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Preparing to Prepare: The Process of Transformational Change in Investigating Rape and Serious Sexual Offences in England and Wales

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand the issues facing police forces when presented with national level change to policy and how they approach systemic change. We focus on Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) and the introduction of a new National Operating Model (NOM) in England and Wales. We share findings in respect of a national programme of support for the learning and wellbeing of officers, to improve policing rape investigations and outcomes. Data were collected across a two-year period via interviews, focus groups, a survey and masterclasses with officers in five forces. We highlight the resistance to changing behaviours and the issues faces forces operating autonomously and at different stages of preparedness. We also include early indicators of positive actions and outcomes. Key recommendations for change created for, and embedded within, the RASSO NOM are shared and can be replicated across an international policing audience.

MAD statement

The paper is an important addition to knowledge in respect of the change process underpinning the learning and development offer to police officers in England and Wales, as part of the new Rape and Serious Sexual Offences National Operating Model. The paper highlights work in progress and successes in the preparation and implementation stages. Consolidation of change will take time and commitment, both in terms of financial investment and regular communication between ranks. Ten rules of change are suggested in the preparation for change, including participatory leadership and changing behaviours, which can be replicated both nationally and internationally.

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Introduction

Why Change is Needed to the Investigation of Rape and Serious Sexual Offences

The number of recorded crimes of violence against women and girls (VAWG) in England and Wales is rising, with over 3,000 VAWG crimes being reported every day (College of Policing, 2024). The continual increase in sexual offences reported prompted a review in England and Wales as part of the VAWG framework and strategy (National Police Chiefs' Council, (NPCC), 2024). As well as highlighting the need to protect the public from these crimes, it demonstrates the significant demand on police resourcing and their ability to react appropriately to these cases (ONS, 2024). Part of the government's response to tackling the issue has been to focus on transforming the way police officers investigate the gap in knowledge around one aspect of the VAWG agenda, rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). Operation Soteria (NPCC, 2024), the focus of this paper and discussed fully later, is a national project commissioned to increase the number of adult RASSO cases reaching the policing charging threshold. Its purpose is to review and deliver continuous improvement across the criminal justice system using a suspect-focused, victim-centred and context-led approach (Gov.UK, 2022). Our paper outlines the issues for forces adapting to a changing model of policing RASSO crimes and if officers are equipped to deal with the specialism and support for victim-survivors of RASSO.

The implementation of the RASSO National Operating Model (NOM) can be seen as a major change to structures and processes, but for it to be successful it also requires significant changes to officers' values and behaviour, which have been identified as a major obstacle to delivering justice for victim-survivors of RASSO (College of Policing, 2023a; Hohl & Stanko, 2015). As an example, a senior police officer was recently accused of describing the bulk of rape complaints as 'regretful sex' (Ambrose, 2023). Therefore, the police forces involved need to recognize that if the force is to adopt a suspect-focused, victim-centred, and context-led approach to rape investigations (NPCC, 2024), this will require major changes to structures/processes and values/behaviours. There is substantial evidence to show that if organizational structure and values are not aligned in an appropriate and supportive fashion, then the change initiatives will fail (Hammer & Champy, 1993; Rogers et al., 2006; Witcher, 1993; Wyland et al., 2024). Consequently, in terms of the RASSO NOM, it is important to recognize that its successful implementation requires complementary changes to both structures and processes, and the values and behaviours of officers and other staff involved in RASSO cases. Past research on organizational change supports the findings from our interviews, which suggests it is easier to change structures and processes than it is to achieve the complementary changes to values and behaviours (Allaire & Firsirotu, 1984; Beer & Nohria, 2000; Burnes, 2017; Kanter et al., 1992).

As can be seen, changing the way that the police investigate rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales is a complicated task. This complexity is exacerbated by the police being a public sector organization that is trying to re-establish legitimacy and address a lack of public trust and confidence (Harding et al., 2024). This paper contributes to the discussion of the potential barriers the police face whilst trying to implement difficult and significant change to their approach to RASSO investigations, within a multifarious, hierarchal structure involving multi-agency working. Whilst this paper refers to national change within the English and Welsh context only, we aim to

share these findings with an international audience. Papers including those by Brown (2011) in the US and Tidmarsh (2017) in Australia suggest there are similarities and issues for rape investigators and police forces across the world. We therefore consider other law enforcement agencies would benefit from our shared knowledge of such an extensive programme of research.

It has been suggested that most organizational change initiatives fail, with some estimating a failure rate of up to 70% (Kotter, 1995; Senturia et al., 2008). Though this is a contested figure and the failure rate does seem to vary between types of change and individual organization, nevertheless, it does seem that change fails more often than it succeeds (Burnes, 2017; Hughes, 2011). Certainly, as far as police services are concerned, there does seem to be a high failure rate both in the UK and elsewhere (Brain, 2023; Bullock & Tilley, 2009; Schafer & Varano, 2017; Skogan, 2014; Stern, 2016). Therefore, it can be anticipated that implementing change within 43 police forces in England and Wales, with each force operating on an autonomous basis at a local level, will be challenging.

