

Police Family Liaison Officer Feedback Focus Group

Summary Note

This summary note contains five sections:

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1. Introduction

Over the summer of 2023, discussions took place between several police forces in the West Midlands region, RoadPeace and the Department for Transport, about how the police could obtain direct feedback from families about the Police Family Liaison Officer (FLO) role, in the context of better supporting victims and families following a road traffic collision.

This resulted in RoadPeace West Midlands and West Mercia arranging a focus group in October 2023 to give a small group of individuals and families, bereaved due to fatal road traffic collisions, a forum to share their individual FLO experiences with officers from two police forces. DfT officials attended to observe, listen and better understand the issues facing families following a road collision.

The focus group consisted of nine family members, who are all active members of RoadPeace. The group was mixed in terms of ages, sex and ethnicity.

The family members were supported throughout the day by Lucy Harrison and Belina Rauli from RoadPeace. Lucy is also bereaved due to a fatal road traffic collision, and she was able to talk about and share her experiences throughout the day, too.

The group, including Lucy, had been bereaved due to nine separate fatal road traffic collisions – all of which were quite different.

We would especially like to thank all the families that took part in this focus group – for their willingness to share their experiences and relive the most difficult times in their lives for the benefit of others who may sadly find themselves in a similar situation in the future.

We would also like to thank and acknowledge the outstanding contribution from Lucy Harrison for her role in this project – from her initial ideas of wanting to get feedback from families directly to FLOs and her continuous support and background work throughout the whole of the planning stages of this project.

We also like to acknowledge Lucy and Belina Rauli for their help on the day and over the days following the event, ensuring that the wellbeing of the families in attendance was of the upmost importance and ensuring that appropriate support was in place.

Also, in attendance was:

- Inspector Gavin Williams (FLO Lead) from West Mercia Police
- Detective Constable Chris Ridge (FLO) from West Midlands Police
- Sergeant Dean Caswell from West Midlands Police, seconded to the Department for Transport (DfT), Road Safety Division
- Leon Brain from the Department for Transport (DfT), Road Safety Division

The forum was held at St Martin in The Bull Ring Church and the event was jointly funded by West Midlands Police and West Mercia Police. The location was specifically chosen as it is familiar to the group who attend the church for support meetings and remembrance events.

The West Mercia and West Midlands regions were selected because of the proximity in their location and the differences between the two forces – in that West Midlands Police have a dedicated FLO team and West Mercia Police do not.

The forum would be an opportunity for both forces to receive direct feedback from bereaved families, in a safe and secure environment whilst ensuring families had ongoing emotional support in place through RoadPeace. Families were also able to help forces explore ideas and help identify best practice in relation to obtaining FLO feedback in the future; something that both forces were keen to adopt but were unsure of the way in which feedback should be sought.

Details and collision history of the group will remain anonymous. The group give permission that comments made throughout the day may be shared with others including service providers, policing, authorities and government departments to further enhance the service given to families by FLOs.

Throughout the focus group, the importance of the FLO role to families and what an impact FLOs have on them during such a tragic time in their lives was evident. It is hoped that this summary can be used to give new and existing FLOs the opportunity to view feedback from bereaved families during this forum and for police forces to consider how best to receive FLO feedback in the future.

Summary Note provided by the Department for Transport

2. Feedback for FLOs:

The following points were identified by families and discussed throughout the day. Each point is a summary of their discussions and are reflective of their thoughts and statements made.

1. Families felt it was important for FLOs to ensure that they communicate the FLO role clearly in plain language, ensuring that the family members know exactly what the FLO role is and the service that the FLO can and cannot provide. Some of the group had a clear understanding of the role from their FLO, others did not.
 - a. *'I didn't know that I had a FLO until RoadPeace explained it to me'*
 - b. *'No-one explained the FLO role to me, I thought they were just a police officer'*
 - c. *'I found out more from the investigating officer than the FLO'*
2. Families felt it was important for FLOs to ensure that a clear communication path is made with families (especially families which have broken relationships / more than one point of contact) and all communication options are made available and explained to families, such as face to face, telephone, text, email etc. Some families may prefer to use one communication option over another and FLOs should (whenever possible) respect the families wishes. Some families were not given any communication options at all. FLOs should ensure that families know and understand that communication is a two-way thing; families should feel comfortable contacting their FLO with questions or queries and not to have to wait to be contacted first.
 - a. *'Email was my preferred option; it was my outlet, but I was made to feel a nuisance for emailing'*
 - b. *'My FLO only made contact by WhatsApp; I didn't know there were other ways of making contact, I wanted to talk to them'*
 - c. *'I felt as though we were made to feel like a nuisance'*
3. Families felt it was important for FLOs to agree with families a contact plan and ensure that families know when FLOs are on rest days, annual leave, sick leave etc. In extended periods of leave, a deputy FLO to ensure contact with families is maintained – even if there are no updates.
 - a. *'I didn't know my FLO had a dual role and they were on nights or rest days, we could wait 3 or 4 days for a response'*
 - b. *'Having a deputy FLO was really useful to me, especially when my FLO was on holiday, just having someone make contact with me was really important'*
4. Families felt it was important for FLOs and other police officers to be mindful of the language they use both at the scene of a road traffic collision and when visiting families and think of the impact words can have.
 - a. *'I was told I was lucky to have had a FLO allocated as I didn't fit the normal criteria, no-one is lucky in a collision'*
 - b. *'When I arrived at the collision, I was screaming and crying, and I'd been locked in the back of a police car. The officer told me that I was making a scene of myself'*

