

The police response to stalking

Report on the super-complaint made by the
Suzy Lamplugh Trust on behalf of National
Stalking Consortium



A joint investigation by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, the College of Policing and the Independent Office for Police Conduct



Contents

Foreword	5
Introduction	7
Summary of findings and recommendations	12
Policing and its partners should do more to make sure stalking is always treated seriously	12
Creating a better foundation for policing to provide a good service for stalking victims	13
Meeting expected standards now and doing the fundamentals well	21
Implementing what works, spreading promising practice and encouraging innovation	31
Responding to our recommendations and monitoring progress	36
Background: Stalking and the police response	37
The scale of stalking	37
Stalking law	38
Stalking crimes recorded by police	40
Strategic leadership and oversight of the police response to stalking	42
National strategic approach to stalking	42
National police leadership on stalking	42
Strategic approach to stalking in forces	43
Availability of data to support transparency and scrutiny of the police response to stalking	46
Data showing police recording of section 2A and section 4A stalking offences and stalking where there is a domestic abuse context	46
Data relating to stalking protection orders	48
Training on stalking for police officers and staff	49
College of Policing curriculum and stalking or harassment e-learning package	49
Training on stalking provided to officers and staff	50
Updates and further development of College of Policing training products	52

Dedicated stalking co-ordination roles and multi-agency working to respond to stalking	54
Dedicated stalking officers and staff	54
Multi-agency working to support the police response to stalking	57
Existing frameworks for multi-agency working to manage stalking perpetrators and offenders.....	59
Identifying and recording stalking crimes	62
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	62
Summary of our findings.....	62
Police misidentifying or failing to recognise stalking	63
Recognising breaches of protective orders as further instances of stalking	65
Recognising section 4A stalking offences involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress	65
Addressing misidentification of stalking	68
Changes to stalking legislation	68
A common approach to describing stalking across guidance	72
Call handling opening codes and qualifiers for stalking	74
Addressing the impact of changes to the crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff.....	76
Stalking screening tool.....	78
Quality assurance and screening to make sure stalking is correctly identified	80
Recognising stalking in police perpetrated abuse of position cases	82
Responding to risk	83
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	83
Summary of our findings.....	83
Identifying risks in stalking cases.....	84
Risk assessment in stalking cases	85
Risk management in stalking cases	89
Recognising escalating risk where perpetrators breach protective measures	90
Specialist support and supervision to support risk identification, assessment and management.....	92

Stalking protection orders	93
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	93
Summary of our findings.....	93
Low use of stalking protection orders	93
The implementation of stalking protection orders in forces.....	96
Using other protective measures over stalking protection orders	99
Stalking protection order prohibitions and positive requirements.....	100
Addressing issues with stalking protection order law and guidance	101
Victim care and support	106
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	106
Summary of our findings.....	106
Victim care and compliance with the victims’ code	107
Investigating stalking	119
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	119
Summary of our findings.....	119
Data on investigation outcomes for stalking crimes.....	120
Overview of the quality of stalking and breach of order investigations	122
Allocation of stalking and breach of order crimes for investigation	122
Issues with the quality of investigations into stalking and breach of order crimes	127
Work to improve the quality of investigations.....	134
Working with the Crown Prosecution Service to achieve the right outcomes	135
Understanding and responding to online stalking	138
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	138
Summary of our findings.....	138
Understanding the prevalence and nature of online stalking	139
Police dismissing or not recognising online stalking behaviours.....	140
Safeguarding advice and actions to protect victims from online stalking	142

Stalking perpetrator intervention programmes.....	145
Concerns raised in the super-complaint	145
Summary of our findings.....	145
Stalking perpetrator intervention programmes.....	145
List of recommendations and actions	149

Foreword

Stalking is a serious crime that can have a devastating effect on victims. It has been described as a crime of psychological terror which leaves victims feeling constantly unsafe and fearful. In some tragic cases stalking behaviours escalate to serious physical harm and murder.

Victims and the public must be assured that reports of stalking will be treated seriously by the police. This means that the police must be able to recognise stalking and the risks associated with this crime. They must keep victims and the public safe and pursue perpetrators by investigating reports effectively and taking appropriate action to stop offending and seek justice.

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium, raised serious concerns about the police response to stalking in its super-complaint. Our three organisations have jointly undertaken a comprehensive investigation into these issues. We have found clear evidence supporting the concerns they raise.

We did find examples of the police taking stalking seriously, safeguarding victims well and carrying out good investigations. But in too many cases the police response was not good enough and victims were being let down.

We have made recommendations that give a clear plan of action for policing to make improvements. These focus on the need for policing to take action now to make sure they are meeting the expected standards and doing the fundamentals well in their response to stalking.

We also found there is a need for greater clarity in the criminal law relating to stalking. Our evidence suggests that government needs to change the law and guidance to provide a stronger foundation for the police response to stalking. We also recommend that the government makes changes to stalking protection orders to provide quicker options to safeguard victims and disrupt offenders.

We were encouraged to see examples of [innovative](#) and [promising practice](#) in some forces. These include examples of forces developing hubs of expertise through multi-agency working and a promising approach to digital evidence analysis in stalking cases. We have made recommendations where we think these approaches should be considered more widely across policing.

We are not the only ones calling for change and improvements. Many of the concerns we identified with poor investigations and victim care reflect the findings of other inquiries and inspections. Particularly those relating to the police response to violence against women and girls, of which stalking is a part. The [Victims' Commissioner for London has also published a report](#), this year, on the Metropolitan Police Service's response to stalking. This highlighted similar findings to our investigation.

Policing and its partners are responding to these calls for change. In July 2024 the NPCC and the College of Policing published a [national policing statement on violence against women and girls](#) (VAWG). This assesses the threat VAWG poses to public safety. The statement identifies stalking and harassment as one of five high-harm and high-volume threat areas that policing will focus on over the next year. This super-complaint report and our recommendations present a real opportunity for policing to build on the progress already made. Policing must now make a step-change to improve the quality of its response to this pervasive and insidious crime.

We are grateful to the Suzy Lamplugh Trust, the National Stalking Consortium and to all those who contributed to this investigation from across policing, government and from victim support services and other partners involved in the response to stalking.

We would like to particularly thank the victims who shared their experiences directly with us. It is their voices that we must listen to most closely and it is their experiences that provide the impetus for change.

Rachel Watson
Director General
Independent Office for
Police Conduct

Andy Cooke QPM DL
His Majesty's Chief
Inspector of Constabulary
and Fire & Rescue
Services

**Chief Constable Sir
Andy Marsh QPM**
Chief Executive Officer
College of Policing

Introduction

Super-complaint about the police response to stalking

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust submitted a [super-complaint regarding the police response to stalking](#) on behalf of the National Stalking Consortium (the Consortium) in November 2022.

A super-complaint is a complaint that “a feature, or combination of features, of policing in England and Wales by one, or more than one, police force is, or appears to be, significantly harming the interests of the public” (Section 29A, Police Reform Act 2002).

The police super-complaints system is designed to examine problems of local, regional or national significance that may not be addressed by other elements of the police complaints system. More information on police super-complaints and the process for making a super-complaint is on the government [police super-complaint webpage](#).

The Consortium raises several concerns about the police response to stalking in this super-complaint. It states that these are features of policing that are significantly harming the interests of the public:

- Misidentification of stalking. This includes:
 - Police treating behaviours as single, unconnected incidents and not recognising the wider pattern of behaviour that constitutes stalking.
 - Police treating stalking behaviours as a different offence such as malicious communications or harassment.
 - Police minimising or trivialising stalking behaviours.
- Flawed investigations leading to inappropriate no further action decisions. This includes:
 - The psychological effect of stalking not being sufficiently recognised by the police or treated as evidence.
 - Risk of serious harm and homicide to the victim not being recognised by the police.
 - Police failing to recognise the influence of online (or cyber) stalking and not treating the behaviours as evidence.
 - Cases being wrongly closed by the police due to lack of evidence, where evidence was available.

- Failure to offer or refusal to apply for a stalking protection order on behalf of a victim in cases of stalking.
- Lack of response by police following breaches of protective orders (including stalking protection orders, non-molestation orders, restraining orders, bail conditions or other), and the failure to treat continued breaches of orders as a further offence of stalking.
- Further issues of concern including:
 - Lack of referrals to specialist services by the police leaving the victim at risk.
 - Dangerous or unhelpful advice given to victims.
 - Evidence not being collected within the statutory six month timeframe, where this applies, and the case having to be closed for this reason.
 - Lack of stalking intervention programmes across England and Wales.

Terminology

Referring to victims

We have used the term ‘victim’ throughout this report to refer to those who report being subjected to stalking and other criminal behaviours. We recognise that some people prefer the term ‘victim-survivor’. However, ‘victim’ reflects the language used by the Consortium in the super-complaint and in the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime](#). Therefore, we have used this same term throughout the report for consistency.

Frontline and investigator

We have used the terms ‘frontline’ and ‘investigator’ to describe officers’ main functions and responsibilities.

By ‘frontline’ we mean officers who were primarily in [neighbourhood policing teams](#), or those teams whose main role is to respond to emergency calls. These officers have received training on investigating priority and volume crimes through level one of the [professionalising investigations programme \(PIP\)](#). This is why frontline officers are sometimes called PIP 1-trained officers.

By ‘investigator’ we mean officers whose primary role is to investigate crime. These officers have typically received further training in conducting serious and complex investigations through level two of PIP. This is why these officers are sometimes called PIP 2-trained officers.

Dedicated stalking officers and staff

We have used the term ‘dedicated stalking officers and staff’ to describe those officers and staff whose main role is related to stalking. These officers and staff are those who are recognised as providing specialist capabilities and are sometimes called ‘subject-matter experts’.

Our investigation

The Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and the College of Policing jointly investigated the super-complaint. References to 'we', 'us' and 'our' throughout this report relate to the three organisations collectively.

The purpose of our investigation was to decide if the features of policing in the super-complaint are significantly harming the interests of the public, and, if so, what should be done about it.

We considered all the concerns raised by the Consortium. And we have sought to understand both the barriers to, and facilitators of, the police providing an effective response to stalking. This report sets out our findings, conclusions and recommendations.

We have also published a series of evidence reports as annexes to this joint investigation report. These evidence reports provide details of the scope, methodology and findings from each strand of the investigation.

The investigation lines of enquiry and associated annexed evidence reports are listed below:

- Research interviews with victims of stalking. The IOPC interviewed nine victims of stalking in October and November 2023 about their experience of reporting stalking to the police and the police response. The IOPC has published a report of this research as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex A: Qualitative research into victims' experiences of reporting stalking to the police and subsequent police actions](#)
- Rapid evidence review of research about stalking and serious harm or homicide. The College of Policing has published its report of this rapid evidence review as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex B: Stalking and serious harm or homicide: Rapid evidence review to support the investigation into the super-complaint on the police response to stalking](#)
- Rapid evidence review of research about victim experiences of the police response to stalking. The College of Policing has published its report of this rapid evidence review as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex C: Victim experience of the police response to stalking: Rapid evidence review to support the investigation into the super-complaint on the police response to stalking](#)
- Fieldwork in six police forces. HMICFRS conducted investigation fieldwork in six police forces in England between June 2023 and October 2023. All the fieldwork was conducted online without physically visiting the forces concerned. The fieldwork forces were Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary, Humberside Police, Lancashire Constabulary, West Midlands Police, West Yorkshire Police and Wiltshire Police. HMICFRS undertook three parts of fieldwork: a review of 254 documents, including

policies, procedures and other material related to stalking provided by the forces; a review of 530 case files relating to stalking; and 37 interviews and focus groups with police officers and staff, representatives from specialist stalking victim support organisations and staff employed by police and crime commissioners. The findings from the fieldwork are published by HMICFRS as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex D: An annex report about HMICFRS fieldwork to support the investigation of the super-complaint on the police response to stalking](#)

- Force self-assessment survey on the police response to stalking. The IOPC, HMICFRS and the College of Policing jointly sent a self-assessment survey to all 43 territorial forces in England and Wales in August 2023. The self-assessment survey asked forces to provide information on their approach to handling stalking crimes. Responses were received from all 43 forces. The IOPC has published a summary of the responses as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex E: Force self-assessment survey on the police response to stalking](#)
- Review of IOPC cases involving stalking. The IOPC conducted a thematic review of 50 IOPC cases involving issues of stalking. The cases reviewed were received by the IOPC between January 2018 and January 2023. The IOPC has published a report of the relevant themes identified across these cases as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex F: Review of IOPC cases involving stalking](#)
- Focus groups with officers and staff involved in the police response to stalking. The College of Policing held four separate focus groups with police contact centre staff, frontline response officers, investigators and supervisors from five forces in July 2023. The forces involved were the Metropolitan Police Service, Bedfordshire Police, Sussex Police, Cheshire Constabulary and Dyfed-Powys Police. The College of Policing published a report of the themes arising from these focus groups as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex G: Officer and staff perspectives on the police response to stalking: Findings from focus groups conducted to support the investigation into the super-complaint on the police response to stalking](#)
- Focus group with stalking victims support service providers. The IOPC undertook a focus group in July 2023 with representatives from five stalking victim support organisations. The IOPC published a thematic analysis of this focus group as an annex to this investigation report: [Annex H: Qualitative research into the perspectives of stalking victim support service providers on the police response to stalking](#)

The investigation team also spoke with a range of stakeholders to inform our investigation. These included:

- representatives of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust
- Deputy Chief Constable Paul Mills, National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) Lead for stalking and harassment

- Assistant Chief Constable Samantha Millar, NPCC Strategic Programme Director for violence against women and girls
- Temporary Chief Constable Alex Murray, NPCC Lead for artificial intelligence
- Katy Bourne, Police and Crime Commissioner for Sussex
- Claire Waxman, Victims Commissioner for London
- Detective Sergeant Dave Thomason, Harm Reduction Unit, Cheshire Constabulary
- Dr Rachael Wheatley, Professional Psychological Practice Programme Manager, University of Derby
- representatives from the Home Office, Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, Ministry of Justice and the Crown Prosecution Service
- various police force stalking leads as part of a special meeting of the NPCC stalking and harassment tactical working group
- police officers and staff from Hampshire Constabulary and West Midlands Police who were involved in three stalking cases identified as good quality investigations in HMICFRS fieldwork

HMICFRS has previously examined the police response to stalking. The findings were considered as part of the super-complaint investigation. In particular:

- 2017 joint HMICFRS and HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPPI) inspection report: [Living in fear – the police and CPS response to harassment and stalking](#)
- 2019 HMICFRS thematic inspection report: [Stalking and harassment – An inspection of Sussex Police](#) commissioned by the police and crime commissioner, and an update on national recommendations in HMICFRS's 2017 report
- 2021 HMICFRS [interim inspection report](#) and [final inspection report on the police response to violence against women and girls](#)
- HMICFRS police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections. This is a rolling programme of inspections of all 43 territorial forces in England and Wales. They include inspection of crime data integrity and investigation standards. The [HMICFRS fieldwork report for this super-complaint investigation \(at annex D\)](#) includes analysis of the stalking cases reviewed as part of PEEL inspections between 2021 and 2022.

Summary of findings and recommendations

Policing and its partners should do more to make sure stalking is always treated seriously

“I think it was the officer taking it seriously... in that very first instance... [the officer] coming out and doing a report was really positive in terms of me realising, oh, this [is] serious, I’m not making this up, this is serious.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Stalking is a serious crime which can have a devastating impact on victims. It is characterised by a pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive behaviour which is intrusive. Stalking can cause psychological trauma and lead to serious physical violence.

The importance of the police taking reports of stalking seriously was a central theme that came out of our interviews with victims and the research we considered on victim experiences. It is fundamental to an effective policing response to stalking. Too often throughout this investigation, we heard examples of the police not taking stalking seriously enough. Our findings also suggest that the way the police respond to stalking victims can differ depending on whether the stalking happened in a domestic abuse or non-domestic abuse context.

Our investigation found clear evidence supporting the concerns raised in the super-complaint which can lead to the poor experience reported by victims. This includes evidence of police not always:

- Identifying and recording cases as stalking.
- Recognising and responding to risk of harm, including escalating risk and indicators of higher risk (like perpetrators breaching protective orders).
- Recognising the effect (including psychological impact) of stalking on victims and responding with empathy.
- Prioritising stalking cases appropriately or allocating these to investigators with the right skills and experience to ensure effective investigations.
- Using their powers to protect victims or pursue perpetrators, including not seeking stalking protection orders (SPOs) and not always arresting suspects when appropriate.

Stalking has not always been well understood within policing, across the criminal justice system or by wider society. This is changing as awareness of the problems and risks associated with stalking increases. Police now record many more stalking crimes than they did in the years following the introduction of the offence, and action has been taken by the Government. For example, to introduce SPOs to protect victims and disrupt offending. We have also seen examples of innovative and promising practice in some forces which seem to be improving the police response to stalking.

But our investigation found problems persist with the police response to stalking. We have made a series of recommendations to address our findings. In this summary, we have structured our findings and recommendations as a plan of action for policing and its partners. This is set out under three themes:

1. **Providing a better foundation for policing to create a good service for stalking victims:** Changes to law and guidance relating to stalking would give policing a better foundation on which to operate. Policies and procedures related to crime recording and police training should be improved to help the police identify stalking more effectively.
2. **Meeting expected standards now and doing the fundamentals well:** We found examples where the police had safeguarded victims well and carried out good investigations. But this was not always the case. Poor safeguarding, victim care and inadequate investigations can leave victims at risk and perpetrators unchallenged. Policing should act now to improve the service it provides to stalking victims and the public.
3. **Implementing what works, spreading promising practice and encouraging innovation:** Some forces have already implemented some promising practices which are helping to identify stalking, support victims and manage perpetrators. These should be considered across all forces in England and Wales. Emerging technologies like artificial intelligence present opportunities to further innovate to support the police response to stalking.

Creating a better foundation for policing to provide a good service for stalking victims

The criminal law on stalking is unclear and difficult to apply

The lack of a clear legal definition of stalking, the overlap between stalking and harassment, and the confusion between these, are widely seen to be contributing to misidentification and mishandling of stalking by policing. We heard this from policing and non-policing stakeholders we spoke to as part of this investigation.

We think the criminal law should be changed so it is easier for the police to understand and apply. The Government should consider whether there should continue to be multiple stalking offences and whether any stalking offence should be a summary-only offence that can only be tried at a magistrate's court.

We found that officers and staff do not always effectively understand and apply the distinction between the summary-only stalking offence in section 2A of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 and the more serious stalking offence in section 4A of that Act. Only the section 4A offence can be tried at the Crown Court, which can impose stricter penalties than magistrates' courts. Stalking is often more serious in terms of the effect on the victim and more complex to investigate than other types of summary-only offences. England and Wales is the only jurisdiction in the UK with two stalking offences. There is a single, either-way offence of stalking in Scotland and Northern Ireland. We think the Home Office should consider whether there should be a single, either-way stalking offence in England and Wales.

Stalking should be more clearly defined in law. However, more detailed information needs to be available about stalking beyond the legislation. Stalking manifests in a variety of behaviours and these behaviours are likely to evolve as technology develops and the way people communicate changes. At present there are several guidance documents which try to further explain stalking for the police but there is no statutory guidance on the offence. Statutory guidance on stalking would provide a single authority on the law and encourage a consistent understanding of stalking across the criminal justice system.

Changes to the legislation and the development of statutory guidance should include consultation with stakeholders, including the Consortium and other experts, to build on the evidence set out in this investigation.

Recommendation 1: To the Home Office

Bring forward legislation in the 2024-2025 parliamentary session that would change the criminal law related to stalking so that it is easier for the police to understand and apply.

The Home Office should consider:

- The definition of stalking and the legal distinction between stalking, harassment and coercive and controlling behaviour.
- Whether there should be a single stand-alone stalking offence instead of the separate section 2A and section 4A stalking offences.
- If the section 2A offence is retained, whether it should be amended to an either-way offence.
- Including a provision that a stalking course of conduct is complete if a reasonable person would consider it to be so.
- Issuing statutory guidance on stalking.

Guidance on stalking is scattered and inconsistent

There are several sources of advice and guidance for the police on stalking and stalking protection orders:

- College of Policing advice documents contained within [authorised professional practice \(APP\) on stalking or harassment](#)
- [Statutory guidance on the Stalking Protection Act for the police](#) (providing guidance on stalking protection orders)
- [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#)
- information on post-separation abuse, related harms, offences and other forms of domestic abuse within [statutory guidance on coercive or controlling behaviour](#)

Each document has a different focus in terms of distinguishing what is and is not stalking. This adds to confusion about how the police should apply the law.

The [statutory guidance on the Stalking Protection Act for the police](#) is focussed on the application for and management of stalking protection orders, but it includes an annex with some explanation about what stalking is. We think this document has the clearest and most descriptive explanation of stalking in the current absence of specific statutory guidance on stalking offences.

During our investigation the College of Policing updated its advice documents so they align more closely to the [statutory guidance on the Stalking Protection Act for the police](#). The Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff is the other main source of information for the police. It should be similarly updated.

Recommendation 2: To the Home Office

By 27 March 2025, to work with the College of Policing, the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment and the National Stalking Consortium to update information on stalking or harassment in the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#). Information on stalking within the rules should align with how stalking is described in the [statutory guidance on the Stalking Protection Act for the police](#).

Action 1: For the College of Policing

The College of Policing will develop its authorised professional practice (APP) on stalking or harassment. The update will take into consideration the learning from this super-complaint including learning on identifying stalking and distinguishing it from harassment, identifying and assessing risk, victim safeguarding and care and multi-agency working. This development work will begin during the 2024/25 financial year.

The legal framework for stalking protection orders can be improved to better support policing to use them

Stalking protection orders (SPOs) are a specific protection order which the police can apply for at any point during a stalking case. SPOs can include positive requirements (things you must do) as well as prohibitions (things you must not do). Breaching an SPO is a criminal offence which carries a potential prison sentence. Policing and non-policing stakeholders told us these aspects of SPOs were useful and mean they have the potential to effectively safeguard victims and tackle stalking behaviours.

But SPO applications can be slow and complicated. The legal framework for SPOs should be changed to make the application process simpler and more efficient. Where possible, the process to apply for an SPO should align with the application process for other protective orders that the police use, to help simplify the system.

Interim SPOs were intended to provide a speedier process for the police to obtain an SPO when there is an immediate risk of harm. But the application process for an interim SPO is very similar to that for a full SPO. Officers must apply to a magistrate's court to secure both interim and full SPOs.

In domestic abuse cases, the police can use a domestic violence protection notice (DVPN) to protect victims and the public without having to apply to a magistrate's court. DVPNs are time-limited and can only apply prohibitions but they can be put in place directly by police with senior authorisation. The interim-SPO does not provide this same quick-time protection for stalking victims as DVPNs provide to victims of domestic violence.

There is no provision for the courts to issue an SPO on conviction or acquittal, but they can issue restraining orders in these circumstances. An SPO may be more effective than a restraining order for managing stalking behaviours as it can place requirements on those subject to the order and not just prohibitions. The courts should be able to issue an SPO without the need for an application from the police.

Officers can only apply for SPOs for people who live in, visit or intend to visit their force area. But stalkers do not need to live near or visit their victim to target them online. The current framework adds complications for officers to apply for SPOs in some cases involving online stalking behaviours.

Recommendation 3: To the Home Office

Bring forward legislation in the 2024-2025 parliamentary session that would change the legal framework for SPOs to:

- Align SPOs more closely to orders available in domestic abuse cases, including providing for a stalking protection notice that could be approved by a senior police officer before an application for an interim or full SPO is made to a magistrate's court.
- Provide for courts to issue an SPO on the conviction or acquittal of an offender.
- Provide that chief constables can apply for an SPO for perpetrators who do not live in, visit, or intend to visit their force area.

We found evidence that some police officers and staff (including police legal teams) are reluctant to apply for SPOs where other protective measures, like bail conditions, are in place. We found some confusion in forces about when it was necessary and appropriate to apply for an SPO in addition to or instead of other protections. We think further guidance would clarify this for officers and staff, so they are confident to apply for SPOs when necessary and appropriate.

Recommendation 4: To the Home Office

By 27 March 2025, work with the College of Policing and others across the criminal justice system to issue guidance that assists the police and criminal justice partners to select the most appropriate protective measure or combination of measures to pursue in stalking cases.

Procedures and rules for incident and crime recording are not always helping the police to identify stalking

Some forces do not have processes that enable staff in control rooms to easily highlight that an incident may involve stalking. This is a missed opportunity to identify and highlight stalking when a victim makes a report.

The current [national standard for incident recording counting rules \(NSIR\)](#) was published in 2011. The Home Office is working with policing partners to produce a new national

standard for incident recording and assessment (NSIR&A). The new standards should include a requirement to flag incidents that may involve stalking. This will assist police officers and staff to identify and record stalking at the earliest opportunity.

Recommendation 5: To the Home Office

Before publishing the upcoming national standards for incident recording and assessment (NSIR&A), find the most appropriate way to include stalking in the NSIR&A, so that incidents potentially involving stalking are flagged as early as possible.

The [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) only require the police to record the most serious crime involved in each case they deal with. This is known as the principal crime rule. This means that sometimes stalking crimes do not have to be formally recorded when a more serious offence has been recorded (like rape or murder). Police must still investigate all reported offences and the investigation must be appropriately documented.

Some forces have record management systems which allow them to document other offences on a principal crime record in a way that is searchable. These are known as “included classifications”. But some force systems do not currently have this capability.

Documenting stalking as an included classification would enable officers and staff to search for all stalking offences on record management systems rather than just stalking that is recorded as the principal crime. Where stalking is recorded as the principal crime, documenting other reported offences as included classifications would also provide a more complete picture of the offending. Some stakeholders have said it would also make it easier for supervisors and forces to reassure themselves that all the offences associated with stalking have been appropriately investigated.

We think that all police forces should seek changes to their records management systems that would allow for associated crimes to be listed in a way that is searchable. We think that the Home Office should also review the impact of the principal crime rule on the identification and investigating of stalking and make changes or provide additional guidance to police if required.

Recommendation 6: To the Home Office

By 27 March 2025, to review the impact of the principal crime rule on the identification and investigation of stalking. This should include an examination of whether risks associated with stalking may be being missed and implement any changes needed.

Recommendation 7: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, where required, seek changes to their crime recording systems to enable staff and officers to document and search for crimes not recorded as the principal crime, as included classifications on crime records.

Processes should be put in place to make sure this system capability is effectively used by officers and staff.

While any necessary system changes are pending, chief constables should put alternative measures in place to make sure stalking and related offences are fully searchable. This could, for example, be the submission of intelligence reports.

Data published by the Home Office about stalking is not detailed or accessible enough

There are gaps in the data that is readily available to policing and the public about stalking. This affects the ability of police leaders to fully understand and compare the police response to stalking within and between forces. It also means organisations with an interest in stalking cannot use this information in their work.

The [Office for National Statistics release on crime in England and Wales](#) includes survey data about people's experiences of stalking. It also includes a figure for police recorded stalking and harassment in England and Wales. This figure describes all stalking, harassment and malicious communications offences recorded by the police.

The Home Office publishes more detailed information on the number of police recorded stalking crimes within its [open data tables on police recorded crime and outcomes](#). Anyone (who knows how) can use the tables to access the number of stalking crimes recorded by each police force in England and Wales from 2012/13. But the data is not broken down by the section 2A and 4A stalking offences.

Recommendation 8: To the Home Office

From the next data release onwards, publish police recorded crime data so it shows section 2A and section 4A stalking crimes separately.

In 2021, the [Home Office and HM Courts and Tribunals Service published data about SPOs](#) which had been collected for a Home Office review of SPOs. This included information on the number of SPO applications the police made to magistrates, the number issued by magistrates, and the number of times the courts were notified of an SPO breach. The Home Office has not published more recent data. The Home Office and Ministry of Justice told us during our investigation that work was underway to collect and publish this data more routinely.

Recommendation 9: To the Ministry of Justice

Before the end of 2024, begin routinely publishing, within [criminal courts statistics](#), data regarding the number of interim and full SPOs applied for, granted and breached.

Forces are providing training on stalking, but it is not always clear that all officers and staff dealing with stalking have received the training they need

Training provided by forces appears to broadly align with the learning outcomes about stalking in the public protection national policing curriculum. However, there are inconsistencies across forces.

Some forces are using a College of Policing e-learning package on stalking or harassment. This helps to make sure they provide training that aligns to the national policing curriculum. However, use of this e-learning is not widespread.

The College of Policing updated the content of this stalking e-learning package during the super-complaint investigation. The College of Policing and the NPCC will write to forces to make them aware of these changes, and how the e-learning supports the delivery of learning outcomes related to stalking in the public protection national policing curriculum.

Some forces co-provide training with local or national victim services and other people with expertise. This may help officers to better understand different perspectives, including the victim's perspective.

Training on stalking is an opportunity to explain local procedures and practice to officers and staff that they are required to follow to provide a good service to victims. The training materials we reviewed in our fieldwork did not always cover this. The force stalking policies were also not always as comprehensive as they should be.

Some forces appear to have a poor understanding of who has attended training about stalking, when and how often. This means they cannot clearly identify how training is helping to improve the response to victims.

Recommendation 10: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, review and update their learning and training provision relating to stalking so it:

- Meets the learning outcomes on stalking within the public protection national policing curriculum.
- Makes appropriate use of the stalking or harassment e-learning product developed by the College of Policing.
- Uses the skills and knowledge of local victim advocates or others from outside policing with relevant expertise.
- Includes information on relevant local policies and practice where necessary.
- Is provided to the officers and staff who will most benefit from the learning.

Chief constables should also make sure that their policies and practice are reviewed and updated in accordance with the findings in the super-complaint investigation report.

Meeting expected standards now and doing the fundamentals well

Many forces do not sufficiently understand the scale and types of stalking in their area and have not always embedded effective strategies to support their response to stalking

Some of the fieldwork forces did not have a [problem profile](#) or other form of product that helped them understand the nature of stalking in their area. Even when forces did have a product, we found it was not as comprehensive as it should have been, with gaps in analysis around victim or offender profiles.

Some of the fieldwork forces had combined stalking offences with harassment offences in [force management statements](#). They set out current and predicted future demand without reflecting on the potential differences in the demand generated from these different offences.

Some forces were not able to provide us with important performance data, like victim service referral rates, in response to our force self-assessment survey. We also found that fieldwork forces did not always measure victim satisfaction or engage with victims or advocates to hear the victims' voice.

In February 2024 the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing published a [policing violence against women and girls \(VAWG\) national framework for delivery](#) and a complementary [force self-assessment template](#). These provide a four-P model (prepare, protect, pursue and prevent) to organise a strategic response to VAWG. Forces should

use this framework to guide their strategic response to VAWG offences. These include stalking, a crime that disproportionately affects women and girls.

Recommendation 11: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, make sure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to fully understand the scale and types of stalking behaviour within their force and the effectiveness of their response. This should align with the [VAWG national delivery framework](#). Mechanisms should include:

- Problem profiles using police data and intelligence and other sources of information to ensure that the full extent of stalking is well understood. This could include information sharing with local victims' services and other public services, and national and local statistics.
- Regular assurance work such as audits to better understand the force response and make improvements where appropriate, including monitoring the use of SPOs, investigation outcomes and the quality of investigations.
- Ways to regularly receive feedback from victims, such as victim surveys.
- Force management statements which reflect current and future demand from stalking.

Poor risk assessment and safeguarding may be leaving some victims at serious risk

The police had not identified risk of serious harm or homicide to a victim in many of the relevant cases that were part of our fieldwork case file review. This finding is especially concerning. Our review of case files also identified many cases where officers did not seem to be taking a proactive approach to managing risk by making risk management plans.

We also found evidence of officers and staff not recognising the risks associated with breaches of orders or other protective measures in a stalking context. This includes not recognising the breaches as further instances of stalking and not having robust processes to identify breaches as important indicators of escalating risk and respond to them accordingly. Forces should consider additional checks or screening around risk, for stalking and breaches of orders crimes, given the risks associated with these types of crime.

During this super-complaint investigation, the College of Policing worked with the NPCC to release a NPCC-developed risk identification tool for stalking, the stalking screening tool (SST). The College of Policing also supported the NPCC with knowledge sharing events to enable forces adopting the SST to help each other implement it successfully.

Risks to stalking victims should be considered throughout an investigation. In domestic abuse cases there are embedded processes for ongoing assessment and management of risk, including well-established tools which support record keeping and information sharing. This is not always the situation for other stalking cases. We found confusion in forces about which tools to use to assess and manage risk in non-domestic abuse stalking cases. Some forces were relying on a question set which helps identify stalking risk (known as the S-DASH) that HMICFRS has previously warned is not sufficient on its own to adequately assess ongoing risks to stalking victims.

