

## The timely and effective completion of initial investigative actions in rape investigations

### Abstract

**Purpose.** This research assessed how five police forces participating in Operation Soteria Bluestone conducted first response and early investigative actions in rape cases. The focus was on whether these actions were completed appropriately, sufficiently, and in a timely manner.

**Methodology.** Researchers reviewed case logs from 59 rape offences across five forces. Each log was coded using a standard format to identify completed actions, missing information, and the timing and quality of responses. Descriptive analyses were conducted to explore how often each investigative action was taken, and judgements made based on a standard set of criteria as to whether they were completed effectively and in a timely manner. Data from the qualitative analyses were used to provide additional context.

**Findings.** Most investigative actions were completed (between 72.88% and 100% of the time), demonstrating that whilst first responders and officers are generally conducting the early crucial steps in rape investigations, timeliness of these actions varied widely, completed promptly in only 69.49% - 90.62% of cases. Even more concerning was the sufficiency in which these actions were completed, which ranged from 49.15% - 66.66%. Qualitative data revealed that these shortcomings were often due to limited specialist knowledge and resource constraints. These factors affected both the speed and quality of early investigative practices, with important implications for victim safety and evidential integrity.

**Originality.** This study provides a unique contribution by analysing case data to evaluate frontline police actions in the earliest stages of rape investigations - an area often neglected in existing research. While prior studies have focused on victim experiences or criminal justice outcomes, this paper highlights operational gaps in initial investigative practices, including evidence collection, safeguarding, and logging information. The findings emphasise the foundational role of early police action in determining case progression and outcomes, aligning with the principles of the National Operating Model for rape and serious sex offences and offering practical recommendations for improvement.

**Keywords:** first response; initial investigative actions; golden hour; rape and serious sexual offences; policing RASSO; rape investigations

## **Introduction**

In recent years, trust in the police in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland has reached a historic low (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services [HMICFRS], 2022a), and this erosion of confidence is particularly evident in the police response to rape. It is estimated that just one in six victims of rape report the offences to the police (Office for National Statistics, 2021). Lack of trust and confidence in the police has also contributed to high case attrition rates, with 50% of adult rape victims withdrawing their complaints to the police (HM Government, 2021). These attrition rates have been attributed to poor treatment of victims by police, as well as lengthy delays in investigations (HM Government 2021). Inquiries have highlighted systematic failings within some of the most recent and highest profile rape cases (Angiolini, 2024), and the recent End-to-End Rape Review (HM Government, 2021) highlighted catastrophic failures in police handling of adult rape cases, calling for improved timeliness across all stages of the criminal justice process and emphasising the need for systemic change to restore public trust. This lack of trust in the police occurs at a time when reported incidents of violence against women and girls are on the rise, reaching 'epidemic' levels, with the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) recently describing the issue as a 'national emergency' (NPCC, 2024). This is supported by a survey of nearly 500 victims which reported that only 14% believed they would achieve justice by reporting a crime to the police (Victims' Commissioner, 2020).

### ***Entering the criminal justice system: First response and initial investigation***

To foster public trust and deliver justice for victims of sex offences, it is vital that every stage of the justice process is both timely and responsive. A swift and appropriate response can have enormous benefits for victims (Mourtgos et al., 2021), which is particularly important given that victims have described how delays in the investigative process and a poor response from officers prolonged their trauma (George & Ferguson, 2021). In particular, how officers manage the initial stages of an investigation is crucial, as officers' first response can often shape victims' desire to progress with a criminal investigation (HMICFRS, 2021a). The effective completion of initial investigative actions can also maximise the chance of securing relevant evidence that supports the realistic prospect of conviction (College of Policing, 2013; 2024). Effective first response and the subsequent immediate actions conducted as part of a rape investigation are, therefore, a critical part of ensuring investigative success.

The College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice guidance entitled the *Investigation process* states that investigations should follow reasonable lines of enquiry to gather evidence which impartially involves the suspect linked to the investigation. The evidence collected through enquiries involving the victim, as well as witnesses, should be examined with the aid of both scientific and technical expertise in order to maximise evidential opportunities and reach a successful case outcome (College of Policing, 2013; 2024). There are multiple actions that could be considered 'standard practice' as part of an initial rape investigation, including (but not limited to): conducting intelligence checks on any named suspects; assessing risk and ensuring the safeguarding of the victim and others involved; securing and preserving forensic material such as DNA material; collecting and analysing digital material such as mobile phone data; suspect interview; and obtaining a victim account.

