

Progress to introduce a national operating model for rape and other serious sexual offences investigations. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

Published on 22nd August 2024, this inspection outlines national findings regarding the progress of Operation Soteria, an initiative aimed at transforming how the police handle rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO). Since 2021, West Midlands Police (WMP) has been one of 19 early adopter Forces implementing Soteria through the National Operating Model (NOM). The NOM provides a foundation of investigative practices and guidelines to help Forces improve responses to these serious crimes and achieve better outcomes in RASSO investigations.

The inspection, conducted between September and November 2023, assessed the progress Forces have made in RASSO investigations, as well as the benefits and challenges they have encountered. WMP was one of four pathfinder Forces inspected for their progress with Operation Soteria. The inspectorate recognised the challenges of implementing a new operating model that requires both organisational and cultural shifts in how RASSO cases are approached. While the inspection highlighted numerous areas of promising and continually improving practice, the inspectorate made five national recommendations for Chief Constables to further enhance the handling of RASSO cases.

‘By 31 January 2025, all Forces should make sure personnel working on rape and other serious sexual offences receive College of Policing approved training on the investigation of word-on-word cases’.

Training materials are currently integrated for RASSO personnel, ensuring comprehensive coverage of all necessary aspects for effective implementation. In preparation for further guidance from Operation Soteria, WMP has proactively distributed training materials to managers and supervisors to ensure readiness. The regional delivery of NOM training, led by the Operation Soteria Joint Unit, is planned to take place before January 2025.

‘By 31 July 2025, chief constables should make sure their Forces use the new definition of repeat rape and other serious sexual offences suspects to identify and manage them’.

WMP has proposed the completion of the definition currently under development. Pillar 2 of Operation Soteria, along with its lead, has already suggested a definition, which is being used to develop a data extraction methodology aimed at identifying specific offender cohorts. Additionally, they are exploring local forums to manage offenders through a collaborative, partnership-based approach. While Durham's Multi-Agency Tasking and Coordination (MATAC) has been recognised as a best practice model in shaping the definition, upon review, it closely aligns with WMP's existing programmes for Offender Management.

The expectation is that WMP will comply with the timescale prescribed by the inspectorate.

‘By 31 January 2025, all chief constables should make sure their Forces prioritise identifying and disrupting RASSO suspects. This includes making sure that: Forces track, manage, and respond effectively’.

to breaches of bail and protection orders in RASSO cases; and all relevant personnel complete National Operating Model training on using criminal and civil orders to tackle RASSO’.

WMP is actively prioritising and closely monitoring suspects in RASSO cases. Breaches of bail conditions are tracked within individual crime reports, with supervisors and managers overseeing the process to ensure accountability.

Training specifically relates to NOM products NOM 21 and NOM 22, that provide for the training on using criminal and civil orders to tackle RASSO. WMP are currently in discussion with the Operation Soteria joint unit on the delivery mechanism for NOM products.

The WMP RASSO team holds regular service improvement meetings to identify ways to streamline the tracking and management of offenders on bail for RASSO offences. This includes systematically recording breaches within a performance framework to ensure a consistent and appropriate response. Additionally, WMP utilises a civil order reporting tool that consolidates data and clearly identifies individuals subject to Sexual Risk Orders (SROs) and Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPOs). Therefore, I am satisfied that the Force is making good progress in identifying and disrupting RASSO suspects.

The expectation is that WMP will comply with the timescale prescribed by the inspectorate.

‘By 31 January 2025, chief constables should make sure their Forces have good processes in place for applying to retain DNA and fingerprints to improve their use of section 63G of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984’.

The current process, developed and fully implemented by the Major Crime Unit (MCU), will undergo an independent evaluation at the request of WMP as part of this recommendation, with support from Operation Soteria, to ensure appropriate procedures are in place.

‘By 31 March 2025, all chief constables should make sure that, as part of adopting the National Operating Model, their Forces: develop a rape and other serious sexual offences problem profile; include the National Operating Model flight deck within their strategic performance monitoring; and adopt any key performance indicators that are agreed and published by the Soteria Joint Unit’.

In preparation for this recommendation, WMP has commissioned and received an analytical product to guide the development of the Problem Profile. The full Problem Profile has been commissioned, with partnership data requested for inclusion. Key stakeholder engagement has been facilitated through the Sexual Assault and Abuse Board to ensure comprehensive input. While the information within the NOM and Key Performance Indicators are still being finalised, draft KPIs have been shared, with plans underway to develop an Operation Soteria reporting tool to allow straightforward strategic performance monitoring.

The expectation is that WMP will comply with the timescale prescribed by the inspectorate.

Conclusion

It is encouraging to see the positive recognition of WMP for their work. The acknowledgment of their progress, driven by Operation Soteria, underscores the Force commitment to addressing these critical issues more effectively. The implementation of an online portal to centralise resources and guidance for their workforce is a significant step towards enhancing operational efficiency, ensuring officers have the necessary tools to navigate RASSO cases effectively.

While the feedback from the Operation Soteria review team challenges forces commitment to prioritise RASSO, WMP strategic leads have taken a proactive approach by collaborating with other Soteria police forces. This led to the creation of a comprehensive Soteria plan, complete with performance metrics, demonstrating a clear focus on data-driven outcomes. It is reassuring to see such efforts aimed at providing chiefs with the insights needed to assess the progress of Operation Soteria implementation.

WMP have dedicated RASSO teams with proposals to ensure 100% of those officers are accredited detectives or on the pathway to become accredited. WMP is also spearheading national activity with both the Sexual Abuse Victim Advisor (SAVA) and a RASSO cold case review officer. The Chief Constable has approved the formation of a cold case review team, following funding from my office to support fund these pilot roles as innovations for Operation Soteria. The formation of a RASSO CPS gatekeeper is seen nationally as innovative practice and there is a specific Joint Operational Improvement Meeting (JOIM) (CPS interface) for RASSO.

Equally noteworthy is the WMP commitment to supporting the well-being of their RASSO teams. The introduction of "The Inspire Wellbeing Programme" reflects an understanding of the emotional and psychological toll these investigations can take on officers. The programme offer includes well-being training days and hypnotherapy sessions, affording proactive measures aimed at addressing stress and burnout, which will likely contribute to better staff retention.

I welcome the findings and recommendations from this inspection. WMP has been praised for their pioneering and proactive approach to both Operation Soteria and staff well-being. The recommendations from this inspection will serve as a guide for further transforming how police forces nationwide handle RASSO cases. However, WMP must continue to build on this progress to ensure that the rights and welfare of victims and survivors are always at the forefront of the quality of the response, the investigation and the outcomes that are achieved.

Yours faithfully,



Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner