

Relationship based practice in police diversion (out of court resolutions)

As an out of court resolutions (OoCR) approach, a centralised team of police staff keyworkers hold responsibility for a caseload of offenders under deferred prosecution. Relationship-based practice is central to the keyworker-client relationship which aims to reduce reoffending.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Evaluated locally
Purpose	Reoffending
Topic	Criminal justice Offender management
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Region	South West
Partners	Police Health services Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	January 2017
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Offenders

Aim

- reduce reoffending of those who are entering the criminal justice system through low-level/less serious offending and due to wider underlying needs
- address the needs of low-level offenders which could be contributing to or driving their offending behaviour (for example, drug and alcohol issues)
- improve confidence and legitimacy in policing and responding to needs for low-level offenders and potentially increase the likelihood of reporting crime and positively interacting with police in the future
- help individuals recognise and build their strengths, improve capacity to make better decisions
- increase pro-social behaviour, through modelling by keyworkers of safe and trusted relationships and connection to their local community assets

Intended outcome

- reduce the rate of reoffending for those opting into deferred prosecution, in comparison to those who have not received a deferred prosecution for similar offences
- increase scores for perceived police legitimacy from those completing deferred prosecution

Description

In Devon and Cornwall's deferred prosecution approach, a relationship-based model is implemented where each offender is allocated an individual keyworker within the OoCR team.

The deferred prosecution scheme has the below eligibility criteria and is available for summary only and either way offences.

Offender criteria:

- all adults aged 18 years and above
- lives in Devon and Cornwall
- offence committed in Devon and Cornwall
- agrees to participate (and has either postal address or email AND phone number)
- admission of guilt/accepts responsibility

An offender will not be eligible for deferred prosecution if they:

- have a current Domestic Violence Protection Notice (DVPN) or Order (DVPO)
- have a current court order or are on sentence from court
- are on prison licence
- are on police or court bail or released under investigation for a different offence
- have no means of contact

Once a crime has been evidenced, reviewed and the eligibility is checked by evidence review officers, the crime will move over to the OoCR Team for allocation to a keyworker.

OoCR keyworkers complete a needs assessment which takes the form of an initial conversation with the offender about their criminogenic needs and gathering information around previous offending. This is a conversation by a trained practitioner, designed to build rapport and trust, that seeks to identify and understand the lead up to the offence, the context of the individual's life, and their wider goals and motivations. This forms the foundation for a therapeutic relationship, designed to support behavioural changes.

A 16-week contract is agreed with conditions being restorative, rehabilitative, reparative and restrictive, bespoke to the individual's needs and risks. Supported by the keyworker-client relationship, the contract addresses needs through one-to-one interventions by the keyworker and warm introductions to external partners, where more specialist or long-term support is needed.

Keyworkers come from various professional backgrounds and are trained in approaches such as motivational interviewing, strengths-based approaches, personal safety, and first aid. As the keyworkers are police staff, they can implement restrictive conditions, raise crime records, create safeguarding alerts and submit intelligence. Reflection, observed practice, and peer learning are

also key parts of their role.

For the force area of Devon and Cornwall, the team has 16 full-time equivalent employees, comprising of a team manager, two supervisors, an administrator and twelve case workers. There are no commissioned services for deferred prosecution; all interventions are delivered in-house or in collaboration with third sector partners through agreed referral routes or statutory referrals.

Buy-in from senior leaders and across local policing areas is key to ensure that eligible crimes and offenders are referred to the deferred prosecution team. Crucially, crimes that are referred and are eligible are then managed by the OoCR Team. This helps to reduce officer workloads, and due to a high compliance rate, most (85-95%) offenders have not returned to officers for breach and charge to court.

Evaluation

Deferred prosecution in Devon and Cornwall was evaluated by Society of Evidence Based Policing with University of Cambridge in 2024, in a Maryland level four evaluation. The results found that only 19% of those who completed the deferred charge contract reoffended, compared to 40% of those who were eligible but opted to attend court instead.

Deferred prosecution was also evaluated by University of Cambridge in 2023, in a randomised control trial (RCT), which found that 15.9% of people reoffended after completing their deferred caution contract after two years, in comparison to 20.3% who had received a simple adult caution. Importantly, those who did reoffend after completing their deferred caution caused 78% less crime harm in the following two years, compared to 3.5% less crime harm from those who received a simple adult caution.

Overall impact

Deferred prosecution in Devon and Cornwall continues to have high compliance rates, positive feedback from offenders and victims, and continues to address reoffending.

There are now specific enhanced offers for 18-25 year-olds and women within the deferred prosecution scheme.

Learning

System and step up

- Senior leader buy-in is essential to secure and maintain centralised funding and understanding of key performance indicators. These may be different from established indicators – for example, progress made by clients, rather than number of appointments completed.
- Diversity within the keyworker cohort – recruitment of case workers from across disciplinary areas is vital, rather than always using internal recruitment from officers. This brings knowledge and experience in interventions and relationship-based work which is vital for successful reoffending rates.
- Policy is vital to change practice in norms in policing away from automatically charging, to considering deferred charge where appropriate. Building in policy directives to support this can help get traction across a big force area.
- Piloting within certain groups can be a good way to start and build support. Individuals between 18-25 years are an effective cohort as this client group and professionals around them are often familiar with similar youth justice approaches.

Practice tools

- Assessment of clients' needs before contracts is essential. The better the assessment, the more bespoke the contracts can be and the more effective they become for the individual.
- Theoretical grounding – for example, person-centred practice is useful to pin down. It can be a broad approach like strengths-based or trauma-informed practice, but, ethically, it should be evidence-based. This will also support communication about what you are doing with external partners who you may want to refer to. Those working across the team should be trained in the approach as part of induction and ongoing CPD.

Evaluation

Whilst getting an academic institution on board, the evidence base for deferred prosecution has grown significantly in the last few years. Wider evidence for relationship-based practice is very well established. Completing internal evaluations in house as you go can be a quick answer, for example, using an administrator to complete reoffending checks (rather than relying on Performance and Analysis support) and completing ending surveys with offenders and victims can collect strong qualitative data.

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