of availability (long waiting lists and delays responding to initial requests were reported, especially for counselling and psychotherapy) and time limited versus open-ended provision. Importantly also, there were some reports of rape survivors being directed toward more generic victim support provision rather than toward the specialist services equipped to deal with the unique impacts of sexual violence, which again illustrates the importance of knowing what crime-specific support is available.

Repercussions of ‘poor’ survivor care

The repercussions of statutory agencies not supporting survivors sufficiently during the criminal justice process are significant. Perceptions of poor experience not only affect survivors' mental health and decrease their satisfaction with said agencies, they also reduce the likelihood of survivors reporting future incidents and encouraging others to do so.

Moreover, several survivors said they had considered withdrawing from their cases as a result of feeling insufficiently supported by the police in particular, and the two participating survivors who ultimately did so cited this as the main contributing factor. Importantly, both said they would probably have continued with their case had they felt better supported.

An unbalanced system?

Finally, several victims said they had been struck by what they considered to be an imbalance in favour of suspects within the CJS. Particular concerns were around: the length of time taken to question suspects; suspects being given longer notice periods to attend police stations to answer questions and having fewer of their personal records accessed; and their versions of events being given precedence over those of survivors.

Indeed, there was a prevalent perception that the System does not have victims at its heart, and that all too often rape survivors in particular do not feel believed, listened to, and validated. This, coupled with the widespread knowledge of low conviction rates in rape cases, is a significant deterrent to reporting that must be addressed if more of those who suffer serious sexual violence are to receive justice in future.

Appendix: Case studies of survivor journeys through the Criminal Justice System

In order to give a complete account of survivors' journeys through and experiences of the CJS, we have included three case studies below. Please note that names have been changed and some more detailed information omitted to protect survivors' identities.

Case Study 1: “Kayleigh”

Case study

Kayleigh had experienced sexual violence previously but never reported it, largely as she grew up within a culture of distrust of the police. When she did decide to report an incident, while she had little faith in the system in terms of justice, she expected to be treated with kindness, referred to support services and for a thorough investigation to be undertaken.

None of these things happened. Instead, Kayleigh described “non-existent” evidence collection (despite the availability of CCTV footage, physical evidence on clothing, and mobile phone/social media data) and lack of effective communication, respectful treatment and concern for her wellbeing. No referrals to specialist support were forthcoming, and so Kayleigh found the “helpful and validating” support she eventually received through her own research.

Overall, Kayleigh felt let down and said her confidence in the CJS – and particularly the police - had decreased. Indeed, as she no longer trusted that the police would protect her in similar situations, Kayleigh said she would never report to them again.

Pre-reporting views and perceptions

Kayleigh had experienced sexual violence previously but never reported it. However, when the most recent incident occurred, she felt mentally strong enough to go to the police and was confident that there was enough evidence to support her allegation. Kayleigh was also being stalked by the suspect and this, along with the rape, had left her feeling very concerned for her safety, further motivating her to report.

“I had previously experienced sexual violence on a number of occasions, but I either didn’t know who the perpetrator was, or I felt as if I was in a very vulnerable position. This time I was older and felt I had enough evidence. I felt I would be doing myself an injustice by not reporting. As well as raping me, he was also stalking me – which was almost more terrifying, knowing he was watching me”

Kayleigh had very mixed views of the police prior to reporting the incident. She grew up in a culture of distrust around the police generally, but also specifically in the context of sexual assault and rape. As a result, women and girls seldom reported these types of incidents due to fear of being disbelieved and/or police inaction. However, she considered the situation to be different in England, and explained that although she did not necessarily have much faith in the system in terms of justice, she expected to be treated with kindness, transparency and given the necessary support.

“I’ve had a very mixed relationship with the police. I’ve had a lot of encounters with them as a result of having quite a messy childhood. I’m from [place name] which has generally got a real issue with the police. You don’t call the police ... not for stuff like this. Women will say, ‘It’s not worth the hassle, they’re not going to believe you.’ But in England, I always believed the police were better and that it was different here. So, I would say I had a distrust of them, whilst simultaneously almost having faith in them to keep me safe”

“I knew there were high odds of it all going quite badly. But what I expected was to feel that the police were on my side. I didn’t expect to be lied to, which is what happened. I expected to be put in touch with appropriate support, and that I would be given an ISVA who really had my back. I didn’t necessarily expect much from the justice system itself, but I thought that there would be some empathy from the officers dealing with these types of cases, who were kind to me”

Experiences of making the initial report

Kayleigh was not given much time to prepare for the initial report; she disclosed to a 101 operator about both the rape and the stalking and was told a police officer would visit her some hours later. The officer who took the initial report was described as warm and personable, but (unintentionally) made “bold claims” about an imminent arrest, which gave Kayleigh a false sense of security.

“The initial response guy was really nice. He told me a little a bit about himself ... We just had a really nice, human conversation and he treated me like a normal person ... However, he made a lot of promises he probably should not have made. He said they were going to go and arrest him straight away, make sure he is taken into questioning that day ... Basically made out I was going to be safe by the end of the day and I didn’t need to worry about it. Because he made it clear he cared and that he believed me it gave me a bit of blind faith. I think the officer told me what he wished would happen, as opposed to what probably would happen. After that day I never heard from the initial officer again”

With regards to the safeguarding and support put in place at this stage of the process, Kayleigh was told about a Civil Restraint Order that she would need to arrange herself, but she decided it was not necessary because the initial officer had assured her that the suspect would be arrested immediately. Kayleigh was not provided with

an STO and despite actively asking the police about support services, was never referred to any, nor was she allocated an ISVA. She said that having worked with other rape survivors, this lack of support is fairly typical.

