

WORDS MATTER REPORTING GUIDELINES

Guidelines for reporting on male violence against women and girls

FOREWORD

The Words Matter reporting guidelines have been created in collaboration with Gloucestershire Constabulary, Gloucestershire's Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and This Ends Now.

These guidelines aim to initiate a significant change in language for police communicators reporting on instances of male violence against women and girls in order to reduce victim blaming and misogyny.

These crimes are committed primarily, but not exclusively, by men and boys against women and girls, and victim blaming language contributes to a culture which normalises this.

Therefore, it is important to accurately report on incidents within the context of a society where male violence against women and girls is prevalent.

A shift in language can help amplify the voices of victims and survivors, place responsibility on the perpetrator, and improve accuracy in reporting by naming the crime.



**Gloucestershire
Constabulary**



OPCC
Office of the Police &
Crime Commissioner
for Gloucestershire



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TOP TIPS

1

AVOID VICTIM BLAMING

Ensure all communications are free from victim blaming language. Victim blaming is when the responsibility for the crime is put on the victim, rather than the offender who chose to commit an offence.

USE THE ACTIVE VOICE

Always describe incidents by using the active voice to focus on the perpetrator's actions. For example, write "a man raped a woman", rather than "a woman was raped by a man". The active voice holds the perpetrator accountable for their actions and avoids shifting blame to the victim/survivor, who did not have a choice.

NAME THE CRIME

Clearly identify the crime which has been reported in all communications to ensure accuracy and in order not to sanitise offences. For example, an incident reported as rape, should be described as such, rather than a serious sexual assault.

AVOID VICTIM BLAMING

Ensure all communications are free from victim blaming language. Victim blaming is when the responsibility for the crime is put on the victim, rather than the offender who choose to commit an offence.

The wording 'victim/survivor' has been used throughout these guidelines as some people identify as a victim, while others as a survivor. For more on this see [Victim or survivor?](#) on page 8.

Focus on the perpetrator's actions (see [Use the active voice](#) on page 7) and avoid unnecessary details about the victim/survivor's behaviour, clothing or location that could inadvertently shift blame away from the perpetrator.

Victim blaming language can be subtle and is often used unconsciously. Details about a victim/survivor's level of intoxication, what they were wearing, or whether they were in an area known for crime should not be included, as this implies that they hold some form of responsibility.

Geographical information, such as a road name, town, or name of an establishment can be used when necessary for context or witness appeals. However, be cautious with details that might suggest the victim/survivor was at fault.

Avoid using details, such as the victim/survivor's profession, vulnerabilities or personal characteristics, as this can unintentionally lead to victim blaming.

Ensure information is presented in a way which does not imply blame, and instead focus on the perpetrator's actions and the crime.

USE THE ACTIVE VOICE

Always describe incidents by using the active voice to focus on the perpetrator's actions. For example, write "a man raped a woman", rather than "a woman was raped by a man". The active voice holds the perpetrator accountable for their actions and avoids shifting blame to the victim/survivor, who did not have a choice.

The way we use language unconsciously keeps attention off the issue of male violence against women and girls. To combat this, avoid phrases which make the perpetrator seem invisible. Depictions of violence that obscure the role of the perpetrator perpetuate problematic views of women as passive victims of crimes.

The media often use police press releases as a basis for writing their articles, and therefore it is vital that all headings, subheadings and the body of the press release are written in the active voice.

NAME THE CRIME

Clearly identify the crime which has been reported in all communications to ensure accuracy and in order not to sanitise offences. For example, an incident reported as rape, should be described as such, rather than a serious sexual assault.

In line with the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (2017), the only exception to this approach should be when it is deemed necessary to safeguard a vulnerable person (for example, if they have mental health vulnerabilities), to protect a victim's interests (for example, considering the victim/survivor's request) or as an investigative tactic.

In these circumstances, the decision to use a different term, such as a serious sexual assault, must be carefully considered by the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) after consultation with the External Communications Team. The SIO should record the rationale behind any decision not to use the accurate term.

When writing communications about incidents that may be difficult to describe, include as much information as possible to provide context, rather than trying to define it by a specific overarching term. If you are uncertain about how to label an incident, first state what the offence was and/or what the perpetrator would be or has been arrested on suspicion of, and then explain what was reported to have taken place. Remember to use the active voice to avoid victim blaming.

