

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Non-contact sexual offences, HC 504

Wednesday 24 April 2024

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Members present: Dame Diana Johnson (Chair); Lee Anderson; James Daly; Simon Fell; Kim Johnson; Tim Loughton; Alison Thewliss.

Questions 69 - 157

Witnesses

I: Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, Deputy CEO, College of Policing, NPCC Lead for tackling VAWG, Chair of the Violence and Public Protection Portfolio; Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Paul Furnell, Contact, Safeguarding, Crime & Justice, British Transport Police; Louisa Rolfe, Assistant Commissioner, Frontline Policing Metropolitan Police Service; Commander Ben Russell, Intelligence & Covert Policing, Metropolitan Police Service.

II: Laura Farris MP, Minister for Victims and Safeguarding; Joanna West, Director of Tackling Exploitation and Abuse, Home Office; Amy Randall, Director for Victims and Vulnerability Policy, Ministry of Justice.

Written evidence from witnesses:



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Deputy Chief Constable Maggie Blyth, Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Paul Furnell, Louisa Rolfe and Commander Ben Russell.

Q69 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to the Home Affairs Committee. Sorry for the slightly late start this morning. This is our last session on our inquiry into non-contact sexual offences. The aims for this session are to explore the current policing response to non-contact sexual offences—including the potential for data to inform that response and any challenges to utilising that data—to understand what more can be done across the criminal justice system to prevent these offences, identify perpetrators and bring them to justice, and provide effective support to victims and survivors, and then to question the Minister about issues raised so far during the inquiry and within her remit.

Welcome to our first panel this morning. I would like each of you to introduce yourselves. If we could start perhaps with Commander Russell, if you could just say who you are representing, that would be very helpful.

Commander Russell: Good morning, I am from the Metropolitan Police and I am the commander for intelligence and covert policing.

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: Good morning. I am the National Police Chiefs' Council's lead on tackling violence against women and girls. I am also the deputy chief constable at the National College of Policing.

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: Morning, I am at British Transport Police, and I am in charge of, and strategic lead for, VAWG.

Louisa Rolfe: Good morning, I am assistant commissioner from the Metropolitan police, responsible for frontline policing, and the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for domestic abuse.

Q70 **Chair:** Thank you. We are very pleased to see you all today. I wondered if I could start us off with DCC Blyth. You are obviously the main person in dealing with violence against women and girls, and I wondered if you could just set out what your main achievements have been since you have been in post?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you for inviting me to give evidence this morning. As the National Police Chiefs' Council's lead in tackling violence against women and girls, I would also emphasise I work across many other NPCC leads, such as assistant commissioner Louisa Rolfe; we very much co-ordinate together. What I would like to set out this morning is what we have done over the last two and a half years, but also the importance of the national co-ordination that we feel we need to maintain to provide a consistent and co-ordinated response across our 43 forces. It is also worth reiterating



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that as we tackle these crimes, we have to set out what the threat is, be really clear about the level of threat, and that is really well understood.

In the last couple of years we have published—we are doing this annually—a strategic threat risk assessment, in the same way that we tackle any other crime, like terrorism, serious and organised crime. That really has helped us draw out and focus on domestic abuse as a volume crime, rape and serious sexual offending, child sexual exploitation and abuse. That is important both in terms of the impact on victims, but also just the numbers of perpetrators we are talking about, and then the online threat. In pulling out and setting that threat assessment, we are quite methodical in understanding what we are dealing with.

I was going to share with you, as a starter, some of that headline data as well. If you do not mind me using the term VAWG—it is not always an easy acronym to explain—for those crime types that sit within this level of violence. It is really helpful to have VAWG placed within the strategic policing requirement because that has, again, allowed us to approach our policing response in the same way that we tackle counter-terrorism and serious and organised crime. Over the last two years, we have mobilised all 43 of our police forces around VAWG. We set our first national framework in 2021, setting out those key threats and expecting every police force to self-assess against that in preparation for inspection from HMICFRS. We have reinvigorated that framework in the last six weeks, using and adopting the police doctrine of a 4P approach, which is very much around pursue, prevent, protect and prepare, and again, very similar to how we approach terrorism and serious and organised crime.

It is important to have that national co-ordination and that national framework so that we can initiate consistency across 43 forces, and to allow the guidance, the training and the approach to be as consistent as possible in how we pursue largely the men who are violent towards women; not always, there are male victims too. But our data shows that this is predominantly a crime perpetrated by men. It has also allowed us to set out the evidence base, and a big part of that evidence base in the last two years has been initiated by Op Soteria, which I think, Chair, you and colleagues are familiar with as very much a new approach to understanding the perpetrators behind rape and sexual offending. And this is relevant to what we are going to discuss today. Allowing us to use that evidence base across other crimes that sit within VAWG, particularly domestic abuse: one in three rapes is domestic abuse linked, and we know that stalking and harassment underpin much of the sorts of crimes we are talking about. Having that evidence base set by Soteria, and using it to inform guidance and training elsewhere, has been really important.

Q71 Chair: That sounds very impressive. Lots of strategies and reinvigoration, and lots of the four Ps, and Operation Soteria we have heard lots about. Drilling down, then, into this particular issue that we are concerned about, the non-contact sexual offending. How does that fit? All that framework you have around it, what does it actually mean in terms of



police response to non-contact sexual offending?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: It is really important to set out that framework because it evidences the level of the epidemic. Our data has shown that one in 10 people are victims of the crimes that sit under VAWG. We estimate that one in 15 people are perpetrators of these types of crimes.

Q72 **Chair:** Sorry, one in 10 people, we are talking about women, are we not? One in 10 women—

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: Not entirely, because if we look at under-16s we know that some victims are boys, and we know that some victims of these types of crimes are male as well. We know it is predominantly affecting and impacting women, but not entirely. We also know that predominantly the perpetrators are male.

Q73 **Chair:** You are saying one in 15?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: In terms of an estimate against the scale of what we are dealing with, and I wanted to start with the scale because that includes non-contact as well as contact. If we are looking at all those crimes that sit within VAWG, from child abuse, exploitation, through to domestic abuse, to rape and serious sexual offending, to the online threat, looking at ONS data, looking at the data we are collecting, we are really, really concerned about the scale that we are dealing with. That is important, then, for the policing response. Largely around pursue, Commander Russell will talk about some of the approaches the Met is taking around going after the men that commit these crimes using a data-informed approach. But the scale is so huge to include non-contact and contact that it requires more than just a policing response. We have to be held to account on our response, but we urge the panel to understand the scale that we are dealing with.

Q74 **Chair:** One of the problems we have come across is the lack of data on non-contact sexual offending, for various reasons, which I am sure we are going to come on to. But you are saying VAWG is an epidemic?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: Yes, absolutely.

Q75 **Chair:** I have said before, I think most women would say at some stage in their lives they have been subjected to non-contact sexual offending. Either a man exposing himself, or something, exposure is the main one. What would you say about that, in terms of whether most women would say they have been subject to that?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: You are absolutely correct in saying, again, we only know what is reported into policing, and we accept the scale of non-contact sexual offending is wider than what is reported into policing. We cannot find research that demonstrates an absolute correlation between non-contact sexual offending and going on to commit more serious sexual offending. But my professional advice is, and colleagues here today will also say, "Absolutely, there will be some link."



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It does not necessarily mean non-contact offending determines an absolute escalation to go on to commit more serious sexual offending. But looking into patterns of offending would indicate that those, again, largely men who commit non-contact sexual offending, may have a propensity to go on to commit more concerning offending. It is something that we need to be able to target. We need to be able to understand, as we would in approaching any other investigation, that there will be red flags should, for example, somebody have committed indecent exposure and then gone on to commit other types of crime.

Q76 **Chair:** I am going to move on to James Daly in a moment, but why do you think it is that the police have been so poor at dealing with non-contact sexual offending in the past? Why have they not recognised it as a problem?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: There are three things here. First, policing reflects society, and as a society we have not placed weight on these crime types. Since the pandemic, and since some of the awful murders of women that have increased understanding across the public, things are changing. Secondly is the scale, and the scale that we are talking about means more than just a policing response. Thirdly, we are recognising this is now a threat like terrorism, but we recognise we still have an enormously long way to go.

Q77 **James Daly:** Deputy Chief Constable, I just have to pick you up on one of the statements you have made. It may well be true; it is very depressing if it is true. But if we are in this position because the police effectively have not taken the offences we are talking about seriously, that is a great indictment of the police over the last decade, is it not?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: I think, and the evidence that I was putting forward suggests, that in our society, these crimes that often happen behind closed doors—some in public spaces but often behind closed doors—we have not had an understanding of those. And we have not been equipped in how to deal with them, not just in policing but within society. I believe that is changing.

Q78 **James Daly:** I appreciate that, but that is just an excuse, is it not? To say that the police reflect society's faults or whatever is a very sad state of affairs. You are law enforcement officers who have offences to prosecute. I do not know whether you would call it institutional misogyny or a lack of taking offences seriously, but I think it is a disgrace, personally. And the public have been badly let down by the police, have they not?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: We absolutely know that we have a significant way to go in improving our policing response to these crime types. But I believe we are changing, and I have worked in this field of public protection all my career, and society is changing in the same way. Crime is evolving all the time. Particularly the online crime is something that 10 years ago, we would have not had the knowledge of in the way



that we do now, and how some of the underpinning concerns around stalking and harassment are utilised and how online crime perpetuates that.

Q79 James Daly: Can I ask the other members of the panel, and in respect of various offending types, I ask variations of this theme, because when you look at the data that is put forward, especially in respect of rape—we are not talking specifically about that, but it falls within the type of offending that we are all discussing here today—the charging rate is ludicrously low, and there may well be many reasons for that. But if I just give you an example, and I will come on to data in a second, at the end of March 2023, according to the figures that I have here, there were approximately 68,949 rape offenders reported to the police. There were 1,685 convictions. Now that is what I am reading here now, and that is from the internet, but if you put that into context that is beyond belief. It is literally beyond belief, that is not even charged outright, that is convictions. So out of the 68,000 people in the year 2023, only less than 2,000 of them had a conviction.

Now there is a huge problem with how these matters are prosecuted and your relationship as police officers with the Crown Prosecution Service, and it presents barriers which are very difficult for the police to overcome. I have spoken to police officers in this area who say that essentially for offences of this nature the Crown Prosecution Service is requiring evidence that amounts to a slam dunk; that unless you have the effective confession signed in blood, or very strong evidence, there is little chance of a charge. And I just wonder whether you feel that is impacting how seriously these matters are taken by the police?