One factor that is often cited as a key obstacle to change is employee resistance, which seems to be a particular issue in large organizations where change projects tend to be bigger, more complex, require a significant investment in time and money, and often necessitate a disruption to daily business during the change process (Choi & Ruona, 2011; Ford et al., 2008; Mosadeghrad & Ansarian, 2014). The police, like most large organizations, has cyclical rounds of evaluations of their working practices. Despite regular national-level reviews into rape and serious sexual offences investigations, including the Independent Review of Rape in London (Angiolini, 2024), the London Rape Reviews (MOPAC, 2019, 2021), the End-to-End Rape Review (Gov.UK, 2021a), the Criminal Justice System review (Gov.UK, 2021b) and the End-to-End Rape Review Progress Update (Gov.UK, 2023a), rape conviction rates have remained historically amongst the lowest in Europe (Hohl & Stanko, 2015; Lovett & Kelly, 2009). Hohl and Stanko (2015, p. 325) suggest that rape had been effectively 'decriminalized' with issues of rape myths and stereotypes, pressure on victim-survivors and fear of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS, 2023) process surrounding rape investigations. Victim-survivors remain reluctant to either report or continue with reporting a rape, due to long wait times and fear of being believed (Frith, 2009). In 2021, the attrition rate of victim withdrawal from pursuing their reported RASSO crimes in England and Wales was 1.6% (Gov.UK, 2021a). In cases of domestic violence, other issues including victim-survivor vulnerability, whether children are involved, and the role of physical violence are characteristics that inform whether formal justice is sought by a victim-survivor (McPhee et al., 2021). The UK government's End-to-End rape review (Gov.UK, 2021a) revealed the pattern of high attrition and low conviction rates for rape continued, confirming that any recommendations for change introduced because of these historic reviews has continued to have little effect. The need for transformational change is evident in the investigation of rape and serious sexual assault (RASSO), to move away from a 'tick-box' exercise of investigations in RASSO investigations (NPCC, 2024).

Police officers often regard changes in structures and management as creating more work for them, rather than creating a more effective approach to policing (Holdaway, 2017; Sklansky, 2005). In addition, changes in policing practice are likely to be met with resistance unless officers believe that those managing the change process take account

of their views and experiences, which is often not the case (Williams et al., 2022). Therefore, though employee resistance to change should not be underestimated, it has to be recognized that the way change is managed and the nature of the change itself can reduce or exacerbate resistance (Michel et al., 2013; Oreg, 2003; Oreg & Sverdluk, 2011). As a major review of the change literature by Oreg et al. (2011, p. 491) found:

As a rule, change recipients who experienced high levels of participation tended to report higher readiness and acceptance of change, appraised change as less stressful and exhibited overall support for the change.

This touches on one of the fundamental questions regarding resistance to change, do individuals naturally resist change, regardless of the way it is managed or the type of change, or do some approaches to change and types of change provoke resistance (Burnes & Jackson, 2011, 2015; Oreg & Sverdluk, 2011)? Oreg et al.'s (2011) study would seem to indicate that how change is managed, especially the participative element, is an important factor not just in terms of the level of resistance, but also whether the change is successful or not.

When considering how to manage a change project, there must be alignment between the type of change and the way that it is managed (Burnes & Jackson, 2011). Therefore, the first issue to address when choosing an approach to change is the type of change being undertaken. Though there is no standard typology of change types, there does seem to be some commonality amongst those who study change. For example, Pettigrew et al. (1992) distinguish between operational change, that is small-scale, relatively unimportant, and strategic change, that is of major significance to the future of the organization. Similarly, Quinn (1996) differentiates between small-scale incremental change and radical-transformational change. Mirvis (2006) uses terms such as evolutionary, fine-tuning, revolutionary and discontinuous to cover the same ground. Therefore, many experts consider change as running along a continuum from small-scale/unimportant incremental change to large-scale/fundamental transformational change. However, what this form of change typology excludes is whether the change is primarily technology/process-orientated or primarily behaviour/culture-orientated. Burnes (2017) argues that though both forms are usually present in any major change programme, and though both must be aligned, the way they are managed depends on which is considered most important in terms of how difficult it is to achieve and its importance to an organization's strategic priorities.

In terms of implementing the RASSO NOM, on the face of it, many would consider it primarily a major change to technology/processes change. However, the various reviews of RASSO that have taken place have identified officer beliefs and values as a major factor in the failure of the police's current approach to RASSO (College of Policing, 2023a; Hohl & Stanko, 2015). Consequently, no matter how well new technologies, procedures and processes are introduced, without the accompanying changes to officer behaviour and values, the new RASSO NOM can be expected to fail. The need to change both technology/processes and behaviour/values raises the issue of sequencing – which of these comes first? It is usually recommended that the former should be done first followed by supportive changes to behaviour/values, though this is not always the case especially where changes to behaviour/values are seen as crucial factors in making the new technology/processes work effectively (Beer & Nohria, 2000;

Burnes, 2003). The reason for putting technology/processes first is that changes to these must be done at the same time and quickly or the entire system collapses as the constituent parts no longer mesh, but culture change is a slow and often incremental process of unlearning and learning (Davenport, 1993; Johnson et al., 2016). Kanter et al. (1992) refer to the approaches necessary to achieve these two forms of change as 'Bold Strokes' – rapid, system-wide change, and 'Long Marches' – slow and incremental change often involving trial and error. Bold Strokes can have a relatively rapid effect on structure and processes, but do not have any lasting effect on culture and behaviour. Long Marches, on the other hand, can lead to significant changes to behaviour, but take much longer to implement. Also, unlike Bold Strokes which can be implemented relatively quickly in a top-down fashion by a few senior managers, Long Marches requires widespread commitment throughout an organization and are likely to take much longer to implement.