### ***Intelligence gathering – background checks on suspects***

Where suspects are named, conducting background intelligence checks on that person is a critical early-stage investigative action, helping to identify risks and guide subsequent actions by revealing prior allegations or convictions which may be relevant to the current investigation (College of

Policing, 2013; 2024). This process involves thorough checks across multiple databases, including force intelligence systems, the Police National Computer, the Violent and Sex Offender Register, and the Police National Database. Research highlights that thorough suspect vetting helps prevent miscarriages of justice and promotes accuracy and fairness in legal proceedings (Baldwin, 2017). Additionally, suspect background checks can contribute to offender profiling, enabling law enforcement to understand behavioural patterns and characteristics of suspects. This information can guide investigative strategies, help to prioritise leads, and support proactive crime prevention measures (Turvey, 2011).

#### *Risk and safeguarding*

Assessing risk and safeguarding at the onset and throughout a rape investigation is critically important because it directly protects the victim's safety, wellbeing, and engagement with the justice process, while also helping to prevent further harm to others. Some sexual violence victims report to police specifically because they fear for their safety and seek the protection of the police (Brooks-Hay, 2020). Neglecting a victim's welfare and safeguarding can not only put them at further risk, but may also exacerbate trauma and mental ill-health, and may lead some individuals to disengage from the investigation altogether (Waxman, 2019). According to the College of Policing (2013, 2024), first responders to reports of rape should carry out an initial assessment of risk or harm (e.g. THRIVE – threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability, and engagement; Keningale et al., 2024), identify vulnerabilities, and ensure that immediate safeguarding activity is instigated. Safeguarding measures for victims and witnesses, such as restrictions on suspect contact with the victim, should be continually monitored and reassessed as the investigation progresses. Risk assessments must remain flexible and be revisited regularly and where new information or intelligence necessitates a review.

#### *Physical material – DNA*

DNA material collected during rape cases may increase the likelihood of identifying the perpetrator where the suspect is unknown, or provide support to a victim's statement where the suspect denies sexual acts have taken place (College of Policing, 2017). DNA evidence can also strengthen a prosecution's case, with jurors being 33% more likely to convict when presented with DNA evidence in sex offence cases (Briody, 2002), and being perceived as stronger than eyewitness testimony (Cross et al., 2022). DNA material collection and analysis may also allow for subsequent crime linkage opportunities in the future, if the suspect reoffends. The collection of DNA material is likely to be time sensitive, and undue delay or failure to consider opportunities for DNA collection may lead to valuable material being contaminated, overlooked, or lost, highlighting the importance of timely material gathering. The decision and manner in which DNA material is collected, therefore, is an important, time sensitive investigative action, with effective action during the 'golden hour' in live cases often leading to the recovery of evidence which may enable rapid investigative progress (College of Policing, 2013; 2024).

#### *Digital material – the use of mobile phone data*

Over 90% of reported crimes involve a digital element (NPCC, 2020), with evidence commonly retrieved from mobile phones, laptops, applications, social media, internet activity, CCTV, and ANPR (Automatic Number Plate Recognition) data. Collecting digital material early is essential to prevent data loss and ensure timely processing, given the often-lengthy nature of digital forensic analysis. A 2022 inspection revealed police forces were overwhelmed by digital forensic demands, leading to a backlog of over 25,000 devices awaiting examination (His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services, 2022b). This backlog creates significant risks, delaying

investigations and with potential impacts on victims, witnesses, and suspects. Digital Media Investigators (DMIs) handle diverse digital evidence and require both technical and investigative expertise to assess its value (NPCC, 2020). However, concerns remain about inconsistent recruitment and insufficient technical skills among DMIs. Despite calls for improvement, progress in enhancing digital forensic capabilities has been modest (Wilson-Kovacs, 2021). Mobile phones present a particular issue in that not only do suspects go to great lengths to conceal or destroy data, but advanced levels of privacy and encryption offered by mobile phone companies present significant challenges for DMIs to extract data (HMICFRS, 2022b). Further, many mobile phones are protected with biometrics/passcodes that are difficult to bypass without user cooperation (Jones & Brookman, 2024).

#### *Suspect interview*

The suspect interview (whether provided voluntarily or under arrest) is a critical element of the initial stage of the investigation, allowing the police to gain a foundational understanding of a report using the PEACE model adopted in 1992 (Bull, 2023), and preserve accounts at the earliest opportunity. This allows investigators to identify contradictions or corroborations with other evidence, witness statements, and the victim's account (Tidmarsh, 2021). This also provides the opportunity to assess immediate risks and safeguard appropriately. Further, whilst physical and forensic evidence can prove the occurrence of sexual contact and/or intercourse, it does not prove absence of consent. Timely suspect interview has been subject to scrutiny of late, as a report by HMICFRS (2024) revealed delays in suspect arrests as officers were 'routinely diverted' away from rape cases to police local and national events. These delays left victims feeling 'vulnerable' and 'afraid'.

