

An inspection report on progress to introduce a national operating model for rape and other serious sexual offences investigations in early adopter police forces

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Foreword

Operation Soteria is an unprecedented programme to transform how the police handle rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO). RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

Soteria provides both a new approach and a new model for responding to these devastating crimes. It is grounded in decades of research that has examined policing practice and why RASSO [victims](#) have been systematically failed by the criminal justice system.

Soteria aims to create effective suspect-focused RASSO investigations, where the police support victims and understand their needs. It also aims to make sure [intelligence](#), analysis and [digital forensics](#) are used effectively to support cases.

As part of Soteria, forces should target and disrupt repeat suspects, to prevent future RASSO taking place. And they must take action to change RASSO investigators' skillsets and well-being.

Since 2021, 19 early adopter forces have been putting Soteria in place via the National Operating Model (NOM). The NOM sets out a foundation of investigative practice and corporate guidance that help forces achieve better outcomes in rape and other serious sexual assault cases. And by November 2024, the Home Office wants all forces to adopt Soteria by putting the NOM in place.

It is too early to assess the success of Soteria. But in May 2023, the then Home Secretary commissioned us to inspect progress so far. This was to make sure learning from the first 19 forces can improve future rollout of Soteria and the NOM.

In the nine early adopter forces we inspected, Soteria is already improving how the police understand and support victims. For instance, many [independent sexual violence advisers](#) told us they had noticed a positive cultural change in how [police personnel](#) approach victims. And new training is helping investigators understand more about RASSO and how victims can be targeted by perpetrators.

We found that the Government, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and the [College of Policing](#) all strongly supported Soteria. Several police personnel called it a "game changer" that is creating a victim-centred and suspect-focused approach to RASSO. This is good.

We recognise the positive efforts of investigators, forces and those working at a national level in policing in England and Wales to put Operation Soteria and the NOM in place. And we would encourage all forces to fully implement them to realise the benefits.

But adopting the NOM requires major changes. We found areas where forces need to improve their approach to make the most of Soteria. And these are often problems that we have identified before. In this report, we repeat our recommendations and urge forces to fix things quickly.

We recognise that forces are trying to make things better while dealing with high demand and limited resources. While we don't give recommendations on how to increase resources, we know that resource pressures can mean forces risk losing the benefits of Soteria. We are worried this will become a larger issue as the NOM develops.

We found resource gaps in digital forensics, analysis, victim support and investigation teams. In most forces we inspected, half of their rape investigation team roles are held by trainees.

In some cases, victims wait months to receive specialist victim support. And some forces also need to improve at collecting and analysing data on rape in their areas so that they can disrupt RASSO suspects more effectively. These are some of the things that need to improve.

The short-term funding for the Soteria Joint Unit doesn't help. And the long delays that RASSO cases face in the courts add to the problems. RASSO cases are still taking too long to reach trial. Victims often wait at least two years for their cases to be heard. In two forces, they waited as long as four years. Delays and uncertainty make it much more likely that victims will withdraw support for a case.

Even with all these challenges, Soteria is a major opportunity for the criminal justice system to finally give victims the service they deserve.

We praise the leadership and hard work of police forces, the Crown Prosecution Service and others on Soteria so far. They must keep up this momentum to make sure Soteria can reach its full potential for RASSO victims across England and Wales.

Summary

Soteria is an unprecedented programme that aims to transform how forces across England and Wales handle rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigations. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

The National Operating Model (NOM) sets out how forces should change their approach to investigating RASSO.

The six pillars of Soteria were used to create the NOM. These are:

1. having a suspect-focused investigation;
2. targeting and disrupting repeat suspects;
3. supporting [victims](#) by using a [procedural justice](#) approach;
4. improving investigators' knowledge, learning and well-being;
5. using data and analysis effectively; and
6. improving RASSO investigations through effective use of [digital forensics](#).

The pillars are linked. So if forces put them in place properly, there should be system-wide changes. And improvements should continue in the long term because there are new structures in place too. But it also means that forces must improve across all six pillars to get the full benefits of Soteria.

In this inspection, we looked at nine early adopter forces who have been putting Soteria and the NOM in place since 2021. We set out to understand the benefits and challenges they have already found from Soteria.

We examined seven questions relating to Soteria. These are:

1. To what extent have forces adopted the pillars of Soteria and to what extent do they prioritise suspect-focused investigations?
2. How effectively do forces identify and disrupt repeat suspects?
3. How effectively do forces carry out victim-centred investigations and achieve procedural justice?
4. How effectively do forces provide for their [officers'](#) well-being in the context of RASSO investigations?
5. How effectively do forces prioritise officer and [staff](#) learning and development on the national standards for RASSO investigations?

6. To what extent do forces have good strategic analysis to improve RASSO investigations and prevent offences?
7. How effectively do forces' digital forensic services provide quality and timely support for RASSO investigations?

Using these questions, we have mapped the police approach to Soteria in nine early adopter forces. We evaluated the progress they have made and the benefits and challenges they have found so far.

1. Adoption of the Soteria model and prioritisation of suspect-focused rape and other serious sexual offences investigations

Soteria requires forces to change how they work, and personnel to change how they think about RASSO. For such major changes to succeed, there must be visible senior leadership and strong oversight from the start.

Most forces see responding to RASSO as a strategic priority

Most forces we inspected treat RASSO as a sub-category under other priority crime types. For example, serious violence, violence against women and girls (VAWG) or [domestic abuse](#).

We found most forces had detailed plans to put Soteria in place. They also had good leadership and governance structures. But project managers and pillar leads need time to make sure that such a large-scale programme of change can succeed.

In every force we inspected, the implementation of Soteria was led by a [chief officer](#) or other senior leader in charge of public protection. But one force had left this strategic role empty for a year. This is poor.

Some forces appointed a dedicated Soteria project manager. They help forces stay focused and work quickly to make the major changes required. But this isn't always the case, particularly in forces which don't have robust oversight of plans to implement Soteria.

Most forces make sure Soteria strategic leads have the time and resources they need to make changes. This often includes developing plans to invest in support staff, trainers, investigators, analysts and digital forensics personnel.

Some forces don't fully understand the system-wide benefits of Soteria

Most forces we inspected understood Soteria and how to use the six pillars to put it in place. But in a few, senior leaders didn't fully understand how it works or the benefits it can offer.

Some forces used their existing plans for tackling violence against women and girls to put Soteria in place. They claimed this stops them repeating work and keeps similar types of police activity in one place.

We recognise that there are clear overlaps between tackling violence against women and girls and Soteria. But the six pillars should be used as a framework to put the NOM in place. This will help forces gain the system-wide benefits of Soteria.

Some forces don't understand the extent of RASSO in their areas

Forces should use [problem profiles](#) to help them understand current and emerging threats to public safety. But not all forces had one for RASSO.

For those that did, their RASSO problem profiles weren't detailed enough. Many didn't include data from partners, such as local authorities, or ethnicity details. This made it harder for forces to understand how RASSO affects people from diverse backgrounds.

Most forces use RASSO scrutiny panels well

Every force we inspected had scrutiny panels. They used them to improve their approach to RASSO investigations by examining cases when no further action was taken.

Some panels included the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and [independent sexual violence advisers \(ISVAs\)](#). But ISVAs often aren't equal members of scrutiny panels. This means they can't select cases that they think would benefit from a review.

The detective shortage continues to be a problem

The shortage of RASSO detectives makes dealing with demand difficult. And because there aren't enough detectives, all forces find it harder to appoint detective tutors.

Forces are trying different methods to recruit more RASSO detectives. But the Home Office should urgently complete its review of the role of detective constable. This will set out plans to make this career path more attractive and help reduce detective shortages.

Most forces face challenges in managing demand in RASSO units

The shortage of detectives means some non-specialist personnel handle RASSO cases. Most forces reduce the risks of doing this by getting experienced RASSO supervisors to oversee these cases.

Suspect-focused investigations are helping investigators consider the wider context of RASSO cases

In the forces we inspected, we found that investigators consider the wider context behind RASSO reports.

Under Soteria, investigators assess the wider context of a crime, including [intelligence](#) about the RASSO suspect and digital evidence. It also means considering how the suspect acted towards the victim (and others) before and during the alleged crime.

This detailed approach helps investigators build cases where the evidence points towards or away from a suspect. It also helps the police and prosecutors collect evidence that a jury is more likely to understand.

Early advice isn't always working well enough

Investigators should consider asking the CPS for early advice (EA) in RASSO cases, particularly where the investigation is complex or sensitive. EA involves CPS prosecutors giving the police guidance to help them understand what evidence they need to support a prosecution or if a suspect can be charged.

During our inspection, we saw that EA wasn't consistently used in every force. It sometimes took a long time for the CPS to give advice, but this varied greatly.

Where EA worked well, the police and CPS had useful face-to-face meetings to discuss the case. They agreed what lines of enquiry to focus on and proportionate actions to take.

Investigators can use the NOM's investigation management document to help them ask for EA. But some prosecutors and RASSO investigators said it wasn't fit for purpose.

Soteria is helping to improve the relationship between some police and CPS RASSO specialists

In [our 2022 joint inspection with His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate into the police and CPS response to rape](#), we found deep divisions between police investigators and CPS RASSO prosecutors.

In this inspection, we found that relationships are improving, and investigators and prosecutors work well together. This is good.

Under Soteria, the police and CPS focus on making sure evidence requests are proportionate and justifiable. But some investigators told us some decisions made by some [on-call](#) prosecutors before charging a suspect aren't victim-centred enough.

Training on word-on-word cases must improve

We found that many investigators and police supervisors didn't fully understand the evidence required in word-on-word rape investigations. These cases can include those where the people involved disagree about whether consent was given.

The NOM gives guidance on relevant legal standards for word-on-word rape cases. But until the police and CPS use it consistently, some victims won't get justice.

2. Identification and disruption of repeat suspects

Forces need national guidance to help them identify and disrupt repeat suspects

[College of Policing](#) guidance to investigators shows that one in four RASSO reports involves a repeat suspect. This suggests that policing should target those who keep committing these crimes.

But the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) has no definition of a repeat suspect.

There is no consistent approach to identifying and disrupting repeat suspects across forces

All forces in England and Wales are responsible bodies under [multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\)](#). Forces use MAPPA for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) who have been convicted of relevant crimes.

But if a repeat RASSO suspect hasn't been convicted, they usually aren't managed under MAPPA. To fill this gap, some forces have created new multi-agency structures using a formula designed for domestic-abuse-related offending.

In general, we found that few forces actively target repeat RASSO suspects.

The police should do more to protect victims during RASSO cases

Most forces we inspected had [positive action](#) policies. These encourage officers to consider arresting suspects after domestic abuse reports. But this wasn't always the case for RASSO reports.

Some victims don't want the police to arrest a suspect and don't want any criminal justice outcome. From a procedural justice point of view, the police should take this into account. But they need to balance this with the risks involved.

We found that few forces knew how many repeat suspects they arrest, rather than ask to attend voluntary interviews.

To keep victims safe, forces must make sure they have a good understanding of repeat RASSO offenders, regardless of whether they have been arrested or convicted. This provides a better understanding of the offender and greater opportunities to target them to help protect victims.

The police don't always manage pre-charge bail breaches well

Only a few forces monitored whether RASSO suspects breach pre-charge [bail](#) conditions. And these conditions aren't always enough to deter suspects from breaching them. Suspects may contact victims, for example. The police also don't always arrest suspects for bail breaches, as they sometimes decide that a breach is too minor.

The police could use protection orders more effectively to safeguard victims

Under Soteria, forces are encouraged to use all types of protection orders to protect victims. These place restrictions on people's behaviour to stop them causing sexual harm to others.

Examples of protection orders are [sexual risk orders](#) and [sexual harm prevention orders](#). But only half the personnel we spoke to knew how to use them effectively.

The police don't use their powers to retain fingerprints and DNA often enough

Under [section 63G of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#), the police can apply to keep the fingerprints and DNA of RASSO suspects who haven't yet been charged or convicted.