Consequently, the implementation of the RASSO NOM may require a combination of a Bold Stroke approach, to implement major changes to structures and processes, and a Long Marches approach, to achieve the long-term behavioural changes necessary to create a person-centred approach to both the victim-survivor and procedural justice, that is required for a RASSO system that is fit for purpose (Geoghegan-Fittall et al., 2023). However, given the need to align the underlying values of the change initiative and the way that the change is implemented (Burnes & Jackson, 2011), a participative approach to both the technology and values elements of the change will be required. Thus, leadership teams in each force will need to have engagement at all ranks, for officers to feel part of a trustworthy culture and be committed to a change process they believe is meaningful and will work (Burnes & James, 1994). Therefore, as we explain below, we will be advocating the use of a Lewinian Organization Development approach to change, which is widely advocated and used in situations where changes to values and behaviour are required (Johnson et al., 2016).

Conceptual Approach

Conceptually, this paper draws on work of the Organization Development (OD) movement which, since the 1950s, has been the major approach to organizational change across the Western world, and increasingly globally (Boje et al., 2011; Burnes & Cooke, 2012; Mirvis, 2006). OD comprises a broad and integrated framework of theories and practices that address the main change situations organizations face, especially those concerning the human side of organizations (French & Bell, 1995). In particular, we draw on Kurt Lewin's 3-Step approach to change, which lies at the heart of OD, and is probably the most well-known and widely used approach to change (Burnes, 2020). Over the years, Lewin's approach to change has attracted much criticism, including that it is too incremental, ignores the role of power and politics, is top down, and that his 3-steps 'ice-cube' model of change is linear, simplistic, mechanistic and ignores the dynamic nature of modern organizational life (Dawson, 2003; Hatch & Cunliffe, 2013; Kanter et al., 1992; Pettigrew et al., 1992). Yet, as many have argued, these criticisms appear to be based on a misunderstanding of Lewin's work which promotes change by democratic participation and choice rather than imposition, recognizes the issues of power and politics, as is shown by his work on conflict resolution, especially in terms of religious and racial

intolerance, and sees change as an iterative and experimental process (Burnes, 2004; Cummings & Worley, 2015; French & Bell, 1995; Weick & Quinn, 1999). Crucially, what Lewin's critics misunderstand is that his 3-Step model is not primarily aimed at processes, structures or procedures, which do tend to change on a relatively frequent basis, but concerns changing behaviour, which does tend to be relatively fixed and very difficult to change (Bargal et al., 1992; Barley & Lawson, 2016; Kwasnicka et al., 2016; Lewin, 1935; Marrow, 1969).

Lewin's (1935) approach to understanding behaviour was based on a series of pioneering experiments carried out in Berlin in the 1920s, which were underpinned by field theory – Lewin's method of analysing behaviour (Lewin, 1935; Marrow, 1969). These experiments were designed to test, develop and prove his new approach to understanding human behaviour, which he labelled – a Dynamic Theory of Personality (Lewin, 1935). Lewin's Dynamic Theory of Personality postulated that human behaviour was a product of the totality of coexisting and interdependent forces that impinge on a person or group and that comprise their psychological environment (life space) (Lewin, 1935). For Lewin (1947), a person or group's current behaviour is maintained through a field of relatively stable forces, which he referred to as a quasi-stationary equilibrium. From this, in the 1930s and 1940s, Lewin argued, and demonstrated, that behavioural change was a purposeful move from one quasi-stationary equilibrium to another through changes in the holistic field of restraining and driving forces that comprise the person or group's current context or life space. Therefore, Lewin (1935) showed that behavioural change was a three-stage process. First, to destabilize the current quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to make change possible. Second, for those involved to determine what to change to and how to change. Last, to re-establish a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to prevent regression from the new behaviour to the old. Lewin (1947) would later label these stages as 'unfreezing', 'moving' and 'freezing'. Since he proposed his 3-Step model of change, many other 'step' approaches to change have been proposed that parallel and support Lewin's view that change is a step process of moving from one fixed state to another (Elrod & Tippet, 2002). Indeed, Hendry (1996, 624) asserts that:

Scratch any account of creating and managing change and the idea that change is a three-stage process which necessarily begins with a process of unfreezing will not be far below the surface.

Though Kanter et al. (1992) and others have characterized Lewin's 3-step model as simplistic, once it is realized 'unfreezing' is based on a participative approach that requires those involved to evaluate the appropriateness of their current behaviour, identify the forces that maintain it, and determine whether change is necessary, it begins to look far from simplistic. As Schein (1996, p. 28) comments, the key to unfreezing:

... was to see that human change, whether at the individual or group level, was a profound psychological dynamic process that involved painful unlearning without loss of ego identity and difficult relearning as one cognitively attempted to restructure one's thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and attitudes.

As with all aspects of Lewin's work, choice plays an important role because 'unlearning', letting go of the emotional attachment to current beliefs and arrangements, can take place only if those involved decide of their own volition that these are no longer

appropriate or sustainable (Burnes, 2017). Choice is also crucial to the third stage of Lewin's approach – freezing or refreezing. This recognizes that once change has taken place, it must be self-sustaining (i.e. safe from regression). For Lewin, the key to making change self-sustaining was that those concerned needed to be involved in the change process and be able to make genuine choices (Burnes, 2017). Another important factor in freezing is to ensure alignment between the new behaviours, the new working practices, structures and processes, and the way change is led and managed. This issue of alignment is particularly important given that a large number of change initiatives fail (Burnes & Jackson, 2011).