“I literally sat there and asked them what support was available for me and he said he would make a note in my case notes that I should be referred to appropriate services. But knowing what I do now, the vast majority of people are not referred to ISVAs by the Police. 90% of the people I see don’t even know what an ISVA is. From my point of view, an ISVA should be there right from the initial report phase”

Experiences of providing a statement

The initial police officer suggested that Kayleigh should undertake a video-recorded statement straight after the initial reporting. She agreed because she “did not know any better” and trusted the officer as a result of their kindness towards her. However, this meant that she had no time to prepare or have the process properly explained to her. Kayleigh was also asked to sign forms about giving evidence in court at this point, which she did not do due to feeling increasingly overwhelmed – but she was never asked about this again later in the process.

“I really didn’t know what to expect from the statement. When he said, ‘We’ll do it now’ I just kind of went with it, because he seemed nice. I didn’t even know I could say no! I had a similar experience a few years ago where I reported an assault and they made me do it then and there as well, so I thought it was just common practice. They flip the camera on straight away ... I didn’t like it. I didn’t have any time to prepare and I was exhausted. I was in bits”

Overall, Kayleigh felt that her lack of preparedness and confusion at this stage of the process may have contributed to the case’s NFA outcome.

“Because the case ended up being NFA’d, I question whether things would have been different if I’d had more time to prepare for the statement, had I ticked the box saying that I would be willing to stand up in court ... if I’d had time to think about them and had the appropriate support, would it have turned out differently?”

Evidence collection and investigation

The evidence collection was described as “non-existent”, insofar as neither CCTV footage, clothing, nor mobile phone and social media data were examined, despite Kayleigh offering to hand over her personal items on numerous occasions. There was also no mention of, or referral to, a SARC, and thus no DNA evidence was taken.

“There was very minimal evidence collection of any kind. I offered to give them my laptop and they said no. They didn’t take any CCTV of him entering my building, didn’t take the pyjamas I was wearing that night. I ended up sending them data from Facebook but didn’t even get a reply. I asked why they weren’t trying to gather more evidence, and the investigating officer said it was because what they had was sufficient: my statement and a few social media screenshots I sent over!”

Kayleigh also thought that the suspect was treated more favourably than her during the investigation process. For example, she had been expected to formally report the incident and make a statement within hours of calling 101, whereas the suspect was

given a few days' notice to attend the police station for questioning and, therefore had more time to prepare.

"They said they submitted a data request form for his internet, but I was told the odds of them getting it were very slim. My investigating officer told me that [the suspect] would be given four days' notice to come in and give a statement, whereas I was given six hours! I told her that by then he would have got rid of some of the evidence. And by the time he gave his statement his phone was 'broken'"

Communication and timeliness throughout reporting and investigation

Kayleigh's investigating officer came across to her as cold, uncaring, defensive, minimising, and refused to meet with her face-to-face. They also allegedly sided with the suspect, trivialising and downplaying his actions.

"The investigating officer was assigned to me later on that day, once I had made the initial report and statement. I was so excited because they had assigned me a woman. But I spoke with her on the phone and straight away I realised that she wasn't nice. I asked to meet her, because it would make me feel comfortable because it was all so emotional and scary. I offered to come to her, or for her to come to me, and she said she didn't see any relevance in meeting me"

Kayleigh also described a particularly traumatic encounter whereby the officer shouted at her when she questioned their handling of the case.

"When I questioned why the accused was being given four days' notice before giving a statement, she just started shouting at me, told me I was being ridiculous. She completely dismissed me ... All of this whilst I was crying down the phone; I must have seemed so pathetic. She just dismissed something so personal and traumatic as nothing"

Kayleigh received no communication or updates on her case unless she chased for them. Moreover, no-one explained the stages of the CJS process, which increased her uncertainty and confusion.

"Over the entire case, I think I had about five calls - which were all less than 15 minutes long – and one email from [the investigating officer]"

"Overall, I felt really uninformed. No-one seemed to be able to give me any knowledge about what to expect; about how certain things would be used in the case. I look back on it and blame myself, feel like I somehow did myself wrong"

By the time the case was being investigated, Kayleigh felt in desperate need of support, but was still not referred to relevant services.

"It was at this point I really, really needed support. I was really mentally unwell; I wasn't going to university ... My new relationship was crumbling because I couldn't cope ... I really needed them to put me in touch with support, but there was nothing"

The timeliness of the whole process was also a major issue for Kayleigh. As previously mentioned, she felt that her report and statement were rushed, and that

there was little investigation undertaken. However, there were subsequent delays due to the wrong documents being sent to the CPS which meant the case had to be re-submitted, adding a few unnecessary extra months to the timeline. During this time, she once again had to chase for updates but heard little back and had “lost all hope.”

The case outcome

The suspect was identified but never arrested or charged and the CPS later decided on an NFA outcome due to lack of physical evidence. Kayleigh had been concerned about the lack of evidence collected during the investigation and was surprised the case had even been passed to the CPS – a decision she believed was made purely for statistical reasons rather than in a genuine attempt to seek justice. Therefore, while the outcome was disappointing, it did not come as a surprise.