2

VICTIM OR SURVIVOR?

In police communications, a complainant in a crime will predominantly be referred to as a victim. This will generally be the case for witness appeals.

However, the word survivor has been widely used to describe victims of male violence against women, as it can be used as a term of empowerment.

Once a case has been proven in court, communicators should ask the individual how they would prefer to be referred to within a press release. This may be as a victim, survivor, or another term which they find empowering.

If you are unsure or you are speaking in general terms, you can use 'victim/survivor'.

There are legal protections for victims of sexual offences which entitle them to lifelong anonymity under the Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act 1992.

This protection also applies to victims of female genital mutilation, human trafficking and modern slavery. This anonymity stays in place regardless of whether an allegation is withdrawn, no further police action is taken or the accused is acquitted.

Victims/survivors can waive their right to anonymity if aged over 16 without requiring consent from the court. This must be provided to police communicators and/or reporters in writing.

Working with victims/survivors, either anonymously or named, can be a powerful way to encourage others to come forward and report a crime or seek support. For post-conviction reports, use victim personal statements where possible or ask for a statement to be provided for a press release in order to give victims/survivors a voice within your communications.

3

WRITING ABOUT CRIMES

WITH ADULT VICTIMS/SURVIVORS DOMESTIC ABUSE

Always use the term 'domestic abuse' instead of 'domestic violence', as not all domestic abuse is physical. Domestic abuse can encompass, but is not limited to, incidents of controlling and coercive behaviour, and psychological, physical, economic, emotional and sexual abuse.

When describing the crime, do not refer to domestic abuse as a domestic or a domestic dispute, as these terms frame the incident as a private family problem, rather than a serious crime.

Use the terms abusive partner or living with an abusive partner, instead of an abusive or toxic relationship. The latter terms shift focus away from the abuser and imply that both parties are equally responsible for the abuse.

Domestic abuse is about power and control exerted by the perpetrator, and this should be clearly recognised in communications.

Never use qualifiers such as an 'on-again-off-again relationship' to describe the relationship in question, as this can lead to victim blaming by implying the victim/survivor is complicit in the abusive situation.

If children are present during the crime, write in communications that they have been impacted by, or exposed to domestic abuse, rather than simply witnessing it. The effects of domestic abuse can be traumatic and long-lasting.

In cases of domestic abuse, the victim/survivor must be personally connected to the perpetrator. For example, when they are or have been in an intimate relationship, are cohabiting, engaged, married, civil partners, have had or have a parental relationship to a child, or they are relatives. Only include the connection between the perpetrator and victim/survivor when it is necessary or there is a purpose to do so. Consider only providing this level of information post-conviction with consent from the victim/survivor.

Although victims/survivors of non-sexual offences are not protected by law with anonymity, do not release information which could identify them without their consent.

SEXUAL ASSAULT

Sexual assault is when one person intentionally touches another person sexually without their consent. The touching can be done with any part of the body or with an object.

When you are reporting on an incident of sexual assault, it is important to always refer to the incident as sexual assault. Refrain from using phrases such as sexually touched, as this implies consent was given.

Consider using the term without consent in the body of a press release. For example, if a man kissed a woman without her consent and you are appealing for witnesses, in communications refer to this as a sexual assault first. Then provide more context and state how it was reported that a man kissed a woman without her consent.

Consent is defined in the Sexual Offences Act 2003 as someone engaging in sexual activity if they agree by choice and they have the freedom and capacity to make that choice. If consent is given, it can be withdrawn at any time.

Avoid euphemisms or terms such as unwanted advance or sexually propositioned, as this language can downplay the severity of the crime. See more information in the [Name the crime](#) and the [Use the active voice](#) on page 7.

RAPE

Always refer to an incident of rape as rape, rather than a serious sexual assault.

In line with the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (2017), the only exception to this approach should be when it is deemed necessary to safeguard a vulnerable person (for example, if they have mental health vulnerabilities), to protect a victim's interests (for example, considering the victim/survivor's request) or as an investigative tactic.