In this latter respect, Lewin's work on leadership and learning also have a role to play. He was the first to identify the importance of leadership style in managing and changing individual and group behaviour, especially the importance of participative leadership. In drawing attention to the merits and drawbacks of different leadership styles, he laid the basis for current contextual approaches to leadership (e.g. Goleman, 2017). In terms of learning, Lewin's asserted that change involves a process of unlearning, i.e. discarding old learning that is no longer suitable, and learning, i.e. taking on new perspectives and knowledge that is appropriate. In so doing, he contributed much to our understanding of how people learn and thus how they can effectively be taught new things (Schein, 1996).

The continuing growth of the OD movement (Burnes, 2017; Burnes & Cooke, 2012) has seen Lewin's work applied to a wide range of organizations, including the police service (Adams & McNicholas, 2007; Linturi & Muna, 2021). In drawing on Lewin's work, researchers and practitioners sometimes use different labels for Lewin's three steps (Bullock & Batten, 1985). Brain (2023), in applying Lewin's 3-Step model to Operation Soteria, uses the terms Preparation (unfreezing), Implementation (moving), and Consolidation (refreezing). This does not imply any significant change to Lewin's approach, but merely the adoption of terminology that is likely to be more familiar to a police audience. Burnes points out that at each stage of the change process, those involved must address key questions.

This paper considers the use of Lewin's model, based on a 'preparation, implementation and consolidation' approach for police officers in England and Wales who investigate sexual offences. Work across the six pillars of Operation Soteria has identified the values of investigations being context-led, suspect-focused and victim-centred. These values have come to underpin both the work conducted with pathfinder forces and are also reflected in the advice ('10 lessons' – see conclusion) given to forces as they work to embed the new NOM into their operational practices.

The National Project – Operation Soteria

The design outlined for the fieldwork for this element of the project, the change management, is part of a much larger, national research project. Set against the backdrop of victim-survivor care, attrition and poor conviction rates, Hohl and Stanko (2022) created a research project with a unique academic and police practitioner partnership to transform RASSO investigations.¹ The police-academic collaboration was crucial to overcoming any barriers to an effective solution for the implementation of change. This framework was named Operation Soteria (Gov.UK, 2022) and is a government

funded project aimed at transformational change in the way RASSO cases are handled. Operation Soteria has a focus on adult rape only and does not include child abuse, domestic abuse or other public protection offences. There are six pillars (or work streams) underpinning the framework: (1) suspect focused investigations (2) repeat suspects (3) procedural justice approach to victim engagement (4) *officer learning, development and wellbeing* (5) use of data and (6) digital forensics and performance. The aims of the RASSO NOM (Gov.UK, 2022) are:

To enable truly transformative change in police investigations of rape, resulting in radically improved outcomes (including, but not limited to, justice outcomes); Procedural justice for victims and suspects of all backgrounds; and fair and balanced rape investigations to focus on the alleged offence, including the entirety of the suspect's relevant behaviour, without over-investigating the victim, i.e. a suspect-focused, victim-centred, and context-led rape investigation.

Forces can work to achieve this by knowing: The problem of rape in their force (what is the demand generated through reported rape and other sexual offences?); the force's ability to investigate in a way that challenges offending behaviour and disrupts harm to victims; and the capability, competence, and capacity of its whole workforce (investigators and police staff) to enable the best decision-making and interface with justice and victims.

The authors were part of the Pillar 4 team exploring officer learning, development and wellbeing and the findings of this paper are based only on one element of Pillar 4, understanding officers' preparedness for implementing the RASSO NOM.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was provided by The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee HREC/3854. All interviews and focus groups were governed by relevant ethical guidelines for social research (e.g. BSA, 2017). All participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form before the project which was agreed by all participants. Given the sensitive nature of some of the questions asked (on well-being), relevant signposting to support was provided both during and at the end of all data collection.

Methods

Sampling

For the purposes of clarity, we have divided the data collection into two phases: (1) Academic year one, pre-workshop phase and (2) Academic year two, workshop phase. In year one, the pre-workshop phase with the five pathfinder forces consisted of qualitative data collection via 28 interviews and 23 focus groups, with a total of 129 participants, with an additional 258 free-text written responses from the survey. The survey was later enhanced with responses from officers across all 43 forces in England and Wales, but this additional data collection is outside of the timeframe of the change workshops and therefore is not included in this paper.

In year two, the workshop phase was a series of masterclasses with each of the five pathfinders. The aim of the workshops was to investigate how officers approached the implementation of change and the interaction and involvement across different levels of experience of officers. Participants for all data collection methods were selected

purposively for RASSO investigation experience by project manager gatekeepers within their forces, given the relevance of their engagement with Operation Soteria. These online masterclass sessions were undertaken as spaces for officers to share good practice and address concerns. They gave officers space to discuss between themselves the short and long-term changes that were possible. The sessions were led by our expert in change management, to discuss how change is possible and providing real-world examples of other large multi-national institutions and public sector bodies. In these masterclasses, the academic team remained off camera, to allow officers to raise their queries and have space to share good practice and outcomes that could be replicated across other forces. It also created a space to allow officers to feel comfortable to discuss and question their processes to RASSO, important aspects when considering participant comfort in face-to-face research (Westland et al., 2024). Anonymised ideas and concerns raised in the masterclasses were shared with senior leaders and officers after all five had been undertaken and the key findings and themes informed the basis of the interview and focus group questions.