“Two months after reporting I was told that the case was going to be submitted to the CPS. I wasn’t confident because I knew they didn’t have any evidence. I felt like my case was only being submitted to boost the numbers and making the statistics on how many cases are sent to the CPS look better. It was just going to make them look good”

While Kayleigh would have expected a sensitive and personal approach to receiving such important and disappointing information, the news was communicated via a short email with no warning. Moreover, the email contained no information about the Victims’ Right to Review (VRR) Scheme, or any offers of an initial follow-up conversation, referrals/signposting or any form of post-case support.

“Two months after I was told that the case had been re-submitted to the CPS, the investigating officer called me one day, but I missed it. Within 10 minutes of the missed call, I got an email saying that the CPS had decided not to progress due to lack of physical evidence, and if I needed any further information, to let her know ... That was it; no information about appeals, follow-up support, nothing like, ‘I’ll try to ring you again later to see how you feel about it’”

“I expected to be communicated with about this not via email ... There was absolutely no concern or support for me at all”

Experiences of support services

Given the police did not offer any help with support referrals, Kayleigh found out about appropriate services through her own research. This resulted in her receiving counselling through a specialist support agency, which was extremely helpful and validating.

“Once I realised the police weren’t getting me any support, I contacted [support service] via email. No-one got back to me, which is not uncommon because they have so many people to get back to. They want to help but they don’t have the resources ... After a three month wait, I had the best counselling I’ve ever had. The woman was so lovely, and I had 26 sessions. It helped me not feel alone with everything I was dealing with, which was lifesaving at the time. After everything I dealt with, with the police, I was so relieved for somebody to be nice to me”

However, as noted, the counselling took some time to arrange due to high levels of demand for the service. Kayleigh would also have benefitted from more sessions, especially as recovery and healing is often a non-linear journey.

“My only regret is that I didn’t see [the counsellor] privately so that I could have had more sessions. That’s the only thing I would say, it’s a bit too short. People who have been through trauma like this are not going to get over it in six weeks, or 20 sessions. Really, you need a year’s worth. Also, healing is not linear; I can have a good month, followed by a really crap two weeks. But too often, counselling does see it as linear and sometimes fails to acknowledge that sometimes you can’t completely heal or take away the memories”

The same organisation was also assisting Kayleigh with a formal complaint about the handling of her case at the time she was interviewed. Having someone to advocate on her behalf, especially as she no longer wanted any direct contact with the police, was something she considered to be “really important.”

Overall views and thoughts

At the outset, Kayleigh had expected to be treated with care, referred to support services and for a thorough investigation to be undertaken. None of these things happened, but all would have made a positive difference to her experience. Instead, she described little regard for evidence collection and lack of effective communication, respectful treatment or concern for her wellbeing.

“It’s not like I expected much; I didn’t necessarily think he’d be sent to prison and rehabilitated. I just wanted the police to treat me like a human being with feelings but there was very little consideration of what had happened to me. I expected them to collect evidence, be more active in trying to collect evidence, I expected to be put in touch with support, I expected not to be shouted at by a police officer”

As a result, Kayleigh felt let down and said her confidence in the CJS – particularly the police – had greatly decreased. Indeed, as she no longer trusted that the police would protect her (and others) in similar situations, Kayleigh said she would never report to them again.

“It re-traumatised me. Telling someone whose job it is to protect you about this awful thing that happened to you only for them to dismiss it like it’s nothing. Before I reported, I coned myself into thinking there would be some sense of justice. I didn’t really know what that meant, but to be believed, heard. Now, I am so aware of how unsafe I am. If someone was to rape me in the street, they can because I won’t call the police. There’s something very sobering about going through something as traumatic as sexual assault and violence, going through the police, and realising that there is no-one there to protect you”

Kayleigh suggested that, going forward, more training should be provided to police officers involved in rape and sexual violence cases to ensure survivors are treated with the empathy, respect and support they deserve.

“I think more training needs to be made available to police officers who deal with these types of cases, and to make sure they specialise in them, rather than working across all sorts of different cases. How are they supposed to appreciate

the gravity of the situation if they're also dealing with drug raids, drunk and disorderly etc. It requires a specific skillset to work with someone who has been traumatised in this way. It's so nuanced"

Case Study 2: "Jessica"

Case study

Jessica reported a rape by the person she was in a relationship with. Her initial experiences of the police were negative, mainly due to: delays and miscommunications; indifferent and disbelieving attitudes; a lack of safeguarding; and no referrals to or information about specialist support (which she eventually sourced herself). Although Jessica was eventually allocated a STO who fully supported and communicated with her, she felt this was only because she "got lucky."

The perpetrator in Jessica's case was charged following a lengthy process, during which they continually broke their bail conditions without reprimand or safeguarding for Jessica (which she again eventually arranged herself). A court case was arranged, for which Jessica felt ill-prepared by the WCU, but cancelled when the perpetrator submitted a guilty plea – but there were then further delays in sentencing due to an administrative error. Jessica was not proactively contacted about any of these developments, instead only finding out when she chased for updates.

Overall, with the exception of her STO, Jessica felt badly let down by the various CJS agencies - to the point that she often considered withdrawing from the case. She was most disappointed with the lack of empathy, communication and updates, safeguarding and regard for the impact of lengthy timescales on survivors. Jessica concluded that her confidence in the CJS had decreased, and that she understood why so many people do not report rape/s.

Pre-reporting views and perceptions

Jessica had previously called the police on numerous occasions about the domestic abuse she was subjected to by her ex-partner but always changed her mind about formally reporting the incident(s) by the time the officers arrived. No-one ever attempted to probe or investigate further.

