

Police Service of Northern Ireland
and Public Prosecution Service

Joint Strategy for Investigating and Prosecuting Serious Sexual Offences

April 2026 – March 2031

Working Together to Enhance our Service
to Victims of Serious Sexual Offences



Police Service
of Northern Ireland



**Public
Prosecution
Service**

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Joint Foreword

Sexual offences are undeniably amongst the most harmful crimes that exist in our society. We understand that for a victim, the crime committed against them may represent the worst moment in their life, violating their sense of safety, dignity and often leading to significant harm. It is vital that as your Police and Prosecution Services we understand the scale of that impact and respond to it effectively. It is our responsibility to investigate and prosecute sexual offences with diligence, professionalism and empathy, ensuring that every victim's trust in us is well founded. As leaders of our services, we take these responsibilities very seriously and commit to driving positive change together.

This Strategy does not come from a standing start. We are proud of the care, empathy and professionalism with which our investigators and prosecutors approach these cases and we commend the hard work of the Police Service of Northern Ireland's (PSNI) Public Protection Branch¹ and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland's (PPS) Serious Crime Unit² to continuously enhance the service victims receive. Many of the recommendations of the Gillen Review Report into the Law and Procedures in Serious Sexual Offences in Northern Ireland (May 2019) and successive strategies developed by the Northern Ireland Executive and Departments have already been implemented, with major contributions from the PSNI and the PPS. Whilst we have made substantial progress, it is clear to us that we can accelerate change by developing a comprehensive strategy for our joint working, setting out our longer term vision for investigating and prosecuting these cases.

In developing this Strategy, it is essential that we start with the needs of victims. We have therefore listened to the voices of victims who have bravely shared their experiences with us. We understand the trauma that is caused by sexual crime and the courage required of victims to face the criminal justice process. A trauma-sensitive approach across all elements of our services is therefore of paramount importance. It is for this reason that we set the first of our principal ambitions for this Strategy, which is that no victim will withdraw their support for their case as a result of their experience with the investigation or prosecution process.

The complexity and scale of the challenges in investigating and prosecuting sexual offences have grown beyond recognition. There are a number of drivers for this, including the proliferation of digital material, complaints of non-recent offending, the sensitivities of the disclosure process and the widening impact of online harm cases. This has increased the difficulty in investigating and prosecuting these cases.

The impact of these pressures has been compounded by the legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic and by the impact of lengthy withdrawals of legal services by the Criminal Bar Association (CBA) in 2025 and 2026, resulting in unprecedented case volumes currently before the Crown Courts. Both organisations are also facing recurring resourcing pressures. This combination of factors means that we are still seeing unacceptable levels of delay. Whilst we are proud of the dedication of our staff and their efforts to drive down delay, in order to reduce the critical impact on victims, we recognise that the wider criminal justice system must also go further to substantially eliminate avoidable delay.

Both organisations are also facing recurring resourcing pressures. This combination of factors means that we are still seeing unacceptable levels of delay. Whilst we are proud of the dedication of our staff and their long hours of effort to drive down delay in order to reduce the critical impact on victims, we recognise that the wider criminal justice system must also go further to substantially eliminate avoidable delay.

In order to achieve this, we are setting a second ambition which is to reduce the current time taken to investigate and issue a decision in serious sexual offence cases by a third.

To succeed, we must ensure that our respective services are resourced to meet these demands and that our teams are provided with the training and other support needed to deliver the highest quality investigations and prosecutions.

Ultimately, we cannot achieve the end-to-end change that victims are entitled to in isolation. We must collaborate as a whole system, from prevention through to the conclusion of a trial, to reduce the incidence of these crimes and to ensure our response is uncompromising. We have therefore aligned our plans with the vision set out in the Department of Justice's Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy and The Executive Office's Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

We are deeply grateful to our partners in public and voluntary sector bodies who have contributed so generously to the formation of this Strategy. We hope that it meets your expectations.

At its core, our message remains a simple one:

To all victims of sexual crime

We encourage you to come forward and report your experience. We collectively recognise the importance of your recovery and will do our very best to avoid any further trauma to you during the criminal justice journey. We understand that we can never fully erase the harm you have experienced. Our specialist investigators and prosecutors will, however, ensure that you are treated with dignity, respect and compassion throughout your case.

To our staff

We also commit to taking the necessary steps to equip you to support the victims you serve while ensuring that your own wellbeing is fostered and maintained.

It is our mission as leaders to make this change happen together.



Jon Boutcher QPM

Chief Constable of the
Police Service of Northern Ireland



Stephen Herron

Director of Public Prosecutions
for Northern Ireland

¹ PSNI Public Protection Branch (PPB) consists of a number of specialist investigation teams, for example the Rape and Serious Sexual Offences Team (RASSO) and the Child Abuse Investigation Unit (CAIU). For further information, see Annex A.

