



# Operation Amazon

This summary provides further information about Operation Amazon – an independent complaint investigation that was investigated under the umbrella of Operation Linden.

Operation Linden was published in June 2022. It covered 93 independent investigations of complaints and conduct matters in relation to South Yorkshire Police's (SYP) handling of reports into non-recent child sexual abuse and exploitation in Rotherham, South Yorkshire, between 1997 and 2013.

The outcome of Operation Amazon was previously published in the Operation Linden report on page 112.

## The complaint

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The aim of Operation Amazon was to investigate a complaint about the lack of action taken by senior officers from SYP in relation to the protection of children and vulnerable young adults between 1999 and 2011 in the Rotherham district. The investigation defined senior officer as the rank of Chief Superintendent and above.

The complaint referred to us by SYP on 23 July 2017 was:

“That senior officers failed in their statutory responsibilities to protect children during the period relevant to the 3 recent trials where 18 offenders were found guilty of non-recent abuse offences against children.”

## What Operation Amazon looked at

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The investigation considered national policies that were in place during this period, Government Key Performance Indicator (KPI) targets, and what can be shown that SYP knew about perpetrators of Child Sexual Exploitation and/or Abuse (CSE/A).

Significant materials were received from SYP's Professional Standards Department (PSD) as well as other sources, including original documents and witness

statements from victims and survivors of CSE and abuse in Rotherham. These were obtained as part of the wider Operation Linden investigation.

During the Operation Amazon investigation, we considered written accounts that SYP officers had provided for Operation Linden and the reviews conducted by Baroness Louise Casey, Professor John Drew and Professor Alexis Jay. Some of the officers who served during the relevant period (1999 – 2011) had retired and were not legally bound to assist us with our investigation.

The investigation recovered and reviewed social care files from social services, health departments, education departments, youth support services and 'Risky Business' (which were collated by Operation Linden), along with a number of independent reviews of SYP operations carried out by the National Crime Agency (NCA). All documentation was reviewed and compared to three analytical reports compiled by a SYP analyst in 2002, 2003 and 2006.

## Findings

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After careful consideration, we upheld the complaint referred to at the beginning of this summary for the reasons set out below.

During this investigation, no senior or any other SYP officer was under investigation for misconduct or a criminal offence. Operation Amazon considered that there was no indication that a member of SYP may have committed a criminal offence or behaved in a manner which would justify the bringing of disciplinary proceedings.

## What information SYP had

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Operation Amazon considered the intelligence SYP held on 18 perpetrators who were convicted of non-recent sexual offences at the time the offences were committed.

Accounts provided to us from complainants, survivors and police officers from as early as 2001, showed that named perpetrators of CSE/A, and their victims/survivors, were discussed at stakeholder meetings. As a result, there were some operations conducted by SYP in Rotherham to tackle the issue of vulnerable children missing from home and targeted by adult men for sexual purposes. However, the available evidence showed that SYP did not sufficiently develop the information into actionable intelligence to conduct operations.

In some cases, SYP staff said information from victims and Risky Business was not put on intelligence systems. Some SYP staff decided that it was not intelligence; other staff said that it was regarded as local intelligence that was not shared with frontline staff. The force did not seem to be aware of the scale of CSE/A in Rotherham, although SYP appeared to have been given some information by Risky Business.

It is recognised that there were challenges investigating named perpetrators of CSE/A before 2012. SYP did not always acknowledge and understand that they were dealing with vulnerable child victims, survivors and witnesses, who were understandably unable or unwilling to provide testimony accounts, if they were even asked to provide such testimony. SYP were also dealing with a large volume of referrals and an apparent lack of knowledge of CSE/A and the scale of the problem.

In 2001/2002, Operation Forced was an operation to safeguard vulnerable children who were missing from home and being exposed to CSE. Officers were also tasked with assessing whether surveillance of named perpetrators was viable. It subsequently appears that it was not. We were unable to find any material that had been kept to assess the effectiveness of this operation due to retention policies, but the issue of CSE/A persisted and was reflected in reports in 2002.

Evidence was found that names of some of the perpetrators were discussed at meetings attended by SYP officers. However, no action appeared to be taken by SYP. The perpetrators went on to continue to abuse young girls until they were convicted in 2016 – 14 years later.

## **SYP response to the reports from SYP Analyst**

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In the years after Operation Forced, the three comprehensive reports of an SYP analyst (dated 2002, 2003 and 2006) could be considered to reinforce the intelligence picture. One of the reports contained intelligence relating to named perpetrators' personal details, vehicles, and businesses together with links to named victims/survivors. Some of these named perpetrators were later convicted in 2016 - 2018 for offences relating to CSE/A.

Due to the passage of time, Operation Amazon was unable to identify who the first two reports were circulated to. The investigation did uncover evidence of the 2006 report being circulated to officers and responded to, to some degree.

