



London Pilot of Free Legal Advice for Sexual Violence Complainants

Final Report
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M O P A C

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Introduction

This report presents findings from the first two years of a London pilot offering free, independent legal advice to adult complainants of sexual violence. Commissioned by MOPAC and delivered by the Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ) and Women & Girls Network (WGN), the pilot was designed to address a longstanding gap in support for complainants navigating complex criminal justice processes. The evaluation demonstrates strong demand for specialist legal advice and that legal support can improve both complainant experiences and decision-making across the criminal justice process.

About the Legal Service

The pilot was available to women aged 16+ living in London who had reported sexual violence to the police. While self-referral is possible, the pilot was publicised to a limited number of specific referral routes to manage resources (these referral routes were: WGN services, a handful of other London ISVA services, and four Metropolitan Police Rape and Serious Sexual Offences (RASSO) teams).

The pilot covers five areas of legal support:

1. Police and/or CPS requests to access the complainants' sensitive personal data
2. The Victims' Right to Review [VRR] scheme
3. Complaints about the police and/or CPS
4. Criminal injuries compensation (limited to advice on eligibility and time limits)
5. Advice on other legal issues relating to complainants' rights and interests through the criminal justice system

Roles & Governance

The Women & Girls Network [WGN] employed pilot staff and provided sexual violence training, safeguarding procedures, and other operational factors. The Centre for Women's Justice [CWJ] provided legal training, data monitoring, legal supervision, and (alongside the Violence Against Women & Girls Team at MOPAC) led the strategic direction of the pilot. This created a *de facto* leadership team comprising members from MOPAC, CWJ, and WGN.

Additionally, a Steering Group, chaired and run by MOPAC, met monthly to review progress, set goals, and problem-solve. Representation covered:

Mayor's Office for Policing & Crime [MOPAC]
Women & Girls Network
Centre for Women's Justice
Metropolitan Police Service
Crown Prosecution Service London
Legal Pilot Team
Loughborough University (service evaluation)

A separate report (*Initial Report July 2024*) sets out the justification, expected outcomes, and set-up process of the pilot.

While the evaluation period ended in May 2026, the legal pilot has been extended until December 2026. This also represents an expansion to the project, with 2 FTE lawyers and 0.8 FTE paralegal, demonstrating MOPAC's commitment to offering this vital service.

Executive Summary

This report evaluates a Mayor of London funded pilot of free and independent legal advice for sexual violence complainants, delivered by the Centre for Women's Justice and Women & Girls Network. It finds strong evidence that this model fills a significant gap in existing support and supports the Government's move to create a national expansion.

Headline Findings

- Demand was high even when the pilot was deliberately kept small-scale: 247 complainants were supported on 297 matters, and the service sometimes had to close to most referrals because demand exceeded capacity.
 - Clients reported feeling heard, validated, empowered to make informed decisions, suggesting that independent legal advice offers procedural justice.
 - Around 35% of matters involved challenging criminal justice decisions or processes. These challenges often led to reopened cases, apologies, or improved handling of evidence requests.
 - The model's independence, specialist mix of legal expertise, trauma-informed practice, partnership with ISVAs, and salaried roles were important for its perceived value.
 - Police and CPS confidence about the legal service needs improvement, perhaps via a national code of practice and training to provide reassurance.
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Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation used mixed methods data from May 2024 to May 2026, including case management data on 297 legal matters, 84 reflective diaries from the pilot team, surveys from 51 clients, 48 support practitioners and 20 police officers, plus follow-up interviews and focus groups with clients, ISVAs, and police. The findings therefore draw on both service data and the perspectives of complainants, support practitioners, and criminal justice professionals.

The Pilot

The London pilot offered free, independent legal advice to women aged 16 and over living in London who had reported sexual violence to the police. It was funded by MOPAC and delivered by Women & Girls Network, with legal supervision from the Centre for Women's Justice. The pilot began taking referrals in May 2024, and this report evaluates its first two years of operation to May 2026.

The service was designed to address a longstanding gap in support for complainants navigating the criminal justice process. Its scope covered:

1. Requests to access complainants' sensitive personal data
2. The Victims' Right to Review scheme
3. Complaints about the police and/or CPS
4. Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority claims (eligibility & time limits)
5. Other legal issues relating to complainants' rights and interests within the criminal justice system

Although the evaluation period ended in May 2026, the pilot has been extended until December 2026. This extension also represents an expansion of the project, with 2 FTE lawyers and 0.8 FTE paralegal, demonstrating MOPAC's continued commitment to the service.

“I cannot stress enough how brilliant and absolutely vital this pilot has been” (Support Practitioner 35)

Key Findings

There is strong demand for legal advice and support.

The pilot demonstrated clear demand for free, independent legal advice. During the first two years, 247 complainants received support across 297 legal matters. This included 42 complainants who returned for further support on additional issues.

This level of demand is significant because the pilot was not advertised publicly and referral routes were deliberately limited to manage capacity. Even with these safeguards, demand sometimes exceeded available resources, and the service had to close to most referral routes for around 24 weeks over the two years.

Complainants sought legal support across a wide range of legal issues, reflecting different needs across multiple stages of the criminal justice process. The most common type was general advice about criminal justice matters (37% of all 297 issues handled), followed by Victims' Right to Review (33%), making complaints about the police, CPS, or trial counsel (12%), third-party material requests (9%), Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority applications (6%), and digital device issues (3%).

The median time per case was just over 3.5 hours in year one and 4.6 hours in year two, with VRRs requiring the most resource (median of 7.7 hours in year 2), demonstrating that type of legal issue substantially changes resourcing needs.

*“This support has been truly invaluable and is irreplaceable”
(Client Survey 36)*

Legal support delivers procedural justice for complainants.

The pilot substantially improved complainants' experiences of the criminal justice process. Clients described feeling heard, validated, and better able to understand what was happening in their case. The legal advice helped complainants distinguish between what was lawful and what could be challenged, allowing them to make informed decisions and focus their energy on what mattered most.

Overall, the outcomes described by clients and support practitioners reflected core principles of procedural justice: complainants felt listened to, treated with dignity, and able to participate meaningfully. The findings therefore speak directly to the aims of Soteria approach to rape and serious sexual offences.

"I still don't know the outcome, but I felt very heard and supported" (Client Survey 7)

"I was at a loss before meeting the lawyer. They helped me to understand my case and my rights, and made me stronger to make the right decisions... I felt supported and taken seriously at last." (Client Survey 31)

Legal challenges produced tangible outcomes.

Around 35% of cases involved challenging the CJS process or decision-making, mostly through Victims Right to Review [VRR], but also via complaints and pushback on over-reaching evidence requests. Notably, most cases in this pilot therefore involved providing information that was not about challenging the CJS, such as explaining why evidence requests or other decisions were lawful.

Where challenges were made, the outcomes were often significant. Of 12 challenges to requests for digital or third-party material, six resulted in the request being fully withdrawn and four in a reduced scope; only two resulted in no change, both because the client chose to consent to avoid delays to trial. Of 21 completed VRR reviews, 46% led to cases being reopened, including three suspects charged and two further cases referred to CPS for a charging decision.

“I would have just handed over all of this evidence that wasn’t relevant... to the detriment of the case, to the detriment of justice” (Client Interview 1)

Beyond quantified outcomes, the pilot encouraged best practice. Steering group discussions regularly led police leads to address issues within their teams, and direct meetings between lawyers, police, and CPS were described as constructive. In other cases, clients received an apology and felt they might improve responses for others in the future because they had raised their concerns.

MOPAC’s model brings significant benefits.

The pilot’s benefits were linked to how the service was designed. Clients, support practitioners, and the pilot team valued MOPAC’s model of legal support for being trauma-informed, independent, and specialist. Clients trusted lawyers who understood sexual violence, trauma, safeguarding, and the criminal justice process. Support practitioners valued being able to refer clients to lawyers who were not generalists, but who worked specifically in this area and understood the realities of rape and sexual violence cases.

“I trusted their expertise because they worked entirely on intimate crime [and] they were very compassionate and just human.” (Client Interview 9)

Other strengths included the use of salaried legal roles, because it meant the lawyers could focus on complainants' rights and interests cost effectively, and the pilot strongly benefited from legal supervision by the Centre for Women's Justice. Any wider scheme should include properly resourced legal supervision that is independent, trusted by specialist services, and knowledgeable in both criminal and relevant civil law.

CJS practitioners need help to be more confident about engaging.

Police participants in the evaluation raised questions about the potential impact of a legal advice scheme on trust in policing, the risks of witness contamination, and the impact of disclosure obligations. Some police and CPS practitioners were slow to respond to the legal team, and a small number were wary of engaging with the lawyers due to questions about contamination and disclosure. Where police and CPS did engage with the pilot, communication was generally viewed as constructive, but a handful of difficult individual cases created friction.

An initial challenge involved all communication with CPS being routed through police, which turned officers into intermediaries in disputes about decisions they had not made. Police described feeling "caught in the crossfire", but this was resolved by a clear Memorandum of Understanding between all parties.

Police signposting to the pilot appeared to be concentrated among a small number of individual officers. Interventions by police leads to encourage officer engagement in the referrals process did not produce sustainable results. Embedding signposting into existing police processes may help.

"I do see the benefit in having this scheme [but] I believe the scheme is generally unnecessary and is asking officers to do more with less time" (Police 12)

Key Recommendations for National Scheme

Recommendations are made throughout the report, and are listed here in the order that they arise:

1. Ensure sufficient team sizes to provide resilience during staff turnover and absence, with built-in review points to check resourcing meets demand.
2. Optimise value for money by recruiting both administrative support and paralegals to free up lawyer time.
3. Make legal support accessible for all adult rape complainants.
4. Ensure police clearly understand referral criteria, so ineligible complainants are not told about the support only to be turned away.
5. Lawyers currently advise on a wide range of criminal matters and this is highly valued. A national scheme should maintain this broad scope and also identify how best to effectively signpost clients to support on civil matters.
6. Encourage strong partnership working with support practitioners, e.g., ISVAs, by promoting a shared trauma-informed and client-centred ethos. This should be factored into tendering and recruitment processes.
7. Design of the national scheme should preserve the strengths of MOPAC's model, particularly the lawyers' independence and specialist training on sexual violence (see *Initial Set-Up Report* for further advantages, such as salaried positions).
8. Factor in resources for legal supervision, which should be independent, trusted by specialist services, and knowledgeable in both criminal and civil law (see *Initial Set-Up Report* for the relevant knowledge base).