The College of Policing had already published information in its [advice for investigators on stalking or harassment](#) on the available risk assessment tools to use in stalking cases. The College of Policing has updated this list to provide greater clarity on the most appropriate risk tools to use during stalking investigations.

Recommendation 12: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure that risk identification, assessment and management is effective in all stalking and breaches of orders cases, including by:

- Considering implementing the stalking screening tool to support the identification of stalking and the risks associated with stalking.
- Having clear policies and procedures in place for assessing and managing risk in all cases. And where appropriate, embedding recognised risk assessment tools in force systems so that it is easy for officers to access, use and document their consideration of risk and safeguarding.
- Recognising (in policies, guidance and training) the heightened risk associated with breaches of protective orders and measures.
- Implementing screening and checking processes to support the early identification, assessment and management of high-risk cases. This may require stalking and breach of order cases to be considered at daily management meetings.

Our review of IOPC stalking cases included some cases where police officers or staff had taken advantage of their position to pursue a sexual or improper emotional relationship with a member of the public and which also involved stalking behaviours. In most of these cases, the police suspect was investigated for serious offences, including misconduct in a public office or misuse of police systems. However, it was not common for these cases to be recorded and dealt with specifically as stalking offences by either the IOPC or the police force professional standards departments who investigated them. This means that the risk to victims may not have been properly identified and managed, including through stalking-specific protections such as SPOs. Victims would also be unlikely to be referred to specialist stalking support services.

The IOPC recognises that there is more it can do to make sure IOPC staff and police officers and staff in police professional standards departments recognise and respond appropriately to stalking behaviours in police perpetrated abuse of position cases.

Action 2: For the IOPC

By 27 March 2025, the IOPC will provide advice to IOPC staff and police professional standards departments about recognising and responding to police perpetrated stalking behaviours, particularly where these are present in cases involving police abuse of position.

The use of SPOs by the police is worryingly low

Robust implementation and management of protective orders is an important way in which policing can manage perpetrators and challenge their behaviours. It is therefore concerning that the use of SPOs in stalking cases appears to be low. The number of SPO applications made per recorded stalking crime does vary between forces. This suggests variable approaches to how the orders are implemented. The likelihood of an SPO being granted to protect a victim should not be dependent on where the case is being handled. Police leaders must do more to make sure officers and staff have sufficient knowledge and support to identify cases and apply for SPOs when appropriate.

In some forces officers and staff in roles dedicated to responding to stalking support the application and management of SPOs. Other dedicated teams, like those that specifically work on the application and management of lots of different orders and protections, can also play this role.

Recommendation 13: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure that force strategies, structures and processes are in place so that police consider an SPO in every stalking case, and apply for an SPO where relevant and appropriate to prevent harm and further offending.

To achieve this, chief constables should review, and revise where necessary:

- Local training and guidance on SPOs, including training and guidance for supervisors.
- Mechanisms for supporting investigating officers to identify cases where SPOs would be appropriate and assisting them with SPO applications. This could be through dedicated teams or roles and/or through daily management meetings considering risk and safeguarding.

Stalking victims often do not receive the care and support that they need and should be able to expect from police

Our case file review found that police were failing to consistently meet aspects of the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime](#) (the victims' code). This included not conducting and recording victim needs assessments, or not doing so early enough, and not always communicating well with victims. We also found many cases where the police had not referred stalking victims to any victim support services.

We found poor levels of awareness within policing that stalking victims are entitled to enhanced rights under the victims' code. This means stalking victims are not always told about the specialist victim support services that exist or are not referred to them when appropriate.

Poor compliance with the victims' code is a known issue across the criminal justice system. In their report [Meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice system](#), HMICFRS, His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate (HMCPIS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) called for system-wide change to improve the service to all victims. Our evidence supports these recommendations.

Recommendation 14: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure stalking victims receive the rights they are entitled to under the victims' code and have access to support services. Chief constables should make sure:

- Victim needs assessments are always completed.
- Their force has appropriate processes to make sure all stalking victims are told about their rights under the victims' code.
- Information about the national and specialist stalking support services available in their force area is easily available to police officers and staff, victims and the general public.
- Victims who would like to receive support are referred to an appropriate service in a timely manner.
- They monitor the number of stalking victims who are referred to specialist support services and take action when referral numbers are low.

The availability of specialist stalking support services is sometimes variable within and between forces

In some force areas there are no specialist stalking support or advocacy services. This inhibits the ability of forces to meet their responsibilities under the victims' code to refer stalking victims to a specialist support service.

There is typically greater provision of specialist domestic abuse services, like independent domestic violence advocates (IDVAs), than specialist stalking services, like independent stalking advocacy caseworkers (ISACs). This can mean that victims who have or had an intimate relationship with their stalker receive some kind of local specialist service, but other stalking victims do not.

Evidence shows you can improve the quality of investigations and victim care when specialist victim services are available and work closely with investigating officers.

The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 places a duty on police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and their mayor equivalents to collaborate with health services and local councils on victim services. This duty provides further impetus for PCCs and mayor equivalents to consider local provision of these services.

Recommendation 15: To police and crime commissioners (PCCs) and their mayor equivalents

By 27 March 2025, review whether the right specialist services have been commissioned to support stalking victims in their area, including provision of trained independent stalking advocate caseworkers (ISACs).

PCCs and their mayor equivalents should provide the necessary services where they do not exist and should consider collaborating across force boundaries to provide services if it would be efficient and effective to do so.

The service to stalking victims can be improved by better collaboration between investigators and victim advocates or support services

Our evidence shows that victim advocates and support services improve investigations, safeguarding and victim support. They make sure the victim's voice is heard throughout the investigation and act as critical friends to policing. When investigators, victim advocates and support services do not work closely together, this can negatively influence the response to victims. For example, police safeguarding plans cannot account for all available information without access to additional risk assessments carried out by victim advocates.

We found that closer working relationships between the police, support services and advocates can be encouraged through open information sharing policies and/or co-location of services.

Recommendation 16: To chief constables, PCCs and their mayor equivalents

By 27 March 2025, work together to review commissioning arrangements and make changes as soon as possible to ensure they embed collaborative working and information sharing between policing and services providing victim support to stalking victims.

The government can now issue statutory guidance on the role and function of some specified victim support services under the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. We think statutory guidance on independent stalking advocate caseworkers (ISACs) could provide important clarity about how they should work together and share information with investigators.

Stalking and breach of order cases are not always allocated to the most appropriate investigators

The nature of some stalking crimes means they should be investigated by officers and staff trained to provide investigations into complex and serious crimes.

Crime allocation policies for stalking offences vary between forces. Some allocation policies were unclear or only focussed on whether there was a domestic abuse context, or whether the case was treated as a section 2A or section 4A stalking offence. Some of the fieldwork forces did not have clear policies on which teams should investigate breaches of protective orders.

We also found that in some forces crime allocation policies were frequently not adhered to. This meant that frontline officers were investigating more serious and complex stalking cases when this may not be appropriate. There was sometimes disagreement in forces about who should investigate stalking cases. Some of the victims, officers and staff we spoke to described stalking cases that were moved between officers and teams. They felt this had caused delays and had an adverse influence on communication with the victim.

Force crime allocation policies should now reflect new content on case allocation within [APP on investigations](#) published by the College of Policing. This says impact, seriousness and complexity should guide case allocation decisions. The new APP content also says risk of harm, repeat victimisation, and unreported or historical incidents should be considered when the police make allocation decisions for crimes like stalking.

Recommendation 17: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, make sure the new College of Policing investigations APP content on case allocation is reflected in the relevant policies relating to the allocation of stalking and breach of order cases for investigation. Force policies should support the allocation of stalking cases to officers with the right skills and experience, taking into account the potential risk and complexity involved in stalking and breach of order cases.

Stalking investigations are sometimes not good enough

National figures show stalking cases are often closed without further action due to evidential difficulties or because the victim did not support further action. We note the concerns raised by the Consortium regarding the low charge rate.

Our case file review found evidence of police sometimes failing to complete reasonable lines of enquiry, including not securing evidence from digital devices. We also found evidence of officers failing to use their powers of arrest and failing to use their powers to search for and seize evidence belonging to suspects. Most case files were also missing evidence of the psychological impact on victims. In many cases, we did not think officers had recognised this impact at all. This is concerning as providing evidence of victims' fear of violence, or serious alarm or distress are ways of proving the section 4A stalking offence.

We heard of some promising digital investigative techniques. These include an approach to digital evidence analysis in stalking cases trialled in the Metropolitan Police Service. The College of Policing has now included this approach, known as [Operation Atlas](#), on its practice bank. We think other forces should explore how to implement similar techniques to make the best use of digital evidence in stalking investigations.

Some of the investigations in our case file review were poorly supervised. Good supervision improves the quality of investigations and is particularly important when investigations are led by new or inexperienced officers. The College of Policing published [guidelines for supervisors on supporting the delivery of effective investigations](#) in August 2023. It is also scoping a new educational programme for front-line supervisors to make sure they have the skills and knowledge to support their officers and staff to undertake quality investigations of public protection crimes like stalking.

The NPCC and College of Policing [2024 national policing statement for violence against women and girls](#) (VAWG) committed to making sure investigations into VAWG offences, including stalking investigations, are victim centred, suspect focused and context led. This approach has already proved effective in securing justice in cases involving rape and serious sexual offences.

Recommendation 18: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to improve the quality of stalking investigations by taking a victim centred, suspect focussed and context led approach. Chief constables should make sure:

- Their workforce has the capacity and capability to undertake effective stalking investigations and can apply new and innovative investigation techniques to pursue digital lines of enquiry.
- All reasonable lines of enquiry are pursued, supported by good supervision.
- Arrest and search powers are used to gather evidence from and about suspects.
- The impact on victims is evidenced in witness statements, so it can be used to inform charging decisions and improve the likelihood of successful investigation outcomes.

A joint approach from police and the Crown Prosecution Service is likely to improve investigation outcomes for victims of stalking

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) response to stalking was outside the scope of this investigation. We therefore did not speak to CPS prosecutors to understand the reasons for their decisions relating to stalking cases. But we did hear about practice in the CPS related to stalking from policing stakeholders.

The 2017 [Living in fear report on the police and CPS response to stalking](#) identified several areas for improvement for the police and CPS. Our investigation found that some of the concerns raised in 2017 are still present for policing, and it is possible that they continue to be challenges for the CPS too.

A joint police and CPS response is vital to improve criminal justice outcomes for victims. This has been an important feature of work to improve outcomes in rape cases under [Operation Soteria](#), and to improve the response to domestic abuse through the [domestic abuse joint justice plan](#).

The CPS and the NPCC are updating the joint protocol for stalking or harassment as an action within the domestic abuse joint justice plan strategic priorities. We welcome this activity.

Recommendation 19: To the Crown Prosecution Service

By 27 March 2025, consider the findings from this investigation and take action in relation to any areas where the Crown Prosecution Service may also need to improve its response to stalking. This could include:

- Ensuring consistency in how stalking is described across guidance it produces.
- Identifying stalking and understanding the risks and effect of stalking on victims.
- Recognising breaches of orders as further instances of stalking or serious escalation of risk.
- Providing effective victim care, including by working with stalking advocates and support services.

The police could do more to keep stalking victims safe online and to better understand online elements of stalking offending

We heard from victims who reported online stalking behaviours which were not recognised by the police as stalking. This contributed to victims feeling that their report was dismissed by officers and staff. We also found evidence of cases where the police gave victims unhelpful and potentially dangerous online safeguarding advice. We also saw evidence that some forces lacked the necessary hardware and software to protect victims online.

Nationally there is a recognition that online stalking behaviours are harmful and that policing needs to do more to understand and disrupt online offending. The NPCC and College of Policing [VAWG national police statement 2024](#) identifies online and tech-enabled VAWG, including online stalking behaviours, as a significant area of risk. Under the [national delivery framework for VAWG](#), policing should develop its understanding of dangerous online spaces to inform its response, including preventative work.

Online communications like social media networks have become commonplace in most people's daily life. Yet the police infrequently apply the online flag to stalking cases that include online offending. This means police forces cannot rely on this flag to understand how many stalking cases they have that involve online stalking behaviours and plan their resources accordingly.

Recommendation 20: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to improve how their force effectively recognises and responds to online elements of stalking. This should include making sure:

- The scale and nature of online stalking behaviours informs their strategic understanding of, and the response to, stalking.
- Examples of online stalking are included in locally produced training and guidance material about stalking.
- Clear online safety advice is available to officers and staff, drawing on the College of Policing APP on stalking or harassment when it is developed.
- Appropriate tools, technologies and support services to digitally safeguard victims are procured and officers and staff use these resources when appropriate.

Implementing what works, spreading promising practice and encouraging innovation

There are examples of innovative and promising practice happening locally to improve the police response to stalking and work is being done to share these with all forces

We have found examples of [innovative](#) and [promising](#) practice during our investigation. We have worked proactively with forces to share some of these examples on the [College of Policing's practice bank](#) so that the information is widely available. We have highlighted where we have done so throughout this report.

The NPCC lead for stalking and harassment facilitates some sharing and learning at a national working group and through regional networks. We encourage the NPCC and forces to build on this by using the practice bank to share practice related to stalking, including about digital safeguarding technologies.

Investment in dedicated stalking officers and staff can provide positive benefits to the force response to stalking

Dedicated stalking officers and staff are responsible for coordinating their force response to stalking and promoting a suspect focused, victim-centred and context led approach to stalking crimes in some forces.

Our investigation found these dedicated stalking officers and staff added value to their forces' responses to stalking by:

- screening crimes and incidents to identify stalking cases that had been misidentified
- proactively supporting investigating officers to improve the quality of investigations and safeguarding
- supporting officers to apply for SPOs
- raising awareness and knowledge about stalking in forces
- providing points of contact for advocacy services, and improving links between forces and specialist victim support services

Two examples of teams with dedicated stalking officers and staff are included on the College of Policing's practice bank. The [harm reduction unit in Cheshire](#), which is explored further below in the discussion of multi-agency responses to stalking, and the [early awareness stalking intervention \(EASI\) unit](#) in West Midlands Police. Other forces have established dedicated resources, including subject matter experts, in different ways.

Recommendation 21: To the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment

By 27 March 2025, to collate and disseminate information to chief constables on the dedicated stalking co-ordination roles that exist. This information should support chief constables to consider whether and how dedicated stalking officers and staff can be used to support the police response to stalking.

The information collated and disseminated should include (but not be limited to) details of:

- Skills and experiences of dedicated stalking officers and staff, and any extra training provided to them by the force.
- Day-to-day responsibilities of dedicated stalking officers and staff, and how these are aligned to force priorities.
- How dedicated stalking officers and staff are organised within force operational command structures.
- How dedicated stalking officers and staff contribute to multi-agency working which supports victims and provides interventions to perpetrators.

Recommendation 22: To chief constables

By 27 September 2025, using the information collated by the NPCC lead under recommendation 21, to consider whether and how dedicated stalking officers and staff, or other subject matter experts, can be used to add value and support the force response to stalking.

Early screening of crime reports can help to identify stalking cases misidentified at first response

There will always be a risk of misidentification of stalking at first response as stalking overlaps with other criminal and non-criminal behaviours.

We found several forces recognised this and used screening processes to help find cases that had been misidentified. Some forces have invested in dedicated stalking officers and staff to facilitate this type of screening. For example, the [early awareness stalking intervention \(EASI\) unit](#) in West Midlands Police carries out daily screening of reported stalking and harassment crimes and some types of order breaches.

This screening can also help to make sure the police's allocation of cases, investigative actions, safeguarding decisions, and referrals for victim support are appropriate.

Recommendation 23: To chief constables

By 27 March 2025, implement a mechanism for early screening of crimes to improve the identification, recording and management of all stalking cases.

Forces should consider screening crimes similar to stalking, or where stalking behaviours may be present as part of a course of conduct, like harassment, malicious communications and breaches of orders.

We think there is potential for artificial intelligence to play a role in crime screening. It could help improve accuracy and efficiency in identifying stalking and risks within stalking cases.

Recommendation 24: To the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment

By 27 March 2025, begin working with the NPCC lead for artificial intelligence to explore how artificial intelligence could be used to support the police response to stalking. This should include developing a proof of concept for using artificial intelligence to screen incidents and crimes to help identify stalking and risks associated with stalking.

Multi-agency approaches offer a promising model for tackling stalking – more could be done to make sure partners work more effectively together

We found several forces had implemented multi-agency approaches to tackle stalking. The forces have taken different approaches, but these usually involve dedicated police stalking teams working alongside victim advocates, healthcare, probation and other professionals to tackle stalking offending.

An [evaluation of three multi-agency stalking intervention programme \(MASIP\) sites published in 2020](#) indicated that they had a positive impact on outcomes in stalking investigations. One of the three evaluated sites is the [harm reduction unit in Cheshire](#) (detailed on the College of Policing’s practice bank).

We heard from police and stalking advocates about the value multi-agency teams provide as hubs of expertise that support the management of risk to victims and interventions with perpetrators to disrupt offending.

We also heard that fully integrated multi-agency teams can be expensive to establish and resource. However, there may be opportunities for forces to collaborate to implement multi-agency approaches in a more cost-effective way. Some forces had also developed other ways to work with partners, such as running regular multi-agency stalking meetings to discuss high-risk cases.

We are concerned that forces may be missing other opportunities to work with partners. Recent changes to statutory guidance on multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPAs) require agencies to consider managing more stalking offenders under MAPPAs. Officers and staff we spoke to in the fieldwork forces were not aware of these changes and most fieldwork forces did not refer to MAPPAs in their local stalking policies.

Recommendation 25: To chief constables, PCCs and their mayor equivalents

By 27 March 2025, explore opportunities to improve how their force works with partners to contribute to a multi-agency response to stalking. This should include considering:

- How the force works in partnership with healthcare, the CPS, probation services and other criminal justice partners to manage stalking perpetrators and address their behaviour.
- Whether and how they should collaborate with other forces to effectively and efficiently contribute to multi-agency partnerships on stalking.
- How multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPAs) are being used to effectively manage stalking offenders.

There are very few stalking-specific perpetrator intervention programmes available – it is not clear what interventions work for stalking perpetrators, or what the minimum requirements for provision should be

We encountered a small number of forces involved in providing interventions for stalking perpetrators. These include the forces involved in the MASIP pilots.

The [2020 evaluation of the three initial pilot MASIP sites](#) said it was too early to draw firm conclusions about the effect of the perpetrator interventions the MASIPs provided. It said more stable funding arrangements were required and further evaluation was necessary to understand the effect of these approaches.

Limited availability of stalking-specific perpetrator intervention programmes means the police rarely ask courts to consider whether attendance on a perpetrator programme should be a condition of an SPO.

The availability of intervention programmes for stalking perpetrators is currently largely dependent on specific Home Office funding. The Home Office is funding various projects through a [£39 million fund for domestic abuse and stalking intervention programmes](#).

Individual projects may include plans for evaluation. However, we think more work is required to better understand and share what works in relation to stalking perpetrator interventions. This would better inform decisions about what interventions should be available and how these services should be used by the police and its partners.

Recommendation 26: To the Home Office

For its current funding programme for domestic abuse and stalking interventions:

- Evaluate the stalking specific perpetrator intervention projects and publish details of the findings so this information is available to policing and other services working with stalking perpetrators.
- If necessary, commission further research to inform the commissioning and delivery of stalking perpetrator intervention programmes.
- Consider developing standards and providing funding for stalking perpetrator intervention programmes based on the available evidence, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice.

Responding to our recommendations and monitoring progress

We have asked chief constables and the organisations subject to recommendations to respond to us within 56 days. We have also asked chief constables to publish an action plan on their websites explaining how they will respond to the recommendations we made to them. We hope this will aid transparency about the police response to this super-complaint.

We have asked the NPCC to gather details of what forces have achieved after six months and, within a further three months, share a national summary that we will publish. This will make sure our organisations, the National Stalking Consortium, and the public can see policing's progress against our recommendations.

Recommendation 27: To bodies subject to recommendations

By 22 November 2024 (56 days from publication), write to HMICFRS, the IOPC and the College of Policing setting out their response to the recommendations made to them. Chief constables should direct their response to the NPCC which should provide a collective response on behalf of all police forces. PCCs and their mayor equivalents should direct their response to the APCC which should provide a collective response on their behalf.

Recommendation 28: To chief constables

By 22 November 2024 (56 days from publication), publish on their force website an action plan which explains what their force will do in response to each of the recommendations made to them and send the NPCC a link to where this action plan can be found.

By 27 March 2025 (six months from publication) provide an update to the NPCC describing the progress they have made against their action plans.

Recommendation 29: To the NPCC

By 27 June 2025 (nine months from publication), share a report summarising the progress forces have made against their action plans with HMICFRS, the IOPC and the College of Policing. This report will be published on the [GOV.UK police super-complaints webpage](#).

Background: Stalking and the police response

Stalking does not have a clear definition in law. However, it is commonly described across various guidance as “a pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive behaviour which is intrusive”. It is this combination of factors that means that stalking presents particular risks around repeat victimisation (stalking sometimes continues for many years) and escalation of behaviours. This includes escalation to serious physical harm and homicide in some cases. An [overview of research around the links between stalking and serious harm and homicide is included at annex B](#).

The psychological harm caused can be significant for both in-person and online stalking, even when it does not lead to physical harm. Stalking has been described as a crime of psychological terror, leaving victims feeling constantly unsafe and fearful.

The scale of stalking

Stalking is a crime that affects many people. Figures from the [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#) (the Crime Survey) indicate that an estimated 1,639,000 people aged 16 and over were victims of stalking in the year ending March 2023.

The Crime Survey shows that stalking is experienced by women and men of all ages and backgrounds. However, stalking is a gendered crime, with women more likely to be victims of stalking than men. The Crime Survey shows that in the year ending March 2023, an estimated 21% of women and 9% of men in England and Wales had experienced stalking in their lifetime (since the age of 16).

In the Crime Survey, members of the public are asked directly about their experience of crime. Therefore, the survey can capture crimes that have not been reported to the police. The Crime Survey asks members of the public questions about whether they have experienced repeated unwanted contact that caused fear, alarm or distress. This could be stalking but may also capture behaviours that would not fall within the description of stalking as a crime in law. Even taking this into account, the Crime Survey data (when compared with stalking crimes recorded by police) suggests that many incidents of stalking go unreported. Research indicates that victims who do report stalking to the police have often experienced stalking for some time before contacting the police, and often only do so when the stalking escalates, or when they are afraid it will escalate (this research evidence is discussed in our [rapid evidence review at annex C](#)).

Stalking law

A specific crime of stalking was introduced in England and Wales in 2012 through an amendment to the [Protection from Harassment Act 1997](#). Before this, stalking behaviours could be prosecuted as a crime of harassment. Campaigners argued that this did not provide sufficient recognition of the nature of offending and the devastating effect that stalking can have on victims. The introduction of stalking offences in 2012 was an important step forward in recognising the serious nature of the offending and the potential devastating effect on victims.

These changes introduced:

- [Section 2A offence of stalking](#)
- [Section 4A stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress](#)

Section 2A offence of stalking

Section 2A of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 makes it an offence to “pursue a course of conduct” that “amounts to stalking”. Section 2A is a summary only offence (a less serious offence that is heard in a magistrate’s court). It carries a maximum sentence of 26 weeks imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Section 2A sets out that a course of conduct (related behaviour on two or more occasions) amounts to stalking if:

- it is harassment
- it involves behaviours “associated with stalking”
- the person doing it knows or ought to know that it is harassment

This means the crimes of stalking and harassment are linked and overlap under the law.

Behaviours associated with stalking are not specifically defined.

Section 4A stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress

Section 4A stalking is a more serious offence than section 2A stalking. It is an either-way offence (it can be heard in either a magistrates’ or Crown Court) and carries a maximum sentence of ten years imprisonment, a fine, or both.

Section 4A of the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 applies when stalking causes either:

- on at least two occasions, the victim to fear that violence will be used against them
- serious alarm or distress which has a “substantial adverse effect” on the usual day to day activities of the victim

Section 4A only applies when the suspect knows or ought to know that they have caused fear of violence or serious alarm or distress that has had a substantial adverse effect.

Stalking protection orders

The [Stalking Protection Act 2019](#) introduced stalking protection orders (SPOs) and interim SPOs. These came into operation in January 2020. These are civil orders which can be made by magistrates following an application by the police.

SPOs place specific prohibitions and/or positive requirements on those subject to them. These are intended to protect victims from risks and harm associated with stalking.

Examples of prohibitions might include:

- prohibiting the person from entering certain locations or defined areas where the victim lives or frequently visits
- prohibiting the person from contacting the victim by any means, including telephone, post, email, text message or social media

Examples of positive requirements might include:

- attending an appropriate perpetrator intervention programme
- surrendering devices
- providing the police with access to social media accounts, mobile phones, computers, tablets and passwords

The Home Office has issued [statutory guidance for the police regarding SPOs](#). It sets out that an SPO can be sought at any point during a stalking case. Including following the conviction or acquittal of a perpetrator and in cases that do not meet the threshold to charge. The courts must not use SPOs as an alternative to prosecution, but they can be used to complement the prosecution of a stalking offence.

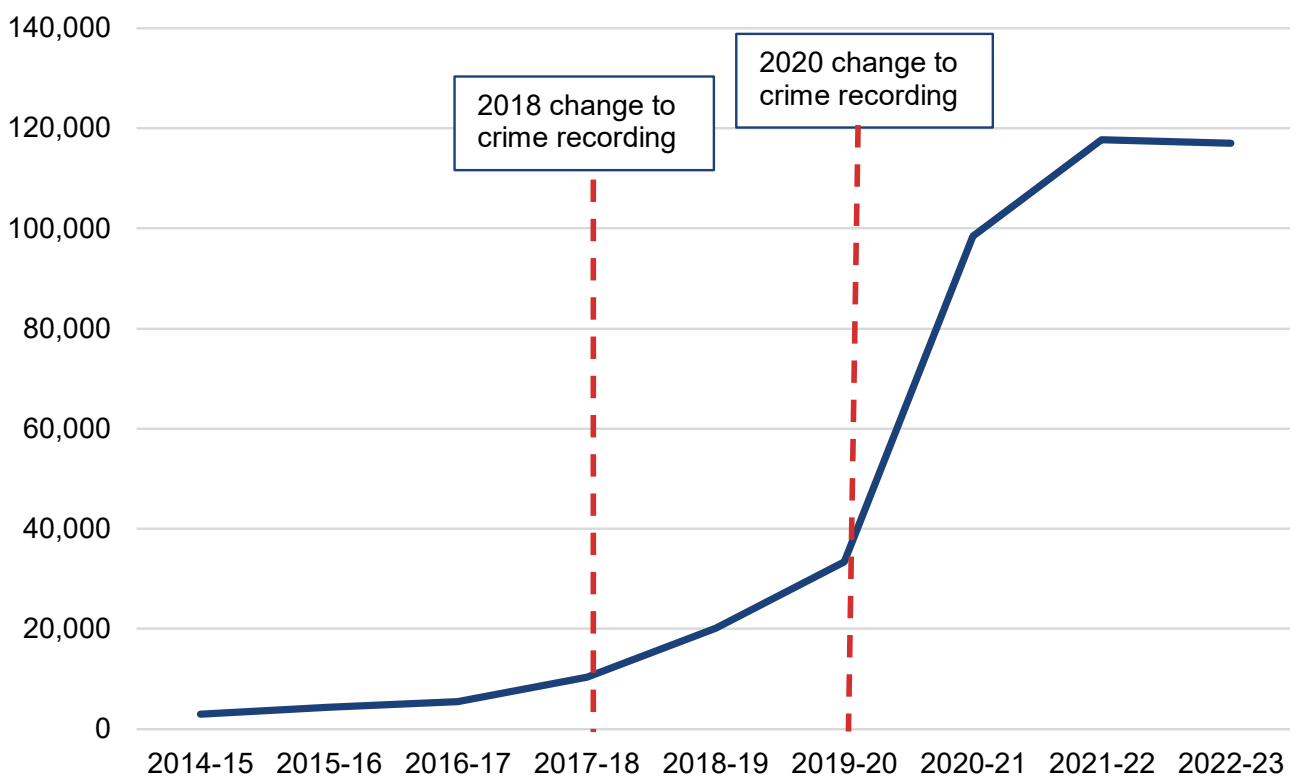
The police can apply to a magistrate for an interim SPO in cases where there is an “immediate risk of harm”, but more time is needed to gather the information to apply for a full SPO, or where the court is unable to provide a full order in time. Interim SPOs allow for prohibitions and requirements to be placed on a stalker while the police are preparing an application for a full order.

Breaching an SPO is a criminal offence which carries a maximum sentence of five years imprisonment.

Stalking crimes recorded by police

There were 117,049 stalking crimes recorded by police in the year ending March 2023. The number of stalking crimes recorded by police has increased significantly over the last ten years. However, during this time there have been a number of changes to the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) (the crime recording rules) which have influenced the recording of stalking crimes.

Figure 1: Police recorded stalking crimes in England and Wales between the year ending March 2015 and the year ending March 2023



Source: [Home Office data published by the Office for National Statistics](#)

Changes to the crime recording rules over this period have influenced how stalking crimes must be recorded by police. Before April 2018, where a stalking crime was reported together with a more serious crime in terms of sentencing, the principal crime rule meant that the stalking crime did not need to be recorded.

The crime recording rules changed in April 2018 and required that where stalking was reported at the same time as another crime, then both the “conduct crime” (such as stalking) and the other crime should be recorded. This change corresponds to an increase in recorded stalking crimes.

In May 2023 the requirement to record two crimes when stalking and another crime was reported was removed. Police are now required to assess which is the most serious crime reported in terms of impact, and only record that. In most cases this will be the

conduct crime, such as stalking. Therefore, this change may not have a significant effect on the number of stalking crimes recorded, though it is too early to assess what the effect has been. We discuss concerns about this change to the crime recording rules later in this report (see [Addressing the impact of changes to the crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#)).

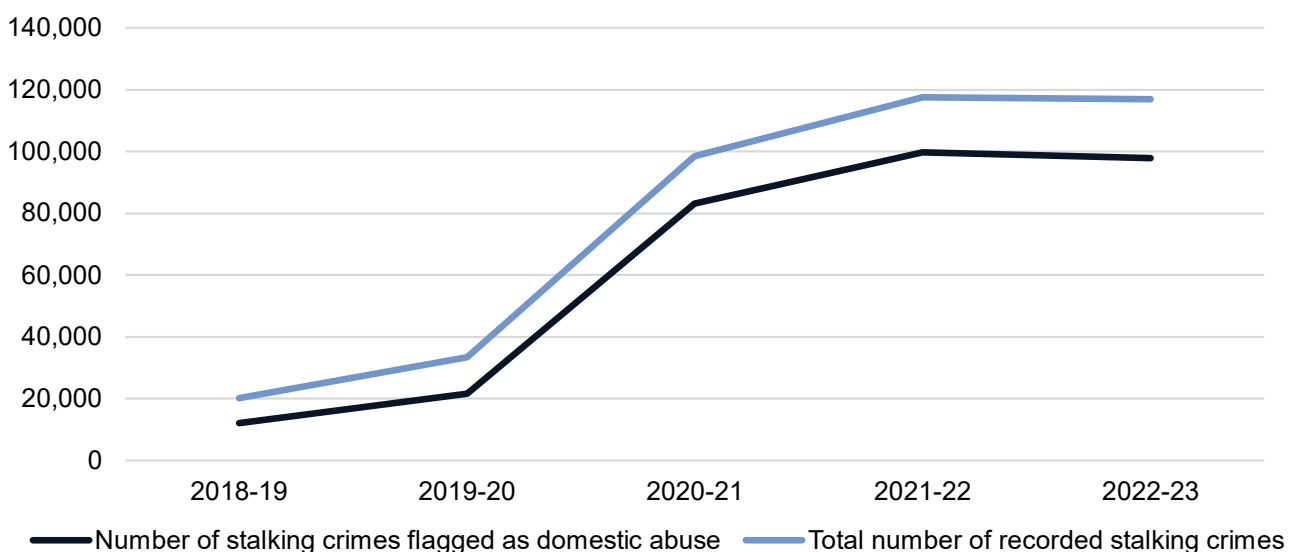
An additional change to the crime recording rules was made in April 2020. This change required that:

“All cases where a course of conduct is reported between a victim and their former partner (except where one or both parties is aged under 16) must be recorded as stalking unless the [force crime registrar] is satisfied that the matter amounts to harassment in law only.”