In these circumstances, the decision to use a different term, such as a serious sexual assault, must be carefully considered by the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) after consultation with the External Communications Team. The SIO should record the rationale behind any decision not to use the accurate term.

Publicising guilty outcomes and sentences for rape and sexual assault can be an opportunity to encourage other victims/survivors to come forward. Therefore it is important that these incidents are reported on accurately and avoid victim blaming narratives. See section on [Avoid victim blaming](#) on page 6 for more information.

When writing a court report, there may be an opportunity to establish through the investigating officer whether the victim would like to be referred to as a victim, survivor, or another empowering term of their choice. See section on [Victim or Survivor?](#) on page 8 for more information.

In all communications, signpost to local support services that are available and where victims/survivors can report incidents to police or other organisations.

MULTIPLE PERPETRATOR RAPE

If more than one man rapes a victim/survivor, do not refer to this as gang rape. This term is inappropriate as it may sensationalise the crime and may have racial connotations. Instead, state how it has been reported that more than one man raped the victim/survivor(s), that it was a multiple perpetrator rape, or state the number of perpetrators involved.

STRANGER RAPE

A stranger rape is a rape which involves people who are not known to each other. Do not use the term 'stranger rape' in external communications. Instead, describe the incident as a rape involving people who are not known to each other.

For external communications, clearly define an incident as rape by someone unknown at the earliest opportunity for the community to be aware of the potential safety risk.

Statistically, the majority of rape offences are committed by a man who is known to the victim/survivor. Therefore, when reporting on an incident of rape perpetrated by someone who is unknown to the victim/survivor, consider stating that it is uncommon in order to help dispel this common and harmful rape myth that rape by a person unknown to the victim is more common.

DOMESTIC HOMICIDE

When writing communications on a domestic homicide, do not report on this in a way which compromises the dignity of the deceased. When writing statements for press releases on behalf of officers, avoid language which refers to the murder as a tragedy or horror, as this is passive reporting and does not accurately reflect the fact a perpetrator chose to commit the crime. See [Dignity for Dead Women guidelines](#), produced by Level Up, in [Appendix D](#) on page 36 for more on this.

During the early stages of an investigation, consider using the phrase that the suspect and victim were known to each other. This can be used to explain to the public and media that the incident did not involve strangers, but be wary about providing further details prior to conviction, as any history of abuse may not yet be known.

Do not include information about the perpetrator's character or any sensationalising language. Stating their profession may imply respectability or community standing, potentially generating sympathy for the perpetrator. These details can shift the focus away from the crime itself and lead to problematic narratives in the media which attempt to rationalise or excuse the perpetrator's actions.

The only personal details about the perpetrator that should be released at charge and post-conviction are their name, age and address. See [Referencing the perpetrator's profession/occupation](#) on page 26 for more on this.

Remember to use the active voice to place responsibility on the perpetrator for their actions. See [Use the active voice](#) on page 7 for more on this.

FAMILICIDE

Familicide is the murder of one or more members of a person's own family.

Communications must use language that accurately reflects the incident and the gravity of the crime. In the case of a suspected murder-suicide, avoid referencing the perpetrator's character or any sensationalising language. Stating their profession may imply respectability or community standing, potentially generating sympathy for the suspect. These details can shift the focus away from the crime itself and lead to problematic narratives in the media which attempt to rationalise or excuse the perpetrator's actions.

The only personal details about the defendant that should be released at charge and post-conviction are their name, age and address. See [Referencing the perpetrator's profession/occupation](#) on page 26 for more on this.

Avoid suggestions that the family dynamic was problematic. Framing the family as troubled can imply that the victims/survivors were somehow responsible for the crime or that the perpetrator was driven to act in this way. This not only diminishes the severity of the crime, but also perpetuates harmful victim blaming narratives.

If reporting on prior allegations or convictions of domestic abuse, ensure that the information is factual and does not excuse the perpetrator's actions. See [Domestic abuse](#) on page 9 for more on this.

Communications should focus on the accountability of the perpetrator only, and be written using the active voice. See [Use the active voice](#) on page 7 for more on this.

COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Commercial sexual exploitation is a form of violence against women and girls. When writing about this, the focus should always be on those who choose to abuse women in this way, rather than the victim/survivor.