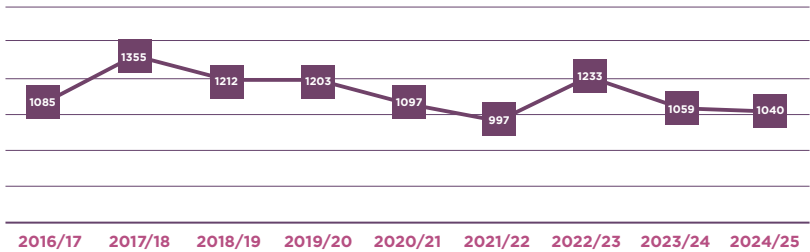
² The PPS Serious Crime Unit (SCU) was implemented in January 2016. The SCU, which is headed by an Assistant Director, deals with the most serious sexual offences including rape. Prior to January 2016, cases of this type would typically have been dealt with by the PPS regional teams. In terms of sexual crimes, the regions continue to deal with cases involving offences such as indecent exposure and voyeurism. The majority of files submitted by the police to the PPS involving sexual offences are dealt with by the SCU (64% of all such files received in 2024/25). For further information, see Annex A.

Introduction

The current position

In Northern Ireland, we are currently facing unprecedented levels of sexual offence reports. 2022/23 saw the highest numbers of sexual offences ever recorded by the PSNI (4,303). In the same year, the PPS’s Serious Crime Unit (SCU) received 1,233 files from police involving serious sexual offences, including rape.

Chart 1 - Number of files received by PPS involving a serious sexual offence 2016/17 - 2024/25



This compared with 1,085 in 2016/17, the first year of SCU’s operation – a rise of 14%. Cases are increasing in their complexity whilst (as noted above) the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and successive withdrawal of services by the CBA has also placed enormous strains on the system. This combination of factors has led to unacceptable levels of delay over recent years. The median number of days taken for the PSNI and the PPS to investigate and issue a decision in serious sexual offence cases has grown significantly, exceeding 300 days in four of the last nine financial years. In 2022/23 the figure stood at 310 days. Major efforts have been made by the PSNI and the PPS to bear down on delay over the last two years

and the median figure reduced to 224 days in 2024/25, a fall of 28%. Nevertheless, significant improvements are still needed.

Focus on serious sexual offences

We recognise unequivocally that all sexual offences are serious. However, for the purposes of this Strategy, we have defined serious sexual offences as those currently reported by police to the PPS Serious Crime Unit which include rape, sexual assault by penetration, all sexual crimes against children (including child sexual abuse or grooming) crimes that exploit others for a sexual purpose, whether in person or online, and alleged sexual misconduct by police officers. We have placed these boundaries on the Strategy to create momentum and to enable us to chart progress around these classes of cases. We believe this will help us to implement change more rapidly. It is our intention that the benefits of these actions will extend to all sexual offence cases over the lifetime of the Strategy.

Guidance as to how we investigate and prosecute serious sexual offences is provided at **Annex B**.

What do we want to achieve?

Whilst many of the challenges being faced by the PSNI and PPS are caused by factors outside the control of our organisations, we are concerned that sometimes this has meant victims have not received the level of support and care they deserve. Therefore, as your police and prosecution services, we understand that we must and will do better to deliver support to victims, to develop our personnel working on these challenging cases, to further reduce the time taken to reach a prosecution decision and to achieve the high levels of case file quality needed to support the timely progression of these cases in court.

Our Ambitions

As a result, our ambitions for this Strategy are:

- **Firstly, that no victim will withdraw their support for their case as a result of their experience with the investigation or prosecution process; and**
- **Secondly, that we will reduce the time taken to progress serious sexual offence cases to ‘progress serious sexual offence cases through investigation and prosecution by a third.’³**

While PSNI and PPS are independent of each other and have individual roles to play, we have developed a number of joint outcomes in support of these ambitions. These outcomes will act as a framework and guide our planning, assumptions and outcomes over the five-year life of the Strategy. The four outcomes are as follows:

Outcome 1: Improved support to victims

All victims will consistently receive trauma-sensitive support to meet their needs and clear communications about their case.

Outcome 2: Improving timeliness and quality

We will progress cases as quickly as possible whilst prioritising exceptional case file quality.

³ To approximately 149 days, based on performance over the 2024/25 financial year (224 days). This figure reflects the time taken (median number of calendar days) from the date an offence is reported to the police by the victim to the date the PPS issue a prosecutorial decision. PPS prosecutorial decisions may include indictable prosecution (prosecution in the Crown Court), summary prosecution (prosecution in the Magistrates’ / Youth Courts), diversion (e.g. a caution) or a decision not to prosecute.

Outcome 3: Demonstrating accountability and leadership

We will increase the visibility of our leadership teams in the response to serious sexual offences to ensure that we are accountable to the public and can influence both the prevention and detection of these crimes and produce positive criminal justice outcomes.

Outcome 4: Developing our people

We will build and develop our workforces to ensure that all our staff feel supported and empowered to deliver exceptional investigations and prosecutions.

These outcomes, which are explained in greater detail below, are directly aligned to the aims and objectives of linked strategies including the Departments of Justice and Health’s joint Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy 2024-2031, the PSNI Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Plan and The Executive Office’s Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls. It is our intention that our joint Strategy will strengthen the response to sexual offending across Northern Ireland.

Joint Action Plan 2026/27 – 2027/28

Action is required now. Therefore, we have developed an Action Plan setting out our commitments for the first two years of this Strategy. We understand that we must be accountable to the wider public for our performance in tackling serious sexual offence cases. It is our intention to report annually setting out our progress against the actions within this Strategy.

This will include updates on a number of key delivery measures which we will use to track performance against our desired outcomes.

This report will complement the information already published by our organisations in this area, such as the PSNI's Recorded Crime Statistics and the PPS's Annual Statistical Bulletin on Cases Involving Sexual Offences.