This change corresponds with a large increase in the number of stalking crimes recorded. This also corresponds with an increase in the proportion of stalking cases that are flagged as domestic abuse as illustrated in the graph below (figure 2). The police are required to flag crimes that involve [domestic abuse](#).

The number of recorded stalking crimes that are not flagged as domestic abuse has not increased in the same way over this period. This includes stalking by people who are known to the victim, such as acquaintances or work colleagues as well as stalking by strangers.

Figure 2: Police recorded stalking crimes and police recorded stalking crimes flagged as domestic abuse in England and Wales between the year ending March 2019 and the year ending March 2023



Source: Home Office data published by the Office for National Statistics in data tables showing [police recorded stalking crimes](#) and [police flagged domestic abuse crimes](#)

Strategic leadership and oversight of the police response to stalking

National strategic approach to stalking

The Home Secretary included violence against women and girls (VAWG) within the [strategic policing requirement](#) in February 2023, putting VAWG on a par with terrorism and serious and organised crime in terms of national threats to public safety.

Stalking falls within the strategic focus on VAWG. It is a gendered crime which is disproportionately perpetrated by men against women. In July 2024 the NPCC and the College of Policing published a [national policing statement on violence against women and girls](#) which provides an assessment of the threat VAWG poses to public safety. The statement identifies stalking and harassment as one of five high-harm and high-volume threat areas that policing will focus on over the next year. This clear focus on stalking is a welcome development.

The focus on VAWG across policing is an important opportunity to ensure improvements in the police response to stalking. The NPCC and the College of Policing have produced a [delivery framework](#) and [self-assessment template](#) as part of the national strategic focus on VAWG. This provides guidance to police forces on how they can plan, resource and evaluate their work to keep women and girls safe, using a four-P model (prepare, protect, pursue and prevent). Forces should be using this framework to guide their strategic response to VAWG offences, including stalking. This should involve police leaders, PCCs or their mayor equivalents, and other oversight and accountability mechanisms such as Local Criminal Justice Boards.

The recommendations that we have made to policing throughout this investigation, draw on and support the principles in this framework.

National police leadership on stalking

Police leadership on stalking is provided nationally by Deputy Chief Constable Paul Mills. DCC Mills has been the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment since 2018. His appointment to this role closely followed the 2017 publication of the HMICFRS and HMCPSP [Living in fear inspection report](#) on the police and CPS response to stalking. DCC Mills told us that his work as NPCC lead has focussed over this period on helping to make sure that policing delivers against the recommendations in the Living in fear inspection report.

DCC Mills chairs a national stalking and harassment offences working group. This is attended by police regional stalking leads, statutory partners across the criminal justice system and representatives from the National Stalking Consortium (the Consortium) and academia. Complementing this is a tactical working group involving regional stalking leads, and a separate academic knowledge exchange group focussing on opportunities for academic research into stalking and the police response. Members of the super-complaint investigation team attended the national working group throughout this investigation. In the super-complaint, the Consortium refer to the effective working relationship they have with the NPCC lead. We also saw this in the working group meetings we observed.

These working group meetings discuss local and national issues, challenges around the police response to stalking, and share updates from policing and its partners. The meetings are used to share information about new initiatives and approaches taken by different forces to improve the police response to stalking.

Throughout this investigation we have heard about different innovative and promising practice in different forces. We have worked with forces to share some of these examples on the [College of Policing's practice bank](#) so information is widely available. These practice bank examples are highlighted throughout this report.

We encourage the NPCC and forces to build on the work of the national stalking and harassment offences working group as an information sharing forum by using the College of Policing practice bank to share practice related to stalking. We would encourage the NPCC lead to work closely with the College of Policing to continue to identify innovative and promising practice that can be formally shared in this way, promoting adoption of good practice across different forces.

Strategic approach to stalking in forces

Forces' strategic understanding of the stalking problem and the police response in their area

An effective response to stalking requires a good understanding of the stalking problem in each policing area, and a clear strategic approach to tackling this.

Each police force in England and Wales has an elected local policing body. This includes Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) and mayor equivalents. These set the police and crime objectives for their area through a police and crime plan.

Most forces told us, in response to the force self-assessment survey, that their force's police and crime plan included specific reference to stalking. Many forces reported that stalking was referenced under the force's strategic focus on violence against women and girls. A number of forces responded that stalking fell within their strategic focus on domestic abuse. Where this is the case, there may be a risk that stalking in a non-domestic abuse context is not given sufficient strategic consideration.

Despite including stalking in police and crime plans, we found that forces do not always have clear mechanisms for strategic oversight in relation to stalking crimes. We found that some of the fieldwork forces did not have a [problem profile](#) or some other form of product that helped the force understand the nature of stalking in their area. Even when forces did have a product, it was not as comprehensive as it could have been. For example, we found gaps in analysis around victim or offender profiles.

We found that none of the HMICFRS fieldwork forces had estimated how demand from online or digitally enabled stalking was likely to change in the future. We also found that some fieldwork forces combined stalking crimes with harassment crimes in [force management statements](#) which set out current and predicted future demand. Combining these does not recognise that the demand from the two types of crimes may be very different. For example, stalking cases may require resources to apply for stalking protection orders.

We have made a recommendation later in the report that chief constables take action to make sure they have appropriate mechanisms to fully understand the scale and types of stalking behaviour within their force.

Oversight, assurance and improvement work relating to stalking

Responses to the force self-assessment survey also revealed gaps in important information that could help forces understand how well they were responding to reports of stalking. Only 15 out of 43 forces were able to tell us roughly what percentage of stalking victims they referred to specialist stalking support services. Some forces were unclear about how many officers and staff had received required training on stalking. And many forces could not provide information on how significant the online element of stalking is across their stalking caseload.

We also found evidence that new developments and initiatives to improve the response to victims in stalking cases – such as the introduction of stalking protection orders or the piloting of a stalking screening tool – had been poorly implemented across many forces. However, there were also positive indicators. Some forces had invested in dedicated stalking officers and staff, or innovative approaches to improving the response in their area. These are discussed in more detail throughout this report.

Evidence from the fieldwork and force self-assessment survey indicates that many forces are undertaking some audit and assurance activities around the quality of the police response to stalking. This covers areas including crime recording, quality of investigations, and victim satisfaction. However, our fieldwork indicates that this type of assurance activity is sometimes infrequent or does not always result in actions to address issues that are identified. For example, in 2022/23, only two of the six HMICFRS fieldwork forces had conducted a survey of stalking victims to gather their views about the service they received from police.

The NPCC and College of Policing [VAWG self-assessment template](#) emphasises the importance of involving victims to inform change and improve practice. We think that more needs to be done to make sure that victims' voices inform how police respond to stalking and how leaders understand the quality of the police response. This is included in our recommendation to chief constables below.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025 make sure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to fully understand the scale and types of stalking behaviour within their force and the effectiveness of their response. This should align with the [VAWG national delivery framework](#). Mechanisms should include:

- Problem profiles using police data and intelligence and other sources of information to ensure that the full extent of stalking is well understood. This could include information sharing with local victims' services and other public services, and national and local statistics.
- Regular assurance work such as audits to better understand the force response and make improvements where appropriate, including monitoring the use of SPOs, investigation outcomes and the quality of investigations.
- Ways to regularly receive feedback from victims, such as victim surveys.
- Force management statements which reflect current and future demand from stalking.

[\(This is recommendation 11 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Availability of data to support transparency and scrutiny of the police response to stalking

The publication of police crime data is an important mechanism supporting police transparency and accountability. It allows the public, academics, third sector organisations, and policing and government to better understand reported crime and the police response. It is fundamental to holding police forces to account.

In the super-complaint, the Consortium has called for the published data of stalking crimes recorded by police to differentiate between the section 2A and section 4A offences. We support this proposal for improved transparency through publishing more detailed data relating to stalking crimes and we make a recommendation about this below.

The Consortium has also called for criminal justice agencies to implement a unified recording system which would allow the journey of a victim to be followed through the criminal justice system. We have not explored the practicalities involved with this proposal as this extends beyond the scope of this super-complaint, which is limited to considering the police response to stalking. However, we support this ambition for cross-organisational victim-centred data reporting. And we are aware that the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office is co-leading [a criminal justice system data improvement programme](#), which aims to improve how data held by different criminal justice agencies is shared, used, and managed.

Data showing police recording of section 2A and section 4A stalking offences and stalking where there is a domestic abuse context

There are gaps in the data that is readily available to the public about the criminal justice response to stalking. The Office for National Statistics publishes data on police recorded stalking offences for England and Wales as a whole. The [Office for National Statistics release on crime in England and Wales](#) includes the number of police recorded stalking and harassment offences (all stalking, harassment and malicious communications offences). It also includes information about people's experiences of stalking based on responses to the Crime Survey for England and Wales. In addition, the number of domestic-abuse related stalking offences recorded by the police in England and Wales is available in the [Office for National Statistics release on domestic abuse prevalence and trends](#).

The Home Office publishes more detailed information on the number of police recorded stalking offences in its [open data tables on police recorded crime and outcomes](#). Members of the public can use the tables to calculate the total the number of stalking crimes recorded by each police force in England and Wales from 2012/13 onwards.

The Home Office also collects information about numbers of stalking offences recorded by each force as section 2A and section 4A stalking. This 'sub-offence' code data is supplied to the Home Office Data Hub which allows an automated capture of crime data (via direct extracts from forces' own crime recording systems). However, this data is not published. Additionally, the Home Office collects data on whether stalking offences were related to domestic abuse. This data is published in the [Office for National Statistics release on domestic abuse prevalence and trends](#) at the national level only.

One of the concerns raised by the Consortium in the super-complaint relates to whether the police are appropriately recognising and investigating stalking as the more serious section 4A offence, when it is appropriate to do so. It is difficult to compare how forces are applying the distinction between section 2A and section 4A stalking crimes and to assess whether this is done consistently, when the published data does not show these offences separately.

The NPCC lead for stalking and harassment also expressed concern about the lack of detail in the published data on stalking. DCC Mills commented that it is more difficult for the NPCC or individual forces to compare approaches between forces to help inform improvements because disaggregated data is not easily available.

The Home Office provided data from the data hub as part of this investigation. It shows the number of stalking crimes recorded by force under section 2A and section 4A. Our investigation shows that this data can help to inform the understanding of stalking and the police response to this crime, including highlighting areas of inconsistent practice across policing. We think that there would be value in the Home Office publishing this level of disaggregated data in its [open data tables on police recorded crime and outcomes](#).

Recommendation to the Home Office

From the next data release onwards, publish police recorded crime data so it shows section 2A and section 4A stalking crimes separately.

[\(This is recommendation 8 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Data relating to stalking protection orders

DCC Mills, NPCC lead for stalking and harassment, also highlighted problems with the availability of data on stalking protection orders (SPOs). He told us that limited published data on the use of SPOs by forces made it difficult to get an accurate overview of which forces are using SPOs, how they are using them and how often, and success rates where applications for SPOs are made to the courts by police.

[The Home Office and HM Courts and Tribunals Service published data about SPOs](#) alongside the [Home Office review of the initial implementation of SPOs](#) in 2022.

This included information on the number of SPO applications the police made to magistrates, the number issued by magistrates, and the number of times courts were notified of an SPO breach. However, further courts data on SPOs has not been published since this time.

HMICFRS collects data on SPOs from forces as part of its inspection work, but this data is not usually published. We discuss this data in more detail in [our chapter on SPOs](#).

The Home Office told us that it was working with the Ministry of Justice to make publication of courts data about SPOs more routine and aligned to other published data about court orders. We welcome and support this action to improve the transparency about the use of SPOs.

Recommendation to the Ministry of Justice

Before the end of 2024, begin routinely publishing, within [criminal courts statistics](#), data regarding the number of interim and full SPOs applied for, granted and breached.

[\(This is recommendation 9 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Training on stalking for police officers and staff

“I can understand [in relation to] training... not everybody can be an expert on identifying this sort of crime, but [police officers and staff should] at least have an appreciation to say something’s not right here.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

College of Policing curriculum and stalking or harassment e-learning package

In the super-complaint, the Consortium has called on the College of Policing to mandate specialist stalking training for all officers that deal with stalking.

The College of Policing sets learning standards for English and Welsh policing in the national policing curriculum. Police forces are responsible for providing training and learning to officers and staff that meets the expectations in this curriculum. Stalking is included in the public protection part of the national policing curriculum.

The College of Policing has an e-learning package on stalking or harassment. Forces can use this to support their delivery of the public protection national policing curriculum. The e-learning can be used as standalone training or as part of a package of training. The content can also be used as the basis for classroom training. The stalking or harassment e-learning package provides information about:

- the stalking and harassment offences in the Protection from Harassment Act 1997
- how to identify and recognise stalking or harassment and the effect it has on victims
- the first investigative steps to take once stalking or harassment is identified, using good practice in the investigation of cases

This e-learning is aimed at police officers, including police specials, PCSOs and police staff. The e-learning package is available to all forces. Forces can also develop their own training materials and may collaborate with local victims’ services or other experts to co-provide training.

During the super-complaint investigation, the College of Policing updated the content of this stalking e-learning package. Further details about this and other work the College of Policing is undertaking around training on stalking are provided at the end of this chapter.

Training on stalking provided to officers and staff

We asked forces about the training they provide on stalking to officers and staff in our force self-assessment survey. All forces reported providing some form of training on stalking. However, the evidence from our investigation indicates that training provision on stalking is very variable across different forces. Worryingly, some police officers and staff we spoke to in our focus groups reported feeling poorly prepared to identify and respond to stalking effectively.

Some forces use the College of Policing's stalking or harassment e-learning package, but uptake is relatively low. In response to the force self-assessment survey, more than half (25 out of 43) of forces stated that they did not require their officers or staff to complete the stalking or harassment e-learning.

Most forces reported that they provide some type of locally developed and delivered training on stalking in addition to, or instead of, the College of Policing e-learning. Forces described this training as covering issues such as identifying stalking and distinguishing stalking from harassment. However, we were unable to assess from the survey responses how closely this locally developed training followed the national policing curriculum or the content from the College of Policing e-learning package.

Concerningly, some forces provided responses to the force self-assessment survey which suggest that training on stalking was not required for a significant proportion of officers and staff. Some forces reported poor completion of the training that was available (less than 50% of those required to complete the training did so). Some other forces did not know how many officers or staff had completed the training that had been set. This is a concern as understanding whether officers and staff have received appropriate training, is important information about the force capability in terms of its response to stalking. This is relevant to forces' strategic oversight of the police response to stalking which we have discussed earlier in this report in [our chapter on strategic leadership and oversight](#).

Some force responses to the self-assessment survey outlined more comprehensive approaches to training. This included examples of forces using a range of different training approaches, tailored to different levels of expertise required across different roles. Further details and examples are in the [summary of survey responses included at annex E](#).

We also found variability in the training provision across the six HMICFRS fieldwork forces. All the training we reviewed included an input on how to tell the difference between harassment and stalking. However, the training material we reviewed lacked content on police practice that sits alongside or after the initial identification of stalking. For example, in some forces, the training did not include information about how to record stalking in accordance with the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) (the crime recording rules). None of the training products in any of the fieldwork forces included reference to stalking victims' entitlement to an enhanced service under the [victims' code](#)

(the victims' code is discussed in further detail in [our chapter on victim care](#)). Only two of the six forces included adequate content in stalking training about breaches of protective orders in the context of stalking crimes, including when to treat these as further instances of stalking. It also appeared that all the fieldwork forces had not trained all relevant officers on stalking protection orders.

Training on stalking also provides an opportunity to explain local procedures and practice to officers and staff that they are required to follow to provide a good service to victims. The training materials we reviewed in our fieldwork forces did not always cover this. The policies themselves were also not always as comprehensive as they should be.

In our fieldwork, we also asked forces about the training provided to student officers. We found that the student officer training content varied from force to force. The fieldwork forces had not recently reviewed their student officer training and it was missing important information. For example, information about how to properly record stalking crimes.

Participants in our focus groups with police officers and staff all told us that they had received some initial basic training on recognising stalking and harassment. However, gaps in knowledge and inadequate training to understand stalking in practice were discussed at every level of seniority. This was particularly highlighted by the call handlers and frontline officers we spoke to. Supervisors also spoke about limited training for frontline officers regarding stalking:

“There’s pretty much nothing as a DC, or PC. Or as a DS.”

“In relation to training, I think there is a gap in relation to the responding officers.”

(Police focus group – supervisors)

The supervisors also told us that they did not necessarily receive additional training on stalking. This was seen as an issue as they may not always be able to guide or advise their officers appropriately.

“As a PC I just had standard inputs into... domestics and stuff like that and then... trying to identify what stalking was. As a Sergeant, I’ve had no further training on that, to be honest.”

(Police focus group – supervisors)

The victims and victim support service providers that we spoke to as part of this investigation also told us about their perceptions of the variability in police training on stalking.

The College of Policing is taking steps to update and further develop its training in relation to stalking (set out below). We also think that forces need to do more to make sure that appropriate training on stalking is provided to officers and staff who respond to and investigate stalking crimes. We have made a recommendation to chief constables about this at the end of this section.

Updates and further development of College of Policing training products

The College of Policing recognises that there is more it can do to support forces to make sure that officers and staff are appropriately equipped to respond to stalking. The College of Policing has commissioned the Open University to review the public protection national policing curriculum. The Open University's work, the findings of this super-complaint investigation and other important reports such as the [Casey Review](#) and the [Angiolini Inquiry](#) will help inform the College of Policing's new professionalising public protection programme, which is in development.

The College of Policing is committed to supporting forces to build the core safeguarding and investigation skills they need to provide excellence in public protection. The College of Policing will refresh its safeguarding programme for frontline officers, so it includes a standalone training module that covers stalking and harassment. It will also develop an entirely new educational programme for frontline supervisors. This will help ensure frontline supervisors have the skills and knowledge they need to support their officers to provide quality initial investigations for all crimes and help supervisors improve the oversight and scrutiny of investigations.

In the meantime, the College of Policing has updated its existing stalking or harassment e-learning package which forces can use to support the delivery of the existing national policing curriculum. Our evidence indicates that forces could make better use of this e-learning product as either standalone training and/or as the basis for locally developed and delivered training. Using the content from the College of Policing's e-learning package can help forces make sure they are meeting the curriculum requirements in a robust and consistent way. This can then be complemented by inputs from specialists from outside of policing, such as stalking victim support services or academics that provide a different perspective.

The College of Policing and the NPCC will write to forces to make them aware of the updates to the e-learning and how the e-learning supports the delivery of learning outcomes related to stalking in the public protection national policing curriculum. Following this we are recommending that forces review and update their training provision relating to stalking.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025 review and update their learning and training provision relating to stalking so it:

- Meets the learning outcomes on stalking within the public protection national policing curriculum.
- Makes appropriate use of the stalking or harassment e-learning product developed by the College of Policing.
- Uses the skills and knowledge of local victim advocates or others from outside policing with relevant expertise.
- Includes information on relevant local policies and practice where necessary.
- Is provided to the officers and staff who will most benefit from the learning.

Chief constables should also make sure that their policies and practice are reviewed and updated in accordance with the findings in the super-complaint investigation report.

[\(This is recommendation 10 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Dedicated stalking co-ordination roles and multi-agency working to respond to stalking

Dedicated stalking officers and staff

Some forces have dedicated stalking officers or staff who are responsible for coordinating their force's response to stalking. They also provide support, assistance and advice on stalking cases. Our investigation found evidence that having dedicated stalking officers and staff can benefit a force's response to stalking.

Five of the six fieldwork forces had at least one officer or staff member who worked exclusively on stalking crimes. In response to the force self-assessment survey, 14 out of 43 forces reported having some type of dedicated stalking teams or roles.

We spoke with a number of officers and staff members in dedicated stalking co-ordination roles during our fieldwork and focus groups with police officers and staff. These officers and staff members were well-informed and showed a good understanding of stalking. We saw good evidence of them working well with partner organisations.

Forces were asked to describe the types of activities that dedicated stalking officers and staff undertook in the force self-assessment survey. One response mentioned that the dedicated stalking unit in that force was developing an investigative function. However, in most cases, dedicated stalking units were small teams providing an advisory, support and co-ordination role. In some cases, this dedicated resource was complemented by a wider network of officers and staff that act as points of contact for advice and assistance with stalking cases.

The tasks undertaken by dedicated stalking officers and staff included:

- Being a single and known point of expertise for the force (internally and externally).
- Being a single point of contact for direct liaison with specialist stalking victim support services and advocates.
- Daily checking of stalking crime reports. This was: to make sure all necessary investigative and safeguarding actions had been considered; to generate remedial actions; and to make sure that crimes had been correctly recorded as section 2A or section 4A stalking.
- Daily checking of other behavioural crimes to make sure stalking crimes had not been missed or misidentified.
- Screening of cases to identify those suitable for stalking protection orders and liaising with legal services.

- Formulating and delivering training and guidance.
- Supporting or reviewing risk assessments and providing safeguarding advice.
- Developing and administering multi-agency responses to stalking. For example, as part of stalking clinics or multi-agency stalking intervention programmes.

The scope of these tasks and the exact numbers of officers involved varied between forces. In some cases, we were told that resource limitations significantly restricted the work of these roles. This meant that intervention and support could not be provided for all stalking cases, or advice provided on cases could not be followed up.

The following is an example of the structure and responsibilities of a dedicated stalking team from our investigation fieldwork:

Promising practice – West Midlands Police – early awareness stalking intervention (EASI) team

West Midlands Police had a dedicated stalking team – [the early awareness stalking intervention \(EASI\) team](#) – consisting of six officers and staff and two supervisors.

One of the roles of the team was to perform daily searches on the crime and custody systems to find cases of stalking that had not been recognised among other behavioural crimes. The team then placed an entry on the crime record to alert the investigating officers and their supervisors.

The team also provided other written advice to investigating officers. This included information about:

- [Stalking protection orders](#).
- Specialist support services including the national charity that provides help to [victims](#) of online harm, [The Cyber Helpline](#).
- How to refer cases to the [perpetrator intervention programme](#) (this promising practice example is described in [the chapter on stalking perpetrator programmes](#)).
- How to refer cases to the force stalking triage clinic.

The stalking triage clinic was a multi-agency meeting that took place every two weeks. The purpose of the meeting was to identify and manage stalking perpetrators and coordinate support for victims.

In the force self-assessment survey, we asked forces to suggest how the police response to stalking could be improved. Close to half of the responses suggested dedicated stalking officers, co-ordination units, or stalking clinics as a way of improving the police response to stalking. Forces which had dedicated stalking officers and staff reflected on the value they provide:

“We feel strongly that our strong charging performance is a result of the role of [our multi-agency stalking unit] and their crime screening role.”

“The provision of access to specialists and the opportunity to discuss cases is really helpful... and has created a much more open dialogue about the use of SPO's and other protection measures.”

(Force responses to the force self-assessment survey)

We also heard from stalking victim support service providers about the central function that dedicated stalking officers and staff play in supporting effective working relationships with stalking support service providers and advocates. This collaborative working is important in making sure that best use is made of the essential support provided by these services. This is discussed in more detail in [the chapter on victim care and support](#).

The benefits of dedicated stalking units, where these work closely with stalking support services or advocates, is also evidenced in research evaluations of specialist stalking teams. For example, [an evaluation of a specialist domestic abuse cyber stalking unit, Taylor-Dunn and Erol \(2022\)](#), found high levels of victim engagement and satisfaction where the specialist unit was involved. This included a dedicated victim advocate co-located with the police team. The evaluation also pointed to positive results around police action to safeguard victims. Of the 21 cases identified by the evaluation which were successfully prosecuted, all had a restraining order imposed.

Forces with dedicated officers and staff take different approaches to how these roles or teams are structured, the tasks they complete, and training or skills requirements for officers and staff in these roles. More could be done to share details of different models and their benefits. This would help all forces consider whether such an approach could work in their force to improve the police response to stalking.

Recommendation to the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment

By 27 March 2025, to collate and disseminate information to chief constables on the dedicated stalking co-ordination roles that exist. This information should support chief constables to consider whether and how dedicated stalking officers and staff can be used to support the police response to stalking.

The information collated and disseminated should include (but not be limited to) details of:

- Skills and experiences of dedicated stalking officers and staff, and any extra training provided to them by the force.
- Day-to-day responsibilities of dedicated stalking officers and staff, and how these are aligned to force priorities.
- How dedicated stalking officers and staff are organised within force operational command structures.
- How dedicated stalking officers and staff contribute to multi-agency working which supports victims and provides interventions to perpetrators.

[\(This is recommendation 21 in the summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 September 2025, using the information collated by the NPCC lead under recommendation 21, to consider whether and how dedicated stalking officers and staff, or other subject matter experts, can be used to add value and support the force response to stalking.

[\(This is recommendation 22 in the summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Multi-agency working to support the police response to stalking

Several forces have implemented multi-agency approaches to tackle stalking. Forces have taken different approaches, but these usually involve dedicated police stalking teams working alongside victim advocates, healthcare, probation and other professionals to tackle stalking and assess and manage risk.

We heard from representatives of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust about the [multi-agency stalking intervention programme \(MASIP\)](#), which they have been involved in designing and delivering. The approach involves co-located integrated working between different agencies from the start of the response to a report of stalking. It is focused on the management of the risk to the victim, as well as looking at tailored interventions to address

the offending. This includes considering stalking protection orders and health interventions for the perpetrator where appropriate. In the super-complaint the Consortium calls for all police forces and PCCs to implement the MASIP approach.

A pilot which involved three MASIP sites was established with initial funding from the Home Office Police Transformation Fund. An [evaluation of the pilot sites](#) was undertaken by University College London in 2020. This found that early evidence indicated a positive influence on investigations and outcomes in stalking investigations. However, the evaluation reflected that it was too early to draw firm conclusions, particularly regarding the effect on perpetrator interventions. We discuss the need for further evaluation around perpetrator intervention programmes in [the final chapter of this report](#). And we have made a recommendation to the Home Office in relation to this.

One of the three evaluated MASIP approaches was the harm reduction unit in Cheshire. This has since been included on the [College of Policing practice bank](#) as an example of promising practice.

All participants in our focus group with stalking victim support service providers agreed that the most successful responses to stalking by the police were multi-agency responses.

“Some of the best case examples we would have would be where a case has come into an area where there is a multi-agency response. The victim has been able to work with an advocate from day one to look at her home security and to negotiate with her employer about her routes to work and all of the things that she hadn’t thought of until an advocate... told her that this might be an option for her. Then we’ve got the police in the same conversation, considering the stalking protection order at the earliest opportunity so we can get some intervention and mental health professionals saying “actually from what we’ve read here it sounds like maybe we need to get some intervention for this perpetrator”. And then of course if we get it to a point where it’s progressed to a charge in a court case, we’ve got probation there writing a pre-sentencing report having been involved in all of these conversations. So all of our best examples really would be with that multi agency response.”

(Stalking victim support service provider – focus group)

We also heard from police, in the force self-assessment survey and in our focus groups with police officers and staff, about the value multi-agency teams provide. They were seen as hubs of expertise that support the management of risk to victims and interventions with perpetrators to disrupt offending.

However, we also heard that fully integrated multi-agency teams can be expensive to establish and resource long term. We found that some forces had developed other ways to work with partners, like running regular multi-agency stalking meetings to discuss high-risk cases. An example of an alternative approach is the West Midlands Police EASI programme. This is described in more detail in [our discussion of dedicated stalking teams](#) and [perpetrator programmes](#). It has also been included on the College of Policing practice bank as [an example of innovative practice](#).

There is a lack of clarity across policing about what the expectations around multi-agency working in relation to stalking mean in practice, or the relative value of different approaches. However, as a minimum, collaborative working between police and victim support services and advocates should be seen as central to an effective response to stalking. We have made a recommendation in relation to this in [our chapter on victim care](#). We have also proposed further evaluation of perpetrator programmes, which are usually facilitated by multi-agency approaches in [our chapter on stalking perpetrator intervention programmes](#).

Overall, we think that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that multi-agency approaches should be considered by forces as a promising model for improving the police response to stalking. This could involve collaboration between forces to share costs. In the previous section, we have made a recommendation to the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment to collate and disseminate information on dedicated stalking teams and this should include examples of different multi-agency approaches. Forces should consider this information and the examples included on the [College of Policing practice bank](#) when considering what type of approach might work in their area.

Existing frameworks for multi-agency working to manage stalking perpetrators and offenders

There are also opportunities for policing to develop and build on the existing frameworks for multi-agency working.

Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) are well established and exist in all police force areas. Through these multi-agency arrangements, the police, probation and prison services work together with other agencies to assess and manage violent and sexual offenders to protect the public from harm.

Category 2 MAPPA applies to offenders who have been convicted of certain violent and sexual offences (including stalking) and have been sentenced to 12 months or more in custody (or are detained or transferred to hospital under the Mental Health Act 1983). Category 3 MAPPA includes other dangerous offenders who do not fall within category 2. This applies to a person who has been cautioned for or convicted of an offence that indicates they are capable of causing serious harm and requires multi-agency management.

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service published [revised MAPPA guidance](#) in March 2023 which strengthened the guidance in relation to the management of stalking offenders. The guidance now states that:

“Those with convictions for stalking or who display stalking behaviours must also be considered for referral to Category 3 if they do not fall into Category 2 management.”

The updates to the MAPPA guidance are welcome as they provide for more stalking offenders to be managed under this established multi-agency process. However, at the time of our investigation it did not appear that these changes had been effectively communicated to all of the police personnel responsible for tackling stalking.

Forces may not have updated their own policies and approaches to take account of this recent change to guidance. Indeed, only one of the six fieldwork forces' stalking policies contained any reference to MAPPA and this only contained general information.

The NPCC Lead for stalking and harassment has since written to forces, in July 2024, to highlight the changes to the MAPPA guidance in relation to the management of stalking offenders.

The College of Policing is taking further action to develop its APP on stalking or harassment. This will include developments to provide clearer links to the MAPPA guidance. It will also provide clearer links to the College of Policing advice on [identification, assessment and management of serial or potentially dangerous domestic abuse and stalking perpetrators](#) which also highlights the importance of multi-agency responses.

The [2024-2027 NPCC VAWG delivery framework](#) sets out that policing should focus on identifying and tackling VAWG perpetrators and their behaviours, focusing on repeat and high harm perpetrators. In the [self-assessment template for forces](#) that supports this framework, the indicators of effective performance around targeting VAWG perpetrators include that the:

“Force uses integrated offender management structures, multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA), multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARAC) and multi-agency stalking intervention programmes (MASIP) to reduce the risk posed by VAWG perpetrators.”

Our evidence indicates that more could be done across policing to meet these expectations. Multi-agency approaches could be used more effectively to support the police response to stalking and manage, intervene and disrupt dangerous stalking perpetrators and offenders.

Recommendation to chief constables and PCCs and their mayor equivalents

By 27 March 2025, explore opportunities to improve how their force works with partners to contribute to a multi-agency response to stalking. This should include considering:

- How the force works in partnership with healthcare, the CPS, probation services and other criminal justice partners to manage stalking perpetrators and address their behaviour.
- Whether and how they should collaborate with other forces to effectively and efficiently contribute to multi-agency partnerships on stalking.
- How multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) are being used to effectively manage stalking offenders.

[\(This is recommendation 25 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Identifying and recording stalking crimes

“It should have immediately been recognised as a potential stalking case... It took too long to get to that point and when it got to that point, I felt reassured, I felt taken seriously and I felt more confident in the police. But it took too long to get there.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

The Consortium raises concerns in the super-complaint that the police are misidentifying stalking, and not recognising behaviours as stalking when victims first contact the police to report a crime. The Consortium refers to case studies and feedback from stalking advocates which suggest that police often respond to reported behaviours as single, unconnected incidents, treating the behaviours as different crimes such as malicious communications, criminal damage, threats to kill, or burglary, rather than stalking. The Consortium states that stalking is also commonly misidentified as harassment without taking into account the fixated and obsessive nature of the behaviours.

The Consortium also states that police are failing to treat breaches of protective orders as further instances of stalking where it would be appropriate to do so. This is another area of misidentification, which we discuss in this section of the report.

The Consortium states that there is a lack of understanding across policing about what behaviours constitute stalking, as well as evidence of police minimising or trivialising reports of stalking made by victims.

