

How technology can help tackle Violence Against Women and Girls and Rape and Serious Sexual Offences

techUK is the trade association for the technology sector in the UK. Our over-1000 members, the majority of which are UK-based SMEs, are based around the United Kingdom. They employ 1.1 million people across the UK, with a turnover of £329bn in 2023 and an estimated annual growth rate of 10%.

We have prepared this briefing to help Prospective Parliamentary Candidates understand key tech issues in the UK. This briefing focuses on shoring up the UK's future energy supply and incentivising energy efficiency– vital for the future of the UK's energy security and cutting energy bills.

This briefing draws upon:

- Our [*UK Tech Plan: How the next Government can use technology to build a better Britain*](#)
- The [*Seven Tech Priorities for the next Government and polling of 250 tech industry leaders in February 2023*](#).

More briefings, both from ourselves and techUK's members, can be found on our [online briefing hub](#).

This briefing has been prepared to help prospective Parliamentary candidates understand key violence against women and girls (VAWG) and rape and serious sexual offences (RASSO) issues in the UK.

How common are VAWG and RASSO?

VAWG and RASSO make up 18% of all reported crimes in England and Wales. Technology has the ability to provide police with new solutions to prevent crime, but it also provides suspects with new tools to commit crime. Online abuse, for example, disproportionately affects women. Women are up to 27 times more likely to experience online abuse compared to men. About 36% of women have encountered online abuse on social media, and this number increases to 62% among young women.

Additionally, there is increasing evidence of a connection between offline and online offences, with **up to a third of domestic abuse survivors reporting instances of online harassment, abuse, or control from a current or former partner**. According to the [Crime Survey for England and Wales](#), around 1.4 million women experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2023. For victims of domestic abuse, it **takes a long time to access legal assistance and protection**. This process could often take up to two weeks, and sometimes even longer once a referral has been made to a specialist support service and appropriate local legal support secured.

What are the major technological challenges in combatting VAWG and RASSO?

- **Underreporting and victim support:** Victims often face challenges in reporting due to distrust in the justice system, and when they do, they may not be taken seriously or have their mobiles phones and technology devices taken for extended periods. This can lead to trauma and lack of trust in law enforcement. Victims also face other issues, such as delays in court proceedings and low conviction rates.
- **Crime investigation and data collection:** The increased use of technology from perpetrators and prevalence of online abuse have significantly increased the sources, volume, and variety of data available for investigations, making cases more challenging. Digital forensics data from victims, witnesses and suspects is typically from non-police sources and is approximately 20 times the volume of all other police data combined.
- **Technology awareness and education:** Although police forces are prioritising VAWG and RASSO, each of them faces a unique set of challenges in terms of digital provision. With no digital roadmap that will suit all 43 forces, a lack of digital literacy, education and training programmes are also a barrier for policing in this area.

How can we better use tech to combat VAWG and RASSO?

There are several ways that better-utilising technology can not only increase the rate of criminal prosecutions, but help those working in the field to detect VAWG and RASSO earlier and devise schemes to prevent crimes happening in the first place:

- **Police must have the means and confidence to use digital evidence.** This requires supporting forces through schemes such as the [Digital Evidence Project](#) (DEP), a joint Home Office and Police Digital Service initiative. The programme aims to establish common standards and methods for using digital evidence to investigate RASSO. A good example is their work exploring tools to extract data from victims mobile phone devices, which can be used as evidence in their case, without taking their phone from them.
- **Police must also Digital Forensics tools to access data and bring key evidence to trial.** Digital forensics are an essential element for law investigations, [playing a role in 90% of criminal cases](#). They can help gather evidence but also improve the policing experience for victims of rape and serious sexual assault. Digital evidence can have significant weight to the survivor's testimony, as in case the perpetrator denies allegations, objective digital evidence can support the victim's testimony..
- **Law enforcement can also identify patterns of behaviour** by developing digital forensics that may indicate ongoing abuse and risk of future offences, which can be key for intervention and prevention efforts.
- **Police, the 3rd sector academia and industry should be supported to share data and best practice** An improved communication and data sharing process across different organisations (including third sector organisations, public services, academia and industry) would improve opportunities for detection and prevention of violence. Whilst strongly taking into consideration the sensitivity of such data, harnessing data so it can be used and shared effectively whilst ensuring those who need the data understand what is actually means is crucial. A successful example is the *Violence Reduction Units*, that bring together police, local government, health and education professionals, leaders and other key partners to ensure a multi-agency response to serious crimes.

There is a required cultural shift in addressing VAWG and RASSO across law enforcement bodies and local communities, investing in training and education, as while technology offers

significant opportunities to those working against VAWG and RASSO, technology requires the right culture and environment to be used to its full potential. This also includes making investigations less disruptive to the lives of victims.

- **More support for victims is essential to ensuring more crimes are reported and carried through to trial.** This includes the adoption of a victim-centred approach, following the good practice implemented by Operation Soteria, which has led to all 43 participating forces across England and Wales adopting a [National Operating Model](#) for addressing rape and other serious sexual offenses.
- **Improving the digital forensics tools available to police also supports a victim-centred approach** by reducing the need for victims to repeatedly recount traumatic experiences, protecting their privacy and integrity, as digital information techniques ensure that sensitive information is handled confidentially.
- **Facilitating collaboration among police forces** not only saves police time by preventing task duplication, but also ensures the development of tools to a national standard, making the most effective scalable across different forces and parts of the UK. Collaboration such as the RASSO Tech Partnership board, chaired by Chief Constable Sarah Crew, is already proving useful in this field.
- **Effective prevention strategies and education programs** are essential to address the root causes of VAWG and RASSO. These efforts often require long-term investment and collaboration across sectors. Awareness and promotion of initiatives such as “[HeForShe](#)” or improving broader engagement through the “[Employers’ Initiative](#)” will aid the prevention of these crimes happening in the first place.
- **Schemes that drive collaboration, such as the aforementioned RASSO Tech Partnership board, require investment.** This is necessary to support the working groups, organisations and supporting groups for victims, as well as a need for local and national analytical and data capabilities.

What can I do to learn more?

techUK’s manages a successful ‘VAWG and RASSO Tech Working Group, a platform for collaboration aiming to raise awareness of the current issues in this space, supporting policing to make a real change and impact. The group includes representatives from industry, police, policymakers and academics. More information on the work and discussions of the group can be found [at this link](#). [An example of the groups work has been to deliver a ‘tech hub; for justice and law enforcement to engage with.](#)

[techUK’s VAWG and RASSO Tech Hub](#) highlights the latest developments, thought leadership and insight from across the space. Content includes work to support victims through the criminal justice system, the use of digital to support policing investigate and how technology is improving prosecution rates

techUK can also arrange a call with yourself and our policy managers so we can brief you on this topic in more detail. If this would be of benefit to you, please contact archie.breare@techuk.org and alice.campbell@techuk.org.

techUK is also able to arrange a meeting between yourself and a member company of ours who has premises in your constituency if possible. This would provide you with a photo opportunity and allow you to discuss the importance of this issue further with a company operating in your constituency.