Participants for the interviews and focus groups were recruited through purposive sampling via the Pillar 4 lead at each of the participant forces, to ensure officers who were involved in the Operation Soteria project and deal with RASSO investigations on a regular basis were invited to participate. The research team's project manager was the only point of contact with the forces during the recruitment process. The research project team only met the officers for the purposes of data collection, leaving contact information for any follow-up questions after our meetings. All focus groups were undertaken online and lasting approximately 90 minutes in length, due to differing shift patterns and to ensure the largest number of officers possible were able to attend. All participants were re-read the details of the information sheet and researchers checked that the consent form had been signed before the interview.

Analysis

The three foci in the findings section of this paper were overwhelmingly the areas where officers across all forms of data collection – survey, interviews, focus groups and masterclasses, believed change was necessary for the NOM to have the possibility of success. These headings form the focus of this paper.

In addition to the above Pillar 4 focus, in year one the pathfinder forces gave all pillars unprecedented access to files, reports, data and interviews/focus groups with officers, known as 'deep dives'. The Pathfinder forces were recruited by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and each force engaged with Operation Soteria on a voluntary basis. The Pathfinders were provided with full feedback on the academic findings to their Senior Leadership Teams on the findings across all pillars of work. The deep dive analysis informed the academic year two work and the support offered to the additional 38 forces implementing the NOM, which will be considered later within this paper.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were analysed independently by three researchers to determine inter-rater reliability and the process was assisted by NVivo (One) software. Findings from the qualitative data were analysed in the first instance using an interpretive approach, to make meaning of the findings within a particular context, in this case, change necessary

within the context of their specific force and their approach to policing RASSO investigations. In this way information could be gathered and condensed, and clear link to processes to change could be understood and established (Thomas, 2003). Specifically, to this task, patterns began to be identified across all forces and through officer knowledge and experiences, processes requiring change could be understood. Subsequent rounds of the thematic analysis were undertaken, to develop higher order and themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings were analysed using this coding structure to generate a wider thematic framework, to accommodate a deeper analysis of these headings using a narrative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Although there was a significant amount of cross-pillar work and engagement, including the workshops discussed later, the sheer size of the project across 6 pillars, 8 universities and 5 pathfinder forces would make it impossible to cover all 6 pillars, which as outlined above, each had very specialized area of focus. Understanding the change process was one work package in the overall research project of RASSO investigations (please see Footnote at the end of this paper). The research team for the management comprised of one academic expert in change management; a professor was brought into the team to provide guidance and expertise in this area of supporting the national academic and policing team, and all forces as they implement the National Operating Model. A Research Fellow and Research Associate undertook all other aspects of this work package. They had worked on Operation Soteria for two years at the point of this data collection.

For the purposes of this paper, we are using data from two of the Pathfinder forces as a case study within the wider project for comparison purposes across years one and two, to demonstrate how they have tackled the early barriers to change and the enablers that have facilitated change to take place. The discussions with the pathfinder forces in the workshop phase explored how they approached the change required, based on their starting point in the project. We also wanted to understand if any ways of working had changed or if any new processes had been implemented and to identify any enablers and barriers to the implementation of change. It was important to be able to demonstrate to other forces that if these two pathfinder forces found ways of enabling change and that it was possible under time and workload demands to make successful changes in their workplace, then others could too.

The two case study forces were able to clearly demonstrate the issues they faced in year one and the learning they were able to share in year two during the workshop phase. We wanted to show how different organizational approaches to investigating RASSO operate – one has a specialist unit handling all RASSO cases, the other operates the omnicompetent model. Omni-competency is seen by others as enabling officers to have a range of skills and who can deal with all situations with which they are confronted (College of Policing, 2023b). The move away from specialist rape teams to an omnicompetent model of policing was considered by many officers interviewed as a detrimental step within forces, removing officers from areas of specialism and subsequently reduced dedicated training (Williams et al., 2022). However, we recognized from Lewin's work that this would be likely to involve 'painful unlearning' as staff addressed the often-uncomfortable feedback from the academic deep dives (Schein, 1996, p. 28). We acknowledge that forces are regularly confronted with a change of working patterns and initiatives, that have shown to be unsuccessful, particularly given the large churn of

staff and turnover of officers into other roles or responsibilities (Williams et al., 2022). Therefore, a key issue for the forces was to learn from past experiences and not repeat the same mistakes.

Based on the findings of year one, the research team wanted to begin to prepare the five pathfinder forces for the changes in the forthcoming RASSO National Operating Model (RASSO NOM) and for this learning to be shared with all additional forces. This work would have two outcomes: one, that the Pathfinder forces could be supported as they moved into their next phase of preparation for the RASSO NOM and secondly, that the learning from the Pathfinder Forces would support the additional forces that joined the programme of change work in preparation for the NOM.

Results

Learning and Development – the Need for Ringfenced Time for Learning

The most dominant finding of the year one fieldwork was time for learning, development and wellbeing is regarded as an abstraction from duty and a 'luxury', rather than investment in the officers themselves (Williams et al., 2022). First and foremost, a lack of officer numbers meant that officers are at full capacity with workload, many carrying significant number of cases and working overtime as a regular occurrence. The situation is compounded by many less experienced officers being the first point of contact with victims, who lack the specialist training for dealing with RASSO victim-survivors. Yet police training improves officer confidence, decision-making and their attitudes and perceptions of victim-survivors in sexual offence cases (Darwinkel et al., 2013).