Louisa Rolfe: Chair, if I may? Operation Soteria gave us a really good insight into what is going on here. The national lead for Rape and Adult Sexual Offences is Chief Constable Sarah Crewe from Avon and Somerset: I know she has previously spoken to this Committee about that work. But Operation Soteria identified a number of things. The Crown Prosecution Service has been working closely with policing on a joint national action plan, and I agree with you, the prosecution rate is far too low, and there has been work together to improve that and significantly address it. In the Met alone, in the last year 500 more cases of rape were prosecuted than the previous year. But also policing managing a significant increase, a 244% increase in reporting—

Q80 James Daly: In terms of non-contact sexual offences, if there has been an increase in prosecution in respect of rape, has that been reflected in the offences we are talking about here today?

Louisa Rolfe: I would need to come back to you on the increase, but I know the data in terms of reporting of exposure and voyeurism in the last year: 1,566 offences and a positive outcome rate, so a charge of 10.9%. We would like it to be more. But if I may go back to Operation Soteria and its key findings for policing nationally; forces have really grasped this, and through Maggie's leadership and working with her and Sarah



and their teams, they are really understanding. We have an adversarial justice system—I am sorry, I know you know this—where the burden of proof is on the prosecution to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that a crime has occurred. It is not always suited to behaviour-based crime, and particularly we find the conviction rate for stranger offences is higher than for offences that occur within a relationship. I know as the domestic abuse lead, there is a one-third overlap between domestic abuse and rape and sexual offences. We also know that often sexual offences are a way that perpetrators will seek to control their victim. It is a horrific thing. But we have also found that our adversarial justice system was leading police and prosecutors to be overly focused on the veracity of a victim's account, and insufficiently focused on the behaviour of perpetrators. And therefore, we might be—

Q81 James Daly: Can you explain what that means?

Louisa Rolfe: Yes, of course. If the burden of proof is on the prosecution to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that an offence occurred—

James Daly: The comment you made regarding the veracity of the complaint.

Louisa Rolfe: Yes, so actually ensuring that the case you put forward is watertight, and this comes out in society as well. You will all recall the news about celebrity cases and then the media's intrusive focus on whether the victim is perfect, rather than the offender's behaviour.

Q82 James Daly: I have to say, I completely agree with you. You explained it far more articulately than I did, but that has to have an impact. One of the things when we are talking about this debate, is conviction rates in court are not really the issue because the conviction rates are, I will not say acceptable, everything can always be improved. But the major problem is the referral rate from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service for these types of offences. Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell, I just wonder what your general view is in respect to this, because I take the view—unless I am wrong—that police want to prosecute people if they think there is evidence that they should go before a court, but this is not happening. Why?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: Yes, absolutely. I would echo both Maggie and Louisa's comments around a societal problem needing a societal response. I agree totally with that. One of the impacts of those rates that you have just referred to is a lack of confidence in the public, in victims and survivors of those offences, in reporting. British Transport Police is the 44th force, so 43 plus one, we are obviously outside the Home Office jurisdiction. And we recognised that in 2019 and did some academic research at the time to understand what we could do to increase reporting around non-contact sexual offending. I am pleased to report that we have doubled our figures over the last four or five years in non-contact reporting. That has had an impact on our solve rate. They are nowhere near where we as British



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Transport Police or UK policing want it to be, but that increased confidence and staying with those investigations has been really critical for us.

We listened to the survivors and victims' voice during that period, and one of the things that was critical, coming back to your point, Chair, was that some of the feedback we had from survivors was that not everyone in the non-contact space wished to pursue a judicial outcome. One of the major things that we have concentrated on in British Transport Police is listening to that voice and creating different pathways of reporting and recording from the traditional one route only into a prosecution. Currently as a force, you can report non-contact sexual offending anonymously and in confidence to us. And we will honour the confidentiality of that reporting because our priority is focusing our attention on identification of the perpetrator and looking at early identification intelligence programmes to deal with that perpetrator. That may be through civil orders, it may be through criminal orders, hopefully.

One of the benefits we have seen in that, is we have also developed an offender management programme that is outside the ViSOR programme of high-harm offenders, with RISE in partnership, looking at some of the behaviour. Because we are not saying that every man in the non-contact space is a sexual predator, because some are not. Some is about behaviour change and identification of the risks that they present, and our intelligence programme over that five years has been able to identify those through a streamlined process.

Q83 James Daly: Thank you. Just one very brief question for Commander Russell. This is in terms of your experience of prosecuting the offences we are talking about here today, and the relationship with the Crown Prosecution Service, because I am assuming that you have some form of oversight in respect of what happens in the Met in respect of that. If a victim comes forward and the evidence is a witness statement to say, "This has happened to me," is it generally the case that the Crown Prosecution Service will say that a witness statement with nothing else is not sufficient to mount a charge?

Commander Russell: I do not think we can generalise that much.

Q84 James Daly: That is the case in many circumstances, is it not?

Commander Russell: All on the panel have probably seen circumstances where you look at a case, and you think it is a very good one, and it has not gone the way you want it to go. Every case will be different, but we can all probably think of those cases. Probably the only other thing I would add is that I completely agree with all my colleagues, it is not all about prosecution; often our goal is around just reducing harm. As my colleagues said, civil orders are really powerful. Another thing is even when people are in prison, sometimes they keep offending. We know of offenders who continue to harass their victims even from within prison. We have to look at the whole life cycle of an offender and



the needs of a victim quite a bit more in the round. I completely take the point you are making, but it is not always about prosecution.

Q85 **James Daly:** I understand, but you are not a social worker, are you? You are there to enforce the law. Much as I appreciate that, that is all great, if somebody commits an offence, they should go before a court, should they not?

Commander Russell: Yes, and one of the good things we can do is with civil orders, we can take a case to court on the balance of probabilities rather than on beyond reasonable doubt and have much more chance of success. When putting restrictions around someone, we can put in place restrictions where they cannot form a relationship without permission from the police, where they cannot approach women in the street. There are very strong powers that we can use—others on the panel will know more about this than me—that are really powerful, and probably we want to make more use of them as well as prosecute and take more cases through the criminal justice system.

Q86 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel. DCC Blyth, you mentioned in your opening comments about violence against women and girls reaching what you described as an epidemic. I would be curious to know, in terms of the work that is being undertaken across the country in the 43 forces, you mentioned that they undertake a self-assessment. In terms of consistency and of monitoring of that approach, who does that and how well is it working?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: Thank you, that is a really important question. With 43 forces, there are many different ways of responding and approaching. We have wanted to look at consistency. The answer to your question is HMICFRS, the inspectorate. Those self-assessments are of interest to inspectors when they come in to do what are called PEEL inspections on general effectiveness. They also sometimes do deep-dive inspections into particular areas they have just completed, in terms of rape and serious sexual offending. We have worked hand-in-hand with colleagues in HMICFRS to ensure that the stick element of setting out guidance, the enforcement element of making sure that this remains a priority, is undertaken through inspection.

Q87 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of non-contact sexual offences, we have heard that the collection of data is not great, and part one of Angiolini talked about raising the profile and raising awareness. Again, how are those 43 forces looking at doing that in practice?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: In two ways really. One through the work that we are doing under the umbrella of VAWG, of recognising that non-contact offences committed by a perpetrator are part of the intelligence gathering. The golden-hour investigation when anyone, a PCSO, anyone at local level, has turned up to respond. So making sure that the perpetrator behaviour is understood. In the same way that we are looking at organised criminality, looking at terrorist profiles, we are



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wanting to ensure that that skills training is understood at the frontline. That is one way.

The second way is actually encouraging and ensuring that people report it in. The challenge we have with non-contact sexual offences is we only know part of the picture. At the moment, we accept a loss of confidence from our public reporting these crime types in. We want to encourage women and girls and anyone, boys and men too, to report in and to continue to build up that picture from data. But our data is still quite poor in this area.

Q88 Kim Johnson: And do you believe that people have the confidence, in terms of reporting in, that action will be taken? Because we heard from police last week in terms of poor resources, in terms of dealing with retail crime, for example. Does the same apply to this particular type of offence?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: It is really important that women and girls, and members of our public, feel that they can report these in and feel confident to report to us. I talk to stakeholders all over the country, for different organisations that represent members of the public, and this is top of the agenda: the trust and confidence element. We want to work with stakeholders nationally, but also forces at local level have their own links and engagement. Some interesting examples of where we are trying to improve that trust and confidence are through independent advisory groups, working with local members of the community to come in, and in some forces actually look at decisions that have been made by policing around these crime types. So trying to encourage a greater understanding of what we do and why we think it is important.

Q89 Kim Johnson: AC Rolfe, we know that the accessibility of online porn has contributed to a rise in sexual offences, and particularly in terms of young males having access. I was just curious whether any research is being undertaken, in terms of the progression from non-contact sexual offences to other more serious offences, and whether that is available?

Louisa Rolfe: Thank you for the question. I know that there is research from many years ago that identifies a clear link between exposure to extreme pornography, and particularly pornography that includes violence against women, and it having a dehumanising impact, and people seeing violence against women as more acceptable. In terms of recent research that shows that non-contact offending definitely leads to contact or harmful offending, at the moment there is a gap, and there is a mixed picture. Of course, we in policing would love for there to be more research that could help us, but also there is plenty for us to be getting on with.

We have been doing an awful lot of work in London, I am working closely with the College of Policing and the national Violence Against Women and Girls Task Force, to understand how we really pick up those findings from the Angiolini report about our officers being professionally curious for



focusing on offenders, the findings from Operation Soteria about focusing on offenders, finding the links, the patterns. We have ensured that we are reviewing our information about cases so that we are looking at patterns of offending, linking cases, being really clear about our commitment to attend incidents of indecent exposure, or voyeurism, or other non-contact sexual offences, and tracking that attendance closely, tracking our response to victims. So an awful lot to help us understand the picture, but fundamentally to ensure that victims receive the right and the best service from policing, and that we are very offender-focused, and can identify those escalations. And we have had some really notable success: the work that Ben is leading, in terms of understanding our data and who is posing the greatest threat, and who should we prioritise our resources and focus upon. A lot of work is in development, but at the moment there is certainly a gap in that independent academic research.

Q90 **Kim Johnson:** Commander Russell, in terms of the Met, do you have dedicated teams that are looking at these types of crimes? And how frequently is training rolled out to officers to make sure? Because I am aware that officers tend to move to different teams on a fairly regular basis.

