# **Policing in a Time of Austerity: Understanding the Public Protection Paradox through Qualitative Interviews with Police Monitoring Officers**

# **Abstract**

This article examines the changing nature of public protection police work in a climate of continued austerity and increasing prosecutions for sexual offending, which have impacted significantly on the workloads of police teams who manage and monitor registered sexual offenders in the community. This increase has run parallel to a decrease in the general policing budget, which has seen it cut by an average of 22% across England and Wales (BBC, 2017). Utilising data from observations and in-depth qualitative interviews with police officers from a force in England, this article highlights the effect which cost saving measures have had on the professional standards of the police service in the management of sex offenders; how collaborative working practices have been hindered by these austerity measures, and finally how continual cuts have had a detrimental effect on the police’s ability to protect the public.

# **Introduction**

Following the introduction of public sector austerity in 2010 (HM Treasury, 2010), the financial challenge facing state-funded police forces in Britain has been evident. Central government funding to the police service has fallen by 25 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16 (Millie and Bullock, 2013), with a disproportionate impact on forces more heavily reliant on central government funding than on local council tax precepts. HMIC (2014) highlights that the cut-backs have been reflected in the police service, via recruitment freezing, purchasing cheaper or fewer goods and services (e.g. replacing specialist cars with cheaper ones; less spending on IT equipment), tightening discretionary spending, and necessitating the same cost reductions across all budgets, regardless of the importance of the specific area of policing. HMIC (2014:58) also found that in 2014/15, the majority (66 percent) of savings occurred through cuts in pay costs, by ‘restructuring force operating models and cutting departmental budgets to reduce the size of the workforce’.

Indeed, while the scale of pay savings has witnessed the adoption of a variety of efficiency measures, such as continued pay restraint; reductions in overtime; and the implementation of the Winsor pay reforms (2011), the vast majority of pay cost savings have occurred through reductions in police staff, police officer and Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) posts (HMIC, 2014). By March 2015, the total police workforce (officers, staff and PCSOs) had decreased by 14 percent, from 243,900 in 2010 to 209,500 in 2015; a reduction of approximately 34,400 workforce personnel (HMIC, 2014). While the appropriateness of fiscal constraint as a solution to the current economic climate is open to debate (Davidson, 2009; Skidelsky and Wigstrom, 2010; Krugman, 2012), fiscal austerity has nevertheless raised considerations for how effectively policing can be delivered, and the consequent implications for crime control (Millie and Bullock, 2013) and public protection.

Sexual offending is one area of public protection which arguably provokes some of the strongest feelings of fear and abhorrence (Thomas, 2015). Since its media induced rise to public attention during the 1990’s (Nash, 1999), sex crime has developed into a real public concern. As the number of sexual offenders being registered each year continues to increase (Ministry of Justice, 2016), successful and effective policing in this area is vital to the maintenance of public confidence. For this reason, the policing of registered sexual offenders has been chosen as the focus for our discussions of austerity and its effects on policing.

**The management of sexual offenders**

The management of sexual offenders in the community is the responsibility of MOSOVO or equivalent teams, whose work falls under the Public Protection remit. First developed as a result of the introduction of the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, which established specific arrangements for assessing the risk posed by sexual and violent offenders (Thomas, 2016), MOSOVO hold post-conviction responsibilities for all RSOs, including the monitoring of compliance with notification requirements, the safeguarding of adults and children, covert operations, liaison with partner agencies under MAPPA, and the ongoing assessment of risk (The College of Policing, 2018c); as well as responsibility for all violent and dangerous offenders and all Potentially Dangerous Persons (PDP) (College of Policing, 2018b).

In recent years, the exponential number of registered sexual offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2016), coupled with the technological advances of offending in this area (McAlister, 2014), have dramatically altered the role of MOSOVO or equivalent teams. This is a complex area of policing, which, as Kemshall discusses (2009:331), takes place in ‘a climate of public blame and anxiety’; any errors in the management or monitoring of an RSO, could result in a serious further offence and devastating consequences for the public (The Telegraph, 2008; Thomas, 2015). The need for defensible decision making and comprehensive assessment of risk is therefore vital in maintaining both, public protection and public confidence (Kemshall, 2009).

