

Guidance on re-engaging with previous victims in rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigations

A guidance document for investigators on re-engaging with previous victim(s) of RASSO investigations involving multiple or historic complaints.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Rape and serious sexual offences Investigation
Organisation	Norfolk Constabulary
Contact	Holly Beevis
Email address	holly.beevis@norfolk.police.uk
Region	Eastern
Partners	Police
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	January 2023
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Offenders Victims
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Aim

The aims of the initiative are to:

- provide a clear framework for identifying and managing cases involving multiple or linked complainants
- ensure ethical and transparent decision-making when considering previous engagement with victims
- promote a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach to all contact and engagement in rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) cases
- ensure compliance with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) guidance
- maximise opportunities to progress investigations by reducing barriers to victim engagement

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the initiative are to:

- increase the number of previous victims who re-engage in RASSO investigations
- increase RASSO charge rates in cases where the suspect has previously been named as a perpetrator
- reduce the number of discontinued RASSO cases resulting from lack of victim engagement
- increase the use of victim-centred, trauma-informed engagement approaches across all RASSO investigations

Description

The initiative has been developed as part of Norfolk Constabulary's work to improve the quality of RASSO investigations, in line with Operation Soteria (national programme to transform the investigation and prosecution of RASSO) and its principle of conducting suspect-focused investigations. Initial research conducted by Operation Soteria identified that a significant proportion

of RASSO offences are committed by repeat perpetrators. A further review by Norfolk Constabulary highlighted that investigators often lacked confidence in managing cases, where linked or previous complainants had been identified. The review also revealed:

- uncertainty around whether it was appropriate and ethical to re-approach previous victims
- lack of clarity regarding whether disclosures could be made about the existence of other complainants
- inconsistent understanding of CPS guidance and national policy
- variations in practice and decision-making
- inconsistent record keeping

Planning process

The planning process was led by the Operation Engage team who specialise in victim engagement. The teams consists of:

- one detective sergeant who is a specialist interview advisor
- one RASSO detective inspector
- one detective chief superintendent for safeguarding

The team utilised practitioner insight, existing policy, and national learning to:

- review national guidance such as Operation Hydrant (co-ordination of multiple non-recent child sexual abuse investigations around the country) and CPS policies relating to victim disclosure and contact
- identify current practice gaps
- understand how the Operation Soteria principles of suspect focused, victim centred, context led align with the delivery of the initiative

While the Operation Engage team have been supporting the initiative since 2023, it has only recently been formalised with the creation of a procedural guidance document. The document located on the force intranet outlines when, why and how to re-contact previous or potential victims to:

- develop pattern evidence for suspect focused investigations
- support case building

- provide victims with the opportunity to re-engage with the justice process
- ensure that enquiries are ethical, proportionate and victim-centred

Investigators can use the document to:

- assess whether re-contact is appropriate
- consider whether a superintendent policy is required around the disclosure of other victims
- assist in the planning of victim contact and support investigators to conduct re-engagement visits
- document post visit actions

Implementation

The initiative has been embedded into existing RASSO investigative practices by using the following approach:

Identifying suitable cases

All rape investigations are reviewed on receipt by a RASSO administrator. Research is then undertaken to establish whether the suspect has been named in any previous RASSO investigations. If they are, a note is placed on the investigation to ensure that the officer in charge (OIC) is made aware. The OIC will then conduct further and more detailed research on the suspect. The OIC supervisor will then review the investigation to establish whether it is suitable for further engagement to be made with a previous victim. The suitability will depend on the case and why it has not been previously progressed.

Policy and legal considerations

If disclosure of other complainants is required, detective superintendent and CPS advice is sought before a decision is made.

Planning and re-engagement

The Operation Engage team have developed a planning document, which sets out a structure for planning and conducting visits in cases where:

- a suspect has been named in a rape investigation
- a suspect has previously been named by other people as a perpetrator of a RASSO

- the previous case was not pursued due to the victim choosing not to engage with the criminal justice process
- no video record interview (VRI) or MG11 witness or victim statement was taken during the original investigation
- a VRI or MG11 was taken, however it was not of sufficient quality to proceed

The planning document is set out in the following sections:

- Pre-visit – investigators conduct pre-contact investigation and victim checks. This information is used to plan the visit, identify who is best to conduct the visit and to establish if the visit is appropriate for the previous victim(s).
- Visit – investigators are encouraged to think about what information they will initially disclose to the previous victim(s). Initially, the investigator examines the victim's experience of the justice system and their personal reasons for not pursuing the complaint. Investigators also use this opportunity to check whether support was offered and re-make that offer.
- Invitation to re-engage – victims are provided with an initial invitation to engage with the investigation. If they wish to engage, officers will explain the process and seek to gather evidence.
- Second invitation to engage – once the victim has been offered suitable wraparound support, a second invitation to engage is made.

At the conclusion of the form, there is a section around the filing of documentation. A copy is to be sent to Operation Engage team for retention and auditing purposes.

Overall impact

Initial findings indicate that a third of re-engagement attempts with previous victims have been successful, with some cases resulting in a charge or conviction. While some victims have chosen not to engage with the criminal justice process, they have accepted support from specialist services.

Norfolk Constabulary's procedural guidance document has now been rolled out to all investigators to increase awareness of the initiative.

Learning

- Re-engaging with victims after a substantial amount of time can be highly distressing. The first question that must be asked is whether re-engagement is appropriate for the previous victim(s). Safeguarding and welfare considerations are crucial.
- The initiative is not appropriate for all investigations. For example, if the master investigation is evidentially weak, re-engagement should not be used to strengthen the case. Each allegation and its evidence must be assessed on its own merits. Supervisor oversight is essential to ensure suitability.
- If the intervention is suitable to support the investigation, officers and staff with expertise in witness engagement should be consulted. Within Norfolk Constabulary, specialist victim interviewers are available to consider the best outcomes and support for the victim.

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