Summary of our findings

Concerns about the misidentification of stalking and inaccurate recording of stalking crimes were important findings in the HMICFRS and HMCPSP [2017 Living in fear inspection report](#). Since then, there has been a significant increase in the number of stalking crimes recorded by police. This is a positive indicator of improvements in the identification and recording of stalking crimes by police. However, there have been changes to [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) (the crime recording rules) which are likely to have contributed to this increase. Further details of these changes are in [the background section of this report](#).

Our investigation found that the misidentification of stalking is still an issue across policing, despite increased numbers of stalking crimes recorded by police.

We think that greater clarity about what constitutes stalking across law and guidance will provide a better foundation for police to identify stalking and respond appropriately.

We propose that the Home Office changes the existing criminal law relating to stalking in England and Wales. This should include changes to clarify how stalking is defined and consideration of the need for separate section 2A and 4A stalking offences.

However, even if the law is clarified, there will always be a risk of misidentification of stalking as stalking behaviours overlap with other criminal and non-criminal behaviours. Work has already been undertaken by the NPCC and College of Policing during this investigation to provide updated tools and guidance to support the police to identify stalking and take initial actions to address immediate risk. We also propose that forces consider the early screening of behavioural crimes and incidents to identify stalking cases that have been misidentified and risks that have been missed. This is an area which we think could be supported by the use of artificial intelligence.

Police misidentifying or failing to recognise stalking

It is crucial that police recognise stalking behaviours where these are reported, to make sure that the police response is appropriate to the seriousness of the crime and the risks to and effect on the victim. Accurate crime recording is an important part of this. The accurate recording of stalking crimes is the clearest indicator that stalking behaviours have been recognised by police. Crime recording decisions made by police also inform how police allocate investigative resources and make referrals to specialist victim support for individual cases. Data on recorded crime also informs the understanding of crime at a strategic level across forces.

The policing and non-policing stakeholders that we heard from throughout this investigation told us that stalking behaviours continue to be missed, dismissed, and not recorded or treated as stalking by the police. This is despite the increase in the number of stalking crimes recorded by police in recent years.

We heard examples from stalking victims and victim support service providers about cases where they felt that the police had misidentified stalking or dismissed stalking behaviours. One victim we interviewed explained:

“I got in touch with Protection Against Stalking... They totally agreed it was stalking. They tried, they did try their best with the police, but the police would not acknowledge it was stalking.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Most police forces reported in the force self-assessment survey that misidentification of stalking was an issue in their force. While many forces told us they had got better at identifying stalking because of changes they had made, some forces told us that misidentification was still an issue despite their interventions.

HMICFRS undertook an analysis of its PEEL inspection findings between 2021 and 2022, looking at crime data integrity across 22 forces. This analysis showed that when stalking crimes are reported to the police, approximately:

- three in five stalking crimes are classified and recorded correctly
- three in 20 crimes of stalking are incorrectly recorded as other crimes, such as harassment
- one in five crimes of stalking are not recorded at all

As part of the fieldwork for this super-complaint investigation, HMICFRS considered 60 cases recorded as malicious communications and found five of these should have been recorded as stalking. They assessed that an additional six cases should have been recorded as harassment and one should have been recorded as coercive and controlling behaviour. We cannot extrapolate from this to give a national estimated rate of mis-recording from these figures. However, malicious communications is a common crime, with 274,930 malicious communications crimes recorded in the year ending March 2023. Even if a small proportion of these crimes should have been identified and recorded as stalking, this could impact the service received by a significant number of victims.

The police's response to a crime of malicious communications is likely to be different to their response to a crime of stalking. This is in terms of investigative resources allocated, recognition of risk, and level of support provided to the victim, including referral to specialist victim services. The following IOPC case is an example of the police misidentifying stalking as malicious communications and shows the effect this can have.

IOPC case example: Police response to stalking prior to the murder of the victim – involving police recording the crime as malicious communications

The victim contacted police about unwanted contact and threats made by her former partner. She said that her former partner had been abusive, controlling and had repeatedly threatened to assault her and her family members if she ever left him. She described him as obsessive and told police that she was fearful now she had left the relationship.

The crime report was recorded as a domestic-related malicious communications offence. The investigating officer noted on the crime report that stalking and harassment may be more appropriate crimes for investigation. However, the crime report was never re-categorised. It remained a malicious communications investigation throughout. The former partner had shown a pattern of violent behaviour towards women, particularly when a relationship did not work out. This information was included on his intelligence profile on the force's computer system.

Further reports were made by the victim. These included increasingly threatening messages and counter-allegations made by her former partner. These did not appear to have been substantiated by the police. They were not treated as a pattern of behaviour that indicated stalking. The incorrect categorisation of the offences on the crime recording system meant that officers who spoke with the victim later did not have an accurate picture of the previous allegations or risk posed.

Following the IOPC investigation into this case, an officer was found to have a case to answer for misconduct. The matter was dealt with through the reflective practice review process (a management process focused on learning and development) and not the misconduct process. This is because the officer was new in service, still a probationary officer, and had not received support throughout the investigation.

Recognising breaches of protective orders as further instances of stalking

Breaches of protective orders should, in some cases, be treated as a further instance of stalking. In our fieldwork, we looked at 72 cases involving breaches of protective orders. We found that the police had not recognised almost half (35 of the 72) of the breaches of protective orders cases as a further offence of stalking when they should have.

Where breaches of protective orders are dealt with in isolation without recognising the wider patterns of victimisation in the context of stalking, police may not adequately identify and assess the risks to victims. And the case may not be appropriately investigated and prosecuted.

Further examples of the misidentification of stalking are included in the annexed reports of the [HMICFRS fieldwork](#), [IOPC case review](#) and [IOPC victim interviews](#).

Recognising section 4A stalking offences involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress

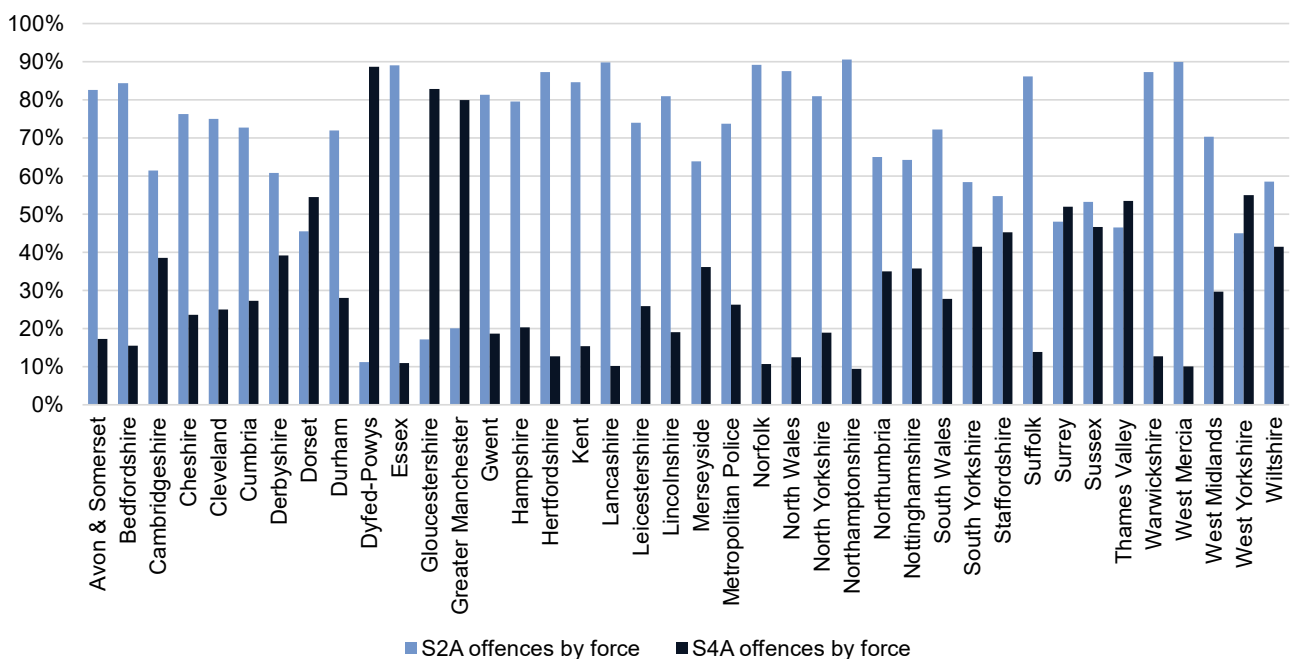
As set out in our background section, stalking is split into separate offences – section 2A stalking and the more serious section 4A stalking involving fear of violence or serious alarm or distress.

Our investigation fieldwork found that all six fieldwork forces were mis-recording and mishandling cases as section 2A when they should have been dealt with as section 4A offences. Of the 190 section 2A stalking cases examined by HMICFRS in its case file review, they assessed that 16 should have been recorded as a section 4A offence.

We also found that police were not always recognising, or recording how they had considered, the psychological impact of stalking. Consideration of psychological impact is particularly relevant to the decision about whether stalking involves “serious alarm or distress” as per the section 4A stalking offence. HMICFRS assessed that in the 470 stalking and breach of order investigations reviewed, there was evidence recorded in only 129 cases to show that the investigating officer had recognised the psychological impact of the stalking. If the psychological impact of stalking is not recognised, this could contribute to police not pursuing stalking as a section 4A offence when they should.

The Home Office provided our investigation with police crime data for the year ending 2023 showing the proportion of stalking cases that are recorded as section 2A and section 4A stalking offences by force.

Figure 3: Proportion of stalking crimes recorded by forces in England and Wales as section 2A offences and section 4A offences in the year ending March 2023



The data covers most forces in England and Wales. Data was not available from two forces (Devon and Cornwall and Humberside), and we have excluded City of London Police and British Transport Police as these forces are not directly comparable to other forces in England and Wales.

The data shows that the proportion of stalking cases recorded as section 4A offences is very different across different forces. Some forces recorded less than 15% of stalking as section 4A offences in the year ending March 2023 compared with more than 80% of stalking cases in another force. It is unclear what an appropriate distribution between section 2A and section 4A stalking offences should be. We did not ask forces to account for the difference in their use of this offence.

However, 27 out of 43 forces in the force self-assessment survey reported that officers in their force found it difficult to distinguish between section 2A and section 4A stalking offences. Many of the responses mentioned the need for greater clarity around the definition of “serious alarm or distress” and how this element of section 4A should be applied.

Some forces questioned the value of having separate section 2A and section 4A offences and suggested that there should be one crime of stalking:

“Having a higher and lesser offence (at the time of recording) could lead to officers/investigators paying less attention to those crimes that are deemed less serious at the outset. One crime of stalking would alleviate this and the difference between them could be decided upon at the point of charge.”

(Force response to the force self-assessment survey)

When we spoke with police regional stalking leads as part of the NPCC stalking and harassment tactical working group, some suggested that a single stalking offence should be created. However, others suggested that this may make it more difficult for police to identify more serious and high-risk stalking crimes.

In the super-complaint, the Consortium suggests that the interpretation of “serious alarm or distress” is an important point of misunderstanding and confusion for the police. It argues that all stalking results in serious alarm or distress and that police should record and investigate all cases as section 4A stalking in the first instance. This point was also made by the Victim’s Commissioner for London, Claire Waxman, when we met with her as part of this investigation. Ms Waxman suggested that the poor understanding and application of section 4A stalking was a significant issue for police relating to misidentification of stalking.

Addressing misidentification of stalking

We have seen throughout this investigation that how stalking behaviours are recorded is likely to influence the investigating officer's mindset, how they investigate the crime and assess risk, the support and safeguarding given to victims, and potential interventions for perpetrators.

The consequences of not identifying stalking and failing to take stalking seriously can be devastating. A number of tragic cases investigated by the IOPC ([annex F](#)) involving death or serious injury of stalking victims suggest that the police's failure to identify stalking played a part in missed opportunities to protect victims.

All of the stakeholders we spoke to told us that training for officers and staff was important to make sure stalking crimes are correctly identified and recorded. [Our previous chapter on training](#) includes our assessment and conclusions about police training on stalking.

Our evidence indicates that there are other steps that can be taken to better support police to identify stalking and associated risks accurately. These include:

- amending stalking legislation
- adopting a common approach to describe stalking across guidance
- making sure there are appropriate call handling opening codes and qualifiers for stalking
- making sure stalking offences can be searched for on police systems
- implementing the stalking screening tool
- screening crimes to identify stalking cases
- recognising police perpetrated stalking in abuse of position cases

Changes to stalking legislation

Clarifying the definition of stalking in law

“I've trained thousands of police officers across the world but particularly in England and Wales since 2012, and not a single officer has ever been able to tell me the difference between stalking and harassment according to the legislation.”

(Police force stalking lead, NPCC stalking and harassment tactical working group)

It is widely accepted that not having a clear definition of stalking in law, as well as the overlap between stalking and harassment, and the confusion between these, contributes to the misidentification of stalking crimes. We heard this from the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment, in responses to the force self-assessment survey and when we spoke with police officers, staff and stalking victim support service providers.

“As it stands, there is no clear definitive distance in the legislation which shows, unequivocally, the legal difference between [section] 2 harassment and [section] 2A stalking.”

(Force response to the force self-assessment survey)

The HMICFRS and HMCPSI [2017 Living in fear inspection report](#) concluded that:

“The absence of a single accepted, consistent definition of stalking is a very significant contributory factor to the unacceptably low number of recorded crimes and prosecutions. It is also one of the main reasons that police officers, staff and prosecutors gave us varying interpretations of stalking.”

This report recommended that the Home Office should review the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, including defining stalking more clearly. The Home Office did not accept this recommendation at the time.

The College of Policing has developed guidance and training products since the [2017 Living in fear inspection report](#) which include advice to assist police to distinguish between stalking and harassment. However, in our focus groups with police officers and staff, we heard varying interpretations of what constitutes stalking. We also found that the six fieldwork forces described stalking in different ways in local training materials. Stalking is also described in different ways in guidance produced by the Home Office, CPS and College of Policing.

In [the next section of this report, A common approach to describing stalking across guidance](#), we discuss the importance of guidance on stalking that is consistent across different parts of the criminal justice system. However, the current inconsistency across guidance is also a reflection of how difficult it is to interpret and apply the current stalking law.

We think that the law around stalking should be changed so that it is clearer and easier to understand and apply. We have recommended that these changes should consider whether stalking should be a standalone offence that is separate from harassment.

We also think that there would be value in the Home Office issuing statutory guidance on stalking. This would provide a single authority on the law and encourage consistent understanding of stalking across the criminal justice system. We have recommended that the proposed changes to the law include provision for the Home Office to issue statutory guidance on stalking.

Separate section 2A and section 4A stalking offences

In our previous chapter on the misidentification of stalking, we discuss evidence showing that the distinction between section 2A and section 4A stalking appears to be poorly understood and inconsistently applied by policing. Our evidence suggests that having separate section 2A and 4A stalking offences, where these are not well understood, adds further complexity and confusion for police when applying the law around stalking.

Stalking is a single, either-way offence (rather than separate higher and lower stalking offences) in other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom (Scotland and Northern Ireland). We think the Home Office should consider whether there should be a single, either-way stalking offence in England and Wales.

If the separate section 2A and section 4A stalking offences are retained, we think the lower-level section 2A offence should be changed to be an 'either-way' offence (which can be heard in either a magistrates or Crown Court) rather than remaining as a 'summary-only' offence (a lower-level offence that can be heard in a magistrate's court only).

Most stalking crimes are dealt with by police as section 2A stalking offences. Our fieldwork shows that some cases that are dealt with as section 2A stalking are assessed as involving medium or high-risk for the victim. Arguably, stalking is more serious in terms of risk and impact than other types of 'low level' crime that are summary offences – such as low-level motoring offences, minor criminal damage or common assault.

As a summary only offence, there is a six month time limit for the police to conclude a section 2A stalking investigation and present the case before a court. The Consortium argues that the police close some stalking cases due to this time limit expiring – leaving victims at risk.

We did find some evidence of investigations into section 2A stalking being closed by police due to the expiry of the statutory time limit. We have discussed this evidence in more detail in [our chapter on investigating stalking](#). This issue would be addressed if section 2A stalking was made an either-way offence, or if a single either-way stalking offence was introduced. We have recommended that these options should be considered by the Home Office in a review of the stalking law.

Stalking where the victim is not aware

We know that stalking can happen secretly. Some victims may not know they are being stalked or the full extent of the stalking they are being subjected to at the time it is happening. This could include circumstances where stalkers use technology to spy on or track their victims. However, under the current law a victim is required to know they have been stalked in order for the offence to be complete. For example, the section 4A stalking offence requires the victim to experience fear of violence or serious alarm or distress. Police and prosecutors may be limited in how they can respond to serious stalking behaviours if the victim was not aware of the stalking, or the full extent of the stalking, and was not fearful, alarmed or distressed at the time of the offending.

The law is different in other parts of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, under the [Protection from Stalking Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2022](#), it is an offence of stalking where a person undertakes a course of conduct that causes another person to suffer fear, alarm or substantial distress. It is also an offence where “a reasonable person” would consider that the conduct would cause the victim to suffer fear, alarm or substantial distress. This means there is no requirement for the victim to know they have been stalked for the offence to be made out. This is another area where we think changes to the law on stalking in England and Wales should be made.

Further consultation to inform legislative change

There is much consensus that the law around stalking is unclear and unhelpful. However, there are differing views about the precise changes that are needed and the effect these may have. For example, when we met police regional stalking leads as part of the NPCC stalking and harassment tactical working group, some raised concern that too many incidents were now recorded as stalking. They suggested that a single stalking offence should focus on the more serious, higher risk incidents. Others saw value in a wide definition of stalking that allowed ‘lower-level’ stalking behaviours to be included.

Changes to legislation and the development of statutory guidance should include consultation with important policing and non-policing stakeholders, including the Consortium and other experts to build on the evidence in this investigation.

The Home Office will need to take into account the influence that changes to the definition of stalking will have on the related law regarding harassment, as well as the newer offence of coercive, controlling behaviour and also stalking protection orders. The Home Office will also need to consider how to manage any risks around implementation. This includes consideration of the context of current backlogs and delays in the court system. Crown Court delays may be exacerbated by making all stalking cases potentially triable in a Crown Court.

Recommendation to the Home Office

Bring forward legislation in the 2024-2025 parliamentary session that would change the criminal law related to stalking so that it is easier for the police to understand and apply.

The Home Office should consider:

- The definition of stalking and the legal distinction between stalking, harassment and coercive and controlling behaviour.
- Whether there should be a single stand-alone stalking offence instead of the separate section 2A and section 4A stalking offences.
- If the section 2A offence is retained, whether it should be amended to an either-way offence.
- Including a provision that a stalking course of conduct is complete if a reasonable person would consider it to be so.
- Issuing statutory guidance on stalking.

[\(This is recommendation 1 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

A common approach to describing stalking across guidance

There is no clear legal definition of stalking. However, following a recommendation made by HMICFRS in its [2019 stalking inspection](#), a common description of stalking is now used across various guidance products across the criminal justice system, including [College of Policing guidance](#) and [CPS guidance](#) on stalking. Stalking is described as “a pattern of unwanted, fixated and obsessive behaviour which is intrusive.” This description is abbreviated as FOUR – Fixated, Obsessive, Unwanted, Repeated.

In the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces mentioned FOUR as helpful in assisting officers and staff to identify stalking. However, the responses were not universally positive about relying on the terms in FOUR to define stalking. Concerns included that there was too much reliance on the interpretation of what constituted fixated or obsessive behaviour and that the terms “fixated” and “obsessive” were not reflected in stalking law.

However, our investigation found that FOUR is used and recognised across policing. As well as being mentioned in the force self-assessment survey, it was referenced in our focus groups and meetings with police officers and staff. It is also a core component of the stalking screening tool, which we discuss below. Our review of IOPC cases also provided some examples of where police had applied FOUR to identify stalking and articulate the risks associated with stalking behaviours.

There is reference to FOUR across guidance about stalking for police and criminal justice partners. However, descriptions of stalking are sometimes inconsistent in other ways.

The [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) (the crime recording rules) are issued to police to make sure they take a consistent approach to recording crime. These rules include an explanation of stalking which has a different emphasis to the College of Policing or CPS guidance on stalking. The crime recording rules do refer to FOUR but include additional advice which focuses on stalking being “more aggressive” than harassment and involving “following” (though not necessarily in person). In the same guidance, “cyber stalking” is listed as an example of harassment and not an example of stalking.

The Home Office [Stalking Protection Act: Statutory guidance for the police](#) includes an annex which provides a comprehensive description of stalking behaviours and how stalking might be identified. This statutory guidance is focussed on SPOs. Therefore, we think it is unlikely that the police would use this as the primary guidance regarding the identification of stalking. However, it is the newest and most specific guidance document that discusses stalking.

During our investigation the College of Policing updated its advice documents so they align more closely to description of stalking in the Stalking Protection Act statutory guidance. For example, previously, College of Policing guidance for police responders and call-taking described the distinction between stalking and harassment by noting that “stalking will often focus on a person, whereas harassment will often focus on disputes”. Our fieldwork found that some force policies used the principle of “harassment often focussing on disputes” in their training materials.

The College of Policing advice has now been updated so that it no longer includes this description. This aligns with the Stalking Protection Act statutory guidance which includes examples of where disputes might be used by perpetrators as a way of stalking victims. For example:

- Bringing vexatious litigation or making vexatious counter-allegations against the victim, or otherwise using official processes to perpetuate contact with the victim, cause them distress or a drain on their resources.
- Creating or exploiting disputes between the victim and their friends, family or wider support network, to isolate the victim and make them dependent on the perpetrator.

We have recommended that the description of stalking in the Home Office crime recording rules should also be updated to align with the description of stalking in the Stalking Protection Act statutory guidance.

We have also recommended that the Home Office issue statutory guidance to provide a single authority on the law regarding stalking and encourage a consistent understanding of stalking across the criminal justice system. The College of Policing is committed to further improving the clarity and usefulness of its advice. It will further develop its authorised professional practice on stalking or harassment, as set out below.

Recommendation to the Home Office

By 27 March 2025, to work with the College of Policing, the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment and the National Stalking Consortium to update information on stalking or harassment in the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#). Information on stalking within the rules should align with how stalking is described in the [statutory guidance on the Stalking Protection Act for the police](#).

[\(This is recommendation 2 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Action for the College of Policing

The College of Policing will develop its authorised professional practice (APP) on stalking or harassment. The update will take into consideration the learning from this super-complaint including learning on identifying stalking and distinguishing it from harassment, identifying and assessing risk, victim safeguarding and care and multi-agency working. This development work will begin during the 2024/25 financial year.

[\(This is action 1 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Call handling opening codes and qualifiers for stalking

The first opportunity for the police to identify stalking correctly is generally in police control rooms. Most stalking offences are reported by the victim, or by someone else on their behalf, in this way.

The [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) (the crime recording rules) require that:

“All reports of incidents, whether from victims, witnesses or third parties and whether crime related or not, will, unless immediately recorded as a crime, result in the registration of an auditable incident report by the police.”

In some cases, if it is obvious that there has been a crime, the control room staff may record the crime in accordance with the crime recording rules, without first recording an incident. In cases where it is less clear that the reported incident is a crime, the incident will be recorded first. A decision about whether there has been a crime will be made later by the police officer deployed to respond to the incident. Some forces record all initial reports as incidents.

When recording an incident, police control room staff allocate an 'opening code' to the incident log. Opening codes indicate the nature of the incident. Opening codes are important because they allow supervisors in police control rooms to see what type of incidents are currently open. This helps supervisors to understand the immediate risk and prioritise resources accordingly.

Police forces can specify their own opening codes. However, they must align with the common approach set out in the [national standard for incident recording \(NSIR\)](#). The main aim of the NSIR is to:

“ensure that incidents are risk assessed at the earliest opportunity leading to an appropriate response as well as being recorded in a consistent and accurate manner to help the police and local communities tackle anti-social behaviour and other issues.”

The NSIR includes a list of incident categories and sub-categories and additional qualifiers. Under the category of “Public Safety and Welfare” in the NSIR, there are incident sub-categories such as “domestic incidents”, “concern for safety” and “civil disputes” but there is no incident category for stalking. There is also no qualifier for stalking.

Some forces will have introduced their own opening codes or qualifiers for stalking, but there is no requirement to do this under the NSIR.

In our fieldwork, we found that only one fieldwork force had a specific opening code to identify stalking. In the other five forces, reports of stalking, if they were recorded as incidents, had to be recorded under the different codes of 'domestic abuse', 'harassment' or something else. The lack of either an opening code or qualifier for stalking in these forces represents a missed opportunity for control room staff to recognise and accurately record stalking when victims first make a report.

In our focus groups with police officers and staff, participants discussed the influence opening codes can have on the prioritisation of the police response. Participants mentioned that without a stalking-specific opening code, stalking incidents may not be prioritised for response unless there was a domestic abuse context.

The current NSIR was published in 2011. We understand the Home Office is working with policing partners to produce a new national standard for incident recording and assessment (NSIR&A). The new standards should include a requirement to flag incidents that may involve stalking, to encourage the identification of stalking at the earliest opportunity.

Recommendation to the Home Office

Before publishing the upcoming national standards for incident recording and assessment (NSIR&A), find the most appropriate way to include stalking in the NSIR&A, so that incidents potentially involving stalking are flagged as early as possible.

[\(This is recommendation 5 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Addressing the impact of changes to the crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff

In [the background section of this report](#), we set out the changes to the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) (the crime recording rules) relating to stalking. We discuss the apparent influence this has had on the number of stalking crimes recorded by police.

The most recent change in May 2023, removed the requirement to record multiple crimes involved in the same case. In its place, police are required to assess which is the most serious crime in terms of impact and record that – the “principal crime”. In most cases involving a course of conduct crime like stalking, the course of conduct crime should be recorded as the most serious crime. A [“look up” table](#) has been created to assist police to identify the principal crime. Section 4A stalking offences are listed quite high in the look-up table. Section 2A stalking offences appear lower down, although these are still higher than some other serious crimes such as assault causing actual bodily harm or criminal damage.

Our fieldwork did not look at any cases that had been dealt with since this change was made, as we looked at crimes closed in the year ending April 2023. However, we have heard views from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and in response to the force self-assessment survey, that raise some concerns about the effect of this change. These stakeholders told us they are concerned about stalking crimes getting lost through the practical application of the principal crime rule. In particular, where a stalking crime is dealt with as a section 2A offence and may not be the principal crime.

We also heard that there may be adverse effects where stalking is recorded as the principal crime and other associated crimes are not recorded. This is because the data about the associated crimes can be helpful to give a picture about the nature of the stalking (for example, whether the stalking behaviours involved assault, criminal damage, or threats to kill).

[Similar concerns have been raised by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner in relation to the impact of the principal crime rules on the recording of domestic abuse incidents.](#)

The 2023 changes to the crime recording rules were introduced to remove the requirement to record multiple crimes relating to the same incident, which was [assessed as being time-consuming and overly bureaucratic](#). We recognise that it is important that the crime recording requirements on police are not overly burdensome and time-consuming.

However, understanding the full picture and context of crime is also important. This is true for all crimes but is particularly relevant in course of conduct crimes like stalking which are often reported alongside other crimes.

We are aware that some forces have systems that allow for crimes other than the principal crime to be documented on the crime record as 'included classifications'. This is not the same as creating a new crime record for each offence but does create a searchable record.

When stalking is not the principal crime, documenting it as an included classification would enable officers and staff to search for all stalking offences on record management systems rather than just stalking recorded as the principal crime. Where stalking is recorded as the principal crime, documenting other reported offences as included classifications would also provide a more complete picture of the offending.

This could help to mitigate the risk that details about concurrent offending might be lost or overlooked, but without introducing significant additional recording requirements. Some stakeholders have said it would also make it easier for supervisors and forces to reassure themselves that all the offences associated with stalking have been appropriately investigated. However, we understand that the widely used police records management system, [Niche](#), and some other systems do not currently have this capability.

We think that all police forces should seek changes to their records management systems that would allow for associated crimes to be listed in a way that is searchable. Forces should also consider interim measures to ensure records are searchable to support identification of stalking crimes, while system changes are being made. This could, for example, include the use of searchable intelligence reports.

We think that the Home Office should also review the impact of the principal crime rule on the identification and investigating of stalking and make changes or provide additional guidance to police if required.

Recommendation to the Home Office

By 27 March 2025, to review the impact of the principal crime rule on the identification and investigation of stalking. This should include an examination of whether risks associated with stalking may be being missed and implement any changes needed.

[\(This is recommendation 6 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, where required, seek changes to their crime recording systems to enable staff and officers to document and search for crimes not recorded as the principal crime, as included classifications on crime records.

Processes should be put in place to make sure this system capability is effectively used by officers and staff.

While any necessary system changes are pending, chief constables should put alternative measures in place to make sure stalking and related offences are fully searchable. This could, for example, be the submission of intelligence reports.

[\(This is recommendation 7 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Stalking screening tool

The 2017 HMICFRS and HMCPSI [Living in fear inspection report](#) included a recommendation to the NPCC to develop an “evidence-based approach to risk assessment in harassment and stalking crimes”. The NPCC worked with partners to develop the stalking screening tool (SST) in response to this recommendation.

The SST was developed to support first responders to identify stalking behaviours and the risks associated with them. It is a template document that includes questions intended to help identify stalking and identify immediate risks associated with stalking. It prompts officers and staff to consider and record risk management and safeguarding decisions. It also includes reminders about referring victims to stalking victim support services with some details about available providers.

The SST was designed to:

- support frontline officers and staff to identify stalking behaviours and the risks associated with them
- prompt early safeguarding action to reduce and mitigate the risks to victims
- prompt officers and staff to document initial safety planning in advance of a full risk assessment

The SST was initially piloted in three police forces. The initial pilot informed revisions to the tool which was then rolled out to five more pilot forces for further testing. Three of these eight pilot forces were part of the super-complaint fieldwork. The fieldwork looked at stalking cases in the 12 months up to April 2023. This covered the second pilot period.

The fieldwork found that there was a lack of direction and leadership about the implementation of the SST in these three forces. Limited training or other work had been done to embed the tool in operational processes. Of the 183 stalking cases HMICFRS examined in these three forces, officers and staff had only completed the SST nine times. We heard similar feedback about poor implementation of the SST from officers and staff who participated in our focus groups.

Middlesex University was commissioned to evaluate the initial pilot of the tool.

The [evaluation, published in April 2022](#), found that some forces found it difficult to integrate the SST into their IT systems. The evaluation also found some inconsistencies in officers' completion of the tool. However, the majority of the officers surveyed as part of the evaluation felt the SST made it easier to identify stalking. The evaluation concluded that the SST was a "potentially positive addition to the toolkit police officers have to draw upon when responding to stalking cases."

In responses to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces discussed the value of tools, such as the SST, to assist officers to identify stalking crimes. Some forces commented that, if properly implemented, the SST could help officers with the identification of stalking and called for clearer guidance on whether and how they should use the tool operationally.

The College of Policing and the NPCC have decided to release the SST to all police forces in England and Wales. The NPCC and the College of Policing wrote to all forces in April 2024 asking them to consider using the SST to help with identification where victims report repeated, unwanted behaviours that could be stalking. The College of Policing also supported the NPCC with knowledge sharing events to enable forces adopting the SST to help each other implement it successfully.

We discuss the SST further in [the chapter on responding to risk](#). We have made a recommendation to forces to consider implementing this tool in that chapter.

Quality assurance and screening to make sure stalking is correctly identified

Quality assurance to understand and address misidentification of stalking

Our fieldwork found that all the fieldwork forces had undertaken some assurance work around misidentification of stalking. This varied in its extent and focus. In response to the force self-assessment survey, most forces reported undertaking some form of auditing to understand whether officers and staff are identifying stalking when they should. This type of quality assurance audit is important if forces are to understand the extent of misidentification of stalking and to inform local strategies to address misidentification. We also discuss internal audit and assurance in [the earlier section on strategic leadership and oversight](#). However, this type of audit work comes too late to mitigate the immediate risk of harm to victims and making sure that victims are properly referred to specialist support as soon as possible.

Crime recording checks completed by crime data integrity teams at the point a case is closed are important to ensure correct crime recording. However, they are also likely to come too late to mitigate the risks for victims of inappropriate handling.

Some forces, in response to the self-assessment survey, referred to crime data integrity teams carrying out reviews of crime recording for stalking and related offences (such as harassment) within the first 24 hours of the crime being recorded. We think that this approach may add greater value as changes made to the crime recording could impact immediately on the case handling.

