

Government launches new national Legal Advisors service for rape victims and expands Operation Soteria into the courtroom

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Rape victims will have access to dedicated legal advice throughout the criminal justice process, while new project will look at shifting the focus of rape court cases from the victim to the perpetrator.

- Operation Soteria to be delivered in courtrooms, ensuring rape cases focus on suspects not victims.
- New national Independent Legal Advisor service for rape victims to be launched later this year, fulfilling manifesto commitment.
- New data shows structural reforms to leave Crown Court backlog 84,000 cases lower in 2035, compared to investment and efficiencies alone.
- Part of Government's plan to deliver fairer and faster justice for victims and tackle violence against women and girls.

Rape victims will soon have access to dedicated legal advice throughout the criminal justice process as the Deputy Prime Minister today (Tuesday 10 March) announces a new national Independent Legal Advisor (ILA) service, while expanding the principles of Operation Soteria into the courtroom.

Operation Soteria - launched in 2021 - has already transformed how police and prosecutors investigate rape by placing the suspect's behaviour at the centre of cases rather than spotlighting the victims themselves. It did this through prioritising evidence about a suspect's behaviour and patterns, and only seeking victims' personal records where they are likely to hold substantial probative value.

The Government will now build on those reforms by ensuring the same approach is reflected when cases reach court. The Deputy Prime Minister has commissioned academic Professor Katrin Hohl to examine where courtroom practice can still place disproportionate scrutiny on victims and recommend improvements in training, guidance and best practice so that trials focus on the behaviour of the suspect.

The new Independent Legal Advisor service, backed by initial funding of £6 million over two years, will provide rape victims with specialist legal advice throughout investigations and prosecutions.

Independent Legal Advisors will help victims understand their rights and challenge unnecessary requests for personal information such as counselling records, medical history or mobile phone data.

The national service delivers a key manifesto commitment and builds on previous pilots, ensuring victims across England and Wales can access independent legal advice during the most complex stages of the justice process.

Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy said:

For too long victims of rape have faced not only the trauma of the crime but the trauma of a justice process that can feel like it is judging them instead of pursuing the perpetrator.

Operation Soteria has already changed how rape cases are investigated by putting the focus where it belongs - on the suspect. By introducing Independent Legal Advisors and expanding the principles of Operation Soteria into the courtroom, we are making sure victims have both the protection and support they deserve throughout the justice process.

Alongside our reforms of the Courts system through the Courts and Tribunals Bill, we are rebalancing the system to put victims first.

Today's announcement comes as the Courts and Tribunals Bill reaches Second Reading in the House of Commons, a key milestone in the Government's plan to repair the justice system and deliver swifter justice for victims.

New data published today shows that even with efficiencies and running the system at maximum the backlog in the Crown Court would hit 133,000 by 2035.

In contrast, the Government's package of investment, efficiencies and structural reform is projected to reduce the backlog to around 49,000 cases by 2035, ensuring victims are not left waiting years for justice.

Ahead of Second Reading of the Courts and Tribunals Bill, The Deputy Prime Minister said:

Even with investment and five percent efficiency gains this parliament, rising to 10 percent efficiency gains in the next parliament, the backlog is projected to hit 133,000 by 2035. It is only if we add in our package of reforms that projections go down to 49,000 by 2035.

The choice for parliamentarians is clear. Support our Bill so that 84,000 fewer lives are on hold by 2035. Ensure victims get the swift and fair justice they deserve.

The Bill introduces a range of pragmatic reforms to modernise the justice system, including:

- New Swift Courts, where cases with a likely sentence of three years or less will be heard by a judge alone
- Giving courts the power to determine where cases are heard, preventing defendants from gaming the system
- Retaining jury trials for the most serious offences, including rape, murder, aggravated burglary and grievous bodily harm
- Judge-only trials for particularly complex fraud and financial offences
- Increasing magistrates' sentencing powers to 18 months, freeing up Crown Court capacity for the most serious cases

These measures form part of the Government's wider plan to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, ensuring victims receive the justice and protection they deserve.

This Government is investing over £1 billion as part of its mission to fight violence against women

and girls, with £550 million for victims' services, including yearly funding increases, and another £499 million for safe housing for victims of abuse over next 3 years.

Katrin Hohl, Professor of Criminology & Criminal Justice at City, University of London and Independent Advisor to the UK government on Criminal Justice Responses to Sexual Violence, said:

Operation Soteria has transformed the police and CPS approach to rape cases using the principles of suspect-focused, victim-centred and context-led investigations. This pilot study will examine how we can carry these principles all the way through to the courtroom.

I am grateful to the Ministry of Justice for funding this pilot study. Improving rape justice requires the whole criminal justice system to work together, and this is an important step towards making that a reality.

Siobhan Blake, national lead for rape and serious sexual offences at the Crown Prosecution Service, said:

No victim should ever feel as though they are the ones on trial.

In 2023, following Operation Soteria, we overhauled how we prosecute rape cases – working closely with police from the beginning to make sure investigations focus on a suspect's actions rather than scrutinising victims.

Our specialist prosecutors are trained in how to dismantle harmful assumptions and misconceptions about how a victim 'should' behave and challenge these head-on in the courtroom.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-new-national-legal-advisors-service-for-rape-victims-and-expands-operation-soteria-into-the-courtroom>