We found that most RASSO investigators and supervisors didn't know enough about this power. Forces should make sure they understand it and use it to protect victims.

3. Victim-centred investigations and procedural justice

Soteria is helping to create a new victim-centred culture

Soteria takes a victim-centred approach to RASSO investigations. It encourages investigators to examine the full context of a crime to understand what a suspect has done.

It challenges the behaviour of suspects by looking at how they acted towards the victim and others before and during the alleged crime. And it uses procedural justice to help win the trust of victims who report RASSO.

In our inspection, we found that new RASSO training covers more than just how the law works. It dispels rape myths and teaches personnel how the trauma of RASSO can stop some victims from seeking help. It also helps investigators think carefully about their beliefs and behaviours and the language they use with victims.

Many specialist RASSO support services are overstretched

Many RASSO victims get timely support from ISVAs, but others don't. In some force areas, rape victims wait four months to receive specialist support. This is due to rapidly growing demand.

There isn't enough funding for victim services

Despite some extra funding for victim services, demand keeps rising. There isn't a long-term approach to make sure support services can give consistent support to victims in the future.

In many forces, some services only have funding in place for the next three months. That is because funding is often very time-limited.

Police communication with victims is improving but varies across forces

In [our 2022 joint inspection with His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate into the police and CPS response to rape](#), we said that most victims felt police communication with them was poor. They also said that the police contacted them less often as cases went on.

The NOM aims to improve how often and how well the police communicate with victims. This includes making sure RASSO victims get timely updates from a single point of contact. We found that most forces do this already.

Many ISVAs said things have improved under Soteria. They said that the police, particularly RASSO teams, are better at communicating with victims. But this wasn't always true in every force.

Forces don't always use victims' feedback to make improvements

When senior leaders examine how well their force is dealing with RASSO, they don't always consider feedback from victims. This is a mistake. They should use it to understand whether the force is meeting victims' needs.

The police don't always explain to victims decisions to take no further action

The NOM has templated documents that forces can use to help them communicate effectively with victims when closing a case and taking no further action. Some forces use this guidance well. But we found that police don't always explain these decisions to victims.

Many ISVAs told us that specialist RASSO investigators understand victims' trauma and treat them with care. But they also said that investigators who aren't RASSO specialists don't support victims enough when closing cases.

It is too early to tell if a national survey of RASSO victims shows improvements under Soteria

As part of Soteria, the City, University of London created a survey to record the experiences of victims of rape and sexual assault who report these crimes to the police. This was introduced in January 2023.

In September 2023, [the City, University of London published its interim report on the Operation Soteria Bluestone rape and sexual assault survivors' survey](#), based on the views of 1,968 people who completed it between January and June 2023.

The university found that victims who have recently been in contact with police now have much better experiences. But the report's author told us that victims often report a better service at the start of cases, with police contact then becoming less frequent.

In September 2024, a further report is due to be published. This may give further insights into victims' experiences.

4. The well-being of rape and other serious sexual offences investigators

Some forces don't give dedicated well-being support to RASSO teams

In every force we inspected, police well-being leads were proud of the range of well-being support they offer the workforce. This can include access to mental health first aid, peer support and, for some roles, annual psychological screening.

RASSO teams can all access well-being support services. But we were told that, due to their workloads, most don't have the time to research and access the support available. And only some forces give mandatory psychological screening to RASSO personnel.

Critical reflection should become a key part of RASSO investigations

Critical reflection is a key part of the Soteria model. It encourages personnel to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs and consider how these could affect their approach to cases. It also helps them think about how their work affects their well-being.

The NOM gives forces guidance on critical reflection. But when we inspected, most forces were still training their personnel on the Soteria approach. This meant that critical reflection wasn't being used yet.

High workloads can harm investigators' well-being, but some forces are making positive changes

In all forces, RASSO personnel said their main well-being issue is stress due to high workloads. We found that RASSO investigators' workloads vary a lot across forces.

Some forces have a policy where investigators only manage up to 15 cases at once. This makes it easier for them to cope with demand. It means they are less likely to take work home with them or have problems sleeping due to stress.

Many RASSO investigator posts are held by trainees

Nearly every force we inspected struggles to recruit enough detectives. Most are working hard to fill vacancies in RASSO teams, but there are often still gaps.

As a short-term measure, some forces use student officers or trainee detectives who join RASSO teams on an attachment. This is a short-term placement in a RASSO team as part of their training.

We found that in nearly every force, half of RASSO teams are personnel who aren't fully qualified and are still training.

5. Learning and development on the new national standards

New specialist training shows early signs of improving RASSO investigations

Every force we inspected had either already given new rape investigation skills training to many personnel or had plans to do so by spring 2024. The new training teaches investigators about the psychology of sex offending and its impact on victims. And they said that this has helped them become better investigators.

But in one force, some RASSO investigators and supervisors hadn't had any specialist training at all, even though they had been in post for years.

In general, the new specialist training standards are a good thing. But without enough trained detectives in RASSO roles, they will have a limited impact.

RASSO personnel must have protected time to complete training

Every force we inspected sees RASSO training as mandatory. This is good. But only some forces give protected time for RASSO personnel to train, away from their usual working tasks.

6. Strategic analysis to improve investigations and prevent offences

Forces must make sure they are using qualitative and quantitative data to measure their performance on Soteria

We found that forces often use how many RASSO crimes charges they have made as their main measure of success.

Soteria uses a wider range of factors to measure how well forces manage RASSO cases. The NOM gives forces guidance on adopting these wider performance measures, which should include both quantitative and qualitative data.

For example, it suggests that forces should use sickness levels in RASSO teams and whether RASSO cases use a procedural justice approach as measures of success. They should also consider how often victims stop supporting a case.

The Soteria Joint Unit told us it has created a set of Soteria key performance indicators for all forces to use as part of the NOM. These are yet to be finalised. This should help forces use more consistent performance measures.

Forces still have major gaps in their data

Many forces we inspected know there are gaps in their data. This means they can't collect and use some types of information.

Data gaps often exist because of limited force IT systems that can be fixed by individual forces themselves. But others require changes to IT systems used by all forces in England and Wales.

Most forces told us they didn't prioritise understanding or fixing data gaps. This is a mistake. Missing or inaccurate data can make it harder to identify suspects or repeat RASSO offenders.

We found that very few forces are doing enough to improve data accuracy or educate personnel about this. Forces must make sure their workforce focuses on data quality. If not, they will keep making mistakes that can put victims at risk.

Forces don't always have the resources needed to analyse data effectively

Many forces said they find it difficult to recruit and retain enough analysts.

We found that analysts are often used to help chief officers understand their forces' performance. But in most forces, there wasn't much analytical support for investigators managing complex RASSO cases.

7. Digital forensic services

Forces have invested in technology to improve RASSO investigations

Every force we inspected has a detailed digital forensics strategy. This sets out how they will meet the forensic standards required in RASSO investigations.

Forces make sure their digital forensic units can access the latest technology. They invest in computers and cloud-based services to keep up with demand and new forensic standards.

Digital media investigators can help forces recover digital evidence in a proportionate way

We found that most forces had digital media investigators who have been trained in how to use digital evidence and data to support cases.

Digital media investigators help RASSO investigators use digital evidence during their investigations but in a proportionate way. And in many forces, digital media investigators give training to RASSO investigators and some CPS prosecutors.

Every force we inspected prioritises digital forensics for RASSO cases. They return victims' mobile phones within 24 hours of taking them for forensic examination. And in rare cases where they can't do this, they give victims replacement phones.

In many forces, the police examine suspects' mobile devices more quickly than they used to. But in two forces, suspects' devices took up to five months to return. This delayed cases.

Considering Soteria as a wider model for change

Soteria is an evidence-based academic model that is victim-centred, context-led and suspect-focused. It is grounded in decades of research that has examined policing practice and why RASSO victims have been systematically failed.

Soteria can transform the police approach to RASSO across England and Wales. And it could be used to change how forces deal with other crimes, such as domestic abuse or [modern slavery](#).

But to succeed as a national model, for RASSO and even other crime types, Soteria needs a lot of support from the national level.

The NPCC's portfolio structures need to be simplified

In 2021, the NPCC reviewed its committee and portfolio structures which offer national leadership on specific policing issues. In this review, the NPCC found these structures weren't working. It said they were "too complex and required considerable time and effort to navigate, agree and deconflict responsibilities and keep all relevant leads briefed".

This is a problem. To get the full benefits of Soteria across England and Wales, there needs to be clear national leadership to support change.

The NPCC has made plans to create clearer structures at national level. This is good. It must make sure its structures are set up correctly to help policing improve things more quickly and consistently across all forces.

Forces need long-term national support and funding to help them put Soteria in place

In October 2023, the 24 forces who hadn't started putting the NOM in place completed and shared self-assessments with the Soteria Joint Unit. These set out how ready they are to start putting Soteria in place and the resources they have to do this.

The Joint Unit has analysed these self-assessments. The forces found the same problems as we have identified in this report.

With the support of the Soteria Joint Unit, the Home Office wants these 24 forces to adopt Soteria and implement the NOM by November 2024.

But the Joint Unit is only funded until March 2025. It isn't funded to help deal with weaknesses found in the most recent round of Soteria self-assessments. This will mean it can't help forces adopt Soteria and the NOM.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

As soon as possible, and no later than 30 November 2024, the Home Office should complete its urgent review of the detective constable role. And it should share the findings of this review with the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#).

The review should include specific recommendations that make sure all forces have the investigators they need, including those who specialise in investigating rape and other serious sexual offences. In its review, the Home Office should focus on making this career path more attractive by offering better support, promotion opportunities and rewards.

Recommendation 2

By 31 January 2025, the Soteria Joint Unit should work with the [College of Policing](#), the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to approve and publish a new investigation management document.

The document should avoid unnecessary detail, and focus on the specific advice police need from prosecutors in rape and other serious sexual offences cases.

Recommendation 3

By 31 January 2025, all forces should make sure [personnel](#) working on rape and other serious sexual offences receive [College of Policing](#) approved training on the investigation of word-on-word cases.

Recommendation 4

By 31 January 2025, the Soteria Joint Unit should work with the [College of Policing](#), the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the Victims' Commissioner and police forces to:

- define what a repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspect is; and
- create new guidance for forces on managing repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects, including the benefits of using the potentially dangerous persons and [multi-agency tasking and co-ordination](#) processes.

Recommendation 5

By 31 July 2025, chief constables should make sure their forces use the new definition of repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects to identify and manage them.

Recommendation 6

By 31 January 2025, the Soteria Joint Unit and the [College of Policing](#) should work with forces to help them understand the National Operating Model's disruption toolkit. This should help the police to manage repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects effectively.

Recommendation 7

By 31 January 2025, all chief constables should make sure their forces prioritise identifying and disrupting rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) suspects. This includes making sure that:

- forces track, manage and respond effectively to breaches of [bail](#) and protection orders in RASSO cases; and
- all relevant personnel complete National Operating Model training on using criminal and civil orders to tackle RASSO.

Recommendation 8

By 30 November 2025, the [College of Policing](#) and the Soteria Joint Unit should commission independent academic research to evaluate how well forces use criminal and civil orders in rape and other serious sexual offences cases.

This should focus on [officers](#)' knowledge of protection orders and the application process and use of relevant orders, restrictions and breaches.

Based on their findings, the College and the Joint Unit should give guidance to forces on the most effective way to use these powers.

Recommendation 9

By 31 January 2025, chief constables should make sure their forces have good processes in place for applying to retain DNA and fingerprints to improve their use of [section 63G of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#).

Recommendation 10

By 30 April 2025, the Home Office and Ministry of Justice should adapt funding arrangements to make sure there is enough support for all rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) [victims](#). This should include:

- providing extra funding for RASSO support services;
- placing funding for RASSO support services on a long-term footing to make sure there is consistent specialist support available; and
- working with the relevant [police and crime commissioner](#)'s office to make sure national grant funding aligns with funding given via local commissioning arrangements.

