

# **The policing response to the investigation of online child sexual abuse and the management of registered sex offenders**

PEEL spotlight report

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# Foreword

The investigation of online [child sexual abuse](#) and the management of registered sex offenders involve perpetrators of harrowing sexual offences. The demand on forces in these high-risk areas of policing isn't only increasing but is exceeding resources. Focus and change are needed.

These two areas of policing are interconnected, but forces too often consider them as separate. When an online child sexual abuse offender is convicted, they become a registered sex offender. As forces become better at identifying and convicting such individuals, demand increases in [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams. If registered sex offenders reoffend online, this leads to further investigations and, therefore, increased demand on online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) teams. Police forces should consider what effect change or reduced investment in one area could have on the other.

Online sexual offending is increasing, yet the existing processes for managing [contact](#) and non-contact offenders are the same. Research is required to understand if different techniques are needed to effectively manage different types of offenders. This approach may also improve the understanding of why people offend and, therefore, how to prevent this from happening in the first place.

In this report, we have reviewed the findings related to the investigation of online child sexual abuse and the management of registered sex offenders from our 2021/22 and 2023–25 police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy inspections. We have identified where police forces could further improve. This needs to happen at a force level, supported by change and improvement at a national level. The [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), [College of Policing](#) and the Home Office should work together alongside forces to improve the system. This will reduce the risk to the public, including some of the most [vulnerable people](#) in our society: [children](#).

This report also highlights where police forces have improved over our inspection cycles. We know that the [officers](#) and [staff](#) who work in MOSOVO and OCSAE teams are passionate and professional and have the protection of the public at the heart of what they do. We found examples of great practice and innovation but also that some leaders lacked understanding in these areas. And we recognise that a lack of investment means those officers and staff can't always carry out their roles to best effect. National guidance and training in both areas need to be updated to make sure practice is more consistent within forces and across England and Wales.

Forces need to make sure they record, analyse and use data to better understand performance, including prioritising risk, recognising good practice and identifying issues. They should use this to inform governance and performance meetings at all levels and allow better oversight across the force. They need to use this data alongside demand projections to make sure that there are enough trained officers and staff to manage demand now and in the future.

During our inspections, we found that many forces had improved their well-being support for officers and staff. We commend this. However, due to the disturbing material they encounter on a daily basis, well-being assessment, such as the use of a psychological health screening, should be mandatory for all OCSAE and MOSOVO teams. Supervisors should have ongoing trauma-informed well-being training to help them recognise potential signs of well-being issues and burnout in their staff and themselves. Access to professional support should be easy and understood by all. Forces need to continue to be progressive with their well-being assessments and support to make sure they can meet the needs of their officers and staff.

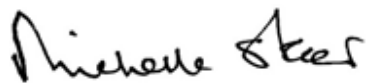
Across England and Wales, forces' use of technology is inconsistent. Police forces need to improve how they use technology to investigate and detect offences, monitor offenders, triage electronic devices and carry out administrative tasks. [Digital forensic](#) time periods for device examination vary greatly across England and Wales and are often too long. This can lead to children being insufficiently [safeguarded](#) for months. It also means that investigation conclusions can be delayed, leaving [victims](#) waiting for updates and outcomes. This needs to improve on a national level.

OCSAE and MOSOVO teams can't make these changes alone. The investigation of online child sexual abuse and the management of registered sex offenders require input from partner agencies, such as the Probation Service and children's social care. This can be [intelligence](#) sharing, safeguarding and the joint management of offenders. Forces need to continue to build professional relationships and develop service level agreements with partners to make sure that safeguarding opportunities aren't being missed.

Many MOSOVO teams have good working relationships with [neighbourhood policing teams](#), which are the police representatives in the communities where registered sex offenders live. They can safeguard potential victims, provide intelligence to offender managers and reduce the chances of reoffending. OCSAE teams should do the same to make sure that neighbourhood policing teams are aware of the arrest of suspects. This will help neighbourhood teams better respond to and reduce any tension in communities and make sure that [bail](#) conditions are kept.

We have issued 16 recommendations in this report for police forces as well as the National Police Chiefs' Council, College of Policing and the Home Office. These recommendations concentrate on better governance and performance, capacity and capability, up-to-date guidance, staff and officer well-being, the use of technology and partnership working. The aim is to improve standards in the investigation of online child sexual exploitation and the management of registered sex offenders.

I commend this report and its 16 recommendations to all those involved in these two areas of policing.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michelle Skeer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and a stylized 'S'.

**Michelle Skeer OBE QPM**

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary

# Summary

In this spotlight report, we make clear the strain under which online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) (OCSAE) and the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams across England and Wales are operating. This pressure will only intensify with ever increasing levels of demand.

Forces and national bodies such as the [College of Policing](#), [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and Home Office need to invest in these areas of policing. There is specific need for investment in:

- research to inform operational practice;
- technology to support the timely identification of offending; and
- the workforce, to make sure forces have sufficient numbers of well-trained and well-supported [personnel](#).

## **Most forces have good governance and operating models for the investigation of online child sexual abuse**

During our 2021/22 and 2023–25 police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections, we found that most forces had good governance and operating models. Where we found oversight issues during our 2021/22 inspections, we were pleased to see that some forces had improved these by the 2023–25 inspection cycle.

## **Forces should have well-structured teams and processes in place to effectively investigate online child sexual abuse**

Some forces aren't regularly reviewing the [intelligence](#) for referrals that are awaiting enforcement. This means they can't accurately assess whether the risk has changed and whether the enforcement should be prioritised. Some OCSAE team investigations can take over 12 months to conclude. The risk can change over this period. But some forces don't carry out regular intelligence checks on investigation suspects.

During our inspections, we found that some forces had outstanding referrals in intelligence development, investigation action (progressing to a warrant or arrest at an address) or both. And some had outstanding referrals during both inspection cycles. This showed that those forces hadn't reduced their outstanding referrals sufficiently and didn't have enough trained personnel to meet the demand they faced.

During our inspections, we found that some forces had outstanding referrals that were outside the timescales suggested in the [Kent internet risk assessment tool](#) and the operational prioritisation response tool. In some cases, forces were allocating lower-risk investigations to teams other than specialist OCSAE teams.

## **Police officers and staff need to do more training to improve the investigation of online child sexual abuse**

During our inspections, we found that many forces didn't have enough [officers](#) and [staff](#) to investigate online sexual abuse, even after we had highlighted that their staffing models were insufficient.

Online child sexual abuse investigations involve digital evidence, so officers and staff need specialist skills to find, seize and examine devices that might hold [indecent images of children](#). But at the time of writing this report, there was no nationally accredited course focusing specifically on the investigation of online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

Investigating online child sexual abuse is a specialist, high-risk area. Clear and detailed guidance is essential to make sure that best practice is followed and successful outcomes are achieved. Guidance is provided by the National Police Chiefs' Council and National Crime Agency document 'Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE'.

This reflects the latest best practice approaches. The document is comprehensive, but it is also lengthy and can be difficult to use. The College of Policing provides [authorised professional practice \(APP\)](#) for many areas including those covering other investigations. This format makes advice easier for police personnel to access and understand. However, at the time of writing this report, there was no APP for investigating online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

## **Forces aren't always effectively managing the risk posed by online child sexual abuse suspects**

Forces should primarily use arrest for OCSAE team investigations. Some forces use [voluntary attendance](#) for interview rather than arrest powers, which removes opportunities to [safeguard](#) the public.

The use of [bail](#) to safeguard [victims](#) should be a starting point due to the offences that the suspect has been arrested for. These offences are committed online. This means that suspects don't require physical access to [children](#) to be a risk. Forces should use bespoke conditions that will safeguard the public. During our inspections, we found that some forces didn't bail suspects after arrest and instead [released them under investigation](#).

We also found that some forces didn't carry out bail checks for those bailed by OCSAE teams. This can lead to forces missing bail breaches and changes in risk to children. It also makes the imposing of bail conditions less meaningful.

Families of online child sexual abuse suspects are often severely affected by the investigation. However, they aren't officially classed as victims. To provide support, some forces use a third-party organisation or an officer or staff member whose sole responsibility is to carry out the family support role. This allows for separation between the investigation and family support.

### **Inconsistent operating practices and team structures are affecting the successful management of registered sex offenders**

During our inspections, we found that many forces didn't consistently follow national guidance (including the APP for MOSOVO) when managing registered sex offenders. Some MOSOVO teams also lacked centralised oversight, which prevented forces from achieving consistent performance across all teams.

We found that some forces failed to use the [Violent and Sex Offender Register \(ViSOR\)](#) effectively. In these cases, this was because officers and staff lacked sufficient training in both the system and the expectations for recording their activities with offenders. If ViSOR isn't updated and an offender is given a new offender manager or moves to another force area, the information needed to accurately assess and manage the risk posed by that offender may not be available.

We found that forces with the most effective MOSOVO teams had dedicated, centralised senior leadership oversight. This approach makes sure that all teams operate consistently, allows for accurate performance comparisons and makes it easier to move officers and staff between teams during high-demand periods.

### **Poor performance analysis and demand management is affecting the successful management of registered sex offenders**

During our inspections, we found that some forces lacked effective performance data for the management of registered sex offenders. Some forces didn't record enough details to monitor risk. For example, some didn't log outstanding risk management plans (RMPs) or [active risk management systems \(ARMS\)](#) assessments. Other forces lacked information on when the offender's last ARMS assessment, RMP and home visit had been and, therefore, how overdue they were.

The Home Office has told us that in 2028 a new system called the Multi-Agency Public Protection System will replace ViSOR. It is planned to have information from partner agencies and improved connectivity, with the ability for further functionality in the future. However, when introduced, it will only have management information functionality that is equal to that of ViSOR. We are aware that there is an intention to provide additional functionality once ViSOR has been replaced. However, what this will include and the timescales for this are yet to be determined. This is disappointing and a missed opportunity as, at the time the Multi-Agency Public Protection System is made available, forces still won't have the functionality they need to assess performance, manage demand and reduce risk.

During our inspections, we found that many forces had large numbers of outstanding ARMs assessments, RMPs and offender home visits to complete. Some of these forces had only completed between 76 and 90 percent of ARMS assessments and RMPs for which police were the lead agency. The APP for MOSOVO outlines that forces should have a completion rate of 95 percent or more. If these ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits aren't completed, offender managers may miss changing levels of risk and if any reoffending has taken place.

### **A lack of trained personnel means forces aren't always effectively managing the risk posed by registered sex offenders**

During our inspections, we found that some forces needed to increase their number of MOSOVO offender managers to improve the ratio of offender managers to registered sex offenders. If MOSOVO offender managers have high caseloads, it can lead to ineffective offender management due to them not having enough time to complete all tasks thoroughly.

Better-performing forces make sure that ratios are appropriate and that offender managers aren't removed from their duties unnecessarily. If forces are [abstracting](#) trained offender managers regularly, it can lead to a lack of trained officers and staff to carry out MOSOVO duties. This can mean that forces don't effectively identify and manage an increase in outstanding tasks and risk.

We also found that some forces didn't have enough supervisors, which led to high supervisor workloads. This can result in poor supervisory oversight and review of important risk-reducing documents such as ARMs assessments and RMPs as well as a lack of effective management of increasing demand. In some forces, we found that a supervisor could be responsible for 500 registered sex offenders.

There is no national training course for supervisors in the management of registered sex offenders. This can lead to inconsistent practices across force teams and throughout England and Wales.

## **Forces must understand and follow national guidance to better manage registered sex offenders**

Forces should follow the College of Policing APP for MOSOVO to make sure that they assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders robustly.

During our inspections, we found that some forces were using single-crewed visits, which is where one person carries out the visit alone. The APP for MOSOVO is clear that visits should be carried out by two people as this allows them to use their observations to assess the risk. The APP for MOSOVO also outlines that visits should be unannounced. But we found that some forces carried out announced visits to registered sex offenders without clear policies on when this should be done, who should authorise visits and what rationale should be recorded.

Some forces aren't using the [Police National Database](#) to check their registered sex offenders on a regular basis. The database holds intelligence gathered from forces and services across the United Kingdom. Forces should be using it to understand the intelligence that exists for offenders at all levels of risk in the community and to assess and manage the risk appropriately.

We found that some forces placed registered sex offenders in [reactive management](#) inappropriately and without complying with all expected criteria. In the majority of cases, offenders were still subject to civil orders such as an existing [Sexual Harm Prevention Order](#). If forces feel that the order is no longer required, they should make a request for removal to the court.

The College of Policing is responsible for completing and updating the APP for MOSOVO. The last update to the APP was on 21 December 2023. But due to changes in how forces operate and research into the management of registered sex offenders and the types of offending, this APP needs updating.

## **Forces must invest in technology and train officers and staff to use it effectively**

At the time of writing this report, there was no national digital course for the management of sexual offenders. During our inspections, we found that some forces didn't provide sufficient digital training to give officers and staff the confidence in the use of technology. This can lead to missed opportunities to identify further offending.

We also found that some forces lacked digital triage equipment for MOSOVO teams to use. This affects their ability to identify breaches of orders and any further offending, which can reduce the accuracy of [risk assessments](#) in place for registered sex offenders.

For the examination of digital devices, we found that some forces had unacceptably long timescales of up to two years from the point at which the digital device was submitted. This may mean that a child hasn't been safeguarded during the time it has taken to examine the device. The victim has to wait far too long for the outcome of the investigation, which is likely to have a negative effect on their well-being.

During our inspections, we found that there were no standardised timescales across England and Wales for the submission and examination of devices. This means it is a postcode lottery for how long it takes for a device to be examined by a force's [digital forensic](#) unit.

Some forces use polygraph tests (a tool that can detect deception) as an intelligence-gathering tool. Forces that use this tool have been able to identify new offences that they then investigate, making sure that victims are safeguarded. All forces should have access to this useful intelligence tool.

Some forces are having difficulty in placing positive requirements, such as the use of polygraphs, into Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and [Sexual Risk Orders](#). The National Police Chiefs' Council and forces need to work with the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts to better understand and implement these obligations.

Forces use specialist software to review and categorise indecent images of children, which communicates with the [child abuse image database \(CAID\)](#). The CAID system checks to see if the image has been identified before and if it has, it puts the image into the correct category. CAID relies on the same image being [graded](#) several times to quality assure the grading level. Some forces have backlogs of indecent images of children to upload to CAID. Forces that aren't uploading all images are slowing the process down and reducing the capability of this system.

## **Adequate well-being provision for MOSOVO and OCSAE teams is essential**

The [National Police Wellbeing Service](#) commissioned the 2025 national police wellbeing survey. The results outline the need for welfare provisions to be mandatory for high-risk roles such as those in MOSOVO and OCSAE teams. This is because they are frequently carrying out emotionally demanding work.

People who need support may not self-refer for welfare provision or recognise there is an issue. A mandatory referral for an annual psychological health screening would normalise and standardise initial access and remove any the perceived stigma from an opt-in process. This would also allow preventative measures to be put in place, along with interventions, before the individual's well-being is affected.

The survey results also highlight how important the supervisor's role is. Most staff and officers go to their supervisor for support. Therefore, it is essential that supervisors are trained in recognising signs of trauma and burnout and know how to respond. Supervisors also need support as it is likely that they won't only be supporting their officers and staff but may also experience trauma and burnout themselves.

