

“Investigation ongoing”

**A super-complaint regarding excessively lengthy
police investigations into sexual offences**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

December 2025

Overview

This super-complaint, submitted by Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre (CRCC), Centre for Women's Justice (CWJ), Rape Crisis England & Wales (RCEW) and Bindmans LLP, comes at a time of unprecedented delays and challenges across our criminal justice system, particularly for survivors of sexual violence and abuse who make the decision to report what happened to them to the police. Rather than operating as one system, criminal justice in England and Wales is delivered via coordinated action by a number of separate agencies, each with their own distinct roles: the police, the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and the courts. The focus of this complaint is excessive delays at the police investigation stage.

Over the past few years there has been much-needed scrutiny and work to transform the investigation and prosecution of rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO), with Operation Soteria being one of the most high-profile examples. Although such initiatives have brought renewed focus and welcome improvements, we continue to hear from survivors who do not feel that their reports have been handled well. Many sexual offence cases are taking far longer than is reasonable for the police to investigate, resulting in some staggering and inexplicably long delays.

Data obtained from the Home Office via Freedom of Information request shows that over the past decade:

- **37,188 sexual offence investigations have taken longer than three years to investigate.**
- **More than half of these investigations have taken longer than four years; and many considerably longer (see figure 1, below).**
- **There was a 652% increase in closed police investigations into sexual offences which took longer than three years to conclude (see figure 2, below).**

At the end of the 2024/25 financial year, there were **13,949 ongoing sexual offence investigations that had been open for more than 3 years; 1,716 of these had been ongoing for more than 7 years** – the amount of time it will take for a child to finish their primary school education.

Figure 1: The number of sexual offence investigations closed between 2014/15 and 2024/5 that took longer than 3 years, by investigation length.

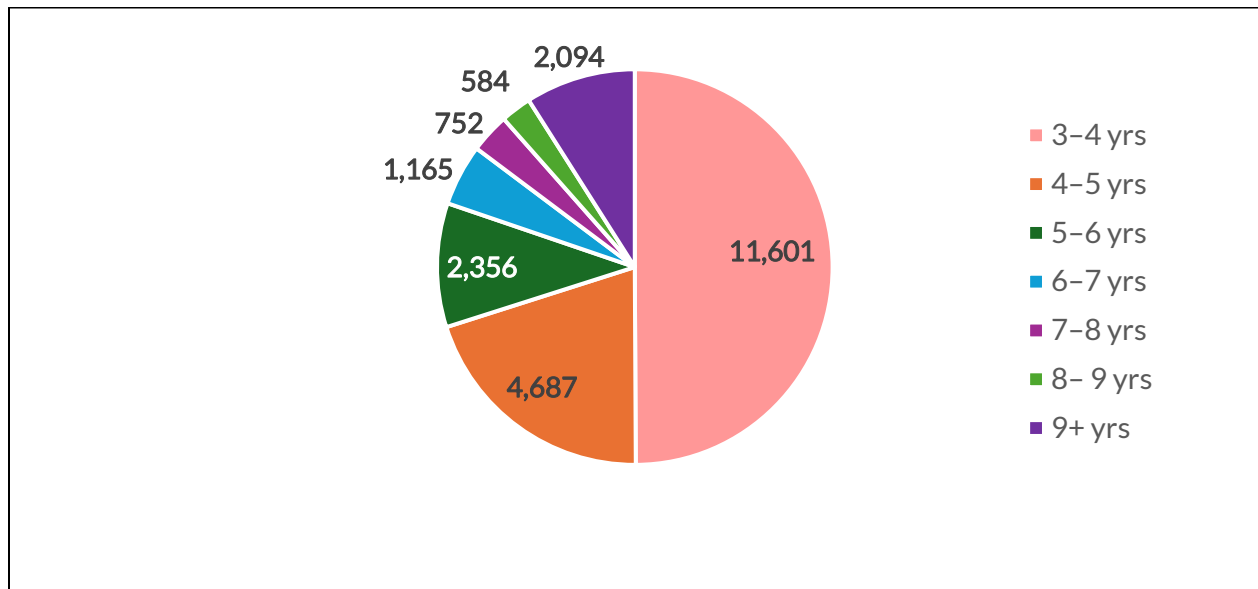
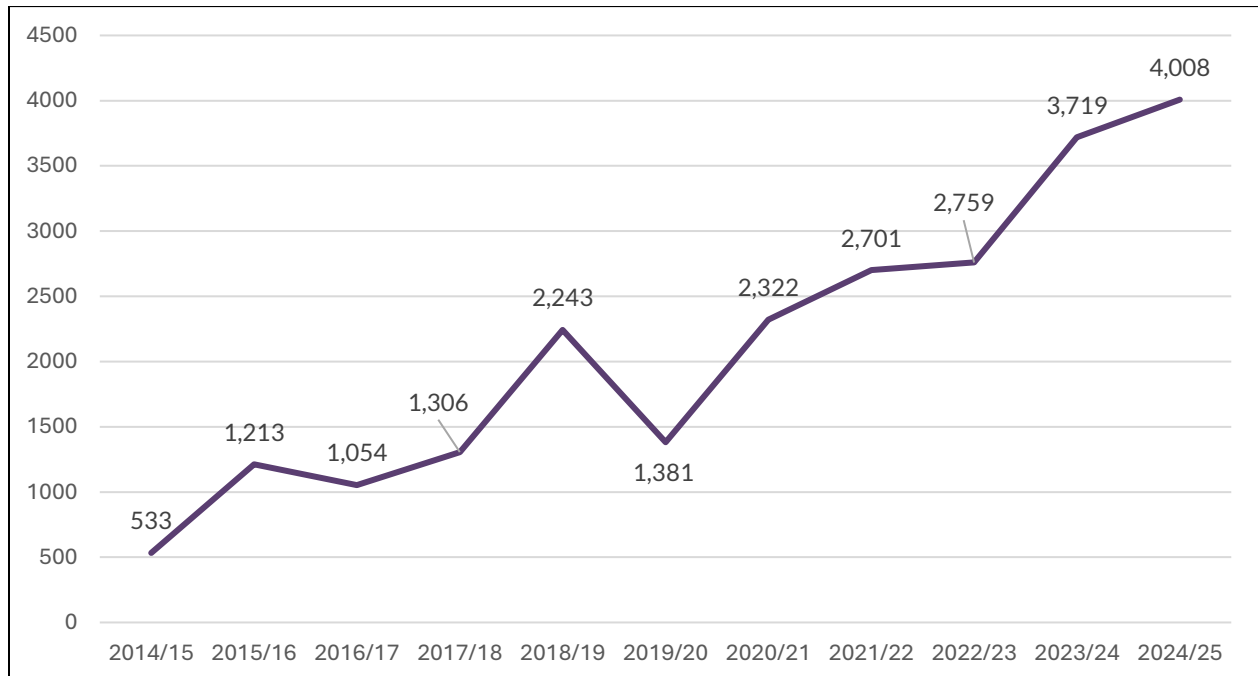