Commander Russell: In terms of dedicated teams, it will depend on the type of offending. Definitely at the most serious end, that is the case. One of the things we have done recently is with indecent exposure cases—actually not that recent—we have moved all those investigations into our specialist CID teams, so they would get a more specialist response than they are used to. The reality, though, is of course investigating these offences is the job for every police officer, so it is a scale.

Q91 **Chair:** Can I just be clear then, the specialist team, is that the specialist RASSO team that you are saying?

Commander Russell: Yes, that is an example. Yes, exactly.

Q92 **Chair:** That is an example. Before I move on to Tim, can I just ask DCC Blyth, not all police forces have specialist teams, do they?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: That is absolutely correct, yes.

Q93 **Chair:** And they should?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: We definitely want a cohort of investigators specially trained to deal with these crime types. The challenge with specialist teams for some of our smaller forces is a capacity issue. There are examples now of collaboration across a regional area. I would want to promote that, because specialist training is really important, but we cannot dictate one model on the different 43 forces. And that is largely geography as much as anything.

Q94 **Chair:** Are you able to tell us which forces do not have RASSOs? It



sounds like the smaller ones.

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: I could certainly provide that information to you separately. But it tends to be smaller organisations, where if you create a specialist team you are taking officers off another response activity.

Q95 **Chair:** They should all do what the Met has done, which is to put these non-contact sexual offences into the RASSO specialist teams, to deal with this issue of being able to see patterns and identify what is going on.

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: We are really promoting bringing together experts in domestic abuse, RASSO, under the umbrella of public protection, and beefing up our public protection response so every force has a public protection unit. We want to ensure that those public protection units are adequately trained and supported.

Commander Russell: Just to be really clear, rape and serious sexual offence teams will deal with rape and serious sexual offences. What I was trying to say is separate to that, we then have frontline officers who will pick up volume crime. We also have CID, so more complex crime. What we have done is we have not moved indecent exposure into the RASSO teams, we have moved it into our complex crime CID teams.

Q96 **Chair:** There is a view that that should happen, because then you would be able to have that experience and knowledge about how indecent exposure and other non-contact offences could feed into the broader picture. But you are saying not in the Met, it goes to CID?

Commander Russell: It is a volume problem, yes.

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: The other issue we can overcome with this is ensuring that there is adequate training, specialist training programmes that those individuals who are working in a particular area can undertake and become accredited for. And that is certainly the approach we have taken with RASSO and want to replicate.

Q97 **Tim Loughton:** AC Rolfe, can I pick up on what you have just been saying? The main reason we launched this inquiry was we were concerned with the very high levels of non-contact sexual offences that were not being pursued and resulting in criminal action, including, unfortunately, police officers who had serious form in exposure and other lower level non-contact offences and went on to commit some very serious sexual offences.

You just described that sort of progression as a bit of a gap and a mixed picture. How does it actually work at the moment? If you get random reports of an individual exposing himself in a public place or privately, but without a lot of evidence to go with it—i.e. photographs and multiple witnesses—where does that lead? Will you do some greater analysis to put those different reports together of, "Hold on, he was doing that there, and somebody else was reporting that there; there appears to be more to



it than just an odd incident”?

Louisa Rolfe: I could probably best illustrate with an example. An indecent exposure was reported to us about 18 months ago, I think it was in the Maida Vale area of London, near Paddington Basin. One of our crime intelligence analysts spotted that there had been a couple of similar offences nearby. We looked at the pattern of offending, identified a number of linked offences, and found some ANPR camera footage that identified a moped ridden by a food delivery driver. We were able to pursue some other lines of inquiry, and we then found a series of linked offences that matched this delivery driver’s working pattern of deliveries, and we were able to charge and prosecute that individual because of joining the dots.

This is the key finding from Operation Soteria and the recommendation from Angiolini of clearly joining the dots and ensuring we use our data to be really clear about patterns of offences. The Met has just moved to a new system based on a poll database for the recording of crime and intelligence that enables us to connect people, objects, locations, and events, which will be identified and flagged if we are seeing a series. If something had a similar registration number, a similar modus operandi of an offender, in a similar location, or a similarly described person, we would be in a position to identify connections and pursue lines of inquiry.

The wonderful thing about working in a big city like London is there is so much CCTV footage, ANPR cameras, Ring Video Doorbells; things that our investigators can pursue. We make no secret of the fact we have a lot of work to do, but we are determined to be really focused on ensuring we do not miss these opportunities and the learning from those horrific cases you described, whether that is offending behaviour—we are very focused on ensuring there is no place for abusers within policing—or in terms of tightening our vetting, pursuing cases, learning from the events of the past, and investigating cases.

Q98 Tim Loughton: That all sounds as though it has worked very well. My concern is when a dot then becomes part of a pattern of dots that you proactively try to join up, and the capacity you have for that sort of analytics. As constituency MPs, I am sure we all get complaints about a crime that has been reported to the police—there may even be video evidence—but the police are reluctant to take it forward.

In the past, there have probably been cases where somebody took the trouble to report to the police that somebody exposed themselves in front of them, and the response was, “Do you know who it is? Do you know where he’s from? Have you seen him do it several times? Is he from there?” and so on. If the answer to most of those questions is no, it is usually a case of, “Don’t call us, we’ll call you,” rather than, “We’re going to check all the VT possibly available for cameras in that area.”

What has changed now—if anything—for you to be more proactively saying, “Thank you very much for that evidence; let’s see if we can



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match it up with other evidence”? We now have this whizzy analytical, and you launched this V100 initiative in the Met as part of an action plan announced at the end of last year. Why is this more likely to lead to greater investigation that may then lead to action against a specific potential high-level offender who is a low-level offender at the moment?

Louisa Rolfe: We have been really clear in terms of our commitment to attending incidents when they are reported; attending the scene, speaking to witnesses and victims, and encouraging and supporting our officers to be professionally curious. At the outset, Maggie mentioned the scale of offending; I mentioned an increase of 244% in reporting rape to police; domestic abuse is now more than 11% of emergency calls into policing; more than 30% of violence with injury is reported to police, and more than 50% of violence experienced by women in London is domestic abuse.

From Operation Soteria, we also know the impact upon our investigators of repeated exposure to these traumatic cases; that all adds up to a difficult leadership challenge for us in policing. But we are really determined about prioritisation; we are working with every call handler in the Met who is trained to apply a threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement assessment at the point of call, and the Inspectorate of Constabulary assess how well we are doing that when they inspect our effectiveness. We seek to identify the difference between someone reporting a confused person who left their home not properly dressed and somebody committing an aggressive offence of indecent exposure in public and the risk associated with that, to apply the right resources, and join the dots between offending.

Q99 **Tim Loughton:** Can you explain how the V100 initiative works? It is overseen by the Met’s chief scientific officer and supposedly utilises, “Data analytics to identify and target the 100 men who pose the most risk to women.” How big a difference is it making? It requires quite a lot of analytics and people trained and able to identify individuals who have the potential to become serious sexual offenders. It has not been a priority for the police in the past to the extent that a lot of women do not report it because it will almost be laughed off, “Oh, it’s old such-and-such; he always does that on a full moon,” or whatever, just to be flippant about it. Are the police really taking this seriously now? If so, what changed?

Louisa Rolfe: Yes. I have worked as a national lead for domestic abuse since 2013, for 10 years. I have seen a lot of change in that time, and greater investment in our understanding of the risk inherent in violence against women and girls. Sadly, two women a week die in the UK at the hands of a partner or ex-partner through domestic abuse alone.

Q100 **Tim Loughton:** Can I stop you there? I entirely understand that, and domestic violence is a huge problem that is taken much more seriously. This is different; these are usually strangers exposing themselves to completely random and unknown victims, mostly women, and are harder



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to identify, unlike domestic violence where we know who is doing it, but it is a question of whether the victim is brave enough to come forward and shop the known partner or whoever it is. I am not interested in this scenario about domestic violence; it is completely separate.

Louisa Rolfe: I understand, although we do see a huge overlap in offending. While we say much happens within the home, predatory perpetrators will sadly offend against many victims in the home and outside. Ben Russell is leading the work on the V100, so he is the best person to describe it, but it is a really effective tool that we are determined to exploit and make the most of.

Tim Loughton: The baton has been passed, Commander.

Commander Russell: No problem. There are probably two different problem sets, and I want to differentiate between the two. We have a problem with a disproportionate amount of harm against women being caused by a relatively small cohort of offenders, and the theory behind the V100 is you target the small cohort of offenders and prevent a disproportionate amount of harm. That is slightly separate from the problem you have spoken about of escalatory behaviour, where something might start as you describe and end up in very serious contact offending.

Our Strategic Insight Unit is working with Maggie's team on an algorithmic, more complex approach that will try to build something that says, "Could we spot the people early on who we think are on that pattern?" but we are not there yet. We have a bit more to do. The challenge of London is volume, but the benefit is you have a lot of data.

With the V100, you have to know the name of the suspect otherwise you cannot have an offender focus. We have about 33,000 named suspects of VAWG offences from the last year alone in London. We take those 33,000 and say, "How are we going to adopt a triage process where we focus on those who we think are causing the most harm?" We look at the recency of their offending—whether it is in the last year—severity, whether they are named as a suspect in that offending, and frequency. Partly because of the challenges we have heard about the criminal justice system, this is about suspects; we are focusing on people who are named for suspicion.

We then chuck as many resources as we can find at it. If you were investigating a murder, you would have a detective chief inspector leading that investigation, and it is the same for one of these cases. Our approach is, if we can prosecute for anything, we will. A significant number of these people are also involved in other crime, so if you are on our top 100 stack, we will investigate you for whatever you are involved in.

Q101 **Tim Loughton:** So this 33,000 will include people who have never been charged or prosecuted but have been reported as likely to have been offenders.



Commander Russell: Exactly. This is not the police; the vast majority of this data comes from what the public is telling us. We join the dots and pull those cases together. Quite a lot of people at the top of our stack are offending against multiple victims, in different parts of London. There are potentially many years of historical information about these people, there are often complex mental health needs, and addiction challenges; they are really complex and challenging cases. Our approach is to use the data to spot the people we think are behind the most harm and throw everything we can at them.

Q102 **Alison Thewliss:** I have some questions for TACC Paul Furnell. British Transport Police obviously have operations in Scotland as well. I saw the Railway Guardian app that you have been working on with Crimestoppers. How successful has that been? How many reports have you had, and how many convictions have led from that?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: I will have to come back to you on reports at a later date. Going back to the 2019 research, we heard from survivors about the importance of speed and access to reporting to allow anonymous and confidential intelligence and reporting. So the simplest way was for us to develop an application for British Transport Police that was national and reached across three countries.