Disappointingly, during our inspections, we found that some forces weren't providing good enough well-being support for MOSOVO and OCSAE teams. Some forces weren't proactively offering well-being provision; instead staff and officers themselves were responsible for identifying that they needed help. This isn't acceptable. Officers and staff aren't trained to understand or pick up on the signs of welfare issues. They may incorrectly attribute changes in their behaviour to something else.

## **Strong partnership working is essential within forces and with other statutory organisations**

Forces can't safeguard victims and successfully manage the risk posed by offenders alone.

The Probation Service works with the police to manage registered sex offenders. But high probation workloads can lead to delays in risk assessments and RMPs being uploaded to ViSOR and some are missed completely. This means that some forces can't properly manage the risk of offenders in the community.

When the lead agency changes from the Probation Service to the police, we found that some forces didn't have a recent risk assessment and RMP in place from the Probation Service. Without the extra information provided on the risk assessment and RMP, forces can find it difficult to fully understand the risk. This could increase the risk to the public.

Better-performing forces have good working relationships with the Probation Service. They have strong service level agreements and a two-way review, feedback and escalation process for issues in the management of registered sex offenders.

[Neighbourhood policing teams](#) are the police representatives in the community. It is important that they understand who their registered sex offenders and online child sexual abuse suspects are. This supports the safeguarding of the wider community and provides intelligence to officers on behaviours that may suggest further offending is taking place.

Better-performing forces have MOSOVO teams that are co-located with neighbourhood policing teams. But we found that the same level of connectivity didn't exist between OCSAE teams and the neighbourhood policing teams. This is a missed opportunity to monitor suspects on bail for indecent images of children offences as well as identify and address any community tension after a suspect's arrest.

Police forces should work closely with children’s social care (CSC) to effectively safeguard children. However, we found that some forces weren’t sharing information with CSC at the earliest opportunity. In these cases, CSC was contacted prior to the police searching the suspect’s premises but usually no more than 24 hours beforehand. This was generally due to the fear that CSC would contact the suspect before police enforcement, which could risk vital evidence being lost before the police had been able to secure it.

Most forces have now changed procedures and are sharing information with CSC much earlier. This makes sure that there is an opportunity to put the right safeguarding measures in place to protect victims.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- review existing practices to make sure they use the [Kent internet risk assessment tool](#) and the prioritisation tool to prioritise referrals for all [children](#) and adult suspects;
- review their procedures to make sure there is regular assessment of [intelligence](#) and risk for online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) suspects both prior to enforcement and throughout the lifecycle of the investigation; and
- make sure investigations allocated outside online child sexual abuse and exploitation teams remain under the team’s management oversight, including a central escalation policy.

### Recommendation 2

By 30 April 2027, forces should review existing staffing levels in [online child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) teams to make sure that they have enough [officers](#) and [staff](#) to manage demand effectively and that workloads are manageable.

### Recommendation 3

By 31 December 2026, the [College of Policing](#) should:

- review the ‘Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE’ and create an [authorised professional practice](#) for this area in conjunction with this advice; and
- implement a national investigators’ course for the management of online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#).

#### **Recommendation 4**

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- review their online [child sexual abuse](#) procedures and make sure that arrest and [bail](#) is considered and recorded for all suspects; and
- make sure that when online child sexual abuse suspects are on bail, conditions are proactively checked at least once per applicable bail period.

#### **Recommendation 5**

By 30 April 2027, forces should make sure that third-party provision is in place to support families of online [child sexual abuse](#) suspects and that leaflets with contact details of support organisations are available.

#### **Recommendation 6**

By 30 October 2026, forces should:

- review their operating models and governance frameworks to make sure they have a consistent approach to managing registered sex offenders across all teams, including use of the [Violent and Sex Offender Register](#) in line with Home Office standards; and
- review the data they collect, how they collect it and how it is presented and make sure that it represents what is on the Violent and Sex Offender Register to accurately assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders.

#### **Recommendation 7**

By 30 April 2027, the Home Office should continue to consult with police forces on the need to fund further development of the new Multi-Agency Public Protection System after its introduction, including enhanced management information to help forces properly manage the risk posed by registered sex offenders.

## Recommendation 8

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- use previous demand trends and review predicted demand for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) teams for five years to make sure that they have enough offender managers and supervisors to manage this;
- make sure that management of sexual offenders and violent offenders team [abstractions](#) are recorded, reviewed, don't happen on a regular basis and don't have a negative effect on workload completion;
- make sure that management of sexual offenders and violent offenders teams have manageable numbers of outstanding [active risk management systems](#) assessments, risk management plans and visits and that these are assessed by both risk level and how overdue they are; and
- make sure that supervisors are completing reviews of active risk management systems assessments, risk management plans and visits promptly and within one month.

## Recommendation 9

By 30 April 2027, the Home Office in conjunction with the [College of Policing](#) and the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should evaluate the potential for an effective and expedited process for police application to the courts to remove [Sexual Harm Prevention Orders](#) for appropriate cases.

## Recommendation 10

By 31 October 2026, forces should make sure that:

- home visits are unannounced and carried out in pairs to comply with the [College of Policing authorised professional practice](#) for the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#);
- visits that don't comply with the authorised professional practice for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders are authorised, the rationale is recorded on the [Violent and Sex Offender Register](#) and that a system is in place to allow assessment of the decision;
- any [reactively-managed](#) registered sex offenders meet the conditions set out in the authorised professional practice for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders; and
- they carry out and assess [Police National Database](#) checks on registered sex offenders.

### **Recommendation 11**

By 30 April 2027, the [College of Policing](#) in conjunction with the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should review the [authorised professional practice](#) for the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) with forces and publish an updated version.

### **Recommendation 12**

By 30 April 2027, the [College of Policing](#) should:

- make sure that a bespoke national digital training course is mandated for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) offender managers; and
- develop a bespoke management of sexual offenders and violent offenders supervisors' training package to make sure that they have sufficient training and skills to consistently carry out their roles.

### **Recommendation 13**

By 30 April 2027, the Home Office and [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should carry out a cost-benefit analysis for a procurement exercise for all 43 forces in England and Wales to purchase digital triage equipment collectively, rather than individually, for investigating online [child sexual abuse](#) and the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#).

### **Recommendation 14**

By 31 December 2026, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and [College of Policing](#) should develop a [risk assessment](#) tool that allows each of the 43 forces in England and Wales to consistently assess and prioritise the submission and examination of digital devices in a way that also effectively reduces the existing backlog.

### **Recommendation 15**

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- make sure psychological health screening is mandatory and provided at least annually (as per guidance from the [National Police Wellbeing Service](#)) for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) and online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) team members and supervisors with access to follow-on well-being services; and
- make sure that management of sexual offenders and violent offenders and online child sexual abuse and exploitation team supervisors have regular trauma-informed training and knowledge sharing to identify signs of trauma, burnout and other well-being issues and that they can refer to and access timely support and treatment where needed.

### **Recommendation 16**

By 31 October 2026, forces should make sure that they have a strong service level agreement in place with the Probation Service and that they have a two-way process for review, feedback and escalation to make sure [safeguarding](#) opportunities aren't being missed.

# Introduction

## About us

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services to make communities safer. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that the public would ask and publish the answers in accessible form. We use our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

## Methodology

This report focuses on the police response to both the management of registered sex offenders and the investigation of online [child sexual abuse](#) material. It also highlights examples of positive practice and joint working between the police and other organisations, which is vital to managing registered sex offenders and the investigation of online child sexual abuse material.

## Terminology in this report

### National

Our reports contain references to, among other things, 'national' definitions, priorities, policies, systems, responsibilities and processes.

In some instances, 'national' means applying to England and Wales. In others, it means applying to England, Wales and Scotland, or the whole of the United Kingdom.

### The management of registered sex offenders

We have used a general term to refer to the teams that manage registered sex offenders. This is the [management of sexual and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) team. We recognise that police forces use differing names for this team. However, we have used MOSOVO throughout this report for consistency.

## Investigations of child sexual abuse

We have used a general term to refer to the teams that investigate online child sexual abuse. This is the online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) team. We recognise that police forces use differing names for this team. However, we have used OCSAE throughout this report for consistency.

## Background

During our 2021/22 and 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycles, we assessed police forces' investigations of online child sexual abuse and the management of registered sex offenders.

We published our inspection findings for each force in the 'managing offenders and subjects' section in each report.

During both inspection cycles, we found the same themes for improvement. While many forces made progress between inspection cycles, issues remained in some forces. Many of those issues can be resolved at individual force level. However, others require more strategic national focus and development.

Towards the conclusion of our 2023–25 inspection cycle, we, therefore, made the decision to pause our inspection of investigations into online child sexual abuse and the management of sexual offenders. Instead, we are publishing this spotlight report to highlight more broadly what is working well and what needs to improve at both the local and national level.

## Police forces are facing increasing demand

[Annual data](#) shows that in the year ending 31 March 2025, there were 73,047 Category 1 [multi-agency public protection arrangements](#) offenders. This is an increase of 2,995 (4 percent) compared to the previous year. Over the ten years since the year ending 31 March 2015, the number of registered sex offenders increased by 23,581 (48 percent).

The National Crime Agency told us that in the year ending 31 December 2023, forces collectively received 12,469 referrals from the agency for online child sexual abuse. In the year ending 31 December 2024, this rose to 20,704 referrals, a 66 percent increase.

Registered sex offenders remain on [sex offender registration](#) for at least two years and can remain on registration indefinitely. This means that the number of offenders recorded will increase as there are more new registered sex offenders than there are registered sex offenders ending their sex offender registration periods.

This increases demand on forces, which is likely to continue in the coming years. Forces' staffing numbers aren't sufficient to meet the increasing demand they are facing. And legislation changes, such as those proposed by the [Sentencing Bill 2025](#), are likely to add to this demand.

Forces need national policing leaders and the Government to support them to make improvements at pace. Without further focus nationally, demand may exceed capacity and, therefore, risk to the public may increase.

### **What is online child sexual abuse?**

Online child sexual abuse is committed using the internet. It is a horrific crime. It can refer to offences including [indecent images of children](#), child sexual abuse material, online [grooming](#) and live streaming of abuse of [children](#). It is imperative that forces make sure that children are [safeguarded](#) and that the [victim](#)'s well-being is front and centre of the investigation.

Forces receive referrals and reports for investigations of online child sexual abuse in various ways. The majority come through referrals from the National Crime Agency. But the public can also report this type of crime at police stations and by contacting the force [control room](#). Some investigations also result from evidence found during other unrelated police investigations.

All police forces in England and Wales have specialist teams that investigate these offences.

### **What is the management of registered sex offenders?**

Registered sex offenders are subject to conditions set out in law to reduce the risk they pose to the public. This includes [notification requirements](#).

Notification requirements indicate that the risk an individual poses must be managed for a specific period. The length of time depends on the offender's age and the sentence they receive.

An offender can be subject to notification requirements when they are:

- convicted of, or cautioned for, a relevant offence under the [Sexual Offences Act 2003 Schedule 3](#);
- given a [Sexual Harm Prevention Order](#) or they breach a [Sexual Risk Order](#); or
- convicted of a relevant offence outside the UK.

**Figure 1: Sentencing for relevant sexual offences and the sex offender notification requirements periods in England and Wales in the year ending 31 December 2025**

<b>When the offender is:</b>	<b>they will be subject to the notification requirements for:</b>
sentenced to 30 months or more imprisonment (including life)	an indefinite period.
admitted to a hospital subject to a restriction order	an indefinite period.
sentenced to imprisonment for a term of more than 6 months but less than 30 months	10 years.
sentenced to imprisonment for 6 months or less	7 years.
admitted to hospital without a restriction order	7 years.
cautioned	2 years.
given a conditional discharge	the duration of the conditional discharge.
given any disposal (such as a community punishment or fine)	5 years.

**Source:** [Authorised professional practice \(APP\) for managing sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) from the [College of Policing](#)

The notification requirements periods also relate to suspended sentences. This means that the offender stays in the community instead of going to prison. But should they commit further offences within a recorded period, they could serve that sentence in prison. In such cases, the offender would be subject to the sex offender registration requirements, and the police would be the lead agency for their management.

For offenders who were under 18 at the time of the offence, the time periods are halved unless they are subject to the indefinite time period.

For offenders who are subject to notification requirements due to having a Sexual Harm Prevention Order or a Sexual Risk Order, these last for the duration of the order.

Offenders who are subject to indefinite notification can ask for a review of this time period. If successful, they would no longer be a registered sex offender and wouldn't be subject to the notifications. For adults, the earliest period for this review is 15 years. For those offenders who were aged under 18 at the time of the offence, it is 8 years. This is measured from the first point of notification after release from custody. Police forces make the decision for this review process. Appeals to any police-review decision are heard in the courts.

Registered sex offenders are managed using a multi-agency approach through the multi-agency public protection arrangements, and a lead agency is appointed. The lead agency can either be the police or His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service.

The Prison and Probation Service is the lead agency when the offender:

- is in prison;
- returns to the community but is still within the sentencing time; or
- is in the community but is still being managed by the Probation Service such as through a community order.

The police is the lead agency in all other circumstances. This includes after conviction but before the sentence has been given in court or when the sentence period has ended and the Prison and Probation Service are no longer the lead agency.

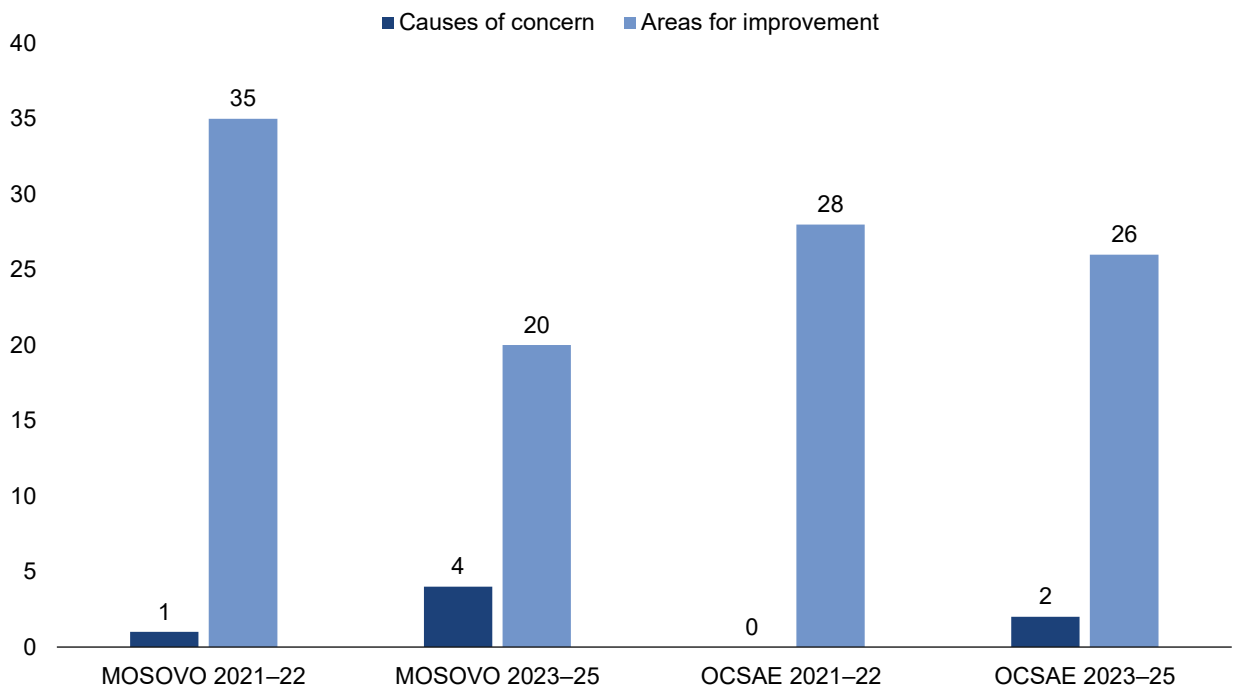
### **How have forces performed?**

Between our two PEEL inspection cycles, we found that many forces had improved their performance in the management of sexual offenders. This reduced the number of [areas for improvement \(AFIs\)](#) from 35 to 20. But the number of [causes of concern \(COCs\)](#) increased from one to four.

