



# Exploring the Impact of Specially Trained Dogs on the Court Experiences of Sexual Offence Survivors in England and Wales: An Exploratory Case Study

Elizabeth Spruin<sup>1</sup> · Katarina Mozova<sup>2</sup> · Tammy Dempster<sup>1</sup> · Susanna. Mitchell<sup>2</sup>

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## Abstract

The current research explored the impact of specially trained dogs on the experiences of sexual offence survivors in an English and Welsh court environment. In total, five cases of survivors of sexual offences were provided with a specially trained dog during court proceedings. In each case, data were collected from several sources, including interviews, observations and various documentation. Using a thorough multiple-case-study design, data were analysed both within and across all cases to identify any individual and thematic patterns. The within-case analysis found that the dog aided survivors in becoming calmer and less anxious. The across-case analysis indicated five reoccurring themes pertaining to the survivor: (1) impact of court context, (2) emotional impact of dog on survivors, (3) physical impact of dog on survivors, (4) change in anchoring due to presence of the dog, and (5) the uniqueness of a dog as a companion. The findings also highlighted important considerations when utilising such services to support survivors at court. Overall, these results identified a large number of benefits not only to the survivors, but also their families and other supporting individuals, providing the first global evaluation of such service for survivors of sexual offence, which should aid in considering the introduction of this service internationally. It is thus recommended that the criminal justice system in England and Wales further explore the use of this service.

**Keywords** Vulnerability · Survivors · Therapy dog · Sexual offences · Court · Support

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✉ Elizabeth Spruin  
Liz.Spruin@canterbury.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1QU, England

<sup>2</sup> Department of Policing, Canterbury Christ Church University, Canterbury, UK

## Introduction

The criminal justice system (CJS) in England and Wales has been continuously introducing new initiatives through its various stages, with the vision of increasing its legitimacy, allowing for procedural justice, and generally improving the experiences of its users (Cooper and Norton 2017). However, even though these initiatives have provided much needed support to some individuals, recent publications remain critical of the overall response of the CJS toward its users, through the criminal investigation process (Smith & O'Mahony, 2018) or court proceedings (e.g. Ahern et al. 2018; Gerry and Cooper 2017; Victim's Commissioner 2018). Initiatives available to individuals going through the legal journey tend to be scattered and inconsistent; those who require them are often not informed of their existence, and evaluations into their effectiveness are generally lacking, all issues strongly linked to austerity measures put into place by the government (e.g. Griffiths & Milne, 2018). Considering that witness cooperation is a key factor in successfully investigating and prosecuting the majority of criminal cases (Griffiths & Milne, 2018; Milne & Bull, 1999), ensuring appropriate care is taken to accommodate for their varying needs is crucial, especially for those witnesses who are particularly vulnerable.

In 1998, it was officially recognized for the first time that some victims and witnesses require more support due to their specific circumstances (Home Office, 1998), and the resulting recommendation that special measures be available for vulnerable witnesses was incorporated into the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999. Special measures, in wide terms, apply to all those under the age of 18; those whose quality of evidence can be diminished by a mental disorder, impairment of intelligence or social functioning, or physical disability or physical disorder; those who are intimidated (especially distressed or fearful because of having to testify); those who are victims of serious crime (e.g. knife attack); and those who are victims of sexual offences (CPS 2017). The measures available range widely, from giving evidence from behind a curtain, giving evidence via a live-link, to having communication aids available (see Cooper and Norton 2017 for a thorough discussion).

The importance of these measures lies in the notion that giving evidence in court has been found to have long-lasting negative effects on the well-being of those testifying for a prolonged time after the testimony takes place (Quas et al. 2005). Furthermore, from a practical perspective, witnesses who feel anxious whilst giving evidence do not provide their best evidence, which can impact on court outcomes due to the cognitive overload witnesses can experience, on top of the trauma of having to recall a negative experience (O'Mahony, Creton, Smith & Milne, 2016; Saywitz and Nathanson 1993). This further impacts on the overall legitimacy of the system, with only 55% of victims and witnesses prepared to give evidence in court again if required in the future (Comptroller and Auditor General 2016). O'Mahony and colleagues 2016) concluded that the use of special measures enables the safeguarding of a witness's well-being, allowing them to communicate more effectively.

However, the consistency and efficiency of these measures in the court setting is questionable and the need for new, innovative, and cost-effective ways of supporting witnesses has been noted (Callanan & Colleges, 2012; Cooper and Norton 2017; Fairclough 2017), with particular emphasis being placed on victims of sexual crimes, as these individuals are often considered the most vulnerable. More specifically, recent government initiatives have emphasised the need to improve the support available for victims of rape and sexual assault within a court setting. In 2018, the Ministry of Justice announced a 10% increase in funding for services dedicated to supporting victims of rape and sexual abuse, highlighting the

importance of providing more innovative support to these victims of crime. Similarly, the annual report from the Victims' Commissioner (2018), further contend that more emotional support is needed for victims of serious crimes.

There is an appreciation by official agencies that not only those who are vulnerable perceive the court environment in a negative light, with stressors embedded in complex legal procedures (Henderson 2015), being cross-examined (Zajac and Hayne 2003), and having to relive traumatic experiences, often causing re-traumatisation of witnesses (Goodman, Levine, Melton & Ogden, 1991). The only services available for all witnesses, regardless of socioeconomic status, and cost or availability of appropriate organisations, lies in Witness Support, who are based in courts across the country and provide information and practical help relating to court processes, as well as personal support (Citizens Advice 2019). Through their own evaluations, they found that witnesses who received such support felt more confident giving evidence, which was associated with 12% fewer cases failing due to witness reasons. Further, 74% of those who received their support said they would be willing to give evidence again in the future (Robertson 2018). Therefore, receiving support at court is important not only in terms of witness well-being, but also the success of a trial.

An innovative way in which witnesses can also be supported lies in the use of specially trained dogs who offer non-judgmental companionship to witnesses, allowing them to stroke or pet the dog, and hence providing a unique, personal form of support not available through any other initiatives (Spruin, Holt, Fernandez & Franz, 2016). Empirical evidence on the use of specially trained dogs is lacking, though recent research showed that the use of facility dogs with victims of sexual crimes and undergoing a forensic interview, decreased their stress-related symptoms (Krause-Parello et al. 2018). Anecdotal evidence from the court setting also supports the idea of facility dogs bring a unique method for comforting individuals, allowing victims to give their best evidence (e.g. Dellinger, 2009; Sandoval, 2010). Despite these positives, as noted above, evidence so far has been gathered mainly through unpublished letters provided by victims, stories shared by those who have witnessed the benefits, and descriptions of single cases; there is therefore a real lack of objective research into this form of support.

That being said, the case for the use of dogs for those who are vulnerable is not a novel one. The benefits that the human-canine relationship can have on vulnerable people has been widely explored in a variety of settings, including children and adults with cognitive impairments (Damon and May 1986), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Shuck et al. 2013), autism (O'Haire 2013), depression and brain injuries (Stapleton 2016). There is thus a clear rationale behind utilizing dogs as a support service for vulnerable victims of crime, as the power of this support lies in the notion that dogs can provide companionship suitable for humans, studies showing among other things that dogs make people feel more comfortable (McNicholas and Collis 2006), increase their confidence (Damon and May 1986), enable people to focus better (Beck et al. 2012) and have a generally calming effect (Jalongo et al. 2004). In fact, dogs have been shown to surpass any other type of animal (including human) in their ability to provide unconditional support and companionship (Sanders 2003).

## The Current Study

With the call for more specialized support for survivors of sexual offences and the lack of empirical evidence relating to the use of specially trained dogs within the court context, the current study aims to understand the impact that specially trained dogs can have on survivors

of sexual offences. Currently, there is no evidence worldwide related to the impact of providing this service specifically to vulnerable or intimidated sexual crime survivors. Because of the sensitivity of the topic and the personal nature of the participants involved, in-depth case studies have been conducted, especially as criminal court research often relies on low participant numbers (e.g. Quas and Goodman 2012). This approach allows for exploration of a phenomenon within its natural context and is the ideal methodology when holistic, in-depth understanding is needed (Tellis 1997). It further allows for a variety of data sources to be utilised, enabling multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Yin, 2004). This multiple-case-study design can be understood within the context of an interpretivist approach (Schwandt 1994) and is guided by one core exploratory research question: What is the impact and practical implications of specially trained dogs on the experiences of sexual offence survivors in the English and Welsh court environment?

