

MODERNISING PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS IN UK POLICING



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From Case Management to Defensible Decision-Making



Professional Standards Departments (PSDs) now play a central role in policing legitimacy. That has not happened by accident. It reflects sustained public scrutiny, high-profile failures, and a growing expectation that forces can demonstrate not just that misconduct is addressed, but that it is addressed consistently, proportionately and defensibly.

The uncomfortable truth is that many **PSDs** are being asked to meet those expectations using frameworks, processes and systems that were never designed for the environment they now operate in. The demand of the work has outpaced the processes and tooling.

Modernising **Professional Standards** is not simply about improving efficiency. It is about ensuring that decisions – at every stage – are consistent, proportionate and defensible under scrutiny.

Modernising **PSD** case management capability is essential to meeting public expectations, supporting investigators, and strengthening organisational integrity. But this is not just a case management challenge. It is about building an end-to-end capability for managing, evidencing and learning from integrity risk. This is not as simple as an IT upgrade, it's an evolution of a system that needs to reliably deliver the outcomes **Professional Standards** are held accountable for: speed, auditability, defensible decisions.



By **Chris Ward**, former Detective Chief
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"If we continue to apply 19th century principles to 21st century risk, using 20th century systems, we should not be surprised when the same failures recur under new scrutiny."

Every force's legitimacy is dependent on how Professional Standards operates



Professional Standards has moved from an internal function to a frontline function.

The consequence is that **PSD** decisions now sit in a different operating environment. A force can no longer simply assert that it takes standards seriously. It must demonstrate precisely how seriously, every time. Every assessment decision, local resolution, escalation threshold and closure rationale is made in the knowledge that it may later be tested by scrutiny with overseeing bodies, the media, or the public if something escalates.

At the same time, the statutory and oversight landscape has tightened. Inspection and review findings have repeatedly highlighted vetting, misconduct and cultural risks, including explicit concerns that it remains too easy for the wrong people to join and stay in policing. The direction of travel is clear. The scrutinisation of **PSD** is steadily increasing.

There are three reasons:

- 01. Public confidence has deteriorated.**
Recent figures indicate that 52 per cent of British adults report little or no confidence in their local police, while 57 per cent are not confident that a police complaint would be handled fairly.
- 02. Demand has increased.**
Following reforms that widened what counts as a complaint to 'any expression of dissatisfaction', forces are now dealing with more than 80,000 complaint cases annually, with volumes continuing to rise.
- 03. The misconduct landscape has hardened.**
Independent reviews have described misconduct handling as too slow and too inconsistent, with widely cited examples of investigations averaging more than 400 days and a significant proportion lasting more than two years.



The demand problem is real – and it is measurable



The widened definition of a complaint has created a much larger front door into Professional Standards. That matters because assessment is where proportionality, fairness and consistency begin.

PSD demand is not only about volume. It is also about complexity. Misconduct work increasingly involves digital evidence spread across multiple repositories, allegations linked to misuse of systems, discriminatory behaviour and sexual misconduct, and cases where intelligence, vetting, welfare and performance concerns overlap. These cases do not move in a straight line. They require repeated review, structured decisions and clear supervisory oversight as information develops.

Where the operating model is weak, volume and complexity do not simply slow the unit down. They distort decision-making. Staff become reliant on memory, informal knowledge and workarounds. Supervisory visibility weakens. Consistency becomes a matter of who happens to be on duty rather than a single repeatable and consistent code of practice.



Delay is not an inconvenience - it is a risk amplifier



Independent reviews have put timeliness firmly in the spotlight. Investigations that run for many months – and in some cases years – create a legitimacy problem as well as an operational one.

Delay has predictable consequences. It harms complainants, who disengage or escalate when they feel ignored. It harms officers, and staff who remain in limbo and whose welfare deteriorates under uncertainty. It harms supervisors and operational command, who cannot manage restricted duties, deployment risk and local confidence effectively. And it harms the organisation, because drift invites challenge and makes later decision-making look arbitrary, even when the original judgement was reasonable.

Delay is often treated as a resourcing issue alone. In practice, it is frequently a systems and workflow issue. Where investigators and supervisors cannot see the same picture of risk, where tasks are tracked outside the core system, and where audit must be reconstructed manually, time expands. The work does not just take longer. It becomes harder to defend.



The real PSD problem – evidencing judgement under scrutiny



In **Professional Standards**, the critical moments are the decision points. Those moments are where forces are most exposed if they cannot evidence how judgement was applied.

- » Is this a complaint, intelligence, or conduct?
- » Does it meet mandatory referral criteria?
- » What is proportionate at assessment?
- » What is the rationale for local handling rather than formal investigation?
- » What justifies escalation, and what justifies closure?
- » What learning is captured, and who owns it?

These decisions are often made with partial information. They are also often revisited later, after context has changed. This is where organisations are often challenged – not necessarily because the original decision was obviously wrong, but because they cannot show what was known at

the time, what options were considered, and why one route was chosen over another. In fact, a recent HMICS paper on conduct and discipline, highlighted these exact issues – released May 2026, they found delays, inconsistent record keeping and gaps in auditable decision rationale – reinforcing the difficulty organisations face in demonstrating decision-based logic under review.

The issue is rarely a complete absence of information. More often, relevant signals already exist across complaints, intelligence, business interests, notifiable associations, vetting concerns or welfare indicators. Individually, they may appear low level. Taken together, they can indicate meaningful risk.