In two of the four COCs, the two forces in question had received AFIs in the previous inspection cycle. These were due to a lack of effective performance and governance processes and the well-being of MOSOVO team members. During our 2023–25 inspection cycle, we found that their performance in those areas had got worse.

The number of AFIs issued in relation to OCSAE teams reduced from 28 in the 2021/22 inspection cycle to 26 in the 2023–25 inspection cycle. But the number of COCs increased from zero to two. In one COC, we had given the force an AFI in the previous inspection. This was for the lack of digital triage equipment available to the OCSAE team. Disappointingly, on reinspection, we found that performance had got worse.

**Figure 2: Number of causes of concern and areas for improvement issued to police forces for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders (MOSOVO) and online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) teams in our 2021/22 and 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycles**

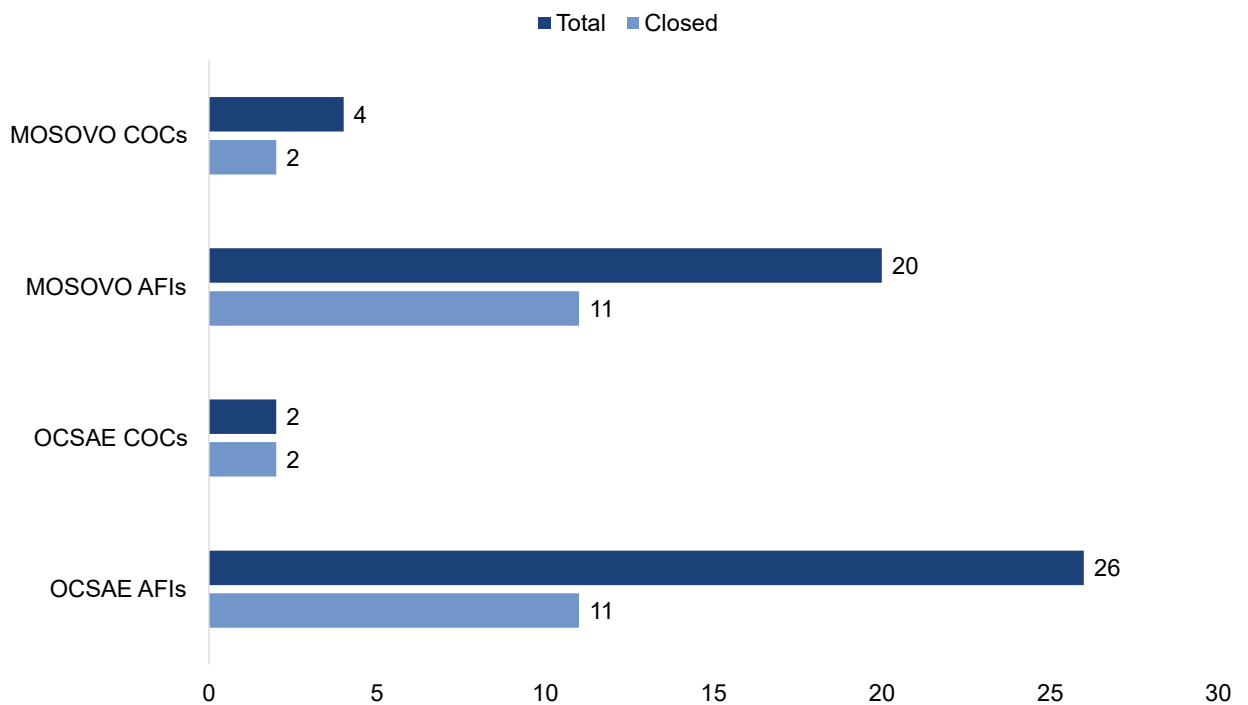


**Source: PEEL inspection reports published by HMICFRS**

Chart description: A column chart showing the number of COCs and AFIs issued to forces in our 2021/22 and 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycles for MOSOVO and OCSAE teams.

The performance of OCSAE and MOSOVO teams doesn't feature in our 2025–27 PEEL inspection cycle. But we have continued to review progress against the AFIs and COCs we gave in the 2023–25 inspection cycle. Positively, forces have continued to work proactively to improve. The below graph shows the progress being made.

**Figure 3: Number of causes of concern (COCs) and areas for improvement (AFIs) issued and closed for management of sexual offenders and violent offences (MOSOVO) and online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) teams in our 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycle**



**Source: PEEL inspection reports published by HMICFRS**

Chart description: A bar chart showing the total number of COCs and AFIs issued to forces in our 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycles for MOSOVO and OCSAE teams and the number closed.

By 31 December 2025, we had closed both COCs for OCSAE teams as well as 11 of the 26 AFIs. For MOSOVO teams, we had closed two of the four COCs, and police forces are making progress to address the remaining two. We had closed 11 of the 20 MOSOVO team AFIs.

# Investigation of online child sexual abuse

In this section, we set out our findings on how well police forces investigate online [child sexual abuse](#). We discuss governance and operating models, how investigations are assessed, allocated and progressed, the number of [police officers](#) and [staff](#) including workloads and the quality of training and guidance. We also examine suspect arrests, [bail](#), bail conditions, bail checks and whether these are being used appropriately. And we assess suspect management, welfare support for families and the use of [child](#) offender diversion programmes.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) is the entry point for most referrals to policing relating to online child sexual abuse and exploitation from companies that are involved in the online industry.

The NCA triages these and passes them to forces for investigation. The NCA told us that the number of referrals they received increased from 25,645 in the year ending 31 December 2019 to 72,161 in the year ending 31 December 2023, a 181 percent increase.

This has, in turn, led to an increase in the number of referrals to the police. For example, in 2023, forces collectively received 12,469 referrals from the NCA. In 2024, this rose to 20,704 referrals, a 66 percent increase.

## **Most forces have good governance and operating models for the investigation of online child sexual abuse**

During our 2021/22 and 2023–25 PEEL inspections, we found that most forces had good governance and operating models.

The operating model is how online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) teams work within the force. It should be simple and efficient. For example, teams should sit within a central hierarchy that is understood by all to make sure investigations are consistent.

Governance relates to how decisions are made and who makes them. This includes how the force oversees investigations, performance dashboards that identify issues, meetings at different levels of the force, the ability to discuss and resolve issues and the force escalation processes. In short, good governance is important to make sure that victims are safeguarded, investigations are progressed efficiently and offenders are brought to justice. Where we found oversight issues during our 2021/22 PEEL inspections, we were pleased to see that some forces had improved these by the 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycle.

### **Case study: Cheshire Constabulary uses an electronic planner to manage online child sexual abuse investigations**

Cheshire Constabulary has an electronic planner to organise all online child sexual abuse investigations. This breaks the department workload into different stages:

- case research and development
- case allocated for investigative action
- device with digital forensic unit for examination
- suspect awaiting second interview
- case file build
- case with Crown Prosecution Service
- suspect awaiting court/trial
- suspect wanted/abroad.

This helps the force understand where investigations are managed, any blockages in progress and what caseload levels are. This means that the force has a better understanding of staff and officer availability, risk levels and the date the investigation went into each stage.

The planner is used by sergeants, inspectors and chief inspectors and is accessed up to the senior command team level. This information is used for daily and weekly meetings to make sure that any issues are understood and addressed.

At the time of our inspection in 2024, Cheshire Constabulary could show that it had no overdue work. It also understood what stage each investigation was at. It made sure that suspects were arrested promptly and investigations were progressed efficiently. This meant that it was effectively assessing and managing the risk to the public.

## Forces should have well-structured teams and processes in place to effectively investigate online child sexual abuse

Investigations into online child sexual abuse are divided into stages, and separate roles or departments oversee each stage. When a force receives an investigation, it carries out an [intelligence](#) review to inform a [risk assessment](#) and assign a priority rating.

### Risk assessment

Forces use risk assessment tools alongside professional judgment to understand and manage the risk associated with child sexual abuse suspects. Forces across England and Wales use the [Kent internet risk assessment tool](#). This tool applies only to male suspects involved in possessing, making, taking or distributing child sexual abuse material or [indecent images of children](#) and not female suspects or those aged under 18. The assessment considers previous offending, access to children and other behavioural indicators. It gives a risk rating based on the threat posed to children, helping forces decide how quickly to act.

On 5 April 2023, we published our report: '[An inspection of how well the police and National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children](#)'. In our report, we recommended that the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) lead for child protection should provide a new prioritisation tool for law enforcement.

In November 2023, the NPCC and NCA published 'Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE'.

At the same time, the NPCC and NCA introduced an operational prioritisation response tool. This tool offers a tiered response based on known risk, suggested response times, review intervals for cases not actioned within expected response times and examples of offending types for each tier. Police forces can use the tool with all online child sexual abuse investigations, including those involving young people aged under the age of 18 and female suspects.

Although risk identification and prioritisation tools can indicate the risk the suspect poses to the public, the full extent of the risk can't be known until a full search of the suspect's house and electronic devices has taken place. It is essential that delays to the start of an investigation are kept to a minimum and that police forces have enough suitably trained officers and staff to manage the demand. The longer the delay, the greater the risk. Forces should continue to review intelligence regularly when they are waiting for investigations to begin.

## Intelligence review

The use of intelligence to identify changing risk is essential to safeguard the public. Some forces aren't regularly reviewing the intelligence for referrals awaiting enforcement so can't accurately assess whether the risk has changed and whether the enforcement should be prioritised. If a force doesn't identify changing risk, it can mean a missed opportunity to safeguard a child.

Some OCSAE team investigations can take over 12 months to conclude. The risk can change over this period. But some forces don't carry out regular intelligence checks on investigation suspects.

For example, during the inspection of one force, we completed an audit of ten online child sexual abuse cases. The force hadn't refreshed the intelligence in any of the cases while it was awaiting digital device examination. As such, the force couldn't be sure that the risk posed to children hadn't changed or whether any action was needed to prioritise the review of devices linked to the investigation. This lack of oversight of risk can lead to increased risk to the public.

Better-performing forces build in intelligence checks for outstanding referrals. They also regularly update intelligence while the investigation is ongoing and before a regular meeting with supervisors. Some forces also have the ability to automatically receive updates on intelligence for the suspect. This helps the ongoing risk assessment of the suspect and makes sure additional safeguards are put in place to protect victims and the public.

### Case study: Gwent Police uses flags to identify and manage risk

Gwent Police uses [flags](#) on its [intelligence](#) and call systems for online [child sexual abuse](#) suspects during investigations. This identifies any new intelligence or information linked to these suspects and their addresses and sends it to a dedicated email inbox. [Officers](#) and [staff](#) check the inbox daily and, where needed, reassess the suspect's risk. This approach allows other officers to be aware of the offences that the person is being investigated for.

This improves [safeguarding](#) for the public. It also means up-to-date intelligence can be shared with other forces for better [risk assessment](#) and management of offenders.

## Investigation process

A typical OCSAE team investigation involves at least five distinct roles. Clear oversight of these interconnected parts is important to identify delays and resource gaps.

Following initial intelligence gathering, investigations begin with a house search at the suspect's address. Officers seize evidence such as laptops, phones and other devices that may store indecent images. Digital forensic teams review these devices. They share a report with investigators about the volume and category of the images found. Officers then examine the images to determine the severity and category of the offending. They attempt to identify the children involved so they can be safeguarded.

During our inspections, we found that some forces had outstanding referrals in intelligence development, investigation action (progressing to a warrant or arrest at an address) or both. And some forces had outstanding referrals during both inspection cycles. This showed that those forces hadn't reduced their outstanding referrals sufficiently and didn't have enough trained [personnel](#) to meet the demand they faced.

For example, at the time of our 2023–25 inspection, one force had 81 outstanding referrals that were awaiting investigative action. These were of varying risk levels. Some referrals were over a year old, and the force was unaware of exactly how old others were. The force hadn't carried out further intelligence reviews to make sure that the risk posed by the suspect hadn't increased.

Better-performing forces understand their demand, make sure they review their staffing numbers and carry out further intelligence reviews on outstanding referrals awaiting enforcement. These are all essential steps in keeping the public safe.

### **Case study: Case management tool helps Warwickshire Police review referrals quickly**

Warwickshire Police uses a case management tool developed by the National Crime Agency. This tool allows the force to review referrals within a day of receipt. The force can review the referral directly, including the image, so it can understand the response needed. This means the force isn't waiting for the National Crime Agency to send it this referral.

As a result, Warwickshire Police has been able to make sure that the online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) team doesn't have backlogs and that it understands exactly what referrals it has and the risk levels. This allows for more effective planning and assessment of risk and workloads. And it means the force has the capacity to carry out effective and timely investigations into online child sexual abuse.

## Appropriate investigation allocation

During our inspections, we found that some forces had outstanding referrals that were outside the timescales suggested in the Kent internet risk assessment tool and prioritisation tool. In some cases, forces were allocating lower-risk investigations to teams other than specialist OCSAE teams.

For example, in one force, some lower-risk cases were sent to local investigation teams to progress. We found that oversight of these cases was often lacking, and cases weren't progressed as quickly as they should be. There was no central escalation policy to make sure that the referrals were completed in the local teams. One low-risk case had been outstanding for a year.

### Recommendation 1

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- review existing practices to make sure they use the [Kent internet risk assessment tool](#) and the prioritisation tool to prioritise referrals for all [children](#) and adult suspects;
- review their procedures to make sure there is regular assessment of intelligence and risk for online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) suspects both prior to enforcement and throughout the lifecycle of the investigation; and
- make sure investigations allocated outside online child sexual abuse and exploitation teams remain under the team's management oversight, including a central escalation policy.

## Police officers and staff need to do more training to investigate online child sexual abuse

### Staffing and workloads

OCSAE teams investigate serious online child sexual abuse cases, so it is important that there are enough investigators to manage the volume of investigations the force receives. If investigators' workloads are too high, it can lead to delays in starting new investigations or completing tasks such as [grading indecent images](#) or getting advice from the Crown Prosecution Service on how a case can progress. All delays increase the risk of further harm to the public. Workloads should be low enough that investigators can move cases forward quickly and take on new ones.

During our inspections, we found that many forces didn't have enough officers and staff, even after we had highlighted that their staffing models were insufficient. In one force, some officers were handling 30 to 54 cases each. We also found that forces didn't give supervisors enough time to support their teams properly and only checked case progress occasionally. This meant that investigations stalled and important checks, such as reviewing offender activity after arrest, were often missed.