Our Outcomes

Outcome 1: Improved support to victims

All victims will consistently receive trauma-sensitive support to meet their needs and clear communications about their case.

Why this objective?

All our specialist investigators and prosecutors have received trauma-sensitive practice training and are experienced in supporting victims of serious sexual crime. Both organisations are also committed to providing victims with clear and timely communications about their case so that they can stay fully engaged with the process and can be signposted to additional support services where this would be beneficial.

Communication with victims and identification of needs must be our focus for effective support during the investigation and prosecution stages. All victims' voices should be heard and we want to better understand the diverse range

of needs arising. We will continue to collaborate closely with partners across the criminal justice sector and wider government departments, the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime and voluntary sector organisations.

What is our ambition?

We understand that for some victims their decision not to proceed with their case will be driven by their personal circumstances and choice. We are respectful and sensitive to this. With this in mind, we have included an action to continually improve our engagement with victims and to signpost them for support outside of the criminal justice system, or to support them to re-engage with their case in the future at a point where they feel ready. For those who choose to pursue a criminal justice pathway, we will ensure that they receive trauma-sensitive support and communication. We want to ensure that no victim withdraws from their case as a result of their experience with the investigation or prosecution process.

Outcome 2: Improving timeliness and quality

We will progress cases as quickly as possible whilst prioritising exceptional case file quality.

Why this objective?

Progressing cases as quickly as possible while enhancing file quality is fundamental to delivering justice and improving victims' experience. Even with the significant progress made to date, delay is still a problem; cases take too long overall, which can cause uncertainty and distress.

While wanting to move at pace, it is critical that we also maintain our commitment to the highest standard of investigation and prosecutorial decision-making. This focus on quality ensures that we also meet our overarching duty to ensure a fair investigation and a fair trial for the defendant. Our commitment is to balance speed with precision, acknowledging that both elements are essential for justice to be achieved.

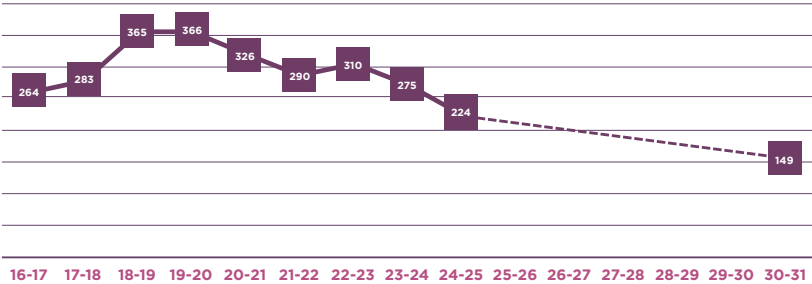
What is our ambition?

Over the life of this Strategy, it is our ambition to reduce the median length of time taken for the investigation and prosecution of serious sexual offence cases by a third when compared with 2024/25 (baseline year - see Chart 2).

By resourcing our teams to capacity, streamlining our processes and ensuring meticulous attention to detail, we aim to significantly reduce the time victims spend waiting for a prosecution decision.

Achieving this ambition will enhance the overall experience for victims and reinforce our commitment to delivering a timely and effective service. We recognise that achieving this goal requires continuous improvement and dedication, but we are determined to make these important changes to better serve victims.

Chart 2 - Median days (serious sexual offences) from date reported to date decision issued: Ambition for 2030-31



Outcome 3: Demonstrating accountability and leadership

We will seek opportunities to increase the visibility and public impact of our leadership teams in the response to serious sexual offences. We want to ensure that we are accountable to the public and can influence both the prevention and detection of these crimes and contribute to a positive criminal justice outcome.

Why this objective?

Increasing the visibility of our leadership teams and their impact within the professional victim support sector and the wider public is crucial for improving public confidence in our response to serious sexual offences - contributing to prevention and influencing wider system change. By demonstrating strong leadership and accountability, we want to strengthen victims' trust in our organisations' handling of serious sexual offence cases. We recognise that effective engagement within the broader criminal justice sector and in the public domain will build trust and confidence in our work.

What is our ambition?

Our intention is to proactively enhance visibility and impact of our leadership in the response to serious sexual offences and ensure we are accountable to the public. By demonstrating strong leadership and clear accountability, we aim to build trust within the community, reassuring the public that serious sexual offences are handled with the utmost professionalism and integrity, in order to see demonstrable improvements in public confidence in our work.

Over time, we hope our actions will encourage more victims to come forward and report crimes against them, knowing they will be supported and heard. Achieving this ambition requires a steadfast commitment to transparency, collaborative working and continuous improvement.

Outcome 4: Developing our people

We will continue to build and develop our specialist workforces to ensure all our staff feel supported to deliver investigations and prosecutions of an exceptional standard.

Why this objective?

We recognise that developing, supporting and expanding our specialist workforce as required is crucial to providing the highest standard of care and responding effectively to sexual offences. Our commitment is rooted in the understanding that well-trained, specialist investigation and prosecution teams are essential for addressing the complex and sensitive nature of these cases. We understand too that this applies to all levels in our organisations, from those providing the vital first response when a crime is first reported, through to the most senior leaders. We are proud of

our current specialist teams, who are dedicated to investigating and prosecuting sexual offence cases with professionalism and care.