Figure 2: The number of closed sexual offence investigations that have taken longer than 3 years to complete, by financial year, 2014/15 – 2024/25.



Delays in the criminal justice system are detrimental to the interests of justice and the safety of the wider public, and cause significant harm to the survivors who have the strength to come forward and report.

In addition to the harm caused to survivors, the excessive delays to police investigations explored in this super-complaint indicate a potential systemic breach of survivors' human rights. The police play a key role in ensuring that the UK discharges the burden of its positive obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). As we explore in the super-complaint: if investigations into serious domestic and sexual abuse are not conducted effectively, the UK may be in breach of its positive obligations under Article 3 (inhuman and degrading treatment), Article 8 (respect for private and family life), and/or Article 14 (discrimination). In our experience, survivors who have been failed by the criminal justice system are increasingly turning to the civil courts to have their rights protected, resulting in many police forces being open to costly legal action for failing to investigate these serious crimes effectively.

Our research around excessive investigative delays also reveals that the experiences of survivors caught up in these protracted investigations are widely obscured from public view and remain hidden in the available national crime data. The way public data regarding investigation lengths is currently captured and presented is misleading, effectively distorting the reality around lengthy investigations for many survivors.

As organisations with decades of frontline experience of supporting survivors through the criminal justice process and beyond, our report examines the scale of the problem, and comments on some of the issues within policing that we believe are contributing to these excessive and harmful delays.

The super-complaint is laid out in four sections. In chapters 1 and 2, we set out the impact of long investigative delays on survivors of sexual violence and abuse. Chapter 3 analyses data on sexual offence investigation length, including data we obtained via Freedom of Information request, to demonstrate the scale of the problem. In chapter 4, we examine the factors causing and contributing to lengthy police investigations. Finally, in chapter 5, we outline the legal position in relation to delay and survivors' human rights. We conclude by making various recommendations for change.