Not having enough officers and staff with the skills needed can lead to missed safeguarding opportunities. Without proper supervision, teams may overlook important investigative steps, and this can reduce the chances of successful prosecutions. Investigations can be significantly delayed, leaving victims, families and suspects waiting. High workloads, as well as the nature of the work, can affect investigator well-being.

Better-performing forces have enough resources and can use data to foresee and react to changes in demand. They prioritise which investigations they progress first by risk and age of investigation. Some forces also create specialist roles in OCSAE teams to review and improve the investigation of online child sexual abuse outside these teams.

### **Case study: Cheshire Constabulary provide sufficient specialist officers and staff to manage online child sexual abuse investigations**

Cheshire Constabulary has a dedicated online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) (OCSAE) team, which manages online child abuse investigations. New [officers](#) joining the team understand that they will be working towards becoming [professionalising investigations programme](#) level 2 qualified investigators. If they have gaps in their training, they spend time with other teams, such as the criminal investigation department or the [protecting vulnerable people](#) team, to gain experience.

The OCSAE team is well staffed, and each officer manages no more than ten investigations at a time. If an officer goes over this limit, the force carries out welfare checks and explores how to reduce their workload. The assistant chief constable oversees this process.

The OCSAE team includes an [intelligence](#) team and [personnel](#) that prepare case files. Team members are trained to [grade indecent images of children](#), but most of this work is done by the intelligence team or the [digital forensic](#) unit.

There is also a dedicated officer who reviews all [grooming](#) and [indecent image](#) cases handled outside the OCSAE team. For example, this includes lower-risk cases overseen by area investigation teams for first time [child](#)-to-child peer sharing of self-generated indecent images. The officer checks that cases are recorded correctly, have an investigation plan and are properly supervised. They also decide if OCSAE teams should take over the case if, for example, it turns out to be more complex than initially assessed. This helps improve standards across the force and makes sure [victims](#) get better support.

During our 2023–25 inspection, the force had no outstanding referrals. Workloads were manageable, and the OCSAE team had the capacity and skills to deal with urgent investigations.

## Recommendation 2

By 30 April 2027, forces should review existing staffing levels in online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) teams to make sure that they have enough [officers](#) and [staff](#) to manage demand effectively and that workloads are manageable.

## Training

Online child sexual abuse investigations involve digital evidence, so officers and staff need specialist skills to find, seize and examine devices that might hold indecent images. However, at the time of writing this report, there was no national investigators' course that focuses specifically on the investigation of online child sexual abuse.

Most OCSAE teams rely on professionalising investigations programme levels 1 and 2 qualified investigators, investigator experience and, in some cases, [specialist child abuse investigation development programme](#) training licensed by the [College of Policing](#).

But this training is insufficient for the specialist nature of these cases. During our inspections, officers and staff in OCSAE teams often told us that they didn't feel well equipped to carry out their roles. This was due to a lack of training about the changing nature of offending and use of technology. This means that staff and officers can miss opportunities to gather further evidence during an investigation. It also leads to inconsistent quality of investigations across England and Wales.

### **Case study: Warwickshire Police has developed specialist training for online child sexual abuse investigations**

Warwickshire Police identified that [officers](#) and [staff](#) in online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) teams would benefit from training on the investigation of online child sexual abuse. In the absence of national training, the force developed a five-day course using an external provider. The training covered the life cycle of an investigation, including interviewing, digital device examination and the recovery of images. New [personnel](#) gave positive feedback about the quality of the course and the appropriateness for their roles.

### **Case study: The Metropolitan Police Service has developed specialist training for officers and staff before they carry out online child sexual abuse investigation roles**

The Metropolitan Police Service has developed an online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) training programme that all [personnel](#) must attend before joining the online child sexual abuse and exploitation team. The training covers all elements of the role including [risk assessments](#), the [grading of indecent images of children](#), searching premises, executing warrants and the seizing and handling of evidence. It covers the full explanation of the referral and investigative process from start to finish.

At the time of our 2023–25 inspection, all personnel up to and including detective sergeants had been on the course, with some detective inspectors also attending.

In February 2026, the [College of Policing](#) was reviewing this course to see if it can be adopted nationally.

## **Guidance**

Investigating online child sexual abuse is a specialist, high-risk area.

These investigations rely heavily on digital evidence and require specific methods for reporting and gathering evidence. Clear and detailed guidance is essential to making sure best practice is followed and successful outcomes are achieved.

The NPCC and NCA have published ‘Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE’. Forces worked with the NPCC, NCA, and [Hydrant Programme](#) to create this guidance, which reflects the latest best practice approaches. The document is comprehensive, with 13 chapters covering everything from the background of these types of investigations to their conclusion. It is 128 pages long, and this can make it difficult to use.

[Authorised professional practice \(APP\)](#) outlines the actions that everyone in policing needs to take to make sure a consistent level of service is provided to the public. The College of Policing researches, publishes and maintains this for forces. All police force personnel should refer to this guidance, but officers and staff can work outside this when appropriate. Forces should record any rationale for not complying with APP standards.

The College of Policing provides APPs for many areas including those covering other investigations. The APP for the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#), for example, breaks guidance into manageable sections rather than providing one long document. This format makes advice easier for police personnel to access and understand. However, at the time of writing this report, there was no APP for investigating online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

### **Recommendation 3**

By 31 December 2026, the [College of Policing](#) should:

- review the ‘Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE’ and create an [authorised professional practice](#) for this area in conjunction with this advice; and
- implement a national investigators’ course for the management of online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#).

## **Forces aren’t always effectively managing the risk posed by online child sexual abuse suspects**

Police forces should make sure that once suspects are identified, arrest powers are used appropriately, searches are carried out and bail with specific conditions is used. They should put the protection of the public at the heart of all decisions. Forces should also consider the welfare of suspects and their families.

### **Arrest or voluntary attendance and bail or released under investigation**

Forces should primarily use arrest in OCSAE team investigations. Arrest gives search and seizure powers and allows for bail to make sure that the public is safeguarded. Using bail means conditions can be placed on a suspect to prevent further offending and protect the community.

However, some forces use [voluntary attendance](#) for interview rather than arrest powers. During our inspections, we found that this approach was often used to manage workloads. Decisions to use voluntary attendance didn’t always consider the risk that may be posed to victims. Forces need to make sure that safeguarding is a primary consideration for such offences.

For example, we found that one force's OCSAE team would attend an address with a warrant and seize devices. If the suspect wasn't high risk and didn't have obvious access to children, the default position was to not arrest. Devices that may hold indecent images were sent to specialists for examination. The suspect was invited in for interview when the phone examination was completed. This process could take up to 12 months. During this time, no restrictions were placed on the suspect, which left them able to offend further and, therefore, put children at continued risk. By not interviewing the suspect earlier, the force delayed possible lines of enquiry. Fortunately, following our inspection feedback, the force changed its approach. But it is disappointing that this force and other forces operating in a similar way haven't understood the risk this approach unnecessarily creates.

The use of bail to safeguard victims should be the starting point due to the offences that the suspect has been arrested for. These offences are committed online. This means that suspects don't require physical access to children to be a risk. Forces should use bespoke conditions that will safeguard the public.

During our inspections, we found that some forces didn't bail suspects after arrest and instead [released them under investigation](#). Some forces told us that they didn't use bail unless the suspect was high risk or had direct access to children. These forces should consider that access to children can also happen online, such as via live streaming.

For example, during our inspections we found that one force used released under investigation much more frequently than bail. The detective sergeant considered if the suspect had access to children. If they didn't, the force used released under investigation. The force didn't reassess the risk of the suspect while they were released under investigation to see if the risk had changed. This approach failed to consider the need to safeguard the public as a priority.

Better-performing forces use bail or Sexual Risk Orders for most suspects and make sure that they have bespoke conditions that are proactively monitored.

### **Case study: Northamptonshire Police uses Sexual Risk Orders to better safeguard the public**

Northamptonshire Police makes sure that the risk of online [child sexual abuse](#) suspects is effectively managed to [safeguard](#) the public.

The force considers and uses [Sexual Risk Orders](#) as an alternative to [bail](#) for these suspects. It works with legal services to apply for and secure orders. The use of these orders means that an offender manager visits the suspect and assesses and manages the risk. This allows for more effective safeguarding and helps build a professional relationship between the suspect and police.

At the time of our 2023–25 inspection, Northamptonshire Police had 64 Sexual Risk Orders. This is a high number for the size of the force.

This positive practice shows a good understanding of the risk posed by online child sexual abuse suspects and how orders can help manage this risk.

### **Bail condition compliance**

Some police forces use bail, which includes bespoke conditions for each suspect. This further improves safeguarding of the public. The ability to proactively check that bail conditions are being adhered to is equally important.

During our inspections, we found that some forces didn't carry out bail checks for those bailed by OCSAE teams. This can lead to forces missing bail breaches and changes in risk to children. It also makes the imposing of bail conditions less meaningful.

Better-performing forces make sure that their [neighbourhood policing teams](#) are aware of the suspect's address and any bail conditions. Neighbourhood policing teams may also complete bail checks on behalf of OCSAE teams.

### **Case study: Sussex Police monitors the use of bail versus released under investigation**

Sussex Police [bails](#) most suspects for online [child sexual abuse](#) investigations. If a suspect is to be [released under investigation](#), a detective inspector must provide the authority for this. The force monitors the use of bail versus released under investigation.

Sussex Police carries out bail checks at least once every authorised bail period (a minimum of once every three months). If a suspect is released under investigation or reverted from bail to released under investigation, [officers](#) visit them every three months to identify any changes in risk.

This approach helps Sussex Police to identify and monitor any changes in risk for their online child sexual abuse investigation suspects.

## Recommendation 4

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- review their online [child sexual abuse](#) procedures and make sure that arrest and [bail](#) is considered and recorded for all suspects; and
- make sure that when online child sexual abuse suspects are on bail, conditions are proactively checked at least once per applicable bail period.

## Suspect management and family welfare

The safeguarding of children linked to, or at risk of, indecent images of children offences is vital. However, it is also important to consider and manage the risk of all people involved in online child sexual abuse investigations.

Suspects who are arrested for crimes of online child sexual abuse can be at risk of self harm and suicide. In the year ending 31 March 2025, [Independent Office for Police Conduct](#) data shows that 60 people across England and Wales died by apparent suicide within two days of release from police custody. Of these cases, 27 (45 percent) were suspected of sexual offences or possessing indecent images of children offences. Forces should complete pre-release risk assessments to identify risk of harm to the suspect and provide information and access to relevant support services.

Families of online child sexual abuse suspects are often severely affected by the investigation. However, they aren't officially classed as victims. The NPCC and NCA 'Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE' outlines that a family support officer role should be assigned at each investigation where the suspect lives in the family environment. This family support officer will be someone other than the investigating officer. They are responsible for liaison with the family throughout the investigation. This is a challenging role and is usually carried out by officers who are investigating other offences.

During our inspections, we found that forces supplied leaflets that contained contact details for support organisations. Although this provides some support during this difficult time, it doesn't go far enough to recognise the devastating impact this crime has on the families of suspects.

Some forces use a third-party organisation or an officer or staff member whose sole responsibility is to carry out the family support role. This allows for separation between the investigation and family support. The use of a third-party organisation creates independence from the police, brings specific expertise and improves trust and confidence in the police. It also increases the force's capacity to investigate, as a police officer or staff member isn't required to carry out the family support role.

### **Case study: West Mercia Police provides separate, dedicated support to indirect victims of indecent images of children offences**

West Mercia Police has commissioned the services of Family Matters, a charity that works with the indirect [victims](#) of [indecent images of children](#) offences. These indirect victims are the family members of the online [child sexual abuse](#) suspect.

Family Matters, working alongside the force, provides updates on the investigation and helps families understand investigatory processes. This allows the [officer](#) in the case to focus on progressing the investigation. And it means that dedicated support is provided separately to, but in collaboration with, the investigation.

### **Recommendation 5**

By 30 April 2027, forces should make sure that third-party provision is in place to support families of online [child sexual abuse](#) suspects and that leaflets with contact details of support organisations are available.

### **Child diversionary programmes**

The latest version of the College of Policing briefing note '[Responding to the taking or sharing of nude and semi-nude images by young people](#)' was updated on 5 October 2023. It outlines guidance for forces about instances when children have shared indecent images of themselves or viewed an indecent image of peers. This is against the law, but the College of Policing's recommended approach is to use [out-of-court disposals](#), such as diversionary and educational approaches, to avoid prosecution. This is to make sure that a child isn't criminalised and is instead educated about the risks involved and that such action is criminal.

In addition, the use of offender behaviour programmes for investigations where children have shared indecent images of themselves or viewed indecent images of peers could be of real benefit. An effective programme could make sure that children aren't criminalised and help them understand the law and how to keep safe online.

### **Case study: Sussex Police educates and supports children who have viewed or shared indecent images**

Sussex Police, through the [police and crime commissioner](#), has commissioned Project SOLAH (safer online home). This project is based on an understanding that 80 percent of offences committed by [children](#) are the sharing of [indecent images](#) with others or the viewing of images taken by their peers.

The force's approach makes sure that where appropriate, children are educated and supported rather than criminalised. This helps them to understand their actions and the impact on others. It also prevents them from committing further indecent images of children offences.

Once a child has been identified as having viewed or uploaded indecent images of children, the force refers them to a key worker from Barnardo's or the YMCA. The key worker runs sessions with the child and their family, which cover topics such as the law, how parents can manage and monitor activity and how to keep safe at home. They also work with education and social care to offer support.

By December 2024, 170 children had been referred to the project over three years. At the time of our 2023–25 inspection in, none of these children had committed further online [child sexual abuse](#) offences.

# Management of registered sex offenders

In this section, we set out findings on how well police forces manage registered sex offenders. We discuss whether forces monitor and achieve consistent performance across all [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams. We also examine their different operating models, whether forces can manage demand and assess risk and whether they have enough appropriately trained [officers](#), [staff](#) and supervisors. And we assess the need for updated guidance for MOSOVO teams.

During our 2021/22 police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspection cycles, we gave 35 [areas for improvement \(AFIs\)](#) and 1 [cause of concern](#) across the 43 forces in England and Wales.

During our 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycle, we gave forces 20 AFIs and four causes of concern. We found that the performance of some forces had got worse, which led to the additional causes of concern being given. But many forces had improved, which led to the reduction in AFIs.

## **Inconsistent operating practices and team structures are affecting the successful management of registered sex offenders**

### **Policy oversight**

During our inspections, we found that many forces didn't consistently follow national guidance when managing registered sex offenders. Some MOSOVO teams also lacked centralised oversight, which prevented forces from achieving consistent performance across all teams.

The [College of Policing's authorised professional practice \(APP\)](#) for MOSOVO and Home Office standards for the [Violent and Sex Offender Register \(ViSOR\)](#) set out the structure for safe and effective management of registered sex offenders. However, chief constables can choose not to follow APP as long as they mitigate any risk that may result to the public and document the decision in force policies. However, in many examples, we found that changes to operations were made due to insufficient capacity rather than risk. This often created inconsistency in the management of registered sex offenders across forces and confusion among MOSOVO [personnel](#) about their roles. In some cases, we found that this increased the risk of further offending by registered sex offenders, which might otherwise have been prevented.