Recommendation 11

By 31 March 2025, all chief constables should make sure that, as part of adopting the National Operating Model, their forces:

- develop a rape and other serious sexual offences [problem profile](#);
- include the National Operating Model flight deck within their strategic performance monitoring; and
- adopt any key performance indicators that are agreed and published by the Soteria Joint Unit.

Recommendation 12

By 31 January 2025, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#)'s Digital, Data and Technology Coordination Committee should work with chief constables and the National Law Enforcement Data Programme to reduce data error rates. This should focus on errors on the [Police National Computer](#) and [Police National Database](#).

Recommendation 13

By 30 June 2025, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should report on its work to simplify its public protection portfolios. It should focus on improving practice quickly and consistently across policing.

Recommendation 14

By 30 September 2024, the Home Office should work with the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) to provide funding for the Soteria Joint Unit that lasts beyond March 2025.

Introduction

Background

Operation Soteria is an unprecedented programme to transform how the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and police forces across England and Wales respond to rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO). RASSO is a term the police use that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences. We use it throughout this report.

Soteria is based on academic research from Professor Betsy Stanko OBE and Professor Katrin Hohl and is led within policing by Chief Constable Sarah Crew QPM.

Soteria builds upon Project Bluestone, a programme where the police and academics worked together to examine RASSO cases and data in detail.

Project Bluestone examined how the police and CPS managed RASSO cases. It identified why so few RASSO suspects were charged and why so many [victims](#) didn't trust the criminal justice system. And it set out evidence-based ideas to help the police design and use a new model for RASSO cases.

In January 2021, the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) lead for adult sexual offences worked with the Bluestone academics to put these ideas into practice. They did this in Avon and Somerset Police, the force led by Chief Constable Crew. This was called the pathfinder pilot. It examined what it takes to improve the police approach to RASSO.

The findings from this pilot, which were shared with the Home Office and Ministry of Justice, included that the police had:

- poor data around RASSO;
- RASSO investigators with limited specialist knowledge about sexual offending; and
- too little focus on identifying and disrupting repeat suspects.

In June 2021, [the Government published its end-to-end rape review report](#). In this report, the Government accepted that rape victims were being failed. They weren't getting enough support, and charge rates were as low as 3 percent. The Government promised to improve the number of rape cases reaching court and how they were handled.

The then Government published an action plan with this rape review report. As part of this, the Home Office and CPS officially launched Operation Soteria.

It offered a new model for handling RASSO cases across six linked pillars. These are:

1. having a suspect-focused investigation;
2. targeting and disrupting repeat suspects;
3. supporting victims by using a [procedural justice](#) approach;
4. improving investigators' knowledge, learning and well-being;
5. using data and analysis effectively; and
6. improving RASSO investigations through effective use of [digital forensics](#).

The then Government also committed to introducing a National Operating Model (NOM) for investigating and prosecuting rape. This would help forces and the CPS understand how to put the Soteria principles into practice.

Pathfinder forces

When it published the rape review action plan, the then Government also announced that four forces would join Avon and Somerset Police in adopting Soteria. These were called the pathfinder forces.

These are:

1. Avon and Somerset Police;
2. Durham Constabulary;
3. the Metropolitan Police Service;
4. South Wales Police; and
5. West Midlands Police.

As part of adopting Soteria, a team of over 40 academics, subject matter experts, police leads and peers reviewed each force's approach to RASSO.

The team considered how forces:

- handled RASSO reports;
- communicated with and supported victims;
- trained RASSO personnel;
- structured their investigator workforce;
- worked with victim support agencies;
- investigated RASSO suspects; and
- performed at preventing RASSO.

After each review, every force was given a written report with feedback from the review team. This set out findings for the force, which included detailed information about what was going well and what needed to improve.

The NOM

The academic leads for Soteria Bluestone, Professor Katrin Hohl and Professor Betsy Stanko, used the evidence from all five pathfinder reviews to create the NOM.

The NOM sets out what forces need to do to turn the Soteria principles into practical changes within forces. It should help forces complete faster and higher quality investigations.

The police's version of the NOM contains over 70 training and guidance products for forces and RASSO investigators to use. In June 2023, the [College of Policing](#) adopted the NOM and began using it in its guidance to all forces.

When we inspected, the NOM was still being updated, so forces couldn't yet use every product. When it is complete, all forces will use it when handling RASSO cases.

Since 2021, the CPS has been testing its version of the NOM. This aims to improve how the police and CPS work together to build RASSO cases. It covers the early advice process. This involves CPS prosecutors giving the police guidance to help them understand what evidence is needed to support a prosecution or if a suspect can be charged.

Expanding Soteria to include all forces

In June 2022, the Home Office invited 14 more forces to adopt Soteria. These are known as the Soteria expansion forces.

In September 2023, the Home Office, the NPCC and the College of Policing created the Soteria Joint Unit. It provides close support to the forces that haven't already adopted Soteria as they carry out their self-assessment and put in place Soteria plans. And it gives guidance to early adopter forces and promotes best practice across regions.

The unit also works to improve the NOM and make it more consistent across forces. It has an important role in building the capacity and capability of policing to make sure Soteria changes succeed over the long term.

Our inspections

In July 2021, [we published our first joint inspection with His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate \(HMCPsI\) into the police and CPS response to rape](#). It focuses on cases from when victims reported them to when the police or CPS decided to take no further action.

We found that the approach to investigating and prosecuting rape wasn't working. Rape cases were difficult to investigate, prosecute and explain to victims. There was too much focus on a victim's account rather than the suspect's actions. And this often meant that cases were dropped. We said that a whole new approach was needed.

In February 2022, [we published our second joint inspection with HMCPSI into the police and CPS response to rape](#). It focuses on cases from when suspects were charged through to when they ended. We found that police and prosecutors often didn't work well together, which led to delays.

We raised concerns about how the police and CPS communicated with victims. After a suspect was charged, victims often received confusing updates about their case. And sometimes there weren't any updates at all.

In this inspection, we examine how Soteria has addressed some of these problems.

About us

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire & rescue services, to make communities safer. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that the public would ask and publish the answers in accessible form. We use our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

Our commission

In May 2023, the then Home Secretary commissioned us to carry out this inspection using the powers under section 54(2B) of the Police Act 1996. The commission said that our inspection should have two phases.

The first phase should map progress made by the Soteria pathfinder and expansion police forces in adopting the NOM. And it should identify the benefits and challenges of this new approach.

We may carry out a further inspection in due course. The second phase should examine how cases progress after suspects have been charged using the Soteria model. It may be carried out jointly with HMCPSI.

Explanations

When we completed this inspection in November 2023, the Soteria Joint Unit was still updating parts of the NOM. Forces couldn't access every part of it.

This means we can't yet say how well forces have adopted the NOM. But we have made comments about how it is already being used and how it is changing the way investigators work.

The focus of this inspection is how well forces are adopting the six Soteria pillars. We do this by looking at seven questions.

Terminology in this report

In the context of RASSO cases, different terms are sometimes used to refer to the people involved. Those who report crimes are called complainants, victims or survivors. Those who may have committed these crimes are called suspects, defendants or accused people.

In this report, we use the term victim to refer to those affected by RASSO. This covers terms such as client, complainant or survivor. And we generally use the term suspect to refer to those accused of RASSO, though we also use perpetrator or offender in some places.

When we refer to published data or quotes, we use the terms that they used. This makes sure that we are consistent with the original source.

Our reports contain references to, among other things, 'national' definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes. In some instances, 'national' means applying to England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England, Wales and Scotland, or the whole of the United Kingdom.

Our terms of reference

Our terms of reference required us to address seven questions:

1. To what extent have forces adopted the pillars of Soteria and to what extent do they prioritise suspect-focused investigations?
2. How effectively do forces identify and disrupt repeat suspects?
3. How effectively do forces carry out victim-centred investigations and achieve procedural justice?
4. How effectively do forces provide for their [officers](#)' well-being in the context of RASSO investigations?
5. How effectively do forces prioritise officer and [staff](#) learning and development on the national standards for RASSO investigations?
6. To what extent do forces have good strategic analysis to improve RASSO investigations and prevent offences?
7. How effectively do forces' digital forensic services provide quality and timely support for RASSO investigations?

Methodology

Our inspection took place between September and November 2023. We carried out fieldwork in four Soteria pathfinder forces. These were:

1. Durham Constabulary;
2. the Metropolitan Police Service;
3. South Wales Police; and
4. West Midlands Police.

And we carried out fieldwork in five Soteria expansion forces:

1. Gwent Police;
2. Kent Police;
3. Lancashire Constabulary;
4. Warwickshire Police; and
5. Wiltshire Police.

We also:

- examined over 600 RASSO-related force documents, including policies, [force management statements](#), commissioning reviews and [problem profiles](#);
- reviewed over 70 products that form the NOM;
- looked at information sharing and communication among police forces via the online Soteria national learning network;
- spoke to NPCC portfolio leads, victims' commissioners and advocacy groups;
- held around 200 interviews and 45 focus groups with police personnel, the CPS, victims' advocates and others;
- reviewed progress on recommendations and [areas for improvement](#) from our past inspections;
- carried out a literature review of relevant reports, including [the independent academic report on year one of Operation Soteria](#) and reviews of the progress made by expansion forces; and
- reviewed [the City, University of London interim report on the Operation Soteria Bluestone rape and sexual assault survivors' survey](#).

When we inspected, the NOM was still being updated, so we decided not to audit RASSO case files. We will consider this in any future inspections in this area.

1. Adoption of the Soteria model and prioritisation of suspect-focused rape and other serious sexual offences investigations

Most forces see responding to rape and other serious sexual offences as a strategic priority

In the forces we inspected, we found that tackling rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) is seen as a sub-category under other priority crime types: for example, serious violence, violence against women and girls or [domestic abuse](#). RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

In most forces, we found detailed plans to put Soteria in place. These included quantitative measures, such as charge rates. Importantly, they also included qualitative measures, such as [victim](#) feedback, to show each stage of the victim's journey. This is positive. It means they consider victims' experiences more effectively.

Innovative practice: Durham Constabulary has created a new performance framework to help it tackle rape and other serious sexual offences more effectively

Durham Constabulary has created a new performance framework called Operation Crystal to track its performance in dealing with rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO). RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

Operation Crystal uses quantitative and qualitative measures to understand how well the force is handling RASSO in several areas, such as:

- the police's use of the [threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement \(THRIVE\) model](#) to tell if a [victim](#) is a [vulnerable person](#);
- victim care strategies;
- whether cases follow Crown Prosecution Service guidance on rape myths;
- targeting of repeat suspects; and
- use of criminal or civil orders to prevent or disrupt RASSO.

The constabulary's head of crime chairs regular Operation Crystal meetings that assess these measures. They review the progress of RASSO investigations and victim care. They also consider relevant feedback such as victim surveys.

This approach makes sure cases follow Soteria standards.

All Soteria strategic implementation plans include qualitative measures. This means that [chief officers](#) can use qualitative information to understand how their force is performing. But in most forces, this doesn't always happen.

In one force, a Soteria project lead told us that chief officers are very focused on charge rates. This means they don't recognise that some victims don't want a court outcome.

Soteria should improve the victim's experience of reporting RASSO. Senior leaders shouldn't just focus on targets and numbers as a measure of success. They should think about [procedural justice](#) and make sure that victims' wishes shape how the police respond to RASSO. We make further comments about this later in the report.

In every force we inspected, the implementation of Soteria was usually led by a chief officer or other senior leader in charge of public protection. This is good.

But it isn't good that one force left this strategic leader role empty for a year. This created problems. It meant that this force didn't adopt Soteria or the National Operating Model (NOM) consistently across the force. Investigators also told us they had little communication from senior leaders about Soteria. This made them feel less confident and that RASSO wasn't being taken seriously enough by the force.

Some forces appointed a dedicated Soteria project manager. They help put in place the many changes needed for forces to fully adopt Soteria.