It's been so long that I really think reporting was pointless. I didn't want him to rape/assault anyone else and I found out he had done so multiple times which is why I reported mine years later. He could have done it over and over in the last 3 years for all I know."

(Survivor, investigation ongoing, over 3 years)

Methodology

This super-complaint relies on evidence obtained from the following sources:

- Data obtained via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to the Home Office, as well as each of the 43 police forces in England and Wales. We requested data on the numbers of investigations into sexual offences that have exceeded three years from report to police outcome, since 2014, broken down by the number of years that the investigation has taken, from three to nine+ years.
- Survey data from 12 Rape Crisis Independent Sexual Violence Advocacy (ISVA) services in England and Wales, regarding sexual offence investigations lasting over three years.
- Data obtained via focus groups with eight Rape Crisis ISVAs and ISVA managers, regarding their experience with police investigations into sexual offences.
- Data obtained via an online survey for sexual violence and abuse survivors whose cases took over three years to be investigated. Survivors told us about the delays they experienced and answered questions about how this impacted them. 75 responses received, relating to investigations managed by 26 different police forces across England and Wales.
- Detailed case studies from three survivors of sexual violence and abuse who have endured excessively lengthy police investigations.

The impact of lengthy investigations

The impact of excessive delays on survivors of sexual violence and abuse

For survivors of sexual violence and abuse, long-running investigations can lead to a profound loss of trust and confidence in police, as well as other criminal justice agencies. We heard directly from survivors, and the ISVAs supporting them, that protracted investigations can affect all areas of their lives: their mental health and emotional wellbeing, relationships, family life, financial security, parenting capacity, education, employment, and physical health. Many survivors described feeling ‘stuck’ and unable to forward plan in other areas of life whilst their case was ongoing.

For children and young people, the negative impacts of investigation delays often span crucial developmental milestones. The long-term consequences for their mental health, education, and future life chances can be even more significant. For women and girls subjected to multiple forms of disadvantage – such as mental health challenges, poverty, homelessness, disabilities, and uncertain immigration status – it can be even more challenging to remain engaged with criminal justice processes over long periods of time, leaving them without protection and particularly vulnerable to further abuse and exploitation.



The experience of the criminal justice system/police investigation has been so re traumatising and has ruined my life.”
(Survivor, investigation ongoing, 5 years & 5 months)

The impact on the availability and effectiveness of support

Survivors subjected to long-running investigations are often prevented from fully benefiting from the support and help available to them from specialist support organisations, such as Rape Crisis centres. Survivors described feeling unable to talk about their experiences for fear of jeopardising their case. Indeed, survivors are often advised by police not to talk to other witnesses – including family members – about their case. ISVAs, who provide specialist support and advice to them to help navigate the justice process, must limit their exposure to evidence.¹

Similarly, therapeutic spaces *should* be safe and confidential, to enable survivors to talk openly about their experiences pre-trial. However, many survivors are frequently only able to access limited therapy in which the details of the incident(s) are not discussed, to avoid any future claims of ‘witness coaching’ and/or the possibility of requests for disclosure of their notes to the defendant and discussion at trial.² In some cases, with no meaningful guarantee that their sensitive records will not end up at court, survivors choose to avoid the therapeutic support they desperately need and deserve altogether.

The cumulative impact of criminal justice delays

In order to fully understand the impact on survivors, it is important to situate lengthy police investigations in the context of the wider criminal justice system. For the minority of survivors whose cases are eventually charged by the CPS, excessive delays and uncertainty persist. The unprecedented and rising backlog of cases in the Crown Court mean that survivors in sexual offence cases frequently face a further wait of several years to see the inside of a courtroom. A recent report by Rape Crisis England & Wales³ details a particularly bleak picture of a court system beset by problems at every stage:

- As of June 2025, 78,329 cases were outstanding in the Crown Court – 17% of these (13,238) are sexual offence cases – a 66% increase since Q3 2022.
- Adult survivors of rape are now made to wait longer for their day in court compared to people who have experienced other crimes – 499 days on average, compared to 284 days for other crime types. Though many survivors wait even longer.
- 1 in 3 rape trials are now postponed at least once.

¹ Crown Prosecution Service. (2022). Pre-Trial Therapy. Available at: <https://www.cps.gov.uk/prosecution-guidance/pre-trial-therapy>.

² Ibid.