"I just said I'd made a mistake, but no-one questioned it and just took what I said at face value"

Jessica had not initially planned to report the rape to the police, explaining that she was in denial about it and did not want to be labelled a "rape victim." Instead, she focused on leaving the relationship and was keen to start afresh. However, after the perpetrator continued to stalk and harass her, she took the decision to contact the police – and when she was reporting the harassment, Jessica was given a 'checklist' of abusive behaviours to read, which prompted her to acknowledge she had been raped.

“It took me a long time to report it; he was my partner and I left him, and it wasn’t something I was ever planning on reporting. It was a very domestically violent relationship. I moved out, knew I wasn’t going back, but he kept sending me messages and ringing me. I also have two children with him, so the communication would start off about the kids, and then it would go onto things about me. He also broke into my new house. So initially, I rang the police to report these issues, not the rape”

“I didn’t want that label of being a rape victim; I didn’t want to live with that ... I didn’t want to be pitied. It’s a label I’d have to live with forever ... and I didn’t want to admit it to myself”

“It wasn’t until I went through a checklist with them to determine how dangerous he was, and [the police officer] asked me about sexual abuse, violence and rape. I never wanted to admit that the rape was actually rape ... It wasn’t until that point that I really acknowledged that I’d been raped”

Once Jessica disclosed that she had been raped and decided to formally report it, she expected to be acknowledged, listened to and supported.

“I expected it to be acknowledged that being raped is one of the most horrific things that can happen to a person. I expected them to listen, to offer some support”

Experiences of making the initial report

Jessica felt that when she disclosed the rape after going through the checklist, the officer – who was not a STO – was indifferent and disbelieving. They also abruptly claimed that this was not “their field” and that someone else would contact her about the case in due course. At this point, Jessica was given “generic” Rape Crisis and sexual health leaflets, but no offer of a referral to a support service and/or SARC or any safeguarding measures.

“I originally called 101 to say that I wanted to report him breaking into my house and harassing me. That’s when the lady came out to my house and went through the checklist. But when I nodded that I had been raped, she just said, ‘We can’t deal with this now, we don’t have time’, said that someone else would be in touch with me about it and left! I didn’t feel believed. I thought, ‘If she believes me, why did she just leave me like that?’ She did give me a leaflet for Rape Crisis, which also included Women’s Aid’s number. There was also a leaflet about sexual health. It felt like I was given some generic leaflets”

Instead, Jessica felt that the officer should have arranged for another officer or STO to come to her home immediately and stayed with her until then, so she was not alone.

Experiences of providing a statement

Jessica did not hear from the police until almost a week later, when she was called about making a statement. As such, she was never given the opportunity to make an initial report. Following this phone call, it took a further few weeks for Jessica to make her statement because the appointments were rescheduled several times at short notice.

“I didn’t hear anything until the following Friday. Someone rang and said they wanted me to come in the next day for a statement. But she called the next day and changed it to the following Tuesday. By the Tuesday they said they still couldn’t get me in and said they would ring me back on Friday. A different police officer called on Friday and said they could probably re-arrange for the next day! At this point, I said that if this didn’t happen, I was going to drop the whole thing. But I did finally get to the interview. But I was not expecting to be told that they didn’t have time for me. I felt so angry”

Moreover, Jessica had still not been offered a STO or referred to any external support, making her feel she was simply a “statistic rather than a person”. Instead, though, she took it upon herself to arrange a Non-Molestation Order and an IDVA through social services while waiting to make her statement.

“I am very lucky I had a very strong support network around me. I remember thinking, ‘what if I didn’t have this?’ I was left with nothing from the police. I felt so angry. They [the police] didn’t make me feel supported. I was just left to feel like another number”

Jessica was told that she would need to give a video-recorded statement, but beyond this was not given any further information to help her prepare. Moreover, once she finally arrived at the station to give her statement, the officer conducting it thought the interview was about harassment rather than rape. Jessica attributed this to miscommunication caused by the fact that several different officers had been allocated to her case by the time she gave her statement.

Once the confusion around the nature of the incident was resolved, Jessica’s experience of making the statement was “awful”, mainly because she felt unprepared for the length of time it would take and the types of questions she was required to answer. She also considered the terminology to be “clinical” and “formal”, which added to her nervousness. However, the female officer conducting the interview was kind, supportive and validating, which put Jessica at ease.

“It was awful, horrendous, because you have to be so graphic. I wasn’t prepared for how long it would take (three hours), and for some of the questions, such as, ‘How did I know that this was what he was doing?’ ‘Was he threatening me?’ ‘What was he saying?’ ‘What happened afterwards?’ I had to go over everything, right from the start; it wasn’t just about talking about the rape. It was a shock and it hit hard. I wasn’t made to feel more comfortable about it or prewarned because of all the confusion around what I was even giving my statement about! But the lady who questioned me was very lovely and I did feel believed”

Evidence collection and investigation

After giving her video-recorded statement, Jessica was allocated a new officer and main point of contact within the police, with whom she developed a very good relationship. Jessica’s mobile phone was collected as evidence and at the time of her interview it still had not been returned, although she was warned that it may need to be kept for some time. Her main point of contact was sympathetic about what they were asking of Jessica - explaining that the phone was needed due to the lack of physical evidence - and made it clear the information that would be downloaded.

Jessica understood and agreed with the importance of analysing her phone data and said she trusted the police to only look at what was relevant, but she could not help feeling anxious about having all of her photos and messages accessed.