In most forces, [police personnel](#) and their chief officers strongly support Soteria. Some personnel called it a "game changer". They said that it is creating a culture that is better at understanding victims and their trauma, while also targeting repeat suspects more effectively. This is good.

For Soteria to reach its full potential, chief officers must make sure all six Soteria pillars are put in place. They need to plan, monitor and manage Soteria so that it improves long-term outcomes for victims and investigators.

Most forces make sure Soteria strategic leads have the time and resources to do their work. For many forces, this means developing plans to invest in support staff, trainers, investigators, analysts and [digital forensics](#) personnel. However, these plans take time to put in place.

Promising practice: West Midlands Police has improved its approach to Soteria through effective planning and an online portal that gives information to its workforce

In June 2022, as one of the Soteria pathfinder forces, West Midlands Police received over 500 pieces of feedback from the Soteria review team. This recommended changes to how it was putting Soteria in place.

At that time, there was no National Operating Model guidance to help forces manage the major changes needed for Soteria.

West Midlands Police's Soteria strategic leads decided to create a plan to help them deal with this feedback. They spoke to other Soteria forces to understand how to manage the changes needed and what ideas they should accept from the review. Using this feedback, they produced a new, detailed Soteria plan.

It includes a range of rape and other serious sexual offences performance measures to help [chief officers](#) see the difference Soteria is making. For example, the force collects data on the timeliness of updates to [victims](#) and the quality of victim support referrals. This helps it understand if it is meeting victims' needs, meaning victims are less likely to withdraw support for cases.

The force has also created an online portal for investigators and response [officers](#). This helps them understand Soteria and gives them access to National Operating Model guidance and documents.

Some forces don't fully understand the system-wide benefits of Soteria

In a few forces we inspected, some strategic leads didn't fully understand how Soteria works or the benefits it could offer.

One chief officer told us their force didn't have a specific Soteria plan or leads for each pillar. Instead, it used its existing plan for tackling violence against women and girls to put Soteria in place. The force claimed this stopped it repeating work and kept similar types of police activity in one place.

It is good that forces have plans to tackle violence against women and girls. And we recognise that both violence against women and girls and Soteria involve crimes that are usually gender-based. But this approach might not be focused enough on the six pillars framework which helps forces understand the changes needed to adopt Soteria.

In another force, we found that Soteria wasn't being put in place consistently across all roles, including training investigators. The Soteria strategic lead told us that it was difficult to change things everywhere, because the force is so large.

This is poor. Forces must put in place good leadership and oversight to make sure they adopt Soteria consistently.

Some forces don't understand the extent of RASSO in their areas

Forces should use [problem profiles](#) to understand current and emerging threats to public safety. These profiles include crime and incident data and information from partners, such as local authorities. They help forces understand how to deal with serious problems in their area.

But only four forces we inspected had a RASSO problem profile. Most weren't detailed enough and didn't include data from partners. They also didn't include ethnicity details of victims and suspects to help forces identify how RASSO affects people from diverse backgrounds.

Problem profiles are especially important because victims often don't report RASSO to the police. [Results from the Office for National Statistics' 2020 edition of the Crime Survey of England and Wales](#) showed that fewer than one in six victims (aged 16 or above) of rape or assault by penetration (including attempts) reported to police. This means forces often can't be sure how many RASSO incidents took place in their force area.

In two forces, chief officers didn't fully understand the benefits of a RASSO problem profile. We asked one of them why their force didn't have one. They said that it might not lead to the force doing things differently. This force also doesn't always record basic details such as a victim's gender, ethnicity or relationship with a suspect.

This is a missed opportunity. In [the equalities statement published alongside the end-to-end rape review](#), the then Government reported that victims with some [protected characteristics](#) are more likely to face social and cultural barriers to reporting RASSO.

If forces don't fully understand the extent of RASSO in different communities, they can't tackle them properly. It makes it harder to identify the needs of [vulnerable](#) victims, tackle repeat offending or decide what resources are needed to deal with RASSO.

Durham Constabulary is taking good steps to improve its understanding of RASSO in the community. Its Soteria lead told us the constabulary is working with academics to include disabled victims' experiences in its RASSO problem profile.

The NOM now includes guidance on developing RASSO problem profiles. All forces should adopt this. Most told us they planned to do so in 2024. We make a recommendation later in this report about this.

Most forces use RASSO scrutiny panels well

Every force we inspected had RASSO scrutiny panels. These involve the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) RASSO leads examining evidential weaknesses of court cases and investigations where no further action was taken.

In some forces, panels also work with prosecutors to examine the impact of RASSO early advice (EA) and make improvements. EA involves CPS prosecutors giving the police guidance to help them understand what evidence they need to support a prosecution or if a suspect can be charged.

In three forces, [independent sexual violence advisers \(ISVAs\)](#) are an equal partner in scrutiny meetings. This means they can select cases for the panel to review. This is a victim-centred model which all forces should consider using.

In its scrutiny panel, Gwent Police examines cases by reviewing officer [body-worn video](#) footage and suspect interviews. It gives feedback to the [police officer](#) who led the case and their supervisor. ISVAs told us feedback from this panel has led to improvements, including training on suspect-focused interviews for investigators.

The detective shortage continues to be a problem

In September 2021, [we published our final inspection report on the effectiveness of the police response to violence against women and girls](#). We urged the then Government to urgently review the detective constable role. We said they should make this career path more attractive by offering better pay, promotion opportunities and support.

We made the same recommendation in [our first joint inspection with His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate \(HMCPsi\) into the police and CPS response to rape](#) in 2021.

The [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) has been working with the Home Office to understand the different ways forces try to recruit and keep investigators. But when we inspected, the Home Office still hadn't completed this review. Until this is done, victims will lose out because there are too few detectives to meet demand.

Many forces we inspected recruit direct entry detectives. This means people join the force as a detective, rather than as a uniformed officer first. Some forces recruit both [police staff](#) investigators and detectives into their RASSO teams to boost numbers.

Uniformed officers often don't want to become detectives. This is because cases are often high-risk and, in some forces, detective roles are paid less than officer roles. To tackle this, some forces give extra payments to officers who become trained detectives. But not all forces can afford this.

Due to the detective shortages, most forces also struggled to appoint enough detective tutors. Some made new detectives become tutors as soon as they finished training. But many new detectives said they didn't have enough experience to manage their work and supervise trainees' cases at the same time.

Most forces face challenges in managing demand in RASSO units

Most forces we inspected understand the gaps in their RASSO teams and have plans to fill them, including with direct entry detectives. But one senior manager in a rape investigation team said 45 percent of their detective posts were vacant. They told us they had "no idea how to fill them".

Some forces deal with the lack of detectives by giving RASSO cases to non-specialist investigators. These are investigators who have had no RASSO training.

Those forces told us that these were cases reported before Soteria began. They also said that, before non-specialists took these cases, a supervisor had looked at them and decided they were less complex. Most forces managed risks well by getting experienced supervisors to oversee these cases. But this didn't always happen.

In one force, a response officer with 18 months of service said they were handling a complex rape case. It involved a suspect who had tried to murder their partner by strangling them. The officer didn't have enough experience or training to deal with such a complex case. And we saw no evidence of a recent case review by their supervisor.

When we asked the supervisor about this, they said they had been managing two response teams because of workforce shortages. And they had only just come back to work after serious illness. This is unacceptable. It leaves victims at risk of harm and is unfair to police personnel.

Recommendation 1

As soon as possible, and no later than 30 November 2024, the Home Office should complete its urgent review of the detective constable role. And it should share the findings of this review with the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#).

The review should include specific recommendations that make sure all forces have the investigators they need, including those who specialise in investigating rape and other serious sexual offences. In its review, the Home Office should focus on making this career path more attractive by offering better support, promotion opportunities and rewards.

Suspect-focused investigations are helping investigators consider the wider context of RASSO cases

In the forces we inspected, we found investigators consider the wider context behind RASSO reports. Under Soteria, investigators examine the wider context of a crime, including [intelligence](#) about the RASSO suspect and digital evidence. It also means considering how the suspect acted towards the victim (and others) before and during the alleged crime.

This detailed approach helps investigators build cases where the evidence points towards or away from a suspect. It also helps the police and prosecutors collect evidence that a jury is more likely to understand.

There is training available on RASSO cases too. For example, forces provide the RASSO investigation skills development programme (RISDP) to teach personnel, such as investigators and supervisors, more about handling RASSO incidents. In forces where personnel have completed this training, we found a better understanding of [controlling, coercive or threatening behaviours](#).

In focus groups, response officers who have had RISDP training said they carry out intelligence checks to look for evidence of these types of behaviours during cases. They also understand how to take a balanced approach to collecting digital evidence and the different ways victim might respond to trauma.

Early advice isn't always working well enough

The police should consider asking the CPS for early advice (EA) in RASSO cases, especially where they are more complicated. EA involves CPS prosecutors giving the police guidance to help them understand what evidence they need to support a prosecution or if a suspect can be charged.

The CPS uses EA to help police understand how to manage investigations. It includes advice about how much digital evidence can be collected. And it can also cover relevant legal advice or what criminal charges the police could pursue.

EA can help reduce the number of action plans the CPS gives to the police. Action plans are lists of tasks that prosecutors ask investigators to complete before deciding whether someone can be charged. Action plans might ask for extra statements from witnesses or request social care records and medical evidence.

EA should speed up investigations. But we found that it wasn't used consistently in every force and the CPS took a long time to provide it in some places. For example, the CPS usually gives EA within 48 hours in Wales, but in many forces the police wait up to 30 days.

Where EA worked well, the police and CPS had useful face-to-face meetings to discuss the case. They agreed lines of enquiry to focus on and proportionate actions to take. This is good. It shows what the police and CPS can achieve when they work together effectively.

In other forces, EA didn't work well because the police weren't always sure how to use it properly. In one force, the CPS lead told us investigators send over too much information, which makes giving EA more difficult. They said the police send over complex evidence files that are over 25 pages long, rather than specific questions for prosecutors with a case summary.

In November 2023, a lead prosecutor in one CPS area [dip sampled](#) 51 evidence files to evaluate the use of EA. They found that 19 weren't complex cases, so police supervisors should have made decisions without asking for EA. Forces should make sure they only use EA where it is useful and they can't make decisions alone.

Every force we inspected holds operational improvement meetings, where police and the CPS discuss how to work together more effectively. These help them monitor how EA is working.

To help them ask for EA, the police use the NOM's new investigation management document (IMD). And in November 2023, the NPCC's lead for adult sexual violence published new guidance on EA to help forces too.

But there are still problems. Some police interviewees said the IMD is repetitive and takes too long to complete. And CPS leads said it doesn't always make clear what advice is needed.

One CPS RASSO lead told us: "My heart sinks when I see the IMD." They agreed that it is too long and includes too much information. Many said the same thing. One said it was "pure duplication" of information in other documents.

Recommendation 2

By 31 January 2025, the Soteria Joint Unit should work with the [College of Policing](#), the Crown Prosecution Service and the police to approve and publish a new investigation management document.

The document should avoid unnecessary detail, and focus on the specific advice police need from prosecutors in rape and other serious sexual offences cases.

Soteria is helping to improve the relationship between some police and CPS RASSO specialists

Under Soteria, relationships between police and CPS personnel working on RASSO are improving.

In interviews, every police and CPS RASSO lead said they now work together more effectively. In focus groups, RASSO investigators said the same thing about their relationships with specialist RASSO prosecutors.

When we reviewed records of meetings, we found more evidence of this. CPS-police discussions are suspect-focused, proportionate and consider victims' needs. This is good.

The CPS and the police also both focus on making sure evidence requests are proportionate and justifiable. It shows a move away from the deep divides we reported in [our 2022 joint inspection with HMCSI into the police and CPS response to rape](#).

But there were still some challenges. Investigators told us that charging decisions made by some [on-call](#) prosecutors aren't always victim centred.