- c. *'It's good that you're a happy family and have young children to focus on'*
 - d. *'There were a lot of acronyms used'*
 - e. *'Sorry, I've been ever so busy'*
- 5. Families felt it was important for FLOs to assist families with retaining information and consider different options that families could possibly use. Many of the group found information retention hard, especially in the early stages. Consider possibly having friends or family present during meetings and providing resources for recording information. Also consider knowledge gaps between family members who have been at the collision scene and those that were not.
 - a. *'If a FLO could follow up conversations with an email and the main bullet points, that would have been really useful to me'*
 - b. *'I kept my own logbook of everything as we went along'*
 - c. *'It just didn't sink in, I was in denial and shock, I needed someone else to take it all in for me'*
 - d. *'FLOs should be prepared to explain things more than once, my concentration levels were very low'*
 - e. *'I really didn't remember a lot, I kept asking the same questions'*
- 6. Families felt it was important for FLOs and police investigators to make sure that information given to families is accurate and up to date to ensure trust and confidence in the investigation and court processes. When different information comes to light within the investigation, be honest and clear ensuring that families know and understand why the information has changed. Ensure that families understand why certain information may be held back so as not to compromise an investigation.
 - a. *'The FLO said it was his car, then they said at court it was his brother's car'*
 - b. *'They couldn't tell me if he came to the college where me and my son both worked or the uni – I didn't want us to bump into him in the corridor'*
 - c. *'The collision was in a different force area, I had more updates from the investigator than my FLO'*
- 7. Families felt it was important that FLOs should have a good understanding of specialist support services that are available and the different types of support that are provided. Referrals to specialist support providers should be considered at the start of the FLO engagement with families and wider thoughts as to who should be referred. A lot of the group wished that they had been given access to support at a much earlier stage. Some of the group had reached crisis point before being offered support or finding support themselves. Some support providers assist families through entire court processes so a referral at the end of an investigation could be too late.
 - a. *'Only I was referred, my husband wasn't but he needed as much support as what I did'*
 - b. *'Mom was in such a bad place, I just started searching the internet for help'*

- c. *'FLOs should offer support more than once and follow up with families at different stages'*
8. Families felt it was important for FLOs to have a good knowledge and understanding of resources that are available to assist families, particularly surrounding support from specialist service providers, remembering that all families are different.
 - a. *'I found RoadPeace myself on the internet'*
 - b. *'I found the green book (Brake Pack) excellent'*
 - c. *'We are a fractured family, I didn't get a copy of the book (Brake Pack)'*
 - d. *'My brother's partner threw the Brake Pack away'*
 - e. *'I found RoadPeace through the green book (Brake Pack)'*
 9. Families felt it was important that FLOs should explain investigation and court processes in detail, ensuring that families understand what is likely to happen throughout, particularly around likely time scales for Forensic Collision Investigation and for Crown Prosecution Service decisions. FLOs to discuss realistic expectations surrounding sentencing and the reduction in sentences that guilty pleas can bring.
 10. Families felt it was important for families to know if drivers and riders were alcohol and drug tested at collision scenes. FLOs should be aware of guidance for families surrounding press, social media, CCTV or mobile phone footage of collision scenes etc.
 - a. *'I knew court dates but didn't find out enough of the process'*
 - b. *'Can I check please what the policy is around drink drive tests after a collision?'*
 - c. *'Surely you have all the information on your police systems which should have known I was his daughter?'*
 11. Families felt it was important for FLOs to consider other ways of helping families.
 - a. *'Watching the CCTV was really important to me, I could see that he didn't suffer'*
 - b. *'I wrote thank you cards to those that helped my son at the crash, I don't know who the people are, but my FLO made sure the cards got to them'*
 - c. *'I attended a Driver Confidence Course to get me back in a car and driving'*
 - d. *'The FLO really helped us with transport, the wheelchair was not an issue'*
 - e. *'Despite the FLOs best efforts, we were together with the other family at court'*
 - f. *'The FLO chased court updates and delays on our behalf'*

3. Common words and phrases for FLOs to consider

Below are a few common words and phrases that came out frequently during the day:

- Communication
- Human touch
- Updates
- Understanding
- Sympathise
- Nothing was too much trouble
- Face to face
- Made time for us
- Welfare
- Accommodating
- Honesty
- Openness
- Empathy

4. How should forces obtain future feedback in relation to FLOs

Families felt that being able to give feedback to FLOs was crucial and it was very important to the group to be able to do that – especially if it helps other families receive a better FLO service in the future.