9. Monitor compliance of whether police provide information about the service at key points, as with the Victims Code, but don't use quotas.
 - Service details should be included in Victim Information Guides, digital data extraction forms, 'NFA' letters, and other relevant paperwork.
 10. Establish a clear escalation route for cases where individual CJS professionals don't respond, or disputes can't easily be resolved.
 - Introduce Single Points of Contact [SPOCs] for each force and their Police & Crime Commissioner (or mayoral equivalent).
 - Ensure centralised monitoring of CJS engagement with the lawyers, mirroring the role of MOPAC and the pilot's steering group.
 11. Use a Memorandum of Understanding, alongside TPM protocols, to encourage CJS practitioner responsiveness, clarify police and prosecutor roles in disputed cases, and streamlining communication where possible.
 12. Build CJS practitioner confidence in engaging with the complainants' lawyers by developing a national Code of Practice for legal support to provide reassurance about service standards and address misled fears about witness coaching.
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Evaluation Methodology

This report outlines the independent evaluation conducted by Dr Olivia Smith. The evaluation ran alongside the pilot and was guided by three research questions:



1. Is there demand for legal support?



2. What impact, if any, does legal support have?



3. Is this model of legal support useful?

Relevant Measures:

- Number of referrals
- Number of clients supported
- Capacity vs demand
- Nature of legal issue(s)

Relevant Measures:

- Nature of legal support
- Outcome of legal support
- Client feedback
- Support service feedback
- Police feedback

Relevant Measures:

- Pilot team feedback
- Support service feedback
- Police feedback
- Client feedback

Data Collection

To answer the research questions, there were 5 main data collection streams:

- Mixed methods survey of 51 clients (complainants),
- Mixed methods survey of 48 support professionals (mostly ISVAs),
- Mixed methods survey of 20 police officers
- Monthly reflective diaries from pilot scheme staff (84 total)
- Service management data from 247 clients (297 legal matters)

During analysis, police views appeared to be an outlier to the rest of the data. To understand these findings, follow-up focus groups were conducted with two ISVAs and nine police, as well as interviews with nine clients. The reflective

diaries and surveys ran concurrently with the pilot, but focus groups and client interviews occurred retrospectively in August 2025 and May 2026.

Sampling occurred opportunistically and on a self-selecting basis. Support practitioners and clients involved in the legal pilot were emailed an online feedback survey for completion at the end of each legal issue. Members of the pilot team were asked to complete a monthly online reflective diary as part of their role. Police surveys were emailed to all members of the teams selected to refer clients at the end of year one, and to other named officers who had direct contact with the pilot team at the end of year two. All cases referred to the pilot were included in the anonymised case management data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data (case management data and Likert scale survey questions) were cleaned, with missing values identified. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the data, primarily using frequency analysis. Where sample sizes allowed, associations were tested using chi-squared and Fisher's exact tests. A significance level of $p < .05$ was applied.

Qualitative data (e.g., focus group and interview transcripts, written comments from open survey questions, and the reflective diaries) underwent inductive thematic analysis using the six stages outlined by [Braun & Clarke \(2006\)](#).

Limitations & Caveats

There are several caveats to this report. The police survey and focus group samples were almost exclusively from the police teams chosen as referral pathways for the pilot, rather than officers who actual had contact with the pilot. Evidence from ISVAs and team reflective diaries suggest attitudes towards the scheme may have been more positive among these officers.

Surveys were distributed to CPS staff, and focus groups were offered, but only two responses were received and only one of these contained free text comments. Given the very low response rate, CPS survey data were excluded from the formal analysis. While this lack of engagement is unsurprising given prosecutors' high caseloads, it means that CPS perspectives are largely limited to those provided by the steering group representative, alongside insights shared by other participants (e.g. police talking about CPS colleagues' engagement with the service).

The client survey achieved a 33.3% response rate, with 153 clients who had direct contact with the legal pilot being invited to participate during case closure¹. Although this exceeds typical response rates for surveys on sexual violence (c.f. [Jeffrey et al., 2022](#)), it still represents a minority of clients. To mitigate potential self-selection bias, support practitioner data captured the experiences of a wider range of clients.

¹ Closure of the legal advice / representation, not the criminal legal proceeding.

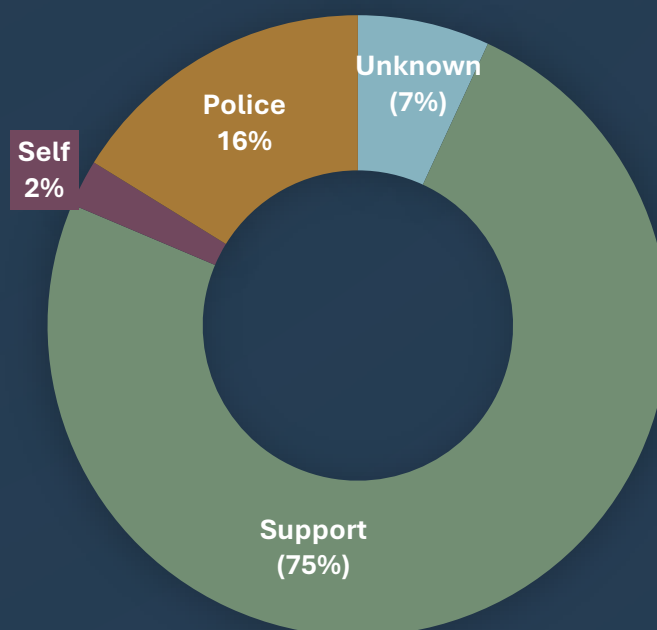
Is there demand for legal support?

Referral numbers show there is strong demand

Case management data shows that 247 clients received support in the first two years (to May 2026). A further 69 referrals were out of scope and 30 did not engage following referral. Out of scope referrals typically involved legal issues outside the criminal justice process or those who had not reported to police. Five involved complainants under 16 and six involved complainants living outside London.

Demand was sufficiently high that, over the two years, the service temporarily closed to most non-police referrals for around 24 weeks. These closures were driven by periods of high referrals, as well as annual leave, illness, or other staff absence within the small legal team meaning they needed to manage demand.

Where did referrals come from?



Most referrals came from support services, particularly ISVAs. In the context of ISVA waiting lists, this meant cases had often progressed significantly. Clients repeatedly identified earlier access to legal advice as the main area for improvement. As one client explained: “This pilot wasn't running when I reported and both the CPS and the police made mistakes... Having [a lawyer] sooner could

have stopped that” (Client Survey 42). Some clients also expressed a desire for ongoing legal support rather than engaging with the service for discrete issues, but recognised this may be difficult to resource (Client Survey 39).

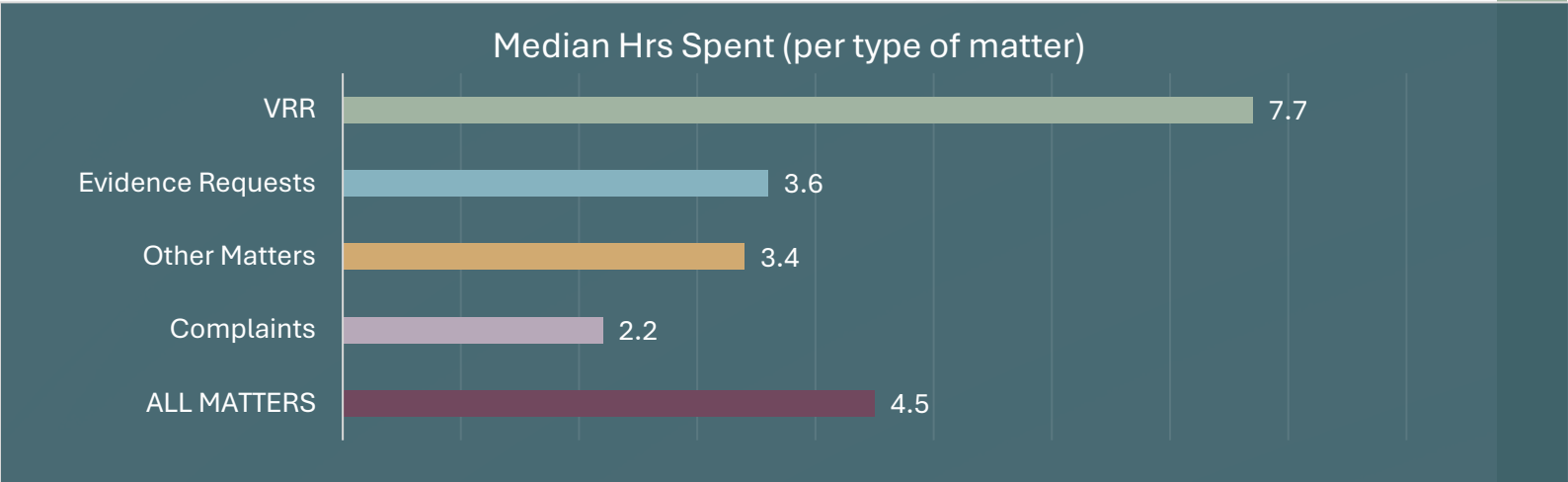
Reflective diaries suggest that referrals are most effective when targeted at specific legal issues rather than provided too early in the investigation (see also [Smith & Daly, 2020](#)). Nevertheless, client feedback demonstrates strong demand for broader and earlier access to legal support: “I wish more people had access to this, and I really hope that that will be the case in the future” (Client Interview 5).

A national rollout may be able to increase access to legal advice earlier in the investigation by asking police to signpost the service at key points (e.g. when requesting access to digital devices or third-party material). In the pilot, police referrals appeared to be concentrated among a handful of officers, but the research evaluation was unable to ascertain whether complainants were signposted and chose not to contact the service. Embedding signposting information in existing victim-facing documents, e.g. NFA letters, forms about access to sensitive evidence, and victim information booklets is likely to be helpful.

Resourcing a National Model

MOPAC developed this pilot with feasibility in mind, meaning it was not advertised to the public and operated through limited referral routes. Demand for a national scheme would likely be significantly higher if the service were widely known and accessible. Even with restricted referrals, it supported 247 clients, which is more than triple the number supported by the successful [Sexual Violence Complainant Advocate](#) pilot in Northumbria.

