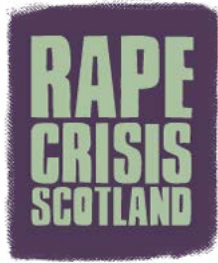


# Survivor Reference Group

Police Responses  
in Scotland Report

**RAPE  
CRISIS  
SCOTLAND**



Rape Crisis Scotland is the national office for the Rape Crisis movement in Scotland, working to end sexual violence.

**We work to:**

- increase public awareness and understanding of sexual violence,
- improve responses for survivors of sexual violence across Scotland,
- support the delivery of high quality, specialist services for survivors of sexual violence
- improve justice responses to sexual crime.

---

If you have been affected by sexual violence  
our helpline is open every day from 6pm - midnight  
on **08088 01 03 02.**

**You are not alone.**

## INTRODUCTION

The Survivor Reference Group is a group of survivors of rape and sexual violence from across Scotland who have engaged with the Scottish Justice System to a degree, from initial police reports that went no further, right through to prosecutions.

Many of these survivors feel let down by the Justice System in Scotland and have come together to advocate for change. There is much that can be learned from their experiences and voices, and we ask that those with power and influence choose to listen, and act.

This report on Police responses in Scotland has been collated from meetings and written evidence from survivors and is intended to shed a light on the experiences of survivors reporting sexual crimes. Police responses are recognised as a significant factor not just in survivors' experience of the justice process – regardless of whether the case reaches court and the verdict – but in their ability to come to terms with what has happened and seek further support. It is also evident that there is a troubling inconsistency in Police response in Scotland that has to be addressed.

The recommendations contained at the end of this report are endorsed by Rape Crisis Scotland and – if implemented – could radically improve the landscape of seeking justice for survivors of rape, sexual assault and abuse in Scotland.

## COMMUNICATION:

Communication was broadly recognised as being fundamental to a survivor's experience of the Police. Good and trauma informed communication – irrespective of any outcome – left survivors feeling heard, believed and supported. Poor and unreliable communication compounded the trauma and had a severe impact on the mental health of survivors, feelings of safety and their faith in the process.

Survivors recognise the role of the Police in seeking evidence and do not expect them to act as a support service or personal champion. This is not incompatible with being treated with compassion and dignity, information being explained clearly and consistently and for any responder to have a basic understanding of trauma and how this is manifested.

Survivors were keen to highlight that it is not simply what is said, but how it is said that leaves a lasting impression and it is notable that many survivors were able to easily recall specific phrases and words that had been said to them, and the impact of these:

*'When I had my SOLO appointment and the woman said to me "I wouldn't normally do this but can we kind of wrap up the now because I need to go and collect my kids" ...Her reason for saying this was "Well, I don't want to have to come back another time, we're almost finished" but that really shouldn't matter... [I felt] very rushed, and that's not something you want to be feeling when you are struggling with quite a difficult thing to do.'*

*'I remember one comment he made in terms of the evidence I gave him. I remember he told me it was the most horrific evidence he had ever seen in his career. He was like "I've been doing this for 7 years". I think he meant like in terms of its strength but again little comments like that didn't make me feel the best.'*

Reporting any kind of sexual crime is a very difficult and daunting decision. Survivors described feeling very vulnerable, and Police occupy a position of significant power. Even comments that are likely not intended to be as such are easily perceived as being flippant and careless.

Where there was good communication, this was often in the form of one particular officer that clearly understood and had been trained in sexual violence and trauma-informed practice.

### Survivors with good experiences valued:

- Being connected with further support, including Rape Crisis support
- Information – even difficult information – being explained clearly
- Responders being accessible for further questions or comment and this not being portrayed as burdensome
- A personable approach where survivors felt seen as a whole person, and not simply a victim
- Being believed and encouraged, without overpromising and within professional boundaries

## ATTITUDES:

Though they are often intertwined, we have made a distinction within this report between communication and attitudes, the former is perhaps slightly easier to address through rigorous training on trauma-informed communication, and strong leadership. The latter requires significant and systematic culture change. That it is more difficult to address only makes it more urgent.

Multiple reports have now shown that there are problematic attitudes held by Police, as these are deeply embedded in broader culture too. We have heard from survivors whose experiences have been dismissed as ‘cultural issues’ or have struggled to report to the police due to language barriers. Racist, sexist, ableist and prejudicial attitudes hinder justice and damage faith in the justice system, preventing minoritised and marginalised women in particular from being given fair and equal access to pursue criminal justice.