“The police told me it was really important I handed it over so that they could access that information ... She [the officer] said, ‘We’re really sorry, but we have to do this.’ She asked if I needed to take anyone off my phone or get rid of before handing it over. She was nice”

“I understood why they needed the phone, but it wasn’t nice handing it over, knowing I’ve got photos and videos on there of my kids ... I knew they wouldn’t go through looking at that kind of stuff and by this point I was happy to hand it over, if it meant they could arrest and charge him...”

“It’s been three years and I’ve still not got it back. I won’t get it back until after he’s been sentenced. It’s cost me a fortune because I had to go and get a new phone. But I was warned that it would be kept for a long time and I probably wouldn’t get it back until after the trial”

Communication throughout reporting and investigation

Up until she gave her statement, Jessica was disappointed with the lack of communication and support she was offered. However, the situation improved once she was allocated a new officer, who was very transparent about what to expect from the CJS process as and when the case continued, and the specific roles of the different agencies.

“My new officer, she was very upfront with me. She said if there was enough evidence then it would go to court and I would have to attend to give evidence. Everything was laid out pretty clearly. She said that it would go to her sergeant, who would decide whether to NFA it then and there or send it on to the CPS. I was also told that the CPS take a while to make decisions and not to expect anything in a few weeks. She was really good ... Once the case was a bit further on and it had gone to the CPS their roles were explained”

Moreover, the new officer updated Jessica about the case via regular phone calls, which she had given as her preferred form of contact. The information was honest, clear and not “sugar-coated”, and also offered in a considerate and sensitive way. For example, the officer would always ask Jessica if it was a convenient time for her before giving any updates.

“The officer I was given once I did my statement was fantastic; I couldn’t have asked for anyone better. I had a discussion with her about how I like to be contacted, and I told her that I’m one of these people who likes to know exactly what is going on when it’s happening. So, she’d always ring but ask if it was ok for me to speak. She knew I had kids; I had to get to school. She was very thoughtful. Also, she would never sugar coat anything; she would always be blunt and tell me how it was, which is what I wanted. She really helped set my expectations around stuff, like not necessarily expecting him to be reprimanded for breaking his bail conditions because it was hard to prove”

“When he was brought in and interviewed, my officer would ring me periodically to update me, for example, ‘He’s just come out of the interview for a break but will be going back in shortly’. She told me when the case was sent to the CPS. I was told when he was bailed and what his bail conditions were”

Overall, Jessica felt that her main point of contact was approachable and respectful, believed her, and genuinely seemed invested in her case. She also felt very supported and often called them if she felt worried or unsafe.

“I always felt I could call her when I felt unsafe after I’d seen him drive by my house. She never made me feel like I was hassling her”

“You could tell she wanted him to be caught just as much as I did. It was really good to have that mutual drive for that. It felt like we were in it together”

Once the case went to the CPS the updates became less regular, which Jessica felt was mainly due to the lack of information passed to the police. However, Jessica’s officer would still contact her at least once a month to “check in.”

“The communication was really regular at the beginning, but once it went to the CPS it wasn’t so regular. But it never went longer than a month and she (the main police contact) will ring just to tell me she had no updates and to check I was alright”

Suspect arrest, charging and bail

The perpetrator was arrested fairly quickly – just a few days after Jessica gave her video-recorded statement - which she felt was an acceptable timeframe. However, they were bailed under further investigation for two years while the CPS decided whether or not to charge, during which time they continually broke their bail conditions by driving past Jessica’s home. The perpetrator was never reprimanded because these violations were too difficult to prove, and as a result they were able to continue their behaviour. During this time, Jessica felt very unsafe and asked the police if they were able to arrange further safeguarding measures but was turned down. Instead, Jessica applied for another Non-Molestation Order herself, and social services referred her case to a MARAC.

Charges were eventually brought, but Jessica felt that having to wait two years for a decision was unacceptable. Furthermore, she suggested that the only reason it did not take even longer was because she chased the CPS for a decision almost every week.

“Every week I contacted the police to ask if the CPS decision had been made - for two years. Every time I would be told, ‘No not yet, but we’ll email them.’ It put my life on hold, I couldn’t move on. I felt like I was the one in prison. I felt very unsafe. Even the MARAC thought I was in danger. What worries me, if this happens to someone who is vulnerable, doesn’t have a good support network around them, doesn’t have fight to chase for updates and to drive the case forward, what would happen?”

Experiences of preparing for court

After the perpetrator was charged, a court case was arranged. To help her prepare, Jessica was able to make a pre-trial visit to the court but was unhappy with the “insensitive” language used by a Witness Care Officer during the appointment. Other than this, Jessica was not offered any other information about what to expect from the Witness Care Unit, even when she reached out to them.

“Some of the language which was used during that walk around ... I wasn’t sure about it. For example, I was told, ‘You will stand there and give your side of the story.’ It’s not a story!! I think they need to learn how to speak to people a bit. Refer to it as evidence not a story”

“If I wanted to speak to them [the WCU], it was me ringing them. So, it was a week before the trial was going to start and I was ringing them because I hadn’t heard from anyone, to ask what was happening and where we go from here, to check if everything was in place and going ahead. But all you seem to get is, ‘I’ll have to e-mail someone and let you know’. No-one seems to be able to tell you in the same phone conversation what you need to know”

She also felt especially apprehensive about the lack of legal advice provided and not being able to meet with her prosecutor and solicitor beforehand. Moreover, the prosecutor changed at short notice, which worried Jessica greatly as she felt this could impact the case. However, no-one offered her any reassurances.