We want to ensure, however, that workloads are not excessive and they have additional support and training available that will support them to deliver on their difficult roles in a sustainable way.

We also acknowledge that different intersectional backgrounds of victims require a workforce skilled in trauma-sensitive practices, who are aware of the different needs of those they are working with. By investing in our specialist teams, we aim to meet the diverse needs of all victims, ensuring they feel heard, respected and supported. This approach aligns with our broader objective to foster a justice system that is both equitable and effective, based on a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by those we serve.

What is our ambition?

Our ambition is to ensure that every sexual offence case is investigated and prosecuted with expert attention from a highly skilled, empathetic and sustainably resourced workforce. Our ambition is to resource our specialist workforces across investigation and prosecution to support this. We also commit to enhancing our processes to ensure we have exceptional training available to all our staff who engage with victims. We aim to set new standards of excellence in victim care.

We also understand the challenging nature of this work and commit to ensuring that our teams have the necessary training and resources to support their own wellbeing. It is our ambition that delivering on this objective will also support us to speed up our processes and allow us to reduce by one third the current time taken from report for a prosecution decision to be made.

Key Delivery Measures

The following are the key delivery measures which we will use to assess our performance against this Strategy. Updates will be provided under our annual reporting arrangements.

Outcome 1: Improved support to victims

KDM 1: Percentage of victims of a serious sexual offence who are satisfied with the overall standard of service and information provided by (a) the PSNI (b) the PPS (c) the Victim and Witness Care Unit. This reporting will ensure that the views of a diverse range of victims and those with additional vulnerabilities and needs are included in the assessment.

KDM 2: Victim attrition – percentage of victims withdrawing their support during (a) the investigation stage and (b) the prosecution stage.

KDM 3: Data collated on the points during the investigation and prosecution stages where attrition occurs, steps taken to mitigate same and the reasons for this outcome.

KDM 4: Number / percentage of special measures applications (a) made and (b) granted in cases involving serious sexual offences within the designated time frame.

KDM 5: Percentage of cases in which victims have been made aware at early investigative stage of the availability of special measures and their views sought regarding an application.

KDM 6: Timeliness of (a) application for special measures; (b) granting of special measures, (c) communication to the victim to inform them of (a) and (b).

KDM 7: Percentage of eligible cases in which (a) a victim was offered the opportunity to give evidence via a Remote Evidence Centre and (b) the victim accepted that opportunity.'

KDM 8: Number of requests for review received by the PPS in cases involving serious sexual offences / percentage of decisions changed.

KDM 9: Percentage of cases in which a review outcome is confirmed within 8 weeks.

KDM 10: Number of service standard complaints received in relation to cases involving serious sexual offences by (a) the PSNI and (b) the PPS; (c) the percentage of complaints upheld within PSNI and (d) the percentage of complaints upheld within PPS.

Outcome 2: Improving timeliness and quality

KDM 11: Percentage of files concluded by the Clinic Model process.

KDM 12: Percentage of investigation files achieving the agreed PSNI/PPS file-build standards following SCU Gateway checks.

KDM 13: Median number of days for the issue of a prosecutorial decision in cases involving a serious sexual offence from date reported by the victim; for (a) prosecution decision; (b) decision of no prosecution and (c) all decisions combined.

KDM 14: Monitor impact of key delivery measures on the percentage of cases where the Test for Prosecution is met.

KDM 15: Percentage of cases which result in a Terminating Ruling or adverse outcome (as jointly defined by PSNI and PPS).

Outcome 3: Demonstrating accountability and leadership

KDM 16: PSNI raising the profile of this Strategy and its Outcomes at the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

KDM 17: Number and target audiences of relevant outreach events, including joint media appearances led by PSNI/PPS (a) jointly; and (b) independently.

KDM 18: Number of meetings per annum of (a) Outcomes Delivery Group; (b) the Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategic Oversight Board; (c) the Independent Consultation Group and (d) reports to Working Together Board.

Outcome 4: Developing our people

KDM 19: Number of agreed training events / staff trained in relevant case-related subject matters across Public Protection Branch and the Serious Crime Unit, including percentage of staff in both organisations who were (a) offered and (b) accepted training and resources to support their wellbeing.

KDM 20: PPB / SCU staff in post as at 31 March annually as a percentage of agreed capacity.

Action Plan 2026/27 – 2027/28

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
Outcome 1: Improved support to victims All victims will consistently receive trauma-sensitive support to meet their needs and clear communications about their case.	1.1 Regular and consultative engagement with victims and victim support sector to ensure they are informed, and understanding needs is embedded within our policy and delivery.	1.1.1	Review current needs assessment policies and processes within PSNI, PPS and the Victim and Witness Care Unit, ensuring they are delivered consistently and in a trauma-sensitive way. Continue to participate in the Departmental led Victim and Witness Steering Group and consult with stakeholders to identify required improvements, leading to development of enhanced needs assessment arrangements. (Note: Delivery of an Enhanced Needs Assessment Service is subject to the appropriate funding)
		1.1.2	Review existing templates/documents to aid communication with victims, with victim support organisations, and identify any areas for improvement by the end of year one.
		1.1.3	Co-produce new template documents together with the victim support sector, ensuring that victims are aware of their entitlements under the Victim Charter and employing the use of trauma-sensitive language. Ensure that any new template documents, along with all other documents, are fully accessible and available to prosecutors and investigators in standardised forms. All materials will be subject to review and amendment as resources and needs evolve.
		1.1.4	Develop processes to monitor the impact of engagement with victims and adjust approaches to meet their needs. This should include information on Victim Charter entitlements, and what the victim can expect at each stage of the investigation and prosecution process, with clear signposting to appropriate points of contact.
		1.1.5	Ensure the facilitation of telephone calls and remote or in-person meetings with prosecutors, court familiarisation visits and pre-trial consultation with Counsel.
		1.1.6	Develop an updated resource for victims, to provide greater clarity regarding responsibility for engagement with them at different stages of the investigation and prosecution process, and points of contact for each stage.