Do not use the term sex trafficking, instead use human trafficking for sexual exploitation or commercial sexual exploitation. This more accurately describes the arrangement, facilitation, or travel of persons for the purposes of sexual exploitation.

The term sex trafficking removes the human element and is often inaccurately used to describe any travel or movement of people who sell sex or sexual services.

Where possible, avoid describing the victim/survivor by reference to their involvement in commercial sexual exploitation, as this can lead to victim blaming. See section on [Avoid victim blaming](#) on page 6 for more information.

PUBLIC SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Public sexual harassment refers to any unwelcomed and unwanted attention, sexual advances or intimidating behaviour that occurs in public spaces.

The government's Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, published in July 2021, identified that sexual harassment in public places is all too common. In the past, public sexual harassment has been captured by a number of offences, including the Protection from Harassment Act 1997, the Public Order Act 1986 and the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

The Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023 will make intentional harassment, alarm or distress on account of sex a specific offence. Under this new law, a person is guilty of an offence if they intentionally harass, alarm, or distress another person, and this conduct is motivated by the victim's sex (or presumed sex). This offence could see perpetrators face a custodial sentence of up to two years.

Public sexual harassment can include, but is not limited to, sexualised or obscene comments, unwanted whistling or gesturing, pressing against someone in a sexual way on public transport and persistent staring.

In communications always use the term public sexual harassment to describe these incidents. Using this wording ensures that the focus remains on the unlawful and harmful nature of the conduct, rather than diminishing its impact through colloquial language.*

Details about the incident can then be included in the body of the press release in order to provide context. However, it is important to use caution when referring to colloquial terms such as catcalling and wolf whistling, as this can trivialise the seriousness of the crime.

Consider describing incidents as unwanted, followed by the act itself. For example, you could say unwanted sexualised comments had been made.

Do not include details that could imply the victim/survivor was responsible for the harassment, such as their clothing, behaviour or presence in a public space. The focus should be on the actions of the perpetrator, who chose to commit the crime. See section on [Victim or Survivor?](#) on page 8 for more information.

**We have yet to see how this offence will be charged in practice. If a different term is used in open court, consider using this term instead.*

WITH CHILD VICTIMS/SURVIVORS

CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

The age at which individuals can legally consent to sex and/or sexual activity, also known as the age of consent, is 16. This is the same regardless of the person's gender identity, sexual identity and whether the sexual activity is between people of the same or different genders.

There are several different offences categorised by age groups in relation to child rape and sexual abuse. Regardless of the offence wording, sexual activity with a child, causing a child to watch a sexual act or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity is child sexual abuse.

Do not refer to rape or sexual activity with a child in a way which implies consent, for example, writing "man had sex with a 14-year-old". Instead, use the offence wording and refer to it as child sexual abuse. See [Name the crime](#) on page 7 for more on this.

When the perpetrator is in a position of trust, such as a school teacher, be mindful to not use language which sensationalises the crime. Use the offence wording, sexual activity with a child or causing or inciting a child to engage in sexual activity whilst in a position of trust, and refer to it as child sexual abuse. Use the active voice and state the perpetrator sexually abused the child, rather than had sex with them. See [Use the active voice](#) on page 7 for more on this.

There is an added imbalance of power in these situations where offenders groom and manipulate impressionable children. Referring to it as anything other than child sexual abuse is a damaging narrative which could deter child victims/survivors from coming forward to report these types of crimes or recognising that they are being abused.

Remember that children cannot consent to someone abusing them.

Using words such as underage or young when describing the victim/survivor is inappropriate and should not be used in relation to child sexual abuse. These terms present abuse as an issue of sexual morality and incorrectly implies that children aged under 16 can legally consent to sex. See [Language on age](#) on page 24 for more on this.

Do not use the term child prostitute to describe a child victim/survivor who has been exploited, as this phrase sensationalises the incident and contributes to victim blaming. It implies consent and that there is no coercion or imbalance of power, when children cannot legally consent to sex work, and puts the responsibility for the abuse, or not avoiding it, on the child. It also

excuses the perpetrator when the reality is that the child is being exploited by an adult for sexual purposes. Instead, simply use child and victim/survivor.