“I was going to go into court completely blind; wasn’t told about what to expect. I was just told I’d meet all the personnel on the morning of the trial”

The case outcome

A few days before the court case was due to begin, the perpetrator pleaded guilty to rape along with several other charges, so the trial was cancelled. Jessica once again praised the police officer in charge of the case, who she considered the “driving force” behind the plea change. However, the CPS did not contact her with the news; instead, she found out when she phoned them for an update.

“It was late on the Friday and I called the CPS to ask a few questions about the court case and they told me he has pleaded guilty – so again it was me making the first move”

Jessica explained that, overall, she was very relieved with the outcome, but in some ways felt that the last-minute guilty plea was another exertion of control by the perpetrator. Indeed, part of her would have welcomed the opportunity to stand up to them in court.

“Overall, it was a very good outcome. It felt like justice. In some ways it was a relief, but in others it was very hollow because he took control and he decided to finish it on his terms. I don’t think he should have been allowed to plead guilty that late in the day. It’s something I still find difficult because he’s had control for such a long, long time. Although I was dreading going to court, it was also my chance to stand up to him. I’d really psyched myself up to for it and then he ended it on his terms”

Sentencing and post-case support

When Jessica was originally interviewed, the perpetrator was awaiting their sentence. She was still in frequent contact with her main police contact, who was offering support and assisting her with her victim impact statement, which was due to be read out at the sentencing hearing. The officer had also planned to attend the hearing to support Jessica.

“She keeps in touch to see if everything is alright, to check whether I need any help with the impact statement. So, yeah, I still have a really good dialogue with her”

However, during a follow-up interview with Jessica, she explained that the sentencing hearing had not proceeded as intended and was instead postponed for a further two and a half months. This was extremely frustrating, particularly as Jessica only found out about the rescheduled date when she contacted the WCU to ask a question about the hearing. Moreover, no-one could explain why this had happened until eventually, after many phone calls, she was told that the delay was due to an administrative error by the Probation Service.

Jessica discussed how the extended timeframe had impacted on her; it had been over two years since she reported the incident, and she was still unable to move on with her life. She suggested that the CJS should show more commitment to survivors by honouring dates and deadlines, and communicate more effectively if and when issues arise.

“[Finding out about the sentencing delay] was horrific. It’s taken 26 months, and that’s if the hearing goes ahead when they say it will. So, you tell yourself, ‘We’ll get to this part, and I’ll be able to breathe. We need to get a charge. We need to get a conviction.’ He pleaded and I thought I just had to hold on a little while longer, but no ... They should have to work to the deadlines that the victim’s side has to work to. And the lack of communication is shocking”

Due to these delays and the way she was treated, Jessica was planning to formally submit a complaint against the Probation Service, although no-one had told her how to go about doing so despite asking on several occasions.

Experiences of support services

Jessica found external support of her own volition in lieu of the police’s failure to refer or signpost. She contacted social services in the first instance, who in turn referred her to a domestic abuse support organisation, where she was allocated an IDVA.

“The police probably should have been the ones to refer me, but I’m very much a sink or swim person which means I made the strength to survive and do what I needed to do to make sure I didn’t sink. I knew I was the one who needed to do all these things because no one else was going to do it for me”

Specifically, Jessica wanted to educate herself around safety, the different types of abuse that can be inflicted on women by their partners, and ‘warning signs’ in relationships. She also wanted to be able to speak candidly with other women who had been sexually and domestically abused. Jessica received practical help with applying for a Non-Molestation Order (which involved being referred to a solicitor),

completed a domestic abuse educational course, and was able to open up about what had happened to her in a safe, non-judgemental space. She described her experiences as “amazing”, and especially valued receiving ongoing support from the service, even post-outcome.

“The group of women there are amazing. It’s a safe, non-judgmental place to talk about anything. The person who runs it is so down to earth. They are amazing. It helped me not feel alone anymore. I have an ongoing relationship with them; I wasn’t just left as soon as the case ended”

The only issue Jessica encountered was with one support worker, who was unhelpful and did not seem invested in her. This attitude was put down to lack of training, as well as a natural personality clash. As such, Jessica suggested that care must be taken when allocating IDVAs and support workers to survivors, along with better training.

“You need to feel like there is a connection, that they genuinely care, and I don’t think I really got that with her. I think it was a personality thing more than anything else. She just didn’t do what I wanted her to do ... I think maybe there should be better training, or only assigning certain people to high-risk cases”

Overall views and thoughts

Although Jessica was eventually allocated a main point of contact within the police who communicated well and fully supported her, she felt this was only because she “got lucky.” Overall, she was “shocked, angered and disgusted” by the way she was treated by the police (up until she gave her statement), the CPS, the Probation Service and the WCU - to the point that she considered withdrawing from the case on numerous occasions. Jessica was most disappointed with the lack of empathy, communication, safeguarding and regard for timescales she encountered - and also felt that the CJS is “designed around the accused and their rights”, serving as a barrier to the fair treatment of survivors.

“Everything is just geared up for the defendant. It is just an uphill battle from start to finish. At the moment it’s a very victim-blaming system. It’s not designed to protect the victim: the communication, the way things are handled ... Lots of things don’t happen because, apparently, it’s against [the accused’s] human rights, yet mine have already been violated. I lived in a mental prison the whole time he was out on bail. Everything is geared up for them. He’ll get a third off of his sentence because he decided on his own terms to plead guilty right at the last minute ... I was treated equally compared with other victims I think, but not compared with the perpetrator. We are not treated equally”

Jessica concluded that for these reasons, her confidence in the CJS had decreased, and that she now understood why so many people do not report incidents of rape in the first place.

