

OPERATION YARDBIRD – IMPROVING EFFICIENCY AND BRINGING OFFENDERS TO JUSTICE

Overview

17 days

**Average reduction in
days for cases to come
to trial**

High level

**of guilty pleas for cases
expedited through
Operation Yardbird**



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How Science and Technology can benefit safeguarding and violence prevention

In the world of policing, science and technology play a vital role in ensuring we stay a step ahead on tackling and preventing crime to better protect the public, deliver justice, and support police on the frontline. Professor Michelle McManus, a specialist in safeguarding and violence prevention, has been working on a project called Yardbird, a beneficiary of Police Science, Technology, Analysis and Research (STAR) Funding.

The aim of Operation Yardbird was to examine whether Possession With Intent to Supply (PWITS) cases could be dealt with in a more swift and efficient manner to bring offenders to justice quicker, and reduce levels of re-offending. The project aimed to co-produce a process to expedite PWITS cases through the Criminal Justice System (CJS) through an innovative 'in house' method for dealing with drugs analysis, supported by a clear process agreed by the Police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the Judiciary.

Thames Valley Police had already clearly identified the problem they wished to solve when they approached Professor McManus. It's something the seasoned academic was impressed by and felt contributed to the project's later success because the force had considered potential approaches already – in her words “they'd done their homework”.

Academia and policing working together

Professor McManus is a highly respected policing expert, with extensive experience in safeguarding, domestic abuse, and exploitation, particularly around county lines. She is currently a Professor of Safeguarding and Violence Prevention at Manchester Metropolitan University.

Her work on the Police and Independent Domestic Violence Advocates co-responder model, Operation Provide, has been identified as best practice by the College of Policing and NPCC, and has improved the uptake of safeguarding and prosecution support for victims of domestic violence in Lancashire. She co-created the Kent Internet Risk Assessment Tool (KIRAT), which is an international tool used by law enforcement to assess the level of risk posed by a suspect who possesses and views indecent images of children. She has also worked with the National Crime Agency on a range of projects relating to sexual offending and serious violence, and her research has had a significant impact on policy and practice in criminal justice.

Operation Yardbird

Yardbird introduced a number of processes to bring offenders to justice faster. It made use of an internal forensic examination of Class A Drugs proving it was of sufficient quality when compared to samples sent to the lab, with no challenge raised in relation to the process. Cases expedited through Operation Yardbird showed a high level of guilty pleas at the first hearing stage and an increase of cases being charged. Savings were realised when the cost of employing a forensic drugs co-ordinator to complete the work in house was compared with the cost of sending all items to external labs for review.

These changes significantly reduced the time taken to bring drug offenders to justice. Yardbird cases take on average 13 days to come to trial (up to 50 days), while non-Yardbird cases take on average 30 days (up to 130). This integrated approach has seen excellent success in bringing offenders to justice more quickly.

One of the strengths of the project is the collaboration between multiple organisations. Despite several practical and cultural challenges including implementing the work during the pandemic, there were also delays and differences in data collection across all agencies but the project was able to push through these barriers.

Prior to Yardbird, it would often take a significant amount of time for the officer in charge (OIC) to get confirmed results back from the lab on the drugs being examined. Other cases would be prioritised as PWITS cases were seen as losing momentum due to time delays around the forensic returns. Now, due to the expedited drug analysis process and the flagging of cases to Crown Prosecution Service, the momentum of the case is more likely to be sustained and progressed through the criminal justice system more efficiently.

The future of policing

Despite these challenges, Professor McManus is optimistic about the future of policing. Some forces are braver and more innovative than others and this project “really shines and shows the good work that can result from collaboration and solutions orientated thinking”. She emphasises the importance of reporting findings, and sharing successes so that other forces can observe the achievements seen in other forces and can both realise the potential benefits of collaboration and the workings of the project itself.