Time spent on cases cannot be compared directly across the two years because of change to data management. In year two, the median time spent per case was 4.6 hrs (excluding cases still ongoing May 2026). Resource requirements varied considerably by type of support, e.g., VRRs required a median of 7.7 hrs compared with 2.2 hours for complaints.



The pilot team managed workload through strategic closures to new referrals. However, this only provided limited relief because support workers simply postponed their referral, resulting in a surge of cases when the service reopened (Reflective Diary, February 2026). The team also identified several time pressures that could be mitigated, such as the time required to chase unresponsive police and CPS contacts.

Another challenge stemmed from the small team size, causing pressure on remaining staff during periods of annual leave or other absence, e.g., “I don’t feel like I can take the day off if I’m sick” (Reflective Diary, August 2024). Similar concerns were raised in October 2024, and by February 2025 it was described as “stressful” because “it is impossible to run this service with just one lawyer” (Reflective Diary). Handover periods and training new staff in year 2 put further pressure on workload, highlighting the importance of retention and pooled teams.

Recommendation 1

Ensure sufficient team sizes to provide resilience during staff turnover and absence, with built-in review points to check resourcing meets demand.

Having a qualified paralegal mitigated some pressure on resources as she could “assist with drafting and other legal work to relieve the caseload and help with case progression” (Reflective Diary, February 2025). Reflective diaries also noted the merit of experienced administrative staff who were better suited to admin tasks. Embedding both roles at scale would maximise cost efficiency.

Recommendation 2

Optimise value for money by recruiting both administrative support and paralegals to free up lawyer time.

Demand came from complainants with varied backgrounds

Clients came from diverse backgrounds (see [Table 1](#)). For example, the age range was between 16 and 75 at the time of referral, with the most common being 25-34. There are large numbers of missing data on ethnicity, but at least 42% (n=104) of clients were from minoritised racial or ethnic groups. Again, sexuality was missing in 30% of records, but 11% identified as a LGBTQIA+ (n=28). There is no reliable data about the demographics of those reporting sex offences to the Metropolitan Police, so it is not clear whether this is representative of rape complainants.

Some clients disclosed specific support needs, e.g., nine clients used an interpreter and 12 had no recourse to public funds. Over a quarter (27%) disclosed a disability and/or neurodivergence, including 12 clients with learning disabilities. One autistic client said communication was adjusted well, but there could be even more understanding about the specific needs of neurodivergent complainants when explaining waiting periods (Client Interview 6).

Clients also noted mental health conditions in 41% of cases (n=101). In the year one data (not available in year 2), flags on files to denoted self-harm and past suicide attempts (n=16) and homelessness (n=11). This highlights the importance of training on trauma, safeguarding, and the impact of sexual violence; and makes the independence of the lawyer especially important for establishing trust.

WGN is a women-only service, so the pilot did not include male complainants and only featured one non-binary complainant. It was also limited to those aged 16+ at the time of referral, as there are different legal considerations for those under 16. As the pilot was funded by MOPAC, only complainants living in London were eligible for support. Two officers noted that this limited the pool of eligible complainants, because a significant proportion of their cases involve complainants who had been visiting London at weekends or for the nighttime economy (Police Focus Group). Any confusion around referral criteria has the potential to cause distress for those told about the scheme and then denied access (Police Focus Group). A national scheme therefore needs to consider whether those visiting the UK but not resident will be eligible for legal advice and support

Recommendation 3

Make legal support accessible for all adult rape complainants.

Recommendation 4

Ensure police clearly understand referral criteria, so ineligible complainants are not told about the support only to be turned away.

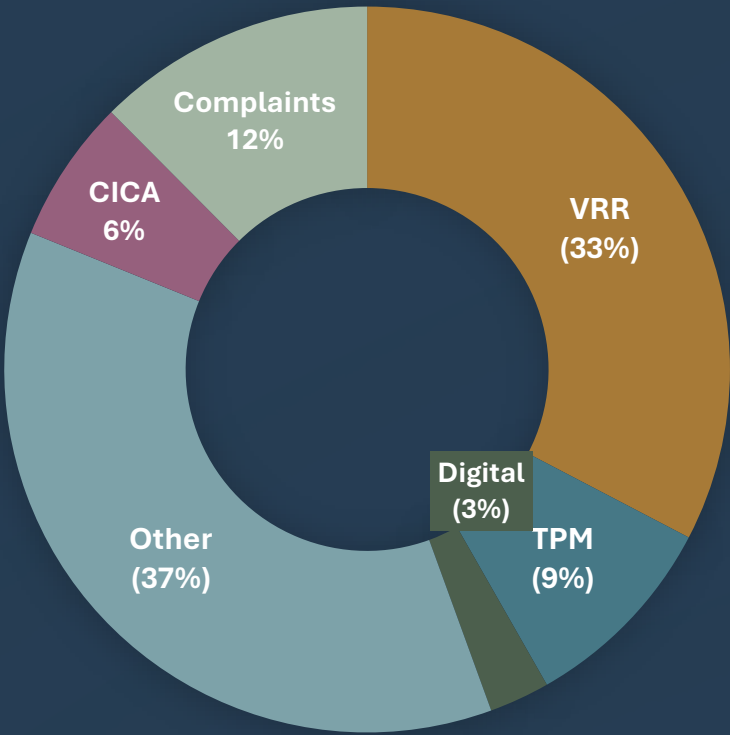
Table 1: Personal characteristics of clients (n=247)

Age	n	%
16 - 24	53	21.5
25 - 34	90	36.4
35 - 44	60	24.3
45 - 54	24	9.7
55+	10	4.0
Missing data	10	4.0
Ethnicity		
Arabic & ‘other’	12	4.9
Asian / Asian British	39	15.8
Black / Black British	39	15.8
Mixed / Dual	14	5.7
White / White British	85	34.4
Missing data	58	23.4
Sexuality		
LGBTQIA+	28	11.3
Heterosexual / Straight	145	58.7
Missing data	74	30.0
Disclosed needs		
Disclosed disability	67	27.1
Neurodivergence	36	14.6
Used interpreter	9	3.6

Demand relates to a range of legal issues

As of May 2026, 247 clients (including 42 who returned for further support) had been supported in relation to 297 legal matters. Most were dealt with as legal advice only (n=199, 67%), while others involved drafting representations² (n=81, 27%). Extended communication with criminal justice practitioners, e.g. via long calls or a meeting, were noted in 16 of the year two matters (approximately 10%).

What legal issues did the 297 matters involve?



The legal issues were varied: There were 109 about general criminal justice issues, 97 Victims Right to Review [VRR], 37 about making complaints, 27 about third-party material, 19 about the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, and eight about digital devices³. Qualitative comments added to the data showed that complaints sometimes related to ‘No Further Action’ [NFA] decisions where the client was ineligible for VRR, as well as failures to impose bail conditions, follow current guidance, or interview the suspect.

² For this pilot, ‘representations’ means making direct contact with police and/or CPS on the client’s behalf. This does not always mean a complaint or challenge, e.g., letters seeking further information for the client.

³ Low numbers of queries about digital devices may indicate fewer challenges with this type of evidence, but may also be due to the high number of ISVA referrals. In London, complainants typically do not receive ISVA support until later in the investigation, whereas access to digital devices typically occurs early in the investigation.

Several support practitioner surveys identified the pilot's ability to offer support across a broad range of criminal justice issues as a key strength. Looking ahead to a national scheme, some clients also expressed a desire for support on civil legal matters such as employment law, housing and immigration rights, but they also acknowledged this may not be possible.

While extending legal support beyond criminal justice issues is not currently feasible, these findings underline the importance of clear onward referral pathways. They also challenge the [Law Commission's \(2025\)](#) prediction that legal support is most valuable for privacy rights. ISVAs argued that limiting support this way "would not feel enough – it would only be a starting point" (ISVA focus group), in particular highlighting the benefits of support for Victims Right to Review [VRR]:

ISVA 1: "They include so much legal stuff that I don't know... doing a VRR you have to really kind of get deep into the evidence with the survivor [then] if it goes to court, I might not be able to be her ISVA for that."

ISVA 2: "It's, like, preserved the ISVAs from having to get too deep into the evidence" (ISVA Focus Group)

Recommendation 5

Lawyers currently advise on a wide range of criminal matters and this is highly valued. A national scheme should maintain this broad scope and also identify how best to effectively signpost clients to support on civil matters.

Finally, reflective diaries noted that a small number of clients had been confused about the scope, e.g., asking for support before a police interview or for the lawyers to investigate instead of police. A national scheme will need to ensure clear explanations about what is and is not covered to avoid disappointment.

What impact did legal support have?

Successful challenges

I initially sought to discuss the proportion of successful challenges, but this proved more complex than expected. Although 103 cases involved a challenge, many were complaints or other actions that did not seek to change a decision. It was also difficult to classify outcomes in a binary of 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' because challenges often involved multiple stages and evolving outcomes. For example, a VRR might succeed in reopening an investigation, only for the case to be closed again later or the client to withdraw. Conversely, one unsuccessful VRR was followed by a judicial review pre-action letter that prompted re-investigation and referral to the CPS for a charging decision.

That said, there is clear evidence of legal challenges leading to changed outcomes or changes to practice. There were 35 matters relating to digital devices or third-party material (TPM)⁴. Of these, 12 involved legal support to challenge the evidence requests: Six resulted in the request being withdrawn and four led to reduced scope. Only two cases did not result in any change to the evidence requests, both because the client consented to the data to avoid delays to trial.

In terms of VRRs, 21 completed reviews led to cases being reopened (46%), including three suspects charged and another two referred to CPS for a charge decision. Many of the reopened investigations are ongoing, but four were subsequently re-closed and clients disengaged in a further two. In two cases, judicial review pre-action letters were required before the case was re-opened.

⁴ This is only 12% of the issues dealt with. A national scheme with referrals earlier in the investigation will likely have a higher proportion of evidential queries.