“If I didn’t have such a good support network around me and if I wasn’t such a strong person, I would have thrown the towel in with the whole thing. I now know why a lot of people don’t bother reporting rape. To a lot of them, you’re just another case, another victim”

Case Study 3: “Josh”

Case study

Josh reported to the police with support from a domestic and sexual abuse organisation and was pleasantly surprised about the sensitivity with which he was treated and the good communication, information, support and safeguarding he received. Importantly, Josh was allocated both a STO and an independent LAGLO and signposted toward specialist support – all of which he valued highly.

While Josh’s overall experiences with the CJS were positive, he did note: delays in giving his statement and the suspect being questioned; being given incorrect advance information about what the statement would entail; a longer than expected investigation process; and dwindling communication from his STO as the case progressed. In fact, Josh’s main suggestion for improving his experience was the provision of more regular updates later in the case while he was waiting to hear a decision around the outcome.

Despite the issues above, Josh’s generally positive experiences led him to say he would feel comfortable reporting an incident or incidents to the police in future.

Pre-reporting views and perceptions

Josh felt that reporting the incident would be right thing to do - especially as the suspect had regular contact with vulnerable people at the time - but did not feel resilient enough to do so initially. He was also concerned about no longer feeling in control of the situation, the way he may treated by the police and CJS, and the low chances of conviction.

“Initially I wasn’t sure if I wanted to report it at all. But what happened kept playing on my mind. Also, the suspect was in a role that involves caring for other people...”

“I kind of saw the police as an emotionless organisation and that once I reported, everything would be out of my control. I was worried about the demands that would be put on me would be too much for me to see the case the whole way through. I didn’t know if I had the mental capacity to re-live it ... I also knew, statistically, that it would be very unlikely that the suspect would be convicted”

Instead, Josh sought support from a domestic and sexual abuse organisation, with whom he talked through his options. This resulted in the support service arranging an anonymous meeting with the police, which Josh considered a really useful opportunity to discuss the CJS process without feeling pressured to report. It was this conversation, along with the help he received from the support service, which led Josh to decide to officially report around six weeks after the incident happened.

“I probably wouldn’t have reported if I hadn’t been in touch with [support service]. Being able to get the first meeting [with the police] through them was the first baby steps in encouraging me to go through the whole process. Without that I think that going straight into reporting and being told I’d have to do a video recorded interview which will last three hours; it would have been too much for me to take in”

Experiences of making the initial report

Josh praised the communication he received around this stage of the process. He was in regular contact with the police and felt very informed about what was required of him. Moreover, Josh felt supported, believed and comfortable during the initial report, mainly because he was allocated a female officer (who was a STO and his main point of contact throughout) and able to have his support worker present.

“The lady who I disclosed to was lovely. I didn’t feel pressured and it was done at my pace. In general, I feel more comfortable talking to females than males. It was just a stroke of luck that it was a lady who came along ... I felt very believed, which was an important factor in me carrying on. It was the way she went about probing around some of the questions; it really made me feel that she believed what had happened”

It was at this point that the police also provided Josh with useful safeguarding and support provision. This included personal alarms, the allocation of an “impartial” Lesbian and Gay Liaison Officer (LAGLO) and being able to communicate with the main contacts on the case any time he felt unsafe or worried. Moreover, although Josh was already in contact with a support service, he was additionally signposted to another domestic abuse organisation who helped organise a Restraining Order against the suspect.

“I was given someone from the LAGLO Scheme, who are an added layer of support for people in the LGBT community who have been through rape/sexual assault. He was independent from the officers dealing with my case. He would phone me periodically to see how the case was progressing, if I had any questions, and because he was impartial, he told me to tell him if anything wasn’t done that should be, which he would push for...”

“...I got scared and messaged [police contact], who got back to me right away, which was really nice. She said that if I have any issues with my ex to contact her or someone else from the police and they will come and deal with it”

Experiences of providing a statement

Josh was initially impressed with the communication around giving a statement: he was given the choice of undertaking it in a video-recorded or written format and was in frequent contact with his LAGLO and main police contact so that he could easily ask any further questions. At the time, this made him feel confident and informed.

“I was told during the initial report that I could choose between doing a written statement and described the pros and cons of doing each. I opted for the video statement because they said that if it goes to court, I wouldn’t have to read out a full statement; they would just play the video”

However, when it came to actually making the statement, Josh’s appointment was cancelled and rearranged the evening before it was due to take place, which made him extremely anxious.

“I had the video recorded interview set up but felt really anxious about it. The evening before I had an email saying, ‘Sorry, we’re going to have to rearrange it.’

It wasn't great. It did get rearranged within a week, so not too long, but it's the added anxiety it caused"

The statement itself was described as long and tiring and made even more difficult because certain elements of the interview – such as the line of questioning and overall structure – were not as previously described. Josh also found trying to remember very specific details of the incident stressful, and worried that not being able to recall them perfectly would impact on the strength of the case if it later went to court.

"Some of the questions were very detailed...and I had no idea; I couldn't remember where every single body part was and when. It made me worry that if it went to court and got played, the defence would question it"

Moreover, information from Josh's initial statement was relayed during the statement, some of which was inaccurate.

"I found that during the interview, they had got a few of the details from my initial report wrong, and things I had to re-clarify during the interview. I think there had been a miscommunication and the officer had taken the information down incorrectly. I was quite shocked and it threw me off a bit. It made me wonder if I had said it, but then thought about it and knew I definitely hadn't"

More positively, however, Josh did feel that the environment was very supportive insofar as the people conducting the statement were empathetic, asked questions sensitively, and offered regular breaks.