During our inspections, we found many examples of inconsistent approaches. For example, offenders should receive regular visits based on their risk level, and this should be outlined in their risk management plan (RMP). High-risk offenders should be visited more often than low-risk offenders. However, the frequency of visits for one high-risk offender may differ from another due to the individual risk each offender poses. As such, a bespoke visit regime is needed. Offender managers should schedule visits in ViSOR so that the system can track when visits are due or overdue.

We found that some forces failed to use ViSOR effectively. In these cases, this was because officers and staff lacked sufficient training in both the system and the expectations for recording their activities with offenders. ViSOR is a national system, and all information about the management of registered sex offenders should be recorded on it. If ViSOR isn't updated, records of visits, [risk assessments](#) and other information may not be accurate. It can also mean that if the offender is given a new offender manager or moves to another force area, the information isn't available to accurately assess and manage the risk of that offender to the public.

### Operating models

During our inspections, we found that forces with the most effective MOSOVO teams had dedicated, centralised senior leadership oversight. This approach makes sure that all teams operate consistently, allows accurate performance comparisons and makes it easier to move officers and staff between teams during high-demand periods.

Not all forces use this model. Some adopt a matrix structure that usually includes central governance and policies but places teams under different senior leaders, such as borough command units. In these cases, commanders often move MOSOVO personnel to cover gaps in other teams. They may also choose to operate outside national guidance to meet wider team demands, without fully considering the increased risk to the public. In larger forces, this can result in up to six MOSOVO teams working in different ways.

Better-performing forces review their operating models. A force could have an appropriate operating model but still identify changes to improve the way it recognises, assesses and manages risk to keep the public safe.

#### **Case study: Northumbria Police adopted a centralised model to improve offender management and better assess risk**

Before our 2021/22 inspection cycle, Northumbria Police used a matrix model. Under this model, [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams managed very-high and high-risk offenders, while [neighbourhood policing teams](#) managed medium and low-risk offenders. Because neighbourhood supervisors lacked MOSOVO training, they couldn't properly oversee their [personnel](#) or review the work they did.

After our inspection, the force reviewed its structure and adopted a centralised model. MOSOVO teams now manage all risk levels of registered sex offenders while remaining based in specific geographical areas. The force introduced clear policies, increased staffing, held information events and implemented the new model in stages.

This has allowed consistent management of registered sex offenders and has made sure that supervision is also consistent and effective for all offender managers. This allows for better assessment and management of risk and keeps the public safe.

## **Poor performance analysis and demand management is affecting the successful management of registered sex offenders**

### **Performance analysis**

To manage registered sex offenders effectively, forces need to make sure they have reliable data. In England and Wales, there is no national direction for what performance metrics should be. There is also no guidance on how to gather and record this reliably; it is left up to individual forces. This data should be in a form where it can be compared and assessed over varying time periods. This helps forces to assess and manage risk effectively. The data needs to be representative of what is recorded on ViSOR, as this is the national system for information on the management of registered sex offenders.

During our inspections, we found that there was a lack of reliable data to measure performance. We found that some forces lacked effective performance measures and dashboards for the management of registered sex offenders. Some forces didn't record enough detail to monitor risk, for example by not recording outstanding RMPs or [active risk management systems \(ARMS\)](#) assessments. Other forces lacked information on when the offender's last ARMS assessment, RMP and visit had been and, therefore, how overdue they were.

We found in one force that data was collected centrally but performance oversight was done locally. Each team had a separate dashboard, which meant performance couldn't be measured across the force. The dashboards didn't contain information on the oldest outstanding ARMS, RMPs or visits. This meant that the force couldn't effectively manage risk as it didn't know how long these were overdue. The force had no central governance, which meant that it couldn't accurately prioritise risk and allocate resources appropriately.

Better-performing forces gather data in a central dashboard. This data can be broken down by team and offender manager. It includes the total number of registered sex offenders as well as the number of:

- registered sex offenders in the community;
- police-led registered sex offenders in the community;
- registered sex offenders at each risk level, including those in [reactive management](#);
- wanted or missing registered sex offenders;
- offender managers and supervisors as well as the ratio of offender managers to registered sex offenders;
- outstanding police ARMs assessments and RMPs by risk level; and
- outstanding visits by risk level.

The data includes the oldest ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits by risk level. It is used in governance meetings to make sure forces prioritise and manage risk consistently. The data helps forces to understand where they might need to move resources from one team to another to manage demand or increase resources.

### **Case study: Data dashboards help South Yorkshire Police to understand and manage demand**

South Yorkshire Police's data dashboards and their use in governance meetings help the force to assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders.

South Yorkshire Police understands the need to have reliable data dashboards with the right information to assess and manage risk. The force has a weekly dashboard with data collected from the detective sergeants in the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) team. This includes outstanding [active risk management systems \(ARMs\)](#) assessments, risk management plans (RMPS) and visits. These are broken down by risk level with the oldest outstanding ARMS assessments, RMPs and visits being identified at each risk level. The weekly dashboard is compared with the monthly dashboard to make sure that tasks and registered sex offenders aren't missed.

The force's monthly dashboard includes data from the [Violent and Sex Offender Register](#) system. This includes offender manager to registered sex offender ratios, both overall and in the community. There is also an adjusted ratio that considers long-term absences, such as sickness and maternity leave. The force also records outstanding ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits by risk level. It supplements this with data for each of the offender managers with all outstanding ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. This data then allows the force to assess the risk as well as any ongoing or staffing issues. This is shared at governance meetings at each level up to senior management to make sure that issues can be addressed. There is the ability to escalate issues where needed.

These data dashboards mean that the force can better assess and manage risk and plot potential future demand.

### **Recommendation 6**

By 30 October 2026, forces should:

- review their operating models and governance frameworks to make sure they have a consistent approach to managing registered sex offenders across all teams, including use of the [Violent and Sex Offender Register](#) in line with Home Office standards; and
- review the data they collect, how they collect it and how it is presented and make sure that this represents what is on the Violent and Sex Offender Register to accurately assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders.

The Home Office has told us that in 2028 a new system called the Multi-Agency Public Protection System will replace the ViSOR system. There has been a long-term plan to replace ViSOR, and the original implementation date was in 2023/24.

It is planned to have information from partner agencies and improved connectivity with the ability for further functionality in the future. However, when introduced, it will only have management information functionality that is equal to that of ViSOR. We are aware that there is an intention to provide additional functionality once ViSOR has been replaced. However, what this will include and the timescales for this are yet to be determined. This is disappointing and a missed opportunity as, at the time the Multi-Agency Public Protection System is made available, forces still won't have the functionality they need to assess performance, manage demand and reduce risk.

## **Recommendation 7**

By 30 April 2027, the Home Office should continue to consult with police forces on the need to fund further development of the new Multi-Agency Public Protection System after its introduction, including enhanced management information to help forces properly manage the risk posed by registered sex offenders.

### **Overdue work and mitigating risk**

During our inspections, we found that many forces had large numbers of outstanding ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. Some forces had only completed between 76 and 90 percent of ARMs assessments and RMPs for which the police were the lead agency. The APP for MOSOVO outlines that forces should have a completion rate of 95 percent or more.

Completing risk assessments and RMPs is essential for the effective management of registered sex offenders. Offender managers need to carry out home visits to understand the risk posed by offenders and complete ARMs assessments and RMPs that will mitigate the risk identified. If a force has a high number of outstanding visits, it suggests that the force doesn't have the capacity to manage registered sex offenders or the increasing demand. This can increase the risk of offender managers missing the signs of behaviour changes that could indicate an increased risk. They may also miss the opportunity to identify any reoffending that has taken place.

In both PEEL inspection cycles, we found that police forces lacked the capacity to carry out ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. In some cases, despite being given AFIs, forces had made little to no progress between inspection cycles to address insufficient personnel numbers. Some forces didn't review their staffing or put plans in place quickly enough to reduce outstanding work meaning that levels were still high at the time of our 2023–25 PEEL inspections. But in most cases, forces have since reduced their number of outstanding ARMS assessments, RMPs and visits.

Positively, some forces did improve in this area between the two PEEL inspection cycles. During our 2021/22 PEEL inspections, we found that 14 forces had overdue ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. During our 2023–25 PEEL inspections, this had reduced to ten, which shows that forces are addressing the issues of outstanding work.

## **A lack of trained personnel means that forces aren't always effectively managing the risk posed by registered sex offenders**

### **Staffing and offender manager to registered sex offender ratios**

Forces need enough offender managers and supervisors in MOSOVO teams to effectively manage the risk of the sex offenders in the community. They must have the ability to track, understand and plan how many officers, staff and supervisors are required currently and in the future.

MOSOVO teams usually aim for one offender manager to hold a caseload of around 50 community-based registered sex offenders. In general, forces aim for no more than 20 percent of that caseload to be assessed as high-risk or above.

This guideline, known as the 50/20 rule, came from best practice recommended by the Association of Chief Police Officers. In 2016, the association was replaced by the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#), which leads commissioned research to review the validity of this rule.

The NPCC found that this ratio was acceptable for effective management of risk but that police forces should consider force size, geography and the presence of authorised premises (temporary, supervised accommodation for high-risk offenders on probation) in caseload calculations. This is detailed in the College of Policing APP for MOSOVO.

The need for enough offender managers to manage registered sex offenders underpins the APP for MOSOVO. During our inspections, we were disappointed to find that some forces needed to improve their numbers of offender managers in their MOSOVO teams and ratios of offender managers to registered sex offenders.

Officer workloads were also highlighted in the '[Angiolini Inquiry Part 2 First Report: Prevention of sexually motivated crimes against women in public](#)', published in December 2025. It outlines that police officers have very large numbers of sexual offenders to manage with the aim of preventing reoffending.

If MOSOVO offender managers are managing large numbers of registered sex offenders, it can lead to ineffective offender management. The offender manager can lack the time to carry out essential tasks to assess and manage the risk of the registered sex offender. The force can often have large numbers of outstanding ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits due to having a lack of capacity to carry these out.

Although we found that some forces had improved their ratio of offender managers to registered sex offenders between our 2021/22 and 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycles, not all forces had.

Better-performing forces make sure that ratios are appropriate and that offender managers aren't removed from their duties unnecessarily. They also use data to forecast registered sex offender numbers and staffing to keep ratios effective. These forces have a ratio of one offender manager to no more than 60 registered sex offenders.

### **Case study: Cheshire Constabulary monitors resource and demand**

Cheshire Constabulary understands the need to have enough trained [officers](#) and [staff](#) in its [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams. It has increased staffing while forecasting demand. It has also made sure that ratios of offender managers to registered sex offenders are recorded and that it increases staffing to match predicted future demand.

Cheshire Constabulary records how many [personnel](#) are in its MOSOVO unit and adjusts this for people who are removed from their duties long term. During our inspection in 2024, Cheshire Police told us that it had agreed an uplift of five further team members later in the year. At the time, this would have created a ratio of one offender manager to 43 registered sex offenders.

During our inspection, we found that MOSOVO officers and staff were motivated, well trained and had manageable workloads.

The Angiolini Inquiry Part 2 First Report also discusses the [abstraction](#) of officers from prevention duties (in which MOSOVO teams are included). If staff are removed from their usual duties on a regular basis, it affects their ability to consistently and effectively manage registered sex offenders. Offender managers need appropriate training to carry out management tasks such as ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. If forces are abstracting trained offender managers regularly, it means that there is unlikely to be enough trained officers and staff available to carry out MOSOVO duties. This can mean that forces don't effectively identify and manage an increase in outstanding tasks and risk.

For example, at the time of our 2023–25 inspection, one force's staffing model was sufficient for the volume of registered sex offenders it was required to manage. However, it had many overdue ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. This was a direct result of regularly allowing offender managers to be removed from their core roles. The force also had no process in place to record and understand the number of abstractions it was allowing and how appropriate these were.

## Supervisory staffing and oversight

Supervisors have an important role in managing registered sex offenders. They provide knowledge, oversight and leadership to offender managers. And they read, assess and sign off ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. Their contribution is essential in making sure that registered sex offenders are assessed and managed effectively and that risk is reduced.

During our inspections, we found that some forces didn't have enough supervisors. This led to high workloads. Supervisors have secondary responsibility for the registered sex offenders of the offender managers that they supervise. The MOSOVO APP doesn't specify a set number, but guidance suggests effective supervision involves overseeing six to ten personnel. Given the high-risk nature of registered sex offender management, supervising ten officers and staff is likely to be too high. In some forces, we found that a supervisor could be responsible for 500 registered sex offenders, which is unmanageable.

We also found that some forces didn't always have effective supervisory oversight. Rather than recording bespoke reviews of ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits, some either weren't reviewing them at all or they were initialling records to sign them off rather than writing a review as required. We found that in some forces, supervisors had large numbers of overdue reviews or had overdue reviews that had been outstanding for a significant amount of time or both. If reviews aren't bespoke or timely, or if there is no supervisory guidance, it may mean that offender managers' assessment and plans miss the risks posed by registered sex offenders. This could increase the risk to the public.

At the time of our 2023–25 inspection, one force had many overdue supervisor reviews for ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits. Many of these reviews were over 12 months old. In some cases, the delay meant that there were multiple ARMs assessments, RMPs and visits to be reviewed. The force wasn't assessing and managing the risk effectively at the supervisor level. This meant that the offender manager could have missed a risk in the reviews, which, therefore, increased the risk to the community. The force also didn't have enough supervisors, which contributed to the outstanding work along with high ratios of supervisors to offender managers and supervisors to registered sex offenders.

Better-performing forces have enough supervisors to manage demand and available data so that they can track how many reviews are outstanding. These forces complete supervisors' reviews within a month. This means that further visits aren't carried out before the supervisor has reviewed the ARMs assessment, RMP and previous visit for all risk levels. This makes sure that risk isn't being missed and that the right risk management measures are in place and being followed. These forces also have guidance documents and audits in place to make sure that supervisor reviews are of a good standard.

## Recommendation 8

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- use previous demand trends and review predicted demand for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) teams for five years to make sure that they have enough offender managers and supervisors to manage this;
- make sure that management of sexual offenders and violent offenders team [abstractions](#) are recorded, reviewed, don't happen on a regular basis and don't have a negative effect on workload completion;
- make sure that management of sexual offenders and violent offenders teams have manageable numbers of outstanding [active risk management systems](#) assessments, risk management plans and visits and that these are assessed by both risk level and how overdue they are; and
- make sure that supervisors are completing reviews of active risk management systems assessments, risk management plans and visits promptly and within one month.

The supervisory role in the management of registered sex offenders is different from the offender manager role. Although supervisors receive full training in the management of sex offenders, the course is primarily aimed at offender managers. It doesn't include any aspect of supervisory training, and, at the time of writing this report, there was no bespoke supervisor course available. Supervisors often learn how to complete reviews from other supervisors. This can create inconsistent practices across teams and across England and Wales.

Supervisors need appropriate training to carry out their roles. We have made a recommendation to the College of Policing as part of [recommendation 12](#).

### **Forces must understand and follow national guidance to better manage registered sex offenders**

The College of Policing has produced guidance for the management of registered sex offenders. This guidance is the APP for MOSOVO. Forces should follow this guidance to make sure that they assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders robustly. Forces can work outside the APP but must consider and mitigate the risk that doing so could cause to the public. Any working practices outside this should have the primary focus of managing risk and not to manage force demand.