As part of Operation Amazon, the sentencing of the perpetrators was considered and examined against the existing SYP intelligence available at the time of the offending. The data relating to the 18 perpetrators contained little reference to discussions at stakeholder CSE meetings and is heavily focussed on drug activity, with seemingly little attention paid to the fact that the men involved were associating with young girls.

The CSE meetings attended by SYP officers highlighted a problem with intelligence not being added to the perpetrators' records on the Operational Intelligence System (OIS). In addition, there appeared to have been no vehicle checks on these individuals, no cross-border intelligence and no requests to staff to target them. Intelligence was also not recorded or shared, which has been corroborated by former SYP intelligence staff.

Following the launch of Operation Forced in Rotherham in 2001/2002, there was little action regarding CSE until Operation Central in 2008. This Operation appears to have been instigated in response to the SYP analyst's report from 2006 and the observations of a neighbourhood sergeant. This secured five convictions and custodial sentences for perpetrators of CSE/A related offences. SYP subsequently carried on receiving intelligence from Risky Business and other agencies in Rotherham, yet named perpetrators of CSE/A continued to commit offences against children.

In summary, Operation Amazon identified that SYP were presented with information/intelligence from a variety of sources. This could have led to operations being conducted and senior officers taking responsibility for overseeing the operation and promoting knowledge of the emergence of CSE/A within South Yorkshire. Information was available in the early 2000s of the actions of a large number of men grooming young, vulnerable girls to facilitate CSE/A. While some efforts were made to address this, it appears there was not a cohesive effort to deal with this effectively. SYP publicly apologised before the completion of the Operation Amazon report to the victims/survivors of CSE/A and admitted in the media their previous failings.

District Commander for Rotherham, Chief Superintendent Jason Harwin, offered an "unreserved apology to the victims of child sexual exploitation who did not receive the level of service they should be able to expect from their local police force". This can be seen in this [video](#).

We did identify some positive work that was carried out. There was evidence that certain officers did act on some intelligence and conduct operations, some of which resulted in convictions. The advent of Operation Central in 2008 was a concerted effort to address the issue of CSE within Rotherham and appears to have been managed without wider force assistance and with a positive result.

## Performance targets

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Operation Amazon examined if the priorities within SYP at that time and/or government set KPIs affected decision making.

Performance targets (KPIs) were introduced nationally by the Home Office in the 1990s as part of 'Public Service Agreements' with constabularies. These were

national targets that sought to direct forces to tackle crime such as burglary, robbery, vehicle crime etc. The investigation found anecdotal evidence offered by a number of senior officers, middle management and civilian support staff that these externally set KPIs were a priority within SYP and affected decision making in terms of how policing issues were prioritised.

The evidence indicates that in the years after the removal of the previously mentioned KPIs, the approach SYP adopted changed to be more victim centric and intelligence-led and the current landscape is markedly different with more joined up working.

## Outcome

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Throughout the investigation there was no indication that any officer may have committed a criminal offence or behaved in a manner that would justify disciplinary proceedings.

At every stage we considered learning relating to the matters under investigation. The decision maker for the investigation stated that had the practices that we were concerned about, for example CSE/A not being properly recognised, been current during the time of the Operation Amazon report, learning recommendations would have been made. They were satisfied that these issues were not current and the investigation uncovered evidence that demonstrated CSE was now addressed in a more co-ordinated and consistent way.

We did find some examples of good practice by SYP officers in their attempts to tackle CSE/A, for example, launching Operation Forced and Operation Central. But the overall response appeared to have been lacking, especially in the early years. This was due to SYP's limited understanding and awareness of CSE/A (as per the national picture at that time). It is clear some police officers were concerned about children being exploited, but there was no consistent, urgent, sustained approach to tackling the problem during the time frame we investigated.

On this basis, the complaint was upheld after considering all of the evidence. To uphold a complaint, the IOPC decision maker must conclude that the force did not deliver the service to a standard that was expected of them. This decision is made on the balance of probabilities, based on the evidence gathered during the investigation.

The complaint was upheld on the basis that over a number of years it appeared that SYP had actionable intelligence which senior officers could and should have addressed and taken responsibility for, but there was no co-ordinated response.

It was our view that this was a systemic organisational failure, as opposed to the failings of individuals. We could not identify a named individual who had responsibility for these matters, and therefore this could not be viewed as a conduct issue. The decision maker however concluded this was a collective failure of the senior leadership team in their statutory responsibilities to protect children.

When we shared our findings in 2021, SYP disagreed with the decision to uphold the complaint. The force acknowledged there was an organisational failure to protect children but stated that there was evidence, within the Operation Amazon findings, that some senior officers had taken action intended to safeguard vulnerable young people in Rotherham.

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