The Railway Guardian app has now been up and running for a couple of years. We have over 300,000 users at the moment. You can traditionally report to British Transport Police as you would report on Single Online Home to a Home Office force and you can report intelligence information. Equally important for us and the transient population we are dealing with—both offender-based and victim-based—is that we get access to that information fast time.

Within there, you will be alive to 61016, the text service for British Transport Police, which is a unique service in policing. It goes live time into a control room, and we deploy resources as soon as we get that call as if you were ringing the police. As soon as someone—a bystander or a victim of offence—texts us or reports via the app, we will deploy resources to the next station of that train to deal with the information on the description or location of where the reporting is.

We also use the application to push and pull a lot of information and data around information sharing on non-contact. We have done a lot of campaign material around describing what sexual harassment is. We have been talking about some of the high-harm offenders, but also the volume-based offenders; we have had to tackle the threshold of reporting that has been lost over many years of perhaps, “Will the police take this seriously? Should we report?” It has not been reported, and we have spent many years through the campaigns asking the public to report every single bit of information. It paints a picture for us.

Coming back to Ben’s point, we can only proactively target offenders if we can identify who they are and where they are operating, and I suspect



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it will not be a stand-alone offence. So the app has been very successful, but it is still at quite early stages. I am having quite a lot of dialogue with Maggie about the national VAWG work and with the Police Digital Service to try to tie that into Home Office forces because we do not have a resident population.

For us, every offender and victim is a resident of a Home Office force area. The key intelligence sharing to identify risk from British Transport Police into our Home Office to manage that offender is critical. The national work is really helping with that consistency of operation because we operate through all 43 forces, so we have to have a consistent approach to our offender management and our service to victims.

Q103 **Alison Thewliss:** It would be useful for the Committee to get some of the stats. You have 300,000 people using the app; how regularly are they using it? Have they downloaded it and never used it or looked at it? How does that work as a follow-up? If I were on public transport and an AirDrop popped up on my phone and I reported that to you, what would then happen?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: The app is on about its fourth version; we are always adding. When we developed the app, we were really keen to buy into a relationship for it to evolve. It has the ability to upload images from your phone that have been sent to you, for example, via AirDrop, as you mentioned, which is quite a prolific offending on the rail transport infrastructure. You can also capture video and audio on the app as it is happening and it will come straight through to us. You will get a reply text message via 61016 from our controller letting you know what is happening.

From a safety perspective, if the perpetrator is nearby, a benefit is you are not picking up the phone and making a call to the police so the perpetrator knows you are doing that. We are encouraging bystander information and bystander advice through the app. We have all sat on a train and seen behaviour we are not comfortable with. We added an I to VAWG—it is VIAWG for us—because we talk about intimidation and behaviour on the train that might escalate around that, so we concentrate heavily on responding, in dialogue with the person on the end of the phone or application.

We are very keen to look at the data with the provider. You are right: we need to understand how many people are using rather than just downloading. We all have apps on our phones that we never use, so it is really key for us to make sure we are capturing the use of that. The fact we have doubled our report around non-contact offending and sexual assault offending shows something in our campaign through app or text is having an impact on confidence in reporting, but I still think it is the tip of the iceberg.

Q104 **Alison Thewliss:** Doubled could go from two to four; that is doubling, but it is still very low. I had a look to see if I could find any stats on this



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for Scotland particularly, and there was an FOI to the British Transport Police in Scotland that said only three offences were recorded between 2019 and 2023, which is nothing compared to the scale of this, is it?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: No, absolutely not.

Q105 **Alison Thewliss:** If a third of women are being sexually harassed on their commute, three reports over four years is nothing.

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: I will check the data and write to the Committee to confirm those figures, but we are certainly seeing an increase across the UK. I will also look at the Scotland figures.

Q106 **Alison Thewliss:** Finally, on a technical aspect, if I am on the West Coast Main Line and I receive an AirDrop in Penrith, how is that recorded? Will somebody be there in Glasgow, and how does that work with the different legislation in Scotland and England?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: We will try to define exactly where the offence took place. Obviously, you might be travelling at quite a speed through different jurisdictions. Historically, British Transport Police has had to really work hard on that because we ended up with recording end of route, and that is not ideal from an analytical perspective.

Alison Thewliss: It seems as though everything is happening in Glasgow, does it not?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: Exactly. If you look at our data, you will often see the major hubs around the country as historically being the place. We have done a lot of work through our reporting mechanism to try to identify and geolocate exactly where that might happen. Technology can assist us with that—with the permission of the victim and survivor—and then we will record the offence where it took place and respond in that way.

Q107 **Alison Thewliss:** That kind of thing—it is not quite called cyberflashing—has been an offence in Scotland since 2009 under the Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2009.

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: I am attending Scotland in a couple of months to look at where the slight difference is in legislation. For me, it does not change our definition of what we look through; it is just the technical recording and prosecution of those offences. We are very much concentrating on sexual harassment being the same in England, Scotland and Wales. The technology and details around the prosecution are slightly different.

Q108 **Simon Fell:** TACC Furnell, I would just like to follow up a few questions there. Travelling on the tube and mainline rail, I cannot help but notice the sheer number of adverts at the moment explaining the bounds of acceptability and where to go if people are straying beyond that. I know you have covered some of this with the conversation about the app, but



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what is the impact for you on that increased visibility on public transport in terms of reports made to you and also the demands on your resourcing?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: We are heavily behind those; they are in joint campaigns across the country with the rail operators, TfL, and so on. From the outset in 2019, I said to Lucy D’Orsi, our Chief Constable, that success for us initially is going to be a significant increase in reporting, and we are not there yet. I do expect short-term success is going to see a significant increase in demand for policing.

Yes, it has increased our demand. We are at the highest reporting we have ever had as an organisation through 61016, and we are preparing ourselves for further increases. Section 4B— the dedicated offence around sexual harassment—of the Public Order Act 1986 will go live this year, and that will redefine the data picture for all police forces, including us, albeit that we already capture that.

I also think the messaging you have seen—which I am glad you have seen—has been about challenging society, in particular men, to what sexual harassment is. I mentioned the RISE programme earlier. We have put some offenders through the programme, and their feedback is awareness and education around language, misogynistic behaviour, and assisting in trying to get to where Ben is: as a policing organisation to be able to identify the offenders we need to target through prosecution versus education and behaviour.

Likewise, the Worker Protection (Amendment of Equality Act 2010) Act 2023—which will come into effect in October 2024—for employers around sexual harassment and non-contact sexual offending will increase reporting to policing. All those things will add up to demand going up for UK policing full stop.

Q109 **Simon Fell:** You would expect to see an increase in reporting; have you managed to capture any deterrent effect from that increase in advertising?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: It is difficult to measure the impact of the campaign directly. It is early days, but there has certainly been a reference to learning and awareness through the very small numbers we have put through the behaviour programme.

I have had direct contact with members of the public around particular posters. You may have seen the one around staring; there are definitely two forms of staring. One is not an offence, and one can very much be an offence around intimidation.

There has been quite a lot of dialogue directly with my team and I around trying to explain that, in particular from men. We have a male ally function within BTP: a group of men who are there to assist in explaining that definition and the difference between an offence and a non-offence.



Q110 **Simon Fell:** Do you have a rough statistic for how much of your work as BTP is dealing in this area, as opposed to other types of crime?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: We definitely will have that data, and I will be able to share that with you in writing.

Q111 **Simon Fell:** Then just a couple of nuts and bolts questions, if you do not mind. We talked about whether to report directly to you or the force in your local area. In terms of making sure you know where that offence has taken place and who leads on investigations, how is that collated?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: If the offence has taken place on the rail infrastructure—on BTP jurisdiction—we will deal with it. We have specially trained officers, we have a RASSO function within the British Transport Police; we mirror everything a Home Office force would have in our capability and capacity to deal, so we would deal with that investigation.

The critical bit is the longer-term offender management. We are not obliged by legislation to have a ViSOR function, but we created a dedicated sexual offending management structure within the force three years ago. We identified that we do have sexual perpetrators who will use the railway to offend; it is very much their MO, so it is critical to have an offender management function wrapped around those individuals. Our offender managers will therefore be obliged to liaise with Home Office colleagues within their ViSOR functions to make sure the management of that offender is very tight and joint, and we will deal with transport to and from prison releases, and so on. If the intelligence cases are there, we will deal with offenders who are travelling using the rail infrastructure and support Home Office forces in the management of that offender, but we will deal with those investigations.

Q112 **Simon Fell:** If I were to make a report to you as a victim of a non-contact sexual offence, would I be put through to a specialist officer, or would it be a more generalist officer?

Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: It would depend on the offence. If it was a RASSO offence, it would go to our Major, Serious and Organised Crime team. As Maggie mentioned earlier, all forces are structured slightly differently in that context. Our RASSO offences are all dealt with by our Major, Serious and Organised Crime team. Any sexual offence is managed by our CID, so it would definitely be a detective. Again, that is around demand and capacity. I know that would not necessarily be the case for those offences with Home Office forces, but all offences in BTP would be dealt with by a trained detective.

Q113 **Simon Fell:** Back to Mr Loughton's point about trying to identify these individual acts, it is obviously harder for you because your network spans three countries. How does that work when you might have an offender who gets on a train at London Euston and ends up in Penrith? We are picking on Penrith today; I am sure there is nothing wrong with the good people of Penrith.



Temporary Assistant Chief Constable Furnell: We are a data-rich environment, as you will all be alive to on the transport infrastructure. We have a dedicated centralised intelligence function, which all that offending will go through and that links into local intelligence.

Six years ago, we developed a streamlined system called Streamline, which is an image comparison tool. Irrespective of whether the victim or survivor is reported and wishes to pursue the investigation or it is anonymous, the data-rich environment will allow us to collect the footprint that might be left through other data—such as Oyster—tapping in and tapping out of the infrastructure, financial payment, and so on.

We can track and trace offenders and look at patterns of behaviour, use our image-based capability to identify if we think there is a link, and that might be a travelling offender or an offender operating in a certain jurisdiction. In London, that offender may be in and out on very short stops across the infrastructure. Over long distance, in more rural areas, you tend to see the offender moving slightly more, but we are able to capture that through a central intelligence mechanism.