Beyond quantified outcomes, the legal pilot encouraged best practice and constructive engagement with criminal justice professionals. The steering group meetings occasionally involved case discussions that enabled police leads to address issues in their team. The reflective diaries also documented productive interactions with police and/or CPS:

“I had positive engagement with the police on a couple of VRR cases. One case was reopened following an NFA meeting without the need to lodge a VRR. On the other, the police agreed to provide further extensive information about the reasons for the NFA and extend the deadline for the VRR to enable the client to consider the further information. On another case relating to a complaint, we had a meeting with the police during which the client heard an apology from the police, and the client and the police agreed to work together to provide training to RASSO officers.” (Reflective Diary, February 2026)

“Managed to assist a survivor with getting her case reopened by drafting legal representations that the perpetrator should have been arrested and interviewed. Had a productive phone call with the OIC’s supervisor who agreed and reopened the case.” (Reflective Diary, April 2025)

Support practitioners echoed these outcomes across their surveys:

“One client was able to continue supporting an investigation she had previously withdrawn from due to past witness intimidation. This legal advice was essential here for a very vulnerable client with a very dangerous perpetrator. Another client’s privacy has been better protected since the legal pilot.” (Support Practitioner 48)

“... numerous successful Victims’ Right to Reviews which simply would not have happened without their support.” (Support Practitioner 27)

Legal support advances procedural justice

Research on complainants' understandings of justice shows that it is not experienced only through case outcomes. It is also shaped by whether complainants are treated with dignity, recognised as credible, able to participate, and able to see that wrongdoing or institutional failure has been acknowledged. In this sense, legal advocacy contributed to procedural justice not only by improving clients' understanding of the process, but by helping restore voice, recognition and respect within a system many had experienced as silencing.

Taken together, the benefits described in the next section demonstrate that the legal pilot offered a sense of procedural justice to rape complainants. As outlined by [Hohl et al \(2022\)](#), procedural justice is linked with increased public trust in the criminal justice process, as well as improved satisfaction and perceptions of legitimacy. While procedural justice theory has previously been critiqued for ignoring complainants, [Johnson et al \(2025\)](#) updated the approach specifically for rape investigations.

Figure 1: Components of procedural justice in rape investigations (Johnson et al., 2025)



A National Operating Model for the [investigation](#) and [prosecution](#) of rape and serious sexual offences [RASSO] was developed under Operation Soteria and is based on these updated procedural justice principles. Figure 3 demonstrates that the benefits of legal support map onto the five principles of procedural justice and have therefore helped MOPAC to improve responses to rape complainants in line with Soteria principles.

Partnership working is highlighted as an important route to both procedural justice in the National Operating Model and to meeting the expectations outlined under the Victims’ Code. Based on the findings in the sections that follow, I argue that legal support can play a significant role in fulfilling Code expectations to:

- *be treated with respect, dignity, sensitivity, compassion and courtesy;*
- *make informed choices that are fully respected;*
- *have your privacy respected by service providers in accordance with their obligations under the relevant privacy and data protection laws; and*
- *have services provided to assist you and your family to understand and engage with the criminal justice process and that are offered in a professional manner, without discrimination of any kind. ([HM Government, 2025](#))*

Figure 2: Mapping the evaluation findings onto principles of procedural justice



Confidence, understanding & informed decision-making

“It was the first time I could get advice on legal questions I’d had for years, as well as finding ways to be empowered in a difficult process” (Client Survey 9)

One of the clearest impacts of the pilot is its ability to help complainants understand complex legal issues and make informed decisions about their cases. Across client and support practitioner feedback, the legal support was repeatedly described as empowering because it translated complex legal processes into clear, accessible information.

This is reflected in the survey findings: 90% of the 51 clients surveyed agreed that ‘the lawyer explained things to me clearly’ and 92% agreed ‘the lawyer helped me understand the issues in my case’. Support practitioners similarly emphasised the importance of having “clarity on the issues and concerns raised” (Support Practitioner 17:

“This really ensured my client had all the information available to her so she could make an informed decision” (Support Practitioner 33)

The value of legal information extended beyond challenging criminal justice decisions. Almost half of all cases (48%, n=143) involved legal advice that did not lead to a challenge of CJS decisions. This included information about bail conditions, safeguarding options, delays, time limits, and the role of different criminal justice agencies. In a further 12% of cases, clients were advised that no viable challenge was available or decided not to pursue one.

While some police respondents questioned the value of legal support when it did not result in a formal challenge, clients consistently described reassurance, clarity and understanding as significant outcomes in their own right:

“Having someone explain to me when information from the police or CPS was correct. When I was frustrated with the process it at least helped to know they were correct and not doing anything wrong.” (Client Survey 6)

“I felt like by explaining the process so they understood the investigation / criminal justice system better, I was able to help people who were struggling with what they were going through.” (Reflective Diary, January 2026)

Indeed, there were clear benefits to client wellbeing when there received clearer information and a legal framework with which to make sense of their experiences:

“Besides informing me of my rights, it was also reassuring. It was through this lawyer that I managed to understand what was happening and why. Otherwise victims are just left to overthink, overanalyse and self-blame which isn't fair, and worsens their health.” (Client Survey 34)

These findings mirror the 2018 legal support pilot in Northumbria ([Smith and Daly, 2020](#)), where most complainants wanted help to understand what was happening, rather than all legal support being about pursuit of formal challenges.

Significantly, clients distinguished legal advice from the support they received from ISVAs and SOITs. While ISVAs played a vital role, clients emphasised that specialist legal expertise filled a different and equally important need:

“As brilliant as the ISVAs are, they're just not lawyers and you really need lawyers, you know. Don't forget the perpetrator has had a lawyer from day one... [ISVAs] can talk about the process; they cannot offer legal advice in any way, and you actually do need legal advice.” (Client Interview 1)

“ISVAs are great, but they just did completely different things... There were questions I would ask my ISVA, and she just didn't know and she couldn't know because she's not necessarily trained in that... whereas speaking with [lawyer], she knew everything” (Client Interview 3)

This demonstrated the legal support as distinct because it was independent, specialist knowledge not available elsewhere:

“Despite researching into the matter myself and looking into police and CPS guidance, the client’s query was not something I could respond to with the detail she deserved... Support was thorough, clearly explained and delivered very sensitively. I had asked the police officers to clarify my client’s questions with the CPS, but the request was dismissed.” (Support Practitioner 33)

“No one seemed to know the answers to some of my questions. Whether that was ISVA support who were amazing, but don’t always have the knowledge for things that are quite specific” (Client Interview 5)

Having detailed information that is both accurate, trusted, and accessible is a necessary precondition for ‘voice’, a central principle of [procedural justice](#), because it enables complainants to understand their space for action.

Empowerment through knowledge

“Receiving support through this service has made me feel more in control of a process that previously felt completely out of my hands. It gave me the knowledge and confidence to make decisions.” (Client Survey 9)

Legal support helped complainants regain a sense of agency within a justice process that many had otherwise experienced as “very confusing” (Client Survey 23) and “isolating” (Client Survey 10), leaving them “trapped” (Client Survey 17) and “lost” (Client Survey 5). As one practitioner phrased it:

“The legal support pilot has been extremely helpful to me and my client in this case. At a time where my client felt disempowered and unsure of herself, she was supported to understand her rights and options from a legal standpoint which can be a huge plus in a criminal justice system that can often feel confusing to people.” (Support Practitioner 22)

By explaining both the issues and options available, lawyers therefore helped clients to understand their space for action and “empowered [them] with knowledge and tools to make choices” (Client Survey 39). As one client explained, the best part of the service was:

“Knowing my rights, understanding the case better, [and] someone advocating for my rights as I didn't always have the emotional or intellectual ability to do this on my own, whilst dealing with the trauma and emotions of having been raped” (Client Survey 34)

Another described feeling “more empowered to be in the process” because “when I had the knowledge myself, I felt like I had the strength to take on more of that engagement” (Client Interview 5).

Simply by providing this information, several clients described feeling cared for, reassured, and less alone. One client said the lawyers made it possible to “let go of the fight for a second and let someone take over for you” (Client Interview 4). Another explained the profound impact this had:

“It helped me not only navigate and find things clearer but helped me feel cared for and helped me go through with it... Their support completely turned my life around. Because of their support I had somehow gained strength and stamina to go through with it.” (Client Interview 2)

Support practitioners also observed this shift. They report “increased confidence” and “empowerment” among clients when they were given clear legal information (Support Practitioner 8). Others explained:

“I have learned so much from them, and survivors find them incredibly valuable. Having a sexual violence lawyer behind them, makes [the client] feel so reassured and confident, especially in intimidating settings such as an NFA meeting.” (Support Practitioner 27)

“My remit ends when it comes to legal suggestions... we do not want to incorrectly advise our service users. The [legal service] are able to give non-biased, non-judgemental advice to service users, which has proven to be life-changing time and time again.” (Support Practitioner 31)

Empowerment in adverse outcomes

A sense of empowerment remained for many clients even when there was an adverse outcome, for example because it “confirm[ed] what wasn’t possible” (Client 2) or allowed them to “hav[e] my disappointment affirmed” (Client 4). This was empowering as it offered clients certainty and freed them to leave the investigative process knowing they had done everything they could. For example, one client described the relief of understanding why certain evidence could not be included in the police investigation:

*“The support also helped me see how the law works and how certain things I felt were important to communicate in my case wouldn’t be able to be used as evidence, and why not, and **this has also been a huge release** as I hadn’t been explained this before and it gave me less to think about in regards to what I should be doing. I’m so incredibly grateful for this support.” (Client Survey 15, emphasis added)*

This was also present in the reflective diaries of the legal team, for example:

“The officers provided further clarifications of the reasons for the NFA decision which helped the client to better understand why her case was closed.” (Reflective Diary, January 2025)

Support practitioners similarly highlighted that legal advice helped their clients focus energy where it was most beneficial:

“Even disappointing outcomes were made easier to support because of this resource, emotional labour applied where it best served the client and further CJS/police engagement minimised, mitigating the potential for ongoing or escalating harm.” (Support Practitioner 7)

“Even when the advice has ultimately been that there will be a difficult or negative outcome, they have still felt so supported and informed.” (Support Practitioner 25)

“Although it was disappointing to hear the lawyer felt VRR would not be successful... this ensured my client did not have to continue with the CJS and could move on without further disappointment.” (Support Practitioner 19)

In these situations, the independence of the legal advice was particularly important. When clients were uncertain about the fairness or accuracy of criminal justice decisions, information carried greater weight because it came from an independent, trusted legal expert rather than the decision-making agencies themselves. Even where outcomes were not changed, clients therefore gained clarity, confidence and closure. This reassurance and understanding contributes to the voice, trustworthiness and fairness elements of procedural justice that underpin the National Operating Model for investigating rape ([Johnson et al., 2024](#)).

