

Warwickshire Road Victims Needs Assessment

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

Introduction:

This research was commissioned by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Warwickshire to better understand the needs of those bereaved or seriously injured by road traffic collisions (RTC). RTCs impact the lives of thousands of Warwickshire residents every year. Statistics from Warwickshire County Council recorded 16,634 collisions and 18,633 casualties between 2011 and 2020 (Warwickshire County Council, 2022). Despite these high numbers, there is very little research knowledge pertaining to road victims needs and the role of road victim support services in supporting individuals to cope and recover from them.

The Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for Warwickshire currently commission an Independent Road Victim Advocate (IRVA) service provided by the road safety charity Brake (Brake, 2022). This report is not a review of the performance of the current service. The research is intended to inform future commissioning cycles by developing a picture of the scale and type of need that a commissioned service could consider moving forward. This is an exciting opportunity to feed into the work of the Warwickshire OPCC and support their commitment to providing an effective response to RTCs for the residents of Warwickshire.

Purpose of study:

This research project aimed to understand the needs of those who may be considered road victims and how those needs align with current provision of road victims' services, particularly focusing on identifying any gaps and constraints in support and the efficiency of current services and processes. It also aimed to explore the issues considered most important to victims and survivors of RTCs, and their experiences of the process of cope and recovery. The research aimed to gather insight into stakeholder and victim perspectives and experiences within these areas, to provide a broad exploration of this under-researched topic area.

Methodology:

To establish the extent of existing literature in this area and provide a context for the study, a literature review was undertaken which examined literature relating to various stages that follow a RTC in relation to the support of road victims, from the immediate post-crash management to short and longer-term psychological consequences and needs following RTCs.

This was followed with a short but extensive period of data collection. The research project adopted a mixed methods approach to understanding the needs of those who may be considered road victims and how those needs align with current provision of road victims' services. The methods used were:

1. Secondary source data analysis of Warwickshire Police road collision data from 2017-2021,
2. Police force FOI request analysis using responses provided by 40 police forces within England and Wales,
3. Focus groups and interviews with 34 stakeholders from different areas of expertise within road safety, ranging from service providers to road traffic collision investigators,
4. Questionnaires with 8 stakeholders,
5. Interviews with 10 victims/survivors of RTCs, and
6. Questionnaires with 3 victims/survivors or RTCs.

Findings:

The roads context

A considerable number of individuals continue to be involved in both fatal and serious RTCs. In 2021, the number of individuals fatally or seriously injured in an RTC within Warwickshire was 230, with a total of 1507 killed or seriously injured casualties on Warwickshire's roads between 2017 and 2021. Males aged 21-30 are particularly overrepresented in fatal and seriously injured statistics, with the number of female casualties being significantly lower than male. Drivers are significantly more likely to be fatally injured than any other road user type, and in particular, male car drivers aged 21-30 disproportionately account for all fatal casualties.

Focus group discussion emphasised the traumatic, public and frequent nature of RTCs which distinguished it from other areas of crime or harm that the police and other emergency services are expected to respond to.

Contextual provision

The roads context is unique in nature and stakeholders suggested therefore that support should be roads-specific to account for such nuanced differences in context. For example, in comparison to other crime types, a greater level of action can be required of road victims, over a longer period of time, due to the impact of death or serious, lifechanging injuries. The duration of proceedings and associated length of the requirement for expert advice may not be adequately addressed within a generic victims' service. FOI data analysis also suggested that the take-up of support is higher with a specialised service than a generic victims of crime service, suggesting that more people would be supported with their needs where a specialist service is provided.

Terminology

No standard terminology for this cohort of victims currently exists, but it is clear in other fields of policing and from the data analysed here that the term 'victim' can problematically make assumptions about an individual that subsequently lead to a resistance to its application to certain people who do not consider themselves such. One of the most apparent findings from the analysis is

the difficulty in providing a definition of a 'road victim'¹, and indeed many suggested that the term victim is not appropriate as it excludes many who are impacted by RTCs who survive the experience but still experience subsequent support needs. The use of the terms 'victim' and 'survivor' require further examination to ensure that they perform an inclusive function and do not deter individuals from seeking support.

Current road victim provision

All forms of analysis highlighted a 'postcode lottery' of victim support provision, with some force areas offering no specific road victim support but others providing funding for dedicated services. Many utilise the family liaison officer (FLO) as support provision, itself sometimes producing additional demand and emotion work for the FLO and meaning that such support is not available at all times of need (i.e., after court proceedings). Some forces offer support to only those considered victims of crime, meaning that many people who experience the trauma of a road collision are not referred to specialist support services. The absence of clear 'victim' categories therefore impacts on who is considered eligible for or receives services. Offenders are often not eligible for road victim support, but they are likely to also be impacted, as are their families and witnesses that may be present in an offending vehicle. This raises questions as to the purpose of support and tensions between civil or criminal findings of innocence and guilt within RTCs.