Through utilising this specific design, the study aims to fill in gaps presented in the literature review, as it aims to provide the first holistic and in-depth evaluation of this service. As such, it looks beyond one-off personal narratives and survivor state management by itself. It aims to enable professionals to understand the service overall and address (1) how the impact of a specially trained dog is perceived by survivors themselves; (2) what changes can be observed in survivor behaviour and state management through the introduction of this service; (3) how the service is perceived by those involved with a specific case, including supporting individuals and professionals; and (4) what positives and challenges are identified as relating to the service, in order to develop best practice guidelines. This allows for the discussion of findings to be placed into a practical service context of the CJS, as well as theoretical context of the human/canine relationship.

## Methods

### Design

A multiple-case-study design was employed, as this allows for the meaningful characteristics of real-life events to be captured in a holistic and applied context (Yin 1984). It is also suitable for answering the set research question, as one of the applications of the case study design is being able to provide a description of an intervention in its real-life context (Yin 1994). It is also a strategy widely used across social sciences, with many advocates suggesting the case study approach to be a rigorous method for qualitative inquiry, as it constitutes an all-encompassing methodology, which can include both qualitative and quantitative methods (Hartley 2004), along with the structured recordings of the researcher into what is happening whilst also examining its meaning (Stake 1995). The quantitative data collected in this study served to support the qualitative data, and so whilst this research could be perceived as mixed-method, its core lies within the overall framework of the case study (Creswell and Plano Clark 2011). This inquiry was designed as an exploratory, collective, multiple-case study (Stake 1978, 1995; Yin, 1993) in which a small number of individual cases are chosen and studied jointly in order to inquire into a general condition, phenomenon or population. Conclusions drawn from the data are thus through replication over multiple cases (Yin 1994), generating stronger reliability (Baxter and Jack 2008) and allowing for naturalistic generalisation (Stake 1995). Whilst the case study design is often criticised for its flexibility, robust procedures have been

developed by researchers over time which have been adopted in the current study by following Yin's (1984, 1994) guidelines.

## Data Collection

To gain an understanding of the impact that a specially trained dog can have in providing support to survivors ( $N=5$ ) during court proceedings, a triangulated data collection method was used to provide stronger substantiation of constructs, through varying epistemological approaches (Yin 1984). There are six sources of evidence that might be used in case studies: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations and physical artefacts (Yin 1994). For the current study, the core method of data collection included: interviews, structured direct observations and documentation, allowing for data source triangulation (Denzin 1984).

Data collected from interviews were used as a primary source of data, with other sources collected to collaborate information obtained during interviews (Yin, 2004). A semi-structured interview approach was implemented, as this is the most common interview strategy for case study research (Runeson and Host 2009). Furthermore, this approach provides systematic data collection for topics relating to the study, allows for comparisons to be drawn between interviews, and also flexibility to follow up interesting developments and probe information obtained from participants (Gubrium and Holstein 2002). Interviews were carried out with the vulnerable survivor participants. The interviews focused on topics relating to each participant's experience of being in the court environment for the purposes of giving evidence and the impact the specially trained dog had on this experience. These interviews took place while each participant interacted with the specially trained therapy dog, both before and after they provided evidence in court. Interviews ranged in length from 18 to 35 minutes ( $M=20.19$ ,  $SD=11.29$ ).

Unstructured interviews and observations were also carried out with individuals supporting the vulnerable survivor participants, including any persons present as a form of support during the court day (family member [ $n=13$ ], Witness Service volunteers [ $n=3$ ], Victim Support volunteer [ $n=1$ ], Independent Sexual Violence Advisor [ISVA;  $n=2$ ]). Topics for these interviews focused on the respondents' perceptions of the participant in relation to their current experiences and the impact they felt the specially trained dog had on the participant. Overall, semi-structured interview data were collected from five survivors and unstructured interview data were collected from 19 additional support individuals ( $n=4$  for Case 1,  $n=6$  for Case 2,  $n=3$  for Case 3,  $n=1$  for Case 4 and  $n=5$  for Case 5). Please see Table 1 for more information about who the support individuals were.

Observational data were collected throughout the court visit, and included physical observations pertaining to the participant's emotional state, interactions with the specially trained dog and any changes observed during these interactions or at any point during their court visit. To ensure reliability of the observations, two researchers gathered these data independently (Yin 1994). A structured observation checklist was created for the observations, and notes were also taken to further emphasis these observations. Observations were centred on A) participant behaviours B) participant/dog interactions C) dog behaviours. Only those observations that were recorded by both researchers were used in order to improve validity through the use of investigator triangulation (Denzin 1984; Stake 1995). These observations offered a means of triangulating the data gathered in the interviews and provided a richness to the topics discussed within the participant interviews (Creswell 2007; Denzin 1984). Observations took

**Table 1** Overview of each case, the participants involved, and how each participant is referred to in the results section (e.g., 'P2', 'P2a', etc.. Anyone without a 'P...' label was present but did not have data recorded from them)

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
<b>Case Offence</b>	Rape	Sexual assault	Sexual assault of a child under 13	Sexual assault	Sexual assault
<b>Witness type</b>	Assault Victim ('P1')	Domestic abuse Victim ('P2')	Victim ('P3')	Actual Bodily Harm Victim ('P4')	Victim ('P5')
<b>Age</b>	32	36	12	49	17
<b>Gender</b>	Female	Female	Female	Female	Female
<b>Special measures (by the court)</b>	Screen Pre-trial visit	—	Pre-trial visit Evidence given via a live video link	Screen	—
<b>Additional information</b>	Social anxiety	—	Under the age of 17	Intellectual impairment	—
<b>Additional support</b>	<p><b>Time 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's father ('P1a')</li> <li>• Victim's mother ('P1b')</li> <li>• Also a witness</li> </ul> <p><b>Time 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's mother ('P1b')</li> <li>• Also a witness</li> <li>• Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) ('P1c')</li> <li>• Witness Service volunteer ('P1d')</li> </ul>	<p><b>Time 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's three daughters</li> <li>• Aged 16 ('P2a'), 15 ('P2b'), and 13 ('P2c')</li> <li>• The eldest is also a witness ('P5')</li> </ul> <p><b>Time 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's three daughters (as above)</li> <li>• Victim's mother ('P2d')</li> <li>• Victim's sister ('P2e')</li> <li>• Witness Service volunteer ('P2f')</li> </ul>	<p><b>Time 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's mother ('P3a')</li> <li>• Also a witness</li> <li>• Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) ('P3b')</li> <li>• Victim Support Volunteer ('P3c')</li> </ul> <p><b>Time 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's mother ('P3a')</li> <li>• Also a witness</li> <li>• Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (ISVA) ('P3b')</li> <li>• Victim Support Volunteer ('P3c')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's adult son (age 31) ('P4a')</li> <li>• Also a witness</li> <li>• Victim's adult daughter</li> <li>• Witness Service volunteer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Victim's mother ('P5a')</li> <li>• Victim's sister ('P5b')</li> <li>• Victim's grandmother ('P5c')</li> <li>• Victim's aunt ('P5d')</li> <li>• Witness Service volunteer ('P5e')</li> </ul>

place during each time the therapy dog was supporting a survivor. For Cases 1, 2 and 3, support was provided twice. This was due to a pre-trial visit for Cases 1 and 3 and because of the need to appear in court on two occasions for Case 2. For Cases 4 and 5, only one set of observations took place, on the day of the trial. The time participants waited before providing evidence, on the day of the trial, ranged in length from 90 to 120 minutes ( $M = 100.17$ ,  $SD = 12.14$ ).

Documentation data were also collected for the purpose of the case study (Runeson and Host 2009). This data included public information available about each participant's court case, verbal and email correspondence between the participant and Witness Services in relation to the specially trained dog, and the six-item State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-6; Marteau and Bekker 1992). This measure is often used in research as an indicator of an individual's level of stress about a specific event. In this case, the participants were asked to complete the measure in relation to their distress about the court proceedings. This data were collected as corroborative evidence to enhance data credibility of the primary data sources (Patton 1990). The measure was administered to survivors on the day of the trial first *before* interacting with the therapy dog (Time 1) and then *after* interacting with the therapy dog for approximately 20 to 25 minutes (Time 2), both prior to giving evidence, to understand the impact of the dog on the survivor's state management.