Overall, these findings suggest that legal support helped counteract the disempowerment that complainants often experienced within the criminal justice process. By explaining rights, clarifying options, and advocating for clients, the service enabled complainants to feel more informed, more confident, and more recognised as active participants in the process.

“[Before] I felt a bit lost, a bit helpless, and a bit like I didn't have a voice. I just felt quite silenced... I came out of it being heard, and I think for the first time, I felt like I had a voice.” (Client Interview 3)

Voice, Validation & Dignity

Legal knowledge provided other benefits associated with procedural justice, as clients felt heard, validated, respected, and more able to trust their concerns would be taken seriously.

Voice

“I still don't know what the outcome will be, but I felt very heard and supported. The service is outstanding...” (Client Survey 7)

For some clients, the support transformed their experience of the justice process from one of silence and powerlessness to one in which they felt heard:

“It has given me a space where I felt heard, safe and someone was finally on my side. The whole investigation has felt awful, I have felt cornered, betrayed, silenced, unsafe, and untrustworthy of the police and CPS. The victim's lawyer has been hugely beneficial in having my voice being heard and valued” (Client Survey 17)

Receiving support therefore “felt like a weight off my shoulders” (Client Survey 9). The lawyers also noted this sense of voice in the reflective diaries. For example, one entry noted the effect of supporting a client to speak up about their case:

*“[VRR] follow-up representations resulted in the police agreeing with us on a legal point which was a huge win for the client. We need to submit further representations now and see whether we can get the case reopened but the **client is already very grateful that we have been able to be 'a voice' for her.**” (Reflective Diary, February 2025, emphasis added)*

The pilot did not simply give clients an opportunity to speak, but also made their voice more effective. Several clients described how the lawyer helped ‘translate’ their concerns into legal terms that criminal justice practitioners were more likely to recognise and respond to:

“Having [lawyer] there made the police take me more seriously... and without that would they have listened to me? I don't think so.” (Client interview 3)

“I was able to challenge the bail terms and feel that as a result of legal presence the police are taking my case more seriously” (Client Survey 20)

This reflects a central benefit of procedural justice: Clients may have concerns about how their cases is being handled, but without legal knowledge they may struggle to frame these concerns in a way seen as legitimate. Legal support helped clients move from feeling ignored to feeling able to participate meaningfully.

It also reduced the emotional burden of having to repeatedly explain, justify, and defend themselves:

“Instantly I just felt like, okay, cool, I've got someone here that can be in my corner, and that can be on this fight with me. It just changes the experience massively.” (Client Interview 3)

“[Before legal support] it just felt like you had to stand up for yourself repeatedly, without anyone trusting or believing anything you were saying...[but with support] it's almost like you can let go of the fight for a second and let someone take over for you.” (Client Interview 4)

Receiving support therefore “felt like a weight off my shoulders” (Client Survey 9) because there was “someone on my side” (Client Survey 6) who “made me feel I am not alone in my situation” (Client Survey 16).

Validation

“I felt truly validated and listened to. The support provided has been invaluable... It was so positive an experience and so empowering to have a strong and intelligent female lawyer on your side.” (Client Survey 15)

Voice was closely connected to validation. Clients did not only want to speak, but also wanted their concerns recognised as legitimate. This is consistent with research on sexual violence and justice (e.g. McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019), which show that complainants value recognition and vindication.

For some clients, validation came through formal acknowledgement that something had gone wrong. One client described the significance of receiving an apology for police errors (“like, that’s huge, that’s a huge achievement” Client Interview 9), while another described the apology she received as meaning that “now looking back on my case, I look back on it with pride” (Client Interview 3).

Survey responses provided further examples:

“My client felt validated that there were lawyers able to advocate on her behalf. She felt more confident in herself and what she felt was an injustice, it gave her a stronger sense of self-worth and belief.” (Support Practitioner 3)

“I knew there were points the police did not take seriously but I didn’t know how to put it into words. It was more of a feeling. The letter [developed with the lawyer] clearly laid out the law and I could understand what was not dealt with correctly.” (Client Survey 7)

This kind of validation was powerful because it converted a feeling of unfairness into a legally grounded account of what had not been properly handled. It enabled clients to understand their concerns were not simply emotional reactions to a difficult process, but reflected identifiable mistakes.

The lawyer's expertise and position as a legal "authority" were central to this validation (Client Survey 13):

"The support that is offered by legal advocacy makes it feel like there is someone 'official' on their side - whilst they have been let down by the police several times."
(Support Practitioner 31)

This theme is developed further in the later section on the model of legal support, including the importance of independence and specialist expertise. Here it is important because validation depended not only on kindness or emotional support, but on clients trusting that the advice was authoritative.

Support practitioners also noted this ability to make clients feel comfortable with the lawyer: "my client was opening up to [lawyer], like crying really trusting in her" (ISVA Focus Group). This was significant because many rape complainants enter the justice process with low trust in police and aware of news reporting about challenges with CJS responses to rape. A trusted, and independent, lawyer could therefore provide a rare space in which clients felt both emotionally safe and legally informed.

The client survey indicated that legal support sometimes increased understanding of failures in CJS decision-making. While 39% of clients felt the lawyer's involvement made the investigation fairer, 25% said it felt less fair. Police survey respondents were concerned that the pilot might undermine trust in the justice process. However, clients' free-text comments suggest a different interpretation. Those who said the process felt less fair explained that:

"The support I received from the lawyer did not make me view the police investigation in a worse way; however, from the sharing of knowledge and expertise, I was enlightened to see how poor the investigation and decision-making was." (Client Survey 11)

“It highlighted the serious deficiencies in the justice system... which remain and cannot be addressed with one VRR” (Client Survey 6).

In other words, the legal pilot illuminated pre-existing concerns rather than created new ones:

“I didn’t think that the police were acting completely fairly anyway... So, you know, this didn’t open my eyes to anything. There wasn’t a huge amount of trust [in police] from the start.” (Client Interview 1)

“By the point that I approached [lawyer], my, yeah, my trust was fully lost already. And it wasn’t because of the service, it was because of how the police handled the case.” (Client Interview 7)

This is important. Procedural justice does not require complainants to feel more positive about the criminal justice system regardless of how they have been treated. Rather, it requires transparent, respectful, and accountable processes. Legal support may therefore reduce misplaced trust, but increase informed trust based on knowledge, scrutiny, and openness to challenge.

Support practitioners similarly noted that many complainants, especially those from minoritised or marginalised groups, do not trust police throughout an investigation, so the legal pilot was unlikely to be the primary reason for distrust:

ISVA 2: Do they trust the police? I don’t trust the police. Make it even worse: As a Black woman, I don’t trust the police.

ISVA 1: You know, if you’ve got mental health, disability, you’re not going to trust the police. There’s so many reasons why women do not trust the police...” (ISVA Focus Group)

Where police responded openly and constructively to the lawyers’ involvement, legal support actively increased trust. For example, a support practitioner praised police for their response to a complaint submitted with support from the pilot:

“They were so understanding, they were really apologetic... In that one particular situation, yes it did [increase trust in the police] because they weren’t defensive.”
(ISVA Focus Group)

Another client made clear that trust in the justice process is built through openness to independent oversight, not through defensiveness:

Denying somebody access to oversight is not trustworthy... if you say ‘oh we made a mistake, I’m so sorry’, that is going to repair and inspire trust more than saying ‘it wasn’t a mistake, it was perfectly fine’. So no, signposting people to oversight just increases the trust that people have because you’re then saying, if there’s any issues, we’re really open to your feedback.” (Client Interview 9)

The implication is not that legal support damages trust, but that defensive practice does. Where criminal justice agencies are willing to respond constructively, independent legal scrutiny can strengthen trust by demonstrating accountability. For officers who are confident that evidence requests, bail decisions or NFA decisions are appropriate, legal advocacy can provide reassurance rather than threat. More broadly, because the lawyers themselves were trusted, their involvement could improve clients’ overall sense that some part of the justice process was fair, accountable and on their side.

Dignity & respect

“I felt like being treated like a human again.” (Client Interview 5)

The findings also show that legal advocacy promoted dignity and respect. Clients were not treated merely as witnesses, evidence-providers or sources of risk to the prosecution case. They were treated as people with rights, legitimate questions and an interest in how the investigation was conducted. This distinction matters in sexual violence cases, where complainants often describe the criminal justice

process as alienating, disempowering or dehumanising. Several clients and support practitioners described legal advocacy as restoring a sense of personhood within a system that had made complainants feel disregarded:

“It has made [client] feel seen and heard, when so often police and CPS disregard them. It has helped them feel respected and like someone in a position of power cares for them and values them.” (Support Practitioner 46)

Several clients discussed how dignity and respect were conveyed through the lawyer’s trauma-informed manner (see p.42). Not only was the legal team’s expertise important, then, so was their respectful and sensitive approach to communicating that expertise. This respect and dignity were not simply ‘nice to have’, but were foundational to clients’ safety, wellbeing, and ability to remain engaged with the justice process. For example, clients described:

“Having the support from [the pilot] made me feel like, I have rights too, and I’m a person in this process too... I was really close to dropping out as it just felt so hard and so isolating... [the support] is really invaluable to survivors... The smallest things like being treated like a human, having your emails responded on time, make the biggest difference” (Client interview 5)

“It helped me not only navigate and find things clearer but helped me feel cared for and helped me go through with it.” (Client Interview 2)

These are powerful examples of dignity in practice. The legal support provided technical advice, but in doing so it communicated that clients mattered, their questions were legitimate, and they were entitled to understand and participate in a process that profoundly affected them.

Another client described the potential consequences of continuing without support from the pilot:

“If I hadn't had support from [lawyer], I realistically would have come to much more harm both by the legal system and by myself. On more than one occasion, until I had support, I considered suicide as the only voice I could have against the violence of the legal system.” (Client Survey 42)

These accounts highlight why dignity and respect should be understood as substantive outcomes of legal support.

Feeling part of positive change

The benefits of legal advocacy extended beyond individual voice, validation and dignity. For some clients, legal support helped them feel that their experience might contribute to wider improvements in the justice system. This reflects a broader understanding of victim-survivor justice, as research has shown complainants value feeling they have contributed to preventing future harm.