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
	1.2 Deliver exceptional victim support within the breadth of PSNI and PPS remit.	1.2.1	Review the process to refer victims to Victim Support NI and other support services as required, and ensure compliance with the agreed processes. Ensure that appropriate and up to date literature / materials are enclosed in initial communication packs and kept under regular review.
		1.2.2	Engage with and support the ongoing delivery of the Sexual Offences Legal Advisors (SOLA) and Children's Sexual Offences Legal Advisors (CSOLA) services to include facilitating meetings with the victims they are supporting.
		1.2.3	Review the process to refer victims to the SOLAs and CSOLAs and ensure compliance with the agreed process. Develop monitoring arrangements to include provision of data on (a) number of referrals from PSNI and (b) nature of SOLA enquiries with PPS to the SOLA Monitoring and Evaluation Group.
		1.2.4	Engage with and support the ongoing delivery of the domestic and sexual abuse advocacy service (ASSIST NI).
		1.2.5	Ensure all staff have clear performance agreements, resources and appropriate training on victim care and safeguarding including the need to ensure that victims are not re-traumatised by any aspect of the investigation or prosecution process. Conduct an audit of PPB and SCU, including support staff, to assess any training needs.
		1.2.6	Continue engagement with joint Department of Justice (DOJ) / Department of Health (DOH) plans to scope and implement a Barnahus Model for child victims of sexual crime in Northern Ireland.
		1.2.7	Ensure that every eligible victim is offered Special Measures to assist them in providing their 'best evidence' at trial. In particular, the use of the Remote Evidence Centres will be monitored, reviewed and extended, in partnership with the DOJ.
		1.2.8	Develop a detailed guidance document on access to pre-trial therapy for victims, to include an explanation of why therapy may be beneficial to victims of serious sexual offences, how psychological trauma can impact victims of these crimes in particular and how this trauma may affect the way in which they present and give their evidence in a case. Seek input from Stakeholders on the content and tone of this guidance.

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
		1.2.9	Scope a new reporting framework which will seek to measure victims' experiences, based on whether victims: • Felt validated, listened to and treated with respect; • Understood what was happening throughout the criminal justice process; • Experienced clear and compassionate communication that reduced uncertainty and distress; • Were able to access appropriate specialist support when needed (legal and therapeutic); • Experienced improvements in understanding and wellbeing following referral to support services and • Felt their views and experiences informed service improvements.
	1.3 Prioritise our understanding and action on victim withdrawal.	1.3.1	Evaluate current arrangements for measuring victim attrition to ensure that the timing / reason for victim withdrawal or disengagement is captured in every case across both organisations.
		1.3.2	Scope live data capture for reasons for victim withdrawal or disengagement by end of year two.
	1.4 All communications with victims to be trauma-sensitive and accessible.	1.4.1	Ensure that all communication with victims will be signed by an identified point of contact and will be timely, clear, tailored to preference and need, and trauma-sensitive. All in-person meetings to take place in an accessible and convenient location for victims, with an option to meet online where that is the preferred course.
	1.5 Prioritise the handling of reviews and complaints.	1.5.1	Ensure that victims are aware of their entitlement to request a review of PPS decisions not to prosecute within one month of the decision being issued and that a senior prosecutor will perform a thorough review of the decision and thereafter will write to the victim with sufficient detail to enable them to feel well informed about the decision-making process.
		1.5.2	Both organisations should keep records of any complaints made and address these in an efficient and professional manner, identifying any process changes or training needs as they arise.

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
Outcome 2: Improving timeliness and quality We will progress cases as quickly as possible whilst prioritising exceptional case file quality.	2.1 Improve timeliness of investigation and prosecution.	2.1.1	Fully implement the Protocol for expediting cases involving serious sexual offences against children under the age of 13 ⁴ - to extend throughout the jurisdiction. Work with criminal justice partners to extend the Protocol further, to include cases involving serious sexual offences against children under the age of 16.
		2.1.2	Continue and expand the work of the SCU Advice Clinic model.
		2.1.3	PSNI to scope specialist digital forensic technology which can be dedicated to investigations in cases involving serious sexual offences, to ensure that cases are not unduly delayed for forensic analysis.
	2.2 Continuously deliver exceptional quality in investigation and prosecution.	2.2.1	PSNI to resource the Gateway review process to capacity so that cases are ready for a prosecution decision without the need to request additional material. ⁵
		2.2.2	Maintain a joint quality assurance and internal learning review process for cases involving serious sexual offences. Cases involving examples of good practice or learning will be highlighted at SCU Team meetings and RASSO Team Meetings and shared at Quarterly Strategy meetings between SCU and PPB.