## Survivor Participants

As the use of specially trained dogs are primarily utilised with vulnerable people (Spruin et al., 2019; Spruin and Mozova 2018), purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants. In this case, participants were chosen for a special situation based on judgement by an expert (Ishak and Bakar 2013). More specifically, Witness Services personnel suggested participants who were vulnerable (as set out in the Victim's Code, 2015). Witness Service staff were told about the service and were told that research on the canine/human relationship has shown improvement in state management through interactions with a canine. So, they suggested cases where a vulnerability was identified and where it was believed that a form of state management is beneficial for the survivor to give their evidence. The choice was not made based on the perceived possible impact of the therapy dog service itself; rather, the use of an innovative state management service. Further, the staff who identified cases (Witness Service managers) were not present for the trial date and so their preconceived ideas of the utility of the service did not influence the results. This method of sampling is one of the most commonly used sampling strategies for qualitative data and sample sizes are determined based on saturation achieved from the data themselves (Patton 1990). In total, five survivors of rape or sexual assault, who were giving evidence in court (or via live-link in a court building), were provided with a specially trained dog before and after they provided evidence.

All participants identified as white British females, with ages ranging from 12 to 49 ( $M = 30.6$ ,  $SD = 6.16$ ). As previously mentioned, all participants were survivors of a serious sexual crime, which included: sexual assault ( $n = 2$ ); rape ( $n = 2$ ) and sexual assault of a child under 13 ( $n = 1$ ). To provide greater generalizability of findings and ensure that participants consist of the complete grouping of vulnerable people (Zikmund 2000), the study included participants across all classifications of 'vulnerable' or 'intimidated' under the Victim's Code (2015).



Accordingly, due to the crimes in question, all survivors can be classed as ‘intimidates’, survivors of ‘serious crime’ and by extension survivors of ‘sexual offences’. In terms of further vulnerability, the study included one survivor with an intellectual impairment, one survivor suffering from an anxiety disorder and two survivors under the age of 18. This is consistent with Cooper and Schindler’s (1998) recommendation that samples be selected from a population that reflects the characteristics of the target population it represents, by doing so, results are geared to be sufficiently accurate in most cases (Zikmund 2000). The sample size was thus determined once the full breath of the target population was collected, Yin (2003) suggests that three or four literal replications of findings is suitable within case research. As such, once saturation was achieved across the selected cases, no further data were collected. The researchers are mindful that the demographic composition of the sample is homogenous in some respects (e.g. race, gender) though this was reflective of the court cases during the data collection period.

## Procedure

Following ethical approval, Witness Services identified and approached vulnerable survivors they identified as benefitting from being able to use a service enabling better state management (specifically, having a certified Pets As Therapy (PAT) dog support them at court). The dog used for this specific study was, on top of being PAT certified, trained from puppyhood, used in a range of previous settings (e.g. secure hospital, school), highly responsive to commands, and of a very calm nature. It was a small Jack Russel–Shih Tzu crossbreed and 7 years of age. If participants agreed to the service, they were provided with an information sheet, detailing the purpose and aim of the study, as well as a picture of the dog and the research team prior to engaging with the research team. Participants willing to engage in the research were presented with a consent form to sign once they met with the research team. Participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement, as well as anonymity and confidentiality of responses and their right to withdraw at any point and up to two months after the data collection. Participants were told that they will receive the service regardless of whether they decide to participate.

As noted in the data collection section, three survivors were observed twice, due to pre-trial visits (Cases 1 and 3) or because they had to attend court twice (Case 2). During the pre-trial visits, only observations and unstructured interviews took place. The main data collection occurred on the day of the trial (semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, observations, STAI-6). On the day each participant attended court, data were collected throughout the day to ensure sufficient collection of data. On arrival to court, after being informed about the study, and prior to being introduced to the therapy dog, participants were provided with the STAI-6 (Marteau and Bekker 1992). Once participants were settled in a separate area within the waiting room, the therapy dog was then presented to them and was available to them for the entire time that they waited to give evidence. As all participants were considered vulnerable survivors; they were separated from other witnesses, and the therapy dog was thus present within this room through the entirety of their court visit. While participants waited to provide evidence in court and interacted with the therapy dog, observational and qualitative data were collected from the participant and also those supporting the participant. After interacting with the therapy dog for approximately 20 minutes, participants were presented with the STAI-6 to understand the impact of the dog on their state management. Verbal consent was gained from all those supporting a survivor. After each participant had finished testifying, they were able to



interact with the therapy dog again and participants were interviewed about their overall experiences. Once the interview was complete, each participant was debriefed verbally and in writing, and thanked for their time. At this time, the research team and the therapy dog left the courthouse, after allowing the survivors the opportunity to say their goodbyes.

## Results

### Data Analysis

In order to conduct a rigorous case study, it is important that a suitable analytical strategy is chosen and followed (Yin 1994). The steps suggested by Leedy and Ormrod (2001), and outlined by Creswell (1998) and Stake (1995), were used to analyse all data collected, as they are in line with a multiple-case-study design and the current research question. These steps were broken down into three distinct phases. Firstly, facts pertaining to each case were organised to provide a descriptive overview (see Table 1); a case refers to a single case study and comprises the survivor for whom the therapy dog was requested and any additional support individuals who accompanied them. Secondly, within-case analysis was carried out to provide an overview of the observed behaviours and measures of anxiety recorded for each case, before, during, and after interacting with the therapy dog. These data comprised the observational data (see Figs. 1 and 2) and the STAI-6 scores (see Fig. 3). Thirdly, across-case analysis was generated to identify patterns that occurred across all cases. The main source of data for the across-case analyses were the interviews with the survivors and their support, but this analysis relied on data from all data sources.

### Within-Case Analysis

Two observers independently noted the behaviours exhibited by the survivors and their family in each case, self-reported anxiety levels were also collected for each survivor, both before the

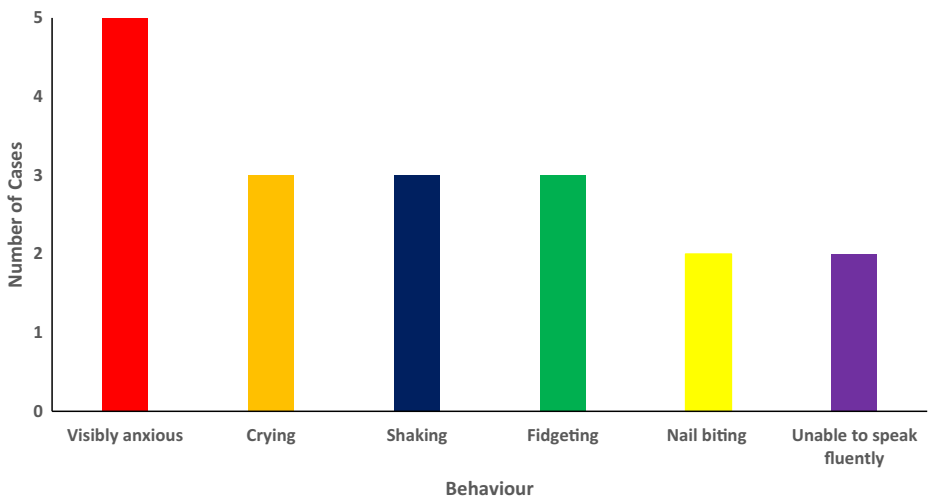
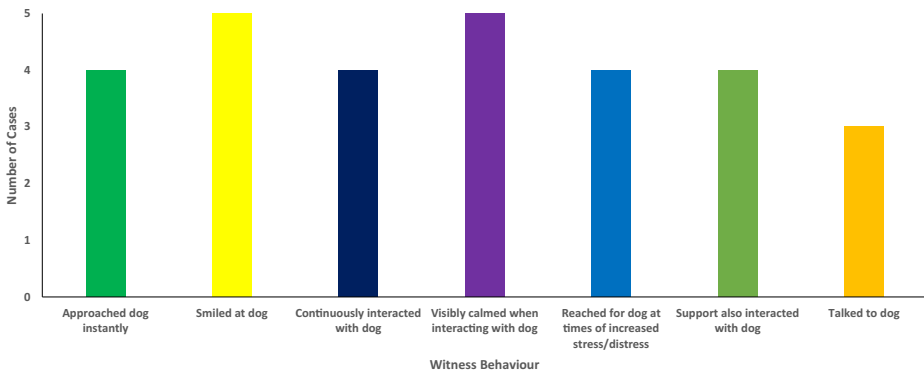