Q114 **Lee Anderson:** Thanks to the witnesses for coming, it is much appreciated. In the UK, our population has been changing dramatically over the years, and there have been some cultural changes. I do not want to single out any group in particular, but we know some groups of women from different cultures are treated differently. They are scared to speak out; there may be a language problem and things like that, and I am sure there are problems in these communities where they do not get the support they deserve. How do you reach out to these people?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: That is probably one for me. We absolutely accept there are such varied communities across the country, therefore the national co-ordination is important, but there also has to be that local response and local forces engaging with their communities to ensure there is confidence to report.

At the moment, the way that is being done really varies across the country, if I am honest, but there is the use of advisory groups at the local level to try to bring in women from some communities who may traditionally not have reported. For example, I know some deaf women find it difficult to report, so the deaf community have made clear representations into policing around that. Other communities may be linked to asylum-seeking communities who find it difficult to report and are not confident to do so. We have to do a lot of work at the local level to increase that confidence to report; it is a very valid point and one that we are very mindful of.

Q115 **Chair:** I know you can report anonymously with BTP, but can you report anonymously to other police forces? Do you always have to give your name if you want to report, say, a non-contact sexual offence?



Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: We are looking at anonymous reporting in terms of our own people being able to report. In terms of reporting, anyone can use Single Online Home, for example, to provide an intelligence report that does not necessarily have to have a name. The challenge is following that up without a name and any identity, so the more information we can get from somebody the better.

We also encourage third-party reporting; if somebody does not feel confident to come in themselves, they can rely on another person to report. We hear that is quite powerful, but we have to encourage women in particular to feel confident to report to us. I know so much work is going on in forces to encourage that trust to increase, otherwise we only ever have part of the picture.

Q116 **Chair:** We have heard some evidence that having the ability to report anonymously would be very helpful. Are you saying it is likely not to be treated the same if it is reported anonymously?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: It will be treated as important intelligence; it is just hard to follow up, and we already know that evidence-gathering is challenging in some of the complex areas we have. The more information we can get about somebody being affected, the more likelihood it can go forward through to a charge.

Q117 **Chair:** The Angiolini Inquiry Part 1 Report called on the College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council to improve guidance and training on indecent exposure by December this year. Is that underway? How far have you got?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: It is very much underway, and it is important to also reiterate the research bit; we recognise there is a paucity of research. We are completing a literature review for this summer, and we want to enhance the training as part of how we deal with RASSO generally. We have already updated our Authorised Professional Practice in terms of indecent exposure, but we also want to include that in the training and approach towards Operation Soteria; not something separate, but to bring it around the evidence base of Operation Soteria.

Q118 **Chair:** Will you have that done by December?

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: Absolutely.

Q119 **Chair:** The other point from Part 1 was around a specialist policy for all sexual offences—including indecent exposure—in all police forces.

Deputy Chief Constable Blyth: We want to do that centrally again, and it is the importance of central co-ordination to ensure consistency. Rather than all 43 forces developing their own, we are taking that forward in a national way through Operation Soteria.

Q120 **Chair:** Finally, this Committee has been very concerned about the workforce within policing. We know there has been the Police Uplift



Programme, but do you have the analytics you need and rely on in order to be able to see what data is showing you?

Commander Russell: I have the intelligence analysis capability in the Met. Part of the focus on police officer numbers we have seen in recent years has been somewhat at the expense of police staff, so our data analytics colleagues are often police staff. We should not just focus on officer numbers first. There is a recruitment challenge for lots of people. If you are a data-analytically-minded intelligence analyst living and working in London, there are lots of places you could work.

Part of the attraction in law enforcement is about the mission and the opportunity to be involved in some of the things we talked about today. Every part of London has a dedicated VAWG analyst, but it is challenging. Our experience is that people are excited to work for the police, we recruit them, we train them, they get really good, and then they go to work somewhere else.

Chair: Thank you very much for your evidence today; that has been very helpful as part of our inquiry. We certainly look forward to the developments we will hopefully see over the next few months and years in policing to focus on this particular area that we are interested in around non-contact sexual offending. We will move to our second panel.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Laura Farris MP, Joanna West and Amy Randall.

Q121 **Chair:** Apologies for keeping you waiting. It is very nice to see you back before the Committee, Minister, albeit in a slightly different role than when you used to be a member of the Committee. We are very pleased to see you today. Would you like to introduce yourself and the officials who are here with you?

Laura Farris: It is good to be back at Home Affairs. I am the Minister for Safeguarding and Victims, and with me is Amy Randall from the MoJ, and Joanna West from the Home Office. Collectively they are the two most senior civil servants who support my work, which has a direct cut across the MoJ and the Home Office.

Q122 **Chair:** You are all very welcome. I would like to start off by asking you a question, Minister. We have been particularly concerned with non-contact sexual offending and whether there is an appropriate response from the police. Are policies in place to try to deal with this?

Perhaps you could set out where non-contact sexual offending fits into the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, particularly around prevention and the attempt to stop offending escalating. Could you set out where you think we are at the moment on this?

Laura Farris: It is a very worthwhile inquiry, and one of the reasons is that non-contact sexual offending falls outside the RASSO specialism, the Rape and Serious Sexual Offences specialism. It also falls outside the



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domestic abuse specialism, although there is one exception to that, stalking, which has some overlap, though not exclusively, with domestic abuse. That means it falls into the category of high volume and low harm, as it has sometimes historically been seen, offending.

One of the things that came out of the Angiolini report was that it had not, sometimes, been treated with the seriousness it deserved by officers, and I will comment a little more on this.

When you look at the three most important prelude offences to Wayne Couzens' offending, there was the 2015 incident, there was the McDonald's drive-through incident in 2021, and there was the incident in the lane in Kent in November 2020: all indecent exposure, and in one case, masturbatory indecent exposure. In all those cases, the IOPC found fault with the officers who handled them.

For example, in the 2021 incident, the failure to record the CCTV and to use the credit card, would have amounted to gross misconduct of that officer. So, irrespective of what I am going to come on to say about the police, it is worth saying that some of those officers fell below the standard that would ordinarily have been expected by a reasonably competent officer acting with those facts at that time and with that level of training.

The good thing is that Parliament, the Home Office and the police have developed their thinking on non-contact offending. Prior to the implementation of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, flashing was seen as a public nuisance offence. Following the passage of that Act, it was treated as a sexual offence. In relation to stalking, which was initially lumped together with harassment under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, during the life of this Government, in 2012, amendments were made to create a freestanding offence. In 2017, we went on to double the maximum sentence for that offence from five years to 10 years. So, Parliament has begun to shine a spotlight and identify a more serious category of offending that relates to non-contact offences, and stalking in particular has had an improved response.

The other thing is that we have moved away from the infantilising language which suggested these incidents should be downplayed. Flashing is an unhelpful term, and I am sorry that I used it in my response, but upskirting, downblousing, all this suggests something light and fluffy, something silly that might happen, rather than what it in fact is: a grossly invasive and degrading experience for a woman—it is nearly always a woman—that directly goes to their personal sense of safety or exposes them to something which, although non-contact, is akin to violence.

So, there is important work to do with the College of Policing, and where we have seen the most improvement is where the College of Policing has been supported by academics. For instance, the Operation Soteria academics supported them in delivering specialist rape training that now



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nearly 3,000 officers have had in England and Wales. That has led to an effective training programme. I do not mean this critically, but it is not the College of Policing acting on its own; it is guided. That is equally the case with the Domestic Abuse Matters training, which is supported by Safe Lives and Women's Aid, so experts are framing the design.

Now the College of Policing, the NPCC, and the Home Office have tasks to do following the publication of phase one of the Angiolini report. We have accepted that. She is very critical of what the 2016 non-contact offence guidance says, and we accept there should be input from academics and experts in how the College of Policing design the guidance. The deficiencies in the 2016 version show that perhaps doing it on its own did not sufficiently capture the issues.

Sorry, that was a complex response.

Q123 **Chair:** That is very helpful indeed. You set it out very clearly.

I am going to come to Simon Fell, but just before I do, I want to ask you; is it your view that non-contact sexual offending should sit within the specialist police force units that deal with rape and sexual offending, just so they can identify patterns of behaviour early on? They might then be able to bring perpetrators to account, rather than it being dealt with by the volume CID offending approach.

Laura Farris: My preliminary view is yes to that, augmented by the fact that we have added violence against women to the strategic policing requirement, which makes violence against women a priority when resources are allocated. We have designated leads like Louisa Rolfe and Maggie Blyth. It would probably undermine these efforts if it was treated in a separate way. We are already quite close to recognising that stalking often belongs within that package of offences.

I am probably speaking prematurely because I do not have the clearance, but yes, I think it belongs within the same framework.

Q124 **Chair:** Finally, before I come to Simon, RASSOs are not in every police force, and we have questioned the witnesses and the first panel about why that is. We are told that for some smaller police forces, the issue is resourcing, and they are not able to provide it.

However, if you are subject to a serious sexual assault or rape that is being investigated in one of the smaller police forces, you would still want to have the same expertise and level of skill from the investigating officers. So, I just wondered, is it your view that this is a reasonable excuse not to have specialist units?

Laura Farris: With the specialist rape training, we set a target that 2,000 frontline officers would be in place by April, and we have more than exceeded that target. There are 2,840, I think, and they are across all 43 forces, even the smaller ones.



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I want to make clear that training is only the first part of this, but it is true to say that there are no police forces that do not have someone who has had specialist rape training. Soteria is the template for this, because we can now say that three years after we implemented the Rape Review Action Plan, it has had a transformative effect on policing. If you look at pathfinder forces like the Met and the volume of cases that they were sending to the CPS for a charging decision, they have more than quadrupled that number, which shows how much the Soteria model has affected their case handling. So, is there room for specialism? Yes. Soteria is, in a sense, a form of specialism, and there are now trained officers in every force.

That does not mean that is the end of the answer. To respond respectfully, of course we are seeing the value of specialism and training. It has basically been the story of the last three years, and so I hope this is iterative, and you will see more to come.

Chair: I am sure we will be coming on to levels of referrals to the CPS. Simon Fell?

Q125 **Simon Fell:** Thank you Chair, and thank you panel for joining us. It is good to see you, Minister.

I would like to ask a few questions around online non-contact sexual offences, especially with regard to the effect on young people. Certainly, from the evidence we have heard in previous sessions, and when I go out and talk to schools in my constituency, this feels almost like an ungoverned space. It is causing a huge amount of difficulty for young people. So I would be interested, just as a starter, to understand what your engagement has been like with tech firms around this, to try to change some behaviour that goes on there and better protect the young people who are affected by this.