#### *Obtaining a victim account*

Obtaining early victim and witness accounts is critical in policing investigations, especially in rape cases, as the victim's memory often constitutes the most crucial evidence (Hohl & Conway, 2017). The detail, specificity, and consistency of victim accounts are pivotal throughout the prosecution process (Hohl & Conway, 2017). Delays in gathering these accounts can significantly hinder investigations, as human memory for details deteriorates over time, yet police heavily rely on the victim's credibility (Leach et al., 2009). Victim interviews – often referred to as ABE (achieving best evidence) interviews (Smith, 2024) – are also essential for shaping investigative strategies by providing insights that guide forensic examinations, identify witnesses, and prioritise leads. This is particularly important in historic cases where physical evidence may be scarce.

#### ***Action, efficacy, and timeliness of rape investigations***

Several factors influence the effectiveness of initial rape actions: whether they were completed when appropriate, whether they were of satisfactory quality, and whether they were conducted in a timely manner. In a survey by the Victims' Commissioner, 65% of rape victims reported 'unreasonable delays' in the criminal justice process, including delays in contacting suspects or witnesses, obtaining evidence, scheduling ABE interviews, returning phones, and making charging decisions (Molina & Poppleton, 2020). These delays increase attrition rates and prolong victims' trauma, leading to feelings of lost hope, mental health deterioration, and diminished trust in police (Brooks-Hay et al., 2019; George & Ferguson, 2021). Delays and the completion of essential actions may be hindered by a lack of officer access to some systems, such as the Police National Database which is often restricted due to confidentiality concerns, resulting in delays as only a limited number of officers, even at inspector level, have access (Phythian & Kirby, 2023). HMICFRS (2021b) found recurring issues in victims' experiences, such as disorganised scheduling of statements, last-minute cancellations, poor communication about information requests, invasive access to unrelated

records, and prolonged phone retention. Many victims reported dissatisfaction with investigations, citing delays in evidence gathering and perceived unfair treatment compared to suspects.

### ***The current study***

Despite the importance of understanding how police respond in a prompt and proactive fashion to rape reports, research on the timeliness and quality of initial investigations remains scarce, despite evidence highlighting critical gaps in fundamental investigative actions. Assessing this issue depends on the integrity of recorded case information. Since 2014, HMICFRS has conducted regular inspections of ‘crime data integrity’ across police forces in England and Wales. These inspections focus on whether crimes, including sex offences, are accurately recorded (Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024). However, they do not evaluate the timeliness or quality of police compliance with statutory responsibilities during the initial stages of rape investigations.

While formal guidance for crime investigations – such as first response protocols and initial investigative actions – are in place (e.g. College of Policing, 2013; 2024), the extent to which police meet these requirements promptly and effectively remains unclear. As noted above, recent reports and research relating to the efficacy of investigative practice in rape demonstrate key failures and are often tied to shortcomings in several standard investigative practices.

This paper contributes to the growing body of evidence on police practices in first response and initial investigative actions in rape cases (see e.g. Allen et al., 2024; Barbin et al., 2024; and Gekoski, 2024, for examples of evaluated police practice related to other aspects of rape investigations). Specifically, it evaluates how effectively five pathfinder forces participating in Operation Soteria Bluestone (OSB)<sup>1</sup> carried out key investigative actions, during Year 2 of the programme. Operation Soteria Bluestone was a national police improvement programme aimed at transforming the approach to RASSO (rape and serious sex offences) investigations by adopting a victim centred, suspect focused, and context led approach. It emphasises the need for timely and high-quality investigative actions, alongside cultural and structural reforms to improve outcomes for victims and reduce attrition rates.

As part of this research, the five participating forces provided case reviews, enabling an assessment of the extent to which the following initial investigative actions were appropriate, sufficient, and timely: 1. background checks on suspects; 2. risk and safeguarding; 3. the collection of forensic biological material; 4. the collection of mobile phone material; 5. suspect interview; and 6. taking a victim's account through formal ABE. We reviewed how these immediate investigative actions were conducted with the following in mind:

- Whether the actions were completed when appropriate;
- Whether they occurred in a timely manner;
- Whether the quality of the action undertaken was sufficient.

## **Method**

### ***Sample and procedure***

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<sup>1</sup> This research was conducted as part of Operation Soteria Bluestone, funded by the UK Home Office. Designed by Katrin Hohl and Betsy Stanko, work package (pillar) leads were Kari Davies, Miranda Horvath, Kelly Johnson, Jo Lovett, Tiggey May, Olivia Smith, and Emma Williams.