Fig. 1 Observed behaviours exhibited by the witness before the dog arrived

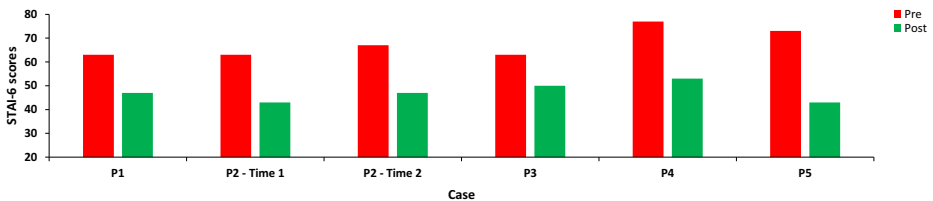


**Fig. 2** Observed behaviours exhibited by witnesses whilst the dog was present

dog arrived and during the dog's presence. A summary of each case and the observed and self-reported anxiety levels before, during, and after interacting with the therapy dog can be found in the Figs. 1, 2 and 3, below. For the observational data, only behaviours which were noted by both observers, independently, have been included in the analyses.

**Case 1** The first case involved a 32-year-old woman ('P1') who had been raped and assaulted by her (then) boyfriend. Since the attack, which had occurred 2 years earlier, she had developed social anxiety and rarely left the house. Before the attack, she had worked in a rescue shelter and was studying for her degree.

P1 met the therapy dog on two occasions. The first time was before the court date (Time 1), at the researchers' workplace, and the second occasion was at the courthouse 1 month later on the day P1 gave evidence (Time 2). P1's father ('P1a') said that meeting the dog was 'the only thing which had gotten [P1] out of the house', and although her mother ('P1b') explained that P1 did not normally talk to anyone anymore, the presence of the therapy dog in the courthouse seemed to encourage P1 to talk. This reflected in P1 talking toward the dog, but also to the handlers, to whom she became very talkative on the topic of dogs. Outside of the topic of dogs, however, P1 was very quiet and spent most of the time in the courthouse either crying or on the verge of tears, visibly upset. In times of particular distress, both P1 and her mother, P1b, reached for the dog, and although always tense and upset, P1 visibly relaxed when in close proximity to the dog and was observed to be continuously looking at and/or stroking the dog at both Time 1 and Time 2. As can be seen from Fig. 3, P1's anxiety levels on the day of the trial



**Fig. 3** Participants' STAI-6 scores before meeting the therapy dog (pre-) and after spending time with the therapy dog (post-). The range of possible scores was 20–80 (Marteau and Bekker 1992), with higher scores indicating higher levels of anxiety. Using Sternberg et al.'s (1983) original STAI guidelines, Bekker et al. (2003, p. 260) suggest that scores of 35 and 48 indicate a normal level of anxiety for non-psychiatric and psychiatric populations, respectively, but that in stressful situations a normal score for non-psychiatric populations can be expected to fall between 50 and 61

were above what is considered the norm for non-psychiatric populations in stressful situations; however, once P1 began interacting with the therapy dog, her score dropped to the higher end of what is considered to be the norm for a stressful situation (Bekker et al., 2003).

**Case 2** The survivor ('P2') in Case 2 was a 36-year-old woman who had been a survivor of sexual assault and domestic abuse. P2 was at court to give evidence against her former partner who had violated his restraining order and attacked her. The survivor was attending court with her three teenage daughters and had been particularly keen on the dog's presence to try and help her daughters cope with the day, although on multiple occasions she herself also reached for the dog at times of increased stress/distress (e.g., after reading her witness statement).

The data from P2 were also collected on two separate occasions. The first occasion was at the courthouse on the first day she gave evidence (Time 1). However, because a key piece of evidence went missing, the trial was postponed for 3 months. The next occasion (Time 2) therefore occurred at the courthouse 3 months later when she and her eldest daughter were next called in to give evidence. On both occasions, P2 was visibly anxious, biting her nails, fidgeting, shaking, unable to settle down and unable to speak fluently. As can be seen from Fig. 3, P2's anxiety levels were above what is considered the norm for non-psychiatric populations in stressful situations (Bekker et al., 2003), particularly at Time 2. When the therapy dog arrived at Time 1, however, P2 approached her instantly, and both her anxiety and that of her family visibly decreased when interacting with the dog. P2 wiped her tears away to smile at the dog, and within minutes of stroking her, the fluency of her speech improved and she stopped fidgeting. At both Time 1 and Time 2, the whole family interacted with the dog continuously, and whenever P2 became particularly distressed (e.g., when she had to review her statement), she reached for the dog. This visibly calmed both her speech and her breathing.

After interacting with the therapy dog, P2's anxiety scores dropped to below the norms for a stressful situation (Bekker et al., 2003). Behaviourally, this lowered anxiety remained even at the end of Time 1 when P2 had just been informed that the case was being delayed due to missing evidence and had been visibly upset by this news: 'we were looking forward to going away and putting this behind us...I feel sorry for my girls, they do not deserve this.' In-fact, P2 and her children enjoyed the dog's company so much that when they were free to leave, they all chose to stay at the courthouse for an extra 15 minutes to interact with the dog.

**Case 3** The witness in Case 3 was a 12-year-old girl ('P3') who had been raped. P3 met the therapy dog on two occasions. The first time was during her pre-trial visit to the courthouse where she was given a tour of the courtroom and the live video link room (Time 1). The second occasion was at the courthouse, approximately 6 weeks later, on the day P1 was due to give evidence via the live link room situated in the courthouse (Time 2). On both occasions, when the therapy dog arrived, P3 approached her instantly and although she was visibly very tense at the courthouse, she notably relaxed as soon as she started to stroke the dog. P3 smiled instantly each time she saw the dog, which was particularly notable because the only times she did smile in the courthouse was when she was looking at the dog.

When she was walking around the courthouse during her pre-trial visit, P3 always turned to look at the therapy dog and would not enter any rooms until the dog went in first. When she was not walking, P3 always engaged with the dog and each time something particularly stressful occurred (e.g., being shown the view of the courtroom on the camera in the live video link room) or someone asked her a direct question, P3 always reached for the dog and only engaged with the people in the room if she was stroking the dog. Her

mother (P3a) also reached for the dog whenever she became upset herself. During Time 2, while P3 was waiting to give evidence, at times she appeared visibly anxious, to combat these emotions, her mum suggested she lay on the floor with the therapy dog and engaged with the dog until the lawyers came to advise that the defendant had pled guilty and there was no need for her to testify. Upon hearing of this news, P3 asked if she was able to stay a bit longer with the dog. On the day that P3 was due to give evidence, her anxiety scores were slightly above the normal range for a non-psychiatric population, once P3 began interacting with the therapy dog, her score dropped within what is considered to be the norm for a stressful situation (Bekker et al., 2003).

**Case 4** Case 4 was a 49-year-old female ('P4') with intellectual impairments, who was the survivor of sexual assault by her neighbour. The data were collected in the courthouse on the day she gave evidence. It was the second time P4 had been to court to give evidence for the case. The first time she had a panic attack and the trial had to be rescheduled; as a result, the therapy dog had been requested for her second attempt to see if the dog's presence could help.

Before the dog arrived, P4 had complained of feeling hot and wobbly and had been visibly distraught, shaking uncontrollably and exhibiting disorientated speech. As can be seen from Fig. 3, her anxiety score was almost at maximum, but after interacting with the therapy dog, her score dropped to the lower end of what is considered to be the norm for a stressful situation (Bekker et al., 2003). Although P4 was distraught, crying and shaking, when the dog arrived she smiled instantly. Within a few minutes of stroking the therapy dog, both her hands and her voice had stopped shaking. When P4's barrister arrived to explain the process of giving evidence, her anxiety increased visibly and she began shaking and crying again. The dog went to sit next to her and P4 started smiling, visibly relaxing, and her shaking reduced dramatically as she stroked her.

When it was time to give evidence, P4's anxiety increased and she became physically very tense and started shaking again, her voice becoming wobbly. The researchers offered to walk her to the door of the courtroom with the therapy dog, an offer which she accepted. When she left to give evidence she requested that the dog would be waiting when she returned. The dog was and although P4 returned from the courtroom crying, after a few minutes of stroking the dog she calmed down once more.