Furthermore, some forces offer support only to those considered victims of fatal collisions, but the above statistics exemplify the extent of the issue of RTCs with serious injuries, which may have considerable and long-lasting harmful impacts upon those involved. Participants particularly emphasised the needs of those subsequently responsible for the care of a loved one seriously injured and unable to care for themselves for the rest of their lives, which can be demanding and long-lasting.

Support, choice and availability

Interviews with those impacted by road death/serious injury found that the key needs of road victims relate not simply to emotional support, but to informational and practical assistance, especially in the immediate aftermath of the RTC. Information was the most frequently stated need, which was reported as both the primary immediate need and an ongoing significant need in terms of coping with the aftermath. Choice also emerged as a key consideration for participants within the study; choice in type of service and the timing of the engagement provided participants with a sense of control over the situation and empowered them to take an active role in their recovery.

Preferred road victim service

Analysis of interview data highlighted that for those impacted by RTCs, having an individual to 'walk beside' them throughout the aftermath and provide information and guidance as stages of the process emerged was the preferred service model. Those who received support from the

¹ It is important to note that we continue to use the term victim in our report and analysis to refer to those impacted by road trauma, in the absence of a yet-to-be-agreed appropriate term.

Independent Road Victim Advocate reported that this was the single most important factor in their ability to cope and recover. In addition, victims/survivors recognised the value of respect, empathy and care/compassion being shown in the provision of support.

Referral mechanisms and awareness of services

Data from stakeholders as well as victims/survivors suggested that the role of the FLO has a significant impact on the victim experience as effective delivery of this role can facilitate access to other services, reduce anxiety through the provision of information and provide victims with the confidence to return to work/ normal life. Awareness of available services at a local and national level is essential for effective service provision and a 'warm referral' (i.e., a request to pass on the victim's personal details) to any specialist road victim service in that police force area, or to a national road victim helpline. Participants highlighted that self-referral processes need to be made clear to ensure those impacted are able to access available support.

The positive impact of the involvement of personal injury solicitors emerged as a key finding and a lack of awareness of the services they provide is a weakness of the current response. A robust triage stage within the initial and immediate response to road victims is recommended which should include referral to specialist personal injury solicitors for any appropriate cases. FLOs and other service providers should be trained to inform victims of the range of support mechanisms which personal injury solicitors can put in place as a separate facility to a final financial settlement.

Justice outcomes

Where criminal proceedings did not take place, victim participants spoke in terms of being denied any attempt to secure justice. The justification not to pursue a criminal or civil route needs to be explained clearly to road victims, to manage expectations and to mitigate feelings of being denied justice or reparation.

Recommendations:

1. We recommend commissioning a dedicated service to support road victims from the time of the incident through to the end of civil and criminal proceedings, and for sufficient time for the victim to begin to cope with and recover from the RTC.
2. There is a need for future research but we would provisionally recommend that support services be described as 'available to those impacted by road collisions or incidents' as an inclusive phrase.
3. We recommend that commissioners consider the impact of RTCs on all those involved and that support is available to all, including the negligent or culpable driver and their passengers, as well as those directly impacted and witnesses. This model of provision already exists in some areas, offering the opportunity for learning.
4. We recommend that a variety of support options are made available to individuals impacted by RTCs. Support should be available to all when needed and of a sufficient variety to enable the individual to feel a sense of control over their support provision.

5. We recommend that victims are offered multiple opportunities to engage or re-engage with services following initial contact with the provider. This could take the form of agreed check-ins over time and the provision of contact phone numbers, tailoring the approach to meet the needs of those who are reluctant to accept help when needed and those at risk of becoming dependent on support.
6. We recommend that any future commissioned service includes an advocate role which provides a bespoke level of guidance and support dependent on the needs of the individual victim and circumstances of the RTC. We envisage that this should alleviate unnecessary emotion work from FLOs and therefore reduce the need for additional professional support services in this area.
7. We recommend that the services of the Air Ambulance are offered to those impacted by road trauma within Warwickshire.
8. We recommend training and awareness raising of the function of personal injury provision for FLOs and other relevant personnel. Personnel should be able to discuss personal injury provision with victims in a way which informs whilst managing expectations.
9. We recommend that needs assessments are undertaken within a pragmatic approach which sets out to the victim the extent of the waiting lists for services and the options available to them, including self-funding and applications to grants or other charitable funds. Road victim service providers should liaise with the wider support sector to monitor waiting lists and develop referral pathways where possible.
10. We recommend that in cases where the CPS decides not to pursue a case, the victim is made aware of the Victims' Right to Review scheme and supported to access this.

Broader recommendations

11. We suggest that further research in this area focuses on the examination and classification of road victims, to develop a robust framework for understanding victim needs and developing effective interventions, as well as understanding preferred terminology for them.
12. We recommend that further research is undertaken to identify and engage with those affected by RTCs who have not accessed any support or other services in relation to the impact of the incident. Until the experiences and needs of this group are known the full extent of service provision cannot be known.
13. Although this is a broader recommendation that we recognise is not relevant to local service providers, we recommend that future consideration is given to the provision of a national support service for road victims, to address gaps in both geographical provision and victim type and to level up the disparity in support services received by road victims.