Screening to identify stalking crimes that have been missed

Forces with dedicated stalking co-ordination roles all referred to some type of case screening as part of the work of these officers and staff. In some forces, this screening was specific to domestic abuse cases, so was not designed to identify non-domestic abuse related stalking. Other forces described reviewing cases already identified as stalking to help ensure correct handling. This type of screening would not capture stalking that had been mis-recorded as a different crime. However, some forces told us they did early screening checks on a broader range of related crimes including harassment, malicious communications and breaches of orders.

An example identified through our fieldwork was the approach taken by the dedicated stalking unit at West Midlands Police. This is described earlier in [our chapter on dedicated stalking teams](#).

Our investigation found that identifying stalking and the risks associated with stalking is an important factor which influences the allocation of cases, investigative decisions, safeguarding decisions, and victim support. The effect of misidentification can be significant and yet misidentification of this crime continues to be an issue across policing.

For these reasons, we consider that the early screening of cases to help identify stalking is warranted.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, implement a mechanism for early screening of crimes to improve the identification, recording and management of all stalking cases.

Forces should consider screening crimes similar to stalking or where stalking behaviours may be present as part of a course of conduct, like harassment, malicious communications and breaches of orders.

[\(This is recommendation 23 in the summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Possible use of artificial intelligence to support screening to identify stalking

Screening of crimes and incidents for stalking behaviours and associated risks is an area where there is potential for the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology to assist police in identifying stalking. This could involve using AI language models to search across incidents and crimes reported to the police, for words and terms that could suggest stalking. This could allow crimes and incidents to be screened quickly for stalking risk indicators, to narrow down the cases most appropriate for manual review by officers and staff tasked with assessing if stalking has been missed.

The potential application of this type of technology to screen reports made to police is broader than stalking. It could apply more widely to other areas of vulnerability and risk. However, we think that screening for stalking behaviours and risks is a good candidate for initial proof of concept work, given the issues with misidentification for this type of crime.

Recommendation to the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment

By 27 March 2025, begin working with the NPCC lead for artificial intelligence to explore how artificial intelligence could be used to support the police response to stalking. This should include developing a proof of concept for using artificial intelligence to screen incidents and crimes to help identify stalking and risks associated with stalking.

[\(This is recommendation 24 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Recognising stalking in police perpetrated abuse of position cases

The review of IOPC stalking cases undertaken for this investigation included some cases that involved a stalking suspect who was a police officer or staff member. In a number of these cases, the stalking behaviours were investigated as part of a wider investigation into allegations of police abuse of position for a sexual purpose. Abuse of position for a sexual purpose is any behaviour by a police officer or staff member, whether on or off duty, that takes advantage of their position as a member of the police service to misuse their position, authority or powers to pursue a sexual or improper emotional relationship with any member of the public.

A significant feature of abuse of position for a sexual purpose cases is the power imbalance between the perpetrator in their police role, and the victim. Our review of IOPC cases found that where stalking behaviours were present, this was sometimes enabled by the misuse of police systems to find out information about victims and their family members. Another example involved the police suspect continuing to insist on contact with the victim as part of the police investigation into another crime the victim had reported. Case examples are included in the [IOPC case review report at annex F](#).

In most of the abuse of position cases included in the IOPC case review, the police suspect was investigated for serious offences, including misconduct in a public office or misuse of police systems. In many cases the police officers or staff involved were dismissed for gross misconduct and, sometimes, convicted of serious crimes. However, it was not common for these cases to be recorded and dealt with specifically as stalking offences by either the IOPC or police force professional standards departments who investigated them. This means that the risk to victims may not have been properly identified and managed. This also means that stalking-specific protections such as SPOs may not have been considered, and victims would be unlikely to be referred to specialist stalking support services.

The IOPC recognises that there is more that it can do to make sure IOPC staff and police officers and staff in police professional standards departments recognise and respond appropriately to stalking behaviours in police perpetrated abuse of position cases.

Action for the IOPC

By 27 March 2025 the IOPC will provide advice to IOPC staff and police professional standards departments about recognising and responding to police perpetrated stalking behaviours, particularly where these are present in cases involving police abuse of position.

[\(This is action 2 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Responding to risk

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

The Consortium raises concerns in the super-complaint about flawed investigations into stalking, including that the risks of serious harm and homicide to victims are not always recognised by police. Failures in risk identification, assessment and management are also referred to elsewhere throughout the super-complaint, as a part of other issues.

This includes:

- police misidentification of stalking, leading to risks associated with stalking not being identified
- failure to recognise the alarm or distress experienced by victims and not identifying section 4A stalking offences
- minimising and trivialising stalking behaviours, resulting in minimisation of risk
- failure to respond appropriately to breaches of protective orders, including failure to treat repeated breaches as a further offence of stalking

Summary of our findings

Our investigation has found that, too often, police are failing to adequately identify and assess risk in stalking investigations, including risk of serious harm and homicide.

Where police do identify risks, appropriate risk management plans are not always put in place, and new information or further offending does not always result in the reassessment of risk and risk management plans. In particular, breaches of protective orders and bail conditions must be seen as indicators of serious, elevated risk in the context of stalking. We found that, too often, they are not seen in this way.

The College of Policing and the NPCC are taking steps to release the stalking screening tool to all forces in England and Wales. The release, if adopted by forces, may help the police to identify and respond to immediate safeguarding risks in the initial response to a report of stalking. The College of Policing has also updated its [stalking guidance](#) to police to clarify which risk tools are available to support initial and secondary risk assessments completed in stalking cases. Policing should use this opportunity to improve its approach to risk identification, assessment and management in stalking cases as a priority.

Identifying risks in stalking cases

Initial identification of risk when a victim reports stalking

The first opportunity for police to identify risk is usually when the initial report is made to police by the victim or by someone else on the victim's behalf. Control room staff who receive initial reports of incidents and crimes are expected to identify immediate risks and threats of harm. This informs decisions about the initial police response, including whether and how quickly to deploy response officers. Police control rooms use a model called threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement (THRIVE) for this purpose.

Our investigation fieldwork found that control room staff completed THRIVE in 398 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases that we examined.

If stalking behaviours are not identified properly at this initial stage, the risks to the victim may not be properly identified, even if THRIVE is completed. We have made recommendations to address issues with the misidentification of stalking in [the previous section of this report](#).

Identifying risk throughout investigations into stalking

Risks may change and the understanding of risk may change as more information is gathered by police throughout an investigation. Police who are deployed to respond to a report of stalking should have a clear focus on identifying risks and taking appropriate safeguarding actions. The College of Policing [advice to first responders on stalking or harassment](#) reminds response officers to:

“Focus on risk first – your primary task is to make people safe. Risk is dynamic and needs continual reassessment.”

However, we found that risks were sometimes not identified by police throughout investigations into reports of stalking.

We found that there was risk of serious harm or homicide to the victim in 297 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases we assessed in our fieldwork case file review. But there was only evidence that the police had identified these risks in 66 of the 297 cases. This is especially concerning. This evidence shows that officers and staff are missing opportunities to identify the risks to stalking victims.

The fieldwork found that poor identification of risk was also a factor in cases being recorded as section 2A stalking offences when they should have been recorded as section 4A offences. This is because the fear of violence or serious alarm or distress elements required for a section 4A offence are also indicators of heightened risk to the victim. This was not properly recognised in some cases.

In [the previous chapter on misidentification of stalking we discuss the stalking screening tool \(SST\)](#). During the course of this investigation, the NPCC and College of Policing

released this tool to policing. The tool can be used to help frontline officers and staff identify stalking and the associated risks. It prompts the user to take safeguarding actions and document their decision making. The SST may be particularly helpful for officers and staff in non-domestic stalking cases, where other risk tools which focus on domestic abuse may not be relevant to use. However, the SST is not specifically recommended as a comprehensive risk assessment tool. We discuss below the risk assessment tools available for stalking, and their use by police.

Risk assessment in stalking cases

Where risks are identified by police officers and staff, they should be assessed to understand the likelihood of harm to victims and the level of influence this could have. We use the term risk assessment in this investigation to mean a structured professional judgment to help officers and staff assess the likelihood of harm to victims. Completing a risk assessment in stalking cases is intended to help officers and staff decide appropriate levels of intervention in relation to:

- reducing the risk posed by suspects
- increasing the protection available to victims

One of the purposes of a risk assessment is to allow the person assessing the risks to piece together the actions of the perpetrator. This means their behaviour is considered in totality and incidents are not dealt with in isolation. The risk assessment should also consider the nature of previous related behaviour experienced by the victim. Risk assessments should be reviewed regularly and updated as circumstances change.

The police use different tools and models to help staff and officers assess risk from when an incident is reported and throughout an investigation. The [College of Policing guidance on vulnerability related risk](#) states that:

“[Risk tools and checklists] can inform and guide a responder on the nature and origin of risks. However, decisions about the level of risk and what action to take rely on responders using professional judgement.”

Risk assessment tools for use in stalking cases

The [College of Policing guidance on stalking or harassment](#) points to a range of risk tools and models that can be used to help officers identify, assess and record risk throughout a stalking investigation. The College of Policing and the NPCC’s preferred risk tools to use in domestic abuse contexts are DARA (domestic abuse risk assessment) and DASH (domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and honour-based violence). The DASH risk assessment tool includes a specific question about stalking behaviours. If the answer to this question is yes, there are 11 follow-up questions to ask specifically about stalking risk. This question set is called the S-DASH.

The College of Policing has not specified a preferred risk assessment tool for non-domestic stalking cases. However, it does list a number of tools the police can use to assess risk in its [advice documents](#). As set out above, the SST can be used by police forces to help identify stalking risks and record initial safeguarding actions in non-domestic abuse related stalking cases.

However, during an investigation into a stalking crime, a more comprehensive secondary risk assessment will usually be called for. This secondary risk assessment is also important to inform police decisions about applying for a stalking protection order (SPO). The [Home Office statutory guidance on SPOs](#) states:

“The police should ensure that an appropriate specialist stalking risk assessment or screening tool is used, in consultation with other relevant agencies or via an independent risk assessor where appropriate. This is to ensure that they have a detailed picture, where possible, that informs decisions throughout the stalking protection order process.”

The College of Policing [advice for investigators on stalking or harassment](#) details several secondary risk assessment tools. These support officers to continually assess the risk to stalking victims and develop and maintain their risk management plans. As well as DASH and DARA for domestic abuse cases, other risk assessment tools can be used for secondary risk assessment in all stalking cases:

- Stalking Assessment and Management (SAM) guidelines
- Stalking Risk Profile (SRP), with the accompanying Screening Assessment for Stalking and Harassment (SASH)

How the police use risk assessment tools in stalking cases

All of the fieldwork forces had policies in place requiring that the DASH or DARA risk assessment tool be used in domestic stalking cases. However, our fieldwork case file review found evidence that the police had completed a DASH or DARA in only 143 of the 197 domestic abuse related stalking cases we examined.

Some police forces use the S-DASH question set on its own (without the core DASH risk assessment questions) in non-domestic stalking cases. Five of the six fieldwork forces had policies to use the S-DASH question set to support risk assessment in non-domestic stalking cases.

HMICFRS has previously stated that the S-DASH questions on their own do not constitute an adequate risk assessment. This was a finding of the joint HMICFRS and HMCPSI [2017 Living in fear inspection report](#). The NPCC accepted this finding. The College of Policing [advice on stalking for investigators](#) has been updated and does not refer to the S-DASH questions. The College of Policing's [advice on stalking for first responders](#) does refer to the S-DASH questions as screening questions which may assist first responders with identifying risk indicators associated with stalking.

Our investigation found confusion across policing about the best approach to take to assess risk in non-domestic stalking cases. In response to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces mentioned the need for more clarity around the right risk assessment tool to use in stalking cases, particularly non-domestic abuse stalking. Some respondents noted that a tool similar to DASH or DARA was needed for non-domestic abuse stalking cases. Police participants in our focus groups provided similar feedback.

Stalking support service providers also spoke about the lack of a common risk assessment tool for stalking contributing to the lack of consistency in how stalking cases are handled. The focus group also discussed concerns about the domestic abuse focus of the tools that were used. They felt they were not always fit for the purpose of assessing stalking risk.

The lack of clarity around what risk tool to use in non-domestic stalking cases could contribute to the lower use of these tools in these cases. In the fieldwork for this investigation, HMICFRS assessed that police had only completed a record of a structured risk assessment in 28 of the 187 non-domestic stalking cases reviewed.

One fieldwork force highlighted the difference in the approach to risk assessment in domestic and non-domestic stalking in its Force Management Statement:

“Priorities are not connected within stalking offences. 70% of stalking is linked to DA where there is a DASH assessment completed. The remaining 30% has no current risk assessment due to the limited capacity to implement one.”

The College of Policing is taking further action (set out in Action 1) to develop its APP on stalking and harassment to embed the learning from this super-complaint. It will look for ways to ensure the APP provides clear and effective guidance on risk identification, assessment and management for stalking cases.

It remains the case that there is no one specific risk assessment tool for stalking cases, or specifically for non-domestic abuse stalking cases. But we think police forces can do more to make better use of the risk tools that are available to support officers and staff to identify, assess and manage risk in stalking cases. This includes embedding the risk tools that forces are asking their officers and staff to use in force systems and processes. We have made a recommendation that addresses these points below.

The College of Policing is also undertaking a longer-term programme of work to support improvements to public protection policing. The College of Policing has recently welcomed the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP) into its operations. The VKPP is leading work on a new national strategy to support policing to provide a consistent and evidence-based approach to public protection and adult vulnerability. This strategy will align with other work the College of Policing is doing to further professionalise public protection in policing.

One aspect of this national strategy will be data and performance. This will include work to explore how existing risk tools can be better integrated into police IT systems. The longer-term ambition is to develop digital capabilities to ensure information about all vulnerability and risk is consistently recorded and easily retrieved.

Issues with risk assessments, including where risk tools are used

Poor assessment of risk was a strong theme across the IOPC stalking cases reviewed, including those where risk assessment tools were used. We found examples of cases where serious risks were missed, dismissed or downplayed leading to victims not being offered appropriate protections and safeguards.

A recurrent theme across IOPC cases was police officers relying too much, in risk assessments, on whether violence had been reported as part of the immediate incident, and whether the perpetrator was in the immediate area. The following case is an example of where clear risks were dismissed because there was no violence in the immediate incident reported to police.

IOPC case example: Police response to stalking prior to the suspect seriously injuring the victim – involving concerns about the assessment of risk

The victim and others had contacted the police on numerous occasions to report her former partner for stalking.

During the victim's conversation with the police, she said that she was so scared of him that it was easier to be in a relationship with him than not. She told the police that her former partner was not happy that the relationship had ended. She also said that he had recently broken into her house and she could not get away from him.

The victim told the attending officers that she was frightened of him turning up again. She gave the following answers to the DASH risk assessment which would indicate an increased level of risk:

- she had separated or tried to separate from the suspect within the last year
- he constantly called, texted, contacted, followed, stalked, or harassed her

- there was a history of domestic abuse
- the suspect was following her
- the suspect had been arrested by the police or had a criminal history

Despite these answers, the officer assessed the risk as standard and gave a rationale that there were “few risk indicators, no violence”.

Following the IOPC investigation into this case, a number of officers were found to have a case to answer for misconduct or requiring management action.

The IOPC case review also found examples of cases where supervisors had intervened to address issues with risk assessment and management. These types of checks and interventions are crucial to making sure that risks are properly identified, assessed and managed. This is discussed further in the sections below.

Risk management in stalking cases

Risk management is the process of the police identifying what safeguarding actions they need to take to minimise or remove the risks to the victim. The risk of harm cannot always be fully mitigated. However, implementing effective risk management plans are vitally important to keep victims safe. They enable police to:

- understand the risks to the victim that have been identified
- consider what interventions are available
- choose and take the most suitable actions to manage the identified risks and protect the victim

In our fieldwork case file review, we examined 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases. We only found evidence of a risk management plan in 80 cases. In the 194 section 4A offences we examined, we only found evidence that the police had completed a risk management plan in 25 cases. This is especially worrying and means that we could not be reassured that all stalking victims were being safeguarded.

In our review of IOPC cases, we also identified a concerning lack of risk management plans. Most cases we reviewed did not appear to have a risk management plan in place. Where they existed, only a small number of risk management plans appeared to be effective. The lack of risk management plans was often linked to issues with the risk assessment itself. In some cases, the police had not properly identified or assessed risks, and therefore had not put a management plan in place. However, in some cases the police had identified risks, but had left the responsibility for safeguarding and managing the risk to the victim.

In the fieldwork forces that had conducted audits of stalking cases, some audit findings also indicated that the police were not always completing risk management plans in stalking cases. In August 2023, one fieldwork force had undertaken an audit of stalking cases, which included the conclusion that:

“There was a lack of comprehension, both as to how to deal with the inherent risk factors involved in stalking cases and in more general terms, and how to formulate an action plan mitigating that risk and identifying protective factors.”

The same audit report said:

“There is no one place to record what safeguarding has been carried out and [there are] of course multiple options to use.”

The joint HMICFRS and HMCPSI [2017 Living in fear inspection report](#) highlighted that some forces' risk assessment forms did not incorporate a risk management planning section. The report concluded that, because of this, it was more likely that police would fail to complete a risk management plan.

The DARA risk tool includes sections for police officers to document risk management or safeguarding plans. This is not included in the DASH risk assessment tool, though some forces have added a risk planning section to this tool for police officers to complete. We asked forces in the self-assessment survey where they recorded risk management plans, and whether this was part of the risk assessment form or elsewhere. Around 40% of forces responded that risk management plans were recorded as part of the risk assessment form.

We think that chief constables should do more to ensure that risk tools are effectively embedded in police systems and processes, and we have made a recommendation to this effect below. As part of this, chief constables should consider how risk management plans are recorded.

Recognising escalating risk where perpetrators breach protective measures

Protective measures will be put in place by police or courts in some cases to manage stalking perpetrators and protect victims. Breaches of protective measures, including bail conditions or protective orders, should be treated by police as a significant escalation of risk.

Research around the relationship between stalking and risk of serious harm and homicide points to breaches of protective orders and failure to stop when instructed as important indicators of persistent stalking, where the behaviour is also more likely to escalate.

An [overview of this research is provided at annex B](#).

We found through our investigation that police do not always respond quickly and robustly enough to breaches of orders and other protective measures. This suggests that police may not be treating breaches of protective measures as seriously as they should, and may not be recognising these as indicators of elevated risks to victims.

We considered 72 breach of protective orders cases in our fieldwork case file review. We concluded there were avoidable delays in the police response in 14 of the relevant cases we examined. As discussed in [the previous section on misidentification of stalking](#), police had not recognised a further offence of stalking when they should have in almost half (35 of the 72) of the breach of orders cases we looked at. The offender was only arrested on 39 occasions across the 72 breach of order cases we examined. We think this proportion of arrests is worryingly low and sends the wrong message to suspects that the police may not always take firm action in breach of order cases. Further evidence around police investigations into breaches of orders is also discussed in [the chapter on investigating stalking](#).

Officers need to know that breaches of protective orders could be a sign of increased risk to the victim, particularly in the context of stalking. However, this subject was only included in two of the six stalking policies of the fieldwork forces, and only adequately covered in two of the forces' training products on stalking.

We also found evidence of police failing to respond to changing and escalating risk in stalking cases in our review of IOPC cases. Again, police not recognising or responding to elevated risk associated with breach of bail conditions or breach of protective orders was a particular area of concern.

[Our review of IOPC stalking cases \(annex F\)](#) includes a number of examples where risk was seen to be managed with pre-charge bail conditions, but with no action taken or amendment to the risk assessment where bail conditions were breached.

The College of Policing is taking action to emphasise the importance of police recognising and responding to breaches of protective measures as an indicator of escalating risk, in the updates it is making to its [stalking guidance for police](#) and College of Policing e-learning products on stalking. This should be followed by forces reviewing their own policies and guidance to make sure this principle is highlighted. We have made a recommendation on this below.

Specialist support and supervision to support risk identification, assessment and management

The College of Policing [advice on stalking for supervisors, managers and senior leaders](#) makes it clear that supervisors have an important role in making sure risk assessment and management is effective. In our review of IOPC cases, we saw examples of where the intervention of supervisors supported better risk assessments in some stalking cases. However, in our fieldwork, we found that supervision was poor in many of the stalking cases we reviewed. We discuss this in more detail in [our chapter on investigating stalking](#).

We think it is appropriate for forces to consider additional checks or screening around risk for stalking and breaches of orders crimes given the risks associated with these types of crime. We have previously discussed the benefits that dedicated stalking officers and staff and multi-agency stalking units can bring to the police response to stalking. This includes supporting the identification, assessment and management of risk.

We also heard about other approaches some forces are taking. In response to the force self-assessment survey, one force told us it had included stalking crimes in cases for review at daily management meetings, using this to help make sure risks were fully understood and captured.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure that risk identification, assessment and management is effective in all stalking and breaches of orders cases, including by:

- Considering implementing the stalking screening tool to support the identification of stalking and the risks associated with stalking.
- Having clear policies and procedures in place for assessing and managing risk in all cases. And where appropriate, embedding recognised risk assessment tools in force systems so that it is easy for officers to access, use and document their consideration of risk and safeguarding.
- Recognising (in policies, guidance and training) the heightened risk associated with breaches of protective orders and measures.
- Implementing screening and checking processes to support the early identification, assessment and management of high-risk cases. This may require stalking and breach of order cases to be considered at daily management meetings.

[\(This is recommendation 12 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Stalking protection orders

“We know that when we have stalking protection orders in place, actually they can stop the behaviour. We’ve got many examples of perpetrators who have ceased stalking once that order is in place because then the impact is on their life... So they can be really effective when they’re in place.”

(Stalking victim support service provider – focus group)

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

In the super-complaint, the Consortium raises concern about the low use of stalking protection orders (SPOs) by the police. The Consortium suggests that police officers are not always aware of the existence of SPOs, or do not apply for SPOs in cases of stalking where they would be appropriate. When SPOs are put in place, the Consortium states that police do not make enough use of positive requirements. The Consortium argues that police failure to put in place an interim or full SPO at the earliest opportunity puts victims at risk of further acts of stalking, and the psychological and physical harm that may result.

Summary of our findings

Our investigation found that SPOs are widely considered to be a valuable protective measure for stalking victims. This is particularly because SPOs can include positive requirements for perpetrators, and because SPOs can be put in place before conviction. We heard this from the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment, in responses to the force survey, and in our discussions with regional stalking leads. We heard similar feedback from stalking victim support service providers.

However, we agree with the Consortium that the use of SPOs across policing is worryingly low. Our evidence suggests that there are problems with how SPOs are designed in legislation, as well as problems with how policing has implemented SPOs. These issues must be addressed if the police are to make best use of these protective orders to disrupt perpetrators’ behaviour and protect victims.

Low use of stalking protection orders

There is limited publicly available data about the police use of stalking protection orders (SPOs). This makes public scrutiny of the use of these orders difficult. We have made a recommendation to the Ministry of Justice which seeks to address this in [our earlier chapter on the availability of data](#).

From the evidence we have collected for this investigation, it is clear that SPOs are not widely used by police forces to protect stalking victims. Our evidence indicates that police

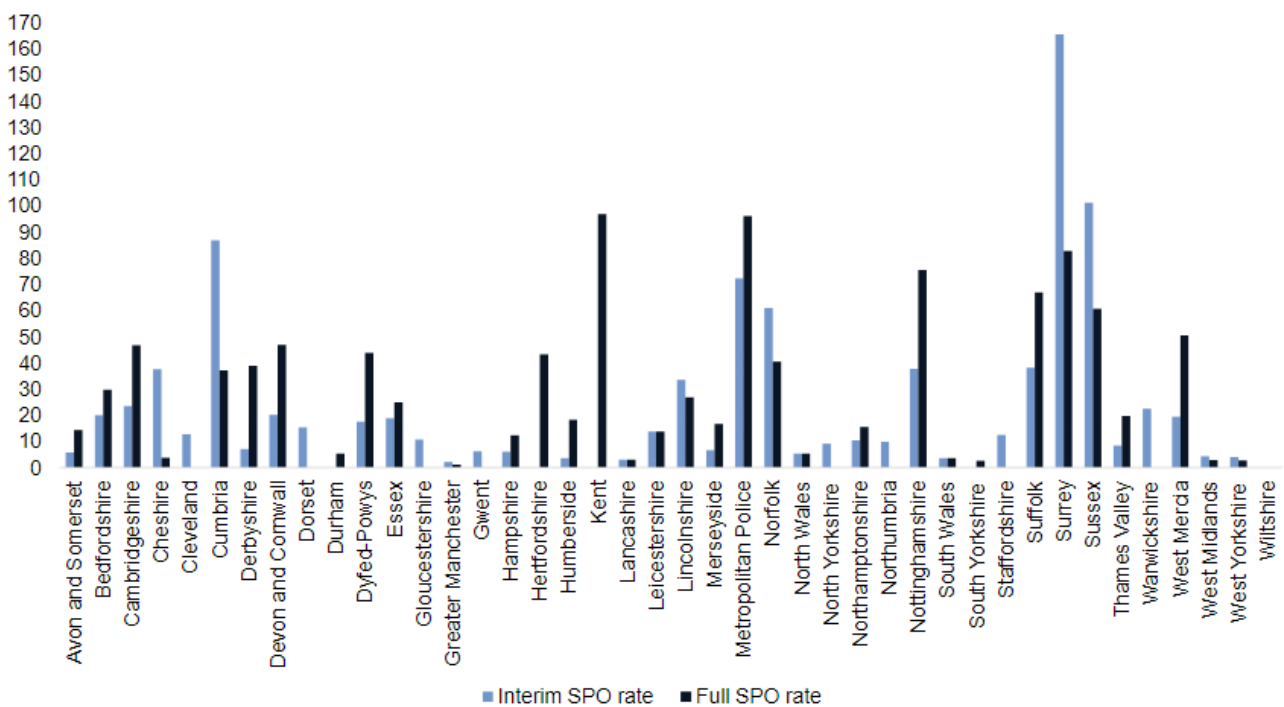
forces are making very few applications to courts for SPOs. This means that few SPOs are granted.

HMICFRS collects data directly from police forces in England and Wales on the number of SPOs they have applied for, and the number of applications that are granted at court (this does not include data for British Transport Police (BTP)). The data shows 227 interim and 304 full SPO (a total of 531) applications were granted at court in the year ending 31 March 2023 across forces in England and Wales. There may be an overlap between interim and full SPOs where an interim order and subsequent full order may relate to the same offence.

There were 116,792 stalking offences recorded by forces across England and Wales (excluding BTP) in the same period. This indicates that SPO applications were only granted in a small proportion of recorded stalking offences.

The chart below shows the rate of SPOs granted per 10,000 stalking offences in force areas for England and Wales in the year ending 31 March 2023. It shows that the rate of granted SPOs (both interim and full) varied across forces, with some forces having no SPOs granted in the period. The interim SPO granted rate across all forces in England and Wales was 19.4 applications granted per 10,000 stalking offences. The granted rate across all forces in England and Wales for full SPOs was 26 applications granted per 10,000 stalking offences.

Figure 4: Interim and full stalking protection orders granted per 10,000 stalking offences across forces in England and Wales in the year ending 31 March 2023



Source: [HMICFRS analysis of HMICFRS data and Home Office Data](#)

Interim and full SPO granted rates have been calculated by dividing the number of applications granted in a force area by the number of recorded stalking offences in that force area. The rate will reflect how accurately a force records stalking offences. A force that has under-recorded stalking offences may have an artificially inflated SPO granted rate. Interim SPO figures were missing for Kent Police and were excluded for Wiltshire Police due to quality issues. Therefore, figures for these forces may be an undercount.

The data shows that the use of SPOs is low overall. The evidence from our fieldwork for this investigation reflects this national picture. In our fieldwork only 14 successful SPO applications were made across the six fieldwork forces in the year ending 31 December 2023. One force had not successfully applied for any SPOs in that period.

We found evidence that an SPO had been considered in 16 out of 384 stalking cases reviewed in our fieldwork. We found many examples where we assessed that the police should have considered an SPO, but the evidence suggests that this was not considered.

Fieldwork case study

The victim was a student who went to the same university as the suspect. A court had previously issued the suspect with a [Stalking Protection Order \(SPO\)](#) for a different victim. That SPO was still in place when the suspect turned his attention to a new victim.

The suspect stalked the new victim constantly by phone. This victim was scared and called the police. The investigating officer recognised the emotional and psychological impact of the behaviour and graded the risk assessment as high.

The suspect was arrested and bailed with conditions, but the police did not consider applying for a SPO to protect the new victim.

Linked to [our findings on inadequate supervision in stalking investigations](#), we found that supervisors were routinely failing to check that officers had considered applying for an SPO in the stalking cases we reviewed in our fieldwork. We also found that senior officers in the fieldwork forces had not made sure SPOs were applied for in cases where they were needed.

We found little evidence that victims were told about the existence of SPOs. In only six out of 384 stalking cases could we find evidence that the police had told the victim about SPOs. It is possible that officers had told the victim about SPOs, but this had not been recorded. However, taken alongside the low number of SPOs overall, the evidence strongly indicates that SPOs are not being considered in most cases and victims are not being told about them.

The implementation of stalking protection orders in forces

The HMICFRS data set out earlier in the chapter shows that the number of stalking protection order (SPO) applications granted per 10,000 stalking crimes recorded is low. It also shows that this number varies between forces. This suggests that forces have taken differing approaches to implementation of these orders. In response to the force self-assessment survey, 33 out of 43 forces reported they experienced problems with using SPOs. We set out below some of the issues with the implementation of SPOs by forces.

Strategic oversight of the use of stalking protection orders in forces

The level of use of stalking protection orders (SPOs) is one important indicator of how effective a force is in its response to stalking. However, in our fieldwork, we found that some forces did not have good systems for monitoring how many SPOs had been applied for, how many applications had been successful, and how many had not been successful (with the reasons). Police leaders providing strategic oversight of a force's response to stalking should have an understanding of this type of performance information and be actively seeking to address any system issues if the use of SPOs is low. We discuss strategic oversight of the police response to stalking in [our earlier chapter on strategic leadership and oversight](#).

Police knowledge, experience and capacity to apply for stalking protection orders

Evidence from our fieldwork and the force self-assessment survey suggests that, in most forces, investigating officers are primarily responsible for identifying whether a case is suitable for a stalking protection order (SPO) application, and for starting the application process. In most forces, applications are then made to magistrates' courts by police legal teams.

However, the evidence from our investigation suggests that there is a lack of awareness and experience of SPOs among many investigating officers. In response to the force self-assessment survey, some forces described a lack of understanding among officers and a lack of training around the application process and evidence requirements for SPOs.

In our fieldwork, we could see from the records forces gave us that forces had not trained all relevant officers on SPOs. And our focus groups with officers involved in stalking investigations showed there was wide variation in participants' knowledge of SPOs. The frontline officers we spoke to in our focus group had little awareness about SPOs, and the investigators we spoke to reported a lack of experience of using them.

The stalking victim support service providers focus group also provided examples that indicated a worrying lack of awareness of SPOs among police officers who respond to stalking victims:

“There’s a lot of misunderstanding from the police about what [SPOs] are. We’ve had victims with SPOs in place being told when they’ve reported breaches there’s no such thing as a stalking protection order.”

(Stalking victim support service provider – focus group)

In the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces suggested that lack of knowledge and time resulted in a reluctance among officers to apply for SPOs.

“Individual [officers in charge of the investigation], on investigation teams, with high workloads and poor knowledge of the orders have historically been required to apply for SPOs via [our] legal services department. This has resulted in extremely low numbers of orders (interim and full) being applied for and obtained by the force.”

(Force response to the force self-assessment survey)

A number of forces also reported challenges with the capacity of legal teams to support SPO applications in a timely way. Some forces noted that additional legal services capacity had been made available for SPO applications in response to this issue.

Police leaders must do more to make sure that officers and staff within their force have sufficient knowledge, time and support to properly identify cases where SPOs may be appropriate, and to apply for SPOs where this is the case. In response to the force self-assessment survey, some forces described having dedicated teams or officers tasked with supporting SPO applications. This appeared to help with specialist knowledge and capacity. This is discussed in further detail below.

Dedicated roles to support identification of cases for stalking protection orders and making applications

In response to the force self-assessment survey, some forces told us how they used specialist roles to support the identification of cases where a stalking protection order (SPO) would be appropriate and to support applications. Examples included using dedicated stalking officers and staff (where these roles are in place). We have made a recommendation about the use of dedicated stalking officers and staff in [our chapter on dedicated stalking co-ordination roles](#).