Risk assessment first emerged as a feature in the management of sexual offenders in the 1990’s; originally taking the form of case conferences between police and probation (Lieb et al, 2011), the need for increasing accuracy and better levels of prediction, saw the formalisation of risk assessment into actuarial tools for use by criminal justice agencies (Wood and Kemshall, 2007). Risk assessment still remains a vital aspect of the MOSOVO role and this is achieved through the use of Risk Matrix 2000 (RM2000), a tool which assesses static risk factors, such as age at first offence, criminal record and sex of victim (MAPPA, 2017), and more recently ARMS (Active Risk Management System), a dynamic risk assessment tool which considers both the protective factors and risk factors in an individual’s life, in order to assess current risk (College of Policing, 2014).

The effectiveness of police RSO management is very difficult to assess and there is very little evidence to suggest that current practices are preventing recidivism (Thomas, 2016). However, if we look to the literature on desistence from sexual offending, we can see that formal sanctions tend to promote sex offender desistance by initiating a process of cognitive transformation (Farmer et al, 2015). During this ‘transformation’, the encouragement of pro-social engagement, employment, and familial reintegration (Weaver and Barry, 2014) are essential to continued desistence. It could be argued that the MOSOVO management of RSOs, via both the ‘welfare’ and ‘surveillance’ supervision models which they employ (Healy, 2012), provide both formal sanctions and pro social support, forming an essential contribution to low rates of reoffending by this group (Grubin, 1998; MOJ, 2017).

Such management does however, require a great deal of resources, and as this paper highlights, the financial cuts which have effected this increasingly important and highly specialised area of policing (HMIC, 2016), has resulted in the dilution of good practice which previously ensured public protection.

This paper aims to explore some of the barriers police officers experience in relation to the effective performance of their public protection function. It anchors its examination within the ambit of sex offender management, exploring the inter and intra organisational tensions that have arisen as a result of austerity measures, and explores how these might affect the successful management of sexual offenders.

Cuts in police spending have occurred simultaneously with a rise in recorded sexual offences, attributed in part to improved victim willingness to disclose (Office of National Statistics, 2017) and the greater readiness of the justice system to pursue historic sexual offenders post the Jimmy Savile inquiry and Operation Yewtree (BBC, 2013). An increase in sexual offences, coupled with decreased resources for the management of these offenders has inevitably affected the ability of the police to effectively manage the risk posed by sexual offenders; this is supported by the HMIC (2014) who estimated that in 2014, the risk represented by approximately 2,700 registered sex offenders in England and Wales had not been assessed, highlighting the fact that ‘many forces are failing to understand and manage the risk posed to the public’ (HMIC, 2017:17).

The effects of austerity on sex offender management is further reflected in wider debates around austerity and its impacts on visible policing and public protection. Scholars emphasise the importance of uniformed staff working directly within a community for the creation of reassurance, trust and legitimacy amongst the public (e.g. Bickman, 1974; Balkin and Houlden, 1983; Singer and Singer, 1985; Steele, 1989; Durkin and Jefferey, 2000). Thus, while much of the public’s disquiet regarding cuts to police funding has focused almost entirely on those in visible frontline policing roles (The Telegraph, 2017), the discreet and at times covert nature of non-visible frontline policing roles, such as those involved in the management of sexual offenders in the community, have masked the effects of austerity, arguably leaving the public less protected and completely unaware.

This article argues that austerity measures have led to, among other consequences, increased and unmanageable workloads and workforce de-professionalisation. In addition, such measures have posed a hindrance to effective multi-agency collaboration, a cornerstone feature of the public protection agenda, conceptualised and legislated to enable the seamless and cost-effective delivery of offender management (Nash and Williams, 2008; Lieb et al., 2011). Austerity has thus resulted in a paradox, whereby public protection is a key objective for the police service and other criminal justice agencies, but austerity has undermined the ability to adequately perform the functions necessary to achieve this aim, therefore rendering the public unprotected.