She's [officer] been in Public Protection now for three years and she's not been able to get a course. So, if you said to her, she'd feel relatively confident, but really, she's not trained, she's not equipped. We've done it back to front, she's had to learn the hard way without any courses or training' [Year one, pre-workshop phase, Force 2, RASSO Investigator]

Feedback from forces included issues around force size or strength and their ability to 'abstract' officers from duty for learning, particularly for smaller forces. It is therefore important to put into context the difference in the strength and structure of the case study forces, as both faced the same issues, yet both were able to find solutions to their issues.

Force 1 serves both an urban and rural community, with approx. 3000 serving officers. To put into perspective the size of Force 1 against other forces, the Metropolitan Police Service, the largest force in England and Wales, has approx. 33,800 serving officers (Met.-Police.UK, 2024). Force 1 has a dedicated RASSO team, focusing on adult sexual abuse and (separately) domestic abuse and they share their specialist knowledge with CID and their First Response team. Force 2 is also a force that serves both an urban and rural community, larger than Force 1, with approx. 8,000 officers. In year one, it relied on an omnicompetent model, whereby all officers handle a full range of offences, with some specialist RASSO knowledge. In year two, there was a move towards the creation of a specialist team through Uplift numbers. Whilst working on their learning and development needs, Force 2 put a strong focus on improving the wellbeing offer for their staff.

Following the feedback to forces from the findings of year one, they began to acknowledge that providing officers with time for training and a change of behaviour, from

abstraction from duty to an investment in officers, was necessary. This highlights the importance of preparation when considering any major change. Issues such as resistance to training and capacity constraints can be anticipated and mitigated or avoided, but this does require those in charge to look at what has worked and not worked the past and involve operational staff in preparing for change. Though forces are understandably keen to implement change as quickly as possible, experience shows that taking time and involving a wide number of people at the preparation stage does produce more effective change and overall saves time because it leads to quicker and more successful implementation (Martinsons & Davison, 2007).

In the workshop phase, the Pathfinders were proactive in understanding the need to support their officers and to change their approaches and processes to RASSO officers and victim-survivors. Forces needed to make difficult decisions around team strength, with strategic leads needing to manage the needs of their other teams, alongside the needs of other units within their force. Strategic Leads also began to see the value in the learning from Op Soteria, which influenced their thinking around other aspects of the job and the wider role of policing.

So the whole force now, the force values reflect what we're learning [...] even though this is focusing on [Soteria] right now, rape right now, it's so much bigger than that. [Year two, workshop phase, Force 1, Strategic Lead]

Given the number of changes forces were asked to consider, some forces began with 'quick wins', to be able to effect short-term difference and bring about immediate change, as they worked on the wider implementation process (CoP, 2023b). Force 2 implemented protected learning time for their officers, to enable them to engage with learning, including online training events or providing protected space for officers on degree pathways.

The next step was to give them protected time where we'd sit down and just talk through some of the issues for an hour and a half, two hours, which was doable in the short term. So, we could do that straight away. [Year two, workshop phase, Force 2, Strategic Lead]

Working with Partners – The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

The single recurring response when discussing the wider issues with partner agencies when dealing with victim-survivors and the pressure of moving a case to charge, was the forces' relationships with the CPS. In year one, there was a real sense that the CPS were seen as hindrance to the investigation process, rather than a support mechanism. Officers suggested that they were unable to meet the high threshold needed to charge under RASSO offences and there was a reluctance to 'push back' on CPS recommendations. In addition to an already overstretched workload, the feelings of not being able to regularly meet CPS criteria also compromised officers' sense of their identity and capability as investigators.

It was almost as though we had a tick list of what we had to do for CPS. We weren't investigating. I think what's happened is we have turned that tide a bit, saying well, actually, no, we're not going to do that investigation, because it doesn't form part of the rationale. No, we're just not going to go and get third-party material. No, we're not going to do A, B and C. We are investigators. We're all experienced investigators. [Year one, pre-workshop phase, Force 2, RASSO Investigator]

In response to the Operation Soteria report, the CPS worked, and continue to work collaboratively with the College of Policing and the academic team, to design training specifically with the police, to enable improved decision-making and enhance victim-survivor care (CoP, 2023a; Gov.UK, 2022). This work is continuing, but Force 1 has already begun to see significant advantages of this new way of working, both in terms of benefits for the criminal justice system and for on-going working relationships.

Yes, probably the single biggest success in three years [CPS]. And I'm not saying it's my personal success although I do think I hopefully have brought something to the party. We've definitely turned the relationship around in RASSO. And I can see the results [...] we all bond. We're all going for our Christmas meal next week so there's seven or eight of us in that team [name]. We wouldn't have even wanted to talk to each other over coffee three years ago. [Year 2, workshop phase, Force 2, Tactical Lead]

Prioritizing Change in Access to Wellbeing

The lack of investment in officer learning and development appeared to have a linked deleterious effect on officer wellbeing. In year one, difficulties around accessing learning had the added pressure of officers working continuously within a traumatic environment (Sondhi et al., 2023). In addition to the workload and capacity issue, officers' sense of camaraderie mean they had to provide support for fellow colleagues and continued to work whilst unwell (Maguire & Sondhi, 2022). Hobfoll's Conservation of Resources theory (2001) suggests that individuals will accommodate distress on themselves to minimize the discomfort of others, ultimately leading to burnout.

