


Point of contact

Family liaison officers can play a key role in investigations and are often the first point of contact for families. As a national standard is being developed, Phil Chamberlain reports on the professionalisation of the role.

 Tea and sympathy are not the watch words of family liaison officers (FLOs), in fact, as Det Con Louise Pye puts it: 'There is still a little bit of ignorance about it. A lot of people think you are just there as a shoulder to cry on and to drink cups of tea.'

DC Pye has been a police officer in Sussex Police for 17 years, has worked as secretary to the FLO national executive board and is one of the hundreds of specially trained officers across the country who are an essential part of any sudden and violent death inquiry.

'It can be a very difficult and very solitary role. Family liaison officers volunteer for the job, they get no specific reward for it and it is a very demanding,' she said.

Liaison officers have been heavily involved following both the tsunami disaster and, more recently, the July bombings in London. Now their role is written into any disaster emergency plan. They can also get called in to kidnaps, missing person investigations and deaths abroad.

'You sit with the family members asking them the most intimate of details and facts while trying to balance this with the fact that they are grieving

'The main difficulty is the perception of those who don't do it. You've spent hours and hours of exhausting work and you get back in the office and a flippant comment about drinking tea all day is the last thing you need.'

Ask any FLO to define their job they will immediately let you know that they are not counselors.

Commander Andy Baker, from the Met, is the ACPO lead for family liaison officers, and he says: 'First and foremost they are investigators. There are other caring agencies which can provide the therapy.'

DC Pye, who recently attended the second ACPO Family Liaison conference, held in June this year in Coventry, said that discussions included developing the role FLOs play in gathering intelligence and establishing a national standard.

The standard would indicate the level of skills necessary to do the job, training courses required and what is expected from those carrying out the role.

The officer explained how the original role of the family liaison officer grew out of the experience of traffic police.

As they were dealing with so many families traumatised by a death they realised there was a need for an officer who could be designated to deal with the family. They could explain why things were, or were not, happening and act as a link between them and the investigating force.

This was gradually codified into a set of rough how-to rules and other departments took up the idea.

She explains that across the country each force was doing its

own thing with FLOs. There were pockets of good and bad practice and little of either was being shared.

The role suffered from a perception that it was no more than 'hand-holding'.

The Stephen Lawrence inquiry gave FLOs a timely political boost, says DC Pye, as relations between the Lawrence family and the police had gone sour.

That Lawrence report recommended more effort be put into developing liaison officers and properly sorting out training and responsibilities.

DC Pye said that people began linking up those pockets of good practice and a training course was set up.

It was still the case that too little was shared among the different forces, she explains, but adds that the value of the liaison officer as an investigator was becoming increasingly apparent.

DC Pye, who penned a booklet, *Forget Me Not*, to give guidance for officers when they deal with a child who suffers bereavement through either sudden or violent death, said that since most murders are committed by someone the victim knows then the information from the family is vital.

She argues that this is the reason that three years ago the whole system was finally overhauled.

Two police officers were appointed to share a role as

national advisors to properly assess what was happening across the country and to identify and share best practice.

ACPO took a lead and set up co-ordinating groups at force, regional and national level.

Det Ch Insp Darren McInnes is the family liaison co-ordinator at Surrey Police where he has worked since 1999 having previously been with the Met.

As a FLO co-ordinator Det Ch Insp McInnes will work out at the beginning of an inquiry if a liaison officer is suitable and, if so, who will be the most appropriate person.

'It could depend on the nature of the job and the skills of the FLO,' he said. 'We have to be fair to the families that we deploy the best people for the circumstances.'

Liaison officers are experienced in all aspects of a sudden death inquiry. They have to be because the family may ask them anything. From coroner procedures to what will happen in court, the officer is there to make sure the family is kept up to speed on events.

Some describe it as being the pivot on a pair of scales. On the one side is the family and the other the investigation. Refereeing the demands of both is the liaison officer. The fallout from any media intrusion can add to the juggling act.

Primarily, though, the officer is part of the investigating process

and as such has to make sure that the evidence gathered is recorded properly and will stand up to scrutiny in court.

The officer gathers intelligence, sometimes assessing what they are told with what was said at a briefing earlier that day. For families where a relative is arrested, sometimes late on in an inquiry, the first person they turn to for a reason, or simply to protest, is the liaison officer.

DC Pye said: 'Some officers will request a break or stop carrying out the role after a while. This can be for many reasons, a change of role, personal circumstances or after some enquiries, particularly high profile ones, they may just need a break from it.'

The expertise of family liaison officers is now being used to help forces abroad. Last month Commander Baker and Jayne Zito, patron of the Zito Trust, a registered mental health charity, were talking to European and American law enforcement agencies promoting the work of FLOs.

Commenting on the role of the family liaison officer and the skills needed to carry it out, DC Pye says: 'You learn something every time. Good FLOs have to have certain key skills. You don't make any judgements or assumptions.

'We have to be careful not to use inappropriate terms or police abbreviations.

'We always refer to the person who has died by their name and need to remember that families often will have had no contact with police ever before and therefore will not understand things we may take for granted

'You are constantly thinking a sentence ahead of yourself so you don't say anything inappropriate. You can be seen as the family's best friend or their worst enemy.

'There are sometimes certain family dynamics that come out, the secrets. They will ask you to explain something to the five-year-old daughter because they cannot, or a fact not previously known about has to be discussed.'

Despite the advances made in training and overseeing liaison officers, there is still more work to be done.

Commander Baker said: 'I would like to hone up the training and accreditation for individuals and for voluntary agencies so that there is a standard that is met.

'That way all officers across the country will have been trained to the same standard.'

Det Ch Insp McInnes is working collaboratively on devising a national training package for FLOs which will form part of a new ACPO manual.

'The biggest change in the last few years is that it has become more of an investigatory role. After all, that

is what the police do, we investigate. We are not trained to offer therapy but we can put families in touch with the appropriate services.'

The number of FLOs varies from force to force and there is no set guideline on what is a suitable number. There is also no easy way of measuring performance as a FLO's work does not easily translate into something that can be put on a spreadsheet.

There are no current national selection criteria or indeed deselection criteria. Some forces recruit from uniform, others from CID only.

Commander Baker said: 'Originally we had people who signed up because it was a CV bonus and had people who were over-committed and you can burn out.'

However the process of recruiting FLOs is being looked at to make it more consistent.

One development has been the appointment of FLO co-ordinators, although it can still be the case that people are assigned the job and have to learn as they go. Mentoring schemes for officers new to the role

are recommended, but usually it is a case of just getting on with it.

Nonetheless, Commander Baker said he is pleased that liaison officers do not have to survive on their own but can tap into a force, regional or national network for guidance.

DC Pye said: 'I think it is one of the best jobs and you know when you do it whether you will love it or hate it.

'The satisfaction comes from knowing you have done a good job and knowing that you are getting information that could identify a motive or a suspect.'



FLOs sometimes have to explain bereavement to children