⁴ To complete investigation within 28 days from complaint and make prosecution decision within 21 days of file submission.

⁵ Within Gateway, all serious sexual offences files are reviewed by a senior PSNI officer for quality and compliance before being submitted to the PPS where they are reviewed again by specialist PPS staff before allocation).

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
		2.2.3	Establish a link to the Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) Working Group. Funding has been secured for improvements in ABE suites across NI and training for specialist staff. Delivery to include: • Phased roll-out of improvements to ABE interviews across all police stations, including training of all staff; and • Procurement of technology to ensure victims are able to give their best evidence.
		2.2.4	Identify and embed a mechanism to consistently communicate staff absence across PPS and PSNI during investigation and trial. These plans will outline steps to be taken in the event of staff absences, including identifying backup personnel and redistributing workloads to maintain continuity and ensure consistency of service. This will be supported by PSNI regularly dip-sampling Occurrence Enquiry Logs (OELs) to ensure that they contain a full record of actions taken during the investigation.
	2.3 Continuously deliver exceptional quality in investigation and prosecution.	2.3.1	Review disclosure processes across PPS and PSNI including how disclosure decisions and applications are communicated to victims and how this aligns with our obligations under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Disclosure Management Documents (DMDs) will be completed in all cases involving serious sexual offences in compliance with Crown Court Practice Direction 02/2019 (as revised).

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
		2.3.2	Produce joint guidance on the disclosure of Third-Party material. Monitor the rollout of new Third Party disclosure forms (accounting for updated guidance from the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and monitor compliance in using these across PSNI and PPS.
		2.3.3	PPS to adopt the practices outlined in the revised Crown Court Practice Direction 2/2019 ⁶ for notifying victims where applications for Third Party material are made by the defence.
	2.4 Monitor Prosecution Rates.	2.4.1	Monitor prosecution rates in cases involving serious sexual offences.
Outcome 3: Demonstrating accountability and leadership We will seek opportunities to increase the visibility and public impact of our leadership teams in the response to serious sexual offences.	3.1 Demonstrating our leadership and accountability.	3.1.1	Establish a Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategic Oversight Board to ensure a governance and oversight framework for leadership on the actions and ambitions of this Strategy. This Strategic Oversight Board will meet bi-annually.
		3.1.2	Establish an Independent Consultation Group to meet bi-annually to include representatives from statutory organisations and voluntary groups in order to ensure that all victims receive the best possible support and encouragement to stay engaged in the criminal justice process. Particular attention will be given to ensuring participation which reflects the diversity of victims of sexual crime.
		3.1.3	Reinstate Quarterly Strategic Meetings between the Heads of the SCU and PPB.

⁶ Case Management in the Crown Court (Revised December 2025).

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
	3.2 Influencing the wider criminal justice system.	3.2.1	Engage with key stakeholders including the Departments of Justice, Health and Finance to advocate for adequate funding and support to be provided to both organisations.
		3.2.2	PPS to engage with the Judiciary and the Bar of Northern Ireland to embed best practice in prosecuting sexual offences at court.
		3.2.3	Scope the potential for establishing a Victims' Focus Group to assist both organisations in understanding the experience of victims of serious sexual crime.
		3.2.4	The PSNI will make data publicly available on the number of cases in which an officer is charged or reported for sexual offending and the outcomes of those cases.

Outcome	Priority Areas	Action ID	Action
Outcome 4: Developing our people We will expand and develop our workforce to ensure all our staff feel supported and empowered to deliver exceptional investigations and prosecutions.	4.1 Training and Personal Development.	4.1.1	Ensure all staff have access to a regular programme of training and personal development opportunities.
		4.1.2	Ensure that any new staff across both organisations receive mandatory training in trauma-sensitive practice with content tailored according to role and level of contact with victims. Training to be undertaken by recognised experts to enhance understanding of the impact that trauma has on victims of serious sexual crime.
		4.1.3	Establish an annual joint training event for PPB and the SCU to provide an opportunity for joint learning and closer teamworking amongst our organisations.
		4.1.4	A joint Training Evaluation Report will be completed annually to evaluate the quality and value of training delivered, with a focus on (a) attendance and completion rates; (b) achievement of learning outcomes, and; (c) evidence of change in practice following delivery.
	4.2 Supporting the well-being of all staff working on cases of serious sexual crime.	4.2.1	Identify the ongoing required capacity of PPB and SCU specialist units by collating information and measuring workloads.
		4.2.2	Prioritise staffing specialist PPB teams working on serious sexual offences and the SCU team to the agreed complement.
		4.2.3	Ensure staff have clear escalation routes available to raise concerns about the impact of specific cases or workload risks.
		4.2.4	Supervisors and line managers within both organisations to deliver regular key messages on the importance of well-being and remind staff of the available welfare services and resources provided within each organisation to ensure workforce health and resilience.

Governance and Accountability

As part of our commitment to accountability, we have set up a robust governance framework that will be responsible for leading the effective implementation of this Strategy and Action Plan.

We want to make this clear to the public, so that we can provide confidence that our commitment to achieving these actions in practice will continue beyond the publication of this document. The governance groups that are intended to support the implementation of this Strategy and Action Plan are outlined below.