It's funny, there's a real attitude around if people go off with mental health. Sometimes that might certainly my experience, it's that old boy club that every now and then you find it's an older officer who's off sick again and that's another member of the numbers on the team that struggle [...] You feel like you let them down because you know how hard it is you know how many calls are on the screen, you know how crap it is when there's someone else off sick on the team. When it's you, you just feel like you can't do it because you can't be that person that's making that happen. [Year 1, pre-workshop phase, Force 1, First Response Officer]

I'm not just putting on an acting show here, I genuinely care. And a lot of people do. And the same in my staff. People, we break people. We are breaking people, it's the only way of explaining it. [Year 1, pre-workshop phase, Force 2, RASSO Investigator]

The quotes above were common themes when we discussed wellbeing. The sense of 'letting people down', being at breaking point and the stigma of not showing perceived weakness was a common theme, which remains an ongoing issue in policing (Bullock & Garland, 2018). Such scenarios create a recurring issue for leadership teams to maintain police strength and capacity to support victim-survivors and cases, whilst managing an unwell workforce. Forces recognized early the wellbeing agenda as a central part of addressing their overall Op Soteria recommendations and placed wellbeing at the top of their priorities.

It was really, really clear for me that Pillar 4 was going to be our priority in terms of the current staffing, health, wellbeing issues that had been flagged ... If I haven't got a workforce that are healthy, engaged, focused, productive when they're at work, how am I going to deliver anything else? [Year 2, workshop phase, Force 1, Strategic Lead]

It was mentioned around that correlation, which I think is dead right, around if we can give people the right training in CPD, it's got a massive benefit for wellbeing as well, because they feel that they're equipped to do their job. [Year 2, workshop phase, Force 2, Strategic Lead]

Farr-Wharton et al. (2021) suggest that organizational models that support effective leadership will create a better wellbeing environment for officers, with a positive effect on engagement with the public and improved safety outcomes. If a workplace is not working effectively and efficiently, the barriers to creating a positive environment should be removed and organizational change needs to occur, rather than changing the working pattern of employees to fit the available resources (Hobfoll, 2001). However, this does raise the question of what effective leadership is when undertaking major change initiatives such as Operation Soteria. Daniel Goldman (2000), one of the leading authorities on leadership, argues that there are six main leadership styles, which apply to different contexts. In terms of a change, he argues that the most effective style is a democratic style that encourages participation by those affected by change. This not only aligns with Lewin's (1947) views on change, but also Oreg et al.'s (2011) research, which shows that staff participation and involvement are consistently important.

Discussion

Implementing the NOM – Lessons for the Additional Forces Implementing Change

It became clear during the year one data collection that despite the Pathfinders having significant interaction with, and support from, the academic team, they were not ready for implementation and were still very much at the preparation stage. The findings suggest that disruption to learning and development due to live cases, a lack of ring-fenced learning and resistance to wellbeing support created a barrier to moving forward with a clear implementation plan. The participant forces used in this paper have been chosen to demonstrate that although they had very different starting points, one with a specialist team and the other an omni-competent force, both faced similar issues with implementing change. The approach for Operation Soteria is based on functional equivalence, that change is implemented at a local level, to accommodate the unique needs of each police force.

The size of the task and the difficulty of implementing sustainable change within policing in England and Wales is a recurring issue. Whilst we have highlighted the positive findings of change in this paper, we also acknowledge that change is very much a work in progress and will take time, difficulties will continue to be present or to emerge. Having worked with the Pathfinder forces for over two years and provided deep dive feedback, Theory of Change workshops, change masterclasses, self-assessment completions and with a wealth of recommendations across the six pillars of work, forces felt overwhelmed and ill-prepared in many areas to begin the process of change, hence the notion of 'preparing to prepare'. For change to be transformational, it requires the collaboration of staff, led by senior management, to create a culture and environment that is prepared, open and ready change (Napier et al., 2017). One aspect of the year two work for Pillar 4 was to be the implementation of change, but it was evident that issues around capacity and capability were seen as hindrances to the change process and in all except

the original pilot force were mainly still focusing on the preparation phase, as evidenced by the findings in this paper. Or, to use Lewin's terminology, four of the pathfinder forces were mainly dealing with unfreezing issues and one was approaching the refreezing stage. Nevertheless, the NPCC are responsible for the NOM and it being fit for use in operational policing.

By the end of year 2, a considerable amount of work had been completed in terms of creating a new RASSO NOM, which was supported by over 90 products (resources) across the six pillars of work. It was important when producing materials for the RASSO NOM that functional equivalence was employed, that is, acknowledging that all forces have different approaches to their RASSO investigations, but the principles for change remain the same. Therefore, the advice provided in the RASSO NOM could not be prescriptive, but universal challenges exist in all forces, such as available officer time for learning and prioritizing demand.