Laura Farris: You are quite right to raise the online environment. Just to give you one example, the Suzy Lamplugh Trust has staggering statistics on the amount of stalking that takes place online, and that goes into another point. When you are looking at the factors that contribute to violence against women, non-contact offences and whether they escalate is definitely an element of that. The ubiquity of online porn, violent online porn, is a major issue, and one of the limiting factors at the Home Office is that we are always at the end of the road trying to deal, not only with prevention, but also how we deal with stalking, and intimate image abuse.

There is still a pipeline of young men coming through who are able to access, at the click of their phone, content that has an unbelievably damaging effect on their attitude towards women and their sexual proclivities. This places young women in a very dangerous position. If I could talk about the online environment briefly; you will know about the Online Safety Act and what that says about things like revenge porn and



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intimate image abuse, both taking and sharing, and we are equalising that in the Criminal Justice Bill.

However, if I could go a bit further, one of the most important things happening in Parliament at the moment is Baroness Burton's pornography review. I will be absolutely clear, I hope that it will lead to clear proposals in the manifestos of all the parties about what we say about this, because we cannot ignore the issue. If you look at the most horrific cases, which you will all be familiar with, such as Sophie Moss, Megan Newborough, or Sarah Everard, what do they have in common? Those perpetrators, those killers, had an appetite for violent online pornography. Now, we cannot directly prove causation, but we can say that it is there in every single one of these cases. So, I am very interested in what happens in the pornography review and I have had this conversation with Baroness Burton.

I also want to say a little about pseudo-images and deepfakes. You will, I hope, have spotted the Home Office announcement last week about banning the creation of deepfakes. That was quite a difficult decision to make because the Law Commission had recommended that it would risk criminalising children. However, we are proposing a straightforward creating offence. You will get a criminal record if you use an app to make a nude image using AI with a real person's face.

As a result, two of the biggest deepfake companies in the world—one is certainly big, the other is Nudify, a company based in Spain—have blocked access to users from the United Kingdom overnight, even though the Bill has not hit the statute book. We are the first national Government, by the way, to ban the creation of sexually explicit deepfakes.

This is a sign that if you act strongly, and you make your legislation and your intentions clear, then you can actually have a very quick and direct effect, so I am very interested in this. I am feeling quite emboldened, actually, by last week's announcement, and I am hopeful that we will see some progress from the pornography review in the future. It is really important.

Simon Fell: We will come on to deepfakes.

Laura Farris: I am sorry to jump the gun.

Q126 **Simon Fell:** I do not want to eat Tim's sandwiches but I am interested in this, so I am glad you are having that engagement, and I am glad you are seeing those signals working through the system.

In our last session, we heard criticism of the regulator and whether they are going far enough in this regard. What is your engagement with the regulator like, and are you pushing them to better enforce what these companies are doing?



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Laura Farris: I have to say I have not had any engagement with Ofcom, but the concern that they are not going far enough has been raised with me in the course of the last few weeks, so that is now a priority. The Online Safety Act has an iterative introduction, that was permitted and seen as desirable when the Act was going through the House. However, we are waiting quite a long time for it to protect children, and it is not going to be worth all that effort if we get there and find it has not done the job.

Obviously, there were always a number of concerns about whether it would have sufficiently stringent protection for children online, and so, if they are being given this allowance of time to develop the Ofcom codes of practice, those will have to be very robust. We are expecting that.

Q127 **Simon Fell:** Thank you. You talked about the pipeline of young men, and you are absolutely right, this is deeply concerning. When I talk to online firms, especially social media companies who are predominantly skewed towards young people, their concern is very much around the exploitation piece and what has become normalised through access to pornography and then is used in anger against young people who have shared this imagery on their platforms. I am not going to ask you to announce policy on the hoof around banning mobile phones or anything like that, but there is a way to cut off that pipeline, which is about moving far more to the prevention space, rather than cure.

I am really interested in your thoughts around whether the Government are doing enough on education and awareness and trying to get young people into the space where they can better protect themselves from this stuff.

Laura Farris: That is an excellent question. Let me just start with going back to what the Law Commission said, and why it recommended that we did not create a creation offence. It was worried that we would criminalise teenage boys, but you could say that something has already gone quite wrong in society when 16-year-old or 15-year-old boys are going to find themselves with a criminal record, because you must have allowed things to exist in their world for that to happen.

It is true that there are things that are in the ether, they get raised in the House, they are not part of government policy, such as the idea of banning under 16-year-olds from using social media or banning phones. And we know, by the way, that the most common sites, some we all use as MPs, host really explicit, sometimes violent content that is again freely available. We do not know what Baroness Burton could say, she may recommend something very stringent on porn. Now that is one set of options, and it would be fair to say that everybody is thinking carefully about whether it is achievable.

You are right to mention education. I was reading the "Tackling Violence Against Women Strategy", the document that was produced by the Home Office in the immediate aftermath of Sarah Everard's case, and it is really



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striking how much of that has been implemented and has been successful. One of the biggest flanks where you could say it has not been successful is in education. There has been the RSHE work, but I do not think that goes far enough. I would like to see two things. We need to start the education process at primary school; at the moment, I believe it is really secondary school-focused. We need to prepare children a lot more for what they encounter, including influences and attitudes that they will be exposed to, and people who will try and take their thinking in a certain way.

I was reading a critical piece about education that said, "You cannot really expect a 60-year-old teacher to compete with a social influencer who has 20 million followers." I do accept that point, but I still think that there is something between the ages of maybe eight, nine, and about 12, 13, that is a critical point where we can reach children, and I do not think that we are there yet. We are talking about it in the Home Office, but that is definitely where I would like to see a focus on education and RSHE.

I have actually been into schools and observed some RSHE. I went to one in London recently, and I thought the quality of teaching was very good, but the children were quite old, they were 13, 14. At that age, they are beginning to develop, they may have had a sexual experience, and they are already viewing the opposite sex in a certain way that they would not have when they were younger. I still think there is an opportunity with younger children that we have not explored enough yet.

Simon Fell: That is really helpful. Thank you very much.

Q128 **Chair:** Can I just check; the Home Office's annual report and accounts states that 35% of commitments have been met across the VAWG strategy and Domestic Abuse Plan, but it does not break those down individually. Are you able to say, in relation to non-contact sexual offending, what has actually been achieved?

Laura Farris: Sorry, I cannot give you an itemised answer.

Q129 **Chair:** Can you write to us with that information?

Laura Farris: Yes, I can.

Chair: That would be helpful. Thank you very much. Kim Johnson?

Q130 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, panel. Minister, the Government accepted a number of the Angiolini recommendations and one of them related to masturbatory exposure, but that was also identified in the 2021 VAWG strategy. Could you say a little about why it has not already been undertaken?

Laura Farris: The second part of the Angiolini report is going to go much more into the general quality of policing. One of the things that she does leave open in relation to masturbatory and indecent exposure is that



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police are, “lethargic and inadequate” when it comes to investigating what are perceived to be low-level crimes. She also points out that, actually, one of the incidents that did result in a reference to the IOPC was in 2015, before the College of Policing had updated its guidance.

I do not think that since the “Tackling Violence Against Women Strategy” was published, we have seen any evidence that something like masturbatory indecent exposure is not treated seriously, that leads are not followed up, and that there has not been some improvement, but as I said, the critical part—this is a joint piece of work between the College of Policing, the NPCC and the Home Office—is updating the guidance for front-line police officers to enable them to respond adequately.

There were three really important gateway incidents before Wayne Couzens attacked Sarah Everard, and all three were mishandled because the police did not perform their duties to an adequate standard. In all three, the victim had actually provided very good evidence such as number plates. With the McDonald’s incident, they provided the digits on his credit card because, very unusually, he had used his standard card to pay as well as exposing himself. The reason why that officer—who left before the IOPC had concluded their investigation—would have been found guilty of gross misconduct is that she misled her force and said that the CCTV had already been deleted. It had not, and if she had bothered to look, it would have given a positive identification of him as well. That was a basic functional failure, not a failure of the fact that indecent masturbatory exposure is serious. Stalking is also serious. We know that it is linked to escalating behaviour.

Q131 Kim Johnson: Could you say a little about how you are working with the Minister for Policing in terms of the Angiolini report, particularly in reference to non-contact sexual offences?

Laura Farris: Probably the most direct work I have done with the Minister for Policing has been about the quality of police officers and vetting. I know it does not answer your question, but I will just add something if I may.

If we had a limitless period of time, there is a big question about whether it is appropriate for police law to be distinct from standard employment law, because there is a more complex system of dismissal for police officers than would exist if you just worked in an ordinary workplace down the road.

For example, the decision to dismiss an officer has to be taken by an independent lawyer, rather than a chief officer who would have the closest day-to-day knowledge of that officer. That has resulted in circumstances where some forces know that a person is manifestly inappropriate to continue as an officer, but he or she has succeeded in being exonerated by a disciplinary panel, and they have not been able to sack them. We are changing that. From 7 May, a chief officer will be leading the disciplinary panelling and taking the decision.



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We are also making it easier for someone to be dismissed after a re-vetting process, because even though we could do re-vetting, it was difficult to dismiss as an immediate consequence. That is changing this side of the summer. I had a conversation with the Policing Minister yesterday about when that change would be coming in.

Also, the criminal justice Bill states that if a chief officer is unhappy with somebody, for whatever reason, they can automatically appeal a historic decision not to dismiss. When I spoke to Mark Rowley last week, he told me that when it comes to officers entering the force, they are failing twice as many as they were before and they are dismissing twice as many as they were before. I know that does not give you total confidence, but it shows quite a substantial change, certainly in the conduct of the Met Police in relation to that.

Q132 Kim Johnson: We heard in the earlier panel that there is a level of inconsistency across the 43 forces as well, and that probably needs to be looked at, but just in terms of being the Minister for Victims and Safeguarding, I would be interested to hear how you would describe the support available to victims of non-contact sexual offences.

Laura Farris: Can I just go back to the first bit of what you are talking about, inconsistency? The fact that all 43 forces have operational independence is probably the biggest challenge for a Minister in the Home Office in this area of the law. That is why things like specialist rape training and specialist Domestic Abuse Matters training, are probably the most powerful tool we have to ensure some consistency. There is also an opportunity to have equivalent training in non-contact offences, and I would include stalking in that, because we cannot ignore it as a very significant gateway issue.