Oftentimes communication was poor due to perceived lack of resources, care and understanding. However, at times this was Police officers’ own attitudes around rape and sexual violence influenced how they engaged with survivors and decisions that were made. Survivors were frequently responded to awkwardly and sensed that people ‘didn’t know what to do with them’.

Survivors often found the experience of reporting isolating and were frequently made to feel as though they had done something wrong.

Sometimes this was implicit – and on one occasion a survivor was explicitly told she’d done the wrong thing by accepting a drink of water from people who found her after she had been attacked. This is deeply unhelpful.

Multiple survivors of non-recent childhood sexual abuse spoke of feeling fear that their cases would not be taken seriously because of attitudes presented by officers, including being told that ‘nothing is going to happen anyway, there’s no evidence’. A dismissiveness towards non-recent abuse also manifested in a lack of support for survivors, their trauma was not seen as being present because their experience was not recent. The challenges of reporting non-recent abuse – amplified by the victim-survivor oftentimes knowing or being related to the perpetrator – should not be underestimated.

Informal and unhelpful comments were rife, including survivors being told positive impressions of the perpetrator and overt disbelief, or survivors being told that they had consented. These attitudes whether covert or overt are deeply damaging. They compound the trauma that survivors have already experienced, magnify feelings of injustice; survivors were keen to emphasise that many of these comments and judgements stayed with them for years after their last interaction with Police:

*‘I was told “you weren’t raped, it was consensual” by the DI who made the decision to drop the case. Any further interaction I had with them kind of questioning the decision, it has been quite aggressive from them.’*

*'I was a bit confused at the time saying, "I think I've been raped but I don't remember" and what she said to me that I'll never forget, "I don't understand. How you can think that you've been raped but you don't remember, it doesn't make any sense" ... They couldn't make sense of my story and they were making it really obvious.'*

*'I can put on quite a good front, I can be quite a laugh and I can be quite professional about stuff. I think he really struggled to realise that actually in all of this, I was kind of talking about my dad and it was really difficult. There was kind of a standing joke if I phoned, you could hear him in the background going "I wonder how long it will take me to make her cry" ...I tried to make light of it, but it became that I couldn't speak to him.'*

Whether this is carelessness or prejudice is in many cases difficult to establish or evidence, but what is clear is that problematic behaviours by Police were present in many survivors' accounts of interactions, and firm leadership is required to put an end to it.

*...I tried to make light of it, but it became that I couldn't speak to him.*

## PROCESS:

The vast majority of survivors who report sexual crimes have not done so before. The system is alien, and they – like most of us – are unfamiliar with what can often be a complex process. Trauma impacts our ability to connect with and process information, which makes navigating this system more challenging. Many of the challenges experienced with the process can be mitigated with compassionate and consistent communication, but there are some procedural elements that could be improved to improve experiences across the board.

## Evidence gathering

Several survivors voiced concerns that all available evidence was not gathered/looked into sufficiently – including one survivor whose perpetrator was not even questioned. In instances where survivor's homes had to be searched, multiple survivors reported this as being very difficult. They were not informed what was being taken and why, at what point they could return to their homes and when their belongings would be brought back to them.

In some instances this was a battle that continued post court, with belongings including mobile phones being misplaced or kept for longer than possibly necessary. Survivors returning to their homes post-search spoke of being unprepared for how much had been moved and/or taken. Though evidence gathering is clearly necessary, Police should be reminded that this is invasive and like a significant violation at a point where someone is vulnerable. Care and good communication could

better prepare survivors for this part of the process, rather than a clinical and unfeeling approach.

*'They need to be sensitive to that because they are going in and they're touching your stuff, they're taking your stuff and you've already had something taken from you in the biggest possible way...They have to sit and talk to you and say this is what we're doing and explain, just try and make that response a wee bit easier.'*

### Support and the environment

The opportunity for some kind of support was not consistently offered – whether friends, family members or Rape Crisis advocacy support – but where it was it made a real difference. Some survivors were expressly told that this was not permitted – although others were able to have someone with them – and at various points in the process survivors described feeling abandoned often in unfeeling, grey, cold environments, with no-one looking out for them:

*'It was probably the most depressing room I've ever sat in my life because it was just, it wasn't obviously a jail cell, but it felt like that because it was so grey and horrible. She sat there and started asking me all these questions and I felt like I was being interrogated.'*

### Statement giving

Lots of survivors emphasised how difficult statement giving was – the length of time it took, feeling as though they were being cross examined whilst often in quite traumatised states. In one instance a survivor was required to give 7 statements, the final one lasting for 8 hours without a break. In giving their statements many survivors would have valued the opportunity to have someone sitting with them, even if in silence. Some survivors described feeling still drunk or hungover, or in a state of considerable distress at the time of giving the statement without being given adequate breaks and time to rest. To then have to recall and rely on a statement produced in these circumstances – often years later in court – is extremely challenging, particularly when in many cases survivors only have access to their statement the morning of the case reaching court.