In one case, an investigator asked the CPS to charge a rape suspect and keep them in custody. The on-call prosecutor refused because the victim hadn't given evidence in an interview. The investigator argued that the victim's account was already on body-worn video and said that the victim shouldn't have to explain the traumatic event again so soon after the crime. But the CPS didn't accept the body-worn video was enough to support a charging decision.

In another case, a prosecutor asked police to download extra data from a victim's phone. The force's digital media investigator said it wasn't justified and refused the request.

Requests for evidence must be necessary, proportionate and justifiable. It is important to consider victims' needs throughout RASSO cases.

Training on word-on-word cases must improve

Some victim support organisations raised concerns about how the police handle word-on-word RASSO cases. These are cases where the only evidence is the victim's account against the suspect's word.

Victim support groups told us that, before taking a case to the CPS, the police sometimes require corroborative evidence. This is evidence that can help prove the victim's account. But CPS guidance says that suspects can be convicted even where there is little or no corroboration.

This type of evidence isn't legally required. And some RASSO cases are unlikely to have corroboration: for example, cases where victims and suspects disagree about whether consent was given and where there is no other forensic evidence.

We found that many investigators and police supervisors didn't fully understand this part of CPS guidance. CPS and police RASSO leads claim that more word-on-word cases are being put forward for prosecution. But we found no data to support this.

The NOM gives guidance on legal standards for word-on-word RASSO cases. But until the police and CPS use it consistently, some victims won't get justice. Chief constables should make sure investigators follow this important guidance.

Recommendation 3

By 31 January 2025, all forces should make sure personnel working on rape and other serious sexual offences receive College of Policing approved training on the investigation of word-on-word cases.

RASSO cases are still very delayed in reaching court

In interviews with investigators and ISVAs, they told us that RASSO cases still take a long time to reach trial. Victims were often waiting at least two years for courts to hear their cases. And in two specific forces, they waited as long as four years.

We found that scheduled court dates are often delayed. Some cases are listed as floating trials, meaning that they might take place if gaps appear in the court schedule.

This is unacceptable. It makes it more likely victims will withdraw support for cases.

2. Identification and disruption of repeat suspects

Forces need national guidance to help them identify and disrupt repeat suspects

[College of Policing](#) guidance shows that one in four rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) reports involves a repeat suspect. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

To deal with RASSO effectively, forces should target those who keep committing these crimes.

But the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) has no national definition of a repeat suspect for forces in England and Wales to use. Without a standard definition, many forces identify repeat suspects with the recency, frequency and gravity (RFG) model. This looks at how recent, frequent and grave suspects' alleged crimes are. But while RFG is a common assessment tool used by the police, it wasn't designed for sexual offences.

Some forces have improved the RFG model by adding [victim](#) risk factors and the police's professional judgement to each case. This is known as RFGV+.

Most of the nine forces we inspected already identify and target repeat RASSO suspects using RFGV+ or were planning to use a similar model by April 2024.

In one force, RASSO investigators told us there is no method for targeting repeat suspects. Their supervisor said: "There's no list of top offenders. This type of business isn't really [intelligence](#)-led."

This force's RASSO lead accepted that they are "painfully behind the curve". The force has already had a [peer review](#) assessment of its Soteria plan, which gave it feedback on this area. But the force still hasn't changed things. This is unacceptable.

Two forces also told us about specific problems that make it harder for them to identify and disrupt repeat suspects.

One claimed that the National Operating Model (NOM) guidance about repeat suspects isn't fit for purpose. It said the NOM's disruption toolkit, which explains how forces should target repeat RASSO suspects, is too long and complicated.

The other force said the toolkit doesn't tell forces about ethical issues they need to consider when targeting repeat suspects. This includes making sure that disrupting a repeat suspect is justifiable, given the right to privacy under the Human Rights Act 1998.

There is no consistent approach to identifying and disrupting repeat suspects across forces

All forces in England and Wales are responsible bodies under [multi-agency public protection arrangements \(MAPPA\)](#). These involve police working with partners, such as health or probation services, to manage risks from sexual, violent and other dangerous offenders.

Under MAPPA, police forces have teams for the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) who have been convicted of relevant crimes.

MAPPA covers some offenders who have no convictions but are suspected of sexual offences or have behaviours that may pose sexual risks. After they have been referred to the local co-ordinator, these offenders can be managed under MAPPA.

For suspects with no convictions, forces should consider using the potentially dangerous persons process to manage risks. This process allows the police to create a multi-agency response to the suspect, create a record of the risks they pose and place [warning markers](#) on the [Police National Computer](#).

The process results in a force creating a risk management plan. This can include asking courts for protection orders, such as a [sexual risk order](#), which place conditions on suspects. For example, it can limit internet use, prevent travel abroad or require them to tell police when they move in with a new partner.

We spoke with police offender management leads about how they manage risks posed by repeat RASSO suspects who haven't been convicted. We found that the potentially dangerous persons process was rarely used.

Instead, most forces now use a different process called [multi-agency tasking and co-ordination \(MATAC\)](#). This was first trialled in 2015 by Northumbria Police.

MATAC aims to reduce [domestic abuse](#) by sharing information between the police and partners (such as housing services) about dangerous suspects. It often involves programmes that try to change how perpetrators behave towards victims, so that they don't commit further crimes.

Promising practice: Durham Constabulary has created a new process to manage high-risk rape and other serious sexual offences suspects, even if they haven't been convicted

Durham Constabulary has used [multi-agency tasking and co-ordination \(MATAC\)](#) teams to deal with [domestic abuse](#) perpetrators in its force area. This was effective at reducing the harm created by medium-risk perpetrators.

One independent academic study found that MATAC reduced domestic abuse referrals by 42 percent. Many of those referrals included [controlling, coercive or threatening behaviours](#). Another evaluation in 2023 showed a 38 percent drop in referrals over a longer time period.

But this approach wasn't used for high-risk offenders, who pose even greater danger to victims.

Instead, Durham Constabulary increased the size of its [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) team. The constabulary then made this larger team responsible for managing [high-risk domestic abuse](#) suspects. They did this through [multi-agency public protection arrangements](#).

This meant the MOSOVO team could manage some repeat rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) suspects, including some who hadn't been convicted yet. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

To support this team, the constabulary uses analysts to identify repeat RASSO suspects. It also monitors suspects who break [bail](#) conditions or other restrictions that are designed to keep victims safe.

The constabulary's overall approach is good. It could help to protect RASSO victims from harm.

Recommendation 4

By 31 January 2025, the Soteria Joint Unit should work with the [College of Policing](#), the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the Victims' Commissioner and police forces to:

- define what a repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspect is; and
- create new guidance for forces on managing repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects, including the benefits of using the potentially dangerous persons and [multi-agency tasking and co-ordination](#) processes.

Recommendation 5

By 31 July 2025, chief constables should make sure their forces use the new definition of repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects to identify and manage them.

Recommendation 6

By 31 January 2025, the Soteria Joint Unit and the [College of Policing](#) should work with forces to help them understand the National Operating Model's disruption toolkit. This should help the police to manage repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects effectively.

The police should do more to protect victims during RASSO cases

Most forces we inspected had [positive action](#) policies. These encourage [officers](#) to consider arresting suspects after [domestic abuse](#) reports.

But this wasn't always the case for rape reports. And few forces could tell us how many repeat suspects they arrest, rather than asking them to complete voluntary interviews.

Some officers said that if they don't arrest someone, they can't set pre-charge [bail](#) conditions. These help the police prevent suspects contacting the victim or other witnesses. If the police can't set bail conditions, some victims could feel less safe.

But positive action isn't always what a victim wants. Some victims don't want a criminal justice outcome, so may not support the police arresting a suspect. The police need to balance these risks and benefits.

Whatever action they take, forces must make sure they have a good understanding of repeat RASSO offenders. This should include both those who have been arrested or convicted and those who haven't.

The police should try to understand a suspect's past actions in detail. If forces understand what RASSO offenders have done before, it will be much easier for them to target and disrupt these offenders in the future. This will protect victims from harm by preventing further crimes.

The police don't always manage pre-charge bail breaches well

In our inspection, we examined how forces manage suspects who breach bail conditions or civil orders. This is important because some victims need protection from suspects throughout cases. On average, a RASSO investigation lasts ten months. And it can then take between two and four years for a case to reach trial.

Every force we inspected tracked how often they apply for and secure civil orders. But only a few monitored whether RASSO suspects breach civil orders or bail conditions.

Many investigators said that police bail conditions aren't taken seriously by the criminal justice system. Even though breaching bail can lead to an arrest, suspects who do this can't be charged. Breaching bail isn't a criminal offence by itself. Investigators told us suspects sometimes ignore bail conditions because they know courts don't take them seriously.

[Independent sexual violence advisers \(ISVAs\)](#) told us that if officers think a bail breach is minor, they usually don't arrest the suspect. For example, if a breach doesn't involve threats of physical violence, the police might not arrest the suspect. Instead, it might only be mentioned in the police report to a court. One ISVA told us that some officers justify this by saying the victim was "overreacting". Another ISVA said that police sometimes say: "It's not quite a breach."

In one interview, several ISVAs told us about a case where a suspect went to a victim's house. They were caught on a video doorbell camera. But even though this breached their bail conditions, the police decided it wasn't serious enough to arrest them.

Even if there is no risk of violence, forces need to recognise the dangers of ignoring what they feel are minor bail breaches. Taking no action can encourage suspects to keep breaching conditions or commit more serious offences. It could lead to victims withdrawing support for a case if they feel unsafe.

Promising practice: Kent Police consider arresting suspects for new criminal offences when they breach pre-charge bail conditions

When suspects breach pre-charge [bail](#) conditions, the police should consider what other crimes they may have committed. For example, a suspect who contacts a [victim](#) (in breach of bail conditions) could be arrested for [stalking](#) or [harassment](#), depending on how they have behaved.

In Kent Police, rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigators told us the force works hard to arrest suspects who breach police bail. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

In Kent, when a suspect breaches bail, the police carefully examine what the suspect has done. They try to understand if they can arrest the suspect for another crime. This is a good approach. It can help to keep victims safe.

The police could use protection orders more effectively to safeguard victims

In 2014, the Government introduced [sexual harm prevention orders \(SHPOs\)](#) and [sexual risk orders](#). They place restrictions on people's behaviour to stop them causing sexual harm to others. Under Soteria, forces are encouraged to use all types of protection order to place restrictions on suspects. These help to keep victims safe.

The police can apply to courts to place SHPOs on people convicted or [cautioned](#) for sexual or violent offences. The police can also sometimes ask for an interim SHPO which applies before a case reaches court.

The police can give sexual risk orders to suspects they think could cause sexual harm to others, with approval from a court. Unlike SHPOs, a person can be given a sexual risk order even if they don't have a criminal conviction.

We found that some forces have a dedicated prevention orders officer. They give training and help colleagues apply for protection orders. But we still found that only half the personnel we spoke to knew how to use them effectively. This must improve.

Force legal teams manage applications for SHPOs. But some investigators said legal teams don't ask for interim SHPOs often enough. Instead, prosecutors often delay applying for SHPOs until court cases are over. This could put some victims at risk.

In some forces, legal services are run by external providers. Investigators told us this makes it more difficult to challenge things that aren't working.

Promising practice: Lancashire Constabulary uses civil orders to protect victims from harm

In Lancashire Constabulary, [police personnel](#) secure civil orders which place restrictions on suspects to keep others safe. They try to do this when they start rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigations. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

For example, investigators work with [victims](#) and their [independent sexual violence advisers](#) to secure [restraining orders](#) or [non-molestation orders](#). The police record these orders on their systems with instructions on what personnel should do if they are breached.

Breaking a civil order is a criminal offence. This means that [officers](#) can charge suspects who ignore these rules. This can help [safeguard](#) victims from dangerous RASSO perpetrators.

Recommendation 7

By 31 January 2025, all chief constables should make sure their forces prioritise identifying and disrupting rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) suspects. This includes making sure that:

- forces track, manage and respond effectively to breaches of bail and protection orders in RASSO cases; and
- all relevant personnel complete National Operating Model training on using criminal and civil orders to tackle RASSO.