³ Rape Crisis England & Wales. (2025). Living in Limbo: Our second report on the retraumatisation of rape and sexual abuse victims and survivors in the Crown Court backlog. Available at: https://rcew.fra1.cdn.digitaloceanspaces.com/media/documents/LivinginLimbo_NEW_b.pdf.

These additional delays increase the risk of issues arising further down the line – in terms of witness availability, the defendant’s health, or further evidential reviews by the CPS. Survivors’ memories and ability to recall evidence may also be impacted by the passage of time. Ultimately, and understandably, survivors may feel less able or willing to continue supporting the prosecution. At present, 58% of adult rape investigations are closed pre-charge because the survivor no longer supports police action.⁴ Whilst there is no official qualitative data examining the reasons for this attrition, anecdotally we know that many survivors withdraw due to excessive delays. If we are to bring offenders to justice and prevent further harm, we must be able to offer survivors a criminal justice system that responds to them in a timely manner, at the very minimum.

Data on police investigation delay

Home Office data

We submitted Freedom of Information requests to the Home Office, and all 43 police forces across England and Wales, asking for information relating to police investigations for rape and serious sexual offences cases that had exceeded three years from report to outcome, since 2014. The data obtained show that over the past decade, **over 37,000** investigations have taken longer than three years – almost **14,000** of these investigations were still ongoing as of the end of the 2024/25 financial year.

Of those investigations that have been completed, more than half took longer than four years. There has also been a steady increase in long-running cases from 2014/15 to 2024/5: a **more than six-fold increase** in the totals, and a **15-fold increase** for investigations lasting between three to four years.

FOI data has been relied on in this super-complaint, because we found that publicly available ‘timeliness’ data from official sources and academic research largely obscure the true length of delays experienced by many survivors. Much of the published data on timeliness is limited to adult rape offences, and details medians, which is misleading and obscures very long-running investigations. The Home Office and Ministry of Justice publish national crime statistics on the average rape investigation length - 103 days (under four months) and 434 days (16 months) respectively. This is a far cry from the reality.

However, the solution is not simply to report on mean investigation lengths rather than medians. Instead, we consider the relevant categories of cases for assessing timeliness, to ensure that a realistic and meaningful picture of investigation length is presented.

⁴ HM Government. (2025). Criminal justice system delivery data dashboard: Increasing victim engagement. Available at: <https://criminal-justice-delivery-data-dashboards.justice.gov.uk/victim-engagement>.

Data from ISVA services

We collected survey data from 12 Rape Crisis ISVA services to provide a snapshot of what ISVAs see in their day-to-day work. The data was provided by services in different areas of England and Wales, and related to investigations conducted by 21 police forces. Whilst ISVAs do not systematically monitor timescales, they do have an in-depth and reliable understanding of the circumstances of the individuals they support. The ISVAs identified 251 cases known to their services that have taken between three and nine years to investigate, with the largest numbers at the London-based services. ISVA survey data highlight the harmful impacts of these very long investigations on survivors' lives and the challenges posed to services trying to support the survivors in these cases.

We also held focus groups with experienced ISVAs and ISVA managers from across England and Wales, the majority of whom had over a decade of experience in the role. The perspective of these workers was essential, as very long investigations can be less apparent when ISVAs are in post for shorter periods. The experienced ISVA group reported that in the early years of their roles, it was common for cases to take in the region of **two years from report to trial**. They reflected on how investigation lengths have extended dramatically over the last decade, with the goal posts around what is viewed as a 'normal' timeframe expanding incrementally. The experienced ISVAs also had a good understanding of the issues within policing that they view as contributing to the long delays, which was grounded in their day to day working with police officers.

Factors contributing to lengthy police investigations

Our full report identifies five key factors causing and contributing to lengthy police investigations:

i. Prioritisation decisions

Operation Soteria research has highlighted that ad-hoc and informal approaches to the prioritisation of different sexual offences are applied by officers from the first call handling stage.⁵ 11 out of the 12 ISVA services who replied to our survey shared experiences of police prioritising cases they perceived as more 'urgent' or 'risky', often referring to these as 'live jobs'. Other cases are seemingly deprioritised by police officers, meaning it takes longer for these investigations to be progressed effectively.

⁵ Smith, O. et al. (2025). The systemic procedural injustice faced by victim-survivors in police responses to rape and 'serious' sexual offences: A comprehensive study of four forces in England and Wales, *International Journal of Law, Crime and Justice* (82)100756. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1756061625000321>.