**Case 5** The witness in Case 5 was a 17-year-old girl ('P5') who was a survivor of sexual assault and was in court to give evidence against her attacker, who was an acquaintance of hers. Data were collected on the day P5 was giving evidence in court. As can be seen from Fig. 3, of all the participants in the case studies P5 showed the largest drop in her STAI-6 scores (a drop of 30), going from nearly the maximum score before seeing the dog to below the normal range for a stressful situation (Bekker et al., 2003) after interacting with the dog. Before the dog arrived, P5 was notably anxious, fidgeting and unable to settle down, but the demeanour of her and her younger sister instantly changed when they saw the dog and P5's anxiety visibly decreased as she interacted with the dog. She and her sister had brought treats along in anticipation of seeing the dog and were excited to interact with her. While waiting to be called to court, P5 spent the majority of her time on the floor of the waiting room playing with the dog and feeding her treats. Even during times of particular stress/distress (e.g., when reading her witness statement) she would reach for the dog and cuddle her. The dog eventually fell asleep on P5's lap and she and her family smiled whenever they looked at her.

## Across-Case Analyses

The interview data collected from the survivors and those present to support them (see Table 1 for a full list in each case), were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). To ensure validity across interpreted themes (Hosmer, 2008), each interview was blindly analysed by an independent reviewer who was not involved in the data design or data collection, and any themes which occurred repeatedly within an interview were identified. The coding of themes was therefore carried without knowledge of the expectations or hypotheses of the project (Silverman, 2013), ensuring a strong process of analytical credibility and reliability was sustained across the interpretation of the data (Gibbs, 2002). Themes were generated using an inductive ('bottom-up') approach (Frith & Gleeson, 2004), which involved identifying themes that are strongly linked to the data (Patton 1990). This particular method was implemented as our aim was to understand the impact that specially trained dogs can have on vulnerable survivors, rather than focusing on specific research questions or theoretical underpinning. Subsequent to the themes being identified, they were then grouped together by case and finally all the cases were compared for similar themes. Only the themes present in all cases were discussed within the results.

Two master themes were identified throughout the data. First, there were five main themes identified in relation to the impact of therapy dogs on survivors, each of which occurred across all five cases and included (1) the impact of the court context, (2) emotional impact of the dog on survivors, (3) physical impact of the dog on survivors, (4) change in anchoring due to the presence of the dog, and (5) the uniqueness of a dog as a companion. Aside from the main themes identified above, another important aspect that arose across all cases can be seen in the second master theme: logistical challenges associated with the use of dogs in a courthouse. Two themes in relation to logistical issues were identified: (1) well-being of the dog and (2) the importance of the training of the dog/handler team. Each of the themes will now be discussed in order.

**Impact of the Court Context** This theme arose as a response to the environment itself and provides background on the feelings and expectations that both survivors and support persons had as the survivors were waiting to give evidence. As such, this theme provides context to the impact of the service itself. All of the survivors and/or their families expressed how much they disliked the thought of the survivor having to give evidence and the situation that they were in. As P1's mother (also a witness) explained: *'I'm really worried about [P1]. It's hard for everyone. I do not want to be in this situation, I do not want to be doing this, but this is really about [P1]. Her whole life is being affected by this'* (P1b). P3's mother (also a witness) stated something very similar about her own daughter: *'I just never expected to be in a situation like this...not in a million years. I'm very upset. For me, for her [P3]. It's horrible'* (P3a). For some, it was the stress of the courthouse itself: *'I just want to get this over with. Never been to court'* (P4).

P5's grandmother, although not a witness herself, was visibly anxious about being at the courthouse and started crying when the barrister came to talk to her grandchildren:

*'I just want this to be over with for them. I have never been to court and it's not a place for kids'* (P5c).

For others, the main source of stress was the thought of giving evidence, *'...this is stressful for me too. I will be giving evidence on another day. I cannot even begin to imagine what it's like for my daughter'* (P1b). And in some cases it was the idea of seeing the defendant which produced the greatest level of anxiety:

P3a: I'm terrified of the trial. It's really intimidating. I'm really worried about seeing [the defendant] and [the defendant]'s family. And I don't want my daughter to go through that.

P1a: What if she sees the defendant by accident? What if they will be in the same place? What will we do?

As already indicated by P1's mother above, some of the cases said they did not want to go through with the trial at all: *'I'll do it because I have to but I do not want to, I do not want to talk about any of this anymore, but I know I have to...I do not want to...'* (P3). And in all cases they said that they wished it could all just be over: *'I just want it to be over. I wanna go back to school because this was so much'* (P4). This was a sentiment which P2 in particular repeated throughout her interviews:

P2: I am a bit anxious. But more concerned with my daughters and the effect this is having on them... We just want this to be over with.

P2: We just want this to be over. It is really impacting on our lives, especially the girls [her three daughters]. I am glad that we could be offered a therapy dog though, for the girls. They were very anxious about coming.

P2's assertion that she was pleased to be offered a dog was common amongst all the cases. Even P1's barrister commented on the difference when she visited her in the waiting room: *'Wow, it's so much nicer in this room, isn't it? Not just your gloomy courtroom'* (P1e). The context in which survivors were in was overwhelmingly negative and unpleasant, impacting on their behaviour and feelings, supporting the need for an intervention which aids state management. As noted here already, the impact of the dog was felt as mitigating some of the negative feelings, and this will be discussed in the next theme, below.

**Emotional Impact of Dog on Survivors** A recurring theme throughout all the interviews was how much the presence of the therapy dog impacted on the participants' emotional state. By far the strongest and most occurring theme, it was echoed through survivor and support responses. This impact related to feelings of happiness, calmness, but also a wider impact of these on court proceedings, as the presence of the dog improved survivors' confidence and the presence was even attributed to some being able to go through with the whole process. Even P1's mother, who had initially been sceptical about whether the dog's presence would make much difference, enthused about the positive effect the dog had once she saw her daughter interacting with her:

I wasn't fully sure about this. Sure, I like dogs, but I wasn't sure how exactly it will help and how it would work, but I see that's really just so simple. The dog is just here. You can see that she's making [P1] happy (P1b).

And afterwards, P1's ISVA said:

Thank you so much for bringing [the therapy dog] to the court on Tuesday. It made a real difference to [P1] and her mother [...]. I'm sure she wouldn't have been as confident as she was without [the therapy dog]'s support. It undoubtedly calmed her... (P1c).

The dog's presence increasing the survivor's confidence when giving evidence was also something which was noted by the support in other cases as well. For instance, P2's Witness Service volunteer said afterwards:

That really helped to distract [P2] and her girls. They looked so much more confident and relaxed. It's amazing, she [P2] was even smiling and her girls looked so much less stressed. She [the therapy dog] did an amazing job at comforting them all.

In fact, P1 and P4's support said they were not sure whether P1/4 would have been able to go through with giving evidence had the dog not been there. P4's case had already been rescheduled once because P4 had a panic attack. The dog had not been present the first time she'd tried to give evidence and had been specially requested for her second attempt to try and prevent the same thing from happening again. Luckily the second time she was able to give evidence and her son commented: *'[The therapy dog] clearly helped my mum, made her feel less anxious. She did not even get this far last time (P4a).'* And P1's father, when they went to meet the dog at the handler's workplace at Time 1, said:

[P1] is extremely worried about meeting new people, being in a new place, since this happened. It's been a year and a half, a little more, since we found out about everything, and she hasn't been outside, really. She doesn't talk to anyone. Her coming here to meet [the therapy dog] is more interaction than she's had in such a long time [...]. This is the only thing that got her out the house, she really needed that (P1a).

Interestingly, despite how unhappy she was about having to go to court to give evidence, P1 used the dog as a way of framing it in a positive light, i.e. as an opportunity to see the dog again, saying: *'Thank you for coming here. I cannot wait to see [the therapy dog] again' (P1).* This is also something which was echoed by P3 after her pre-trial visit: *'I am happy to come back just to see her [the therapy dog] again' (P3).* Similar comments were made by P2's mother when they returned to court after their trial was delayed because of missing evidence:

*I think the little dog is helping the children, what a great idea! They were talking about [the therapy dog] all the way here. I am glad they have something positive to look forward to, especially in these circumstances (P2d).*

And then, later:

My [P2b] granddaughter asked me this morning, '[The therapy dog] is going to be there, right?' I think when a child has to go to court, and the only thing she asks you is if [the therapy dog] is going to be there, you know it's a really good service, ya know? (P2d).