However, though the new RASSO NOM would significantly improve the ability of the police to deal effectively with RASSO, this would only be the case if it could be implemented in a timely and effective manner. To support the forces in implementing the RASSO NOM, a Change Framework was constructed based on Lewin's 3-Step Model we discussed earlier in this paper (Brain, 2023). The Framework was informed by the experiences shared through the data collection in years one and two of Op Soteria, to provide guidance and support for the national rollout of the RASSO NOM. The Change Framework covers Preparation (Unfreezing), Implementation (Moving) and Consolidation (Refreezing), it lays particular stress on the importance of the of the first phase, Preparation. Both the experience of the Pathfinder forces and the change literature show that the more time spent on Preparation and early involvement of staff, the less problems occur later and the smoother and quicker is the implementation process (Martinsons & Davison, 2007; Oreg et al., 2011). Importantly, the ten-step model to change (Brain, 2023) was provided to give the officers a framework on which to work. The framework provided reassurance that change is a long process, requiring time and effort, but also outlining the 'quick wins' that would enable small changes to make a big, short-term difference. Given that the more experienced officers were the most likely to resist change, having seen cyclical rounds of changing practice with little outcome, the masterclasses also allowed a space for officers of different ranks to challenge pre-conceptions and barriers.

Consequently, the Framework draws on the experience of the Pathfinder forces and the change literature to identify 10 key issues that police forces need to consider in their preparation for change:

1. Do not try to do everything at once. No organizations can make all the changes they would like to make. The RASSO NOM is a major change, so other changes may have to wait to avoid staff being overloaded and confusion occurring over priorities.
2. Learn from past change projects – what worked, what did not work. Do not make the same mistake twice.
3. Change is a co-ordinated team effort and not a series of isolated actions by individuals.
4. Constant communication using multiple channels is necessary. Just sending out an email will not work. Do not assume that everyone knows what you know.
5. Involve front line officers from the start. If the change is to work in the longer term, RASSO staff and other stakeholders need to be involved from the outset and feel they own the new system.

6. Changing behaviour. The most difficult aspect of the RASSO NOM to implement will be the changes to investigators' behaviour. Therefore, forces should identify, support and model behaviours that create a suspect-focused, victim-centred, and context-led approach to rape investigations.
7. Short-term benefits. Not everything needs to wait for the project master plan to be completed. If something can be implemented earlier and bring immediate benefits, it should be done.
8. Use an appropriate leadership style. For the RASSO NOM implementation, a participative style of leadership is likely to be the most effective.
9. Support and motivate change agents. Leading change is difficult and often stressful. Make sure that change agents have suitable support mechanisms.
10. Continuity of involvement of key staff is essential. Changing staff part way through the change process will slow down and can endanger the change process.

The framework outlined and the issues identified in this paper are set within an English context. However, the focus on changing behaviours and processes for change to successfully being to take place is a strategy which replicable across other police forces and law enforcement agencies outside of the UK. The framework was designed to have functional equivalence, whether forces have specialist or generalized approach to RASSO investigations, to achieve the same outcome. At the time of writing, Force 1 has begun to use the framework designed for the RASSO NOM to replicate their success in other areas of business, for example, from rape investigation into their general Criminal Investigation Departments (CID). Although we are unable to validate whether this has been successful at such an early stage in the change process, it suggests that the model is working to the point that forces want to replicate it elsewhere.

This paper has highlighted the significant, additional pressure on the police and how a lack of resourcing and increased demand affects their ability to respond to RASSO cases appropriately and in a timely manner. Our paper demonstrates the complexity of officers working within a rigid environment where change is frequent and therefore often resisted, against the pressure of an increase in crime and growing need for public safety. Officers have shared with us their need to be equipped to deal with the specialism of RASSO cases and to better protect the public. We have seen, first hand, the resistance to cultural change within forces due to the volume of cases requiring time and emotional energy to support victim-survivors. However, the 10 issues for change are in the process of being implemented successfully in our two case study forces, demonstrating that change is possible. Indeed, the first report from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFS, 2024, p. 1) into Operation Soteria labelled the initiative 'a game-changer' in creating a victim-centred, suspect-focused, context-led approach to RASSO in nine forces. Importantly, it mirrors our argument that change was necessary in this aspect of police business and is a continually evolving process.

The RASSO NOM is now implemented across England and Wales (CoP, 2023a). As forces prepare to change their ways of working and adopt the principles of the NOM, on-going academic support remains in place, alongside regional support from the national Joint Unit Team. Adopting new ways of working is an on-going process and changes will adapt and new changes will be developed. Although some changes will be more straightforward to implement, others will take time, even years, which is a real shift in thinking for

police forces who are used to regular turnover of both teams and work priority. Change takes time and requires significant investment, both in temporal terms and from leadership, for it to be seen as possible, enacted, and successful. At present, as our research shows, the officers think they are working against a system that does not support or value them. Given the nature of the changes and their (potential) involvement in implementing them, that could change. They could find that they are swimming with the current rather than against it.

Note

1. Operation Soteria was a UK Home Office-funded programme designed to improve the investigation of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) in England and Wales. It is a unique project which is underpinned by rigorous social science. With multi-disciplined academics located in multiple universities, mixed qualitative and quantitative methods are applied to a six pillared approach to organizational change with police forces, uplifting the capability of more specialist police decision-making in RASSO cases. The research informs policing practice as well as government policy and is set to inform a national change. These research informed pillars pinpoint specific areas for improvement which will form part of the new framework for investigating RASSO: (1) suspect-focused investigations; (2) disrupting repeat suspects; (3) victim engagement as procedural justice; (4) promoting better learning, development, and wellbeing for police officers; (5) using data more effectively in RASSO investigations; and (6) using digital material and technology in RASSO investigations. The pathfinder project started in 2021, based in Avon and Somerset Constabulary. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, the pillar leads include Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith and Emma Williams.

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