The repeated de-prioritisation of some investigations - to the extent that they may not be worked on at all for months or even years at a time - is unacceptable and a significant contributing factor for the excessively delayed investigations highlighted in our super-complaint. Reports of non-recent child sexual abuse made by adult survivors appear to be particularly vulnerable to de-prioritisation, as well as offences perpetrated in a domestic abuse context, where the survivor reports after exiting the relationship. In our view, this reflects a narrow approach to risk assessment, and failure to consider the risks posed by the perpetrator to potential future victims and the wider public.

ii. Resourcing and staffing issues

ISVAs and survivors highlighted police resourcing and staffing issues as being a common reason given by officers for the excessive delays in sexual offence cases. As well as the significant increase in sexual offences being reported to the police in recent years (in 2024/25 there were 71,540 police recorded rapes, compared to 29,420 in 2014/15⁶), ISVAs identified chronic capacity issues in sexual offence investigation teams, often linked to staff absence, burnout, and high officer turnover. ISVAs explained that often, when officers were away from their normal duties or placed on sick leave, their investigations were not reallocated, leaving tasks to stall over long periods.

iii. Supervision, leadership and management

Adjacent to the issues with prioritisation and resourcing are overarching failures of leadership to effectively manage the teams and officers responsible for delayed investigations. ISVAs expressed concerns about the apparent lack of urgency shown by senior officers responsible for overseeing delayed investigations, highlighting that it should be the responsibility of managers to address performance-related issues in their workplace. There is a need for leaders and senior managers within policing to more closely monitor and supervise cases with excessive delays, and to support and motivate their own staff around how best to manage them. It is incumbent on supervisors to raise issues around capacity and resources at a more senior level within each force, and for leaders within policing to take these concerns seriously, recognising their responsibility for ensuring that their teams have sufficient resources and capacity to manage the demand.

iv. Cooperation between the police and Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)

Another factor associated with excessive delays, raised by the majority of ISVAs as well as survivors, is poor communication and partnership working between police and CPS during investigations. This problem is routinely referred to by officers in conversations with survivors and ISVAs, though the degree to which the CPS contribute to investigative delays is difficult to determine.

⁶ Office for National Statistics. (2025). Sexual offences in England and Wales overview: year ending March 2025. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/sexualoffencesinenglandandwalesoverview/yearendingmarch2025>.

Inefficiencies connected to inter-agency cooperation are well established and have been discussed by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) in several previous reports.⁷ Several factors were identified as potentially contributing to delay with regards to police and CPS joint-working, including: excessive CPS action plans, technical issues around file sharing, overly stringent CPS case file requirements, problems with communication, particularly for junior officers, and a lack of follow-up by CPS. There appears to be a shifting of responsibility for delays between both agencies, as delayed cases go back and forth between the police and CPS over extended periods of time.

v. Changes to pre-charge bail and release under investigation (RUI)

The final factor we identified as contributing to excessive delays relates to the legal changes to bail and introduction of 'release under investigation' (RUI) from April 2017. Part of the intention behind these changes was to speed up investigations, the assumption being that officers would conclude their investigation and enquiries more quickly if they had limited time to keep suspects on bail. However, stricter conditions around the use of bail and the introduction of a less administratively onerous alternative (RUI) exacerbated delays, leading to longer investigations, particularly in more complex cases.

Home Office data obtained via a Freedom of Information request shows that once bail changes came into force, there was a significant increase in the number of sexual offence cases taking between three and four years to investigate. This corroborates the findings and recommendations of Sir Brian Leveson, who identified RUI as a major issue linked to criminal justice delays.⁸

The legal position on investigative delay

The final chapter of our full report sets out a number of legal duties on police to conduct timely investigations. Long running investigations into allegations of serious domestic and sexual offences arguably amount to a breach of Articles 3, 8 and 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), by preventing the full and proper investigation of serious crimes. It is self-evident the passage of time will inevitably erode the amount and

⁷ HMICFRS and HMCPSP. (2024). Joint case building by the police and Crown Prosecution Service. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/joint-case-building-by-the-police-and-crown-prosecution-service/>; HMICFRS and HMCPSP. (2021). A joint thematic inspection of the police and Crown Prosecution Service's response to rape - Phase one: From report to police or CPS decision to take no further action. Available at: <https://hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/publications/a-joint-thematic-inspection-of-the-police-and-crown-prosecution-services-response-to-rape/>.

⁸ Leveson, B. (2025). Independent Review of the Criminal Courts – Part 1. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/686be85d81dd8f70f5de3c1f/35.49_MOJ_Ind_Review_Criminal_Courts_v8b_FINAL_WEB.pdf.

quality of evidence available, thereby violating procedural obligations under Article 3 ECHR.