Similar comments were also echoed by P5's grandmother, who also said that the dog had been something her 17-year-old granddaughter had been looking forward to: *'She did not want to attend court, but once we told her about [the therapy dog], it was almost like she was excited' (P5c).* These emotional changes were perceived as key in managing survivors' well-being, which was also noted to aid those supporting the survivors. Beyond such internal impact, these changes are strongly related to physical changes observed in participants, as discussed within the next theme.

**Physical Impact of Dog on Survivors** A recurring theme in the interviews with the support in each case was that they noticed a physical change in the survivors when the dog was present. The changes ranged widely but are related to common observable changes relating to state management, such as increased smiling, and decreased tension in body language, shaking or crying. Importantly, these changes often occurred through the simplicity of seeing the therapy dog and were then improved through physical contact. P5's aunt, when asked what she thought



of the therapy dog, said: *'I think it's great. The girls were really nervous this morning, but the minute [the therapy dog] walked in, they just sat on the floor [with the dog], and you can just see visibly the nerves being lifted'* (P5d). P3's mother, too, when discussing her own daughter, said:

This is the worst thing to go through with your child. I am also a witness here and I really think it helped us both. It helped [P3]. She was so much more relaxed as soon as she started playing with [the therapy dog]. You should have seen her before we came in. She looked so different when she was with [the therapy dog] (P3a).

The change in how participants were holding themselves was something which both observers also noted when the dog was interacting with the survivors. In each case they noted that the survivor's shoulders dropped and they looked visibly lighter and calmer than before the dog arrived. It was something that P2 noticed in herself and her daughters:

I think it's great. I mean, you saw my daughters. And me for that matter. Our immediate physical response. It's like we see her and kind of go [sighs] and relax. Even the act of engaging with [the therapy dog], smiling to ourselves and being distracted by [the therapy dog] (P2).

As well as a relaxation in their shoulders and how they were holding themselves, this reference to the dog making people smile was something which reoccurred both in the interviews with the support and also in the observations made during each case study. Both observers noted that all the witnesses smiled when they first saw the dog (see Fig. 2). Smiling was another physical reaction to the dog which the survivors support frequently brought up, both in their interviews and also as a way of making conversation in the courthouse. For instance, P1's mother made multiple comments to her daughter as she watched her interact with the dog such as (at Time 1): *'Look at you smiling! I'm so glad to see you smiling'* (P1b). And (at Time 2): *'I cannot believe how much you are talking and laughing whilst being here!'* (P1b). In her interview, later she said: *'this is the first time she's actually laughed in two years. I cannot believe it'* (P1b). And P1's Witness Service volunteer, in an email to the researchers afterwards, said: *'[The therapy dog] made [P1] smile. She had not done that in so long and it was lovely to see. [The therapy dog] and you ladies should be very proud of what you do'* (P1d). P2 also commented that up until they had seen the therapy dog, it had been a long time since she'd seen her daughters smile:

[The therapy dog] is very helpful, especially for my daughters. It's nice to see them smile during this. I haven't seen them smile like that in ages, it's almost a relief for me. I don't need to worry quite so much about how they're doing. I can concentrate on what I need to do for me and my daughters (P2).

Later on she explained that:

[The dog] has a positive effect on people because...whatever worries they have about going to court, and what kind of traumatic things they have to talk about and relive, I think it takes away from that, distracts them, gives them a break. And that's really important (P2).

The combination of self-reported emotional changes, along with the observable physical changes, add strength to the positive impact of the therapy dog. This suggestion that the dog helped people to feel better by taking their mind off of what was happening was also frequently

alluded to in the interviews for each case study and is discussed in more detail in the next theme.

**Change in Anchoring Due to Presence of the Dog** In addition to being referred to as a source of comfort and being observed as having a calming effect on the survivors, the dog was often referred to by both the survivors and their support as a welcome distraction, changing their cognitive processes from anchoring on the negatives of their experience to anchoring on the positives the service of the dog could provide. For instance, when asked how she was finding interacting with the dog, P4 said: *'It's a good distraction. It's like she knows.'* Similarly, at Time 1, when asked if they had any comments about the service P2 said: *'The service is fantastic, really great for my kids especially. I am so thankful you brought [the therapy dog]. It's made things better.'* Similar comments were echoed by P2's 13-year-old daughter, *'It's a good distraction' (P2c)*. And at Time 2, when asked how she was finding interacting with the therapy dog, P2 said: *'It's a good distraction, it's like [the therapy dog] knows. I think it's a fantastic idea, especially for the children.'* It is worth noting that although P2 put a lot of emphasis on the benefit of the dog for her children, she too reached for the dog during times of increased upset and anxiety. At Time 1, before she was called in to court, she was visibly upset, and when the dog went to sit next to her, she stroked and cuddled the dog until she was called in to court. In fact, she spent so much time stroking the dog that the dog became so relaxed that she fell asleep next to her whilst being stroked. Her children nonetheless also clearly benefitted from the dog's presence, and when explaining how she felt about her interactions with the dog, P2's 15-year-old daughter gave a similar explanation as her mother: *'It's a great distraction from everything. Kinda like...makes me forget...for a minute (P2b).'*

P2's children were not the only children who found the dog a welcome distraction. P3, the 12-year-old child survivor from Case 3, explained that *'... when I stroke her I do not have to think about where I am. It's like, not as bad...because it's really scary' (P3)*. P3's mother suggested that it wasn't just during their time in court that the dog was helpful, but also afterwards in taking her daughter's mind off of everything.

I'm so thankful to you for bringing her here and coming. I can see it...I can see how she is with [the therapy dog]. I can tell you she will talk about [the therapy dog] for the rest of the day, I can tell you that (P3a).

Although all the survivors and their support were very positive about the impact the therapy dog had in each case, the presence of a dog as a potentially negative distraction did come up in discussion of dogs with the usher who had given P3 a tour of the courtroom on her pre-trial visit, which was due to the usher's worries about the training and temperament of the dog:

'I've never seen something like this in court, but what a great idea! I think it's brilliant but, you know, you have to be careful because this is all so sensitive around here, you need to make sure that the dog is so calm and so good...because it is so easy to get distracted. But not like good distracted. And that doesn't work well in this environment. (P3d)'

The possibility of a dog's presence serving as a potential unwanted distraction is discussed in more detail later. Through this theme, however, it was discovered that both survivors and those around them were able to anchor their thoughts surrounding their environment onto the positives of being able to interact with the therapy dog, whilst also being able to be calmer, enabling them to better participate in the justice proceedings. The impact of the dog as relating

to emotional and physical changes, as well as shift in anchoring, was attributed to the presence of the dog as unique, as is discussed in the following theme.

**The Uniqueness of a Dog as a Companion** There are support mechanisms available to individuals going to court, through services provided by organisations such as Witness Service. What makes this service unique seems to further relate to the ability to touch the dog, which seemed to be a source of comfort for the survivors and their families. It was frequently observed as being almost an unconscious instinct, reaching for the dog whenever they experienced increased levels of stress/distress. When asked how she found interacting with the therapy dog, P3 explained that:

It's really nice. My dog helps me when I'm stressed, and this is that kind of feeling. Like, it's the same when I'm playing with my dog. Dogs just know you and they know when you're stressed and when you want to be with them, and [the therapy dog] was with me a lot (P3).

Her ISVA also said:

It really is amazing, you know, for [P3]. The touch is so important, and it can be difficult, especially in these kind of trials. The touch doesn't come easy for a victim, really, but a dog is different [...]. It was really good because [the therapy dog] was here from when [P3] entered and when they walked out together. It's like they went through it together (P3b).

For witnesses who have experienced a trauma which makes it difficult for them to feel comforted by another person's touch, being able to touch the dog and draw comfort from them may be particularly useful. P1, who was also a rape survivor and someone whom her parents said had not really been willing to interact with anyone since the attack, had also referred to enjoying the comfort of the dog's touch: *'It's a good thing you have no idea what's happening. You just like all the cuddles and I like giving you cuddles'* (P1).