Forces were asked to identify 40 cases of adult rape offences that were reported in their force between 2021 and 2023 as part of work undertaken in Year 2 of OSB. The request for different types of adult rape offence was calculated based on the prevalence within each force of case outcome (Charge – OC1; Victim withdraws – OC14 & OC16; Law doesn't pursue – OC15) and relationship type (domestic, acquaintance, and stranger), making sure a minimum of two cases in each category was sampled (taking away cases from the most prevalent section where needed), and totalling 40 cases. Forces were also encouraged to include, whenever possible, cases involving victims and suspects from minoritised groups (e.g. foreign nationals; English not a first language; part of a minoritised ethnic group; part of a minoritised religious group; identified as trans, lesbian, gay, or bisexual; had a physical or mental disability).

The number of cases actually received was lower than the original number of cases requested, and did not always reflect the sampling criteria set out as above based on our calculations. The length of investigation times for all closed cases was 1 day to 680 days, with a mean length of 340.5 days. Seven (11.86%) of the cases received were also still open, i.e. they had not been formally closed with a policing outcome. These cases were still included in the analysis because all had been open for a sufficient period of time that initial investigative actions should have been completed. For instance, the shortest period of time an open case had been running for was 45 days. One case had Outcome 18 – investigation complete, no suspect identified – attributed to it; this was also included in the analysis. Despite the more limited sample size, the final overall sample is highly diverse, comprising 59 cases across five forces, each of whom provided between seven to 20 cases (force 1 = 10; force 2 = 7; force 3 = 8; force 4 = 14; force 5 = 20), including both recent and historic cases. A breakdown of all analysed cases by relationship type and policing outcome is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. A breakdown of the case studies used by policing outcome and victim-suspect relationship**

	<b>OC1 Charge / Summons</b>	<b>OC14 &amp; 16 Victim declines</b>	<b>OC15 No further action</b>	<b>OC18 Suspect unidentified</b>	<b>Case open</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Stranger</b>	4 (6.77%)	4 (6.77%)	3 (5.08%)	1 (1.69%)	2 (3.39%)	14 (23.72%)
<b>Acquaintance</b>	6 (10.16%)	3 (5.08%)	3 (5.08%)	0 (0.00%)	0 (0.00%)	12 (20.33%)
<b>Domestic</b>	9 (15.25%)	11 (18.64%)	8 (13.55%)	0 (0.00%)	5 (8.47%)	33 (55.93%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	19 (32.20%)	18 (30.50%)	14 (23.72%)	0 (0.00%)	7 (11.86%)	59 (100.00%)

Source: Created by authors

A breakdown of all cases containing details of minoritised groups can be seen in Table 2:

**Table 2. A breakdown of the minoritised category details contained in the cases reviewed**

<b>Minoritised category</b>	<b>Total cases</b>	<b>% out of total 59 cases</b>
Language difference	6	10.16%
Migrant status	9	15.25%
Race / ethnicity	11	18.64%
Religion	1	1.69%
Sexual orientation	7	11.86%
Transgender status	2	3.38%

Disability	3	5.08%
Mental health	31	52.54%

Source: Created by authors

Four forces provided researchers with police laptops through which they had complete or partial access to the force-specific information system. Upon receiving a list of relevant cases from those forces, researchers searched for them in the force system and extracted relevant data using the case review tool. One force provided redacted files for the selected cases, from which researchers extracted the relevant information using the case review tool.

### **Materials**

The case review tool was used to extract data in a standardised format. This tool was a spreadsheet developed and tested by researchers tested and refined as part of OSB (see Hardiman & Khan, in preparation, for further details of the development of the case review methodology). The tool has two main sections. In the first tab, researchers were asked to input the basic details of the case they were reviewing. This helped to understand the incident's context and whether these were being recorded correctly in the crime management system. This was followed by three main sub-sections where researchers recorded whether actions were completed and when they were completed regarding the investigation's opening, main, and closing stages. This section helped to build an overarching view of completed investigative actions and whether any had been missed or not adequately considered. The second tab of the tool consists of a qualitative assessment of the case. It is divided into eight thematic areas of particular importance for rape investigations: Suspect Focus; Repeat Offending; Investigative Strengths; Engagement with Victims; Collaboration; Decision-Making; Timeliness & Disruptions; Recordings & Write-ups. For each of those areas, there are a set of sub-themes with prompt questions to assess and identify the strengths and weakness found in the case, which are noted across green (done well), red (requires improvement), or not applicable columns. After completing the evaluation of every case, researchers were asked to colour code the title box for each section in green or red to indicate whether overall, the work in that area was completed well or whether there was room for improvement.