# **Methodology**

The data utilised in this article is taken from 10 in-depth interviews and multiple overt observations with police staff working in the Management of Sexual Offenders and Violent Offenders (MOSOVO) unit at a force in England. A purposive sampling technique was employed, and participants were drawn from different grades in the police service hierarchy to provide for a range of role responsibilities and experiences; these included one Detective Inspector, two Detective Sergeants, five Detective Constables and two civilian Investigative Officers. The sample represented approximately 5% of the total number of MOSOVO staff in the force and was drawn from all four MOSOVO offices in order to represent all locations in the unit. Participants varied in their experience and employment periods ranged from 28 years to less than 12 months.

For the in-depth interviews, an outline schedule was developed, and all interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, interviews were analysed using thematic analysis, where emerging themes and patterns were described, classified and connected to the research questions. This approach also enabled the researchers to include other themes not initially considered (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Multiple overt observations of the team were carried out during the research period and these observations included the day to day interactions of staff within the team, interactions with staff from other policing teams, training and CPD days, MAPPA meetings and most critically the observation of MOSOVO officer’s interaction with RSOs during unannounced surveillance visits. To ensure anonymity, participants are identified by their rank and interview number only and any information pertaining to the location of the force, has been omitted.

As Reiner and Newburn (2010) discuss, accessing police forces for research purposes has become easier in recent years; the need for increased police efficiency in the face of financial cuts, has opened up opportunities for social researchers to work alongside police in evidenced based research (Lumsden and Goode, 2016), which helps to identify ‘what works’ in relation to cost effective and efficient policing (The College of Policing, 2018a). This new era in collaborative research has resulted in the willingness of forces to accommodate social researchers and it is within this increased climate of collaboration that the fieldwork for this paper was conducted.

The fieldwork took place in 2015/16 during a period of significant change and restructure, which had been prompted by the need for increased cost effectiveness. The MOSOVO department had lost a number of experienced Detective Sergeants and Detective Constables, who were replaced by civilian investigative officers, a cost saving trend noted by HMIC (2017).

At the same time, the unit was also implementing the new and highly resource intensive Active Risk Management System (ARMS). As such, this was undoubtedly a very difficult period for the team and the increased workload and pressure on time and resources had consequences for the fieldwork. Whilst the majority of police staff were keen to share their experiences, many found it difficult to justify taking time out of their busy schedules to take part in the research. Those who did take part tended to be the staff who were most determined to communicate the frustrations and short comings of the current workload and staff structure, and as such the findings cannot be generalised across the entire MOSOVO unit. However, the results and discussion of this paper do accurately summarise the general ‘mood’ of the MOSOVO team, which was palpable during the fieldwork observations.

**Findings**

# **Austerity and its effect on workloads**

A significant feature of the management and monitoring role of MOSOVO staff are the unannounced surveillance visits to the homes of RSOs. Often referred to as ‘home visits’, these unannounced calls to the home or fixed abode of an RSO are essentially investigative interviews and surveillance exercises, designed to monitor all aspects of the RSO, from their appearance through to the conditions in their home; determining whether anything has changed and whether their risk level needs to be re-examined (College of Policing, 2018c). These visits, the frequency of which are determined by an RSOs’ risk level, form a vital part of the accurate and ongoing assessment of an RSO, however, throughout the research, participants highlighted how unacceptably high workloads delayed these visits, despite HMIC (2017:17) recognising them as being necessary ‘in order to keep communities safe’:

We were on the visits, and we never carried them over. Maybe one or two per month, but we were on the visits. And very quickly it became apparent that this was unmanageable, with the workload we were doing…the problem is the resources. We get a new offender each week. It has grown by 50 % in the last two years

(Detective Constable 1)

The increasingly bureaucratic nature of the MOSOVO role, which has been amplified by the introduction of ARMS, was frustrating to participants who had been in the team for many years. They recognised the importance of proactive policing of RSOs and felt that procedures designed to make them more effective, had in fact resulted in less time being spent with the offenders:

When I started off it was very much rumbling sex offenders out there, catching them. We didn’t do management plans back then, we would just visit. We dealt with safe guarding. As time went on, we started doing risk management plans… and it became so bureaucratic that we went down to doing assessments. That has just brought us to our knees, taking us away from the streets. It feels like, every week something new comes in that keeps us in the office even more (Detective Constable 2)