## Registered sex offender visits

Visits to registered sex offenders is an important part of assessing and managing the risk they pose. Visits allow offender managers to check the offender's home environment and electronic devices (where a court order exists or on a voluntary basis) for any evidence of a change in risk or evidence of further offending. It is essential that visits happen at the home address of the registered sex offender, are unannounced and completed in pairs. Announced visits allow the offender to plan for the visit, meaning that they could hide potential risks and reoffending.

During our inspections, we found that some forces were using single-crewed visits, where one person carries out the visit alone. This was mainly done to manage demand, but it didn't appropriately manage the risk posed by the registered sex offender.

At the time of our 2023–25 inspection, one force reported that single-crewed visits did take place. The force explained that it had an agreed process where managers would risk assess single-crewed visits before they were carried out. However, we found that these decisions were made by individual offender managers. There was no requirement to document the decision or gain supervisor authorisation. The single crewing of visits was the norm rather than the exception.

The APP for MOSOVO is clear that visits should be carried out in pairs as this allows two people to use their observations to assess the risk. And it makes sure that the offender manager isn't being influenced by the registered sex offender.

The APP for MOSOVO also outlines that visits should be unannounced. But we found that some forces carried out announced visits to registered sex offenders without clear policies on when this should be done, who should authorise them and that rationale should be recorded.

Better-performing forces comply with the APP for MOSOVO for visits including making sure visits are unannounced and carried out in pairs. They also have authorisation levels to work outside this, record the rationale on ViSOR and monitor or audit to check compliance.

### **Case study: Dorset Police requires supervisors to approve single-crewed visits to registered sex offenders**

Dorset Police has a policy that the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) teams should carry out visits to registered sex offenders in pairs, known as double-crewed visits.

Single-crewed visits, where only one person visits the registered sex offender, must be risk assessed by a supervisor, and their approval should be recorded on the [Violent and Sex Offender Register](#) system. This makes sure that the risk is assessed appropriately by someone else, rather than just the offender manager, and that it is recorded.

The force also records its number of double-crewed and single-crewed visits monthly. This helps it assess whether the numbers of visits are increasing and whether it needs to review the policy.

## Risk management

The use of [intelligence](#) checks and orders is vital in the risk management of registered sex offenders. The right kind of intelligence checks can make sure that ARMs assessments and RMPs use up-to-date information to assess and manage the risk. In some cases, the use of [Sexual Harm Prevention Orders \(SHPOs\)](#) and [Sexual Risk Orders](#) is necessary to give offender managers the best chance to manage the risk of the registered sex offender.

The [Police National Database \(PND\)](#) holds intelligence from forces and services across the United Kingdom. But some forces aren't using the PND to check their registered sex offenders on a regular basis. Forces should be using the PND to understand what intelligence exists not only for reactively managed registered sex offenders but also for those at all levels of risk in the community. Forces need this intelligence to effectively assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders.

The risk posed by a registered sex offender can change, in some cases significantly. In these cases, their SHPO may not be proportionate to the risk they now pose of further offending. At the time of writing this report, there was no guidance on the removal of orders by police.

[In 2023, the 'Independent review into the police-led management of registered sex offenders in the community'](#), written by Mick Creedon QPM, was published. This included a recommendation that forces should review SHPOs to make sure they remain necessary, enforceable and comply with relevant case law. SHPOs that don't meet these criteria should be amended or discharged. The review included an example of a force that had a local process in place with the courts to remove such orders at zero cost. As of February 2026, the Home Office was considering, but hadn't yet acted upon, the review recommendations.

Registered sex offenders need to apply to the courts themselves to have orders removed. We recommend that a national process is developed to allow police forces to request the closure of orders, where appropriate.

## Recommendation 9

By 30 April 2027, the Home Office in conjunction with the [College of Policing](#) and the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should evaluate the potential for an effective and expedited process for police application to the courts to remove [Sexual Harm Prevention Orders](#) for appropriate cases.

### Reactive management

In 2017, a change in the NPCC's approach to the management of registered sex offenders brought about the use of reactive management for low-risk offenders. The introduction of this form of management allows MOSOVO teams to focus more of their time on higher-risk offenders.

To move a registered sex offender into this form of management, the force must make sure that certain conditions are met, including that the offender:

- has been managed as low risk in the community for the last three years;
- has been offence and concern-free during this period;
- has a current ARMs assessment that is low risk; and
- isn't subject to a civil order such as SHPO or Sexual Risk Order.

Forces should complete annual intelligence checks on the registered sex offender in reactive management, including the PND, ViSOR, the [Police National Computer](#) and local intelligence databases. Forces should also complete a review of the RMP, and this information should be recorded on ViSOR.

SHPOs and Sexual Risk Orders are issued to help manage the offender and place obligations or restrictions on the individual concerned. An example of a restriction would be to not delete the history on internet-enabled devices. This would be necessary to make sure that officers could review devices and that the registered sex offender hadn't been accessing online [child sexual abuse](#) material.

While an order is in place, the force should regularly and proactively check that the conditions of the order are being followed. The ethos of reactive management is to respond to intelligence that may suggest the risk of reoffending is increasing. This is at odds with the expectations about the oversight of court orders.

During our inspections, we found that some forces placed registered sex offenders in reactive management without complying with all expected criteria. In the majority of cases, offenders were still subject to civil orders. If forces feel that the order is no longer required, they should make a request for removal to the court. Although there is a cost to have an order removed, if it is no longer required, the force should request removal.

Better-performing forces make sure that they comply with the APP conditions to place a registered sex offender into reactive management. They carry out yearly intelligence checks, including the PND, to gather a picture of any increasing risk. They then complete a RMP based on review of the information.

### **Case study: Gwent Police has good processes to review and assess intelligence about registered sex offenders**

Gwent Police complies with the [College of Policing authorised professional practice](#) for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders for placing offenders in [reactive management](#). And it has good processes to make sure that any [intelligence](#) about the registered sex offender is received and assessed.

Gwent Police has a policy, which is followed in practice, where registered sex offenders are only suitable for reactive management if they meet the conditions of the APP for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders. The force makes sure that a [flag](#) is placed on its systems so that any intelligence about the registered sex offender will go to the offender manager. It also makes sure that it completes a [Police National Database](#) check at least yearly so that no intelligence from other police forces is missed.

This allows for the ongoing assessment of the registered sex offender's risk and makes sure that it is suitable to continue reactively managing them.

### **Recommendation 10**

By 31 October 2026, forces should make sure that:

- visits are unannounced and carried out in pairs to comply with the [College of Policing authorised professional practice](#) for the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#);
- visits that don't comply with the authorised professional practice for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders are authorised, the rationale is recorded on the [Violent and Sex Offender Register](#) and that a system is in place to allow assessment of the decision;
- any [reactively-managed](#) registered sex offenders meet the conditions set out in the authorised professional practice for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders; and
- they carry out and assess [Police National Database](#) checks on registered sex offenders.

## The College of Policing's APP for MOSOVO

The College of Policing is responsible for completing and updating the APP for MOSOVO. Forces use this guidance as a basis of how to manage registered sex offenders and MOSOVO team operations. It is essential that this guidance is updated over time to make sure it is relevant. The APP for MOSOVO was originally published in 2017 and the last update was on 21 December 2023. The increase in the numbers of online offenders who become registered sex offenders means that a section on how to manage these types of offenders is now needed. MOSOVO teams require national guidance on how, and in what circumstances, to examine devices for internet offending.

The College of Policing consults with forces, the NPCC and the Home Office among others when updating the APP. But due to changes in how forces operate and research into the management of registered sex offenders and types of offending, this APP needs updating.

### Recommendation 11

By 30 April 2027, the [College of Policing](#) in conjunction with the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should review the [authorised professional practice for the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) with forces and publish an updated version.

# Linked themes

The previous sections of this report have discussed the themes that affect the investigation of online [child sexual abuse](#) and the management of registered sex offenders separately.

During our 2021/22 and 2023–25 police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL) inspections, we found common themes in terms of processes that weren't working as well as they needed to. We highlighted these issues in the chapters on [investigating child sexual abuse](#) and [managing registered sex offenders](#).

In this section, we discuss investment in digital training and technology in the investigation of online child sexual abuse and the management of sexual offenders. We also assess digital device examination timescales, well-being provision for specialist teams and internal and external partnerships.

## **Forces must invest in technology and train officers and staff to use it effectively**

The use of technology to offend, detect offences and manage offenders is growing. Crimes of a sexual nature are happening online in higher volumes than before. To keep pace with this change in offending, forces should make better use of technology. Forces need to invest in, and know how to use, digital tools to identify offending. Investment in technology can also help forces work more efficiently at a time when demand is ever increasing.

### **Investment in training is needed**

Forces need to make sure that [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams and online child sexual abuse and exploitation (OCSAE) teams understand:

- which digital devices could contain evidence of offences;
- how to carry out a triage examination;
- when to seize devices; and
- when and how to ask for expert help.

Good quality training should cover these areas. Ideally all MOSOVO and OCSAE [personnel](#) should be trained to an appropriate level, which some forces refer to as a digital media assessor. This means that they have had training and understand what to look for but aren't accredited to specialist digital media investigator level.

At the time of writing this report, there was no national digital course for the management of sexual offenders. During our inspections, we found that force-level training often wasn't sufficient to give [officers](#) and [staff](#) confidence in the use of technology. This can lead to missed opportunities to identify further offending, and it also reduces opportunities for using technology to support offender management.

During our 2023–25 inspection of one force, we found that MOSOVO offender managers were manually examining devices but that they had no digital training to do this. Offender managers relied on each other for advice on what to do. The force couldn't be confident that examinations were being completed properly. And it couldn't be confident that information that might affect the accurate assessment and management of risk wasn't being missed. Positively, when we highlighted this issue, the force addressed it.

Better-performing forces commission training from external companies, but this can be an expensive option. Having a national course that is consistently provided in forces would address this.

### **Case study: Thames Valley Police has created a bespoke course for offender managers**

Thames Valley Police identified that [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) offender managers felt that they didn't have sufficient digital training to carry out their roles effectively.

The force designed a bespoke course to give offender managers a better understanding of technology and the confidence to review digital devices. This provides a consistent, high-quality approach to all home visits to registered sex offenders.

The [College of Policing](#) is assessing this course to see if this can be adopted nationally.

## Recommendation 12

By 30 April 2027, the [College of Policing](#) should:

- make sure that a bespoke national digital training course is mandated for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) offender managers; and
- develop a bespoke management of sexual offenders and violent offenders supervisors' training package to make sure that they have sufficient training and skills to consistently carry out their roles.

### Investment in technology is needed

During our inspections, we found that some forces lacked digital triage equipment for MOSOVO teams to use. This affects their ability to identify breaches or orders and further offending, which reduces the accuracy of the [risk assessments](#) in place for registered sex offenders.

For example, one force didn't have technology available to support the review of digital devices and mobile phones. Although the MOSOVO team did include some digital media investigators, not all teams could access this support due to their geographical location and high workloads. Digital media investigators also managed caseloads of registered sex offenders. This meant that they weren't able to provide as much help to offender managers as needed. Offender managers also hadn't received digital training. They weren't confident that they could identify information or evidence of breaches of orders or registration. This means that the force may be failing to assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders.

The issue of investment in technology to manage offenders more robustly is discussed at the national digital working group for MOSOVO. Despite police forces recognising the benefit, the cost of devices can prevent investment.

['The Angiolini Inquiry Part 2 First Report: Prevention of sexually motivated crimes against women in public'](#), published in December 2025, also discussed this issue. It outlines how forces "need to apply for lots of little pots of funding, often at speed". This funding isn't necessarily long term. The failure to do so can lead to missed opportunities for forces to make bids. They may lack the time to make successful funding bids and purchase equipment. The speed at which forces need to apply means that they don't have enough time to map how they will train personnel to use the technology in their everyday work. This can lead to the technology being underused and, therefore, the return on investment not being fully realised.

A national review of whether the assessment, funding and purchase of digital equipment in MOSOVO and OCSAE teams in England and Wales should be managed nationally may improve this.

### Recommendation 13

By 30 April 2027, the Home Office and [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) should carry out a cost-benefit analysis for a procurement exercise for all 43 forces in England and Wales to purchase digital triage equipment collectively, rather than individually, for investigating online [child sexual abuse](#) and the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#).

### Specialist teams use digital examination to identify offending

Due to the changing nature of offending, police forces are examining more digital devices for all types of crime. Forces rely especially on digital examination for online child sexual abuse investigations. Device examination needs to be carried out in accordance with national guidance, and this can have a significant effect on the length of time the investigation takes.

During the examination, the content of the device is downloaded under strict conditions and parts are copied to understand what is stored on the device. The examination may find [indecent images of children](#) that haven't yet been seen by law enforcement; these are known as first-generation images. The priority is then to identify and [safeguard](#) that [child](#).

Some forces have unacceptably long timescales of up to two years from the point at which devices are submitted for examination. This may mean that a child hasn't been safeguarded for the time it has taken to examine the device. This can negatively affect the [victim](#), investigator and suspect's well-being. The victim is awaiting the outcome of the investigation for far too long. OCSAE investigators have unnecessarily high workloads due to investigation delays. And the suspect remains on [bail](#) awaiting a conclusion. Timescales such as this are unacceptable, and forces should make sure that they put in place effective solutions to reduce them.

During our 2023–25 inspection of one force, we found that it only allowed one phone to be submitted to its [digital forensic](#) unit (DFU) at a time. This meant other phones that possibly contained evidence of indecent images weren't reviewed promptly. It could take up to 12 months before a further device could be submitted. This significantly affected the time it took to investigate crimes and bring offenders to justice.

Better-performing forces have good local device review capabilities. They work with DFUs on how to gain good quality digital evidence during house searches or have DFU personnel attend house searches with them. This reduces the number of devices submitted and, therefore, the workload of the DFU and the backlog of examinations.

### **Case study: Digital media assessors help improve investigations in Northumbria Police**

Northumbria Police has trained digital media assessors in the online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) department who triage devices and improve the quality and timeliness of investigations.

There are two digital media assessors in the department who triage devices, and a number of digital forensics investigators who are also trained to triage devices at the scene. This means fewer devices are kept long term, and fewer are sent to the [digital forensic](#) unit for examination. It also improves both the quality and timeliness of investigations. The assessors also support other teams, such as the [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) team, with advice and triage capabilities.

Northumbria Police isn't only improving standards in its online child sexual abuse and exploitation department but is also improving timescales and support given to other departments.

### **Case study: Durham Police uses a service level agreement for device examination**

Durham Police makes sure that risk factors are used to prioritise the examination of devices by its [digital forensic](#) unit (DFU). This means it completes better quality investigations within shorter time periods.

The force has a service level agreement in place between its online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) (OCSAE) teams and the DFU. This requires device examinations to be completed within nine months.

The force uses risk factors to agree the submission grading. A high-risk case can be completed on the day. The DFU also prioritises examination according to [safeguarding](#) circumstances, such as access to [children](#). The DFU works a seven-day shift pattern and attends enforcement activity with OCSAE teams to give advice and triage devices. The detective inspector has responsibility for the OCSAE teams and DFU, so they understand the roles of both.