Evidence collection and investigation

Josh was given the option to hand over his mobile phone as evidence, to which he consented. This was the only physical evidence collected. Although he felt "anxious" and "uncomfortable" about it, the police reassured him that they would only look at what they needed and destroy any downloaded data once the case was over. However, despite the phone only being kept for 24 hours, there was some miscommunication which resulted in Josh initially being told that it was not ready to be returned when he arrived to pick it up from the station, at which time he also felt treated "like a suspect."

"They were quite sensitive about it and made it clear that I didn't have to hand in my phone and even when they did, they reassured me that they would only look through what they needed to ... I felt a bit anxious and uncomfortable about the police trawling through my camera roll. But I trusted them to only look through what they needed to, and I thought it would help with the case"

"I handed it in and arranged to pick it up the next day at a designated time. When I got there, they said it hadn't been released yet and that I had to come back another day, but I said I wasn't leaving without it because I needed it. The person I was dealing with went and got their manager, who was not nice and almost treated me like a suspect. They finally gave it back to me, but it did not feel like I had just gone through a voluntary process"

In terms of the investigation, the suspect was voluntarily questioned, which took longer to arrange than Josh expected. When he asked the police about this, they told him

that the delays had been caused by the case being passed to different departments and the number of officers working night shifts. Although the delays frustrated Josh, he accepted the explanation.

Communication throughout reporting and investigation

Josh was given leaflets about the different criminal justice agencies and felt comfortable asking questions about each stage of the CJS process. Throughout the process, he highly valued having one main point of contact within the police who was supportive, transparent and responsive. This mitigated against the confusion that could have been caused by his case being passed between several different departments. Moreover, Josh was always asked if it was convenient to talk about the case and was never called about it “out of the blue.”

“Having a single point of contact throughout the whole process was very useful because the case got passed between different departments a lot... It was nice to get to know her. She would also ask me if it was convenient for them to call me – they wouldn’t just try to call out of the blue”

“There’s only so much they are allowed to tell people when a case is open, but they were very good with saying, ‘We’ve got this update, but we can’t tell you any more.’ Although it meant sometimes, I was left wondering, I knew there was nothing else they could tell me”

However, communication dwindled over the course of the investigation and Josh found that he had to contact the police to ask for updates, often with no response.

“I felt that as the case progressed through the different stages ... I had less and less contact with the police. I contacted the lady who was in charge of my case a few times and heard nothing back. This was towards the end of the case. I texted her a few times just asking to check in, not because I was expecting anything to have happened, but just to see how the case was going. It would have been nice to know if they were still gathering evidence, or whatever”

The case outcome

The suspect was not arrested or charged, and the case was NFA’d by the CPS six months after the initial report. The case took longer to conclude than Josh had expected, as he was told that the “longest part” of the process would be waiting to go to court if the case proceeded and, therefore, presumed that the prior stages would be “quicker.” However, Josh believed that the police had done their best to keep to timescales and acknowledged that the officers working on the case had been impacted by their shift work.

Josh was informed of the outcome in a phone call with his main point of contact (also a STO), who explained that there was not enough evidence to charge the suspect. They also talked Josh through the VRR and told him he could call at any time over the following weeks if he had any concerns or questions. Josh was not surprised about the outcome and agreed with the police that there was a lack of “concrete evidence to get a conviction.” As such, he decided not to go through the VRR because the lack of forensic evidence would likely result in the same outcome.

“I found out via phone call by my STO. She said there wasn’t enough evidence to charge him, but if I wasn’t happy with the outcome, I could go to the police website and ask for my case to be reviewed by an independent set of eyes. I didn’t ask for it to be re-reviewed because in my heart of hearts I knew all I had was phone screenshots and no forensic evidence”

“I felt quite comfortable about how they went about it, and my point of contact said she was working the whole of the next week and if I had any questions or concerns, I could still phone her”

Post-case support

At the time of his interview, Josh was still in contact with his LAGLO, whose main role at that point was to arrange further support for him as and when he needed it. However, he had not been contacted from anyone else within the police and would have appreciated a follow-up phone call from his STO.

Experiences of support services

Josh accessed a domestic and sexual abuse organisation directly prior to reporting the incident and was allocated an ISVA. The service was described as responsive, accessible and holistic - offering Josh wrap-around support.

“What I really needed more than anything was support around the process (of reporting) and what that would look like, and that’s where [ISVA] helped ... They have been the saviour through the whole process to be honest. I always know they’re just a text away. They’ll always tell me when they’re on annual leave so I know when I can contact them. They never just dealt with the police case; if I was having a bad day, he was happy to talk to me about that, which was really lovely”

The police later referred Josh to another domestic abuse service, who helped with arranging a Restraining Order and put him in touch with a solicitor. Josh was also impressed with the LAGLO he was assigned, who supported him through the whole process, including post-case. Overall, Josh felt that he had received all the help and support he needed.

Overall views and thoughts

Josh was pleasantly surprised about how sensitively he was treated by the police and said he would feel more comfortable about reporting an incident or incidents to them in future. He also commended the police for their transparency and for allowing him to maintain a sense of control throughout the process. Josh’s only suggestion for improving his experience was the provision of more regular updates later in the case while he was waiting to hear a decision around the outcome.

“I was really surprised about how sensitive the police were in reality. They made me feel like I was in control and that I could talk to them whenever I needed to”

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