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# Criminal justice: Cautioning and Relationship Abuse project for diversionary justice in domestic abuse





## The problem

The efficacy of simple cautions as a tool for low- to medium-risk domestic abuse has been subject to critique within the criminal justice sector. Such disposals have often been perceived as an inadequate response, failing to confer accountability upon offenders, address the underlying causes of their behaviour, or provide a meaningful resolution for victims.

The subject police force - Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary - had issued around 1,500 simple cautions in 2023, which are incidents that don't meet the threshold for prosecution and so received only a symbolic sanction with limited restorative or preventative value.

**This public sector impact study is based on a talk at Productivity Pitches, a series of events hosted by the Institute for Government and The Productivity Institute, which aims to share and support ways to improve public sector performance levels. The talk is available to watch on the [Institute for Government's website](#).**



## The innovation

The Cautioning and Relationship Abuse (CARA) model, developed by the Hampton Trust and Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary, represents a significant departure from the traditional simple caution.

It operates as a conditional out-of-court resolution, whereby an offender's formal caution is contingent upon their successful completion of an awareness raising intervention. The core of the intervention comprises mandatory attendance at two psycho-educational workshops designed to compel offenders to reflect on their abusive behaviour, understand its impact on the victim, and develop alternatives for conflict resolution. It is positioned not as a comprehensive, long-term perpetrator programme, but as a targeted, early-stage intervention designed to initiate behavioural change and act as a conduit to more intensive support where appropriate.

The model's design was informed by a multi-agency stakeholder framework that included police, the Crown Prosecution Service, and third-sector specialists. Crucially, its development was also shaped by direct consultation with victims of domestic abuse through focus groups, many of whom stated that they "wanted someone to speak to their partner... about their behaviour". This ensures that the intervention was aligned with their expressed needs for accountability and behavioural change.





## The impact

The efficacy of the CARA model was validated through a randomised control trial conducted in partnership with the University of Cambridge <sup>1</sup>. The trial measured the severity of subsequent offenses using a 'harm index' based on recommended prison time. On average, workshop participants incurred 8.4 days' worth of recommended prison time per offender in the year after the workshop, compared with 11.6 days for those in the control group. This indicates that the workshop caused a 38% drop in harm.

Subsequent evaluations, including a cost-benefit analysis by the University of Birmingham, have provided further evidence of the model's value <sup>2</sup>. The economic evaluation indicated a strong return on investment, suggesting that the cost of delivering the intervention (approximately £250 per offender) is significantly outweighed by the societal and fiscal savings generated through crime prevention.

For West Midlands Police the estimated cost-benefit ratio was 2.75, whilst for Hampshire and Isle of Wight the estimated cost benefit ratio was 11.1. The primary metric of success remains the demonstrable reduction in reoffending - a 56% reduction in the West Midlands - which translates into enhanced victim safety and reduced future demand on police and criminal justice resources.

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1 A full write-up of the trial is available here: Strang, H., Sherman, L., Ariel, B., Chilton, S., Braddock, R., Rowlinson, T., & Weinborn, C. (2017). Reducing the harm of intimate partner violence: Randomized controlled trial of the Hampshire Constabulary CARA Experiment. *Cambridge Journal of Evidence-Based Policing* 1, 160-173.

2 Available here: Flowe, H., Karavias, Y., Bandyopadhyay, S., Bradbury-Jones, C., Taylor, J., & Kane, E. (2022). The CARA (Cautioning and Relationship Abuse) service: theory of change, impact evaluation and economic benefits study report.



## Takeaways

Public sector organisations often struggle to adopt innovations because of operational interdependencies and institutional inertia - especially in domains where the risk of setting precedent or causing unintended harm looms large.

To address this, the Hampton Trust has deployed randomised controlled trials not only for academic validation but to generate the robust causal evidence needed to convince the Director of Public Prosecutions to permit conditional cautions that mandate offender participation in the programme.

This effort was eventually successful, but more than seven years elapsed between the first randomised control trial publication in 2017 and the national reform of conditional caution policy in 2024, which enabled a broader roll-out of the innovation. This delay underscores that rigorous evidence, while necessary to challenge established norms, does not always suffice to overcome deep rooted institutional inertia. Furthermore, this case illustrates the roles that external organisations can play in supporting innovation in the public-sector.

First, rather than merely developing the intervention, Hampton Trust has codified the knowledge on the intervention's core components into a series of guidance manuals that document both procedural decisions and theoretical rationale. This helps other organisations to understand which complementary assets and adjustments to existing work processes are necessary to gain the greatest benefit from the innovation.

Second, Hampton Trust also facilitates human capital investment by offering a training and accreditation programme for local providers. And third, it also plays a role in ensuring transparency around the innovation, by providing ongoing quality and fidelity assurance, so that stakeholders can know that the innovation is being implemented in a way that is safe and efficacious.

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