### **Analysis**

Eight researchers coded cases using the review tool, having been provided with training and ongoing feedback from a senior researcher to ensure quality and consistency. Researchers were paired together and underwent an interrater reliability exercise at the start of the data coding process. They blind reviewed the same case and compared results in a discussion mediated by the senior researcher. This helped clarify misunderstandings in interpretations of categories of the tool and ensured a level of subsequent consistency in the coding where cases were coded by one researcher only. All data extraction was overseen by the senior researcher.

Researchers read through all information contained in the force's management system (and through attached documents when available and relevant) or redacted case files, noting any missing information as they filled out the tool. As they answered the prompt questions from the qualitative assessment tab, they were able to go back and forth between logs to double-check the information. The coded information was then collated to assess whether the immediate investigative actions highlighted above: were completed when appropriate; were completed sufficiently; and were undertaken in a timely manner. Researchers' observations about the cases in the qualitative data collected were used to supplement these initial analyses, providing additional

context where actions were not taken, or where they were not conducted in a timely or sufficient manner.

As with all work with police data there are limitations related to the uncertainty around ground truth regarding whether actions had been taken. It was not always possible to ascertain whether information had not been recorded by the police and would therefore be classed as missing, or alternatively, whether some information was not gathered due to the difficulties around the standardised categorisation and coding of free text information (Spence & Crivatu, 2025). During the analysis it became clear that these difficulties resulted in limitations in our understanding of the progression of these cases. We therefore conducted an initial quality assessment of our data, to highlight where data were available and where it was difficult to answer our initial research questions based on what was available.

### **Ethics**

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Suffolk (reference RETH21/006) and Bournemouth University (reference 39633). The main ethical issues related to the secure collection and storage of the data, given its sensitivity. This included having established protocols in place with each of the forces for how the data would be collected, particularly how it would be anonymised, and where and for how long it would be stored. Data Protection Impact Assessments and / or Data Sharing Agreements were put in place with forces to ensure these protocols were clearly articulated.

### **Results**

During the analysis, the number of cases where each action should have been taken was established, as not every case necessitated every investigative action measured here be taken. For instance, we would expect suspect background checks to be completed in cases where a suspect was identified. No suspect was identified in five of the 59 cases, meaning that this variable was considered ‘possible’ for completion in 54 cases. Table 3 provides an overview of the parameters under which each investigative action was considered viable for completion, and the judgements made around whether said action was timely and sufficient. These judgements were based on standardised assessment where possible, e.g. the collection of DNA material within the advised three-day window (Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine, 2025); others were based on what the researchers considered to be ‘reasonable’ based on their experience of assessing these cases, e.g. a week-long window for risk and safeguarding assessment.

Table 3 also notes the data quality and limitations of the case review data, in particular demonstrating where data were or weren’t available to assess an action’s timely and appropriate completion. Many of the judgements that had to be made were based on the reviewers’ assessments of timeliness and efficacy as outlined in the qualitative data collected. There were instances, such as the sufficiency of DNA and mobile phone material collection, suspect interview, and victim ABE, that was simply beyond the scope of the authors here to assess, based on the data collected. On discussions with the original reviewers, this is due to this information not being recorded in the original case files, e.g. a suspect interview would usually be noted as having been conducted, and the date it was conducted also recorded, but without conducting an assessment of the transcript of that interview, judgements around interview quality were not possible.

**Table 3. A summary of what was considered viable, timely, and sufficient for each investigative action**



Type of investigative action	Completed	Timely	Sufficient
Suspect background checks	The suspect had to be identified in the case review (qualitative data)	No dates were provided for this, so this was based on the researcher's assessment of 'early' in relation to the case (qualitative data)	This included at a minimum: local force systems, PNC, and PND, and further checks if foreign national / different area (qualitative data)
Risk assessment*	This should take place in all cases (qualitative data)	This should take place within the first week of report (qualitative data)	A formal assessment should have taken place (qualitative data)
Safeguarding*	This should take place in all cases (qualitative data)	This should take place within the first week of report (qualitative data)	Follow up actions in relation to the level of risk should have taken place (qualitative data)
DNA material	The offence has to have been reported within 3 days (quantitative data)	DNA was collected within 3 days of the offence (quantitative data)	<i>Beyond the scope of the researcher to assess</i>
Mobile phone material	There must have been a suggestion within the case that digital material was relevant and collected (qualitative data)	Digital evidence was collected within 7 days of being mentioned (qualitative data)	<i>Beyond the scope of the researcher to assess</i>
Suspect interview	The suspect should have been interviewed when named (except in cases where the victim declined to proceed early in the investigation) (quantitative and qualitative data)	No dates were provided for this, so this was based on the researcher's assessment of 'early' in relation to the case (qualitative data)	<i>Beyond the scope of the researcher to assess</i>
Victim ABE	An ABE should have been offered in all cases and completed where a victim wanted one (qualitative data)	Victims were invited to interview, set up when timely and convenient to them (qualitative data)	<i>Beyond the scope of the researcher to assess</i>

\*Risk assessment and safeguarding were separated within the analysis of case review data in order to first determine the timeliness and sufficiency of any formal risk assessments used, and then to examine the timeliness and sufficiency of follow-up actions in relation to safeguarding the victim.