Participants also recognised that not only had workloads increased, and staffing levels decreased, but the new risk assessment tool, designed to ensure greater efficiency and public protection, was difficult to complete due to its time-consuming and sometime duplicitous nature:

We were faced with this massive challenge, to do all these offenders from the ARMS[[1]](#endnote-1)…the assessment would take several hours, because you would sit down and talk with them in massive detail. Then you would come back and it would take several more hours to write them up. It was minimum between six and eight hours…every month you had to sit down with an offender and do an ARMS assessment on him…there seems to be a duplication in the actual assessment process (Detective Constable 1)

Participants also felt that such tasks were often encumbering the skills they felt were required to manage sex offenders. For example, many highlighted the importance of communications skills and relationship building, and discussed the barriers which new risk assessment procedures posed to this:

You have to get them talking…and then when there is that…they are actually a lot more forthcoming about things. You have to have a kind of relationship with them. (Investigative Officer 1)

I feel like I have try to fill all those boxes in (as part of the ARMS assessment), and the conversation doesn’t always flow as naturally as it did previously

(Detective Constable 2)

In response to increased workloads, and in an attempt to manage and support staff, during the course of the research, the force moved to ‘reactive management’[[2]](#endnote-2). Interestingly, sentiments about the effectiveness of these measures for public protection were varied, and dependent on the core responsibilities of each police officer. Senior ranking police officers expressed more optimism for tiered risk management, viewing it as a sound solution to managing resource constraints and ensuring staff had manageable workloads:

The key role for me is taking care of my concerns around looking after my staff. The key role for them is to take care of the highest risk of offenders…it’s all around the highest risk…sad as that is, you have to go to a high risk and then maybe a medium risk…what is the value of the lowest offenders? What value do you actually get from visiting him? So for us to miss that lowest offender, it’s ok for me

(Detective Inspector 1)

However, other lower ranking staff expressed doubts about the effectiveness of these measures for public protection, highlighting how these conflicted with the ‘high stakes’ nature of their role:

Just because they are low risk, they are still offenders. They still have got convictions for something really bad. They may have a partner, a good social network, but when the opportunity arises, and it may change any point in the future, their risk changes. If we don’t manage them then we don’t see the risk…when they said we are not getting more staff, then we had to change the way we worked. You have got to go where your greatest risk is. I can honestly say that it causes me a lot of sleepless nights (Detective Constable 1)

Just because somebody is low risk doesn’t mean they are no risk at all…they can tell us that they are doing everything we are asking, giving us their phones and computers to have a look, but at the end of the visit they know they are low risk and that we won’t be back for months…and if something goes wrong it goes spectacularly wrong. (Detective Sargent 1)

Participants were also of the opinion that efforts to manage workloads have been hindered by siloed intra-agency working. Thus for example, while efforts have been made to ensure other policing teams play a more active role in managing sex offenders, participants articulated a lack of knowledge sharing across different teams, brought about in part by a lack of awareness of the work done by sex offender management teams:

We have incidents where sex offenders are flagged on a STORM system. The flag will tell them that there is a registered sex offender living at that address. But we often don’t get told. We as a department need to be proactive and tell people what we do. What I do is go and do briefings around and tell people what we could do for them. If people don’t know we exist, then they won’t know to come to us

(Detective Sargent 2)

This was something confirmed by our observations of MOSOVO officers’ interaction with other police teams. There was a definite lack of awareness about the role MOSOVO play in public protection and as such, opportunities for collaborative work, which could aid the intense workloads of the MOSOVO team, could potentially be missed.