Some forces referred to other types of specialist support for SPO applications, including having specialist vulnerability lawyers or protective orders teams. One large force described implementing a network of SPO coordinators to manage SPO applications across the force. The force explained that this allowed SPO coordinators to build up knowledge and act as point of contact for frontline responders and investigators who needed advice.

Some of the fieldwork forces also used dedicated officers and staff to screen stalking cases and record on the crime file where an SPO might be appropriate. Although this appeared to help the police identify cases suitable for SPOs, the influence on whether an application was then made was less clear. We heard from some dedicated stalking officers that they did not have the time to make sure that action to pursue an SPO had been taken. And the numbers of SPOs were still low across those fieldwork forces that adopted this approach.

The NPCC lead for stalking and harassment told us he thought there was a clear correlation between force investment in dedicated resources and success in implementation of SPOs. In the responses to the force self-assessment survey, those forces that had invested in specialist resources were positive about the influence this had on the number of SPOs they had obtained. We heard similar feedback from our focus groups with officers.

Our investigation suggests that, in some forces, it has been left for frontline officers and investigators with little training, tailored guidance or support, to identify cases where SPOs would be appropriate. They then liaise with force legal departments about making applications. It is unsurprising, in these circumstances, that the use of SPOs remains low. Police leaders must do more to make sure that robust systems and processes are in place to support officers and staff to apply for SPOs in all cases where it is appropriate to do so.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025 take steps to make sure that force strategies, structures and processes are in place so that police consider an SPO in every stalking case, and apply for an SPO where relevant and appropriate to prevent harm and further offending.

To achieve this, chief constables should review, and revise where necessary:

- Local training and guidance on SPOs, including training and guidance for supervisors.
- Mechanisms for supporting investigating officers to identify cases where SPOs would be appropriate and assisting them with SPO applications. This could be through dedicated teams or roles and/or through daily management meetings considering risk and safeguarding.

[\(This is recommendation 13 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Using other protective measures over stalking protection orders

A number of forces told us, in response to the force self-assessment survey, that investigating officers were reluctant to apply for stalking protection orders (SPOs) where other protective orders or measures were already in place or available.

Responses referred to officers preferring to pursue other protective measures, such as bail conditions, restraining orders and domestic violence protection notices or orders, because they were familiar with them, and they found them easier to apply for and obtain. Forces reported similar issues with police legal teams and courts preferring to use other protective orders and measures instead of SPOs. Or they did not see SPOs as necessary where other measures were in place.

“The cases we have had refused have been [because] when we have got to court the victim has obtained a non-molestation order before we’ve had the chance to make the application for a SPO, or the court has not found the need for an order when the person has been subject to bail conditions that would do the same as an order would (despite submissions that bail does not have any sanction if breached).”

(Force response to the self-assessment survey)

We heard the same concerns in our focus group with victim support service providers. In our fieldwork interviews, we were also told by victim support workers that officers sometimes advise victims to seek [non-molestation orders](#) without apparent consideration for other protective orders, such as SPOs. We also found evidence of this in our fieldwork case review and in the IOPC cases reviewed.

Unlike SPOs, victims have to apply for non-molestation orders themselves, or have an application made on their behalf. They may have to pay for the application. This places a considerable burden on victims to protect themselves when options are available for the police to do this. In addition, a breach of a non-molestation order is not a criminal offence and the penalties for breaching are much less severe. It is inappropriate for police to rely on victims to seek a non-molestation order without discussing protective orders like SPOs with them, that police can apply for on their behalf.

In response to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces mentioned that some investigating officers, legal teams and courts relied on bail conditions as the basis for not pursuing SPOs. Police can arrest individuals who have breached bail conditions. However, breach of police bail is not a crime, unlike a breach of an SPO. This means there are greater limitations on the actions that police can take when a perpetrator breaches bail conditions, compared to when a perpetrator breaches an SPO. The [IOPC case review \(annex F\)](#) includes numerous cases where bail conditions were repeatedly breached with no apparent consequence for the perpetrator, and no additional protective measures put in place.

The evidence from our investigation suggests that there is a lack of clarity about some aspects of guidance and procedures for applying for SPOs. Particularly, what orders or protective measures to apply for and when. In the super-complaint, the Consortium recommends that police officers should first consider SPOs in cases of stalking, before any other orders or protections are considered. We agree that in stalking cases, SPOs should be seen as a first or early consideration. This is because they provide specific protections which can be tailored to the risks faced by stalking victims, and their needs. We consider that further guidance would help clarify which protective measures should be used. A combination of measures may be appropriate in some cases.

Recommendation to the Home Office

By 27 March 2025, work with the College of Policing and others across the criminal justice system to issue guidance that assists the police and criminal justice partners to select the most appropriate protective measure or combination of measures to pursue in stalking cases.

[\(This is recommendation 4 in the summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Stalking protection order prohibitions and positive requirements

There was a strong consensus across the stakeholders that we spoke to that the option for positive requirements in stalking protection orders (SPOs) is a particular strength of these protective orders. This was emphasised in responses to the force self-assessment survey, and in our focus group discussions with stalking support service providers. Participants in a focus group of police officers and staff held the same view. One said:

“[the SPO] gave us the power to go and knock on the suspect’s address. And you know, for... the cyberstalking we had the power to go and look at his phone and look at his history and he wasn’t allowed to delete his history, for example, as part of the SPO. So that was kind of something we’d never be allowed to do without an SPO. ... He’s not allowed to initiate any conversations. So yeah, it was a good tool.”

(Police focus group – response officers)

Examples of positive requirements are included in the description of SPOs in [the background chapter for this report](#).

In the super-complaint, the Consortium states that positive requirements are not widely used where SPOs are in place. They report that their own review of a sample of 25 SPOs found that no positive requirements were included in 17 of these orders. The initial [Home Office review of SPOs](#), after the first year of operation, also found that prohibitions were more likely to be imposed than positive requirements. The Home Office review found that the most common positive requirement referred to was for perpetrators to provide the police with access to social media accounts, mobile phones, computers and tablets with their passwords.

The stalking victim support service providers we spoke to also noted that the lack of sufficiently robust prohibitions and positive requirements in SPOs undermined their effectiveness.

In the force self-assessment survey, some forces told us they were exploring different ways they could use the positive requirement provisions in SPOs. For example, by using perpetrator intervention programmes or using GPS tagging devices for some stalking perpetrators.

However, in response to the force self-assessment survey, just nine out of 43 forces reported that stalking intervention programmes for stalking perpetrators were included in SPO conditions in their force area. The lack of intervention programmes was described by some respondents as undermining the effectiveness of SPOs. We discuss the availability and evaluation of these types of programme in [our chapter on stalking perpetrator intervention programmes](#).

Addressing issues with stalking protection order law and guidance

Slow and complex application process

In responses to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces reported that the process for obtaining an SPO was slow and complex. We heard similar feedback from police officers we spoke to in focus groups and force stalking leads we met with.

We do not have specific data on how long, on average, it takes for forces to apply for an SPO or for this to be granted. However, we heard anecdotal evidence of this sometimes taking many months. For example, in our focus groups with police officers involved in stalking cases, one participant described an SPO application that was started in August 2022 but was still waiting to be approved 11 months on. This was because of the time taken to go back and forth between legal services and the officer.

Two of the victims who took part in our research interviews had stalking cases where the courts had granted an SPO against the perpetrator. One victim described this happening “pretty rapidly” and attributed this to the police and their stalking advocate working together. The other victim described how the SPO had taken eight months to be obtained. They reflected that:

“The government brought in these stalking protection orders to actually make them slick and fast, but actually, the whole thing seems to have been slowed up and almost feels as if you know, it’s really a last resort sort of activity.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

In the force self-assessment survey, some forces attributed the issues with the length of time it took to obtain an SPO to delays in the courts system. A number of forces referred to the length of time it took to get dates for SPO application hearings as a particular problem.

Many forces also referred to the complexity of the SPO application process and the procedural requirements for SPOs as barriers to obtaining SPOs quickly.

Process to apply for stalking protection orders is similar to a criminal trial

In response to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces raised concerns about the requirement for the criminal burden of proof (beyond reasonable doubt) to be applied for the court to grant a full stalking protection order (SPO). The same concern was raised in our discussions with officers in fieldwork forces.

However, since we completed our investigation fieldwork, the Home Office has amended its [statutory guidance on SPOs](#). This now states that it is “likely that the courts will apply the civil standard of proof (balance of probabilities) to the different elements of the SPO application”. This follows a [July 2023 Supreme Court ruling](#) regarding the application of the civil burden of proof for all civil orders. This change is welcome in providing greater clarity around the burden of proof for these orders.

Officers from fieldwork forces also told us that the disclosure of evidence can be a problem in applications for interim SPOs. Where police seek an interim SPO at an early stage after the report of stalking, the police may not have interviewed the suspect and may not want to disclose to the suspect all the information they have about the case. The [statutory guidance on SPOs](#) makes no provision for the hearing of evidence in private by the court and without disclosure to the suspect.

Some officers told us that they felt that, unlike [Domestic Violence Protection Orders \(DPVOs\)](#), SPO applications needed the support of the victim to be successful. This is contrary to the [statutory guidance on SPOs](#) which states that the court may consider hearsay evidence. In this context, hearsay evidence means evidence not given in proceedings by the victim about what the victim had seen, heard or experienced. Officers told us that in their experience this was unlikely to be acceptable to the court.

The SPO statutory guidance about hearsay evidence is also another example of how the SPO application process can be complex and time-consuming. The guidance states that if the police wish to rely on hearsay evidence, and this is contested by the respondent, the police must serve the evidence on the respondent at least 21 days before the hearing.

It is then possible that the court will decide that it will not accept the hearsay evidence and wants to hear the evidence in-person. The statutory guidance makes provision for victims and witnesses to give their evidence by way of [special measures](#) (procedures to provide additional protection for vulnerable victims or witnesses). The court will consider applications by the police for this to happen. This is another example of the parallels between the SPO application and criminal trials processes.

Interim stalking protection orders do not offer quick-time protection for victims

Issues with long delays and complex court application processes were also reported in relation to interim stalking protection orders (SPOs) in responses to the force self-assessment survey. The purpose of interim SPOs is to provide a quicker means of protection before a full SPO can be sought, and where there is an “immediate risk of harm”. However, the application process for an interim SPO is very similar to that for a full SPO. Officers must make an application to a magistrate’s court to secure both full and interim SPOs. Magistrates must be presented with evidence that the perpetrator has stalked and that they pose a risk of stalking.

The need for a quicker interim SPO process to protect victims before a court hearing for a full SPO was highlighted by many forces. Respondents to the survey drew parallels with [domestic violence protection notices \(DVPNs\)](#) and suggested that a similar framework should be introduced to operate alongside SPOs. A DVPN is an emergency protection notice which can be issued by the police (with the authority of superintendent or above) to a perpetrator when dealing with a domestic abuse incident. Because the DVPN is a police-issued notice, it is effective from the time it is authorised. This gives the victim immediate protection. Within 48 hours of the DVPN being served on the perpetrator, an application by police to a magistrates’ court for a DVPO must be heard.

We think that a similar approach to protect stalking victims could offer immediate police-applied protection in non-domestic stalking cases and set a timeframe for the courts to consider an interim or full order. We heard from some stakeholders that, even if a quick-time protection notice for stalkers was introduced, there may still be a need for interim SPOs which could be put in place before a full SPO might be granted. This is because a quick-time protection notice for stalking, like a DVPN, would be unlikely to have positive requirements and may only be in place for a very short time.

The argument to bring SPOs closer in line with DVPOs (and the new [domestic abuse protection orders](#) which will replace these) is persuasive. Some domestic abuse stalking victims could be provided with the quick-time protections offered by police-issued DVPNs. But even though victims of non-domestic stalking may face similar risks and impact, the police do not have the same options for protecting these victims immediately.

More closely aligning the application process for SPOs with domestic violence notices and orders would also bring an added benefit of moving towards a more unified and simplified protective orders framework.

Applying for stalking protection orders where the perpetrator lives in another force area

In response to the force self-assessment survey, some forces also referred to issues with applying for a stalking protection order (SPO) when the perpetrator lives outside the force area. This was also perceived to be a problem by stalking support service providers who raised this issue in our focus group discussion.

One fieldwork force had introduced local guidance which said that officers should not consider applying for an SPO when the suspect lived outside the force area. However, this is more limited than the requirement in the [statutory guidance on SPOs](#). The guidance says that the police can apply for SPOs:

“in respect of a person (respondent) who resides in the chief officer’s police area, or who the chief officer believes is in that area or is intending to come to it.”

However, it is also the case that stalkers do not need to live near or visit their victim to target them online. The current limitations around SPO applications for suspects that live outside the force area could be an issue in these circumstances. We deal with this issue in our recommendation to change the law around SPOs below.

Provision for courts to issue stalking protection orders on conviction

Another suggested change to the law that was raised by a number of forces in responses to the force self-assessment survey, is to allow courts to grant a stalking protection order (SPO) following a conviction or acquittal for a stalking offence, without the need for the police to apply for an SPO. Currently, the CPS can request, and courts can grant, a restraining order where a perpetrator is convicted of a stalking offence. However, a restraining order cannot include any positive requirements that could be included in an SPO. The police could apply for an SPO post-conviction or acquittal, but they would be unlikely to do so if the CPS had already sought a restraining order. Providing courts with the option to grant an SPO on conviction would help to make sure that the protective order that is put in place provides the most appropriate protection for the victim. It would also bring SPOs more closely in line with the new [domestic abuse protection orders](#) when these are introduced.

Recommendation to the Home Office

Bring forward legislation in the 2024-2025 parliamentary session that would change the legal framework for SPOs to:

- Align SPOs more closely to orders available in domestic abuse cases, including providing for a stalking protection notice that could be approved by a senior police officer before an application for an interim or full SPO is made to a magistrate's court.
- Provide for courts to issue an SPO on the conviction or acquittal of an offender.
- Provide that chief constables can apply for an SPO for perpetrators who do not live in, visit, or intend to visit their force area.

[\(This appears as recommendation 3 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Victim care and support

“There was a lot of empathy, a lot of care and time and consideration taken... It was quite sensitive. It was a bit embarrassing for me, but I never felt exposed by [the officer] or like she was... treating it lightly... that was a good experience.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

“I was given... a crime reference number but I wasn’t given any information on like next steps or what I could do or who I would speak to or, what was the officer’s name and when would I hear back. Like there was nothing clear given to me in terms of process except, [the officer] took his statement, he told me to block [my stalker] and then said, you know someone will be in touch.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

The Consortium raises concerns about the support provided by police to victims of stalking in the super-complaint. This includes:

- Police minimising and trivialising stalking behaviours reported by victims, with victims of stalking not being “treated with respect, dignity, sensitivity, compassion and courtesy” as stated by the victims’ code.
- Stalking victims not being referred or signposted to specialist stalking services by the police, as they should be in accordance with the victims’ code.

The Consortium also raises concerns about the police giving victims of stalking unhelpful and potentially dangerous advice. We did find evidence of this, particularly in relation to online stalking. We have explored this issue under the theme of [online stalking later in the report](#).

Summary of our findings

Our investigation has found that stalking victims are often not receiving the care and support that they need and should be able to expect from police.

In our investigation we looked at the specific issues regarding victim care and support the Consortium included in the super-complaint. We also considered the broader obligations on police to provide victim care and support under the [victims’ code](#).

Our investigation found evidence of poor victim care and poor compliance with the victims' code. We found that the police do not always recognise enhanced rights of stalking victims under the victims' code. Many stalking victims are not referred to services which can provide appropriate support. We also found that the provision of specialist stalking support services in force areas is variable. This limits the options for appropriate referrals to be made.

Our investigation findings and the wider research we reviewed suggests that victims are best supported where there are effective referral processes in place, and structures that embed collaborative working between police and specialist stalking support services and advocates. We have made recommendations to make sure that this type of collaborative service is available to all victims of stalking.

Victim care and compliance with the victims' code

Rights under the victims' code

The right support for victims of crime is crucially important to support victim safety and to make sure that victims are able to continue to engage with the criminal justice process. This is recognised in the victims' code. This sets out the minimum standards for services that must be provided to victims of crime.

Under the victims' code, police must tell victims when they make important decisions throughout the criminal investigation. Police should discuss and agree with victims how often they would like to receive updates and their preferred method of contact.

Victims also have the right to be referred to services that support victims and have their needs assessed so services and support can be adapted to meet these needs. Some victims of crime are entitled to enhanced rights under the victims' code. This includes victims of stalking. The code states:

“You are eligible for Enhanced Rights under this Code as a persistently targeted victim if you have been targeted repeatedly as a direct victim of crime over a period of time, particularly if you have been deliberately targeted or if you are a victim of a campaign of harassment or stalking.”

Enhanced rights means that victims are entitled to more tailored victim support. This includes being offered a referral to a specialist support service and being contacted sooner after the police make important decisions throughout the investigation.

Poor victim care and compliance with the victims' code

We found that victim care was often not good enough in our fieldwork case file reviews. HMICFRS assessed that victim care was not good enough in 196 of the 470 stalking and breach of orders cases reviewed.

Evidence from stalking victims and the stalking victim service providers indicates that stalking victims often do not receive an acceptable level of service from police. The evidence from our investigation is consistent with wider research into victim experiences when reporting stalking to the police (an [overview of this research is provided at annex C](#)).

Poor levels of compliance with the victims' code (which we discuss in more detail below) is concerning. But this issue is not specific to stalking victims. Our findings mirror those from the 2023 HMICFRS, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, and His Majesty's Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate joint inspection, [Meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice system](#). That inspection recommended a fundamental review of the experience of victims of crime. It recommended policing look broadly at all services available to victims, seeking to improve the availability and consistency of the service they receive. The findings from our super-complaint investigation provide further evidence in support of this recommendation and should be considered as part of the wider review of victim support.

We also welcome the action that has been taken to strengthen the legal framework for the victims' code under the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024. The victims' code will now be updated, following consultation, to align it to the new legal framework. The College of Policing will work closely with policing and its partners to make sure the new code is embedded into everything policing does.

Recognising enhanced rights for stalking victims

The evidence from our investigation suggests that police often do not recognise that stalking victims are entitled to enhanced rights. They are not then offered the tailored victim support that the victims' code requires.

We found evidence that officers had recognised the victim was entitled to enhanced rights in only 97 of the 384 stalking cases we examined as part of our fieldwork case file review. We also found that only one of the six force stalking policies referenced the fact that stalking victims are entitled to an enhanced service. None of the training products in any of the fieldwork forces included this information.

Minimising and trivialising victim experiences, lack of empathy and victim blaming

The [victims' code](#) makes it clear that victims have the right to be treated with respect, dignity, sensitivity, compassion and courtesy. The stalking victims we interviewed spoke about the importance of police listening and showing empathy from the moment they first reported stalking. Some victims had positive experiences and spoke about the care and understanding they received from some police officers or staff. However, we also gathered evidence where this was not the case, with examples of police minimising or trivialising the stalking behaviours reported to them.

We found evidence that officers had overtly minimalised or trivialised the behaviours reported to them in 46 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases we reviewed in our fieldwork case file review. Examples included officers not treating the case as a serious section 4A stalking offence or treating the reported behaviour in isolation.

The stalking victims that we interviewed as part of the investigation gave further examples including where they:

- did not feel believed or they struggled to have their reports of stalking taken seriously
- felt they were taken less seriously where they did not fit into a certain idea or ideal of a stalking victim
- reported feeling they were victim blamed or shamed:

“I was told keep collecting the evidence and then being told as I’m reporting stalking, continued stalking, ‘well he’s not actually done anything wrong yet, he’s not actually doing anything’ ... which completely skews and twists how you think about what you’re reporting.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Police minimising or trivialising reports of stalking was also a theme arising in our focus group discussion with stalking victim support service providers:

“Even in the cases where risk is not high, the impact on the victim can be absolutely life changing... We had a victim that was having the ice scraped off her car for her every morning. And the response from the officer was, ‘Wow, that sounds great. I need a stalker’. [The] impact on that victim, knowing that wherever she parked her car, wherever she stayed, that ice would still be scraped off in the morning and they were still there, was absolutely destroying everything about her ability to feel that she could access the world. So [in relation to] it being serious, we really need to think about... the way it changes those victims’ lives.”

(Stalking victim support service provider – focus group)

Examples of police trivialising and minimising reports of stalking were also evident across the IOPC cases we reviewed. We found examples where such attitudes negatively influenced the risk assessment and safeguarding actions by police. This is discussed in more detail in [the previous chapter on responding to risk](#).

Some of the IOPC cases we reviewed also included concerning examples of victim blaming. Victim blaming is where the victim, rather than the suspect, is held entirely or partially to blame for the harm they suffered as a victim of crime. The IOPC has recently published [guidance for police and IOPC staff on ending victim blaming in the context of violence against women and girls](#). The IOPC is working with the College of Policing and the NPCC to promote this guidance across policing.

Victim needs assessment

Police must assess the needs of victims to make sure they receive appropriate support under the victims' code. Police do this by completing a victim needs assessment. We found evidence that the police had completed a victim needs assessment in only 82 of the 384 stalking cases we reviewed in our fieldwork case file review.

One fieldwork force had taken action to address concerns about officers not completing victim needs assessments. It had implemented a more structured approach to support officers to ask the right questions and record the information consistently:

Fieldwork example – Innovative practice

Following our [2021/22 police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy \(PEEL\) inspection](#), Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary recognised that it needed to improve its service to [victims](#). The constabulary's lead for victims began to create a structured victim needs assessment (VNA) that could be incorporated into the force crime recording system.

The resulting VNA guides officers about victims' rights under the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#) and includes prompts for what officers need to do to follow these.

Officers can open up the VNA when they are recording an offence. Because the VNA has the appropriate information all in one place, it makes it less likely that officers will forget something.

This system also makes it easy for supervisors to make sure of compliance with the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales. Another benefit is that it is easy for the constabulary to understand how well it responds to victims and make improvements if necessary.

Poor completion by the police of victim needs assessments is not limited to stalking. The 2023 joint HMICFRS, HMCPSI and HMI Probation [Meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice system inspection](#) looked at the service victims received across a number of different crimes. It also found that police often did not complete victim needs assessments. The report included a recommendation to the College of Policing and

the NPCC to develop minimum standards for the completion of victim needs assessments, including timeliness of completion and clarity on the information to be recorded.

The College of Policing has published [a collection of guidance and resources](#) to support policing to meet the requirements of the victims' code. This guidance sets out an expectation that officers and staff carry out an initial victim needs assessment at the earliest opportunity. The supporting resources include a poster on what should be considered during this initial victim needs assessment.

Victims not receiving updates and facing difficulties contacting police

The stalking victims and stalking victim support service providers we spoke to as part of this investigation told us about the importance of victims receiving updates on investigations. Examples were given of effective, regular communication and how this underpinned victims' positive experiences of the service provided by police. But we also heard examples where this did not happen. Victims told us that this lack of communication contributed to the sense police were not taking their report of stalking seriously and left them feeling vulnerable. It was concerning that some victims spoke about not receiving important updates and information that effected their safety. Examples included the details of protective orders, changes in court dates, and information about perpetrators being released from custody.

The stalking victims and stalking victims support service providers we spoke to all talked about the importance of victims having a consistent point of contact. This was also a significant finding from the wider research on victim experiences that we reviewed ([our rapid research review is set out in annex C](#)). Most of the victims who participated in our research interviews spoke about difficulties they encountered by not having a consistent point of contact for their case, or not having one until late in the criminal justice process. Victims spoke about the lack of a consistent point of contact meaning that they had to re-tell their story multiple times to different officers.

Participants from our focus groups with police officers and staff were aware of requirements to keep victims updated in line with the victims' code. However, some participants expressed difficulties or discomfort with speaking to victims where there was nothing specific to update them on in terms of progress on the investigation.

“On our VCOPs [victims' code of practice], we have things like keep up to date every 10 days and there's no point in contacting them to say there's no update... what's the point in ringing someone who's being stalked, ring and say still working on it but we're still waiting on your computer downloads. So that's hard to justify and it's hard, it's a tough conversation to have with victims.”

(Police focus group – response officers)

Victims will have different needs and expectations around how often they expect to be contacted. But the views we heard suggest a possible disconnect between police and victims about the purpose and value of providing regular updates. It is an area where the involvement of victim support services could help, with the role of support services specifically focussed on providing support and advice to victims, and someone to contact throughout an investigation.

We discuss stalking victim support services and their role in providing an effective service to victims of stalking later in this chapter.

Maintaining an effective service for victims when cases involve different forces

A small number of the victims we interviewed were victims in cases that involved more than one police force. Some victims described difficulties with their case being transferred from one force to another. Some talked about finding it difficult to have to deal with lots of different organisations throughout the investigation, and some also spoke about the time that this took, leaving them feeling vulnerable.

Police regional stalking leads as part of the NPCC stalking and harassment tactical working group, told us that collaborative work between forces to safeguard victims worked better for high-risk cases than it did for low-risk cases. The group also discussed the requirement in the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) that stalking crimes are recorded, in most cases, by the force where the perpetrator lives. They suggested that this can create complexities around safeguarding and victim care.

Our investigation only provided limited evidence about issues with the service received by victims where the stalking crime spanned different forces as we did not explore this issue in detail in our fieldwork. However, the broader review of victim support recommended in the joint [Meeting the needs of victims in the criminal justice system](#) inspection should provide an opportunity to give further consideration to how victim care and specialist support services work across force areas. This is particularly relevant in the context of increasing online crime, including cyber-stalking, where victims and perpetrators may not live near to one another.

Specialist stalking victim support and advocacy services

Research suggests that victims feel more positive when supported by an advocate from a specialist stalking victim support service (also referred to as an independent stalking advocate caseworker (ISAC)). This is discussed in [our rapid review of research into victims' experience of the police response to stalking at annex C](#). The advocate role was described as a “bridge” between the victim and the police, also providing advice and reassurance to the victim. We also heard directly from the victims that we interviewed about the value of the support provided by these types of specialist stalking victim support services.

The value of stalking victim support services and advocates was also recognised by the police officers and staff we spoke to as part of our investigation. Police participants in our focus groups spoke about how stalking advocates can help to maintain victim engagement throughout a protracted investigation period, as well as supporting the victim at court. They also said stalking advocates helped provide consistency for the victim when investigating officers may be moved off the case part way through an investigation.

Availability of specialist stalking support services

Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) or their mayor equivalents have been responsible for making sure there is adequate provision of support services for victims since 2014. Because local commissioning operates in this way, it is inevitable that there will be variation from force area to force area. However, we found that some force areas have very limited or no provision of specialist stalking victim support services, or that services are only available to particular categories of victim (such as domestic abuse stalking victims).

In responses to the force self-assessment survey, most forces stated that specialist stalking support services are available in their force area. But many forces mentioned national services (like the [National Stalking Helpline](#)) rather than local provision. Some forces referred to different availability of stalking support services for domestic abuse and non-domestic abuse victims. Nine of the 43 forces reported that specialist stalking victim support services were not available in their force area, and two forces reported that they did not know if this type of service was available.

In our fieldwork we also found different arrangements for the provision of specialist stalking victim support services. In all six force areas there were services that provided support for stalking victims where there was a domestic abuse context. In one force area, the domestic abuse stalking provision did not cover the whole of the force area. Two of the six fieldwork force areas did not have any local provision of support for non-domestic stalking victims. In one force area the specialist stalking victim support services told us that due to the volume of stalking victims, it only allocated resources to high-risk victims.

The enhanced rights set out in the victims' code implies an expectation that appropriate specialist victim support services will be available. However, we found a patchwork of specialist services for stalking victims with clear gaps in service provision, particularly for victims of non-domestic stalking.

The Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 places a duty on PCCs and their mayor equivalents to collaborate with health and local government on victim services. This will provide an important impetus for PCCs and mayor equivalents to consider their local provision of these services. We think this consideration should include whether it is more effective and efficient for services to be shared, particularly in smaller force areas.

Recommendation to PCCs and their mayor equivalents

By 27 March 2025, review whether the right specialist services have been commissioned to support stalking victims in their area, including provision of trained independent stalking advocate caseworkers (ISACs).

PCCs and their mayor equivalents should provide the necessary services where they do not exist and should consider collaborating across force boundaries to provide services if it would be efficient and effective to do so.

[\(This is recommendation 15 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Lack of referrals by the police to specialist stalking victim support services

“[The police] didn’t kind of say... there’s a stalking protection organisation, oh victim support. They didn’t mention that at all. It was just really, well, let’s dish out the crime report number and almost we’ve done our job.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Our investigation found that stalking victims are not always made aware of or referred to local or national specialist stalking victim support services. Most of the victims we interviewed, who were supported by stalking victim support services, said that they found support services through their own research and were not referred or signposted by police.

Participants in our focus group with stalking victim support service providers also suggested that far too few referrals were made by police. They highlighted the discrepancy between the number of stalking crimes recorded by police compared with the number of referrals received by support services.

“Considering we’re national we get one or two referrals a year... and they’re saying to us ‘we’re getting 3000 reports of stalking’ – so who’s supporting those victims?”

(Stalking support service provider – focus group)

We found evidence that the police had referred victims to specialist support services in only 63 of the 384 stalking cases we reviewed in our fieldwork case file review. Officers had recorded that they had given the victim information about support services in only 100 of the 384 stalking cases we reviewed.

It is possible that, in these cases, the police may have referred stalking victims to specialist stalking victim support services in other ways, such as through general victim support or domestic abuse advocacy services. It is also possible that police had informed victims about support services but had not recorded this on the crime record. However, the evidence from victims and victims support service providers suggests that no appropriate referral or information about specialist support services is offered in many cases.

In response to the force self-assessment survey, only five of 43 forces reported that more than half of stalking victims were referred to specialist stalking support services (four of these reported that between 76-100% were referred). Most forces reported that they did not know what percentage of stalking victims they had referred to specialist stalking support services. This is crucial information about the service provided to stalking victims which should be known by forces and PCCs or their mayor equivalents who are responsible for commissioning these services. We discuss this in [our previous chapter on strategic leadership and oversight](#).

We found that forces' referral processes for specialist stalking victim support often relied on officers emailing or calling the support service. This relies on officers (and supervisors) being aware of the services available. However, only one of the six fieldwork forces included specific reference in their force policy to the importance of referring victims to specialist stalking victim support services, and also included information about the relevant organisation. This information was also absent from much of the force stalking training material that we examined as part of our fieldwork.

In our fieldwork, we saw evidence of cases where dedicated stalking officers had intervened to remind investigating officers to offer referrals to victims. This is another area where dedicated officers and staff can add value. This is discussed in more detail in [our earlier chapter on dedicated stalking co-ordination roles and multi-agency working](#).

In force areas where specialist stalking victim support services do not exist, the local general victim support services should support these victims. But in 178 of the 384 stalking cases we examined as part of our fieldwork case file review, we could not find evidence that the police had referred the victim to general victim support services.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure stalking victims receive the rights they are entitled to under the victims' code and have access to support services.

Chief constables should make sure:

- Victim needs assessments are always completed.
- Their force has appropriate processes to make sure all stalking victims are told about their rights under the victims' code.
- Information about the national and specialist stalking support services available in their force area is easily available to police officers and staff, victims and the general public.
- Victims who would like to receive support are referred to an appropriate service in a timely manner.
- They monitor the number of stalking victims who are referred to specialist support services and take action when referral numbers are low.

[\(This is recommendation 14 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Partnership working between specialist support services and the police

Police stalking leads from the NPCC stalking and harassment tactical working group were in broad agreement that victim advocates provided value to investigations by supporting victims, and acting as a critical friend to policing, making sure the victim's voice was heard throughout the investigation. They noted that where there was a close working relationship between support services and advocates, the information sharing and critical friend role worked both ways. This led to better advice and service to victims overall.

The victims' code states that organisations should share information with other agencies that support victims. Therefore, the victim does not have to repeat themselves, which can be re-traumatising. Evidence from our fieldwork, the force self-assessment survey and engagement with police force stalking leads, indicates that there is great variation in the level of information sharing with stalking advocates and support services. There is also a difference in the level of access the police give stalking advocates and support services to policing systems.

We heard from the stalking victim support service providers in our focus group that their experience of working with police was variable. They said that in some cases officers were very receptive to working with stalking advocates, but in other cases they found officers were difficult to contact and sometimes dismissive, obstructive and unwilling to share information. They also suggested that victims were best served and supported throughout an investigation where stalking victim support service providers and police worked together in partnership.

Effective collaborative working seems to work best where there are local stalking specialist support services providing an advocacy role. It also seems to work best when there are dedicated stalking units or officers within the police force who can foster effective multi-agency working relationships, act as a point of contact or escalation, and intervene in cases, including to prompt officers to refer victims to advocacy services.