Source: Created by authors

The information on how often each of the immediate investigative actions were conducted, whether they were conducted in a timely manner, and whether the action taken was sufficient, can be seen in Table 4. The percentages for completion, timeliness, and sufficiency are measured against the number of cases where each action was viable (i.e. judged as should have occurred), not the total number of cases.

**Table 4. The number of investigative actions completed, and whether they were timely and sufficient**

	Viable	Completed	Timely	Sufficient
Suspect background checks	54 (91.53%)	54 (100.00%)	46 (85.18%)	36 (66.66%)
Risk assessment	59 (100.00%)	43 (72.88%)	41 (69.49%)	29 (49.15%)
Safeguarding	59 (100.00%)	56 (94.91%)	52 (88.13%)	35 (59.32%)
DNA material	32 (54.24%)	32* (100.00%)	29 (90.62%)	n/a
Mobile phone material	34 (57.63%)	34 (100.00%)	29 (85.29%)	n/a
Suspect interview	43 (72.88%)	42 (97.67%)	33 (76.74%)	n/a
Victim ABE	42 (71.19%)	42 (100.00%)	32 (76.19%)	n/a

\*Victim (n= 15), suspect (n= 8), both victim and suspect (n= 9)

Source: Created by authors

As can be seen in Table 4, in the majority of the cases where the initial investigative actions were viable (i.e. could be undertaken), they were completed. Where possible, all cases contained suspect background checks, the collection of DNA and mobile phone material, and a victim ABE. Almost all possible cases contained a suspect interview (97.67%) and some form of safeguarding (94.91%), with risk assessment occurring in only 72.88% of viable cases.

The number of viable cases where the actions were taken in a timely and sufficient manner were lower, ranging from 69.49 to 90.62% and 49.15 to 66.66% respectively (with the caveat that sufficiency could only be measured for three of the seven investigative actions). Researcher observations were used to understand why when the actions were viable and completed, they often were not done in a timely and sufficient manner. Whilst suspect background checks were timely in most case reviews, in some cases this was conducted approximately a month from the time of report, with the longest being over two months after report. More concerning was the quality of checks undertaken. In many cases, not all of the standard checks were completed i.e. local force checks, PND (Police National Database), and PNC (Police National Computer). In one case, officers failed to conduct basic investigative processes, including suspect background checks, after a supervisory review determined that the allegation was a result of the victim's mental health and on this basis considered to be false.

Case review data indicated a lack of understanding among some police officers in relation to prioritising the forensic material collection within the golden hour, as well as confusion about which type of evidence should be collected. Moreover, one case review included an officer who

mishandled a forensic exhibit by opening it outside laboratory conditions and thus it could not be sent off for analysis. In a few cases, forensic material collection was delayed due to multiple reasons such as lack of availability of Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) appointments or lack of communication between officers during handovers.

Mobile phone material was often disproportionately taken from the victim, with officers in one case not checking to see whether they could obtain evidence from the suspect's phone instead after the victim did not want to give up their phone. Additionally, in another case, it took officers approximately three months after report to obtain relevant digital material. Although the sufficiency of the digital material collected was beyond the scope of the researcher to assess, in only one case did officers note that they only downloaded what was necessary to the investigation as opposed to a full phone download. In some cases, the suspect's phone was not downloaded despite being relevant to the investigation, and in others, full phone downloads were often conducted, contradicting national guidelines of data extraction needing to be both necessary and proportionate (UK Parliament, 2022).

Whilst most victim interviews were conducted in a timely manner, this was delayed in one case where officers were not able to provide an interpreter for the victim. In some cases, both the victim and suspect interviews were delayed by a month with no rationale provided as to why. Due to heavy workload and a lack of resources, one suspect was interviewed approximately three months from the time of report.

Although few cases showed poor timeliness of risk assessments and safeguarding, without officers providing a rationale for these actions, it was the sufficiency of these actions that were lacking within the case review data. In some cases, a formal risk assessment e.g. THRIVE / DARA (domestic abuse risk assessment) was not conducted, whereas in others the level of risk itself appeared to be judged as low despite concerning details in the cases. For example, in one domestic case the suspect was determined to be a medium risk to the victim with the officers stating that the victim was not persistently targeted. However, both the victim and the suspect were previously known to MARAC (multi-agency risk assessment conference), as well as the suspect having two previous domestic abuse offences against other partners that were not logged by officers during background checks. Additionally, the risk to children was not considered or assessed in some cases, including in one case where the child was present in the bed when the reported rape took place. In many cases, the victim did not appear to be adequately safeguarded, with a lack of support provided and no consideration of long-term safeguarding in cases where the suspect had been arrested. In cases where the victim felt compelled to resume contact with the suspect, no safeguarding actions were taken by officers to protect the victim. In relation to vulnerabilities such as suicidal tendencies or poor mental health, there did not appear to be any safeguarding for either the victim or the suspect. For both risk assessments and safeguarding, there was a lack of rationale provided within the case review data for why certain actions were not taken in order to disrupt the suspect and protect the victim.