A further drain on the limited resources of the MOSOVO team, which was clearly evident through both observations and interviews with participants, was the ‘social care’ role which officers were increasingly assuming, in part due to a lack of availability of other agencies. Participants highlighted how the ‘24 hour service’ provided by the police, had resulted in an over reliance by sex offenders on the team to perform tasks that fall outside of their public protection remit:

There is a lot of stuff that we deal with that we ask our self why we do them, concerning management and care for these individuals…many things fall on us…social care leaves at 5 p.m. and isn’t in until half past nine, and probation likewise. So, no social care or probation before that. And by the time I explain the situation to social care, I think it is probably better if I do it by myself

(Detective Sargent 1)

Interestingly, such dependence could be indicative of the positive and supportive perception sex offenders have of their police monitoring officer, and could be interpreted as a positive reflection of the effort invested in the offender-manager relationship, despite the present time constraints on core job functions:

I genuinely think some people want to speak to us…some things are the most banal things that they phone about. I think that they phone up just to speak to us sometimes…some people are taken by the fact that we are the police, and a lot of them do forget that we are actually the police. It is almost like they are phoning a friend. They tell you everything

(Detective Sargent 1)

The low and the medium risk can be very needy. It is time consuming, but nobody mentions it. It takes a big part of the job. But I think they feel like there is no one else for them. Some of them tend to ask that they haven’t seen us in a while and are we ok?

(Detective Sargent 2)

However, during a period of significant staff loss, such net-widening of the MOSOVO role to include tasks such as the location of housing, the arrangement of amenities and the sourcing of mental health support (all witnessed during observations of the team), does very little to increase efficient working practices.

**Austerity and de-professionalisation**

Civilian police staff have become a regular feature of police forces over the recent decades and whilst they have traditionally acted as support to uniformed staff, recent years have seen an increase in designated civilian officers (Loveday, 2006). By March 2017 there were 61,063 civilian staff in supporting roles across the 43 police forces, of which 4,255 were designated officers; an increase of 3% from 2016 (Allen and Jackson, 2018). The ‘modernisation’ of policing, driven by cost saving and efficiency, has, as Loveday (2006: 111) discusses, encouraged the use of civilian staff ‘because they were much cheaper to employ than police officers’.

During the research a number of civilian investigative officers were introduced to the MOSOVO unit, and whilst some were retired Detective Sergeants or Detective Constables, the majority had no background in, or experience of, policing, and this emerged as a significant issue. Whilst Civilian Investigative Officers (CIOs) were supposed to be trained in the techniques of investigations and criminal prosecutions, the research found cases were being investigated by CIOs who lacked the necessary training or experience, compromising investigations and safeguarding as a result; findings echoed by HMIC’s (2016) force wide investigations:

The IOs…are doing the best they can…this job is about knowing your offender and him knowing and trusting you…I at least know most of my offenders. We have got a new team that know none of them. If they go into a visit and an offender’s appearance has changed, they will not have a clue

(Detective Constable 1)

We have got people joining the police where we frontload them…regardless whether there is previous police experience, we are not giving them the necessary training, we are not affording them a proper tutoring program, we are not putting them in place for organisational needs

(Detective Sargent 1)

I feel really lacking to be honest…we have most of the ARMS training…it tells you how to do the assessment and in theory it’s great, but it’s not that practical…what does that look like? What does managing an offender look like?

(Investigative Officer 1)

Other participants recognised how inadequate training contributed to staff turnover, with implications for case management continuity; something considered important in the establishment of an offender’s trust and the enhancement of information disclosure:

Some of them resigned (CIOs), and I always wondered why, because it was a well-paid job. Some of them would come in and see what they are supposed to do and then say that this was not for them…we have given them the IO course but that is not enough to teach them the job

(Detective Sargent 2)

Other participants articulated the impact a lack of appropriate CIO training had had on their supervisory workloads, and the consequent strain this put on their primary job functions:

The reality is, someone might come in who… cannot seize devices and property…they don’t have protective equipment and they don’t have training…so they have been brought to do the same job as me but they are not doing even close the same job as me…every time my IO wants to see something, then I’m going to have to seize it and I’m going to have to get involved in the custody process…so I’m assisting…and no one will be doing my job other than me…not only are you looking after yourself you also have to consider somebody else

(Detective Constable 4)

Whilst participants articulated the risks to public protection presented by the use of CIOs, and the additional workload their implementation had added, they did also acknowledged CIO commitment to their roles, and understood their introduction as a consequence of cost cutting measures. Some suggested the use of CIOs would be more manageable if they were introduced gradually, giving the unit time to adjust and meet the needs of their new colleagues:

You can argue that you can bring civilians in, but you can bring them slowly. It took me two years to get comfortable in my job. I’ve met some of the people who came in and they are overconfident in their ability, which is so dangerous

(Detective Constable 3)

# **Austerity and multi-agency arrangements**

The Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000 and the Criminal Justice Act 2003, formalised the working relationship between the police, the National Probation Service (formerly Probation Trusts) and the Prison Service, in the management of registered sexual offenders, by the introduction of MAPPA (Multi Agency Public Protection Arrangements (Thomas, 2016). As such, a large of part of the MOSOVO role is based around multi-agency work.