Durham Police has a good service level agreement and process in place for device examination in OCSAE investigations.

During our inspections, we found that there were no standardised timescales across England and Wales for the submission and examination of devices. This means it is a postcode lottery for how long it takes for a device to be examined by the DFU, and therefore, how long it takes for an examination to be completed. This is unacceptable. The National Police Chiefs' Council and College of Policing should provide national timescales.

#### **Recommendation 14**

By 31 December 2026, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#) and [College of Policing](#) should develop a [risk assessment](#) tool that allows each of the 43 forces in England and Wales to consistently assess and prioritise the submission and examination of digital devices in a way that also effectively reduces the existing backlog.

Better-performing forces make sure that they invest in technology and the training of their officers and staff to routinely use it. This is complemented by access to specialist teams with more advanced knowledge and expertise in the use of technology.

#### **Cost is prohibiting the use of polygraph to manage the risk posed by offenders and identify further offending**

Polygraph is a form of [intelligence](#) gathering that uses a person's physiological response to questions to determine whether they are being truthful. Some police forces in England and Wales use polygraph as an intelligence-gathering tool. Forces that use this tool have been able to identify new offences, which they then go on to investigate to make sure that victims are being safeguarded.

#### **Case study: Using polygraph has helped South Yorkshire Police better safeguard the public**

South Yorkshire Police effectively uses polygraph with registered sex offenders to develop [intelligence](#) and assess and manage risk.

The force has two full-time polygraph [officers](#). They use polygraph with registered sex offenders either voluntarily or for conditional [cautions](#). The force carries out a high rate of polygraph tests. The results include disclosures of [child](#) contact, undeclared devices, undeclared relationships and undeclared sexual contacts.

These disclosures have led to a high number of investigations for breaches of [Sexual Harm Prevention Orders](#), which have led to convictions. The initial intelligence from the polygraph examination has prompted an investigation. Without this polygraph examination, the force wouldn't have this intelligence, and the offending is unlikely to have been discovered. The use of polygraph has led to better assessment and management of registered sex offenders.

South Yorkshire Police is making sure it uses this tool effectively. The disclosures it has gained have led to the [safeguarding](#) of the public.

The American Polygraph Association licenses polygraph tests for forces in England and Wales. However, the cost of licensing, training courses and subsequent quality assurance are restrictive for forces. The Home Office, College of Policing and the NPCC should consider how to give all forces in England and Wales the ability to access polygraph tests on the most inclusive and cost-effective basis. All forces should have access to this useful intelligence tool for the management of registered sex offenders. It should also be considered for use in other offences in the future.

### **The use of prevention orders in the management of sexual offenders**

The [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#) made it easier to issue Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPOs) and [Sexual Risk Orders](#) by lowering the standard of proof to the civil balance of probabilities level. This means that evidence that can't be used in criminal cases can be used to prove that the order is needed.

The Angiolini Inquiry Part 2 First Report also outlines the use of these civil orders. Practitioners and those protected by these orders generally favour them, but adoption varies between police forces.

These orders can now also include positive requirements, which means that offenders can be required to do specific things, such as take a polygraph test.

Some forces struggle to include positive requirements, such as polygraph testing, in SHPOs and Sexual Risk Orders. The NPCC and forces need to work with the Crown Prosecution Service and the courts to better understand and implement these obligations. These should be used, where appropriate, to help keep communities safer and support offenders to reduce reoffending.

### **Case study: Cumbria Police includes polygraph testing as a condition of Sexual Harm Prevention Orders**

Cumbria Police works closely with the Crown Prosecution Service to make sure that [Sexual Harm Prevention Orders \(SHPOs\)](#) include the right conditions to manage the risk posed by registered sex offenders and keep the public safe.

One issue identified was adding polygraph testing as a condition under the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#). The courts were reluctant to add the positive requirement to include an annual polygraph assessment to SHPOs. This was due to a lack of understanding about the use of polygraph tests and, therefore, distrust in the need for this as a condition of an SHPO.

Cumbria Police produced information that was provided to judges about polygraph testing. This allowed a better understanding and for questions to be asked and answered about it. This helped to make sure that courts granted SHPOs that included this requirement.

As a result, Cumbria Police has strengthened relationships with the Crown Prosecution Service and the judiciary, improved learning and reduced risk to the public.

### **Use of technology to identify and safeguard victims**

Forces make sure that OCSAE teams receive nationally recognised training to identify and [categorise \(grade\) indecent images of children](#). Officers and staff categorise indecent images by their severity against nationally agreed definitions.

The priority is to identify indecent images that haven't been seen by the police or others in law enforcement before. These are known as first-generation material. The forces will then identify the child in the indecent image and make sure they are safeguarded.

To do this, forces use specialist software that communicates with the [Child Abuse Image Database \(CAID\)](#). The CAID system checks if the image has already been identified and if it has, puts it into the correct category. If it is a new image, specialist officers will make enquiries to try to identify and safeguard the child. This shortens the process for grading and safeguarding. It also potentially reduces trauma for officers and staff as they spend less time viewing indecent images. For CAID to remain up to date, all indecent images of children should be uploaded to the system.

However, this approach isn't always effective as some forces have backlogs of indecent images of children to upload to CAID. This means that these forces aren't uploading all indecent images of children to CAID, which makes the system less effective. CAID relies on the same image being graded several times to quality assure the grading level. Forces that aren't uploading all images are slowing the process down and reducing the capability of this system.

For example, during our inspections, we found one force that had issued guidance for investigations where it may be appropriate to use safeguarding visits to children who had sent or uploaded indecent images of themselves. If the child had sent an indecent image that had been shared with others, the force uploaded it to CAID. However, if the force didn't believe that the indecent image had been sent to others, it didn't upload it to CAID and instead deleted it. It failed to recognise that the image was likely to be a first-generation image. Not uploading such images to CAID can mean that other indecent images of the child aren't identified. This can lead to a delay in providing safeguarding and support for the child. However, we found that many forces did use and upload images to CAID appropriately. Better-performing forces have more than one person that can upload to CAID, which means that workloads can be shared.

During our inspections, we gave some forces [areas for improvement](#) or a recommendation as part of a [cause of concern](#) regarding the upload of images to CAID. We have now either closed these or the force is working towards the improvements needed to address our concerns. For this reason, we haven't given a recommendation in this report, but forces should make sure that they continue to follow guidance for uploading indecent images of children to CAID.

## **Adequate well-being provision for MOSOVO and OCSAE teams is essential**

### **The National Police Wellbeing Survey 2025**

The [National Police Wellbeing Service](#) commissioned the 2025 national wellbeing survey. Although this survey wasn't for OCSAE and MOSOVO teams specifically, it did focus on people who carry out high-risk roles. The results showed that officers and staff were aware of well-being support but felt they weren't supported with work-life balance or dealing with the emotionally demanding work they did.

Only 43 percent of practitioners and supervisors who responded to the survey felt supported with their emotionally demanding work. When asked who they would go to for support with trauma and burnout, 65 percent of respondents said they would go to their manager. Only 32 percent stated that they would go to an [occupational health team](#) or well-being officers.

The survey results outline the need for welfare provisions to be mandatory for high-risk roles such as those in MOSOVO and OCSAE teams. This is because they are frequently carrying out emotionally demanding work.

At the time of writing this report, there was inconsistent access to psychological health screening across England and Wales. Some forces operate a mandatory referral system. But others rely on self-referrals, which fails to recognise that many people who need support are unlikely to self-refer or recognise there is an issue. A mandatory referral for an annual psychological health screening would normalise and standardise initial access and remove any perceived stigma from an opt-in process. This would also allow preventative measures to be put in place, along with interventions, before the well-being of an individual is affected.

The survey results also highlight the vital role of supervisors in OCSAE and MOSOVO teams. Most staff go to their supervisors for support. Therefore, it is essential that supervisors are trained in recognising signs of trauma and burnout and know how to respond. It is equally important that supervisors' well-being is properly supported so that they don't also risk burnout and experience trauma.

### **Well-being guidance for specialist teams**

The investigation of online child sexual abuse and the management of registered sex offenders can be incredibly stressful and harrowing for the officers and staff involved. The disturbing accounts they read and images they review can have a lasting emotional and psychological impact.

As such, MOSOVO and OCSAE staff and officers are regarded as being in high-risk roles. The guidance from the NPCC and National Crime Agency 'Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: Practice Advice for Investigating Online CSAE' outlines that well-being strategies should be in place for OCSAE teams. Forces should also provide well-being support that is easily accessible and understood.

The APP for MOSOVO requires [chief officers](#) to have risk assessments, policies and procedures in place to support the safety and welfare of staff and officers. This includes supervisors and managers being aware of stress, coping strategies and resources. They should know where and how to find help for themselves and their teams. The APP also outlines that independent and confidential counselling should be available and carried out at regular intervals.

Disappointingly, during our inspections, we found that some forces weren't providing good-enough welfare support for MOSOVO and OCSAE teams. Some weren't proactively offering welfare provision; instead staff and officers themselves were responsible for identifying that they needed help. This isn't acceptable. These team members aren't trained to understand or pick up on the signs of well-being issues. They may incorrectly think that changes in their behaviour or mood are due to something else.

During our inspections, we also found that people working in MOSOVO and OCSAE teams could be reluctant to self-refer for support. This was due to fear that they would be viewed as unsuitable for their job and removed from a role they are passionate about. This perceived stigma can leave people desperately needing support but not receiving it.

Lack of proactive access to sufficient well-being support can lead to people developing anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and compassion fatigue. This can lead to long-term sickness and, in serious cases, early retirement. It can also affect the quality of investigation or offender management. All of this could be avoided if forces provided effective well-being support.

Better-performing forces have mandatory psychological health screening at least annually (as per the National Police Wellbeing Service guidance), which is reviewed by a qualified health care professional who is trained in identifying trauma. The health care professional identifies when further support or intervention is needed and that the force has such support in place. Better-performing forces also make sure that officers and staff have time to decompress at the end of their shift. They provide well-being support and create time away from the office as a team. Supervisor one-to-ones include a focus on well-being. And personnel involved in the review of indecent images follow NPCC guidelines, including taking breaks and a grading limit of four hours in a shift.

This range of measures helps forces to identify symptoms of any developing well-being issues and provide early support.

### **Case study: Dorset Police has a thorough and effective welfare process**

Dorset Police's welfare provision for online [child sexual abuse and exploitation team personnel](#) starts during the recruitment process. If an application is successful, the candidate goes through a controlled [grading of indecent images](#) process. This is followed by an appointment with a counsellor so that the impact of the viewing of [indecent images of children](#) can be understood and evaluated. If the candidate is suitable, still feels happy to carry out the role and hasn't had any adverse reactions to image grading, they are offered a role and trained.

Each year, online child sexual abuse and exploitation team members are given three mandatory health monitoring appointments. The appointments provide generic feedback themes for supervisors to address. They also have two welfare days per year out of the office. And they are given access to the [trauma risk management](#) process. A small budget also exists for well-being items within the office.

### **Case study: Essex Police provides a range of well-being initiatives to support officers and staff**

Essex Police operates a process called Pause Point, which allows [officers](#) and [staff](#) to take a break from their roles and to work somewhere else for a period of time. The purpose is to refresh mental strength.

The senior management team allows the whole of the [public protection unit](#), including [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) teams, to access counselling services. Previously, these services could only be accessed by the [police online investigation team](#).

The counselling service gives access to two in-house NHS staff therapists who provide a confidential drop-in service. Details of what is discussed in sessions isn't shared with the force. From April 2026, due to a change in funding, the force's [occupational health unit](#) will provide this service.

Essex Police runs a detective well-being course. And it has also designed and implemented a well-being course for officers, staff and supervisors in management of sexual offenders and violent offenders teams.

### **Recommendation 15**

By 31 October 2026, forces should:

- make sure psychological health screening is mandatory and provided at least annually (as per guidance from the [National Police Wellbeing Service](#)) for [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders](#) and [online child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) team members and supervisors with access to follow-on well-being services; and
- make sure that management of sexual offenders and violent offenders and online child sexual abuse and exploitation team supervisors have regular trauma-informed training and knowledge sharing to identify signs of trauma, burnout and other well-being issues and that they can refer to and access timely support and treatment where needed.

## **Strong partnership working is essential within forces and with other statutory organisations**

Forces can't safeguard victims and successfully manage the risk posed by offenders alone. The management of registered sex offenders is part of [multi-agency public protection arrangements](#). The fact that these outline a multi-agency approach highlights that other partner agencies can and should be involved in the management of registered sex offenders at all levels of risk. Alongside external partners, MOSOVO and OCSAE teams rely heavily on other internal departments to manage the risks involved with their suspects and offenders.

### **The Probation Service**

Due to demand, there can be delays in the Probation Service sharing information about registered sex offenders with the police and uploading it to the [Violent and Sex Offender Register \(ViSOR\)](#). This can affect the quality and timeliness of the police force's risk assessment. And it could increase risk to the public.

The Probation Service works with police forces to manage registered sex offenders. While the registered sex offender is on licence, the Probation Service is the lead agency. An offender is on licence when they have been released into the community from prison before completing their full sentence. They will remain under specific conditions that they have to follow for the remainder of their sentence. This means that the Probation Service provides the risk assessment and risk management plan (RMP) for that offender and updates this on ViSOR. The police role during this time is to support the Probation Service to manage risk.

Probation Service workloads and issues such as a lack of trained staff can mean that there is a delay in uploading the risk assessment or RMP to ViSOR. This means that police forces don't always have access to information about the offender's risk level so can't effectively manage the risk. During our inspections, we found that some forces had gone against guidance and completed their own RMPs for the offender to resolve this issue. This is risky as they won't necessarily have all the information they need to make a full assessment of risk and, therefore, decide how to reduce or remove it.

At the end of the offender's licence period, the police become the lead agency and have 15 days to complete a new risk assessment and RMP. This is in recognition that the registered sex offender is no longer being managed by a probation officer and won't have licence restrictions or probation support.

High Probation Service workloads can lead to delays in forces receiving valuable information at the end of an offender's licence. And sometimes it is missing completely. Some forces don't receive a recent risk assessment or RMP for the offender from the Probation Service. This means they don't have the full details of probation meetings that took place with the offender so can't manage risk properly.

Risk levels can also change. Therefore, it is essential that police forces receive an up-to-date risk assessment and RMP from the Probation Service so they can build their own risk assessments and RMPs.

Better-performing forces have good working relationships with the Probation Service. They have strong service level agreements and a two-way review, feedback and escalation process for issues in the management of sexual offenders.

### **Recommendation 16**

By 31 October 2026, forces should make sure that they have a strong service level agreement in place with the Probation Service and that they have a two-way process for review, feedback and escalation to make sure [safeguarding](#) opportunities aren't being missed.

### **Neighbourhood policing teams**

[Neighbourhood policing teams](#) are the police representatives in the community. They can provide an invaluable source of intelligence about the people living in the areas they work in. It is important that they understand who the registered sex offenders and online child sexual abuse suspects are in their area. This supports the safeguarding of the wider community and provides intelligence to officers on behaviours that may suggest further offending is taking place. This was discussed in the Angiolini Inquiry Part 2 First Report. It outlines that there should be a clear focus on identifying, responding to and preventing sexually motivated crimes against women in public spaces in the job descriptions, training and guidance for the remodelled neighbourhood policing roles.