Recommendation 8

By 30 November 2025, the [College of Policing](#) and the Soteria Joint Unit should commission independent academic research to evaluate how well forces use criminal and civil orders in rape and other serious sexual offences cases.

This should focus on [officers'](#) knowledge of protection orders and the application process and use of relevant orders, restrictions and breaches.

Based on their findings, the College and the Joint Unit should give guidance to forces on the most effective way to use these powers.

The police don't use their powers to retain fingerprints and DNA often enough

Under [section 63G of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#), the police can apply to keep the fingerprints and DNA of RASSO suspects who haven't yet been charged or convicted.

This power came into force in 2013. It lets the police keep biometric material for up to three years. It can help in cases where the victim is too scared to give evidence but might need DNA evidence if they decide to support a case later on.

In [the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner's annual report for 2022 to 2023](#), the Commissioner stated that from April 2023 to September 2023, 70 percent of forces in England and Wales made no section 63G applications at all. And 20 percent of forces have never made a section 63G application.

We found that most RASSO investigators and supervisors didn't know enough about this power. This is poor. Forces should do more to understand and use it to protect victims.

Recommendation 9

By 31 January 2025, chief constables should make sure their forces have good processes in place for applying to retain DNA and fingerprints to improve their use of [section 63G of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984](#).

3. Victim-centred investigations and procedural justice

Soteria is helping to create a new victim-centred culture

In [the Operation Soteria Bluestone Year One independent report published in December 2022](#), Professor Betsy Stanko OBE found that the criminal justice process can be traumatic for rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) [victims](#). RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

In her research, Professor Stanko found that many RASSO victims feel like they are put on trial when they report these crimes. There was too much focus on their sexual history and behaviour, rather than the suspect's account.

Soteria takes a victim-centred approach instead. It focuses on investigations that try to tell the whole story. It challenges the behaviour of suspects and uses [procedural justice](#) to help win RASSO victims' trust.

In our inspection, we found good evidence that new RASSO training covers more than just the law. It dispels rape myths and shows how psychological trauma can stop RASSO victims seeking help. It also helps the police think more carefully about their beliefs, behaviours and the language they use with victims.

This suggests that Soteria training can change the police's approach to RASSO. It could also be used with related crimes such as [sexual exploitation](#) and [domestic abuse](#).

Most forces are good at helping victims access specialist support

[Police and crime commissioners \(PCCs\)](#) work with public health boards, charities and others to support RASSO victims, including people with diverse and complex needs. Information about how victims can access these services is widely available on police internal and external websites.

We found several examples of support for diverse groups in forces we inspected. For instance, in the Metropolitan Police area, we found 32 [independent domestic violence adviser \(IDVA\)](#) or [independent sexual violence adviser \(ISVA\)](#) groups that support RASSO victims. This includes support for men and boys and people from different faith groups, translation services and specialist mental health services.

In some forces, ISVAs and IDVAs are based in accident and emergency departments. This helps because some victims don't want to report RASSO directly to the police but might tell someone in a hospital setting.

We found that most [police personnel](#) knew how to signpost victims to the right support. This is very good.

Many specialist RASSO support services are overstretched

RASSO victims need timely support from well-trained specialists throughout the criminal justice process. This is most important when victims first report to the police, as they are often in crisis. But RASSO support services told us they struggle to keep up with demand for their help.

In most forces, ISVAs and IDVAs work with investigators to support victims. And while many RASSO victims do get timely support, others don't.

In some force areas, we found that RASSO victims can wait four months to receive specialist support. In one interview, a RASSO supervisor said that waiting times varied so much that: "It's like a postcode lottery." They added that: "Some cases went to court before an ISVA was even in place."

In another force, ISVAs told us that demand has risen rapidly and that they struggle to meet victims' needs. Since the start of 2023, there has been a 130 percent increase in victims referred to ISVAs in this area.

To deal with this, the police sometimes try to support victims themselves. But they don't have the right training or knowledge for this. It means RASSO victims don't get the specialist advice and support they need.

If victims can't get help when they need it, they are more likely to withdraw support for cases. Evidence for this comes from [the City, University of London interim report on the Operation Soteria Bluestone rape and sexual assault survivors' survey](#). The university found that, among victims who gave up on their case, one in three might have kept going if they had had a specialist adviser or other mental health support.

The National Operating Model (NOM) gives forces guidance on the victim support services they should provide. But it doesn't talk about how many victims support workers manage.

Many told us they deal with up to 90 cases at once. This means they can't always give victims the service they need. This must change.

There isn't enough funding for victim services

In September 2021, we published [our final inspection report on the effectiveness of the police response to violence against women and girls](#). We urged the Government at that time to create better structures to support victims and provide tailored, consistent help for them.

There has been some progress in recent years, with more funding from the Ministry of Justice. But there still isn't a stable, long-term approach.

In England and Wales, PCCs are responsible for funding local victim services. But we found that funding arrangements are too complicated. They often include a complex mix of funding from PCCs, the Government and other one-off financial grants.

We found that some PCCs worked with health boards to decide what support services to offer. This is good. Supporting victims often means protecting their physical and mental health, and health boards have useful expertise in this area.

But some victim service providers said that victims of specific types of assault weren't given enough support by health services. This includes victims who experienced non-fatal strangulation or suffocation. They told us these victims can't access the same information documents or support that victims of penetrative sexual assault can. This makes it harder for them to get justice or recover from these crimes.

PCCs and ISVAs often told us that once domestic abuse services have been given funding, there isn't enough left over for RASSO victim services. This also means some victims with specific needs, such as those with an uncertain immigration status, don't always get the support they need.

In many forces, the short-term nature of funding means some services only have enough money in place for the next three months. This is poor.

A long-term approach is needed. It would make sure victims have the consistent support needed for long-term recovery. And it would reduce the risk that victim support staff leave the sector due to poor job security.

Recommendation 10

By 30 April 2025, the Home Office and Ministry of Justice should adapt funding arrangements to make sure there is enough support for all rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) [victims](#). This should include:

- providing extra funding for RASSO support services;
- placing funding for RASSO support services on a long-term footing to make sure there is consistent specialist support available; and
- working with the relevant [police and crime commissioner](#)'s office to make sure national grant funding aligns with funding given via local commissioning arrangements.

Police communication with victims is improving but varies across forces

As part of a procedural justice approach, forces must communicate effectively with RASSO victims. They should record victims' views and wishes and, where possible, use these to inform their approach to cases. This will help victims trust the police and feel believed by them.

The [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime \('the Victims' Code'\)](#) sets out the minimum standards criminal justice bodies and others must meet for victims in England and Wales. These include giving victims support and information at every stage of their case.

In [our 2022 joint inspection with His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate into the police and CPS response to rape](#), we said that most victims felt police communication with them was poor. They also said the police contacted them less often as the case went on.

One of the NOM's aims is to improve how often and how well the police communicate with victims. This includes making sure RASSO victims get timely updates from a single point of contact.

Most forces offered a single point of contact via a new police role, known as a victim progression or victim engagement officer. Others use sexual offence liaison officers for this. And investigating officers also have some contact with victims. Between them, these personnel regularly update a victim needs assessment.

In our inspection, many ISVAs said things had improved. They told us that the police, particularly RASSO teams, are better at communicating with victims. Victims get more information about the case, and the police consider their needs more often. But this doesn't always happen.

In one focus group, ISVAs told us that the police didn't update or contact one victim until four months after their first interview. The police said that this was due to very high workloads.

In other forces, we found that investigators with reasonable workloads have the time to update victims. And they work more closely with ISVAs to give extra support when needed.

In Kent Police, the force recognises that some RASSO victims are vulnerable to suspects persuading them to withdraw support for cases. To deal with this, investigators and ISVAs carry out visits to victims' homes, where they look for signs of [controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour](#) by suspects. ISVAs told us this can help keep victims safe, especially those who have experienced many years of abuse.

Police systems for communicating victim needs vary across forces

The NOM gives forces guidance on how to complete a victim needs assessment. And some forces use this assessment process well.

In South Wales Police, victim progression officers use a central system to update victim needs assessments throughout a case. This means victims only have to tell the police about their needs once and get extra support quickly. This could include access to an [intermediary](#), special measures such as video-recorded evidence for court or other personal support.

But some forces don't do this. In one pathfinder force, personnel record contact from victims in at least three different places on force systems. And they don't use the NOM's victim needs assessment document.

The force strategic lead for Soteria told us they had given pillar leads access to the NOM document. The pillar leads said they hadn't received this. This poor communication will make it harder for the force's Soteria strategy to work.

The police are trying different ways to communicate with victims whose first language isn't English

We found that people trying to support victims use different methods to communicate with them, especially when they don't speak English as a first language.

The Lancashire PCC's office has an online portal that tells victims about all the support services in the area, including for victims of RASSO or [hate crime](#). This helps people, such as those who don't speak English as a first language, access services when they are in crisis.

In Durham, a multi-agency sexual violence group supports rape victims who are migrants. It offers information leaflets in different languages to help them access support.

In South Wales, the force gives out an information booklet to RASSO victims and cards with digital QR codes on them. These codes link to information in different languages about how the criminal justice process works and the services available to victims. This helps people from diverse backgrounds get the support they need.

South Wales Police also funds an ISVA to help sex workers recognise when they have been a RASSO victim and access services. And the force offers specific support for RASSO victims who have been [trafficked](#) by [organised crime groups](#).

The police don't always explain to victims decisions to take no further action

In [the City, University of London interim report on the Operation Soteria Bluestone rape and sexual assault survivors' survey](#), academics reported problems with how the police communicate with victims. A total of 32 percent of victims didn't know if the police had examined all the evidence. Only 26 percent said they would be highly likely to report a sexual offence again. And just 31 percent said the police met them in person to discuss their case being closed.

The NOM has template documents that forces can use when communicating with victims. These include guidance on how to tell victims they are closing a case and taking no further action.

These documents help forces explain the strengths and weaknesses of the evidence found in the investigation. They cover support services, how the police make decisions using legal standards for proving a case in court and giving feedback. They also invite victims to speak with the police about why the case was closed and discuss victims' rights to compensation, using civil orders and the [right to review](#).

These documents can be sent directly to victims. But some are explained in a phone call or face-to-face meeting with the victim and their ISVA.

We found some good examples of RASSO investigators working with ISVAs to explain why they are closing a case. Where possible, they do this at a sexual assault referral centre. This is a safe, neutral space, where some victims can access immediate support.

For example, in South Wales, ISVAs said that victims receive a specialist counselling session straight after they are told their case will be closed. This helps them deal with the decision and supports their recovery.

In most forces, ISVAs said that RASSO investigators manage this process well. They understand it can be traumatic and they treat victims with care. But this isn't always true. Some [police officers](#) don't do enough to support victims when closing a case.

In one focus group, ISVAs said they only find out about no further action decisions when the victim tells them. Others said that the same force will verbally inform victims their case is being closed, but victims don't get an official letter until several months later. This is poor. It shows that some non-specialist officers don't understand the ISVA role.

Some forces told us there are now fewer victims' right to review applications, especially since they started using the NOM's no further action guidance documents. They suggested victims may now feel more informed, so they don't want to appeal.

We saw no data to support this. We will consider the victims' right to review police and CPS decisions in any future inspections in this area.

Forces don't always use victims' feedback to make improvements

Victim feedback is collected in different ways at local level. Many commissioned support services ask victims for feedback on the support they have received. Because they collect this information themselves, it isn't fully independent. But it can help PCCs understand the quality of support and any gaps in services.

Many forces also carry out their own victim surveys, though these aren't always specific to RASSO.

We also found that most forces hold forums where service providers give victims' feedback to police. They discuss specific RASSO cases and any problems, such as the timeliness and quality of updates to victims. This lets service providers raise concerns with senior police RASSO leads.

These forums are a good way to provide feedback about particular problems. But they don't always follow the victims' journey through the whole criminal justice system.

