

The sexual misconduct advocate (SMA) service: empowering staff to call out inappropriate behaviour

A support service for Avon and Somerset police officers and members of staff who have experienced or witnessed inappropriate sexual behaviour.

First published
2 September 2025

Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Diversity and inclusion Ethics and values Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	Avon and Somerset Police LimeCulture
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Avon and Somerset Constabulary
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Region	South West

Key details

Partners	Police Private sector
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	June 2024
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Disability LGBT+ Victims Women Workforce

Aim

The sexual misconduct advocate (SMA) service has the following aims around supporting individuals who have experienced inappropriate behaviour:

- to provide any member of the force with a mechanism to share or raise concerns
- to offer the opportunity to raise a formal report
- to support victim-survivors and witnesses
- to provide access to external or internal specialist support services

Intended outcome

- Provision of high-quality, safe and effective support for those working for Avon and Somerset Police who have experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour.

- Improved trust and confidence in reporting inappropriate behaviour.
- Updated organisational policies, guidance and processes that are victim-focused and trauma-informed.
- The identification and risk assessment of intelligence relating to potential perpetrators.
- An enhanced understanding of the demographics of those who have experienced inappropriate sexual behaviour.

Description

In 2021, Avon and Somerset Police sought a review of their response to sexual misconduct reported by staff. The driver for the review came from learning about the offending conducted by serving Metropolitan Police officer Wayne Couzens, and from a debrief from a colleague in the force who resigned after experiencing inappropriate sexual behaviour.

The force's head of professional standards department (PSD) commissioned a national sexual violence and safeguarding organisation called LimeCulture to conduct the review. The aim of the review was to identify:

- the support available to staff who reported sexual misconduct
- the channels that existed to raise concerns
- any gaps or barriers in the organisation's response to sexual misconduct

LimeCulture conducted a series of focus groups with police officers, police staff and senior leaders from Avon and Somerset Police to gather views, experiences and suggestions on the topic of support for sexual misconduct and reporting inappropriate behaviour. Findings from the focus groups led to the identification of the need for a police-victim support service. The force worked closely with LimeCulture to develop and embed an in-house funded service.

The SMA service

The SMA service launched in June 2024.

The service is run by a sexual misconduct liaison officer (SMLO) and is supported by 20 SMAs. The SMAs are volunteers from across Avon and Somerset Police including police officers and police staff in different roles and ranks or grades. The SMA service receives referrals through a confidential IT system on Teams and provides confidential support for the service users.

The role of the SMA service is to provide advice, support and guidance to officers and staff who report inappropriate sexual behaviour or misconduct in the organisation. There are no set hours or shifts for the SMAs, instead they complete their roles based on service users' needs and to fit in with their substantive posts. Activities undertaken by the SMAs include:

- contacting the individual and organising an initial meeting
- discussing what the individual would like from the service, what the service can offer, and options around reporting and processes
- conducting confidentiality agreements, ongoing risk assessments and agreeing contact arrangements
- signposting or referring individuals to relevant specialists, either internal to the force or to external sexual violence services
- advocating for the individuals in processes such as investigations, taking updates from investigators and passing these on
- attending statements for support
- supporting investigators with de-briefs and decision delivery
- discussing special measures for court or misconduct hearings
- attending court or misconduct hearings as a special measure to provide support

All SMAs have attended four bespoke training sessions created by the force and LimeCulture. There is also an annual continued professional development (CPD) day for SMAs to ensure they remain up to date with knowledge, legislation, processes and external support systems. Monthly drop-in sessions also run which the SMAs can attend to discuss main themes, concerns, good practice and anonymised cases.

The SMLO

An SMLO was recruited to implement and embed the SMA service. The SMLO co-ordinates the SMA service by processing referrals and allocating appropriate advocates. This role also provides links into the force PSD and the counter corruption unit for referrals for misconduct. The SMLO can receive referrals from investigators or intelligence leads and from human resources for violence against women and girls (VAWG) related grievances.

Closely supported by stakeholders including the head of PSD, internal VAWG strategic leads, human resources and legal services, the SMLO conducted the following activities to set up the

SMA service.