## **Discussion**

This study evaluated the completion, timeliness, and sufficiency of key initial investigative actions in rape investigations across five police forces in the England and Wales. Fifty-nine case reviews were analysed, with each action assessed only where its completion was deemed viable based on the nature and context of the case. The findings demonstrate that, where viable, most investigative actions were completed, with four of the seven actions – suspect background checks, DNA and mobile phone material collection, and victim ABE – completed in all cases. This highlights a marked

difference from findings during Year 1 of OSB as outlined in Stanko (2022); where safeguarding, for instance, was only completed in 65.1% of cases analysed, suspect intelligence completed in 45.9% of cases, and suspect and victim interview in 60.3% and 45.2% respectively (Walley et al., 2025). These improvements are in line with the positive emerging evidence of the effects of OSB on the policing of RASSO which was captured in the HMICFRS (2024) report on an inspection of progress to introduce the NOM in nine early adopter forces.

Although high rates of completion were observed, the proportion of actions undertaken in a timely manner, and conducted appropriately (where it was possible to evaluate this), was markedly lower. Risk assessment, for instance, was only deemed to have occurred in a timely manner in 69.49% of cases and only deemed to be sufficient in 49.15% of cases. Actions that are fundamental to understanding the context of the case and that should inform other actions such as risk assessment, like suspect background checks, were also only completed in a timely manner in 85.18% of cases, which has the potential to detrimentally impact the course of the investigation as a whole and contribute to the long investigation times seen (Lovett et al., 2022; Topping, 2021).

The contextual information we were able to extract from the case reviews provides some insights into why these delays are occurring and why officers are failing to complete these actions as comprehensively as they should be. A lack of resourcing, for instance, high officer workloads, as well as lack of access to expert resources such as SARC appointments, presents barriers to investigative actions being completed. Similarly, a lack of specialist competence was also seen, for instance, the lack of training or expertise around forensic material collection highlights how critical pieces of evidence may be being missed or mishandled to the detriment of those investigations, as well as critical gaps in appropriate risk assessment and safeguarding actions highlighted. It is well documented in the literature that both a lack of capacity and of specialist competence is deleterious to investigations (Casey, 2023; Walley et al., 2025).

The difficulties associated with a lack of specialist expertise also have the potential to impact negatively on officers. Findings from the OSB Year 1 report revealed that there is a direct link between officer burnout, a lack of learning and development opportunities for officers, and their confidence in applying the right investigative strategies and actions when conducting investigations (Stanko, 2022). More recent research, however, found positive effects where specialism is present, suggesting that acquiring specialist skills or working for specialist units can result in officers reporting more confidence in their abilities, being satisfied with their role, and reporting better wellbeing (Barbin et al., 2025).

One of the secondary findings from this paper was the difficulty associated with evaluating actions taken during an investigation. It is a finding well documented elsewhere that there are significant inconsistencies in police data recording practices, with some forces maintaining entries that were excessively brief and lacking sufficient detail (Brunton-Smith et al., 2024; Office for Statistics Regulation, 2024; Spence & Crivatu, 2025). In one force, logs were so minimal that it was difficult to ascertain the investigative focus or track the progression of the case. Such shortcomings present notable challenges, not just to conducting research or evaluating practice, but especially when cases are transferred between officers, as incoming officers may struggle to identify which investigative avenues have already been pursued and which remain outstanding. Moreover, inadequate recording can hinder the identification of crime linkage opportunities and obscure critical information needed to accurately determine the nature of the victim-suspect relationship, both of which are essential in a context-led approach to an investigation. Comprehensive, accurate,

and detailed documentation is therefore vital, not only for continuity and accountability but also to support strategic decision-making and to ensure that investigations are responsive to the specific dynamics and risks of each case (College of Policing, 2020; Heaton, 2011). These findings suggest an urgent need for improved guidance and training across forces to enhance data recording practices and ensure consistency and sufficiency in investigative documentation (HMICFRS, 2019).