Multiple cases talked about the dog's presence having a relaxing effect. P4's son noted that his mother appeared much more relaxed when she was with the dog, and P5's grandmother, when asked what she thought about the therapy dog, said: *'She just looks so much more relaxed, and that's what you want going to court, I guess'* (P5a). P5's aunt agreed: *'I think that's a fantastic idea...court is just so daunting, it's not a place anyone wants to be. What a great way to just bring something different and relaxing to a place that people dread'* (P5d).

P3's ISVA made a similar comment about P3:

[The] dog was great, she was there when she was needed, and I can see how much it relaxed [P3]. It actually relaxed me, too. It really was amazing. I think it made coming to court easier for everyone here (P3b).

In all cases, the survivors and their support stated that the dog had a noticeable effect on them and provided support which other official support mechanisms cannot – being able to touch, look at, and interact with a calm living creature not involved in their case, going as far as enabling individuals to increase their confidence to actually give evidence. Despite the positives of utilising such service to support survivors in the courthouse, the following sections highlight the importance of thorough consideration of how it is administered.

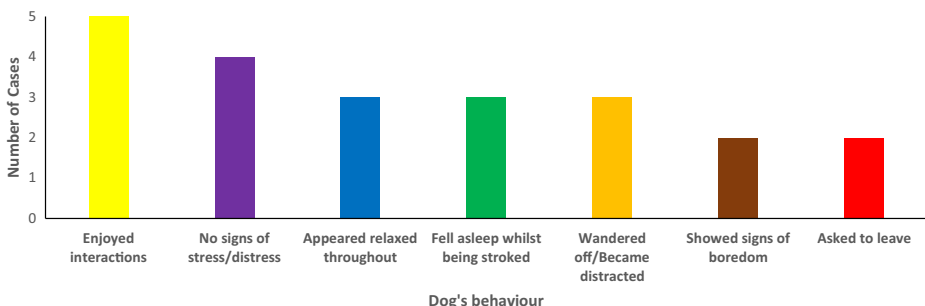
**Well-Being of the Dog** An important aspect of the case studies was to observe the effect of the work on the dog herself. Both observers were familiar with the signs of distress in dogs; in particular, one observer was a canine behaviourist and the other observer was independently trained in observing the signs of stress. Both observers also had experience working with dogs in previous research. Both observers were therefore attuned to the dog's natural body language and behaviour and could quickly detect when the dog was unsettled or distressed. The well-being of the dog was an important consideration for the research team, and the dog was given regular breaks and walks (at least once every 2 hours).

As can be seen from Fig. 4, the dog enjoyed interacting with all five survivors and their support. In three of the cases, she was relaxed throughout her entire time with them, showing no signs of boredom or distress during her time at work. In fact, on three occasions, the dog was so relaxed that she fell asleep on the witnesses' laps. That said, some of the days in court were long, and in three of the cases there were occasions when the dog wandered off, became distracted, or showed signs of wanting to leave. In two of the cases, the therapy dog also showed signs of boredom towards the end of her working day.

On the occasions the dog showed signs of boredom (in Case 1 and Case 3), she was nonetheless still always receptive to re-engaging with the survivors when they wanted to. P3 did refer to the dog becoming distracted, saying it did not upset her but she would have preferred that the dog had been there just for her rather than wandering off so much. Towards the end of the time in court together, it was clear that the dog was becoming bored and kept walking to the door. P3 was still able to engage with her and enjoyed doing so, but by that stage of the day, the dog had started to engage more with the handler. The survivor and her support said they did not mind. The survivor's mother in fact said she thought the dog behaved 'brilliantly' and said it had been a long day, so she was not surprised the dog became a little bored at the end. Despite this, the dog showing obvious signs of boredom and wanting to leave is not ideal for the dog or the survivors, and P3's ISVA reflected:

It's been great today. Maybe we need to work out a shorter time of breaks or something for the therapy dog. But I think it would be useful for others, too. Just to break it apart a little. But that's such a small thing. It all worked great. It was really good because the therapy dog was here from when [P3] entered and they walked out together. It's like they went through it together (P3c).

Thus, although P3 and her support were pleased the dog was present, it was clear that the day ideally needed to be shorter for the dog.



**Fig. 4** The behaviours observed in the dog during her interaction with each of their victims and their support

The only other case where the dog showed signs of boredom and asked to leave was during Case 1. At both Time 1 and Time 2 the dog wandered off and became distracted. However, when P1 was present, the dog was always receptive to being stroked whenever she wanted to stroke her. Nevertheless, there were two occasions when the survivor was not present and the dog asked to leave. In particular, at Time 2, P1 was inside the courtroom giving evidence and the dog became unsettled, showing signs of distress. Permission was given for a break and after a 10-minute break, the dog happily re-entered the courthouse and was back before P1 returned from giving evidence. Later on that day, P1 was called back in again to give evidence. By this point it became clear that the dog needed to leave and had reached her limit for the day. There were multiple occasions throughout the cases when the dog started wandering and did not continuously remain by the survivor. However, these were seen as normal behaviours by all involved and were only short instances.

**Importance of Training of the Dog/Handler Team** Something which became clear during the cases was the importance of both the dog and the handler having adequate training. The importance of handler training was highlighted in multiple cases when various family support asked the handlers inappropriate questions. For instance, in Case 1, the survivor's mother asked, *'what if she sees the defendant by accident? What if they will be in the same place? What will we do?'* (P1b); similarly, the survivor's father further asked, *'What if the jury do not believe her because she's crying?'* (P1a).

The handlers therefore had to repeatedly remind family support members about the handlers' role in the setting (i.e. that they were not able to advise on anything to do with the court case and could only discuss the dog). Being asked questions is not necessarily a problem as long as the handlers have the training to know how to answer (or, more accurately, *not* answer) such questions. Something which was noted by P3's Victim Support volunteer in their interview, when asked if they had any comments on the service they said:

It's amazing. I really like it. I think we should look into this more. If it's done professionally I think it can be great. [The handlers] with the therapy dog were great but we need to be careful because we don't want to cause more stress to anyone. It's great that [the handlers] only talked about the dog and always said they can't answer any other questions, even though they were asked pretty often. It was definitely useful today (P3c).

The need for a dog who had received specialist training appropriate for a court setting was also apparent in some of the cases. As already mentioned in the previous sub-section, the therapy dog became bored and asked to leave during two of the case studies (see Fig. 4). She also wandered off/became distracted in three of the case studies (see Fig. 4). For instance, in Case 3, during the tour of the courthouse itself, the dog went in to places she should not have (e.g., under benches). Although it broke the tension in the room and made everyone smile, this was not ideal and highlights the difference between using a therapy dog rather than a justice facility dog; the latter of which is extensively trained not to go exploring when s/he is working. A similar scenario occurred when the therapy dog smelled someone's food – her concentration related to finding the source of the smell. Case 3 also highlighted the usefulness of being able to have a dog which does not need to be permanently attached to the handler.

Whilst therapy dogs are not allowed off of the lead when they are working and need to be attached (via their lead) at all times to their handler, justice facility dogs are specially trained so that this is not necessary. For example, when P3 was taking a tour of the courthouse, she

repeatedly turned to look at the dog, particularly during times of stress (e.g., if other people were asking her a direct question or when viewing rooms which increased her anxiety). On occasions like this, when it is clear that a survivor would benefit from holding the lead of the dog directly, a therapy dog is unable to do this. With a justice facility dog, however, the extensive training they receive means that they would be able to walk with the survivor. Justice facility dogs are further trained to work for longer periods of time (with appropriate breaks) and are trained to enjoy spending time with individuals for prolonged periods of time, something therapy dogs do not do (and should not be expected to do). Keeping in mind that the dog used for this study had been specifically trained for a forensic setting from puppyhood and is of a very calm temperament, something that other PAT dogs are not, it is important to thoroughly consider how dogs are introduced into the justice system in England and Wales.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of survivors of sexual offences relating to the court process in England and Wales and the introduction of a service of a specially trained dog to as a form of support. Five case studies were conducted, including data from a variety of sources and gained through multiple data collection techniques. This was done in order to gain a thorough, holistic understanding of this specific phenomenon. All survivors had the therapy dog with them in the waiting room whilst they were waiting to give evidence in their trial, with the service being available during breaks and after the trial. Both the STAI-6 scores and the behavioural observations demonstrated that the survivors were calmer and less anxious when the dog was present compared to when she was not. Survivors and their family support were observed as reaching for the dog during times of increased anxiety and distress and all the survivors and their support said they were glad the dog had been there to help them cope. Interviews with the survivor and their support revealed five recurring themes, surrounding the impact of the court context on survivors; the emotional impact, as well as the physical impact, of the dog on survivors; a change in anchoring due to the presence of the dog; and the uniqueness of a dog as a form of support. Logistical issues were also discussed by participants, mainly pertaining to the well-being of the dog; and the importance of training of the dog/handler team.