Within this study, participants reflected heavily on their working relationship with the probation service, acknowledging the similar organisational challenges faced by them which too have been brought about by an ever diminishing budget.

I have got so much respect for people at probation, because they are working under the same pressures

(Detective Constable 3)

Others highlighted how the increasing demands of the MOSOVO role, created tensions in maintaining a positive relationship with Probation colleagues, who are now expected to complete ARMS assessments on all RSOs for whom they are the lead agency.

There have been issues with them, because they are as busy as we are. In the past three months they have been tasked in doing ARMS assessments on the offenders. They barely have time to do it and it is not a relevant assessment for them. It is causing tension and frustrations in our relationship because they keep providing us with workloads saying that we need to do that

(Detective Constable 1)

These frustrations were further fuelled by a lack of inter-agency accountability mechanisms, which resulted in the police assuming more responsibilities; adding to an already overloaded role:

A lot of it tends to end up in the lap of the police. No one intends to take the lead so it is always the police that leads, so we tend to do a lot of things… sometimes we just refer but we don’t get much interaction back

(Detective Sargent 1)

It was evident from observations of the interaction between MOSOVO officers and other agencies that the fiscal pressures currently felt by all organisations, was placing the multi-agency working model under significant strain. It appeared that shortcomings in the role of agencies such as probation and social services, were being mediated by MOSOVO staff because their ultimate role is to protect the public, and they will strive to do this even if it requires going beyond their job specification.

# **Discussion and conclusion**

This article began by mapping out the financial challenge faced by state-funded police forces in Britain, following the introduction of public sector austerity in 2010, and the impacts of this on public protection. Practitioners involved in this study perceived that austerity measures have resulted not only in tightened discretionary spending but also in reduced departmental budgets and workforce sizes, consequently impacting on workloads, professional standards and on collaborative working practices.

One impact of austerity on police workload highlighted by this study is reflected in the extension of the police’s role to include other ‘social’ aspects of offender management, which detract from deterrent public protection functions. Indeed, as the HMIC (2016:24) argues, the police are now being used as the ‘service of first resort’ within all sectors of the force. For the MOSOVO teams, this addition to their role has been magnified as a result of the 2014/15 probation reforms that have done little to allow probation staff to nurture their traditionally supportive role, resulting in a more risk averse approach to offender management (Nash and Williams, 2010). This coupled with the perception of the police as a ‘24-hour service’, has resulted in regular contact by sexual offenders seeking help and support, further stretching police work responsibilities and detracting them from proactive policing which is vital to managing the risk posed by RSOs.

Perhaps another consequence of austerity has been a disregard for the importance of specialist knowledge and skills, and a shift away from the development of professional roles in the implementation of the public protection agenda. This has influenced the ‘standards that social policies set for service delivery’ (Malin 2017: 71), leading to the gradual de-professionalisation of a role that ‘is for the most part a specialist area of policing’ (HMIC 2016: 69). This has resulted in sex offender management units being under-skilled and overwhelmed by demand. Indeed, as a result of budgetary pressures, this study has found that changes in the governance and management of public protection implementation has affected the organisational standards for service provision in the police service. This has included the redistribution of responsibilities, a renegotiation of professional police roles, and a blurring of boundaries between warranted and non-warranted police staff.