The experience of survivors interacting with Police cannot be separated from the broader culture that we are living in. Context is important and we exist in a culture that routinely disbelieves survivors and blames and questions the decisions they made surrounding the assault, rather than placing the responsibility where it lies, with the perpetrator(s). This means that when survivors engage with Police and are asked questions such as what were you wearing and how much had you had to drink, they understandably feel as though they are being blamed in some way. Where Police were able to spend time explaining that these are necessary evidential questions, rather than inferences of blame, survivors were better able to engage with the process.

*'[The police should] make sure that the person has the capacity for the statement to be taken because I had to change my statement, and I felt as though they were going to think that I was a liar. Because I was so drunk, so I spoke to the police when they first came in, I don't even remember what I said to them. Then I had to go and do another statement, then I had to add something else later on.'*

### Single point of contact

Great difficulty was experienced by survivors in trying to establish who to contact, and when. Far too often survivors described feeling burdened with having to chase information from multiple different sources, repeat themselves including personal and traumatic experiences, feeling actively disbelieved and as though they were an inconvenience.

Updates were almost never given proactively by Police – which would have been welcome – and too many survivors were left in the position of having to repeat their experience to multiple different people at various different stages, in many locations. The process experienced was not streamlined – with Police officers even turning up unexpectedly at the workplace of one survivor after a period of no contact.

One survivor who had a relatively positive experience with the Police described the consistency of communication – including being updated where there was no significant update – as helpful. This stopped her from feeling as though she needed to chase and be actively pursuing updates, and she felt as though Police took ownership and were invested in her case.

*'The officers that have dealt with me throughout up there, they have been really amazing...They were happy to meet up with me so that I could put a face to the people I was talking to... The first time that I had any contact at all, a female officer phoned me and said, "I've watched your video evidence, I just wanted to say that was brave". And I just remembered being like "Whoa that's amazing. I was expecting you to say that's a load of rubbish, we don't believe you, and we are dropping the case" ...They were so encouraging...They took ownership which was really nice because it kind of shared that burden.'*

People who have made the difficult decision to report sexual violence should never be made to feel as though they are a nuisance, or a number. The introduction of a single point of contact SOLO officer has made a difference for many survivors, but it is clear from the evidence presented by survivors that application of this across Scotland is patchy.



## RECOMMENDATIONS:

- Trauma-informed communication training for Police Scotland staff at every level, featuring the voices and experiences of survivors
- Urgent work to address widely held problematic attitudes around sexual violence across Police Scotland, including establishing an evaluative framework to monitor these over time
- Clear guidance for survivors on the process of evidence gathering and retention, with greater transparency and accountability
- A consistent, named single point of contact for all survivors reporting any form of sexual violence throughout Scotland
- Early referrals to Rape Crisis support and advocacy services and consideration to the space that survivors are required to enter
- Further use of video statements to reduce time and trauma involved in giving evidence
- Police Scotland to commit to show leadership in providing a clear, consistent, compassionate response to all survivors of sexual violence

## CONCLUSION:

Reporting sexual crimes will never be easy, but it does not have to be this hard.

It is clear that for survivors the response they receive from Police, both in terms of the immediate response and throughout the process has a considerable impact not just in terms of their ability to engage with the justice process, but on their ability to access further support, and on coming to terms with what they have been through.

Many of the survivors involved in this report contributed because they believe that a poor police response is deeply harmful, but not inevitable, and because they are committed to using their own experiences to improve the landscape for survivors in the future. The comments and experiences contained in this report are intended to highlight areas of poor practice, but also to be constructive and indicate priorities for action.

Scotland is a country that values compassion, fairness and justice, and yet too often survivors of sexual violence are let down by individuals and institutions that are supposed to protect all of us. This is not inevitable, and we hope that this report will support those with the power to act to create the change that we all want to see.





Rape Crisis Scotland

1st floor, Abbey House  
10 Bothwell Street  
Glasgow  
G2 6LU

T: 0141 331 4180

E: [info@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk](mailto:info@rapecrisisscotland.org.uk)

Rape Crisis Scotland is a charitable  
company limited by guarantee.  
Registered in Scotland No 258568 at  
1st floor, Abbey House, 10 Bothwell Street,  
Glasgow G2 6LU

Recognised by the Inland Revenue as a  
Scottish Charity No SC025642