Governance Group	Attendees	Purpose	Frequency
Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategic Oversight Board	Leadership from PSNI. Leadership from PPS.	To provide strategic direction To allocate resources To update the Working Together Board as required To ensure alignment with broader CJS strategies and policies	Bi-annual
Independent Consultation Group	Representatives from statutory and voluntary organisations	To consult with and to review progress with the wider CJS	Bi-annual
Outcomes Delivery Group	Staff from PSNI (PPB) and PPS (SCU and Policy & Information Unit)	To progress the actions under the Action Plan To identify clear timelines To identify roles and responsibilities To identify performance measures for monitoring and tracking progress To manage day to day implementation of the Strategy and Action Plan To provide reports to Strategic Oversight Board, as required	Monthly

Annex A: About our Organisations

The Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), established on 1 November 2001, is the principal investigative authority in Northern Ireland.

Our mission is to ensure the safety of the community by fostering a secure, confident, and peaceful Northern Ireland. We are dedicated to preventing crime, apprehending offenders, and protecting the most vulnerable members of society. Our vision encompasses being a visible, accessible, and responsive community-focused service that aligns with the needs of those we serve. We are committed to delivering a service that is caring, attentive, and proactive, working in collaboration with the public, our staff and our partners.

For the people of Northern Ireland, our Public Protection Branch (PPB) is tasked with investigating serious sexual offences. Formed in 2015, the PPB consolidated District Public Protection Units with the Rape Crime Unit, the Child Internet Protection Team, and the multi-agency team managing violent and sexual offenders under the Public Protection Arrangements for Northern Ireland (PPANI). The PPB is now a part of the Crime Department and is responsible for operational activities, partnership coordination, and policy and practice development. The Department is overseen at the Assistant Chief Constable (ACC) level, with operational responsibilities managed by a Senior Leadership Team consisting of a Detective Chief Superintendent, two Detective Superintendents, and five Detective Chief Inspectors.

PPB teams are aligned with Health and Social Care Trusts rather than Police and Council boundaries, promoting closer collaboration with Social Services teams and other statutory and non-statutory partners. There are several Public Protection Branch sites across Northern Ireland, including RASSO sites in Strandtown (Belfast), Ballymoney, and Mahon Road (Portadown).

The PSNI is committed to partnering with other safeguarding agencies and communities to provide appropriate support to victims and their families, protect the public, and investigate criminal offences. The welfare of victims remains our paramount concern, and all investigations are conducted with sensitivity, thoroughness, and professionalism.

For more information about PSNI's investigative approach and standards in addressing serious sexual offences, please visit: psni.police.uk - Sexual Violence and Abuse.

The Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) is the primary prosecuting authority in Northern Ireland. In addition to making decisions as to prosecution in all investigation files submitted by the police, the PPS also considers cases investigated by other statutory bodies, such as HM Revenue and Customs.

Established on 13 June 2005 by the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, the PPS is led by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). The PPS Management Board supports the DPP in steering the organisation. Chaired by the Director, the Board includes the

Deputy Director of Public Prosecutions, the two Senior Assistant Directors (SADs), and two independent non-executive members.

The PPS operates from four main locations: Belfast, Foyle, Newry, and a satellite office in Omagh. It is organised into eight legal sections, each overseen by an Assistant Director responsible for decision-making on investigation files and prosecuting cases within their jurisdiction. The legal sections are:

- Serious Crime Unit (SCU)
- Belfast Region
- Northern and Western Region (based in Foyle)
- Southern and Eastern Region (based in Newry)
- Central Casework
- High Court and International Section
- Fraud and Departmental Section

The Serious Crime Unit (SCU) focuses on serious sexual offences (which are the subject of this Strategy) along with other grave crimes, including murder, manslaughter, modern slavery, and human trafficking. Led by an Assistant Director, the SCU comprises a specialised team of Senior Public Prosecutors, Public Prosecutors, Administrative Support (including from the Victim and Witness Care Unit), with a co-located Detective Sergeant from the PSNI acting as the dedicated Police/PPS Liaison Officer. The SCU is based in PPS Headquarters in Belfast.

Decisions on cases involving serious sexual offences are made by Senior Public Prosecutors who are all experienced lawyers. Further information about the PPS, its decision-making processes, and how prosecutions are conducted can be found

in the PPS Code for Prosecutors. The PPS is committed to ensuring that everyone is treated with respect, and it acts in accordance with its role in delivering justice for all. Casework decisions are made independently, fairly, effectively, and with integrity to secure justice for victims, witnesses, defendants, and the public. The PPS operates without prejudice or improper influence from any source, with prosecutors acting in the interests of justice rather than solely to obtain convictions.

Annex B: How we Investigate and Prosecute Serious Sexual Offences

Detailed evidence is taken from the victim and any other witnesses with interviews conducted by trauma trained officers. A victim will be asked if they wish to provide a statement or prefer to complete an 'Achieving Best Evidence' video interview with trauma trained officers to ensure that their account is captured.

Further forensic evidence may be gathered from the victim. This may include Police accessing their phone records or other digital material, where this is relevant to the investigation.

1. Initial Report and Immediate Response:

Reporting

Victims can report sexual offences to the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) in person, by phone, or through third-party organisations. This can be reported

by the victim directly, or by somebody known to them. Please refer to Annex C for a list of support organisations who can help to support victims through each stage of the process.

