

Operation Odyssey – using data extraction technology in rape and serious sexual offences and domestic abuse investigations

Using technology to speed up the process of obtaining digital evidence from victims of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) and domestic abuse (DA).

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Domestic abuse Rape and serious sexual offences Digital, data and analytics
Organisation	Gloucestershire Constabulary
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: an inspection of Gloucestershire Constabulary
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Region	South West
Partners	Police

Key details

Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	April 2021
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Victims Workforce

Aim

The overarching aim of Operation Odyssey is to improve victims' experiences of digital investigation, their trust and confidence in the police, and to improve the quality of investigations. Operation Odyssey aims to achieve this through the following:

- Giving victims control of the digital data that is viewed and the opportunity to guide investigating officers to relevant data to investigate the allegation.
- Providing victims with greater transparency over the way their digital data is downloaded and processed.
- Downloading relevant data within one day, rather than confiscating victims' phones for extended periods of time.
- Providing victims with the opportunity to ask questions or withdraw their agreement for their digital data to be used at any time.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Odyssey are to:

- improve trust and confidence in Gloucestershire Constabulary
- more procedurally just treatment of victims by officers when using digital evidence
- shorter officer deployment times when obtaining digital evidence

Description

Operation Odyssey is a Home Office and Police Digital Services (PDS) funded initiative. It was initially developed with Police Science, Technology, Analysis and Research (STAR) funding as a proof-of-concept piece. The project started in April 2021 in response to several high-profile RASSO cases in Gloucestershire Constabulary. These cases highlighted the issue of 'digital strip searches', in which police officers take victims' mobile devices for a full download. This is often unnecessary, time-consuming, and causes great distress.

Operation Odyssey operates through specialist data extraction equipment. The equipment is attached to a single laptop and allows officers to extract data from mobile devices at a location of the victim's choice (for example their home, at a police station, at the crime scene), so that officers do not have to remove a victim's mobile device from them.

A dedicated team of digital response officers (DROs), trained and equipped to use Odyssey, can selectively capture the relevant data without the need to take the device away for a full laboratory download. A central coordinator is responsible for managing the activities of Operation Odyssey, liaising with investigating officers and the provider of the equipment, and monitoring the deployments.

Stage 1

Prior to the extraction of digital data, the Operation Odyssey team requires a Digital Processing Notice (DPN) authorised by an inspector, as well as the completion of an Operation Odyssey pre-deployment form containing contact details for the victim or witness.

Stage 2

On deployment, the Operation Odyssey officer consults the victim who directs them to the relevant data and date parameters, which may shift as the investigation progresses. The officer does not conduct a full physical download, and only extracts the data relevant to the investigation. Relevant data is commonly stored in WhatsApp, Facebook and SMS messages. The extraction can be done in the presence of the victim or witness and takes between 20 to 90 minutes.

Stage 3

Once the relevant data has been extracted, a summary report is produced which can be given to the victim or witness to outline which data was extracted.

Feedback from victims and witnesses

The victim or witness is then provided with a survey to gather their feedback on their experience of the process, including how they feel they were treated, how well they understood the process and their trust and confidence in Gloucestershire Constabulary following this experience.

Between April 2021 and March 2024, the officers have been involved in 335 deployments. While Operation Odyssey can be deployed for any crime involving digital evidence, around 75% of cases referred to Operation Odyssey so far have been for sexual offences. Operation Odyssey has currently only been used for victims and witnesses; suspect devices continue to be processed by the Digital Forensics Unit (DFU).

Evaluation

The Operation Odyssey team are currently waiting on an evaluation report from Police Digital Service (PDS). The evaluation is looking at the following data sources:

- Victim experience survey responses
- Deployment times
- Cost savings (officer in charge (OIC) review time, digital forensics resource)
- Officer feedback

Overall impact

As of 27 November 2023, Gloucestershire had received 275 requests for the deployment of Operation Odyssey:

- 189 of these requests have been actioned with a DRO deployed
- 61 were cancelled as the OIC no longer required the deployment because the victim no longer wished to proceed, the device had already been sent to the DFU or it was determined the case would be closed.
- 17 are currently on hold or scheduled for completion.

The victim experience survey (VES) was introduced in May 2023 and has been completed on approximately 57% (108/189) of deployments conducted. For those who chose to complete the VES at the end of an Odyssey deployment:

- 100% felt the Odyssey officer clearly explained the process
- 100% understood what would happen to their data
- 100% felt they had been treated with dignity and respect by our Odyssey officer
- 85% said their opinion of the Constabulary had improved, 15% said their opinion remained the same
- 85% said the likelihood of reporting a future incident had increased, 11% said this had stayed the same and 4% did not respond to this question
- 44% said they would not have surrendered their device
- 15% said they would have surrendered their device for 24 hours or more

Comments from the VES:

“Not having to give up my device for an unknown amount of time gives me more confidence and doesn't make me feel isolated or further victimised. Being able to see the report being produced in front of me and knowing what it contained filled me with a lot of confidence that the data was full and complete. I'd recommend this service.”

“This is great service, I was able to perform the process in my own home, I was not without my device, clear instructions of the process were given, positive experience.”

Learning

Operation Odyssey has evolved since its inception. The equipment has been updated and is now faster than when it was initially introduced. Officers were initially involved on a voluntary basis in addition to their main roles, whereas there is now a team of dedicated officers working on Operation Odyssey due to the ongoing demand for the service.

While some initial training was required to use the Operation Odyssey equipment, officers have become accustomed to the equipment and are developing solutions to initial problems they encountered, such as some apps not being supported.

An essential component of Operation Odyssey has been the role of a central coordinator to manage the activities, liaise with investigating officers and the provider of the equipment, and monitor the deployments. In addition, strong relationships with the Digital Forensics Unit have been essential and have prevented the duplication of work.

Support from the force IT department at the initial stage of implementation was essential in establishing the governance arrangements and compliance with GDPR and producing relevant Data Protection Impact Assessments.

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