Furthermore, excessive delays can be re-traumatising for the survivors and their loved ones. Where there is evidence of specific and detrimental impact of the failures, delays and uncertainty upon the private and family lives of survivors, there may also be a breach of Article 8 ECHR. The systemic problems we identify primarily impact women and girls, bringing the non-discrimination provision, Article 14, into effect too.

Survivors whose human rights are breached by the police may decide to pursue a claim for compensation. This can lead to costly and lengthy litigation in the civil courts.

Conclusions

It is clear to our respective organisations that excessively lengthy investigations into sexual offences are a widespread and systemic issue within policing. They cause significant harm to individuals whose reports take several years to progress, leading to increasing numbers of survivors losing faith in the criminal justice system. Delays also call into question the effectiveness of criminal justice agencies to keep members of the public safe from often prolific and dangerous sex offenders.⁹ Some of these offenders are being kept ‘under investigation’ (seemingly, in name only) over multiple years, with no monitoring or review, leaving the wider public at risk.

Small-scale or localised measures will not be enough to address this issue and there is both a moral and a legal duty on individual police forces and the UK Government to prioritise urgent and meaningful solutions to put a stop to these excessive delays and guarantee effective and timely investigations into sexual offences.

Recommendations

We make 23 recommendations for change, to address the issues of lengthy police investigations into sexual offences. Recommendations are addressed to Chief Constables, the Home Office, Ministry of Justice, Police and Crime Commissioners, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), and the Crown Prosecution Service

⁹ Research by the MoJ found that around four percent of offenders convicted of a sex offence had five or more previous convictions or cautions for a sex offence. See: Ministry of Justice, Home Office, & Office for National Statistics. (2013). An overview of sexual offending in England and Wales: Statistics bulletin. Available at:

<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ca66d40f0b65b3de0a47d/sexual-offending-overview-jan-2013.pdf>.

(CPS). Full recommendations can be found in our full super-complaint, however in summary, we call for:

1. An urgent audit of all live investigations into sexual offences to identify investigations that have been ongoing for three years or more.
2. Forces to develop an investigative strategy to progress long-running cases.
3. Improved communication with survivors.
4. Policing teams to be established to focus solely on progressing long-running sexual offence cases.
5. Force registrars to review the recording of timeliness outcomes in sexual offence cases.
6. The implementation of additional safeguards where suspects are released under investigation in sexual offence cases.
7. Officers to take a broader, and therefore more accurate, approach to risk assessment.
8. Effective measures to protect and support frontline officers handling sexual offence investigations.
9. Improved supervision arrangements in forces.
10. Improved oversight and accountability, involving Police and Crime Commissioners.
11. Implementation of the UK Statistics Agency (UKSA) recommendations to facilitate the re-accreditation of police crime data.
12. Home Office publication of quarterly data on the number of sexual offence investigations that have been ongoing for longer than three years.
13. Workable solutions to recording timeliness when a case is re-opened.
14. The implementation of further regulations on the use of RUI.
15. The implementation of further scrutiny and accountability structures that may be effective in addressing delay within sexual offence investigations.
16. Consultation between the Home Office, MoJ, UKSA, HMICFRS, and Rape Crisis about the most appropriate way to capture and present public data on timeliness in sexual offence cases which does not obscure delays.
17. Home Office publication of data on sexual offence cases broken down by the offence type and relationship to perpetrator.
18. Forces to report to HMICFRS on the numbers of long-running investigations (over three years) identified during their individual audits (see recommendation 1); publication of this data by HMICFRS
19. A joint inspection of forces by HMICFRS and HMCPSI with regard to timeliness in sexual offence investigations.

20. Future HMICFRS inspections focusing on crime recording to also focus on assessing the accuracy and timeliness of recording outcomes.
21. The CPS to review 'file readiness' requirements for sexual offence cases.
22. A CPS audit of all investigations for sexual offences that remain outstanding where it has been more than eighteen months since the initial referral from police.
23. The implementation of routine CPS reminders to police every 28 days, where cases have been sent back to police with further actions.



I find it difficult to bring myself to explain the level of pure disappointment I feel towards the police. The police are supposed to be a body that protects citizens. The police have not just failed me, but many others. It is truly inhumane to put a victim through a process lasting nine years. I have been disappointed by the so-called justice system under which we are meant to feel safe”.

(AB, survivor of sexual violence)

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