Not all forms of child sexual abuse fall within the definition of 'paedophilia' and therefore, you should use this term with caution. As explained by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, paedophilia is a psychiatric disorder where a person aged over 16 has a sexual preference for children, usually of prepubescent or early pubescent age. Referring to child sexual abuse as something perpetrated by 'paedophiles' ignores the fact that not all sexual abuse is motivated by a sexual interest in children, and not all people diagnosed with paedophilia sexually abuse children.

The Children's Society and National Association for People Abused in Childhood co-developed an appropriate language guide for child exploitation and abuse.

To read this, go to [Appendix D](#) on page 36.

INDECENT IMAGES OF CHILDREN

The offences of making, possessing or distributing indecent images of children should not be referred to as child porn or child pornography. Perpetrators have abused children in order to create this type of material, whereas use of the word pornography implies consent and removes the perpetrator's abusive intentions.

The word indecent in indecent images of children is problematic, as it has victim blaming connotations.

Although this is the terminology used in legislation and must be used in charge releases and court outcomes, police communicators can provide context by clarifying that the creation of such material is the result of perpetrators abusing children. Therefore, when writing a post-conviction press release, consider including in a statement how the creation of this material is child sexual abuse, or child sexual abuse material.

WRITING ABOUT IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE OFFENCES

4

IMAGE-BASED ABUSE

Image-based abuse, often referred to as revenge porn, is the non-consensual sharing of, or threatening to share, private sexual material of someone without their consent.

New legislation was introduced in January 2024 under the Sexual Offences Act (2003) in relation to this. When publicising charges or post-conviction reports, use the specific offence wording and do not refer to it as revenge porn.

Revenge porn is a misleading term as it implies that the crime is motivated by revenge, when in reality perpetrators may have other motives such as control, humiliation, or gaining status. The term image-based abuse or intimate image abuse highlights that this behaviour is a form of abuse regardless of motive.

By contrast, revenge porn trivialises the crime and implies the victim/survivor acted in ways that necessitated revenge, which perpetuates victim blaming. It also inaccurately labels the content as pornographic, potentially inviting others to view or share the content for sexual gratification.

DEEPFAKES

Images and videos that have been artificially created or altered to resemble a person's likeness are commonly called deepfakes. The creation and distribution of sexually explicit deepfakes are criminal offences under the Sexual Offences Act 2003.

Non-consensual sexual deepfakes should be described using the same terminology as other image-based abuse. Do not refer to this material as pornography or revenge porn. Use the term deepfake or specify that the images were created using artificial intelligence or image-generating technology where needed.

GENERAL TIPS FOR REPORTING

HEADLINES

Press releases written by police communicators about crimes go directly to the public and media, and therefore it is imperative that they adhere to the Words Matter reporting guidelines.

Active language should be used in headlines to focus on the perpetrator's actions as this avoids shifting blame to the victim/survivor, who did not have a choice.

Headlines should also clearly identify the crime to ensure accuracy and in order not to sanitise. For more on this, read the [Top tips section](#) on pages 5 to 7.

Do not include information about the perpetrator's character, or the circumstances of the victim/survivor, as this can encourage victim blaming and/or sympathy toward the perpetrator.

A perpetrator's occupation should only be included if it is relevant to provide context, such as a teacher who has groomed a pupil. For more on this, see [Referencing the perpetrator's profession/occupation](#) on page 26.

EXAMPLE HEADLINES:

BAD EXAMPLE:

"Police appeal for witnesses after woman is victim of serious sexual assault in Gloucester"

"Builder is jailed after admitting to possessing child pornography"

"Woman dies after attack while out walking dog in the Cotswolds"

"Arrest made after woman sexually touched in Cheltenham"

ALTERNATIVE:

"Police appeal for witnesses after man rapes woman in Gloucester"

"Man is jailed after he admits to possessing indecent images of children"

"Man arrested on suspicion of murdering woman in the Cotswolds"

"Man arrested on suspicion of sexually assaulting a woman in Cheltenham"

LANGUAGE AROUND AGE

Sexual contact with anyone aged under 16 is child sexual abuse or rape in the eyes of the law. Between the ages of 16 and 18, the victim/survivor is still a child, yet can legally consent to sex.