In our fieldwork interviews, stalking victim support workers told us that they found dedicated stalking officers were valuable points of contact when investigating officers were unavailable. Conversely, in one force where there were no dedicated stalking officers, support workers advised that they had no point-of-contact to find out about a case and learn who the investigating officer was. The stalking victim support workers had to call 101 and ask the control room for contact information for the investigating officer.

We found evidence in our fieldwork that the same lack of information sharing happens in reverse. Specialist stalking victim support workers told us that they would not routinely and regularly share information with the police that they had gathered from the victim. This could include additional risk assessments they completed and may mean that police safeguarding plans would not account for all available information about risks known to victim advocates. We found poor information sharing both ways in most of the fieldwork forces.

In response to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces suggested the co-location of advocates or providing advocates with access to police systems would allow for better information sharing and collaborative working. This type of close working is also a feature of the MASIP approach that is used in a small number of forces. This is discussed in [the earlier chapter around dedicated stalking units and multi-agency working](#).

We also found that some other forces were taking steps to improve information sharing and collaborative working:

Fieldwork example – Innovative practice

The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police and Crime Commissioner identified that information sharing and partnership working are better if victim support workers and the police are co-located. The police and crime commissioner had made sure that the tender arrangements for the contract to provide victim support specified this.

At the time of our investigation fieldwork, the force was training and vetting victim support workers so they could access police information systems.

The force has since told us that in February 2024, it started operating four victim care hubs. The hubs are located in police investigation centres. The force created additional staff roles to help victim support workers access police systems.

We think more could be done to make sure appropriate arrangements are in place to foster information sharing and collaborative working between police and stalking victim support services. Different approaches may be appropriate for different police forces, but they should include agreements on information sharing, access to systems, or co-location of services where appropriate.

Under the Victims and Prisoners Act 2024 the government can now issue statutory guidance on the role and function of some specified victim support services.

The Conservative government had [previously committed to publishing statutory guidance on independent stalking advocate caseworkers](#) (ISACs). We welcome this because we think statutory guidance on ISACs could provide important clarity about how they should work together and share information with police investigators.

Recommendation to chief constables, PCCs and their mayor equivalents

By 27 March 2025, work together to review commissioning arrangements and make changes as soon as possible to ensure they embed collaborative working and information sharing between policing and services providing victim support to stalking victims.

([This is recommendation 16 in our summary of findings and recommendations.](#))

Investigating stalking

“I started doing my own detective work because I thought police are not doing anything here.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

The Consortium states, in the super-complaint, that too often police are not investigating stalking appropriately. It states that this leads to the incorrect offence being charged, inappropriate no further action decisions, and low charge rates.

Under this feature of policing, the Consortium states that police are not recognising the risk of serious harm and homicide to the victim. We comment on this concern in [the previous chapter on responding to risk](#). The Consortium also states that police often fail to recognise the impact on victims of online (or cyber) stalking and fail to treat the online behaviours as evidence. We explore these issues in [a separate chapter ‘Understanding and responding to online stalking’](#).

In this chapter, we consider the other points the Consortium has raised around poor investigations into stalking crimes including:

- The psychological impact of stalking not being sufficiently recognised by the police or treated as evidence.
- Cases being ‘erroneously closed’ as ‘no further action’ by the police due to lack of evidence (when evidence is available), and without appropriately consulting the CPS.
- Delays in stalking investigations resulting in section 2A investigations being closed due to the six month timeframe for charging expiring.

Summary of our findings

We share the Consortium’s concerns about the low proportion of stalking cases resulting in a criminal charge. This is concerning because our findings from this investigation show that some police investigations into stalking crimes are not good enough. We found that in many cases the police could have done more to pursue reasonable lines of enquiry, including digital lines of enquiry. We also found that officers did not always recognise the psychological impact of the stalking behaviour on the victim.

We did find that the quality of stalking investigations was better when cases are dealt with by investigators – officers with more specialist training in complex investigations. However, we also know from [other HMICFRS reports](#) that forces are struggling to cope with a chronic shortage of experienced detectives. The issue this creates is also explained in the NPCC and College of Policing [2024 national policing statement on VAWG](#), which states:

“This inexperience deficit can damage both the quantity and the quality of our police investigations.”

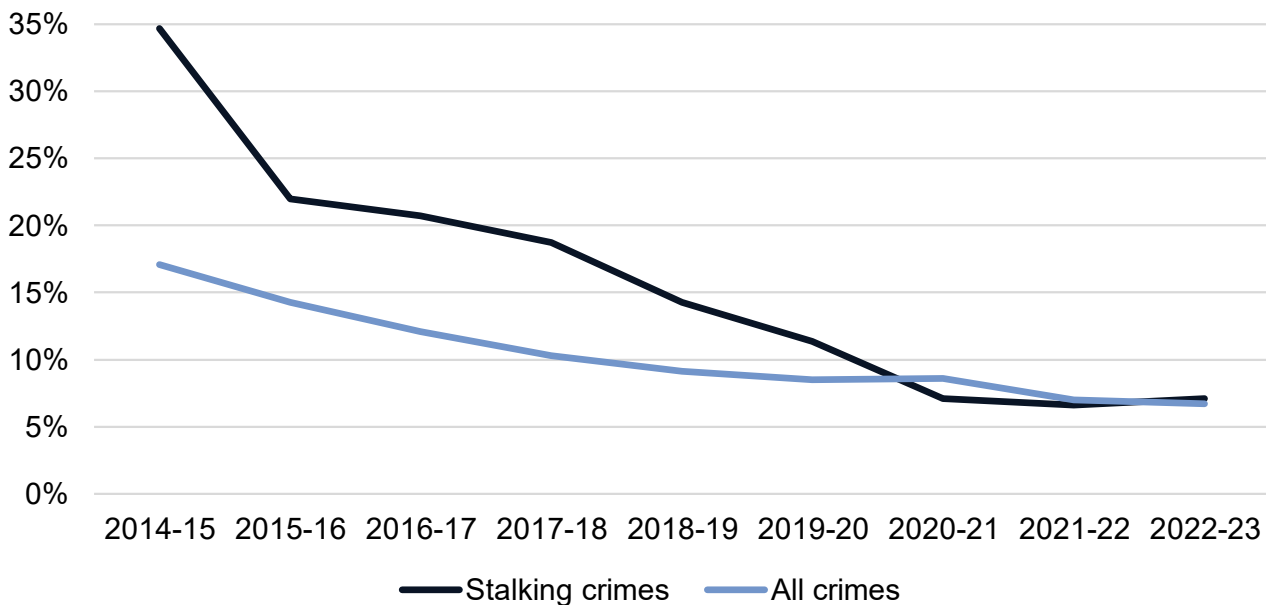
In this context it is imperative that chief constables have allocation policies and processes that make sure the more-complex and high-risk cases are allocated to officers with the right skills and experience. It is equally important that forces make sure investigations are supported by effective supervision, particularly where cases are held by frontline or inexperienced officers.

Throughout our investigation, we have seen that some forces have invested in innovative and promising approaches to improve stalking investigations. We think there are opportunities for policing to do more to learn from what is working well. This includes the innovative use of analytical tools for analysing digital evidence in stalking cases.

Data on investigation outcomes for stalking crimes

The number of stalking crimes recorded by police has increased significantly since 2015. This is shown in the data included in [the background section of this report](#). The proportion of stalking crimes ending in a charge has fallen over the same time period. There has also been a fall in the proportion of crimes that result in a charge across all recorded crimes over this time. This is shown in the graph below.

Figure 5: Proportion of police recorded stalking crimes resulting in a charging decision compared with the proportion of all police recorded crimes resulting in a charging decision in forces in England and Wales between the year ending March 2015 and the year ending March 2023



Source: [Home Office crime data](#)

In the year ending March 2023, 8,304 recorded stalking crimes resulted in a charge (outcome 1). This is 7.1% of recorded stalking crimes in the period.

In the same period, there were 1,954 convictions for stalking ([Ministry of Justice criminal justice statistics](#)).

Most stalking crimes are closed by police due to evidential difficulties or because the victim did not support action. In the year ending March 2023, [Home Office crime data](#) shows:

- 51% of recorded stalking cases were closed due to evidential difficulties where the victim did not support action (outcome 16).
- 31% of recorded stalking crimes were closed due to evidential difficulties where the suspect was identified, and the victim supported action (outcome 15).

Few stalking cases were closed because the suspect was not identified (3.5%). It is likely that this is because the suspect is known to the victim in some way in most stalking crimes.

The data also indicates that very few stalking cases were closed due to the expiry of the time-limit for prosecution (outcome 17). This outcome is only relevant for section 2A stalking which has a six-month time limit for prosecution. However, the published data only shows the outcomes as a percentage of all recorded stalking cases (section 2A and section 4A). Because of this, the proportion of section 2A cases closed in this way is likely

to be higher. In the year ending March 2023, 0.7% of all recorded stalking crimes were closed due to the time-limit for prosecution having expired.

Overview of the quality of stalking and breach of order investigations

We saw examples of effective investigations into stalking throughout our investigation fieldwork. We also heard some examples of good practice in our discussions with stalking victim support service providers and interviews with victims. However, the evidence from our investigation indicates that, too often, police stalking investigations were not good enough and the victim had been let down.

In [our review of IOPC cases \(annex F\)](#), we found examples of flawed investigations into stalking, in some cases with tragic outcomes. In our fieldwork case file review, we concluded that the investigation was not good enough in 164 out of 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases. Similar findings were made in HMICFRS' victim service assessments as part of its 2021 and 2022 PEEL inspection programme. These inspections assessed that investigations into stalking cases were not effective in 33 out of 133 stalking cases examined in 42 forces.

This is concerning, though it is not a new finding. [Previous stalking inspections conducted by HMICFRS in 2017](#) and [2019](#) drew similar conclusions. It is disappointing that the quality of stalking investigations has not significantly improved despite these previous reports.

The issues we identified with the quality of stalking investigations cover a range of different areas and are set out in the sections below.

Allocation of stalking and breach of order crimes for investigation

Concerns with frontline officers investigating stalking cases

We found that, in general, the stalking cases we examined in our fieldwork case file review were investigated less well when investigated by frontline officers.

- A total of 49 of the 67 section 2A offence investigations that were assessed as not good enough had been investigated by frontline officers.
- A total of 54 of the 73 section 4A offence investigations that were assessed as not good enough had been investigated by frontline officers.

This finding is not new or surprising. Previous HMICFRS inspections have reached similar conclusions (see the [HMICFRS report about the police and CPS response to crimes against older people](#)).

The victims that we interviewed also reflected on the value of having an experienced officer, who knew about stalking, investigating their case. Some victims described how the service they received from the police improved once their case was allocated to an experienced investigator. The stalking support service providers who participated in our

focus group also told us they had concerns that frontline officers were investigating stalking offences. They described frontline officers as often not having sufficient understanding of stalking and dealing with incidents in isolation rather than seeing the bigger picture of offending.

Participants in our focus group of supervising officers told us they were confident that frontline officers were effective at the initial response stage, and in the initial collection of evidence in stalking cases. But, overall, there was agreement that ideally, frontline officers should not be investigating stalking crimes. However, participants also stated that in practice stalking crimes are often investigated by frontline officers. And these officers may not have received adequate training. They emphasised the importance of effective supervision where this is the case.

“If we’re pushing investigations down to response officers because we haven’t got the detectives, then we need to equip at least somebody, probably the supervisors with better experience and training.”

(Police focus group – supervisors)

Allocation of stalking crimes for investigation

It is important that the police make good decisions about what type and level of resources are allocated to investigate crimes. This means that officers with the right skills and experience can be matched to the requirements of the investigation, also recognising the needs of victims and witnesses.

How the police allocate cases is decided by local force policies. Forces described their approaches to allocation of stalking crimes in the force self-assessment survey. All forces described frontline officers as responsible for investigating some stalking crimes.

Many forces referred to frontline officers investigating both domestic and non-domestic stalking cases in some circumstances. Generally, forces reported section 2A cases, and cases assessed as low or medium risk of harm to the victim based on a DASH or DARA risk assessment, as being investigated by frontline officers.

This also reflects the general approach taken by fieldwork forces. However, we also found that the arrangements for the allocation of stalking crimes differed in each fieldwork force and allocation policies were often not followed. Two fieldwork forces had set up teams of mainly frontline officers to investigate the majority of offences where an assessment process had decided that viable investigative leads were present. This included most stalking crimes. The intention was that these teams were supported by experienced and better-trained supervisors to help guide the investigators.

Only one of the fieldwork forces had a policy that all stalking crimes should be investigated by teams that had investigators with the training and skills to investigate serious and

complex crimes, sometimes known as '[PIP2 investigators](#)'. Despite this policy, in the force concerned, only 18 of the 67 stalking offences we examined in our fieldwork case assessments had been allocated to a PIP2 team. The other 49 crimes had all been allocated to frontline officers.

In another force, the stalking policy said:

“the starting point for a complex stalking case should be a PIP2 investigator”.

But despite this, we found 26 of the 32 section 4A stalking cases in our fieldwork case file review in this force had been dealt with by frontline officers.

In a different force, the crime allocation policy only covered section 4A stalking offences in a domestic abuse context. It did not address who should investigate section 2A stalking offences or who should investigate section 4A in non-domestic abuse cases. In another force, the policy was for all non-domestic stalking crimes to be allocated to frontline officers and for domestic abuse stalking crimes to be allocated to domestic abuse safeguarding teams.

Lack of clarity around the allocation policy for non-domestic stalking cases was a feature of an IOPC case we reviewed as part of this investigation, and where the IOPC made an organisational learning recommendation:

IOPC case example – police response to stalking prior to the murder of the victim – involving organisational learning for the force

The victim reported an acquaintance to the police, explaining that he had followed her from work after she blocked him on social media and that he had used cameras to watch her while they were together at a location. She stated that he had continually sent her messages despite her asking him not to. Officers were also told by another person about the man's previous stalking behaviours, but they decided to close the investigation with no further action.

Further information about the previous stalking behaviour was not obtained and no national database check was conducted. The suspect was spoken to by the investigating officer and warned not to make any further contact with the victim. However, no risk assessment was undertaken, and no safeguarding plan was put in place.

Some months later, the victim was found with a number of fatal wounds. The suspect was found nearby, having apparently taken his own life.

The IOPC investigation established that the response officers who dealt with the case were not aware that the investigation should have been allocated to a specialist public protection investigation team, in accordance with force policy.

Following this investigation, organisational learning recommendations were accepted by the police force. In response, the force has issued additional guidance on investigating non-domestic stalking cases to officers, including advice about allocation to specialist teams. The force has also appointed a stalking co-ordinator to advise on stalking investigations.

The frontline officers we spoke to in our focus group spoke about the allocation of cases as an area of disagreement within forces. They discussed disagreements between frontline teams and specialist investigations teams at relatively senior levels about where the responsibility lay for investigating which cases.

“the push back is incredible. It’s a lot of arguments of who is dealing with what and how and when, and that gets in the way massively, not only for us police officers, but to the victims.”

(Police focus group – response officers)

The same group of officers also described cases being moved between teams, often causing delays and confusion for victims. They stated that this made it more difficult for officers to build victim’s trust and maintain their engagement in the process. Issues with cases being handed over to many different officers was also a strong theme across our interviews with victims, and in our discussions with stalking victim support service providers.

Allocation of breach of order cases

We also looked at forces’ handling of breaches of protective orders as part of our fieldwork because we know that some breaches can also be offences of stalking. And these cases can indicate escalating risk to victims.

The fieldwork force crime allocation policies we examined often did not include material about breach of order offences. We found that forces’ general presumptions were that frontline officers would deal with breaches of protective orders. This was because forces thought they were simple, straightforward and could be dealt with quickly. That will be true in some cases. But in other cases, the breaches of protective orders may be part of wider stalking behaviour. In these cases, breaches of orders can be part of a complex pattern of offending and the victim may be at more serious risk of harm. We think that it may be more appropriate for investigators trained in complex investigations to deal with the breach of order offences in these types of circumstances. We have made a recommendation to chief

constables to reassess their allocation policies as they apply to stalking and breach of order cases, to align with updated College of Policing guidance.

Embedding College of Policing guidance on allocation

Stalking is a high-volume crime and it may not be a realistic expectation that investigators trained in complex investigations should deal with all cases of stalking. But it is also unrealistic to expect that frontline officers will have the knowledge, skills and capacity to deal effectively with serious or complex stalking cases. The nature of some stalking crimes means they need to be investigated by officers and staff trained to deliver investigations into complex and serious crimes. This could include cases with complex lines of enquiry or victim needs. It could also include those where there is a high level of risk to the victim, such as cases where existing protective orders have been breached.

In April 2024, the College of Policing updated its [investigations process APP](#) to provide further guidance to forces on allocation. This makes specific reference to crimes like stalking where consideration of risk of harm, repeat victimisation, and recognition of any historical unreported previous incidents should inform the allocation decision.

Our evidence suggests that some forces rely heavily on factors like whether a domestic abuse context is present, or whether the case was being treated as a section 2A or section 4A stalking offence, to decide whether stalking cases should be allocated to officers trained in serious and complex investigations. It is not clear that these approaches to allocation reflect the updated investigations APP.

We think chief constables need to do more to make sure the right type of stalking cases and breach of order cases are allocated to more-experienced and specialist investigators. The new College of Policing guidance for forces and the findings of this super-complaint investigation, offer police leaders an opportunity to review their force crime investigation policies in relation to stalking. Forces should carefully consider policies for allocating cases, including how they manage risk to victims when less-experienced officers are allocated stalking cases. This must include making sure that stalking investigations are effectively supervised. We discuss supervision in more detail in the next section.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, make sure the new College of Policing investigations APP content on case allocation is reflected in the relevant policies relating to the allocation of stalking and breach of order cases for investigation. Force policies should support the allocation of stalking cases to officers with the right skills and experience, taking into account the potential risk and complexity involved in stalking and breach of order cases.

[\(This is recommendation 17 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Issues with the quality of investigations into stalking and breach of order crimes

Completing reasonable lines of enquiry

In our fieldwork case file review we found the investigating officers had not pursued all reasonable lines of enquiry before the case was closed in 122 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order investigations examined. Examples included cases in which officers had failed to:

- take victim and/or witness statements
- conduct house-to-house enquiries to trace potential witnesses
- seize CCTV evidence

There were also some stalking cases that were closed without being given to an investigating officer and without any investigation taking place. This was specifically attributed to limited resources in some cases:

“I cannot justify tasking NPT (Neighbourhood Policing Team) to deploy and speak to the suspect at this time because it would not be proportionate in current climate of demand & available resources as the risk is not there.”

Similar concerns about lines of enquiry not being pursued, and resourcing difficulties effecting the police response, were seen across the IOPC cases we reviewed.

Inaction from police in response to reports of stalking was a strong theme in our interviews with victims. Victims also spoke about feeling that they were often left with the responsibility of collecting evidence and driving the investigation, as opposed to police initiating their own investigations:

“Again, I had to, you know, collect the evidence really, to make the whole thing stand up”.

(Stalking victim – interview)

It is concerning that police are not always pursuing all reasonable lines of enquiry and some victims feel left with the burden of driving the stalking investigation. We set out our recommendation to chief constables to address this and the other issues we have identified with the quality of stalking investigations at the end of this section.

Using power of arrest

Arresting and interviewing the suspect is one way police can check the suspect’s account of their involvement with the victim. Arresting the suspect also allows police to impose bail conditions to safeguard the victim and offers search powers under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

We found that police did not always arrest suspects where it would be appropriate to do so. The suspect was arrested in only 161 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases we examined. In the cases where no arrest was made, we found few cases where there was any recorded rationale for the lack of arrest.

This concern was also reflected in the accounts we heard in our interviews with victims. Some victims expressed frustration at the lack of action taken against their perpetrator, including not arresting them.

Using search powers

We found little evidence that the power of search was being used to gather evidence in stalking cases. This is similar to previous [HMICFRS inspections into the police response to stalking in 2017](#) and [2019](#). In the 384 stalking cases we examined in our fieldwork case file review, we found evidence of searches of premises in 19 cases. If officers do not consider searching premises, they may miss opportunities to gather important evidence about the case.

Avoidable delays in stalking investigations

We assessed that there were avoidable delays in investigations in 103 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order cases considered in our fieldwork case file review.

We also heard from victims that delays in investigations, particularly where there was also poor contact or updates, contributed to victims feeling that their reports of stalking were not being taken seriously by police.

Delays leading to section 2A stalking cases being closed due to the expiry of the statutory time limit

Linked to the issue of avoidable delays is the concern raised in the super-complaint about evidence not being gathered for a section 2A charge within the six month time limit, and the case having to be closed for this reason.

Published data suggests that it is not common for police to record that stalking cases are closed due to the six month statutory time limit expiring. This data is set out at the beginning of this chapter. Consistent with this, in our case file review we found that most section 2A stalking cases were closed before the six month time limit had expired.

However, we looked at eight section 2A stalking cases (of the 190 section 2A cases we examined) where it was recorded that the case was closed because the prosecution time limit had expired. We found evidence of inappropriate and avoidable delays in each of these eight cases.

Fieldwork case study

The victim had previously been in a relationship with the suspect. The suspect refused to accept the break-up and stalked the victim. The victim reported this to the police. While the police were investigating the case, the suspect continued to stalk the victim by following her, going to her home and sending her messages via phone. This caused the victim serious alarm and distress.

The records we reviewed showed no evidence that the police had recognised the victim was entitled to an enhanced service under the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales](#).

The victim repeatedly had to contact the investigating officer to try to get updates. The investigating officer initially spoke to the suspect on the phone and gave him words of advice. It took six months for the officer to interview the suspect.

The officer incorrectly identified the case as a section 2A offence, not a section 4A offence, and as a result the police closed the case because the statutory time limit had expired.

Some of the specialist stalking victim support providers and the police officers we spoke to in focus groups provided examples of cases that the police had closed because the statutory time limit had expired.

In our focus groups with officers involved in investigating stalking cases, we heard that the lengthy timeframes for analysing digital evidence (such as evidence downloaded from phones or computers or gathered from internet service providers or social media companies) was a significant contributor to delays in stalking investigations. Participants advised that this created issues with the six month timeframe to investigate section 2A stalking.

“You’ve got six months regardless whether you’re an investigation team or response cop and it’s just, those times just kills the offence basically, you’re never going to get the computer download back in time to charge for a stalking if it’s not a serious distress, it’s just never going to happen.”

(Police focus group – response officers)

We also found evidence that digital evidence collection resulted in delays in our case file review. However, this was not the reason for the delay in the eight cases reviewed that were closed due to the six month time limit expiring.

Digital evidence collection and analysis

Above, we have discussed evidence from our investigation which suggests that delays in collecting and analysing digital forensic evidence can lead to delays in some investigations. In our case file review, we also found there was a lack of submissions for digital forensic analysis and evidence retrieval. Of the 384 stalking cases, there were 123 applicable cases. But we found that the investigating officer had only sent the digital devices for analysis in eight of these cases.

In response to the force self-assessment survey, most forces referred to having specialist digital teams that could provide support to assist officers with evidence retrieval and analysis in stalking cases. A number of forces mentioned implementing approaches to improve the timeliness of digital evidence retrieval. We also heard more about these types of initiatives in our focus groups with police officers. Investigators in one focus group described how their force had set up local digital evidence download teams in each force area, which they referred to as the “best thing [the force] has done in a long time”. We were told that the devices these teams use have the capability to download evidence from phones within two hours and can also download data from internet routers.

However, officers we spoke to in focus groups mentioned some officers did not understand what types of digital forensic evidence to collect in cases of online stalking, or how to use the evidence once obtained. A number of participants said that there was a lack of skills within forces to understand digital download data, and also to analyse and interpret this data so it could be presented as evidence in a format that could be used by the CPS.

The need to improve digital forensic knowledge and skills across policing is well recognised. Through its [Operation Modify](#) training programme, the College of Policing is working to raise digital investigation skills across policing so that available digital lines of enquiry are identified and pursued as early as possible. One of Operation Modify’s modules looks specifically at violence against women and girls. The focus of this module is to help officers identify electronic devices used within relationships to facilitate coercive control, and instances of violence against women and girls more widely. The module also helps officers identify investigative opportunities and safeguarding measures that may be put in place to help victims stay safe.

During this investigation, we were provided with an example of promising practice in relation to digital evidence collection and analysis in stalking investigations which had been trialled in the Metropolitan Police Service.

Promising practice: Metropolitan Police Service's Operation Atlas

Operation Atlas was piloted in one area of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) between November 2022 and April 2023.

The pilot was designed to test an approach involving embedding specialist digital investigation capabilities into the MPS response to public protection, with a specific focus on stalking. The pilot involved a team of officers trained in a specialist software application.

This software distils large amounts of data gathered through investigations. It produces graphs, tables and other data summaries. This allows officers to quickly process significant amounts of digital data and draw out significant evidence for investigations.

Operation Atlas includes a triage process as a first step, with appropriate cases submitted to a sergeant for review. For cases assessed as suitable, Operation Atlas officers agree a digital investigation strategy for the case and request data from relevant sources.

Operation Atlas officers are trained to analyse the relevant digital data using the software which helps them make sense of and report on the data. An Operation Atlas officer uses these outputs to provide a witness statement which includes commentary on what the data can and cannot prove. The witness statement is provided to investigators for use in interview and case file submission to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

An initial evaluation of the pilot showed promising results in terms of reductions in the time taken to investigate crimes and improved charge rates. The MPS also report that the use of the software allowed officers, in some cases, to identify stalking behaviours that the victim was not even aware of.

Operation Atlas is now being implemented in other areas of the MPS following the success of the pilot.

Significantly, the Operation Atlas approach to digital evidence collection and analysis is not limited to online stalking – but looks at the digital footprint of perpetrators which can also show their physical movements. This example shows that digital forensic investigation is an area where there are both challenges and opportunities for the police response to stalking. Operation Atlas has been added to the [College of Policing practice bank](#) as promising practice, and further details, including initial evaluation, can be read there.

We understand that other forces may also have access to this type of analytical software. We think that forces should consider exploring how this can be used in their force to support stalking investigations. This is addressed in our recommendation below.

Recognising the psychological impact of stalking on victims

“I didn’t have confidence that the officer understood the impact this was having on me, and my wellbeing and my day-to-day like state of mind. I didn’t feel that he showed empathy or understanding.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

We have discussed evidence of police dismissing and trivialising behaviours in [our ‘Victim care and support’ chapter](#). Police not taking reports of stalking seriously was a strong theme arising from our interviews with victims. We heard numerous examples of police not recognising the psychological impact that stalking had on victims.

We also found evidence of this in our fieldwork case file review. We found evidence that the investigating officer had recorded that the psychological impact had been recognised in 129 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order investigations we reviewed. This is concerning. The psychological impact of the stalking is evidence of the alarm and distress caused to a victim. This is particularly crucial to proving section 4A stalking involving serious alarm and distress. Officers and staff should, as a minimum, record and show that they have considered the impact of the stalking on the victim in all cases, as set out in the [College of Policing stalking advice to investigators](#).

In their responses to the force self-assessment survey, a number of forces suggested that improved engagement with victims and sensitive questioning to explore the impact of stalking would improve recognition of where section 4A stalking should be applied. One example from the survey referred to the importance of police working closely with stalking victim support services to help explore the impact of stalking on victims:

“[We] try to ensure officers are linking in with advocacy services to better understand the level of fear a victim has. Victims do not always disclose this to an officer and so multi-agency working allows for better understanding and awareness from the officer, thus enabling better representation to the CPS. This also promotes the safeguarding of victims.”

(Force response to the force self-assessment survey)

We think that more should be done by forces to make sure the impact on victims is evidenced in witness statements. This evidence can then be used to inform recording and investigation of the correct stalking offence, and inform charging decisions to improve the likelihood of successful outcomes in stalking cases. This is addressed in our recommendation to chief constables below.

Supervision of stalking cases

Effective supervision involves providing direction and advice to an investigator and having oversight of investigative actions. Our investigation found a poor level of supervision across stalking investigations. In our fieldwork case file review, we found that supervision of investigative actions was not good enough in 191 of the 470 stalking and breach of protective order investigations. HMICFRS also considers supervision as part of its PEEL victim service assessments. It found evidence of effective supervision in 80 of the 120 applicable stalking case assessments undertaken as part of the 2021 and 2022 inspection programme.

Fieldwork case study

The victim and suspect had separated two years previously after a long history of domestic abuse. The victim was still subject to safeguarding arrangements put in place by a [multi-agency risk assessment conference](#).

There had been several incidents between the parties since their break-up. But these had all been recorded as harassment, not stalking. This is contrary to crime recording guidance.

On the latest occasion, the victim rang police, saying the suspect was breaching his restraining order by visiting her neighbour's home. The restraining order prohibited the suspect from going so close to the victim's home. Officers did not attend the victim's house to speak to her until the victim made a further 999 call several hours later. At this point she could be heard screaming. By the time the police arrived, the suspect had left the scene.

The incident was recorded as a breach of restraining order with no consideration of whether a stalking crime should have been recorded.

A supervisor completed an investigation plan four days after the report. The supervisor instructed the investigating officer to take a statement from the victim, look for CCTV evidence and complete house-to-house enquiries.

But the investigating officer closed the crime record 11 days later without undertaking any of the enquiries, and with no explanation as to why not. The supervisor did not check that the actions in the investigation plan had been completed before the crime was closed.

We know that frontline police officers, rather than specialist investigators, investigate many stalking offences. This includes stalking cases that may involve ongoing risk and safeguarding issues. Effective supervision is particularly important in these cases.

We think that police leaders need to do more to make sure that stalking investigations are effectively supervised and that supervisors have the skills and capability to undertake this crucial support role. This is reflected in our recommendation to chief constables, and the supporting work the College of Policing is undertaking to help improve supervision. This is set out below.

Work to improve the quality of investigations

Our findings regarding the poor quality of stalking investigations are a significant concern. Victims of stalking should be able to expect a better service from policing. The consequences of poor investigations in cases of stalking can be devastating.

However, the problem of poor investigations is an issue which is not exclusive to stalking. HMICFRS, in its [State of Policing: The Annual Assessment of Policing in England and Wales 2022 report](#), concluded that police are often failing to get the basics right. This includes not properly investigating crimes and bringing offenders to justice.

The College of Policing launched evidence-based [effective investigation guidelines](#) to support all investigators and forces to improve investigations in August 2023. The guidelines set out the role and obligations of investigators and supervisors and emphasised policing's duty to follow all reasonable lines of enquiry. These guidelines also emphasise the role of chief constables in understanding their capacity and demand, and making sure appropriate investigative capabilities are used. The College of Policing has also set this out in its [authorised professional practice on investigations](#).

The new [national operating model for investigating rape and serious sexual offences](#) says that these investigations should be victim centred, suspect focused and context led. We think these principles should also be applied to improve stalking investigations. The College of Policing has commissioned the Open University to review the public protection national policing curriculum to see how these principles can be embedded into learning for officers and staff about public protection issues like stalking.

In previous chapters of this super-complaint investigation report, we have considered a range of different elements of police practice which also directly link to improving investigations into stalking. This includes [strategic leadership](#), [training](#), [dedicated stalking teams](#), [multi-agency working](#) and [collaborative working with victim support services](#). We think it is most likely that policing will provide effective stalking investigations where all these different elements are in place. This was well described by a participant in our focus group with stalking victim support service providers:

“We talked about tools, we’ve talked about impact, we talked about training, we’ve talked about investigations. None of these things are going to solve the problem on their own. They need to all work together so you can have all the tools in the box... You need to have the training, you need to have the tools, you need to have the

multi-agency working. You need all of the things together to be able to make a good investigation and hopefully a good outcome.”

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to improve the quality of stalking investigations by taking a victim centred, suspect focussed and context led approach. Chief constables should make sure:

- Their workforce has the capacity and capability to undertake effective stalking investigations and can apply new and innovative investigation techniques to pursue digital lines of enquiry.
- All reasonable lines of enquiry are pursued, supported by good supervision.
- Arrest and search powers are used where appropriate to gather evidence from and about suspects.
- The impact on victims is evidenced in witness statements, so it can be used to inform charging decisions and improve the likelihood of successful investigation outcomes.

([This is recommendation 18 in our summary of findings and recommendations.](#))

Working with the Crown Prosecution Service to achieve the right outcomes

This super-complaint relates specifically to features of policing that may be causing harm to the public. However, it is important to recognise that other criminal justice agencies play a vital part in getting the criminal justice response to stalking right. An end-to-end approach to improvement across the criminal justice system is more likely to support improved outcomes for victims.