Ideas from families for obtaining feedback are as follows:

- Obtaining feedback should be manageable for both the family and the police – families were keen not to overburden valuable police time and for the process to also not be too demanding on families either. Also consider that not all families may want to take part in the process.
- Don't wait until the end of the FLO deployment to get feedback – it might be too late by the time an investigation and court case finishes – consider reviewing periodically throughout the process – families suggested perhaps every 3 months.
- Someone independent from the FLO or the FLOs supervisor to obtain the feedback from families.
- A pre-planned time and date suitable to both the family and the police should be used to obtain feedback, bearing in mind that when the time comes, families may not feel up to it on occasion.
- An agreed method with the family to obtain the feedback, rather than just one option- phone, meeting, email, survey etc. Provide questions ahead of the process to allow families time to think about the questions. Every family is different and there shouldn't just be one single method in obtaining feedback.
- Consider focus groups similar to this one in the future. Families who attended today commented on how they felt listened to and there was a 'victims' voice and how it was very important to them to help influence the service that FLOs provide.

5. Comments from Lucy Harrison, RoadPeace

We would like to echo the thanks shared at the start of this summary to those bereaved family members who took part in the focus group. For them, it is too late for their experiences to be changed, but they are committed to helping the next family who will sadly experience bereavement through a road traffic collision. This takes selflessness and courage, and it is right that this is recognised.

We would also like to thank the DfT officials and police officers who were willing to take part in the focus group. This meant engaging in challenging conversations, coming with an open-mind, and being passionate about working to ensure FLOs deliver the best service possible to bereaved families. Listening to the voice of the victim, and collecting feedback from families, are longstanding calls of RoadPeace – and this focus group feels like a firm step in the right direction.

It is our view the role of the FLO is vital. This is a tough and demanding job, requiring emotional resilience, empathy, excellent communication skills, patience and understanding. Some of these traits cannot always be taught, a consideration of personality type is needed for this role. We do not believe all police should be made to be FLOs – we believe officers need to have a particular commitment to this. In many cases, a FLO will be involved with a family long-term (perhaps years). Whether their experience with their FLO is a positive or a negative one, a bereaved family will never forget their actions and words – which is why this relationship needs to work as well as possible. Sadly, we sometimes see a lack of consistency around the quality of FLO deployment and a hesitancy to seek feedback from families who are grieving and traumatised. Yet, it is by really listening to those who have experienced a road death that some of the most profound learning will take place.

Every family will be different, and we don't believe FLO deployment can be completely prescriptive. However, based on discussions with families we support, we know most of them value face-to-face contact. Families often have many questions and may struggle to take information in the first time they are given it – so feeling their FLO is responsive and approachable helps. Families tend to appreciate FLOs checking with them regularly about how they would like to be communicated with; their wishes may change as time progresses.

Communication between a family and FLO may experience additional challenges where the crash occurred in a different policing region to the area in which the family live – extra consideration is needed in this situation. There also appears to be a lack of clarity around whether FLOs should be redeployed if a case is reopened. It may be helpful if a minimum set of expectations regarding the FLO role could be set out – and our RoadPeace families would very much like to help shape this.

The point at which the investigation or criminal justice process comes to an end can feel particularly challenging to a family, especially as the FLO ends contact. Some families tell us this is the point at which their grief really hits. While appreciating that police resource is limited, and FLOs will sadly need to deploy to other jobs, a softer exit can sometimes be beneficial. RoadPeace can sometimes assist with this – it is important families know they can still ask questions or request to look at files after a case concludes.

For a FLO, knowing when to signpost to support services can be a real challenge. Ideally, the FLO shouldn't make the decision about this but rather should hold regular discussions about support. Some families will want to take up all services available immediately, while others may need gentle and continued encouragement to consider this. A debate around whether referrals to support services should be opt-out rather than opt-in, and the difference this may make, is needed.

Going forward, we hope we can continue to work with families, the DfT, and police. RoadPeace stand ready to work with and support all in any way possible; we have staff, volunteers and members with much experience who would be willing to take part in working groups or provide sense checks or input to literature which may be created.

Together, we can build on this event and ensure it results in tangible actions. After all, we are united in a common determination to ensure those families who are given the most devastating news, receive accurate and timely information, support and care.

Lucy Harrison
RoadPeace