

New pilots to boost support for rape victims in court

- enhanced specialist sexual violence support to be trialled at three major courts
- convictions up and support improved 1 year on from landmark Rape Review
- government pledges to go further with £460 million investment in support and Victims Bill
- government expands research into police handling of rape cases

All court staff, police and prosecutors working on cases will receive specialist trauma training, and expert at-court support, such as Independent Sexual Violence Advisors, will be available for victims.

Working closely with the police, CPS and judiciary, the government will use any learning from the pilots to complement ongoing efforts to tackle the backlog and increase the volume and speed of cases going through the system.

It follows a recommendation made by inspectors and the Justice Select Committee for specialist courts to be set up to deal with sexual violence cases. Leeds, Newcastle and Snaresbrook (London) Crown Courts have been chosen as they are currently dealing with a higher-than-average number of sex offence cases.

Courtrooms will also be equipped with new video technology and be able to take advantage of the rapid rollout of pre-recorded cross-examination for victims of rape. This spares victims, subject to a successful application to the court, the stress of giving evidence during a live trial and has already been introduced at 37 courts.

The initiative comes one year on since the government published its Rape Review Action Plan, with an update showing that considerable headway is being made in increasing convictions and improving support for victims.

Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, Dominic Raab said:

Rape convictions are up two thirds over the last year and cases are being completed 5 weeks quicker.

But we are restless to go further, and these pilots will focus on improving support for victims, tackling the backlog and reducing delays.

We're also rolling out pre-recorded evidence faster, recruiting 1000 sexual violence advisors, developing a 24/7 helpline and improving collaboration between police and prosecutors to ensure victims get the justice they deserve.

Alongside this, the government is continuing to roll out Operation Soteria, a new approach to investigating rape that focuses on the suspects not the victims. It involves academics working with police forces to examine their handling of rape cases and make recommendations for operational changes. It is already in action in five police force areas and will soon be rolled out to a further 14 forces by March 2023. By June 2023, these trials will lead to a new national operating model available to all police forces to better investigate and prosecute rape cases.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Rape is an abhorrent crime and I want to see a transformation in the way these investigations are handled to make sure that all victims have the best support possible throughout the entire process.

By making police investigations less intrusive and putting victims at the forefront, we can improve the way in which the police handle these cases, so that the brave victims who come forward are not let down, and the criminals responsible are put behind bars.

Five police forces have also completed a pilot scheme where rape victims received replacement phones if they needed to be examined for longer than 24 hours. Work is ongoing to reduce intrusive requests for phones and for third party records such as therapy notes. The Attorney General's office has published new guidelines and a public consultation has been launched on police requests for third party materials today. This will look at understanding why the police request the information they do, as well as ensuring that all requests are necessary, proportionate, and timely.

Attorney General, the Rt. Hon. Suella Braverman QC MP, said:

The huge programme of joint working between the CPS and police shows some encouraging green shoots of improvement – the number of suspects charged by the CPS is increasing and the time it takes for the CPS to reach a charging decision is down, securing justice for more rape victims, faster. I've also updated my Disclosure Guidelines to further protect victims' privacy. We won't rest until public confidence in the criminal justice system is restored.

Over £460 million is being invested in victim support over the next three years, increasing the amount spent per year by 2025 by 92% compared to 2020/21. It will fund more than 1,000 Independent Sexual and Domestic Violence Advisors – a 43 percent increase over the next three years, a new 24/7 helpline for rape victims as well as hundreds of local support services nationwide.

Pre-recorded cross examination for rape victims is on course to be available nationwide by September and the number of specialist rape prosecutors has

risen by 20 percent in the last year from 360 in April 2021 to 433 at the end of March 2022.

Meanwhile, the latest Criminal Justice System Delivery Data Dashboards are published today as part of a transparency drive. They include information on the time taken for cases to be investigated by the police, for someone to be charged, and for the case to be completed at court. The data can be broken down on a national or regional level, including by local police forces, CPS area as well as Local Criminal Justice Boards. The dashboard also includes information on victim engagement.

Emily Hunt, independent advisor to the government on the Rape Review, said:

Rape is a horrific crime that can have life-long, devastating impacts on its victims. I don't know that we can ever be doing enough, but right now, we are in an incredibly different place than we were a year ago. Charges are, finally, starting to go up.

But no one involved thinks where we are is good enough – because it is not even remotely good enough – and for me that is probably the most important part of where we are a year on: doing better, but still pushing further.

Fay Maxted OBE, Chief executive of the Survivors Trust, said:

The impact of rape and sexual abuse can have a lifelong impact on victims and survivors affecting all aspects of their lives and wellbeing. Sadly, we live in a society where rape myths and misunderstandings about trauma responses are common, often adding to the trauma that victims and survivors have already experienced. Survivors Trust has long advocated for court staff to receive trauma-informed training and we are pleased to see this measure being implemented as part of the new pilot scheme.

The provision of trauma-informed training and enhanced support for survivors in court is an encouraging step towards improving the court process for survivors of sexual violence and abuse. We look forward to the learnings from this pilot helping ensure similar measures are implemented across all crown courts in the future.

Director of Public Prosecutions Max Hill and National Police Chiefs' Council Lead for Rape and Adult Sexual Offences, Chief Constable Sarah Crew said:

Police and prosecutors are doing their part – working together – to make sure we improve the experience of those affected by these devastating crimes and support more rape victims to see justice. The effective investigation and prosecution of rape is one of the most important challenges facing the criminal justice system. We

are optimistic that our actions through our Rape Strategy, Joint National Action Plan and Operation Soteria pathfinders are having an impact

The roll out of Soteria to 14 more police forces and three more CPS areas is welcome news as more parts of the country will continue to make improvements and learn lessons. Soteria offers an opportunity like no other to get to the bottom of the issues impacting successful investigations and prosecutions so we can get more positive outcomes. We are determined to make lasting change to this process and improve the victim experience at all points along the way.

Today's announcement builds on the publication of a draft Victims Bill which will amplify victims' voices and make justice agencies more accountable for the service they deliver.

Notes to editors

- The pilots will be operational by October and the 3 courts will continue to hear other cases outside of rape and sexual violence offences.
- An additional £6.6 million per year is being invested in victim support on top of the £440 million 3 year package announced in March. The Criminal Justice System statistics quarterly (published 19 May) showed rape convictions were up 67 percent compared to 2020 – 895 in 2021, 537 in 2020. It was a 27 percent increase compared to 2019 before the pandemic (702 in 2019).
- An online victim survey has also been launched today (16 June 2022) to find out directly from victims what support services they need. The feedback from this will help draw up the future of victim support. It can be accessed online on Thursday.
- The latest CJS Delivery Data Dashboard will be published at 09.30 on Thursday 16 June 2022.
- The first 5 forces participating in Operation Soteria are Avon and Somerset, Metropolitan, Durham, South Wales and West Midlands. The additional 14 forces taking part are: North Wales, Gwent, Dyfed-Powys, Northumbria, Gloucestershire, Devon and Cornwall, Warwickshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Hampshire, Wiltshire, Dorset, Kent and Sussex. The key findings from the programme to date have been published in the Rape Review Progress Update today (16 June 2022).