Clients interviews reflected this wider sense of meaning. For example:

“It feel like I was doing something that could actually be beneficial for other people, which I think is my main priority. It's like, what's happened to me has happened, how can we protect people in the future?” (Client Interview 3)

This finding connects the pilot to the prevention and citizenship dimensions of kaleidoscopic justice (McGlynn & Westmarland, 2019). Legal support enabled some clients to move from isolation and powerlessness towards participation, agency and, in some cases, pride. In doing so, the pilot offered a form of justice that was procedural, relational and forward-looking.

What is an effective model of legal support?

The findings and recommendations from the *Initial Set-Up Report* (July 2024) remain relevant. They are not repeated here and should be read alongside this report.

The evidence suggests that the effectiveness of the pilot was supported by a combination of the lawyer's independence from police and CPS, the use of dedicated posts, the combination of criminal and civil law expertise, trauma-informed practice, and close partnership-working with support practitioners. Together, these features of the pilot helped to build complainants' trust and confidence.

Dedicated, salaried and specialist legal roles

A significant strength of the model was its use of dedicated, salaried lawyers, rather than relying on solicitors in private practice being instructed on a case-by-case basis. This reduced the risk of conflicts of interest because the lawyers were employed specifically to support complainants, although there remains a small chance that complainants could also be perpetrators. It also made the model more cost-effective than purchasing legal advice on an hourly basis. Given the level of demand, there was sufficient work to justify dedicated posts. This meant lawyers could build familiarity with the pilot, develop relationships with support practitioners and criminal justice partners, and provide timely advice without the additional cost and delay of repeatedly instructing external solicitors.

Recruitment to the pilot ensured there was a combination of expertise within the team, which strengthened the quality of the advice. The lawyers had criminal law backgrounds, enabling them to understand disclosure duties and the criminal justice process. The legal supervisor brought expertise in civil remedies for police failings, such as complaints and public law principles. This meant the team

understood both the criminal justice issues complainants were facing and the legal mechanisms available to challenge or address them. Additionally, the pilot had three barristers on retainer so they could obtain legal advice on specific issues, ensuring their work was rooted in sound advice where legal issues were particularly complex. In steering group meetings, I regularly observed the legal supervisor provide contemporary guidance and case law for criminal justice practitioners to consider. Several meetings involved highly technical discussions between lawyers and practitioners about developing areas of law.

The dedicated posts also meant there could be more embedding within the support service and trauma-informed training on sexual violence. This distinguishes the London pilot from previous models. The Northumbria SVCA scheme also demonstrated strong benefits of legal support, but these were not dedicated positions and the lawyers did not specialise in sexual violence, police complaints or data rights. Smith and Galey's (2020) evaluation found that, while clients greatly valued the SVCA's advice, some felt "instantly intimidated" by the lawyers.

Trauma-informed practice

"The legal pilot team are kind, efficient, knowledgeable, trauma informed and amazing to work with." (Support Practitioner 2)

The pilot team's reflective diaries similarly show that the lawyers valued the WGN training and recognised the importance of safeguarding procedures, particularly when two clients disclosed thoughts of self-harm. However, one diary also noted a potential risk of embedding legal support within a support organisation: some clients may "see the legal support scheme as taking on more of a pastoral role than we are able to provide" (Reflective Diary, October 2024). This highlights the importance of clear boundaries, so that close links with support services do not create unrealistic expectations about the role of the lawyer.

The ISVA focus group reinforce the importance of sexual violence awareness. ISVAs stressed that without this foundation, legal advice can become “disconnected” and “cold” (ISVA focus group). They also emphasised the importance of a shared ethos, so that the ISVA trusted the lawyer and could encourage clients to do the same:

“I think the relationship that they have with the ISVAs [is what made clients trust them]... I have a really good rapport with all my clients; they have that trust in me that I wouldn't get someone involved who isn't the same.” (ISVA Focus Group)

ISVAs contrasted this with their experience of lawyers outside the pilot, for example in family proceedings, who were not always trauma-informed or familiar with sexual violence. They described clients as struggling to understand solicitors, communication breaking down, and ISVAs spending time chasing legal aid solicitors for updates. In this context, specialist training in sexual violence was not an optional extra, but central to the model's effectiveness.

Clients also highlighted the difference between the legal pilot and other attempts to seek legal advice privately:

“The process of trying to recruit a solicitor can be re-traumatising. I never felt retraumatised after any meeting, after any e-mail, and after anything. They were very, very understanding and yeah, very sensitive around the topic.” (Client Interview 7)

In contrast, clients and support practitioners consistently described the pilot lawyers as compassionate, respectful and careful in their communication. One client explained it as:

“I didn't feel like I was just speaking to a lawyer... I felt like I was speaking to a human being. They were sensitive, they used the right language... they completely

put me at ease just in the way that they kind of acknowledged that this is a difficult time.” (Client Interview 1).

This sensitivity did not undermine professionalism. On the contrary, clients appreciated the lawyers’ ability to combine empathy with clear, practical advice and firm boundaries. They described the lawyers as “very patient, kind, gentle, but also very firm and clear” (Client Survey 13), and as using “emotional intelligence and thorough trauma awareness (Client Survey 36).

The combination of legal knowledge and emotional sensitivity made clients feel safe enough to engage with the service:

“They are so emotionally tuned as well as being knowledgeable, so I felt very comfortable to be able to talk to them about such sensitive and traumatic events” (Client Interview 2)

This was particularly important for complainants who had previously been let down by others:

“...my client is very wary of new professionals due to difficult past experiences. [Lawyer] was patient, empathetic, diligent, thoughtful and unbelievably efficient...” (Support Practitioner 25)

This helps explain why 90% of the 51 clients surveyed felt the lawyer was on their side. The more mixed responses are also important. Four respondents were unsure if the lawyer were on their side due to having only limited contact with the pilot. One client said the service was “invaluable” in helping the police take her case more seriously, but also found the lawyer “unhelpful and unresponsive at times” (Client 20). This suggests that responsiveness and relational care remain important markers of quality, even where the legal outcome is positive.

The need for continuing reflection was also shown in another case. A lawyer initially agreed with the police rationale for closing the case, but later reflected on what the client had said, sought additional advice, and apologised. The client said:

“[Lawyer]’s initial scepticism about my case was quite discouraging, however her courage about looking at it again and seeing from my side, though confusing at the time (as I had had a similar response from the police), was also validating.” (Client Survey 45)

This illustrates a further strength of the model: specialist client-centred practice requires humility, reflection and the willingness to revisit assumptions.

The importance of specialism are well established across the investigation, prosecution, and adjudication of rape. Specialist training and accreditation are already used for police officers, CPS prosecutors, prosecuting counsel, and judges. The Law Commission’s (2025) recommendation for mandatory training for defence counsel further underlines the direction of travel around specialism. By funding specialist training and embeddedness in a support service, MOPAC therefore strengthened the pilot and helped future-proof the model.

Recommendation 6

Design of the national scheme should preserve the strengths of MOPAC’s model, particularly the lawyers’ independence and specialist training on sexual violence (see Initial Set-Up Report for further advantages, such as salaried positions).

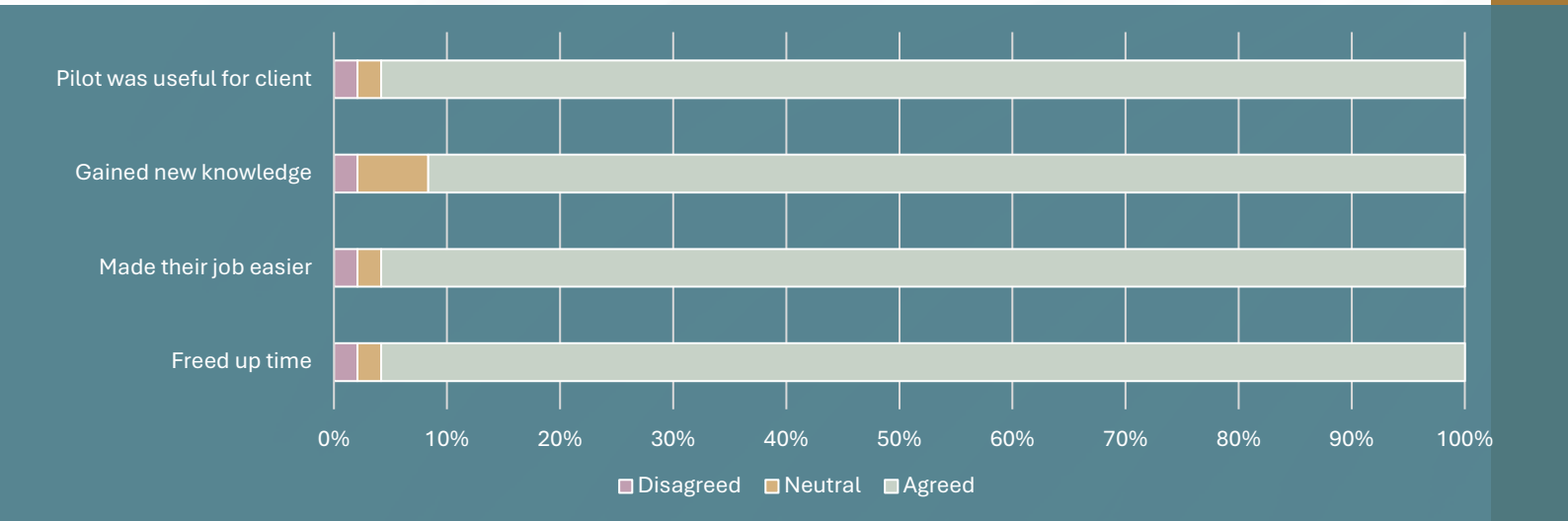
Partnership working with support practitioners

As noted in the ‘Initial Set-Up’ Report, the pilot was also strengthened by close partnerships with ISVAs and other support practitioners. Clients with ISVA support alongside legal support generally saw it as important that their ISVA and lawyer worked together, with saying this 69% mattered to them (n=36).