Anyone under the age of 18 should be referred to as a boy, girl, child or state their age. Once their age is given, for example a 17-year-old, they can also be referred to as a teenager.

Age brackets can be used, such as ‘a child aged under 13’ or ‘a child aged over 16’ when you need to give a broader age range.

Anyone older than 18 should be referred to as a man, woman, adult or person, regardless of whether they are a victim/survivor or perpetrator. Refrain from referring to them as a young man or young woman as this implies that they are not an adult in the eyes of the law. Additionally, describing adult perpetrators as young can downplay the seriousness of their actions, implying reduced responsibility due to their age and potentially diminishing the perceived accountability.

Do not use the term underage girl(s)/boy(s) when describing a child victim/survivor as this is inappropriate. The term presents abuse as an issue of sexual morality and incorrectly implies that children aged under 16 can legally consent to sex.

| Age | Do say | Reasoning | Don't say |
|----------|--|--|--|
| Under 16 | Boy/girl Child Child aged under 16 State their age, thereafter can also use teenager if aged 13 or over | This reflects their legal status as children. Children aged under 16 cannot legally consent to sex. | Underage boy/girl Young man/woman |
| 16 to 18 | Boy/girl Child Child aged over 16 State their age Teenager | This acknowledges their status as minors who can consent, but are still legally classed as children. | Underage boy/girl Young man/woman |
| Over 18 | Man/woman/person Adult Person aged over 18 | They are considered to be adults in the eyes of the law. | Young man/woman |

REFERENCING THE PERPETRATOR'S PROFESSION/OCCUPATION

Only state the perpetrator's profession or occupation in communications if it is directly relevant to the context of the crime. Ensure it is not used in a way that might sensationalise or detract from the seriousness of the offence.

For example, if the perpetrator used their professional position to commit the offence, it is appropriate to reference this to provide context.

Avoid sensationalising the crime by focusing excessively on the perpetrator's profession or occupation. The primary focus should remain on the criminal actions and their impact, not on the profession itself.

If it is deemed necessary to include the perpetrator's profession or occupation, ensure the language is clear and factual, and remember to use the active voice. For more on this, see [Use the active voice](#) on page 7.

VULNERABILITIES

Any victim/survivor of a crime may have vulnerabilities, such as an alcohol or drug dependency, mental or physical health issues, or a history of being exploited.

None of these factors excuse abuse and they should not be referenced in communications, as it could lead to victim blaming and infringe upon the victim/survivor's right to privacy.

There would need to be a policing purpose to release information about a person's vulnerabilities, for example if releasing details could help gain witnesses and aid an investigation. This should only be done following consultation with the victim/survivor and/or their family so that they are aware.

Consider having a non-reportable conversation with a reporter in order for them to be able to accurately report on an incident and not sensationalise it.

SEX WORKERS OR WOMEN WHO SELL SEX

Only mention a victim/survivor's involvement in selling sex if it is necessary and relevant to the context. Avoid using terms like prostitute or prostitution, as these can carry negative connotations and contribute to stigma. Instead, refer to them as a woman or woman who sells sex.

Where possible, ask the victim/survivor about their preferred terminology. If they identify with the term sex worker, use it, but do so cautiously. The term sex worker should only be used if it aligns with the victim/survivor's preference.

It is important to recognise that sex work exists on a spectrum and includes street-based sex work as well as those working through escort agencies or online platforms. It may be appropriate to ask a victim/survivor for their professional title if they are working on sites or as escorts, but not if they are involved in street sex work or survival sex work.

WRITING ABOUT FALSE REPORTS OF RAPE

Research has shown that false allegations of rape are rare, and that there are no more false reports of rape than any other crime.

There may be occasions when there is a requirement to publicise a false allegation of a rape or sexual assault, mainly if a public appeal for information had previously been done in connection with a report. This is to reassure the community that an offence, which likely caused fear and concern, has been investigated and evidence proves it did not happen.

It should also be considered whether, as part of the false allegation, a person was named as a suspect and/or someone was arrested, as this could have a detrimental impact on a person.