### ***Limitations***

Some of the assessments conducted in this article were necessarily arbitrary, e.g. risk and safeguarding, depending on the situation, may require a much more expedited timeline than one week, or may not be required under such a strict timeline. Nevertheless, the researchers suggest it is a reasonable maximum length of time for an officer to have at least made an initial assessment of risk and subsequent safeguarding measures, even if there is no apparent urgency, due to the potential for harm caused to the victim or wider population if this action is not prioritised. It also raises the interesting question of how such an evaluation process can be standardised moving forwards for forces to consider. Although forces were provided with sampling criteria for the selection of cases, not all forces adhered to these criteria and some selection bias may have been introduced.

As noted above, there were also practical issues which affected data collection and the completeness of our final dataset, as has been documented by other researchers about working with police data which may be incomplete and is not recorded for the purposes of academic analyses (Lovett et al., 2022; Spence & Crivatu, 2025). We noticed differences in the detail of information provided in case logs between forces which affected the amount of data we were able to collect. For example, one force had a high number of entries in each case which tended to be very detailed, whilst in another there were very few entries for each case which were concise. Ultimately, as with all police recorded data it was often difficult to ascertain whether an action was completed and not recorded, or not completed at all. This was a particular issue in the force for which redacted case file logs were provided to the researchers, as opposed to direct access to crime management systems. Files in this force, for instance, contained redacted police officers' and witnesses' names (without replacing them with an acronym), which made it difficult for researchers to establish context and the continuity element within the investigation. We would argue, however, that if an action has not been recorded it 'does not exist' for any other officer looking at the case logs, which is the approach we have taken here. The argument equally exists that the case review tool, created for the purpose of this project, would have more effectively captured data had it been able to go through a period of piloting and refinement, but this was not possible within the time constraints of the data collection.

### ***Practical implications and future directions***

The findings here are demonstrative of improvements within OSB forces around the frequency with which investigative actions are conducted when comparing this Year 2 data to the Year 1 data published elsewhere (Stanko, 2022; Walley et al., 2025), although it is impossible to directly or solely link these changes to OSB. Gaps remain, however, around how well they are completed. This raises two pressing matters for forces to consider. The first is *why* there are still gaps around timeliness and sufficiency in the basic building blocks of rape investigations; what the specific resources and expertise are that are required to make improvements in this area. Coordinated efforts between police forces and other agencies would allow for the pooling of resources, expertise, and information necessary for the successful resolution of the investigation. For instance, officers having a better understanding of analysts working in Digital Forensic Units may facilitate the faster analysis of digital material, and the earlier resolution of any challenges associated with this type of data collection.

Likewise, ensuring the appropriate resources are available to facilitate officer specialist knowledge is crucial. The National Operating Model, for instance, was introduced in June 2023 as a result of work conducted during the OSB project, and was designed to provide additional guidance for officers investigating RASSO. Likewise, an updated Specialist Sexual Assault Investigators Development Programme (Home Office, 2024) was launched in 2024 (Home Office, 2024). Evaluation will be required to understand how this additional information assists officers.

The second is *how* forces should be monitoring the success or challenges associated with investigative process. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as part of OSB were produced (not publicly available) for forces to work towards. This research highlights the importance of including nuance within any targets to avoid a ‘tick box’ approach to improvement and the promotion of a ‘hitting targets’ culture. The basis of the analyses for this article was detailed case review data, involving the careful review of the narrative investigative logs, rather than the mass extraction of data coded within the police management systems (as was given to the researchers for other OSB analyses; see Horvath & Davies, 2025, for further details of the data collected for the OSB project). In the absence of any more automated way of extracting these data, forces must be alive to the idea of conducting case study review to understand the nuances with which an investigation is undertaken, and then of recording that review in a way that can be measured against key objectives. No Further Action (NFA) scrutiny panels are an example of where such case review takes place, but forces should consider how the more systematic evaluation of performance could be conducted so that evaluation is not undertaken solely when something is deemed to have gone wrong. While these cases are important, a lack of understanding of the general standard with which ‘acceptable’ investigations are conducted means forces cannot have a proper handle on the range of practice standard which, inevitably, means that good practice cannot be identified and celebrated as equally as poor practice cannot be identified, particularly when it does not lead to formal review. Given the worryingly high number of officers reporting mental health issues (Police Federation, 2024), establishing ways of not only supporting officers to better practice, but recognising good work, must be of critical importance to forces.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored whether, how promptly, and how effectively several initial actions in rape investigations were conducted in several forces in England and Wales. The results suggest that the majority of investigative actions are completed, but they are less frequently conducted in good time or to a sufficient standard. There were often instances where it was difficult to establish how well the investigative actions had been completed from the case files from which the data were drawn. Forces should be aware of why these gaps in good practice exist, and how best to monitor investigative actions to better promote and maintain standards within rape policing.

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