The joint HMICFRS and HMCPSI [2017 Living in fear inspection report](#) made recommendations in relation to both the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) handling of stalking cases. More-recent work to improve the criminal justice response to violence against women and girls (VAWG) crimes similarly takes a joint approach. This includes joint work to improve outcomes in rape cases under [Operation Soteria](#). The CPS and NPCC are also working together on developing the [Domestic Abuse Joint Justice Plan](#) to improve the criminal justice response to domestic abuse. We understand that this will include joint working to support improvements in the response to stalking crimes (including domestic and non-domestic stalking). We welcome this commitment to joint action.

Our investigation did not specifically consider CPS decision-making. However, we did find some evidence that the police did not always refer charging decisions to the CPS when they should have.

The CPS [Director's Guidance on Charging](#) makes it clear that decisions about charging in stalking cases should only be made by the CPS. It is important that the police send cases to the CPS for charging decisions because it allows the CPS to consider the right charge considering the seriousness of the offending and the needs of the victim. It also helps identify if further evidence is required. We found some cases had been charged by the police without reference to the CPS in our fieldwork case file review.

We also found some evidence of other issues with police processes around referring cases for charging decisions. For example, one fieldwork force told us that, since 1 September 2021, it had given [conditional cautions](#) to 140 stalking offenders under a pilot scheme. But the force told us that, of these offenders, 34 had not complied with the conditions of the cautions. In these circumstances, the CPS [Director's Guidance on Charging](#) says that cases should be referred to the CPS for a prosecution decision to be made. But the force only did this in 11 of the 34 cases.

In another example, one fieldwork force had recently taken action to address a recurring issue with some officers closing stalking cases by giving the suspect 'words of advice'. Because stalking offences are serious, it is unlikely that giving a suspect 'words of advice' is an appropriate outcome. The force concluded that this practice was unacceptable and it changed its procedures to prevent it.

In our fieldwork we also saw examples where the police had a different view to CPS about stalking cases. These included one case where the police recommended a charge of stalking, but the CPS authorised a lesser harassment or breach of order charge. And one case where police considered that the more serious section 4A charge should be authorised, but the CPS authorised a section 2A stalking charge.

We did not speak to CPS prosecutors to understand the reasons for these decisions. Therefore, we do not know the full circumstances behind the CPS decision-making rationale and we cannot say whether a stalking charge would have been appropriate or inappropriate.

We are unable to draw conclusions about the CPS response to stalking as this was outside the scope of this investigation. However, it is reasonable to think that some of the issues we identified in this investigation will also be relevant to how the CPS handles stalking cases.

Recommendation to the Crown Prosecution Service

By 27 March 2025, consider the findings from this investigation and take action in relation to any areas where the Crown Prosecution Service may also need to improve its response to stalking. This could include:

- Ensuring consistency in how stalking is described across guidance it produces.
- Identifying stalking and understanding the risks and effect of stalking on victims.
- Recognising breaches of orders as further instances of stalking or serious escalation of risk.

[\(This is recommendation 19 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Understanding and responding to online stalking

“[The police] weren’t interested in [the social media posts] at all. If anything they would just downplay it... he’s not directly messaging you, is not using your name, how can you prove this is you?”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

In the super-complaint, the Consortium raises concern about the police response to online (or cyber) stalking. The Consortium states that the police are failing to recognise the impact of online stalking on victims and failing to take online stalking behaviours seriously. It states that evidence of online stalking behaviours is often not gathered by police or treated as evidence of a stalking crime.

The Consortium states that all stalking cases are likely to have an online element. It suggests that this most commonly includes online communications including emails, social media communications and text messages. Other examples referred to include unauthorised access to online accounts and use of hacking technologies or digital tracking devices. It suggests that police forces should consider investment in improving digital evidence retrieval for online stalking.

The Consortium also raises concern about unhelpful and potentially dangerous safeguarding advice given to stalking victims by police. We discuss this concern in this chapter. We found that the issue of police offering unhelpful and potentially dangerous advice was most prevalent where police were offering victims advice about online safety.

Summary of our findings

In our investigation, we found that forces do not have a clear understanding of what proportion of recorded stalking crime includes elements of online stalking. We also found evidence in support of the Consortium’s concern that police do not always take online stalking seriously enough. We found that some police officers and staff are not confident about how to respond to this type of crime. There is also a lack of clarity about what safeguarding advice can and should be provided to victims where stalking involves online behaviours. Our evidence indicates that more needs to be done to make sure that there are the right skills, knowledge and tools across policing to effectively respond to online stalking and keep victims safe.

Understanding the prevalence and nature of online stalking

Nationally there is a recognition that online stalking behaviours are harmful and that policing needs to do more to understand and disrupt online offending.

The [July 2024 national policing statement on violence against women and girls](#) acknowledges that police data about online offending is not accurate enough. The NPCC has committed to working with the new centre for performance, innovation and productivity (CPIP) to respond to data recording challenges around online VAWG offending.

This is a welcome development. Our investigation also found that many police forces do not have a clear picture of the nature and scale of online stalking in their area.

Where crimes include an online element to the offending, an ‘online’ flag should be used when the crime is recorded. The [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#) state that:

“An offence should be flagged where any element of the offence was committed online or through internet-based activities (e.g. through email, social media, websites, messaging platforms, gaming platforms or smart devices).”

We found that the police underuse the online flag in stalking cases. We found 123 of the 384 stalking cases we looked at in our case file review involved some form of online offending. But forces only used the online flag in 36 cases. This is not a new finding. HMICFRS reached the same conclusion in its [2019 stalking report](#), and made a recommendation to police to improve the use of the online flag.

In the force self-assessment survey, we asked forces to provide details of the proportion of their stalking crimes that included an online element. A total of 22 out of 43 forces stated that they did not know what proportion of recorded stalking crime included an online element. The forces that did provide a figure, reported vastly different rates of online stalking. Most reported 25% or lower, but a few forces reported more than 75% of stalking crimes involved an online element.

The Consortium states in the super-complaint that all stalking cases reported to the National Stalking Helpline now include some type of online offending – most commonly involving contact using messaging services or social media. Participants in our focus group discussions with police investigators and supervisors also told us that the majority of stalking cases have an element of online offending.

The significant divergence in estimates or assessments about the proportion of recorded stalking crimes that include some online element suggests the police (and other stakeholders) have different interpretations about what 'online' offending means in the context of stalking, as well as poor use of the online flag.

The purpose of the online crime flag is to allow policing and government to better understand the volume and nature of offences committed online to help shape the police response. Our evidence suggests that, in many forces, the online flag cannot be relied on to inform the force's understanding of the context or methods of stalking offending. Nor can it inform how the force plans the police response to online stalking or associated digital evidence requirements. Forces should take steps to improve the use of the online flag, but should be cautious about relying on current online flag data to plan the force response to this type of stalking.

The [national delivery framework for VAWG](#) makes clear that policing should develop its understanding of dangerous online spaces to inform its response, including preventative work. Forces should work to improve their understanding of the scale and nature of online stalking behaviours so that this can inform their strategic understanding of, and their response to, stalking. This is addressed in our recommendation to forces at the end of this chapter.

Police dismissing or not recognising online stalking behaviours

[Annex B includes a rapid review of research into the risk of serious harm to victims arising from stalking](#) and refers to research on the harm caused by online stalking. This research indicates that victims of online stalking experience a range of psychological harms similar to other forms of stalking, including depression, anxiety, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder, fear and anger. Other research included in our rapid review at annex B indicates that there are also harms that are more specific to online stalking. This can include distrust of technology and fear of using social media. This could lead to victims being isolated from their family and friends, further increasing levels of psychological distress.

In our fieldwork case review, we identified cases where the police had responded positively to reports of online stalking. We also heard about some examples of good practice in our interviews with victims. These included cases where police had recognised the seriousness of the offending – sometimes more than the victim themselves. However, we also heard examples from stalking victims about police not taking incidents of online stalking seriously.

Victims who participated in our research interviews discussed particular challenges they had experienced with the police response to incidents where perpetrators used social media to post things about them. Victims also described police having a general lack of understanding around online stalking – sometimes blaming the victim for continuing to use social media. One victim described how their stalker had made a death threat

on Facebook. They received a dismissive response from the police officer they reported this to:

“one officer said to me, it doesn’t count... I said, he’s made this death threat and he goes, yeah, but he hasn’t got any followers.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

Some of the frontline officers and call handlers we spoke to in our focus groups discussed their lack of knowledge and confidence around identifying and responding to reports of online stalking. The call handlers we spoke to suggested that online stalking might often be misidentified as other crimes such as malicious communications or sometimes online fraud. They also spoke about a lack of training and organisational support about online stalking:

“I don’t think personally for [our force], we actually have any guidance for cyberstalking. I looked on public contact guide at all of our stalking stuff before this, there’s nothing for cyberstalking. We clearly don’t have an understanding of it and I don’t think we have any SPOCs [single points of contact] or anything for cybercrime either.”

(Police focus group – call handlers)

We recognise that it can be difficult for police officers and staff to distinguish what is or is not criminal behaviour online. To help police to navigate this in the context of stalking, the College of Policing [stalking or harassment advice to investigators](#) provides examples of online behaviours that investigators should be looking for including:

- repeatedly searching for the victim online
- visiting the victim’s social media profiles or those of their friends
- making alias accounts to follow the victim or others associated with the victim
- taking steps to conceal or disguise their online activities
- hacking or taking control of mobile phone, social media and internet shopping accounts
- posting or sharing intimate images or abusive material without the victim’s consent
- monitoring, tracking and controlling the victim using connected Bluetooth speakers, CCTV equipment and location services

We think that more can be done by policing to emphasise to officers and staff the different ways in which stalking behaviours can present and the significant impact these can have on victims. This must include appropriate focus on how digital technology and online activities can enable stalking. We recommend below that chief constables should consider

opportunities to include examples of different types of online stalking in their training and guidance material about stalking.

Safeguarding advice and actions to protect victims from online stalking

Appropriate safeguarding advice for victims of online stalking

“[The officer said] ‘Oh, well, if this man’s a nuisance to you, just block him and ignore him. Or we could send a letter to him and tell him to stop if you want.’ And I said, ‘no I don’t really want you to do that right now’, which was the right thing to do, that I found out later. I also found out later that these two pieces of advice that police gave me were... wrong on many levels.”

(Stalking victim – interview)

The [HMICFRS and HMCPSI 2017 Living in fear stalking inspection](#) identified that police officers were sometimes providing advice to stalking and harassment victims which may be unsafe and which could increase the risk to victims. This included advice to victims to block perpetrators on phone and messaging services, stop using social media, or change their phone number. The inspection report included a recommendation to the College of Policing to provide improved guidance to officers on crime prevention advice for stalking victims, particularly about online offending.

The College of Policing updated its guidance on this issue in November 2020. The [College of Policing guidance](#) states:

“Officers should be mindful not to advise:

- victim to come off social networking sites or block the suspect or any associates
- victim to change their mobile phone number
- any action that may further isolate the victim
- any action that might make the victim feel they are to blame.”

However, we found evidence that the police still give victims this type of advice. We saw this in cases we reviewed in our fieldwork, interviews with victims, IOPC cases reviewed, and focus groups with police staff, officers and stalking victim service providers.

Our fieldwork case file review showed that officers had recorded that they had given victims safeguarding advice in 202 of the 470 stalking and breach of order cases we examined. In 31 of these, it was considered that the advice was unhelpful and may be potentially dangerous. This inappropriate advice mainly related to how victims could protect themselves from online stalking, with officers sometimes advising victims to block their stalker on social media in contradiction of the College of Policing guidance.

In our fieldwork we also examined the force stalking policies and the training forces gave to officers. We found that some of these did not cover the importance of officers giving good safety advice to victims, particularly about online offending. It is disappointing that despite the changes the College of Policing made to its [advice on stalking](#), some forces have not changed their own policies and training to include this guidance for officers to help keep victims safe.

The College of Policing is updating its [stalking or harassment APP](#) in response to the findings of this super-complaint investigation ([Action 1](#)). This will include updates to make sure that clearer guidance is included about online safeguarding and pursuing digital lines of enquiry in stalking cases. We think that forces need to do more to make sure that officers and staff are aware of and can easily access online safety advice for victims that draws on the updated College of Policing guidance. We have included this in our recommendation to chief constables below.

Tools and resources to help safeguard victims of online stalking

In response to the force self-assessment survey, some forces provided examples of how they had tried to deal with the problem of keeping stalking victims safe online and from online stalking. This included investing in cyber-security safeguarding tools, and scanning victims' phones and other devices to identify if stalkerware or spyware was present. Likewise, some of the fieldwork forces provided examples of steps taken to improve online safeguarding for victims:

Fieldwork examples of forces trying to keep victims safe online

At the time of our fieldwork, West Midlands Police had recently bought a handheld wireless intrusion detection system. This is a device the police can use to sweep a victim's address or other property for surveillance devices.

West Midlands Police also told us it had a policy that officers should refer victims of online crime to [The Cyber Helpline](#). This is a national charity that provides free, expert help for victims of cybercrime, digital fraud and online harm.

Lancashire Constabulary had a Digital Media Investigation Unit (DMIU). The force told us that the DMIU trained the constabulary safeguarding teams in digital safeguarding and investigation. It also told us that the DMIU reviews crime records to identify opportunities to help investigating officers. Unit staff can also visit victims to give digital safeguarding advice. In our fieldwork we did not assess in detail how this unit operated.

These developments are encouraging. However, overall, in our fieldwork, we found little evidence that police had the IT hardware and software they needed to help safeguard victims where stalking had taken place online. It is likely that many stalking crimes feature online behaviour, so this should be an important part of the service forces provide to victims.

The development of digital safeguarding technologies is likely to change rapidly over the coming years as technology changes. We encourage the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment to make sharing innovative and promising approaches in this area a focus for the NPCC stalking and harassment working group, and to engage with the College of Policing about further sharing innovative and promising practice examples on the College of Policing practice bank.

Policing must continue to develop its skills and tools in this area. But we also recognise that they cannot address the risks associated with the safety of online spaces and new technologies on their own. The College of Policing and NPCC call for further action from government in their [2024 national policing statement on VAWG](#):

“It is our view that to address this evolving threat more timely robust action is required from government to improve the response by the industry.”

We support the call for government, regulators and industry to play their part in addressing this developing area of risk.

Recommendation to chief constables

By 27 March 2025, take steps to improve how their force effectively recognises and responds to online elements of stalking. This should include making sure:

- The scale and nature of online stalking behaviours informs their strategic understanding of, and the response to, stalking.
- Examples of online stalking are included in locally produced training and guidance material about stalking.
- Clear online safety advice is available to officers and staff, drawing on the College of Policing APP on stalking or harassment when it is developed.
- Appropriate tools, technologies and support services to digitally safeguard victims are procured and officers and staff use these resources when appropriate.

[\(This is recommendation 20 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

Stalking perpetrator intervention programmes

Concerns raised in the super-complaint

In the super-complaint, the Consortium raises concern about the lack of stalking intervention programmes for perpetrators in England and Wales. The Consortium proposes that all forces implement multi-agency stalking intervention programmes (MASIPs). MASIPs have only been implemented in a small number of forces so far.

Summary of our findings

Stalking perpetrators can have specific and complex needs to address the sometimes fixated and obsessive nature of their behaviour. It may be helpful and appropriate for police to refer stalking perpetrators to intervention programmes to try to disrupt their offending and stop stalking.

Through our investigation, we encountered a small number of forces involved in providing interventions for stalking perpetrators. These include the three forces involved in the MASIP pilots. The MASIP model is one approach to the provision of stalking perpetrator interventions. We also saw or heard about other examples, involving different approaches, in our fieldwork and in responses to the force self-assessment survey.

Overall, there are very few stalking-specific perpetrator intervention programmes available for police to access to disrupt and address the behaviour of stalkers. We think more work is required to better understand and share what works in relation to stalking perpetrator interventions. This would better inform decisions about what interventions should be available and how these services should be used by the police and its partners.

Stalking perpetrator intervention programmes

The College of Policing advice for the [identification, assessment and management of serial or potentially dangerous domestic abuse and stalking perpetrators](#) details that forces should provide appropriate options for perpetrator interventions.

Our findings indicate that most forces do not have specific perpetrator intervention programmes available for stalking perpetrators. This was also a finding in the [HMICFRS and HMCPSI 2017 Living in fear inspection report](#).

In response to our force self-assessment survey, only nine out of 43 forces reported that stalking intervention programmes for perpetrators were included in SPO conditions in their force area. In our fieldwork for this investigation, we found that in four of the six fieldwork forces there were no stalking intervention programmes available.

We discussed the provision of these types of stalking perpetrator interventions with staff employed by PCCs as part of our fieldwork. They suggested that there was insufficient funding available for stalking perpetrator intervention programmes. Where programmes were in place, these resulted from successful bids for funding from two government departments, namely the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. In some cases, the funding was targeted at domestic abuse perpetrator programmes and so provision of interventions was not available for perpetrators of non-domestic stalking.

The availability of intervention programmes for stalking perpetrators is currently largely dependent on specific Home Office funding. The Home Office is funding various projects through a [£39 million fund for domestic abuse and stalking intervention programmes](#). Individual projects may include plans for evaluation. However, it is not clear how these projects will be evaluated collectively.

In the two fieldwork forces where stalking intervention programmes were in place, these were centrally funded following successful bids for Home Office funding made by PCCs and other partners. Another force had been involved in a bid that was unsuccessful. Three forces had not made any bids.

The two forces which ran a stalking intervention programme operated different schemes:

Fieldwork example – A multi-agency stalking partnership to address stalking behaviours

In 2023 the Hampshire and Isle of Wight Police and Crime Commissioner and partners received £1.01 million from the Home Office to develop a multi-agency stalking partnership (MASP). The Police and Crime Commissioner also contributed £160,000. The partnership includes Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary, South Central Probation, Southern Health NHS Foundation Trust and Stop Domestic Abuse victim support and advocacy service. One of the aims of the MASP is to develop what the partnership called psychologist-led stalking interventions.

The overall aim of the MASP and the proposed interventions is to:

“reduce the risk of further stalking behaviour and improve the psychological wellbeing of the service user, whilst keeping the safety of the survivor and their dependents at the centre of the work.”

At the time of our fieldwork, the MASP was in the early stages of its development.

Fieldwork example – Promising practice

West Midlands Police told us about its [early awareness stalking intervention \(EASI\)](#) project. This had been funded by the Home Office Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Intervention Fund 2023-25.

The aim of the project is to:

“Intervene at the earliest possible opportunity, conditionally cautioning and referring to the EASI programme those who have not been previously charged with stalking, admit their actions and who qualify for an out of court disposal.”

Each intervention consists of perpetrators attending six online sessions lasting a maximum of one hour with a chartered psychologist. The project targets ex-partner stalking perpetrators.

There are two routes for referral of offenders into the programme: as a condition of a caution in section 2A offences; or by perpetrators voluntarily referring themselves into the programme after pleading guilty at court in either a section 2A or a section 4A offence.

The force has commissioned an evaluation of the programme from the University of Derby Criminology and Forensic Psychology departments.

In both of these examples, the stalking intervention programmes are new initiatives which have not yet been fully evaluated. The EASI project example in the West Midlands only applies to stalking offenders who have received a caution or pleaded guilty to stalking in court. This is a different approach to the MASIP model which is recommended by the Consortium in the super-complaint. The MASIP model includes options for stalking perpetrator interventions to be put in place prior to conviction, potentially as a positive requirement of an SPO.

We discuss MASIPs in more detail in [our chapter on dedicated stalking co-ordination roles and multi-agency responses to stalking](#). As discussed in that chapter, an [initial evaluation of the three pilot MASIP sites in 2020](#) found that it was too early to draw firm conclusions about the effect of perpetrator intervention programmes. It recommended that more stable funding arrangements were required and further evaluation was necessary to understand the effect of these approaches.

While our investigation indicates that more forces are exploring multi-agency approaches to offer interventions for stalking perpetrators, the provision of these services is still very limited across police forces in England and Wales.

We think more work is required to better understand and share what works in relation to stalking perpetrator interventions. This would better inform decisions about what interventions should be available and how these services should be used by the police and its partners.

Recommendation to the Home Office

For its current funding programme for domestic abuse and stalking interventions:

- Evaluate the stalking specific perpetrator intervention projects and publish details of the findings so this information is available to policing and other services working with stalking perpetrators.
- If necessary, commission further research to inform the commissioning and delivery of stalking intervention programmes.
- Consider developing standards and providing funding for stalking perpetrator intervention programmes based on the available evidence, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice.

[\(This is recommendation 26 in our summary of findings and recommendations.\)](#)

List of recommendations and actions

Recommendations to the Home Office

Recommendation 1

Bring forward legislation in the 2024-2025 parliamentary session that would change the criminal law related to stalking so that it is easier for the police to understand and apply.

The Home Office should consider:

- The definition of stalking and the legal distinction between stalking, harassment and coercive and controlling behaviour.
- Whether there should be a single stand-alone stalking offence instead of the separate section 2A and section 4A stalking offences.
- If the section 2A offence is retained, whether it should be amended to an either-way offence.
- Including a provision that a stalking course of conduct is complete if a reasonable person would consider it to be so.
- Issuing statutory guidance on stalking.

Recommendation 2

By 27 March 2025, to work with the College of Policing, the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment and the National Stalking Consortium to update information on stalking or harassment in the [Home Office crime recording rules for frontline officers and staff](#).

Information on stalking within the rules should align with how stalking is described in the [statutory guidance on the Stalking Protection Act for the police](#).

Recommendation 3

Bring forward legislation in the 2024-2025 parliamentary session that would change the legal framework for SPOs to:

- Align SPOs more closely to orders available in domestic abuse cases, including providing for a stalking protection notice that could be approved by a senior police officer before an application for an interim or full SPO is made to a magistrate's court.
- Provide for courts to issue an SPO on the conviction or acquittal of an offender.
- Provide that chief constables can apply for an SPO for perpetrators who do not live in, visit, or intend to visit their force area.

Recommendation 4

By 27 March 2025, work with the College of Policing and others across the criminal justice system to issue guidance that assists the police and criminal justice partners to select the most appropriate protective measure or combination of measures to pursue in stalking cases.

Recommendation 5

Before publishing the upcoming national standards for incident recording and assessment (NSIR&A), find the most appropriate way to include stalking in the NSIR&A, so that incidents potentially involving stalking are flagged as early as possible.

Recommendation 6

By 27 March 2025, to review the impact of the principal crime rule on the identification and investigation of stalking. This should include an examination of whether risks associated with stalking may be being missed and implement any changes needed.

Recommendation 8

From the next data release onwards, publish police recorded crime data so it shows section 2A and section 4A stalking crimes separately.

Recommendation 26

For its current funding programme for domestic abuse and stalking interventions:

- Evaluate the stalking-specific perpetrator intervention projects and publish details of the findings so this information is available to policing and other services working with stalkers perpetrators.
- If necessary, commission further research to inform the commissioning and delivery of stalking intervention programmes.
- Consider developing standards and providing funding for stalking perpetrator intervention programmes based on the available evidence, in partnership with the Ministry of Justice.

Recommendations to the Ministry of Justice

Recommendation 9

Before the end of 2024, begin routinely publishing, within [criminal courts statistics](#), data regarding the number of interim and full SPOs applied for, granted and breached.

Recommendations to chief constables

Recommendation 7

By 27 March 2025, where required, seek changes to their crime recording systems to enable staff and officers to document and search for crimes not recorded as the principal crime, as included classifications on crime records.

Processes should be put in place to make sure this system capability is effectively used by officers and staff.

While any necessary system changes are pending, chief constables should put alternative measures in place to make sure stalking and related offences are fully searchable. This could, for example, be the submission of intelligence reports.

Recommendation 10

By 27 March 2025, review and update their learning and training provision relating to stalking so it:

- Meets the learning outcomes on stalking within the public protection national policing curriculum.
- Makes appropriate use of the stalking or harassment e-learning product developed by the College of Policing.
- Uses the skills and knowledge of local victim advocates or others from outside policing with relevant expertise.
- Includes information on relevant local policies and practice where necessary
- Is provided to the officers and staff who will most benefit from the learning.

Chief constables should also make sure that their policies and practice are reviewed and updated in accordance with the findings in the super-complaint investigation report.

Recommendation 11

By 27 March 2025, make sure that appropriate mechanisms are in place to fully understand the scale and types of stalking behaviour within their force and the effectiveness of their response. This should align with the [VAWG national delivery framework](#). Mechanisms should include:

- Problem profiles using police data and intelligence and other sources of information to ensure that the full extent of stalking is well understood. This could include information sharing with local victims' services and other public services, and national and local statistics.
- Regular assurance work such as audits to better understand the force response and make improvements where appropriate, including monitoring the use of SPOs, investigation outcomes and the quality of investigations.
- Ways to regularly receive feedback from victims, such as victim surveys.
- Force management statements which reflect current and future demand from stalking.

Recommendation 12

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure that risk identification, assessment and management is effective in all stalking and breaches of orders cases, including by:

- Considering implementing the stalking screening tool to support the identification of stalking and the risks associated with stalking.
- Having clear policies and procedures in place for assessing and managing risk in all cases. And where appropriate, embedding recognised risk assessment tools in force systems so that it is easy for officers to access, use and document their consideration of risk and safeguarding.
- Recognising (in policies, guidance and training) the heightened risk associated with breaches of protective orders and measures.
- Implementing screening and checking processes to support the early identification, assessment and management of high-risk cases. This may require stalking and breach of order cases to be considered at daily management meetings.

Recommendation 13

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure that force strategies, structures and processes are in place so that police consider an SPO in every stalking case, and apply for an SPO where relevant and appropriate to prevent harm and further offending.

To achieve this, chief constables should review, and revise where necessary:

- Local training and guidance on SPOs, including training and guidance for supervisors.
- Mechanisms for supporting investigating officers to identify cases where SPOs would be appropriate and assisting them with SPO applications. This could be through dedicated teams or roles and/or through daily management meetings considering risk and safeguarding.

Recommendation 14

By 27 March 2025, take steps to make sure stalking victims receive the rights they are entitled to under the victims' code and have access to support services. Chief constables should make sure:

- Victim needs assessments are always completed.
- Their force has appropriate processes to make sure all stalking victims are told about their rights and under the victims' code.
- Information about the national and specialist stalking support services available in their force area is easily available to police officers and staff, victims and the general public.
- Victims who would like to receive support are referred to an appropriate service in a timely manner.

- They monitor the number of stalking victims who are referred to specialist support services and take action when referral numbers are low.

Recommendation 17

By 27 March 2025, make sure the new College of Policing investigations APP content on case allocation is reflected in the relevant policies relating to the allocation of stalking and breach of order cases for investigation. Force policies should support the allocation of stalking cases to officers with the right skills and experience, taking into account the potential risk and complexity involved in stalking and breach of order cases.

Recommendation 18

By 27 March 2025, take steps to improve the quality of stalking investigations by taking a victim centred, suspect focussed and context led approach. Chief constables should make sure:

- Their workforce has the capacity and capability to undertake effective stalking investigations and can apply new and innovative investigation techniques to pursue digital lines of enquiry.
- All reasonable lines of enquiry are pursued, supported by good supervision.
- Arrest and search powers are used to gather evidence from and about suspects.
- The impact on victims is evidenced in witness statements, so it can be used to inform charging decisions and improve the likelihood of successful investigation outcomes.

Recommendation 20

By, 27 March 2025, take steps to improve how their force effectively recognises and responds to online elements of stalking. This should include making sure:

- The scale and nature of online stalking behaviours informs their strategic understanding of, and the response to, stalking.
- Examples of online stalking are included in locally produced training and guidance material about stalking.
- Clear online safety advice is available to officers and staff, drawing on the College of Policing APP on stalking or harassment when it is developed.
- Appropriate tools, technologies and support services to digitally safeguard victims are procured and officers and staff use these resources when appropriate.

Recommendation 22

By 27 September 2025, using the information collated by the NPCC lead under recommendation 21, to consider whether and how dedicated stalking officers and staff, or other subject matter experts, can be used to add value and support the force response to stalking.

Recommendation 23

By 27 March 2025, implement a mechanism for early screening of crimes to improve the identification, recording and management of all stalking cases.

Forces should consider screening crimes similar to stalking or where stalking behaviours may be present as part of a course of conduct, like harassment, malicious communications and breaches of orders.

Recommendation 28

By 22 November 2024 (56 days from publication), publish on their force website an action plan which explains what their force will do in response to each of the recommendations made to them and send the NPCC a link to where this action plan can be found.

By 27 March 2025 (six months from publication) provide an update to the NPCC describing the progress they have made against their action plans.

Recommendations to police and crime commissioners and their mayor equivalents

Recommendation 15

By 27 March 2025, review whether the right specialist services have been commissioned to support stalking victims in their area, including provision of trained independent stalking advocate caseworkers (ISACs).

PCCs and their mayor equivalents should provide the necessary services where they do not exist and should consider collaborating across force boundaries to provide services if it would be efficient and effective to do so.

Recommendations to chief constables and police and crime commissioners and their mayor equivalents

Recommendation 16

By 27 March 2025, work together to review commissioning arrangements and make changes as soon as possible to ensure they embed collaborative working and information sharing between policing and services providing victim support to stalking victims.

Recommendation 25

By 27 March 2025, explore opportunities to improve how their force works with partners to contribute to a multi-agency response to stalking. This should include considering:

- How the force works in partnership with healthcare, the CPS, probation services and other criminal justice partners to manage stalking perpetrators and address their behaviour.
- Whether and how they should collaborate with other forces to effectively and efficiently contribute to multi-agency partnerships on stalking.

- How multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) are being used to effectively manage stalking offenders.

Recommendations to the NPCC lead for stalking and harassment

Recommendation 21

By 27 March 2025, to collate and disseminate information to chief constables on the dedicated stalking co-ordination roles that exist. This information should support chief constables to consider whether and how dedicated stalking officers and staff can be used to support the police response to stalking.

The information collated and disseminated should include (but not be limited to) details of:

- Skills and experiences of dedicated stalking officers and staff, and any extra training provided to them by the force.
- Day-to-day responsibilities of dedicated stalking officers and staff, and how these are aligned to force priorities.
- How dedicated stalking officers and staff are organised within force operational command structures.
- How dedicated stalking officers and staff contribute to multi-agency working which supports victims and provides interventions to perpetrators.

Recommendation 24

By 27 March 2025, begin working with the NPCC lead for artificial intelligence to explore how artificial intelligence could be used to support the police response to stalking. This should include developing a proof of concept for using artificial intelligence to screen incidents and crimes to help identify stalking and risks associated with stalking.

Recommendation 29

By 27 June 2025 (nine months from publication), share a report summarising the progress forces have made against their action plans with HMICFRS, the IOPC and the College of Policing. This report will be published on the [GOV.UK police super-complaints webpage](#).

Recommendations to the Crown Prosecution Service

Recommendation 19

By 27 March 2025, consider the findings from this investigation and take action in relation to any areas where the Crown Prosecution Service may also need to improve its response to stalking. This could include:

- Ensuring consistency in how stalking is described across guidance it produces.
- Identifying stalking and understanding the risks and effect of stalking on victims.
- Recognising breaches of orders as further instances of stalking or serious escalation of risk.

- Providing effective victim care, including by working with stalking advocates and support services.

Recommendations to bodies subject to recommendations

Recommendation 27

By 22 November 2024 (56 days from publication), write to HMICFRS, the IOPC and the College of Policing setting out their response to the recommendations made to them. Chief constables should direct their response to the NPCC which should provide a collective response on behalf of all police forces. PCCs and their mayor equivalents should direct their response to the APCC which should provide a collective response on their behalf.

Actions for the College of Policing

Action 1

The College of Policing will develop its authorised professional practice (APP) on stalking or harassment. The update will take into consideration the learning from this super-complaint including learning on identifying stalking and distinguishing it from harassment, identifying and assessing risk, victim safeguarding and care and multi-agency working. This development work will begin during the 2024/25 financial year.

Actions for the IOPC

Action 2

By 27 March 2025 the IOPC will provide advice to IOPC staff and police professional standards departments about recognising and responding to police perpetrated stalking behaviours, particularly where these are present in cases involving police abuse of position.

Date of publication: 27 September 2024

Published by His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary in accordance with Regulation 8 (2) (b) of the Police Super-complaints (Designation and Procedure) Regulations 2018

© HMICFRS 2024

hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk

college.police.uk

policeconduct.gov.uk