ISVAs highlighted the benefits of joint working, including attending NFA meetings with lawyers and the “excellent and timely communication” (Support Practitioner 34). They also felt that an initial joint meeting could reduce anxiety about legal support. As one ISVA explained, being told that meeting a lawyer might feel “a bit intimidating”, so having support practitioners at the first meeting offered an ally until the client realised “how lovely the lawyers are” (ISVA Focus Group). After this initial meeting, the support practitioners then stepped back much of the time, to streamline communication.

The pilot was also perceived to reduce pressure on support practitioners. Almost all respondents agreed that it freed up their time and made their jobs easier (figure 5). While one respondent disagreed with each statement, their qualitative comments were about how excellent the service was and how helpful they’d found one of the lawyers so this may have been a misreading of the survey scale.

Figure 3: ISVA perspectives on the impact of the legal pilot (n=48)



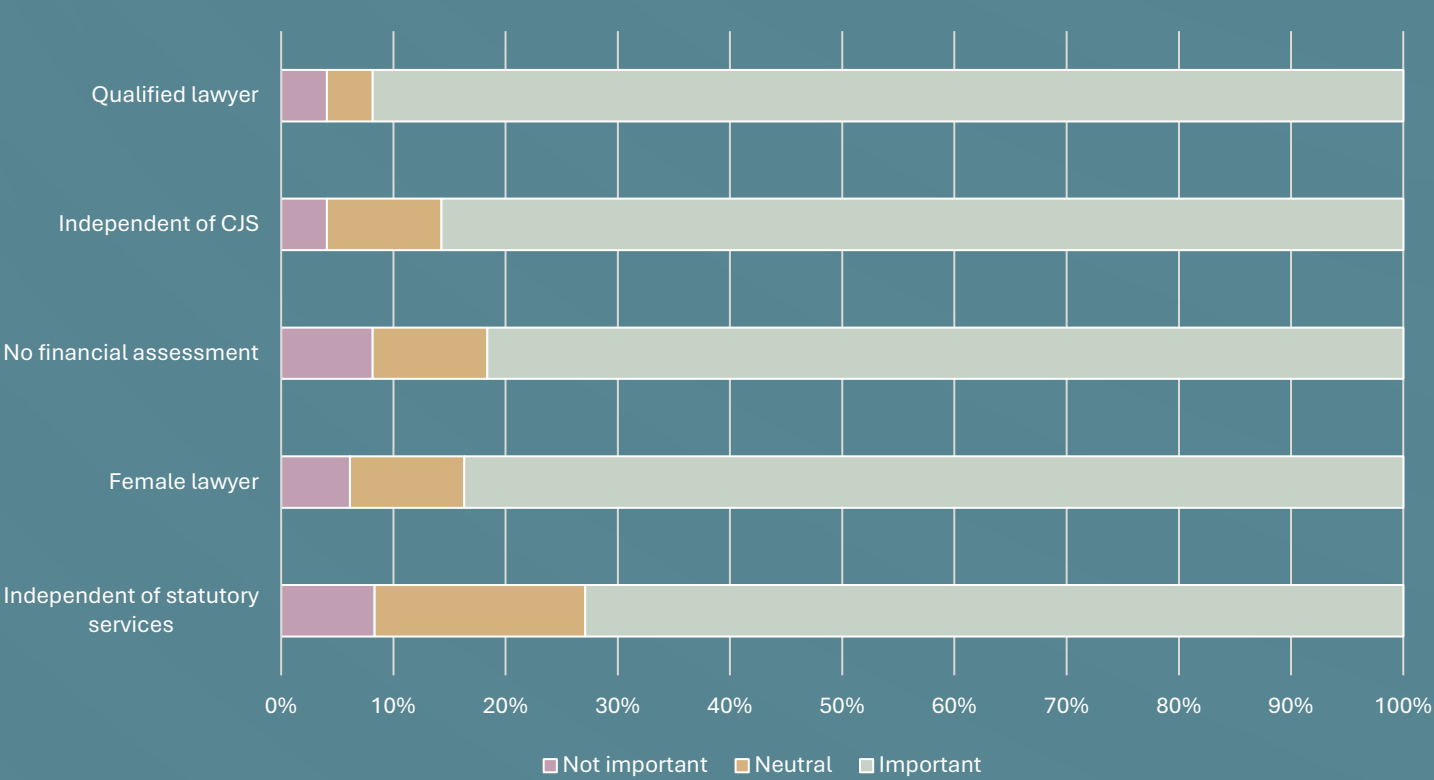
Recommendation 7

Encourage strong partnership working with support practitioners, e.g., ISVAs, by promoting a shared trauma-informed and client-centred ethos. This should be factored into tendering and recruitment processes.

Other characteristics of the model valued by clients

Clients were asked if characteristics of the pilot model mattered to them (figure 4). There was strong agreement that the lawyers should be legally qualified (92%), independent of the CJS (86%), and that the scheme is free without having to apply for legal aid (82%). There was also agreement that it was important for the lawyer to be a woman (84%) and that they were independent of statutory bodies (71%).

Figure 4: Client views about the importance of scheme characteristics (n=49)



The role of Centre for Women's Justice

Legal supervision from Centre for Women's Justice, particularly the leadership of Nogah Ofer, has been the lynchpin of the pilot's success to date.

Without this support, the pilot team would not have the same extensive knowledge of this niche cross-section of law. Nogah and the CWJ's support has been central to recruiting staff, providing external counsel, and strategic planning for the pilot.

Any national rollout needs serious consideration as to how this role could be replicated, particularly during the set-up and first year of operation. Key characteristics of this role will include specialist knowledge of taking legal action against the police and/or CPS, privacy rights, and criminal law surrounding sexual violence investigations. The ability to work constructively with CJS professionals, while maintaining a critical independence will also be essential.

Recommendation 8

Development of a national scheme should factor in resources for legal supervision. The role of legal supervision should be independent, have the trust of specialist services, and hold knowledge of the relevant issues in both criminal and civil law. See the *Initial Set-Up Report* for more about the areas of knowledge required.

Embedding legal support in CJS practice

The pilot also highlighted some implementation challenges, centred largely on engagement with the police and CPS. The challenges show that the scheme's effectiveness depends on clear referral pathways, shared understanding of the lawyer's role, senior leadership across CJS agencies, and addressing concerns about disclosure, legal professional privilege, and witness contamination.

Referral pathways and police engagement

Rates of police referral to the legal pilot appeared low, despite the teams being selected to feed into the pilot because of their positive record on sexual offences. Referral numbers temporarily increased following intervention from strategic leads, but this was not sustained long-term and shifting from referrals to simply signposting the service at one of five 'trigger' points⁵ did not appear to help.

A handful of engaged officers were responsible for almost all police referrals (and continued to refer even once the process had moved to signposting). This suggests that referral rates (including signposting) were affected by variation in whether individual officers recognised the value of legal support and were willing to signpost or refer complainants.

Strategic input to encourage referrals did not create sustainable results, and focus group participants suggested this was perceived as pressure and may have shaped negative responses in the police survey. The same participants were otherwise broadly supportive: "I do like the scheme and I think it's a good idea" (Police Focus Group). The pilot therefore suggests that it is helpful to encourage signposting of

⁵ Officers were expected to give complainants information about the legal advice service during: Access to digital devices, access to TPM, communicating an NFA decision, communicating a negative VRR result, and if a complainant indicated they wished to withdraw from the process.

the scheme at key points in the investigation alongside sustained engagement to inform officers about the benefits of the service for complainants.

Police-initiated referrals (whether by formal referral or signposting for self-referral) are important to enable legal advice when evidence requests are made, as a complainant may not have ISVA support by that time. National rollout should minimise reliance on individual discretion by embedding referral or signposting into existing police processes, such as victim information booklets and evidence request forms. The Victims Code also provides a framework for discussion about police referrals, as it sets out an entitlement for complainants to be informed of relevant support services.

Recommendation 9

- Monitor compliance of whether police provide information about the service at key points, as with the Victims Code, but don't use quotas.
- Service details should be included in Victim Information Guides, digital data extraction forms, 'NFA' letters, and other relevant paperwork.

There are also lessons to learn from police-ISVA partnership working, as this is viewed as a positive relationship despite ISVAs saying “we’re always challenging [police]” (ISVA Focus Group). When asked how they worked with ISVAs who challenge them, police participants said it is about long-term relationships: “It builds over time, it does take time with ISVAs” (Police Focus Group).

This reflects findings from Soteria research, which emphasised the importance of long-term relationships and familiarity between investigating officers and complainant support workers ([Hillyard & Brooks-Hay, 2024](#)). The lesson for legal support is that challenge from an independent professional is more likely to be accepted where it is embedded within existing relationships and from an

established role with which CJS professionals are familiar. As legal support becomes more common, police and prosecutors may therefore be more confident about engaging with the lawyers.

Police understanding of the scheme's value

Some police survey respondents questioned the need for legal support, describing it as a “tick box” exercise (Police 5) or saying it had not produced any benefits in cases they referred (Police 7). This perception sits in tension with the direct evidence outlined earlier, and may reflect that some police referrals did not engage with the service (most of the 30 referrals who did not engage originated from police). Among those who did engage, however, only two police-referred clients had no legal matter to address. In most cases, officers appear simply not to have been aware of the support received. For example, police raised concerns with MOPAC that the pilot had distressed a complainant, but the client herself contacted the lawyers to thank them and express gratitude for their help (Reflective Diary, November 2024).

One police survey respondent observed clear benefits to the complainant having legal support at a joint meeting. They described the meeting as:

“...conducted in an open and constructive manner, with all parties engaging positively. The victim’s legal representative played an important role in the discussion, raising relevant points and asking questions that helped to explore and clarify various aspects of the investigation. This, in turn, enabled further discussion between all attendees and contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the rationale behind the decision... The presence of the lawyer appeared to enhance the victim’s ability to engage with the process, and it was evident that this support provided additional reassurance and advocacy for the victim.” (Police Survey 20)

Another concern among some officers was that the scheme implied criticism of their professionalism. Some officers perceived the scheme as implicitly

“disparaging” of police (Police 11), implying they are not “altruistic and compassionate people” (Police 17), and worried they would be “blamed and looked down on because we are not always able to do what we are asked” (Police 16). However, the teams selected for the pilot had strong track records, and their involvement was intended as recognition of good practice.

It may help to communicate the legal support scheme as being another tool in the wider balance of competing interests during the criminal justice process. The Law Commission (2025) acknowledged that police and CPS must balance a range of competing interests, and that independent legal advice can strengthen this.