When an individual is charged with an offence, such as perverting the course of justice, the level of detail released is limited in order to not impact pending criminal proceedings. Once in a position to write proactive communications post-conviction, or if the person received a caution or faced no further action, it is vital to write this in a way which does not discourage victims/survivors from coming forward to police.

In these communications it is essential to mention how there are no more false reports of rape than any other crime, and resources can be included within the notes to editors section of a press release to highlight rape myths.

When communicating directly with the public, it should also be made clear why this information is being disclosed. It should primarily be to alleviate fears that there is a rapist who has not been arrested or to update the public on a case which has previously gained public interest.

These communications need to be written sensitively in order not to deter victims/survivors from coming forward and reporting incidents to police. Focus on how false reports can take crucial time away from officers supporting victims/survivors and bringing perpetrators to justice, as well as having long-lasting, detrimental impacts on the person accused.

Use clear, descriptive, but non-blaming language in the communications. For example: "A woman in her 20s has since disclosed that the rape, which was alleged to have happened on Jones Street, did not take place. She has apologised and has been cautioned for wasting police time."

As with any other crime, do not include unnecessary personal details about the individual who made a false report to police.

If possible, share drafted communications with an expert local partner agency to ensure that they are comfortable with the language and tone used. They could also include a statement within the press release to emphasise how false reports are rare.

To see an example press release for how to report on a case where an individual was cautioned for making a false report, see [Appendix C](#) on page 33.

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These organisations are responsible for reviewing and updating the guidelines on an annual basis for any amendments or additions to existing legislation. Please note these guidelines only apply to policing in England and Wales.

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We are committed to being anti-discriminatory organisations. This means not only acting in a non-discriminatory way, but addressing systemic inequalities, disadvantage and discrimination.

If you have a query in relation to these guidelines, contact the relevant press office listed below:

- Gloucestershire Constabulary: press.office@gloucestershire.police.uk
- Gloucestershire's Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner: opccmedia@gloucestershire.police.uk
- This Ends Now: info@thisendsnow.co.uk

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: EXAMPLE PRESS RELEASE
- SEXUAL ASSAULT

Heading: Police appeal for witnesses after man sexually assaulted woman in [location]

Subheading: The incident happened at [time] on [date]

Body:

Police are appealing for witnesses after a man sexually assaulted a woman in [location] earlier this week.

On [date] in [location] a man approached a woman from behind and sexually assaulted her.

He grabbed her breasts and tried to kiss her without her consent.

The incident happened between [time] and [time], and the man then walked off in the direction of [location].

The offender was described as being [description].

Investigating officers are asking for anyone who witnessed the incident or who saw the man in the area to contact them.

You can provide information to the police online by completing the following form and quoting incident [XX of XX date].



APPENDIX B: EXAMPLE PRESS RELEASE – RAPE WITH SUSPECT AND VICTIM NOT KNOWN TO EACH OTHER

Heading: Man arrested on suspicion of raping woman in [location]

Subheading: A [age] man from [location] has been arrested

Body:

A man has been arrested on suspicion of raping a woman in [location] and police are appealing for information.

The incident happened at [time] on [date], and following enquiries, a [age] man from [location] has been arrested and is in custody for questioning.

Police are keen to hear from anyone who lives in the area and may have dashcam or CCTV footage which could assist.

Officers are in the early stages of an investigation and at this time it is believed that those involved are not known to each other.

You can provide information to police online by completing the following form and quoting incident [XX of XX date].

If you have experienced rape, sexual assault or abuse, and wish to report the crime, contact police by calling 101 or 999 in the case of an emergency. You can also report sexual offences online here: <https://www.police.uk/pu/contact-us/rape-sexual-assault-or-another-sexual-offence/>

[Name of local rape and sexual assault support centre] support victims/survivors of rape and sexual abuse. For more information visit their website [insert details].



APPENDIX C: EXAMPLE PRESS RELEASE – FALSE ALLEGATION OF RAPE (POLICE CAUTION)

Heading: Update on investigation into alleged offence in [location] on [date]

Subheading: Police said false reports of sexual assaults and rape are rare, and they do not want to deter victims/survivors from reporting

Body:

Note to editor: This press release has been issued as it is felt important to reassure the public, especially women and girls, who have expressed feeling unsafe following the initial report.