We also found that senior officers don't always consider victim feedback when looking at their force's performance on RASSO. They rely on numbers and targets but don't focus on qualitative feedback from victims.

PCCs and [chief officers](#) must work with victim support services to collect and use feedback. Forces should regularly include this information in performance frameworks. Feedback from the survey run by the City, University of London should be part of this.

It is too early to tell if a national survey of RASSO victims shows improvements under Soteria

As part of Soteria, the City, University of London created a survey to record the experiences of victims of rape and sexual assault who report to the police. This was introduced in January 2023.

When we inspected, the survey was still open. But in September 2023, [the City, University of London published its interim report on the Operation Soteria Bluestone rape and sexual assault survivors' survey](#), based on the views of 1,968 people who completed it between January and June 2023.

The university found that victims who have recently been in contact with police are now having much better experiences. But the report's author told us victims often report a better service at the start of cases, with contact from police then becoming less frequent.

While the interim report suggests the police response to RASSO might be improving, the survey is still ongoing. In September 2024, a further report is due to be published. This may give further insights into victims' experiences.

Once 30 victims in a force area have replied to the survey, local police can access statistically significant data about the service they are giving victims. This is very useful.

We asked police victim service leads how they had promoted the survey to victims and used the feedback. We found that most forces ask victims to complete it. But in one force, the victim lead didn't even know it existed. This is poor. Forces should make sure they share the survey with victims and use the feedback to improve things.

4. The well-being of rape and other serious sexual offences investigators

Some forces don't give dedicated well-being support to rape and other serious sexual offences teams

In every force we inspected, police well-being leads were proud of the support they offer the workforce. This includes access to mental health first aid, peer support and annual psychological screening for personnel in some roles.

Rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) teams can all access well-being support services. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

But due to the high workloads in RASSO teams, many investigators don't have the time to research and ask for the support they need. And they sometimes only have access to well-being services for all police personnel, rather than any specific RASSO support.

In two forces, some RASSO supervisors are trained in trauma-informed prevention. This is good. It helps them spot the signs of trauma in their personnel, such as investigators struggling to show emotion as a way of coping with stress. Forces should recognise that RASSO cases can only be successful if forces protect investigators from stress and burnout.

Most forces we inspected treat RASSO roles as high risk for potential trauma. And it is good that some forces give RASSO teams mandatory psychological screening to check for signs of this. But in other forces, there is no screening at all.

All forces must treat RASSO roles as high risk and offer mandatory psychological screening to protect their personnel's well-being and help them access other support.

In a few forces, senior leaders consider all the demands on RASSO personnel. This includes both their usual investigative work and other demands too. For example, they consider time taken to manage case files, support [victims](#) or prepare for trials that are then delayed.

These forces change shift patterns to make sure personnel can take well-being and training days. They ask them how to improve office spaces so that they can take breaks and have a positive environment to work in. This is good leadership that focuses on people's needs.

Some forces have specific schemes to support the well-being of RASSO personnel

We found that forces use a range of schemes to provide extra support to RASSO personnel. These can help protect their well-being and help them deal with stress or trauma.

Some forces use Pause Point to help RASSO investigators ask for help. This scheme lets them take time away from work if they are struggling to cope. The National Operating Model (NOM) gives guidance to help all forces use this programme. And some told us they are working with the Soteria Joint Unit to formally evaluate it too.

Durham Constabulary has a similar scheme called Operation Shield. This lets investigators ask to not take on any more cases. This makes sure they have enough time to manage their existing workload.

Other forces, such as Lancashire Constabulary, give well-being days to RASSO personnel and others in high-risk roles. They spend a day away from the workplace, taking part in activities such as exercise, meditation, counselling, or well-being workshops. Many personnel said this break is important to help them cope with stress.

In South Wales, the force has four counsellors. One counsellor was hired to work only with CID, [child](#) protection and RASSO teams. Counsellors talk with investigators, helping them spot signs of stress and when work is affecting their well-being.

Every RASSO team in South Wales Police also has a detective sergeant who acts as a well-being lead. They share well-being concerns with senior leaders in strategic Soteria meetings and suggest how to protect personnel from stress.

When forces have enough investigators to deal with demand, schemes that provide support work well. They can reduce or prevent long-term absence due to stress.

In most forces, leaders care about the well-being of RASSO personnel. They are trying to recruit new investigators into these teams and help existing personnel deal with stress. This is good.

But many forces still don't have detailed sickness data for each team. This makes it harder to spot patterns of stress or sickness and take action to prevent them.

Promising practice: West Midlands Police provides a well-being programme to support rape investigation teams

West Midlands Police has created a new range of well-being services with a specialist partner. They call this the Inspire Wellbeing Programme.

The force gives rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) personnel specific well-being training days. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

These well-being days teach personnel how to take better care of their mental health and create healthy habits. They give access to a hypnotherapist who teaches investigators how to cope with stress and avoid burnout.

RASSO personnel told us this is having a positive impact on their well-being. They said that more people are choosing to apply for or stay in RASSO roles.

The force has told the Soteria Joint Unit about the benefits of this programme. It is planning to complete a formal evaluation of it.

Critical reflection should become a key part of RASSO investigations

Critical reflection is a key part of the Soteria model of RASSO investigations. It encourages personnel to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs and consider how these could affect their approach to cases. It also helps them think about how their work affects their well-being.

The NOM gives forces guidance on critical reflection. But investigators and supervisors need training to understand the benefits.

When we inspected, most forces were still training their personnel on the Soteria approach. This meant that critical reflection wasn't being used yet.

Most RASSO investigators said they have regular contact with supervisors, who ask them about their cases and well-being. But we found that one-to-one meetings with supervisors are usually held in open office spaces and have no clear structure. This makes it harder for investigators to talk openly about issues they may be having.

One supervisor told us about a briefing they had watched called Preparing for Soteria. This was created by the academics involved in Soteria Bluestone. It gave them advice on one-to-one supervision of RASSO personnel. They told us: "Having watched the presentation, I realise critical reflection is organic, not formal. There's a lot more we could be doing." This is encouraging.

Forces should treat critical reflection as an important part of an effective police response to RASSO.

High workloads can harm investigators' well-being, but some forces are making positive changes

In all forces, RASSO personnel said their main well-being issue was stress due to high workloads. We found that RASSO investigators' workloads vary a lot. In one small force, they managed eight cases on average. In another force, it was 40.

Some forces have a policy that investigators only manage up to 15 cases at once. Investigators said this means they don't take work home with them and can sleep better because they worry less about work. And they only stay late if a case needs urgent action.

One RASSO investigator told us: "When I started, the average was 27 jobs per investigator. Some were on 35. Now, it's down to 15, the best we've ever been. In terms of morale, it's a significantly different place."

But this view wasn't shared across the whole force. In other RASSO units, some investigators said it was difficult to cope with their workload. They took work home with them, and some were trying to leave their roles. A RASSO supervisor told us the force was letting down victims. They said some who had reported rape in 2021 still haven't had any updates because investigators are so busy.

Where forces struggle to recruit RASSO investigators, supervisors told us they have to start investigating cases themselves. They do this while also supervising up to 100 live investigations. Some supervisors said this was the only way to keep up with demand.

In one force with high workloads, the Soteria lead said they were working hard to recruit and train new RASSO personnel. But as a small force, this couldn't be done quickly. When one investigator fell ill, 30 cases had to be shared around the team. A supervisor took some of these, but they told us that others were given to "whoever is least likely to fall over".

In several forces, we found that RASSO investigators are diverted away from their main roles too often. One [police officer](#) told us they had to leave a RASSO case to deal with a child arrested for smoking cannabis. This was because the arresting officer was from a specialist team that don't process their own arrests.

In half the forces we inspected, RASSO personnel are routinely diverted to supporting events such as football matches and festivals.

Forces should recognise that this means RASSO investigators end up cancelling appointments with victims or delaying arrests. It only adds to their workload pressure.

Two forces are working with academics from the Soteria Joint Unit on a pilot project to examine RASSO investigators' workloads. This will create ideas on how to manage workloads effectively and prevent burnout. They expected the results in spring 2024.

Many RASSO investigator posts are held by trainees

Nearly all forces we inspected struggle to recruit detectives. Most are working hard to fill vacancies in RASSO teams, but we often found that there are still gaps.

While they try to recruit more investigators, some forces use student officers or trainee detectives to fill gaps. They join RASSO teams on an attachment. These are short-term placements that are part of their training. These attachments help forces identify personnel they think have the skills to work on RASSO cases permanently.

But in nearly every force, we found that half of RASSO teams are personnel who aren't fully qualified and are still training.

Every force is committed to every RASSO investigator being a qualified detective. But making this happen is difficult. There needs to be appropriate pay, progression and support for detective constables.

As we stated in our first recommendation, the Home Office must urgently complete its review of the detective constable role. This will help deal with some of these issues.

5. Learning and development on the new national standards

Every force we inspected gives rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigators specialist training. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

This training is usually the specialist rape and sexual offence investigation development programme (SSAIDP). This is [authorised professional practice](#) from the [College of Policing](#).

When we inspected, the College was updating the course to align with Soteria and the National Operating Model (NOM). They told us the updated version should be ready in spring 2024.

New specialist training shows early signs of improving RASSO investigations

While the SSAIDP is being updated, the College of Policing and Soteria Bluestone academics have created some interim training for RASSO investigators. This is the RASSO investigation skills development programme (RISDP). It has 11 modules, including specific ones for response [officers](#), specialist investigators and supervisors.

The forces we inspected said nearly every RASSO investigator who is a qualified detective has completed the SSAIDP. But trainee detectives will complete the RISDP until the updated SSAIDP is ready. Most forces had either given the RISDP to personnel already or had achievable plans for doing this by spring 2024.

Three forces we inspected have taken extra steps to make training more [victim](#)-centred. They ask a rape victim to share their experiences with [police personnel](#) during RISDP training. This helps them recognise that some victims react to rape with a survival response and what this looks like.

An RISDP session run by Durham Constabulary gave a good example of this. A rape victim told attendees: “The victim brain does not fight and scratch their way to freedom as I’d envisioned. Instead, I was paralysed with fear.”

This training had a strong effect on attendees. And RASSO personnel said that learning about the psychology of sex offending and its impact on victims helped them

change how they work and become better investigators. They also have more understanding of the different ways perpetrators target victims.

One member of police personnel said to us that, unless there is evidence that suggests a victim isn't being truthful: "We don't test victims' credibility. That doesn't happen in this force." This is a good approach. We were pleased to hear this view shared by investigators in many forces we inspected.

But in one force, we found that some RASSO investigators hadn't done any specialist training. One said that, before speaking with us, they had had to search the internet to find out what Soteria was. Another said: "I went from detective constable to detective sergeant with no training. I've joined the RASSO team with no training."

A final investigator said they had been in the RASSO team for four years and had no specialist training. They said: "The force treats us like it's not really a specialist crime, even though it can be a life sentence offence."

This same force is giving face-to-face RISDP modules virtually, to reduce demand on their training teams. We saw no evidence that the force had evaluated the risks of this.

In general, new training standards are a good thing. But without enough trained detectives in RASSO roles, they will still have a limited impact.

RASSO personnel must have protected time to complete training

Every force we inspected sees RISDP and SSAIDP training as mandatory. This is good. But only some forces give protected time for RASSO personnel to learn, away from their usual working tasks.

Some RISDP modules can be completed online. We were told that some forces didn't give investigators protected time for this, so they have to find time for it during their working days. This means they often don't complete online training because they are too busy. This is poor. It tells investigators that training isn't important to do their jobs.

Other forces take a better approach. They give time for [continuous professional development](#) in RASSO personnel's shift patterns. This often includes time for joint training with partners, such as the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and [independent sexual violence advisers](#).

In Durham Constabulary, Soteria 'champions' give victim-centred training to police personnel, including its criminal justice team which works closely with the CPS.

Senior police leaders told us this training helps criminal justice support staff understand their role in Soteria. And personnel told us this makes them focus on RASSO cases, which leads to better victim and witness care.