Communication between the lawyers, police, and CPS

The most significant operational challenge was communication between the pilot team, police, and CPS. The evaluation did not hear directly from CPS and had a small sample of police perspectives, but the pilot team reflective diaries recorded frequent delays in receiving responses from officers and prosecutors and the legal team often had to chase several times. Some police appeared wary about engaging with the pilot lawyers, which the pilot team perceived as a broader “mistrust of lawyers” because of defence tactics. The wariness was also viewed as being about fear that the pilot would unnecessarily challenge CJS decision-making:

There is a feeling amongst the [pilot] team that due to a few cases towards the end of last year (where we pushed back firmly against decisions/requests made by our referring police unit), word has spread and we are now perceived to be difficult or risky to refer to.” (Reflective Diary, March 2025)

“They seem to struggle to see that our service is not there to undermine their work, but could actually assist in strengthening their cases and improving the survivors’ experience.” (Reflective Diary, February 2025)

Although these accounts reflect the pilot team's perspective, they are consistent with police focus group evidence that officers were uncertain about how, and whether, to engage with the lawyers. A Memorandum of Understanding between the pilot, police, and CPS did not fully resolve the reticence to engage, but was perceived as helpful in pilot team reflections. Similarly, reflective diaries recorded MOPAC and the CPS steering group representatives intervening to resolve communication issues. For example:

“The CPS representative in the Steering Group took an interest in one of the cases and has since asked us to allow him to personally look into the case – I feel that the connections with other services that we have through the steering group have been highly valuable.” (Reflective Diary, February 2025)

MOPAC facilitated these discussions and motivated the steering group members by reminding them of their shared goals. Nationally, a similar panel would be important to embed ongoing leadership. Designated single points of contact [SPOCs] in each force and CPS area would also facilitate communication more locally, as would embedding oversight from each PCC (or their mayoral equivalent).

Recommendation 10

Establish a clear escalation route for cases where individual CJS professionals don't respond, or disputes can't easily be resolved. Introduce designated SPOCs for each force and their PCC (or equivalent). Ensure centralised monitoring of CJS engagement with the lawyers, mirroring the role of MOPAC's steering group.

Notably, the engagement was considerably more positive once contact was established. Most of the direct meetings with officers and prosecutors were described by the pilot team as “constructive and helpful”, quickly resolving issues that had stalled over email for weeks (Reflective Diary, May 2026). One CPS meeting even led to a prosecutor asking how to refer new clients.

In relation to police, one lawyer met several different officers and felt that “in all but one of these, the rapport was very good” and while police were initially apprehensive about her role, “contact was positive and officers were helpful” (Reflective Diary, July 2025). In the remaining meeting, the lawyer perceived the officer’s hostility as directed at the client rather than at herself. In other cases, police did not respond to written representations but complainants later achieved their desired outcomes (Reflective Diary, June 2026). This might suggest that the pilot’s written representations carried weight even without a direct response.

A particularly important communication challenge was early assumption that lawyers should communicate with CPS through police. This turned officers into intermediaries, relaying arguments about decisions they had not made. Police focus group participants described this as creating significant extra work and stress, saying they felt “caught in the crossfire” (Police Focus Group). Similar findings emerged from the Northumbria pilot (Smith & Galey, 2020:45), where routing all communications via police was called “totally bonkers”. The London police focus group expressed a clear preference for direct communication (“I’m happy to be out of the loop”), and an agreement was developed later in the pilot to enable more direct CPS communication, with officers simply CCed into emails.

Recommendation 11

Use a Memorandum of Understanding, alongside TPM protocols, to encourage CJS practitioner responsiveness, clarify police and prosecutor roles in disputed cases, and streamlining communication where possible

Concerns that created barriers to engagement

Police participants raised concerns about the impact of legal advice on evidence gathering, sometimes reflecting operational questions about information-sharing

and sometimes reflecting misunderstandings about the role and professional duties of the pilot lawyers.

Disclosure requirements

Some police and CPS prosecutors worried that if a complainant declined to provide digital or third-party material after receiving legal advice, the same material might later be requested by CPS or the defence, causing delay. Others felt that pilot lawyers sometimes challenged requests without understanding the full case.

These concerns are understandable, but the relevant legal frameworks already provide safeguards. Where a complainant declines to provide material after taking legal advice, this does not prevent the defence from seeking access to material it considers relevant, nor does it prevent a court from determining whether such disclosure is appropriate. The role of the lawyer is not to obstruct reasonable lines of enquiry, but to ensure the complainant's rights are properly represented when requests for personal material are made. Independent legal support therefore adds expertise to the balancing exercise (e.g., to pursue all reasonable lines of enquiry, uphold due process for the suspect, and consider complainants' rights) that is required of police and prosecutors.

Witness contamination

Some practitioners argued that explaining the relevance of evidence may require giving details of the defence case, which cannot be shared with the legal team in case of witness contamination (Reflective Diary, July 2025). One model of note is that used in New South Wales, where complainants sign an agreement permitting their lawyer to withhold certain information, which would address the concerns about contamination. However, this approach sits uneasily with solicitors' professional duty to share information with their clients and so would require further consultation.

The pilot team's reflective diaries suggested that, in practice, these scenarios were rare and manageable. Lawyers argued that they typically required only a general explanation, not specifics of the defence case, to advise their client:

“In practice there is usually a general explanation given... It is generally possible to consider whether the category of request is appropriate in the circumstances. There is no need to disclose details of the defence or other evidence... If a blanket reason is given, such as ‘to see if there is anything relevant to credibility’ then it is a straightforward challenge... but I don’t think we see [this type of blanket request] much now.” (Reflective Diary, July 2025)

Such a general explanation is already meant to be provided to complainants via the nationally developed forms used when seeking such evidence, and the CPS [Guidance for Speaking to Witnesses at Court](#) reaffirms that witnesses can be informed of the general nature of the defence. Further consideration should be given as to how to approach those exceptional cases where more detail is needed.

Legal professional privilege

Two police survey respondents raised concerns that communication between complainants and pilot lawyers created “another layer of TPM” that would be difficult to access because of [legal professional privilege](#) (Police 9). One asked what would happen if a complainant told the lawyer something directly relevant to the investigation, e.g., admitting they had made a malicious complaint (Police 11).

These concerns are understandable, but again there are existing safeguards. The Law Commission (2025) already considered this issue in detail and concluded that the 'iniquity exception' to legal privilege means it cannot be used to conceal evidence of wrongdoing, and regulated solicitors are bound by professional codes of conduct. Communications to police and prosecutors should explain these mechanisms, making clear that independent legal support operates within the existing legal framework.

Recommendation 12

Build CJS practitioner confidence in engaging with the complainants' lawyers by developing a national Code of Practice for legal support to provide reassurance about service standards and address misled fears about witness coaching

Conclusion on implementation learning

Taken together, these findings show that equipping criminal justice agencies to understand and work with independent legal support is central to a national rollout. Sustainable police referrals, delayed communication, and concerns about disclosure, privilege, and witness contamination are real obstacles, but they can be addressed through national protocols, strong leadership, and clearly established dispute resolution channels.

A national scheme should therefore be embedded through formal referral pathways, named police and CPS contacts, direct routes for communication with prosecutors, and training or internal communications to explain the lawyer's role. These safeguards will help ensure that independent legal support is understood not as a criticism of criminal justice professionals, but as a practical mechanism for improving complainants' sense of procedural justice.

A police representative on the steering group for the pilot provided the following helpful summary of police perspectives:

"The MPS supported the pilot of independent legal advocates for victims of serious sexual violence as part of our commitment to more victim-centred investigations. Our teams have provided valuable feedback throughout the pilot, reflected in this document, which will help shape this offer during the national rollout. We have identified through this pilot that the integrity of the investigator role is best preserved where officers signpost victims to the service, rather than actively encouraging victim engagement with the service."

This supports victim empowerment, giving them the space to decide if they would benefit from the additional legal support. We also note that the uptake in referrals through ISVAs was significantly higher than those from police, suggesting that victims may feel more comfortable discussing and being referred to independent legal advocacy that way.

This provides a key insight into how independent legal advocacy should be offered to victims in future, offering a critical support measure for victims. The MPS is grateful for the opportunity the pilot has provided to help us test our decision-making process and provide an independent legal view on investigative decisions.”

Recommendations

This report makes several recommendations, both for the pilot expansion and any future national rollout.

1. Ensure sufficient team sizes to provide resilience during staff turnover and absence, with built-in review points to check resourcing meets demand.
2. Optimise value for money by recruiting both administrative support and paralegals to free up lawyer time.
3. Make legal support accessible for all adult rape complainants.
4. Ensure police clearly understand referral criteria, so ineligible complainants are not told about the support only to be turned away.
5. Lawyers currently advise on a wide range of criminal matters and this is highly valued. A national scheme should maintain this broad scope and also identify how best to effectively signpost clients to support on civil matters.
6. Encourage strong partnership working with support practitioners, e.g., ISVAs, by promoting a shared trauma-informed and client-centred ethos. This should be factored into tendering and recruitment processes.
7. Design of the national scheme should preserve the strengths of MOPAC's model, particularly the lawyers' independence and specialist training on sexual violence (see *Initial Set-Up Report* for further advantages, such as salaried positions).
8. Factor in resources for legal supervision, which should be independent, trusted by specialist services, and knowledgeable in both criminal and civil law (see *Initial Set-Up Report* for the relevant knowledge base).

9. Monitor compliance of whether police provide information about the service at key points, as with the Victims Code, but don't use quotas.
 - Service details should be included in Victim Information Guides, digital data extraction forms, 'NFA' letters, and other paperwork.
10. Establish a clear escalation route for cases where individual CJS professionals don't respond, or disputes can't easily be resolved.
11. Use a Memorandum of Understanding, alongside TPM protocols, to encourage CJS practitioner responsiveness, clarify police and prosecutor roles in disputed cases, and streamlining communication where possible.
12. Build CJS practitioner confidence in engaging with the complainants' lawyers by developing a national Code of Practice for legal support to provide reassurance about service standards and address misled fears about witness coaching.

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- Women & Girls Network
- Centre for Women's Justice
- Victims' Commissioner for London
- Metropolitan Police Service
- Crown Prosecution Service