There is also an opportunity to take Soteria and apply it more widely to other forms of violence against women, because it has been so effective in the police handling of rape. It would not read across perfectly into all other forms of offending, but it would be very, very significant if it worked.

In terms of support, we reserve our principal support, independent sexual violence advisers, for victims of RASSO offences. In the last 14 years we have quadrupled the amount we spend on victim services, and one of the things we are proudest of is that there are now nearly 1,000 independent sexual violence advisers who will support a RASSO victim through every stage of the criminal justice system. We do not have an equivalent in place for a victim of a non-contact offence, but I do work with the Suzy Lamplugh Trust and there are three things we have been talking about, one of which is a specific stalking strategy.

Looking at the definition of stalking, it is now quite out of date; it is 12 years old, and heavily influenced by the 1997 environment which it fits into. In fact, one of the issues we often find is that the police classify stalking as harassment. When you look at the 1997 Act where the



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provisions apply, that is because the Act describes harassment as one example of stalking. We have muddled the police up by using one crime to define another.

There is room to look at that again, and we know that if a stalking victim is supported by an independent stalking adviser, they have a much higher chance of getting a protective order in place, and a much better chance of remaining engaged in the criminal justice system. So, we do have it in relation to stalking but not in relation to other offences.

Q133 Chair: Can I just ask about the Criminal Justice Bill? When do you think it will be back before Parliament because it seems to have just disappeared?

Laura Farris: I hope it is on its way back. I understand it is on its way back, imminently.

Chair: Right, imminently, okay.

Q134 Tim Loughton: Welcome back, Minister. It is always very nice to have former members of the Committee who have gone on to greater things. I want to come back to deepfakes, because technology has moved this whole problem on so much and made it much more widespread and accessible to all ages and anybody who has access to a computer. I want to know your thinking on this. I understand the criminalisation of sharing of deepfakes in the Online Safety Act. Now we have the announcement you made last week about an amendment to the imminent Criminal Justice Bill which says just making those deepfakes becomes a criminal offence. From what I understand, the new law means that if someone creates a sexually explicit deepfake, even if they have no intent to share it but purely want to cause alarm, humiliation or distress to the victim, they will be committing a criminal offence. How do you cause alarm, humiliation or distress to a victim if you are not sharing it?

Laura Farris: That was our press notice, and I have to say, it was not totally accurate. It is absolutely right to say that we have created a criminal offence for somebody who says, "Oh, I was just going to ..." The criteria are as follows: first, that it was done without consent, so if the person had consented to some sort of image being made of them, this would not qualify. Secondly, it must be sexually explicit, which is defined in the legislation in an ordinary way but with some qualifications, so that the police are clear; and thirdly, it is done principally for the purpose of sexual gratification, we assume for the user who will say they did not intend to share, but it could be for anybody. So, something that is obviously sexually explicit would almost inevitably qualify.

But the distinction is that it will not be equivalent to a base offence, which we have in our Criminal Justice Bill for the creation of an intimate image of a real person. In other words, if you take an intimate image of a person without their consent, and you did not intend to do anything, we are creating a very low-level base offence, which becomes more serious if



there is an intention to cause humiliation, harm or distress or sexual gratification. It is a sexual gratification offence, though. It is going to have wide application; it is not going to be tightly confined. You are totally right to say that there was a slightly weird construction that came out in the press notice, but I have seen the drafting of the provision. It is comprehensive. The threshold is low.

I will give you quite a powerful analogy that we have been using in the MoJ. In this country, it is an offence to create an explosive device, even if you do it in your kitchen, you were planning to let it off in the garden, and nobody was going to be affected. It is an offence because it could have catastrophic physical effects if it falls into the wrong hands, or if the motive of the maker changes. We are implementing this offence of creating in the same spirit, because if the motive of the person changes, or it falls into the wrong hands, the psychological consequences for the victim can be profound. We do not think there should be more than an obvious distinction between such psychological damage and the kind of physical damage that would flow from the creation of an explosive device.

Amy Randall: May I just—

Tim Loughton: Yes, please say something.

Amy Randall: As the Minister has said, precisely because we want to keep it broad, there is that dual purpose: it is either sexual gratification or it is intent to cause distress, alarm or humiliation. It does not need to be both; it just needs to be either of those in order to be captured.

Laura Farris: The Lord Chancellor and I sat for some time talking to the lawyers, working through what it would and would not say. I have seen the draft, and it reflects what the Lord Chancellor and I had in mind. It is meant to catch this offence; it is not creating a threshold that is unnaturally high, where people will be able to wriggle out quite easily by saying, "It was not my intention."

Q135 **Tim Loughton:** I understand that, and I do not disagree. I am going to play devil's advocate here because, increasingly in this area, and with emergence of technology, the problem is that we legislate against things which are effectively unenforceable and make for poor legislation. Let us role-play. I am a 17-year-old girl, in my bedroom, who has used my computer to create an image; how can we draw an example without causing offence? Let us say I have put the Home Secretary's head on a naked image of Arnold Schwarzenegger, for want of a better naked image, that looks exceedingly genuine and is for personal sexual gratification, with absolutely no intention of sharing that image. It could be deeply embarrassing to do so, whatever one thinks of the Home Secretary. She would be guilty of a criminal offence.

Laura Farris: She will be guilty of a criminal offence. That is probably not the most realistic example.



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Q136 **Tim Loughton:** I could have used any example, and you could apply the same terminology. How realistic is that, though?

Laura Farris: Let me give you three points, all which we considered very carefully. First, yes, she will be committing a criminal offence. There is no custodial sentence for that; it is just a fine. There is no entry on to the sex offenders' register. Let us be honest: 99% of deepfakes are sexually explicit about women, so let us be realistic in what we are talking about. It would be much more likely to be a male doing this than a young female.

Q137 **Tim Loughton:** That is irrelevant, is it not?

Laura Farris: So, they do not—

Q138 **Tim Loughton:** Why is that relevant?

Laura Farris: The creation offence does not put you on the sex offenders' register, so it does not have those profound consequences. You get a criminal record, which is quickly expunged if it is just a creation offence. The second part of what you are implying, and which is true—

Q139 **Tim Loughton:** It would come up on a DB check, would it not?

Laura Farris: Yes, but it would go in the way that any short-term—

Q140 **Tim Loughton:** After how long?

Laura Farris: That is something I will check and write to the Committee on, but it is short, and we considered that. It is much more serious if you share that image, but creation alone is a criminal offence. You say, "Well, will anyone find out if they are just doing it?" It is true, there will be a detection issue, but there are other crimes, for example, speeding, which people do and do not necessarily get caught every single time they are driving. None the less, we have the offence, and this has added to public protection and contributed to responsible action on the road. Therefore, I still stand by the fact that, even though we have gone further than any other Government, it is a worthwhile thing to have. I maintain that those deepfake creating sites blocking access to UK users—which they are quite right to do, by the way, because they would be criminalising their user base—sends a strong, positive message that this is completely unacceptable in every single form.

Q141 **Tim Loughton:** When does it become a deepfake? Is it only if it is a technologically manipulated image? If I, as a 17-year-old girl, was to cut out of a magazine a photograph of the head of the Home Secretary and one of the naked body of whoever the celebrity is, is that an offence as well now?

Amy Randall: I believe it is, yes. It is any pseudo-image, but we can check that.



Laura Farris: The reason why it would not be a cut-out is that it has to be sexually explicit, and that is defined in a way that is not just intimate image. It is not just saucy; it is properly explicit.

Q142 **Tim Loughton:** I can buy a pornographic magazine, cut out an image and stick on the head of the Home Secretary, and I will be committing an offence.

Laura Farris: I believe so, yes.

Q143 **Tim Loughton:** My concern, whether it is right or wrong, is that we are potentially treading into the realms of somebody, particularly younger people, being a little overly creative in putting together an image, which now transgresses a criminal line where there is no intent to cause any psychological damage or humiliation to the Home Secretary, because he would not know about it, and no intent to share it with other people or to share sexual gratification. It is entirely a private and personal matter that nobody need ever find out about, but accidentally they do, because my computer falls into the hands of a police investigation because of something else that is going on. That is quite a low bar. One could say, is that doing any harm to anybody?

Amy Randall: Just to clarify—

Laura Farris: Sorry, I want to come in, because Alex and I spent a lot of time going through this. You are right, and you raise the counterargument very well, which is, surely we are free to do this? Surely, there is some degree of leeway. People must be allowed freedom of expression, and there are other arguments. First, there are just a few elements. The right to freedom of expression is qualified. You do not have an unqualified right to freedom of expression. We think that when you are using an image in a non-consensual way and the victim has not consented to the use of their image, that is relevant. We are moving from an intent-based to a consent-based offence. That is my first point.

Secondly, sexually explicit is defined in the legislation. As I say, I want you to move away from a seaside image of boobs and bums. We spent a lot of time with the MoJ legal team going through how we would define that so that it is not the same as the intimate image offence; it is a sexually explicit offence.

Thirdly, the purpose is sexual gratification, so this is not just perhaps an arty thing you do on your computer or something. That would not qualify. In fact, that is where Amy is going to with sexual gratification and/or malicious intent. The boundary engages the combination of this consent-based privacy argument for the victim and freedom of expression, but we think we have drawn the line very carefully and in the correct place.

Q144 **Tim Loughton:** We could have a deeply philosophical debate about the freedom of expression.

Chair: But, we are not going to.



Tim Loughton: Freedom of expression surely does not apply when you are expressing your freedom to express to yourself. It is entirely an internal matter that should be subject to regulation or censorship or the law in some form when you express something that is potentially harmful to somebody else. The 17-year-old girl, me, is not expressing anything to anybody else, and I am free to obtain sexual gratification from something, am I not? Because pornography, whether we like it or not, is legal, and so I would have to be 18. If I am 18, I can access pornography legally for sexual gratification, whether it has the face of the Home Secretary or another image or not. What is the difference?

Laura Farris: You can do that, but the person that you access in the pornographic content has consented to being in that pornographic content. We can have a wider conversation about pornography. The victim of the deepfake has not consented to their image being used in that sexually explicit way, and that is what takes it over the line.

Q145 **Tim Loughton:** So, we are criminalising fantasies?

Laura Farris: We are criminalising the non-consensual inclusion of the image of a real person in something that is sexually explicit, which has the purpose principally of sexual gratification and/or to cause humiliation, alarm or distress. The lack of consent informs that. We have to be honest, Tim, when giving these examples.

Tim Loughton: Sure.