- Held interviews for shortlisted SMA applicants to ensure role competency and the understanding of internal and external climate around VAWG.
- Conducted integrity and vetting checks for SMAs to ensure their suitability for supporting vulnerable victim-survivors.
- Created internal policies and guidance on the SMA service including a sexual misconduct pledge. Vital paperwork was also created for SMAs to complete including support agreements, risk assessments and contact logs.
- Worked with LimeCulture to create the bespoke training for SMAs.
- Worked with internal and external stakeholders to gain support for the service. Sexual assault referral centre (SARCs), independent sexual violence advisor (ISVA) and independent domestic violence advocate (IDVA) services all provide unique referral systems for Avon and Somerset Police staff.
- Met with all internal staff networks and associations to agree on the confidential referral and advice system for the SMA service to use.
- Ran webinars and internal campaigns to publicise the SMA service and assist with recruiting SMAs.
- Conducted inputs to different departments and directorates, senior leadership teams and CPD events to raise awareness of the SMA service.
- Set up a confidential IT system on Microsoft Teams for referrals to be received and stored.
- Implemented a data protection impact assessment for the SMA service regarding data collection, storage and retention.

Evaluation

The SMA service was evaluated at the six-month stage by a light touch review. This review involved the appraisal of learning and organisational change and service user feedback received via the service. The review also involved statistical analysis of outputs such as the number of referrals received per month, the number of referrals converted into misconduct, comparisons between police officer and police staff referrals, the gender of referrals, the number of referrals into internal and external specialist services and the number of SMAs deployed.

At the time of the review, 18 people had referred into the SMA service, of which 12 were officers and six were staff. Feedback from service users showed built confidence and trust - knowing they would be supported, believed and heard. The findings from the review evidenced the demographics of service users which has helped understand victimology better in the force. The review also indicated an increased number of referrals going into specialist services since the launch of the SMA service.

Overall impact

The SMA service has enabled the following.

- Enhanced intelligence gathering around perpetrators and the risk they pose.
- Twenty advocates to become accredited to provide specialist support and advice.
- Trust in reporting to the force PS in cases where previously the service user would not have reported.
- A change in procedural guidance when returning property to rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) victim-survivors to ensure a trauma-informed approach, initiated by an SMA whilst supporting a service user. The SMA recognised that the process of returning property to RASSO victim-survivors was not trauma-informed and was triggering. A review occurred and a new policy was written.
- Ongoing support provided to individuals who have left the force but who are still part of a force process.
- Requests for half-pay reviews for those impacted by workplace sexual violence and harassment who are off on long-term sick to ensure the process is victim-focused, and trauma-informed.

Learning

Avon and Somerset Police noted that their model is successful because it uses peer support. This means that people are supported by peers who understand how the force works and its processes, regulations and standards, and who have easy access to those that understand criminal and misconduct processes. Feedback received is that service users feel more comfortable using internal colleagues and they may not have necessarily used an external service to seek support. Relatedly, keeping the advocates as independent away from PSD helps builds confidence. Keeping the support internal also allows the force to understand risks and manage these correctly.

When looking to recruit individuals for SMA roles, organisations should identify people who are:

- caring
- empathetic
- good at listening
- want to be part of a cultural change
- trauma-informed

Avon and Somerset Police held webinars to encourage interest in the role and to have an open discussion about the role and the need for it. To be applicable for the role in Avon and Somerset, applicants needed to have line manager approval and availability for four training dates. Shortlisted candidates went through a full recruitment process consisting of providing written evidence of suitability and interviews. When in role, the SMAs are supported through regular one-to-ones with the SMLO.

Avon and Somerset Police emphasise the importance of continuous risk management and escalation around each case including misconduct, crimes and safeguarding. The force is working towards introducing a scrutiny panel to review anonymous cases to ensure they are providing the most appropriate support for victim-survivors.

Organisations looking to implement similar models to Avon and Somerset will need to consider their processes and responses for instances where there:

- is inconsistent support from departments allowing the SMAs time to conduct the role alongside their substantive post, in Avon and Somerset, the SMLO keeps a close eye on this to ensure that contact is appropriate and proportionate to the needs to the service user and the substantive post
- is inconsistent support from supervisors allowing the service users time to see their SMA, or access to the service in general
- are entrenched cultural beliefs that there is not an issue with sexual misconduct and the service is not needed
- are scenarios where a service user becomes a subject in a misconduct investigation and ensuring boundaries are in place around managing support in either case
- are referrals needing support with issues not within the SMA service remit, Avon and Somerset Police has worked to ensure that all staff networks or associations support the SMA service and have successfully referred matters to these services where the referral does not fit the SMA service remit, but individuals need support (for example for pay issues or uniform concerns)

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