Overall, the current study found positive evidence to suggest that specially trained dogs can have a calming and beneficial impact on vulnerable people in the CJS, provided that further research is conducted, appropriate protocols are upheld and the service is controlled. The findings in this study add to a long list of contexts where dogs have provided invaluable support. This includes settings more traditional to canine intervention, such as schools or nursing homes (Barker, et al., 2016; Majic, Guuzmann, Heinz, Lang & Rapp, 2013; Zimmer, 2014). However, due to the specific context of the court environment, better understanding the implications of using canines as a form of support is needed. Witnesses who have to give evidence in court, either in the witness box, behind a curtain, or through a live-link, are under unique pressure, due to having to relive their experiences (Goodman, et al., 1991) and being in an environment which is embedded in legal protocols and high-intensity pressures (Cooper and Norton 2017).

Despite initiatives across England and Wales being in place in order to support individuals in this context, what has been continuously missing is an initiative which can provide unconditional support, which people can interact with on a personal level and which can be



administered in a controlled manner, whilst appreciating the unique circumstances of every person (Fairclough 2017; Callanan et al., 2012; Spruin et al., 2019). Survivors whose experiences were analysed in this study were all vulnerable. Findings which relate to these survivors feeling more comfortable in the environment and generally re-anchoring their thoughts in a positive light, as opposed to only focusing on the negatives of going through the legal process, are important for the future of how the system supports those who need it the most. The presence of the therapy dog seemed to mitigate the negative connotations surrounding the court process (e.g. Plotnikoff and Woolfson 2009) and even serve as form of therapy for some individuals. This means that there is potential that secondary victimisation (Ewin 2015), through the process of giving evidence under stressful conditions, can be minimised or even avoided which impact on clarity of evidence and future engagement with the justice process.

It seemed that it was the uniqueness of having a dog provide support, rather than a person, which impacted on them emotionally, as well as physically, as survivors could interact with her on a personal level (e.g. touching, cuddling). An interaction that they were at times not comfortable to do with others or were not allowed to do with individuals in an official support position. Dogs are in a special position, in terms of supporting humans, due to the evolutionary bond build between them over centuries (Coppinger and Coppinger 2001; Serpell 1995), where the mere presence of a dog has been shown to impact on humans positively, having a calming effect. This was also shown in the current study, where all survivors and other persons noted positive effects immediately upon interacting with the specially trained dog. Further, relating to attachment theory, this benefit of being able to physically be comforted by a dog can satisfy basic human needs for comfort (Triebenbacher, 1998).

Similarly, this aspect of a dog intervention is in line with a transitional relationship that can develop between a dog and a person, which has previously been observed in animal-assisted therapies (Fine, 2006). The dog, as a transitional object, allows people to feel emotionally supported during transitional periods (Litt, 1985), something which recently been highlighted as a core need of witnesses (Ministry of Justice, 2012; Payne, 2009). This ability of dogs to uniquely support witnesses can enable them to feel that procedural justice is at the heart of the Criminal Justice System, as witnesses may be more confident in talking about their experiences and feel supported in doing so (Callanan et al., 2012). Feelings of fairness and due process play a large role in people's perceptions of their case outcome (Hough et al. 2017).

On the other hand, what was also found in this evaluation was that the effectiveness of the service is highly dependent on the way it is administered. As noted earlier, the dog used for this study was a specially trained therapy dog. Whilst not representative of an average therapy dog, she was also not trained to the extent an assistance dog would be. This reflected in the way the service functioned (see Spruin and Mozova 2018). For example, the dog became disengaged with survivors at times, and in one case could not support the survivor until the end of their trial date. The well-being of the dog is of high importance, and the service can run effectively only if the dog is trained and treated appropriately – the dog will always be an equal participant in the supporting relationship. The training of the dog handler also arose as an important factor, as inappropriately trained handlers can negatively impact on the proceedings (e.g. by providing incorrect advice or discussing the case with the survivor). These problems which arose during the study can be addressed through the introduction of trained facility dogs. These dogs are trained to provide support and enjoy lying down next to people. They do not have to be attached to the handler by a leash and are trained working dogs – something which therapy dogs are not. Similar issues were highlighted in our previous study (Spruin et al., 2019), which



further supports the need to develop an intervention with appropriate protocols in place so that survivors can feel appropriately supported (Wedlock & Tapley, 2016).

In practical terms, this exploratory study adds to the growing base of evidence supporting the notion that dog-assisted intervention is a suitable avenue of support to be explored in the court setting in England and Wales. Based on these findings, it is important to evaluate the use of trained facility dogs in this context, in order to understand how this type of dog is able to support witnesses. Theoretically, using facility dogs should provide the same benefits, but negate the challenges identified here. However, we do not know whether this is true, as no evaluations exist. From the present research and our previous work (Spruin et al., 2019), it is suggested that dogs can be useful in allowing survivors to feel less anxious and more confident prior to giving evidence, and can relax them after giving evidence; therefore, they can be seen as a form of communication aid, specifically in terms of State Management (CPS 2017). However, in order for them to be seen as such, there need to be clear protocols in place, and it is recommended that whilst therapy dogs might have a place somewhere in the system, the lack of their regulation (in terms of training, for example) can be problematic for such a high-risk environment as the court. However, more research is needed in order to create best-practice guidelines. Nevertheless, this service has the potential to provide a unique opportunity for witnesses to be supported in a more personal manner (Payne, 2009).

## Limitations

This study, whilst the first evaluation of dog-assisted intervention for vulnerable survivors of sexual offence in the court setting, is not without its limitations. First, a common critique of a case-study design lies in its small sample size. Whilst it was not the intention of this research to provide generalizable findings, due to the depth provided, we believe that naturalistic generalisation (Stake 1995) can be achieved. Despite this, it is essential that larger studies be conducted as a way to further elaborate on the present results and to explore the best ways in which the service can be applied. Further, the current sample comes from a specific jurisdiction – Southeast England. Witnesses may have different experiences based on provisions provided in different parts of the country. It is also important to appreciate that all of the survivors here were willing to participate in the research study, alongside receiving the service. It is possible that this forms a specific group; however, all individuals approached were willing to also take part in the research, likely because details of their case were not discussed with the researchers and because the procedure was set out to be unintrusive. As noted before, a therapy dog was used in this study – whilst she was specially trained, it is likely that results would differ if a trained facility dog was used, something which should be considered in future research. Lastly, no follow-ups were required from survivors, and so it is unclear how lasting the impact of the dog was in terms of survivor perspectives of the process.

## Conclusion

This study set out to gain an in-depth understanding of vulnerable survivors' experiences of appearing in court and being assisted by a specially trained dog. It provides, globally, the first evaluation of such an intervention, conducted through the use of multiple-case-study design to allow for a holistic understanding. The results identified a large number of benefits to survivors

who used the service, which extended to benefits to the survivors' families and other supporting individuals. Survivors found the context of being in court stressful, which manifested in self-reported feelings of anxiety, stress or worry. Observable behaviours were also present, such as nail-biting or crying.

This was further reflected in participant scores on STAI-6. Scores on this measure were decreased across all survivors upon being introduced to the therapy dog. Both emotional and physical changes were self-reported and observed, such as smiling when interacting with the dog, or relaxation of shoulders. Participant focus was shifted from focusing on the negative connotations associated with being in the court environment and having to give evidence, to thinking about the therapy dog and interacting with her. This was even to the extent of a participant looking forward to going to court only to interact with the dog. These changes are attributable to the uniqueness of using a dog as a service, as survivors were able to interact with her, and the dog provided unconditional support. Challenges to implementing this service were also identified, namely in regard to the need to ensure the dog's well-being and appreciating the importance of appropriate training of the dog/handler team. The current study presents very positive findings relating to the impact of a specially trained dog on participants; however, due to its design and inherent limitations, it is highly recommended that further research is conducted to further explore the service in order to establish best practices. Nevertheless, it is recommended that the CJS in England and Wales explore the use of this service, especially after further research with trained facility dogs is conducted.

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