The introduction of CIOs by the Police Reform Act 2002 was a cost-saving measure put in place to assist warranted police officers with their investigative enquiries. However, while CIO roles were introduced with the intention of ‘freeing up sworn officers and plain clothes detectives to focus on front-line or other investigative priorities’ (Blue Line Jobs, 2017), this study has found that given the high workload volumes, CIOs were performing almost the same duties but enjoying ‘neither the pay nor the status of sworn officers’ (Loveday, 2006: 111)

Finally, this study has highlighted the effects of austerity on inter-agency collaboration. Such inter-agency partnerships have been conceived as an important tool in managing and reducing the risk posed by sex offenders. In fact, this approach to sex offender management is one aspect of a broader push within the criminal justice system in the United Kingdom to create a ‘seamless system for the efficient management of offenders’ (Mawby and Worrall 2011: 80) by encouraging agencies to ‘work more closely together for the greater good of crime prevention, community safety, and more latterly, risk management and public protection’ (Mawby and Worrall 2011: 79). Within the police service such multi-agency working has been enabled by statutory tools such as the Sex Offenders Act 1997; the Crime and Disorder Act 1998; and the Criminal Justice and Court Services Act 2000, all of which legislate closer working arrangements between criminal justice agencies.

In addition to the supposed benefits afforded by multi-agency working arrangements for public protection, they have also been conceptualised as a practical solution to austerity cuts. While the police service will experience an approximate 20 per cent cut to their funding by 2019 (Local Government Association, 2013), Solar and Smith (2016) propose that the argument that has been developed within the government, ‘is that public services can adapt to the challenges of resource constraints by being much more effective and efficient in how they provide services’ (Solar and Smith, 2016: 3).

While this may be the case, this study has found that far from enabling more efficient ways of working, austerity measures have instead hindered the needs of multi-agency collaborative arrangements, undermining its utility to public protection, for two primary reasons. Firstly, austerity measures have placed a barrier to the introduction of new governance arrangements, and to the creation of specific role functions within these arrangements that can help meet the objectives of multi-agency work; and second, austerity measures have created internal agency demands that render collaborative practices a secondary priority to more pressing organisational needs.

Given the challenges posed by austerity measures, how might the police service address these and achieve the aims of public protection? Evidence put forth by the College of Policing (2012) demonstrates the utility of targeted and proactive policing for sustained reductions in crime, including sexual offences. To enable more targeted and proactive offender management given current workloads, forces might consider providing greater discretion to officers on how they choose to manage their sex offenders. This may in fact enhance the quality of sex offender management, presenting a more individualised approach to the heterogeneous nature of sexual offending.

As training budgets have been reduced as a response to austerity, forces have had to consider how skills can be developed whilst still reducing costs. Forces could address skills gaps through the introduction of Investigative Officers in an incremental rather than accelerated manner, although this would have to be dependent on individual force needs. Officers could also be trained to keep pace with changes in technology, particularly since the nature and rate of sexual offending via digital forums has evolved rapidly, rendering challenges to the detection and investigation of this offence (Quayle, 2018; McAlister, 2014); something noted in our observations. To this end, practitioners must acquire ‘data literacy’ in order to be equipped with the tools, methodologies, capacities and information necessary to shine a light on the challenges of responding to technologically facilitated sexual offending. To achieve this, collaborative initiatives are invaluable between technology companies and practitioners.

Finally, in order to overcome the challenges posed by austerity to multi-sector working arrangements, an embedding of multi-sector accountability mechanisms must be prioritised. Indeed, an absence of clear multi-sector accountability mechanisms means that multi-sector practitioner roles and responsibilities are blurred, and decision making becomes harder to regulate. Thus, clear accountability mechanisms must be created in order to provide clarity around how other agencies involved in sex offender management are accountable, and who they are accountable to, with an emphasis on how this might be integrated within an existing police accountability framework.

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1. ARMS stands for the Active Risk Management System; a dynamic risk assessment tool for use with adult male sexual offenders. Introduced in 2014, ARMS’ implementation created extensive workloads for police sexual offender management teams. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. A practice whereby proactive investigation and monitoring visits are carried out with high and medium risk sexual offenders only. Those who have been categorised as low for a period of three years and who are not subject to a civil order, will not receive home visits but will be subject to annual notification requirements only. Should any intelligence or changes to their circumstances occur, a review of their risk will be carried out and offenders can be moved back to proactive management at any time (National Police Chiefs’ Council, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)