Immediate Action

On receiving a report, PSNI will immediately make sure that the victim is safe. Once any immediate safety concerns have been addressed, medical attention will be provided, where needed, and there may be a specialist medical examination at this point. This will always be conducted with the victim's consent and with support from specially trained forensic medical examiners. A victim will then be offered further support through referral to specialist organisations who are dedicated to victim care and support.

2. Investigation:

Specialist Units

Investigations are led by teams of specially trained officers. They are experienced in investigating sexual offence cases.

Witness Statements and Evidence Gathering

Detailed statements are taken from the victim and any witnesses, with interviews conducted by trauma trained officers. A victim will be asked to provide an 'Achieving Best Evidence' video interview to ensure their account is captured. Further evidence, including forensic evidence, may be gathered from the victim, where this is relevant to the investigation.

Suspect Identification

Investigation teams will aim to identify the suspect as soon as possible, if not already known to the victim.

Enquiries may include gathering CCTV footage, collecting forensic evidence, and executing search warrants. The suspect will be interviewed as appropriate.

Pre-charge advice

The PSNI may, in some cases, contact specialist prosecutors within the SCU to seek prosecutorial advice.

3. Case Preparation

The PSNI submits a file of evidence to the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). The PPS then carefully considers the evidence and applies a two-part test. It first assesses whether there is a reasonable prospect of obtaining a conviction. Where that test is met, the prosecutor will then consider whether prosecution is in the public interest. In general terms, if there is sufficient evidence to provide a reasonable prospect of conviction, it will usually be in the public interest to prosecute. Further information about the Test for Prosecution can be found on the PPS website - www.ppsni.gov.uk.

Victim Liaison

Staff from the Victim and Witness Care Unit, and often investigating police and the prosecutor, will keep the victim informed about the progress of the case.

4. Prosecution:

The police may submit files to the PPS in one of two ways: (i) by charging a person, or (ii) by submitting a report on a person. Prosecutions are initiated or continued by the PPS

only where it is satisfied that the Test for Prosecution is met. The Test for Prosecution is met if: (i) the evidence which can be presented in court is sufficient to provide a reasonable prospect of conviction – the Evidential Test; and (ii) prosecution is required in the public interest – the Public Interest Test.

Pre-Trial Preparation

There may be a need to gather additional evidence, interview further witnesses, and consult with experts to ensure that the case is as strong as possible. Defence lawyers will prepare the defendant's case. The representatives of the defendant (the defence) will also conduct enquiries.

Support for Victims and Witnesses

Ongoing support at this stage of the process is available as set out in Annex C.

5. Trial:

Court Proceedings

Most cases involving serious sexual offences are prosecuted in the Crown Court and presided over by a Judge. The cases are presented by suitably qualified lawyers. Victims are entitled to seek 'Special Measures' such as giving evidence remotely via video link, including from a Remote Evidence Centre.

Jury Deliberation

The jury decides the verdict based on the evidence they have heard in court.

Sentencing

If the defendant is found guilty by the jury, the judge will impose a sentence on the basis of the gravity of the offences which may include imprisonment and sex offender registration.

Ongoing support is available to victims and witnesses throughout this process and after the trial is completed in order to continue to assist their recovery.

Overview of the Case Process



Annex C: Useful Contacts

PPS Victim and Witness Care Unit (VWCU)

VWCU Belfast

Telephone: 028 9026 4690
Textphone: 078 2511 8389
Email: vwcubelfast@ppsni.gov.uk

VWCU Foyle

Telephone: 028 7134 0632
Textphone: 078 2511 8416
Email: vwcufoyle@ppsni.gov.uk

Police Service of Northern Ireland

Telephone: 028 9065 0222 or 0845 600 800

(This is a central exchange and you should ask for the officer in your case by name and station)

Support Organisations

Victim Support NI (VSNI)

Telephone: 028 9024 3133 (Belfast Office)
Telephone 028 7137 0086 (Foyle Office)
Email: info@victimsupportni.org.uk

You can contact your local **VSNI Witness Service** on the numbers below:

- Belfast (Laganside) - 028 9023 2523
- Antrim (Antrim, Ballymena, Magherafelt) - 028 9448 8631
- Craigavon (Craigavon, Armagh, Lisburn) - 028 3834 3553
- Downpatrick (Ards, Downpatrick, Newry) - 028 4461 6233
- Dungannon (Dungannon, Omagh, Enniskillen) - 028 8775 1550
- Foyle (Londonderry, Limavady, Coleraine, Strabane) - 028 7127 9440

NSPCC Young Witness Service

Telephone: 028 9344 1947
Email: niyws@nspcc.org.uk

Women's Aid Federation NI

Telephone: 028 9024 9041
Email: info@womensaidni.org

Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline

Telephone: 0808 802 1414
Email: help@dsahelpline.org
Website: www.dsahelpline.org

Nexus NI

Counselling service primarily focused on enabling positive change for those impacted by sexual abuse and abusive relationships.

Telephone: 028 9032 6803
Email: info@nexusni.org
Website: https://nexusni.org

ASSIST NI

Domestic and Sexual Abuse Advocacy Service
c/o 30 Adelaide Park, Belfast BT9 6FY
Email: info@assistni.org.uk
Website: www.assistni.org.uk

The Rainbow Project

Telephone: 028 9031 9030
Email: info@rainbow-project.org

The Men's Advisory Project

Telephone: 028 9024 1929 (Belfast)
Telephone: 028 7116 0001 (Foyle)
Email: info@mapni.co.uk



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