Laura Farris: We now have prolific Nudify apps, which are coming on to the market all the time.

Tim Loughton: I completely agree with that.

Laura Farris: This is a cancer that is spreading through schools and is predominantly affecting young girls.

Tim Loughton: Minister, I do I not disagree—

Laura Farris: We accept that this is quite a strong legislative move to make, but we are convinced we have drawn the line in the right place that protects girls, and we think society broadly would agree with that.

Q146 **Tim Loughton:** I do not disagree with any of that, and I absolutely understand the problem. My concern is that we are potentially using a sledgehammer to crack a nut that will just not stand up in terms of practical enforceability. Sharing and trying to cause harm, absolutely I get that. But, unless you are prepared to illegalise pornography, what you have just described in terms of the first part of the issue is fantasy. You are effectively, whether we agree with it or not, criminalising somebody's individual fantasy for sexual gratification.

Laura Farris: No, we are not.

Chair: I think we—



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Laura Farris: Finally on that—

Chair: Very quickly, because we do need to move on.

Laura Farris: We are not eliminating fantasy. We are constraining your right to take the image of a real person—

Tim Loughton: Fantasy.

Laura Farris: To manipulate that to create a product which is a deepfake image, without their consent, that is sexually explicit and that is for your sexual gratification. We are outlawing that.

Chair: Thank you. James Daly?

Q147 **James Daly:** Thank you very much, Minister. Obviously, there are many strands to what we are talking about today but, in terms of my questions to you, I am interested in the prosecution of the offending through the courts. I think it goes to a wider general principle. I do not know whether you heard the evidence given on the panel prior to you coming in, but one of the witnesses, an assistant chief constable, talked of how sexual offences have been prosecuted, and, probably the best way of putting it, how they have not been prosecuted. One of the reasons for that has been that the police's attitude has reflected that of wider society, I assume, either in not taking these offences seriously perhaps due to misogyny or whatever the case may be. If, over time, the attitude of the police and the way these matters have been prosecuted has been impacted, that is deeply troubling. What do you think about that general principle? If that is the case, how can you, as a Minister, influence police thinking in this area?

Laura Farris: It is a really good question, because for me, it is probably the hardest thing to get transparency on: are there general misogynistic attitudes that exist within the police? Of course, we have seen some unbelievably stark examples, which have been accompanied by the most serious offending by police officers. But, what the day-to-day looks like is a much more difficult question to answer. One thing I would say—I have already given this answer partially—is that when materials are produced and training is developed, it has really helped to have specialists design that training working with the College of Policing, so that there is almost a continuum between the academic or specialist group and the frontline officer. That is the first point.

The second point is the culture within the police really matters, and each chief officer sets the tone. This week, I have been in correspondence with Andy Marsh of the College of Policing, as I am concerned about things like WhatsApp culture, because, even though the college has nominally quite strong principles on this, again and again we see smaller subgroups, where cases are described and attitudes are displayed, which suggest some of the problematic thinking that makes it hard for the



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public to have confidence. Work needs to be done on WhatsApp culture, and it has been discussed at every level in the Home Office.

Q148 James Daly: Can I ask two very quick questions? What you said is a very important point, but the situation we are in, which has been accepted by a senior and many other police officers, is that we have this prevalent attitude in the prosecuting and investigation of these offences. But then, we have this very high standard that the CPS is holding the police to, in my view, in respect of evidence that needs to be produced for the basis of a charge in this type of offending. I fully accept there is an argument against this, but if a representative of the CPS was here, they would argue the point very strongly. It seems to me that is not a relationship or a set of circumstances that is conducive to positive outcomes for victims. I do not know whether you agree with that.

Laura Farris: There is probably nobody with better experience on this particular issue than you sitting in Parliament. I spoke to Stephen Parkinson this week as part of our regular meetings on the rape review, and one of the things that came out of Soteria—there is still room for improvement on this—is closer working between the CPS and the police, and direct engagement at the very beginning of the process. You make a very strong case for the same thing to happen in relation to non-contact sexual offending. I think it is recognised within the CPS that, where they do engage with police officers earlier and tell them more about the expectations they are setting, they get a better outcome. I do not think that has always been the case and, to be honest, I will take your question as a point to raise again, because I understand what you are saying.

Q149 James Daly: Do I have time for one more question?

Laura Farris: Yes. One other point I was going to make very briefly—

Chair: I am okay, chairing. It is all right. James, you can ask one more question, and then I am going to Alison.

Q150 James Daly: Many victims of the type of offending we are discussing today, or domestic violence or serious sexual offending, are people who may, through no fault of their own, have mental health challenges, addiction problems, or all sorts of other issues in their life. My very real concern, and professional experience, is that, many times when victims have the courage to come forward, somebody within the system views them as completely unreliable because of their personal circumstances rather than what they say has happened to them. I think that goes to explain why many of the cases reported to the police are not referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, because the police make a judgment on things which they think mean that these people are unreliable witnesses. That is a very dangerous place that we have come to. I do not know whether you agree with that.

Laura Farris: That came out of the Angiolini report. In the 2015 allegation of indecent exposure, there was criticism of the victim, and it was possible to infer exactly that, and I have seen examples of that. So,



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can I say, noted? I will give it some thought. You make a fair observation. I will have to give some thought as to how we treat that at the Home Office, as I do not have an easy response to that.

Q151 Alison Thewliss: We had quite powerful evidence from Lisa Squire, the mother of Libby Squire, which you may have heard, and she said of all these kinds of non-contact sexual offences, "We have also been conditioned over the years to think that this is just something that happens." What more do we need to do to change society to see that this is actually an issue that we should do something about?

Laura Farris: I read her evidence on that; I thought she was quite right. The number of women who in their lifetime will be the victim of a non-contact sexual offence is incredibly high. There has already been progress. Even just upgrading from public nuisance to a sexual offence in 2003 was the first step in that. The things that have happened in the life of this Parliament, particularly since 2021, have completely changed the way violence against women is treated and the seriousness with which it is viewed not just by the police but by the whole of society.

I want to include stalking in this, because it is a really important non-contact offence that has its own characteristics. It is an area where we have either a specific strategy or the application of what we know to be tried and tested investigative methods, such as an Operation Soteria and I would say a recalibration of police data as well. I know the Home Office has a long-term plan to totally change the way the police national database works, but at moment there is a disjoint in that certain officers cannot access it. The way that some crime is recorded on the police national computer, with other more elaborate details on the police national database, even the data entry skills, the presence of analytic officers, mean that we are not where we need it to be for building a complete picture.

Q152 Alison Thewliss: What conversations have you had with tech firms? I am pretty sure most women have had the experience of being on public transport, for example, and an AirDrop appearing. What more can be done to stop these things at source?

Laura Farris: We have just started to see the convictions coming through on that. We had our first conviction on cyber-flashing last month. Let me take a bit of time on that. We have created an offence, and we are beginning to see the offence work, so it is fair to give that a bit more time before I review whether or not we need to do more on cyber-flashing.

Q153 Alison Thewliss: I ask that because I put the same question to the British Transport police. There had been an FOI put in to British Transport Police Scotland to see how many offences they had recorded. It may be an issue of recording, or it may be an issue of data, but we have had this as an offence in Scotland for a longer period, and they could only find three offences from 2019 to 2023. That does not suggest to me that,



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even with the law there, you have enough reporting, convictions and investigations to make this actually happen and be a deterrent.

Laura Farris: Women have accepted a lot of this low-level offending for a long time, in fact, all my lifetime, have they not? They do not report.

Q154 **Chair:** I want to ask you a couple of questions. The Government committed to conducting research on the escalation of sexual offending among repeat perpetrators. Has that research been published yet?

Laura Farris: Not that I am aware of, but we are building really important profiles of repeat perpetrators. In fact, the Met has its top 100, which it has adapted from its terrorism model. We also know, as a matter of fact, that a small number of perpetrators cause the highest amount of harm.

Q155 **Chair:** Are you expecting to publish this research imminently?

Laura Farris: Publication will be in 2024.

Q156 **Chair:** I want to refer back to the Women and Equalities Committee, where you were critical about data collection not being good enough. Has anything been done to improve that since you appeared at the Women and Equalities Committee, and are you satisfied that policing has sufficient data analysis resource in place?

Laura Farris: I have had the analytics conversation with the Policing Minister, so I can update the Committee. I have explored the possibility of a workaround, actually looking at this in the context of protective orders—we have done a piece of work on this, which we do not have time for now—because we know that the police are not getting as many of these as they could. We know that a busy frontline officer on the beat might come in with some sort of offence. They use the police national computer, and they would like to look at the police national database, but sometimes you get a situation where nobody in the station that night has a licence to access the database. They might intend to go back to it when they are in the next day but, because of the caseload, they just do not.

So, I have explored and am interested in whether you should have a very simple system where the facts of the case get recorded, and the first person with a licence to use the database has to work through them all, whether it is next day, next shift, because some of that gets lost altogether. So, somebody has to go through everything, as I do not think that is always happening.

That is a workaround for a longer-term solution, which must mean much greater accessibility to the national database and a much simpler way to record data. Sometimes, particularly with RASSO offences, data entry is quite elaborate. It asks questions which are not necessarily relevant, and it takes too long for a standard officer to get to the most direct question, for example, what is the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, which is probably the most important detail we need for data.



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Q157 **Chair:** The Committee is quite concerned about the workforce within policing and making sure that we have the right people with the right skills in place. We made a recommendation in our policing priorities report for a workforce plan that we thought would be quite useful for the future of policing. The Government decided they did not agree with that, but we would again say that there are clear issues here around recruitment of people with the right skills for data analysis. We just put that to you, Minister.

The second point I wanted to raise with you is, we are also in the middle of an inquiry into the culture of the fire and rescue service. You made reference today to WhatsApp groups, and we know there have been real concerns in policing about the use of WhatsApp expressing a culture that is not appropriate. Minister, do you want to have a word with the Policing Minister who also has responsibility for fire and rescue about some of the stories yesterday in the media about WhatsApp groups in Shropshire?

Laura Farris: I want to reassure you that conversations about WhatsApp groups have been had at every single level at the Home Office, including with the Home Secretary.

Chair: I am very pleased to hear that. Just so you are aware, we are concerned about the culture particularly in the fire and rescue service, which we came across in our recent inquiry. Can I thank you very much, and your officials today, for coming along? We are very pleased that we were able to hear from you. Can I commend you on how well briefed you were on this important subject to the Home Affairs Committee? Thank you very much.