Issues within **PSD** are not simply about identifying risk. They are issues that arise when control is not sufficiently demonstrated once risk is recognised. The challenge is not just seeing risk but managing and evidencing decisions about that risk consistently, from first severity assessment through to final outcome.



Fragmented systems create fragmented truths



A recurring operational reality across forces is that **Professional Standards** information does not sit in one place. It sits across legacy case systems, spreadsheets, emails, network drives and separate intelligence or vetting records. Practitioners describe re-entering the same information repeatedly – including one blunt account that teams were inputting the same data five times, across five different systems.

Fragmentation creates predictable failure modes:

- » **Duplication creates drift.**
Timelines diverge, details become inconsistent, and the single version of the truth disappears.
- » **Fragmentation drives inconsistency.**
Two supervisors looking at different systems are more likely to apply thresholds differently. That inconsistency is experienced as unfairness by both the public and the workforce.
- » **Sensitive work is pushed into shadow systems.**
When access controls are poorly configured, teams create parallel records to protect confidentiality. That may feel safe in the moment, but it concentrates organisational memory in a small number of people and makes governance harder.
- » **Audit becomes reconstruction.**
When inspection or challenge arrives, the organisation scrambles to rebuild a chronology from emails, notes and disconnected records. That is the moment when a reasonable decision can become an indefensible one.



The impact on practitioners



It is also worth recognising what this environment does to the people doing the work. **PSD** practitioners operate under constant pressure and deal with conflict heavy, emotionally charged matters every day. They make judgement calls with incomplete information, knowing those decisions may be challenged months later when context has faded and colleagues have moved on.

This is not a reflection of practitioner capability or intent - it is a consequence of the environment and systems within which they are asked to operate.

Where systems are fragmented, that pressure becomes personal. Investigators spend too much time reconciling information, maintaining workarounds and rebuilding audit trails, and too little time applying professional judgement and progressing cases. That drives drift, inconsistency and defensive decision-making, but it also takes a toll on wellbeing and careers, because the risk of being unable to evidence “why” can feel like an individual failure rather than the organisational gap that it is.

Over time, it also becomes a resilience and retention issue, because good investigators and supervisors will only carry that level of personal accountability for so long when systems cannot reliably support them.

Addressing and improving the practitioner experience is not a wellbeing add on. It is fundamental to effective control. If a force wants consistent, defensible outcomes, it needs an operating model that reduces avoidable friction, prioritises its practitioners and makes good practice the default.



Addressing the challenge – an operating model that is purpose-built



Addressing these challenges requires more than incremental systemic improvement. It requires a clear, cohesive operating model.

When these stages are connected, decision-making improves – not because more information exists, but because it is handled in a structured, consistent and transparent way. The point is not to reduce professional judgement. It is to expedite that judgement whilst making it reviewable, comparable and defensible across teams and over time.

At its core, effective PSD capability connects five stages:

01. Intelligence & Referral

Capture information once and bring it into a coherent, structured view. This reduces fragmentation and ensures relevant signals are visible early.

02. Assessment

Apply consistent thresholds, risk assessment and recorded rationale. This is where proportionality, fairness and defensibility begin.

03. Investigation

Manage cases through structured workflows that support evidence handling, decision logging, supervision and appropriate access control.

04. Outcome & Resolution

Ensure decisions are clear, consistent and auditable, with transparent rationale that can be reviewed across similar cases.

05. Learning & Prevention

Identify patterns, manage risks such as associations and conflicts, and ensure organisational learning is owned, tracked and applied.

What good looks like in practice



A modern **PSD** capability should be judged not by how much process it adds, but by whether it produces structured, consistent decision-making and defensible audit as a normal by-product of day-to-day work.

- » A coherent record built around people, patterns and context – not disconnected case fragments.
- » Structured decision points, with rationale recorded where it matters most.
- » Consistency by design, not by heroics or memory.
- » Audit that stands on its own, without relying on the recollection of the original investigator.
- » Learning that moves from 'identified' to 'implemented', with ownership, actions and follow-up.



Why this matters now



This is not a technology challenge alone. It is a question of operating model maturity and leadership intent.

When oversight bodies describe the misconduct system as not fit for purpose, or state that it remains too easy for the wrong people to join and stay in policing, they are not describing a failure of individual effort. They are describing a failure of organisational control.

Modernising **PSD** capability is therefore a leadership decision because it directly affects public trust and legitimacy, workforce confidence in fairness and consistency, inspection outcomes and governance credibility, the ability to intervene early where patterns and vulnerability indicators must be connected, and officer welfare where delay creates predictable harm.

The question is never whether **PSD** teams are committed. The question is whether the organisation has built the infrastructure that allows committed professionals to be consistent, successful and defensible at scale.



From case management to confidence management



Professional Standards bears the burden of legitimacy because it is where policing demonstrates its grip on integrity and credibility. That grip is tested daily through assessment decisions, proportionality judgements, escalation thresholds and closure rationales.

In today's environment, forces cannot rely on professionalism alone. They need systems and processes that produce consistency, control and auditability as a normal outcome of doing the work. If we continue to apply 19th century principles to 21st century risk, using 20th century systems, we should not be surprised when the same failures recur under new scrutiny. Modernising **PSD** capability is not about technology for its own sake. It is about enabling organisations to act fairly, consistently and defensibly - and to demonstrate that they have done so. That is what supports investigators, strengthens organisational integrity, and helps restore confidence in policing.



Sources

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