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Mr Roy Wilsher OBE QFSM
HM Inspector of Constabulary
His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Service
6th Floor – Globe House
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18 October 2024

Dear Roy

HMICFRS – Progress to introduce a national operating model for rape and other serious sexual offences investigations

I write in respect of the recently published findings from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) following their inspection report on the progress to introduce a national operating model (NOM) for rape and other serious sexual offences (RASSO) investigations in early adopter forces, and have carefully studied the constructive recommendations it contains.

I recognise that all police forces in England and Wales are currently seeing an increase in demand in terms of the number of rape and serious sexual offences recorded. This is acknowledged to be a positive challenge for Sussex Police to manage locally with victims now having greater confidence in the police service to respond which has been supported by making crime reporting more accessible and straightforward in recent years.

I discussed the content of the inspection report with Acting Chief Constable Dave McLaren at my webcast monthly Performance & Accountability Meeting (PAM) on 13 September 2024 to understand better what Sussex Police is doing to introduce the NOM for RASSO investigations across each of the six pillars of Operation Soteria. This PAM session is available to view on my website through the following link: www.sussex-pcc.gov.uk/get-involved/webcasting/

I am satisfied that Sussex Police understand the extent of offending behaviour in the county through an established problem profile for RASSO which highlights the current and emerging threats to public safety by identifying exactly where, when and how these rape and serious sexual offences are taking place.

The current shortage of RASSO detectives highlighted within the HMICFRS report is recognised as a national problem for all police force areas in England and Wales. Sussex Police have 180 full time equivalent (FTE) detectives working within Public Protection across Sussex which is under-establishment. This shortfall is currently being managed by the Force through the use of non-specialist police staff to support ongoing investigations into rape and serious sexual offences. This support extends to undertaking basic administrative tasks and actions required to progress the investigations, including the collection of medical records and recovery of CCTV footage.

I was reassured to note that these non-specialist personnel do not have responsibility for overseeing any of the RASSO cases and that these cases continue to be overseen by specialist trained officers. Specialist training is also made available to all individuals who provide an initial response to rape and serious sexual offence investigations through the nationally recognised First Responders Programme [developed by the College of Policing].

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HMICFRS found that there was no consistent approach to identifying and disrupting repeat suspects across forces. I was pleased to learn that Sussex Police hold daily GRIP meetings within the Public Protection Teams to look at all the priority crimes and other offences recorded in the past 24-hours, alongside the different individuals involved, to identify whether any of these individuals are known and/or repeat offenders.

This process is supported by Operation Denver – a Power BI dashboard – which has been developed to routinely look at all nominals recorded on the police records management system [Niche] where repeat suspects are identified and the number of instances this relates to. This information looks at all recorded offences, regardless of whether these relate to RASSO investigations, and provides the Force with additional opportunities to disrupt and deter individuals from committing rapes and serious sexual offences through the progression of investigations into other offences.

Sussex Police also work closely with partners to identify, target and disrupt repeat offenders through the established arrangements that exist around information sharing. This includes the use of multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) to support the police and partners in the ongoing management of violent and sexual offenders.

I was reassured to note that Sussex Police use protection orders effectively to safeguard victims, including the routine issuing of sexual harm prevention orders [both criminal and civil] sexual risk orders and notification orders for foreign convictions as appropriate. The Violent and Sex Offender Register (ViSOR) Team within Sussex Police is responsible for overseeing and managing each of the offenders who are issued with these protection orders.

Sussex Police has invested in technology to improve its response to RASSO investigations and has made several changes to the operational practices, processes and procedures used in these investigations to create an improved and victim-centred approach. This has included the development of a digital forensic strategy with a specific focus on the investigations of RASSO and significant investment in digital download kiosks to help police officers and staff to access, recover and return mobile telephones and other electronic devices seized as part of police investigations in much shorter timescales, and within 24-hours, wherever possible.

HMICFRS found that police communication with victims is improving but varies across forces. I understand the importance of keeping victims of crime updated regarding ongoing investigations and recognise that this position is even more significant for victims of rape and serious sexual offences. Sussex Police seek to provide regular updates to all victims about how their cases are progressing and when important decisions are taken, alongside proactively sharing information with them about some of the realities and complexities involved with investigations into these types of offences, in line with the standards set out within the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime in England and Wales.

I shared HMICFRS' concerns that forces do not always use victims' feedback to make improvements. I am pleased to confirm that Sussex Police have proactively undertaken a small number of telephone interview surveys with victims of rape and serious sexual offences each month since February 2022. The Force is also recognised [by the Home Office] to be one of only a small number of police force areas in England and Wales who conduct these surveys with RASSO victims as a matter of routine.

Whilst not a mandatory requirement, Sussex Police took the proactive decision to introduce this platform to ensure that the voice of the victim is heard by measuring victim satisfaction, receiving feedback about existing processes and understanding better how the approach and services provided for the victims of these crimes can be improved.

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The Acting Chief Constable confirmed that the individual caseloads held within the Public Protection Teams across Sussex continue to remain high as demand continues to increase. These workloads are constantly reviewed and monitored locally to understand better what demand exists at any given time and whether any further opportunities are available to redistribute some of these investigations, develop them and/or secure charges and convictions through the criminal justice system.

Sussex Police are also in the initial stages of undertaking a formal review into Public Protection which will look at all RASSO demand and the future operating model required to meet this locally. This review remains work in progress and is anticipated to improve the volume and distribution of the caseloads held by individual RASSO investigators by enhancing the resources available to complete these. This review is scheduled to be completed by April 2025.

I was reassured to note that Sussex Police does not have any significant gaps in the data that is held by the Force around this area of policing. The Force uses a range of qualitative and quantitative data to measure success in this area and to understand whether Sussex Police is tackling RASSO effectively. The introduction of a national performance framework and the creation of a set of key performance indictors [developed by the Operation Soteria Joint Unit] is anticipated to deliver consistency of reporting throughout England and Wales.

Sussex Police has made an initial assessment of each of the five recommendations identified for chief constables in the HMICFRS report. I am pleased to note that these have been allocated to the appropriate individuals within the Force to progress, with action plans developed to address each of these recommendations within the prescribed timescales.

Project Fides

Earlier this year, my office provided funding from Round 5 of the Safer Streets Fund to establish Project Fides – a unique unit created specifically to improve RASSO results. Within Fides, we have created 8 victim coordinator posts to engage with female victims of rape in a public place, secure best evidence and enable investigators to focus on ongoing investigations.

The coordinators seek to build rapport with the victims of these crimes to keep them engaged and involved in the criminal justice system to try and secure criminal convictions against those offenders responsible for these crimes, alongside seeking to gain a better understanding of the barriers that exist to stop these victims from supporting the police with these prosecutions.

Whilst still in their relative infancy, the victim coordinators are already recognised to have had a significant impact to date. Since their introduction in February 2024, the victim coordinators have collectively contributed towards ensuring that more than 130 victims have remained in the criminal justice system across the calendar year of 2024 to date.

In my role as Police & Crime Commissioner, I will continue to scrutinise the performance of Sussex Police in this important area to ensure that the Force looks at the support that is offered to all RASSO victims to maximise the efficiency and effectiveness of the policing response provided and to hold more offenders to account for these offences.

Yours Sincerely

Katy Bourne OBE
Sussex Police & Crime Commissioner