The Soteria Joint Unit and College of Policing should work with chief constables to make sure forces give rape investigation skills training properly.

6. Strategic analysis to improve investigations and prevent offences

Forces must make sure they are using qualitative and quantitative data to measure their performance on Soteria

Police forces generally use numerical measures to tell if they are tackling rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) effectively. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

We found that forces often use how many RASSO crimes charges they have made as their main measure of success. Soteria takes a different approach. It uses a wider range of factors to measure how well forces manage RASSO cases.

The National Operating Model (NOM) gives forces guidance on adopting these wider performance measures, which should include both quantitative and qualitative data. This guidance is known as the flight deck.

For example, the guidance suggests that forces should use sickness levels in RASSO teams and whether RASSO cases use a [procedural justice](#) approach as performance measures. They should also consider how often [victims](#) stop supporting a case.

The fifth pillar of Soteria is about using data and analysis effectively. And many forces we inspected have created a pillar lead for this area in their Soteria plan. This is good.

But three forces still didn't have a data and analysis lead in place. This is a major problem. It means that, while their Soteria plans might include qualitative measures, senior leaders still don't use them in performance meetings.

The Soteria Joint Unit told us it has developed a set of Soteria key performance indicators for all forces to use as part of the NOM.

These are yet to be finalised, after the Unit asked forces for their feedback on them. This should help forces use more consistent performance measures.

Forces still have major gaps in their data

Many forces we inspected know there are gaps in their data. This means they can't collect and use some types of information. For example, information about investigations is sometimes placed in text boxes where personnel can write longer answers. But forces can't always analyse or search this data, so they lose useful information that could help with cases.

Data gaps often exist because of limited force IT systems that can be fixed by individual forces themselves. But other gaps require changes to IT systems used by all forces across England and Wales.

The Home Office's National Law Enforcement Data Programme team regularly updates all forces about the quality of data they have placed on national police databases. They do this four times a year.

We asked force leads how well they understood data gaps and error rates for information they place on the [Police National Computer](#) and [Police National Database](#). This can include important but basic errors, such as missing data on gender, ethnicity or dates of birth.

Most forces told us they didn't prioritise understanding or fixing data gaps. This is a mistake. Missing or inaccurate data can make it harder to identify and arrest suspects or serial RASSO offenders.

We found that very few forces are doing enough to improve data accuracy or educate personnel about this. Forces must make sure their workforce focuses on data quality. If not, they will keep making mistakes that can put victims at risk.

In 2023, the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) agreed to focus on a specific data issue. It decided to help all forces improve how they collect data on [protected characteristics](#) and ethnicity. This is a good approach.

But forces shouldn't rely on national fixes to IT systems alone. In their Soteria plans, every force should set out their data gaps and how they will fix them to help tackle RASSO.

Recommendation 11

By 31 March 2025, all chief constables should make sure that, as part of adopting the National Operating Model, their forces:

- develop a rape and other serious sexual offences [problem profile](#);
- include the National Operating Model flight deck within their strategic performance monitoring; and
- adopt any key performance indicators that are agreed and published by the Soteria Joint Unit.

Recommendation 12

By 31 January 2025, the [National Police Chiefs' Council's](#) Digital, Data and Technology Coordination Committee should work with chief constables and the National Law Enforcement Data Programme to reduce data error rates. This should focus on errors on the [Police National Computer](#) and [Police National Database](#).

Forces don't always have the resources needed to analyse data effectively

In many forces, data leads said they often have vacant data analyst posts because they find it difficult to recruit people for them.

Analysts are often used to give [chief officers](#) insights into force performance. But in most forces, there wasn't much analytical support available for investigators managing complex RASSO cases, such as those with multiple victims or covering several years.

Some investigators and supervisors told us they don't even ask for analytical support anymore, as they know they are unlikely to get it.

Some forces have invested in automated digital insight tools. These let personnel search force data and identify patterns themselves. And they let investigators carry out analysis of their own cases. One force said it plans to use this type of system, but it will take two years to buy and set up.

Forces must make sure they scan other crime reports for RASSO. Looking at [domestic abuse](#), [human trafficking](#) and [honour-based abuse](#) cases can help forces understand the true scale of RASSO in their area. Some forces we inspected don't do this. This is poor. Until forces know the true scale of RASSO, they can't be sure their approach is effective.

Instead of scanning other crime reports, most forces said their [intelligence](#) units focus on identifying hotspots where violence against women and girls often takes place.

7. Digital forensic services

Forces have invested in technology to improve RASSO investigations

Every force we inspected has a detailed [digital forensics](#) strategy. It sets out how they will meet the forensic standards required in rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigations. RASSO is a term that covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences.

To reach these standards, forces must invest in high-quality forensic services. The International Organization for Standardization then decides if they have met the required level. Some smaller forces share forensic services to meet the standards and reduce costs.

Every force makes sure their digital forensic units can access the latest technology. They invest in computers and cloud-based services to keep up with demand and new forensic standards. And they train RASSO teams to understand how to use digital forensics in their investigations.

Most forces use digital download kiosks. These are desktop computers with specialist software on them. These can download basic evidence from mobile devices, such as messages or photos from a specific time period.

Personnel told us that most kiosks are easy to access, and forces said they are training more personnel to use them. In one force, 600 personnel are trained to use kiosks to download evidence. Many forces also use digital evidence vans that can take the material they need at crime scenes. This can speed up investigations.

When personnel ask for forensic support, digital investigation units record this on force systems and prioritise important cases. They use basic analysis tools to identify what digital evidence could be on a device at an early stage.

We found that when investigators ask for a digital device to be examined, supervisors often check to make sure it is necessary and will help the case. This helps protect [victims](#) from intrusive digital searches that aren't necessary.

In [our 2022 inspection into the use of digital forensics by police and other agencies](#), we identified several problems with the approach they were taking. Since then, many forces we inspected have improved in this area. This is good.

Digital media investigators can help forces recover digital evidence in a proportionate way

Most forces have digital media investigators (DMIs) who have been trained in how to use digital evidence and data to support cases. They help RASSO investigators use digital evidence during their investigations but in a proportionate way. And in many forces, DMIs give training to RASSO investigators and some Crown Prosecution Service prosecutors.

In one force, DMIs told us they had spotted gaps in the knowledge of some call handlers and new recruits around digital forensics. They wrote a training package to address this. But the DMIs never gave the training, because they were too busy with their usual work.

This is a missed opportunity. Leaders in the force should have dealt with this issue so the DMIs could give the training, but they didn't do so. This is poor.

In some forces, DMIs scan crime reports to identify when new RASSO cases come in. They give early guidance to investigators on how to use the available digital evidence.

DMIs sometimes visit crime scenes to help collect evidence, such as when the police seize internet routers. This is good. It can lead to better investigations and help investigators understand how to safely recover and use digital evidence.

Forces prioritise digital forensics for RASSO cases, but there are still delays in examining suspects' devices

Every force we inspected prioritises digital forensics for RASSO cases. This speeds up investigations, which were often slowed down by delayed digital evidence. By being quicker, forces can prevent victims withdrawing support for cases.

Forces recognise that victims need their phones to access bank accounts and arrange childcare or other support. So every force we inspected returns their phones within 24 hours of the police taking them for forensic examination.

In rare cases where they can't do this, the police give victims replacement phones with their original SIM card. This means they can use them as normal.

In interviews, some RASSO investigators told us they work with victims to explain and agree how they will search their digital devices. This is good, victim-centred practice. It reduces the risk of unnecessary and intrusive digital searches.

In many forces, the police examine suspects' mobile devices more quickly than they used to. Investigators often get results within 30 days. In one force, it took just seven days. This is good.

But this isn't always true. Two forces didn't have enough resources in their digital forensic units. This meant results from suspects' devices took up to five months, which delays cases.

Considering Soteria as a wider model for change

Soteria is an evidence-based model that takes a [victim](#)-centred, context-led and suspect-focused approach to rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO). This term covers most serious sexual crimes, including all rape, attempted rape and sexual assault offences. Soteria is grounded in decades of academic research that shows how policing has failed RASSO victims.

In our inspection, we saw that the National Operating Model (NOM) is already making a difference. New processes, guidance and training are improving police support for RASSO victims and protecting their rights.

We also found evidence that several forces understand that Soteria can have benefits beyond RASSO cases. It can improve police practice around other victim-based crimes, such as [domestic abuse](#) and [modern slavery](#).

This suggests that Soteria could offer a blueprint for improving other parts of policing. But this shouldn't be left to individual forces. To succeed as a model across England and Wales, Soteria will need strong support at national level.

The National Police Chiefs' Council's portfolio structures need to be simplified

In 2021, the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) reviewed its committee and portfolio structures. These give national leadership on specific policing issues. They help forces across England and Wales change how they deal with specific crime types or other complex problems.

But in this review, the NPCC found that its structures weren't working. It said they were "too complex and required considerable time and effort to navigate, agree and deconflict responsibilities and keep all relevant leads briefed". We think this is true.

There are often several NPCC portfolios with very similar responsibilities. And this creates confusion. It means that improving the national approach to specific policing problems is more difficult.

When a problem touches on several portfolios at once, it isn't clear who in the NPCC should take the lead. And this means victims receive a poorer service because things don't improve quickly enough.

In August 2023, [we published our inspection on race disparity in police criminal justice decision-making](#). We said that the police hadn't moved quickly to improve things in this area. We pointed to many of our past reports which repeated the same recommendations. This included that the police should improve how they record and share data on [protected characteristics](#).

By the end of April 2024, the NPCC's diversity, equality and inclusion co-ordination committee planned to present a new approach to these data problems. This is good. The issue is that change has taken far too long because national structures aren't right.

The NPCC recognises that it must simplify its portfolio structures. In December 2023, the [NPCC's audit and assurance board published a governance report](#). This showed that the NPCC had created "a forum for committee chairs to discuss and agree priorities and coordinate cross cutting activities". This helps NPCC leads decide who is responsible for national leadership on any specific policing problem, especially where portfolios overlap.

This is a good start. For Soteria to succeed in changing police practice, effective national structures are needed in the NPCC.

Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, chair of the NPCC's Violence and Public Protection Board, is leading efforts to develop a national public protection centre for policing. This will be in place by April 2025. It will provide national guidance on how Soteria could be used to improve other areas of police public protection work.

We were also told that there is work underway to make other useful changes at national level. For example, there are plans to help the Home Office, NPCC and [College of Policing](#) work together to align the police's activity around Soteria and violence against women and girls.

Recommendation 13

By 30 June 2025, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should report on its work to simplify its public protection portfolios. It should focus on improving practice quickly and consistently across policing.

Forces need long-term national support and funding to help them put Soteria in place

Across England and Wales, 19 police forces have already begun putting the NOM in place. This includes the 5 pathfinder forces and the 14 further forces who started adopting Soteria in 2022.

Even with expert support, it takes over a year to become a Soteria force. It involves carrying out strategic reviews, making spending plans, building new partnerships and changing recruitment and training practices. Positive results only arrive when force-wide change has taken place.

So, it is good that some forces have already adopted Soteria successfully. But they still need consistent national support to deal with problems such as those we identify in this report.

In October 2023, the other 24 forces completed and shared their self-assessments with the Soteria Joint Unit. These set out how ready they are to start putting Soteria in place and the resources they have to do this. The Joint Unit has analysed these self-assessments. It found the same problems that we have identified in this report.

With the support of the Soteria Joint Unit, the Home Office wants these 24 forces to adopt Soteria and implement the NOM by November 2024.

But the Joint Unit is only funded until March 2025. It isn't funded to deal with the weaknesses found in the most recent round of Soteria self-assessments. This is worrying. The Joint Unit has an important role to play as forces fix the problems we identify in this report.

Without this unit, there is a risk that the benefits of Soteria may be lost. That would be unacceptable, and victims would lose out because of it. The NPCC and Home Office must take action to address this.

Recommendation 14

By 30 September 2024, the Home Office should work with the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) to provide funding for the Soteria Joint Unit that lasts beyond March 2025.

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