Detectives investigating a report of rape in [location] on [date] have confirmed that this did not take place.

It had been alleged that the rape was committed by a person they did not know; however, following an investigation, it became clear that the incident did not happen.

[Spokesperson from the Rape and Serious Sexual Offences team] said false reports are rare and they do not want them to deter people from coming forward, but they take crucial time away from supporting victims and bringing perpetrators to justice.

They added: “There were more than 2,000 rapes and sexual assaults recorded by the Constabulary last year, which involved hundreds of victims/survivors who we’re supporting through the investigation process.

“False reports are rare, but can’t be ignored, and we will challenge them where appropriate as they take valuable time away from officers investigating genuine reports and working with victims/survivors who need our help and support. They can also lead to wrongful arrests.

“We felt the public should be made aware of the outcome of this investigation, as this case would understandably have caused fear and heightened public anxiety within the community at the time and in the weeks/months since.

“We encourage anyone who has been a victim of rape or a sexual assault to please come forward and speak to police. We really do not want to frighten or discourage anyone who has been a victim of any sexual offence from talking to us, as we are here and want to support you.”

It had been reported that an unknown man had raped a woman in her [age] in the area of [location] on [date].

A public appeal for information was then issued.

Following extensive enquiries by the Constabulary's Rape and Serious Sexual Offences team, a woman from [location] was cautioned for wasting police time.

The investigating officer, [name], said: “The woman involved was remorseful and understood the damaging consequences of her actions, and she was relieved to admit the truth during a police interview.”

A man was arrested in connection with the rape allegation, however CCTV evidence later showed that no rape took place and he will face no further police action.

[Officer's name], from the Rape and Serious Sexual Offences team, said: “We recognise a false allegation of rape can have a long-lasting, detrimental impact on someone's life, and welfare and support is provided for those who are victims of this.

“There is power behind words, and it is never too late for someone to confirm the truth.

“Our role is to listen with empathy to every report, carry out a full and impartial investigation and then follow the evidence. We did that in this case, and the evidence proved that it did not take place.

“The majority of rapes relate to people who know each other, and proven false reports of rapes are rare.

“Extensive enquiries take place when a report is made to police, such as sending forensic samples for examination, speaking to witnesses, house-to-house enquiries, trawling CCTV footage, digital forensic reviews, intelligence gathering and other fast-track actions.

“In this case a report was made by a third party - someone who had been told about the incident and reported it to police, and officers then made contact with the alleged victim to establish the details and start an investigation.

“Reports are always taken seriously, whether they are made directly by the victim/survivor or by a third party, and we have a specialised team of passionate officers who are dedicated to bringing rapists and sex offenders to justice.”

[Name] from the [local rape and sexual assault support centre] said: “False allegations of rape are very rare and in fact make up less than three per cent of all reported rapes, which is no higher than other falsely reported crimes. We know that most people who are affected by sexual violence do not report these crimes to the police.

“It is really important to note that when a disclosure is made, the person is believed and it is then crucial to check-in with them with regard to what they would like to happen next. For example, to report the incident or to seek alternative support.”

[Name of local rape and sexual assault support centre] can be contacted via [insert details].



APPENDIX D: RESOURCES FOR FURTHER GUIDANCE

Dignity for Dead Women

Media guidelines for reporting domestic abuse deaths. Created by Level Up in 2022: <https://www.welevelup.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Media-Guidelines-V2-1.pdf>

Ending victim blaming in the context of violence against women and girls

Created by the Independent Office for Police Conduct in 2024: <https://www.policeconduct.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/IOPC-ending-victim-blaming-guidance-Feb-2024.pdf>

Media Guidelines on Violence Against Women

Created by Zero Tolerance: <https://www.zerotolerance.org.uk/resources/Media-Guidelines-on-Violence-Against-Women.pdf>

Why language matters

Why we should never use ‘child pornography’ and always say child sexual abuse material – Created by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 2023: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/why-language-matters/child-sexual-abuse-material>

Child exploitation and abuse: an appropriate language guide

Co-developed by the National Association for People Abused in Childhood and The Children’s Society: <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/child-exploitation-language-guide>

This Ends Now

Why do Words Matter? <https://www.thisendsnow.co.uk/our-work>