Better-performing forces have MOSOVO teams that are co-located with neighbourhood policing teams. This supports regular information sharing. Some forces also have short-term placements for neighbourhood policing team personnel with MOSOVO teams, with neighbourhood officers sometimes working with MOSOVO offender managers. This helps both teams to understand each other's roles and how they can work most effectively together.

### **Case study: Dorset Police uses joint working between neighbourhood policing and specialist teams to better manage risk**

Dorset Police promotes the work of its [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams throughout the force. For example, it shares arrests and investigations that have led to court sentences that protect the public.

The force offers short-term placements in its MOSOVO teams to promote a better understanding of their role. It has also set up MOSOVO champions in [neighbourhood policing teams](#), which are responsible for [intelligence](#) gathering and carrying out any other actions needed.

These neighbourhood policing team members work with the MOSOVO teams to understand who the registered sex offenders are in their areas. They understand the type of offending, what can be done to reduce the chances of reoffending and how to protect both the community and the registered sex offender.

MOSOVO champions speak to MOSOVO teams and review and share information on the force's Microsoft SharePoint site. This makes sure that others can access information on the registered sex offender, including the areas they visit, who they have been seen with and any vehicles they use. This then allows MOSOVO offender managers to better understand the registered sex offender. It means that they don't just have to rely on their observations at visits and intelligence that doesn't specifically address the risks posed or faced by the offender.

This SharePoint site allows [officers](#) to focus on registered sex offenders where extra information is required and where they may pose a risk to the community.

Unfortunately, we found during our inspections that the same level of connectivity didn't exist between OCSAE and neighbourhood policing teams. This is a missed opportunity to monitor suspects on bail for indecent images of children offences as well as to identify and address any community tension after a suspect's arrest. Community tension is where a crime or incident has happened in the community that affects public trust and confidence and can cause public reaction leading to further incidents or crimes. In the case of a suspect of online child sexual abuse, the public may be concerned about the suspect living in the community. They may hold protests, display posters or carry out abuse or assaults to remove the offender from the area.

### **Case study: Humberside Police uses flags to manage risks posed by and to suspects**

Humberside Police [flags](#) all online [child sexual abuse](#) suspects on its resource management system. The force sends a briefing note to the relevant [neighbourhood policing team](#) when new suspects are added. The flagging makes sure that the [officer](#) in the case is automatically notified of any updates. This could be information relating to risk or [bail](#) conditions or any [safeguarding](#) concerns identified by other officers who have had contact with the suspect in their case.

The neighbourhood policing team briefing note includes information on risk, safeguarding concerns and bail conditions. This supports online child sexual abuse and exploitation teams to manage the risk posed by and to the suspects.

### **Children's social care**

Police forces should work closely with children's social care (CSC) to safeguard children effectively. This means OCSAE teams need to make sure that when a suspect or an address is identified as being linked to indecent images of children offences, they identify any children that may be at risk. Sharing information with and receiving information from CSC should take place at an early stage.

During our inspections, we found that some forces weren't sharing information with CSC at the earliest opportunity. In these cases, CSC was contacted prior to the police searching the suspect's premises but usually no more than 24 hours beforehand.

Sometimes CSC wasn't contacted until after the suspect had been arrested. This was usually due to the fear that CSC would contact the suspect before police action, which could risk vital evidence being lost before the police had been able to secure it. However, this could lead to the delayed safeguarding of children associated with the suspect. Clear communication between police forces and CSC to develop shared understanding and processes would make sure that information is shared without risking police investigations. This was an issue that was particularly prominent in our 2021/22 and the early part of our 2023–25 PEEL inspection cycles.

The national OCSAE working group is a forum for all forces' OCSAE team representatives to discuss issues and best practice, such as differences in safeguarding practice and the reasons behind it. During our inspections, we found that forces shared good practice. As a result, most now share information with CSC much earlier in the process, which is positive to see. It also allows for collaboration around potential bail conditions and protective measures that can safeguard children linked to the suspect.

### **Case study: Cleveland Police shares information with children's social care to better assess and respond to risk**

Cleveland Police shares information with children's social care to [safeguard children](#) and families in online [child sexual abuse](#) investigations.

An [intelligence officer](#) makes the initial referral to social services. The referral requests the sharing of information about the suspect and the address. This supports the force in its assessment of the risk posed by the suspect and, therefore, the speed at which enforcement activity at the suspect's house needs to take place.

Following enforcement, a further police protection notice is submitted by the officer in charge or safeguarding officer. This goes through the [multi-agency safeguarding hub](#) process to decide if a [section 47 of the Children Act 1989 strategy discussion](#) is needed.

The force updates children's social care throughout, including on the outcome of the investigation.

This makes sure that early information is shared and that children and families are safeguarded.

# Demand, considerations and research

Increasing demand is placing pressure on the existing systems for the investigation of online [child sexual abuse](#) and the management of registered sexual offenders in England and Wales. It is essential that police forces and linked national bodies seriously consider how to better manage the risk this poses to the public.

Beyond this, they should also consider what academic research is available about these changing offending types and whether changes in practice are needed. They should also consider whether commissioning new research to fill gaps in current knowledge could further support improved practice.

Although our inspections haven't covered the issues this section explores, this insight is essential to helping police forces better understand the challenges they face and how to meet them now and in the future.

## Changing offence types and management

The motivation for online child sexual abuse offences is changing, with offenders now committing offences not just for sexual motivation. For example, there are increases in offenders producing material for the purposes of sadism, misogyny or other motivations that cause significant harm to [children](#). There are also offenders who are financially motivated to exploit children to produce child sexual abuse material. These changing motivations need to be explored to prevent such offences and make sure they are better investigated.

The increasing numbers of online child sexual abuse offences require a national-level reassessment of existing offender management strategies. For example, consideration should be given to whether:

- the existing form of offender management for registered sex offenders is fit for purpose; and
- there should be different methods for managing registered sex offenders depending on how they have offended.

At the time of writing this report, guidance for managing sex offenders was mainly based on contact offending rather than internet-based offending. And forces' use of devices for triage for internet-based offenders was inconsistent. Research and new national guidance for this is required to keep up with the changing types of offending.

## The Sentencing Bill 2025

Due to challenges with the capacity in adult prisons, the Ministry of Justice commissioned the [Independent Sentencing Review](#). In 2025, it published a report of the findings. It explores how the justice and court systems work, who should receive prison sentences and other measures that could be used instead of prison to make sure people don't reoffend. This will lead to fewer general offenders receiving prison sentences. General offenders are those who haven't committed:

- a sexual offence;
- a serious violence offence;
- a terrorist offence;
- offences relating to national security; or
- some offences connected to [domestic abuse](#).

It is likely that general offenders will be released at an earlier stage of their sentence than they have been previously.

The sentencing review is likely to have a major impact on [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) and investigation of online child sexual abuse and exploitation teams. The early release of prisoners and the extra time they spend in the community is going to increase demand not only for police forces but for the partners they work with, such as the Probation Service, health services, councils and housing providers. Although those prisoners who have been convicted of sexual offences may not be released early, others who have been convicted of non-sexual related offences but who are already registered sex offenders could be. This will add to the numbers of registered sex offenders in the community and lead, therefore, to unplanned increases in police workloads. It also will increase the risk to the public, which the police and partners will have to assess and manage.

The Sentencing Bill 2025, which was going through Parliament at the time of writing this report, is likely to bring changes to the type of offences that result in a prison sentence. This will increase the number of community-based sentences and the number of registered sex offenders in the community. This could mean that online child sexual abuse offenders have access to the internet, which they wouldn't have in prison. They are also likely to have less supervision than in prison. This could create opportunities for further reoffending.

## Technological advances

Technological advances offer both opportunities and challenges to policing. They can act as a deterrent to further offending. And they can increase further offending detection. Monitoring software can be uploaded onto an offender's internet-based devices and is used to make sure that the offender isn't accessing, uploading or searching for [indecent images of children](#). It can also make sure that the offender isn't accessing other risky material, and it can update the offender manager if the offender does access any such content. Monitoring software can offer both options for the management of online child sexual abuse offenders. It makes the offender think before they access indecent images of children, and if they do so, the software can alert the police to allow them to investigate relevant offences.

The use of technology to aid investigation needs review not just in procurement but also in online child sexual abuse and exploitation and MOSOVO teams, which need to be able to evaluate tools for effectiveness. This should be part of national procurement along with relevant research.

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a rapidly expanding area and has the potential to help police forces. Forces need to review how they can use AI to reduce administrative tasks and speed up how they carry out some parts of the investigation process. National focus is needed on the impact and benefit of AI for these two areas specifically. And this must be an ongoing process.

AI is also changing the way offences are committed. It has already become part of online child sexual abuse investigations. Offenders use AI to create indecent images of children and to manipulate innocent images of children into indecent ones.

Existing legislation does allow the prosecution of this. It is likely that the [Crime and Policing Bill 2025](#), which is expected to be enacted in 2026, will allow for the prosecution of further offences. This includes new offences for creating, possessing or supplying child sexual abuse image generators, which allow for the creation of child sexual abuse material. And it extends offences to the possession of advice or guidance about creating child sexual abuse images (for example, a manual of guidance to create child sexual abuse images), including the use of AI to generate child sexual abuse material. It also creates an offence for the facilitation of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in an online space or application. This is positive.

Given the speed of technological advances, there is a danger that without dedicated and continued focus, police forces won't be able to keep pace with the use of technology by offenders to commit crime.

## Questions to consider

To continue to improve the management of registered sex offenders and investigations of online child sexual abuse, the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), [College of Policing](#) and Home Office should consider questions including:

- What strategic forecasting is in place to anticipate future demand?
- Are forces thoroughly exploring innovative technologies to manage operational pressures and support [personnel](#) effectively?
- Should national governance be stronger and more collaborative across these two areas?

## Academic research

More academic research about the management of registered sex offenders and the investigation of online child sexual abuse is needed. This will help improve police forces' understanding of the characteristics of registered sex offenders for the different types of offending. This will help them prevent offences and effectively manage those who are already registered sex offenders. It is outside the scope of this report to make a recommendation in this area. However, the Home Office, College of Policing and National Police Chiefs' Council should work together to develop and implement a strategic plan for academic research into both online child sexual abuse and the management of registered sex offenders.

Research needs to be carried out not only into risk assessment systems, [active risk management systems](#) and offender types, but also into what technology can help improve online child sexual abuse investigations and registered sex offender management. Technology to aid MOSOVO and online child sexual abuse and exploitation teams needs to be supported by research and meaningful field testing to make sure that it is effective and efficient.

The need for research into the whole system of managing registered sex offenders is overdue. Previous academic research has focused on parts of the system rather than the whole system.

Research into the management of registered sex offenders and the investigation of online child sexual abuse is being carried out. There have been studies on the use of desistance in the management of registered sex offenders. One such study is '[A desistance practice framework for the police led management of people with sexual convictions: A briefing paper for the police](#)', published in March 2025.

Desistance relates to methods of support that can help change behaviour and thinking over time to stop reoffending. The use of desistance frameworks to support registered sex offenders would require training for MOSOVO teams. It should be included in initial MOSOVO training to help police personnel assess and manage the risk of registered sex offenders. It should be a priority at a national level for the police and the Probation Service.

At the time of writing this report, the University of Lancashire was carrying out research into [risk assessment](#), particularly [active risk management system](#) assessments. This should provide some up-to-date information on the use of the system and highlight future improvements. This research requires input from all police forces in England and Wales to allow for the improvement of the system. It should consider areas that MOSOVO offender managers have identified as affecting offenders and preventing reoffending. MOSOVO offender managers work with registered sex offenders daily and, therefore, have valuable knowledge about how to assess and reduce risk.

Academic research into the different offending types of registered sex offenders and the possible approaches to these types could lead to better risk management. The increase in internet-based offending and what causes people to view online child sexual abuse needs to be reviewed. If there is an understanding of what causes people to do this, it could help to identify ways of preventing it. It could also lead to more efficient treatment and management, which could help health care, the Prison and Probation Service and the police among others. This would also reduce the risk to the public.

According to figures from the Ministry of Justice, on average, 0.3 percent of adults who committed a sexual offence between January and December 2023 in England and Wales, reoffended by committing another sexual offence within one year. This was lower than the reoffending rate for adults who committed violence against the person offences, which, on average, was 2.8 percent in the same period. But to help inform best practice for offender management across policing, more research into this area is needed. The better informed the police are, the better they can stop reoffending and reduce the risk to the public.

However, at the time of writing this report, there was no identified funding for research into these areas for National Police Chiefs' Council leads to use. Instead, funding must be requested from organisations such as the Home Office, and this can take time.

This is a growing and fast-changing area of policing. This means that research is often already out of date by the time the funding and access to the necessary resources and offender managers is gained. A process to commission academic research in a timely manner would allow police forces to access more up-to-date evidence about offender management.

# Conclusion

This spotlight report highlights how forces must review their working practices to make sure they are fit for the demand faced by investigators in online [child sexual abuse and exploitation](#) and [management of sexual offenders and violent offenders \(MOSOVO\)](#) teams now and in the future. These teams are facing ever-increasing demand at the same time as police [officers](#) and [staff](#) numbers are reducing. This needs to be addressed at a national level.

Too often these teams are viewed in isolation during change programmes and in the development of cases to request increases in officers and staff. But they are intrinsically linked.

At a national level, review and revision of guidance (especially the [College of Policing's authorised professional practice](#) for MOSOVO) and training is needed at pace to support consistent high-quality work in both online child sexual abuse and exploitation and MOSOVO teams. This guidance should consider the ever-increasing workloads of both teams and the change in offending types. It should support officers and staff working in this important and challenging area and make sure that they have access to tools and training to support them to do their jobs more effectively.

The time that forces are taking to examine digital downloads and [digital forensics](#) isn't acceptable. Forces must be more efficient in the use of digital forensics and invest in teams, equipment and training to improve wait times. These need to be reduced to improve public [safeguarding](#), achieve better results and to reduce the workloads of officers and staff.

More investment in technology is required to make these roles more efficient. This should be a national consideration to improve standards across England and Wales. Police forces need help with management information in MOSOVO teams. The inclusion of this requirement in the new Multi-Agency Public Protection System, which is being introduced by the Home Office in 2028, would have made forces more efficient and created consistency across England and Wales. It would allow for better and more efficient analysis and risk management than forces' existing solutions. Including the need for more investment in technology should be a priority.

MOSOVO teams should get the recognition they deserve. All too often they are overlooked because some forces can't measure the crime and harm that they prevent. This lack of information means that some forces can't see the benefit of investing in these teams. Instead they invest in teams where senior leaders can view performance data, including an increase in crime detections or arrests, the timeliness of investigations and higher positive outcome rates for [victims](#). But the work of MOSOVO teams is no less important. Preventing crime and harm in the community must be a priority for policing in times of such financial strain.

During our 2021/22 and 2023–25 police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy inspections, we found real improvements in the work of both online child sexual abuse and exploitation and MOSOVO teams. We have seen greater investment, stronger governance, better use of technology and improved officer and staff welfare. But too many forces have neglected these important areas of policing.

These forces and overarching national bodies need to continue to work proactively and at speed to better safeguard communities and support these dedicated teams; teams that every day complete work that most of us couldn't bear to be involved in.

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