

Police Scotland submission of 21 November

PE1948/B: Improve the way that unexplained deaths are dealt with

There is a national process for the selection, training and deployment of Family Liaison Officers within all territorial divisions in Police Scotland.

The primary function of a Family Liaison Officer (FLO) is that of an investigator therefore they are not generally used or deployed to unexpected deaths.

Training

FLO's are experienced police officers who have applied for the role (which is undertaken in addition to their normal duties) and undergone an interview process prior to selection.

They attend a 5 day national training course at the Scottish Police College whereby they receive training/inputs on their role within an investigation, dealing with bereaved families, support available for families and personal welfare. They are also provided with case studies which highlight difficulties that can be encountered as well as best practice learned from previous investigations. Officers are assessed during practical exercises where they are given scenarios and have to show competence and professionalism in dealing with them. Officers must pass the course in order to be deployed as a FLO.

Duties

The FLO's role is to gather evidence and information from the family to contribute to the investigation and preserve its integrity.

The FLO also provides support and information, in a sensitive and compassionate manner. They secure the trust and confidence of families, ensuring they are given timely information in accordance with the needs of the investigation.

FLOs are the single point of contact between the family and the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO). FLOs will identify who the main contact(s) will be for a deployment, in most cases this will be the next of kin however in certain circumstances, it may be another family member.

The FLO will then maintain regular face to face and telephone contact with this person(s) until such time as the police enquiry concludes and, in the event of a crime being established, an accused being reported to COPFS. At this point, the FLO will exit and complete a handover to the Victim Information and Advice service (VIA).

During the course of their deployment, FLOs are also responsible for obtaining statements from the family relating to identification of the deceased, lifestyle, victimology and behavioural characteristics of the victim, obtaining relevant background details of the victim and family members and advising the family in respect of police investigative procedures and criminal justice process.

If the incident is determined to be a homicide, FLOs will speak to families about the assistance and support which is available from the Victim Support service, Supporting Families Bereaved by Crime (SFBC). If the families consent, the FLO will submit a referral to SFBC who will in turn arrange a meeting with the family via the FLO.

If the death is suspicious however not yet established to be a homicide, FLOs can provide families with details of other support organisations/charities which the family can contact if they wish.

Accountability

FLO's are accountable to the Senior Investigating Officer in the investigation.

Deployment

Family Liaison Officers should be deployed in the following cases:

- Murder
- Suspicious Deaths where there is obvious or apparent criminality
- Missing person enquiry where there is reason to suspect foul play
- Any other serious criminal enquiry where deployment of a FLO would be significantly beneficial to the progress of the enquiry

Family Liaison Officers should be considered in the following cases:

- The investigation of every road collision, involving a fatality, potential fatality or life changing injury;
- Death which is likely to be subject of a Fatal Accident Inquiry (FAI);
- Multiple deaths due to a public transport accident;
- A critical incident;

- Any death which is likely to raise serious public concern, and generate significant and sustained media interest.

The deployment of FLOs may also be considered in other types of non-criminal deaths where communication has to be maintained between the police and family of the deceased for an extended period. As the availability of trained FLOs will inevitably be limited, careful consideration should be given to their use in non-criminal deaths. There must be an investigative function to any deployment and they should never be deployed solely to act as a support function. That is not their role.

In relation to the cases where deployment of a FLO should be considered, this is done on a case by case basis at the discretion of the SIO who will make an informed decision as to whether there is an investigative need to deploy a FLO or whether a single point of contact would be more suitable. If an SIO wishes to deploy a FLO, he/she will consult with the divisional Family Liaison Coordinator (FLC) who manages the FLO cadre in their respective divisions. They will assist in identifying suitable FLOs for deployment, taking into account the experience/skills of the FLO, welfare, current workload and availability for deployment.

Frequency of FLO deployments

From 1st January 2022 to date, there have been 76 FLO deployments to incidents which fall under the above criteria.

Given the specialist investigatory role of Family Liaison Officers, the protracted manner of their deployments and the limited number of trained FLOs within the force, it would not be feasible or appropriate to deploy to every unexplained/unexpected death as a matter of course.