

HM Senior Coroner Rachael Griffin
Senior Coroner, Area of Dorset.

By email

April 2026

Dear Senior Coroner Griffin,

I write on behalf of the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) in relation to paragraph 7, Schedule 5 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, and regulations 28 and 29 of the Coroners (Investigations) Regulations 2013, in relation to the prevention of future deaths report sent via email to the NPCC dated 30th March 2026.

The notice sets out concerns that arose from the information received during the inquest into the death of Oliver Roberts. I am very sorry to read of the circumstances of Oliver's death. My sympathies are with his family and friends.

I understand that the matters of concern raised are as follows:

1. There is a perceived lack of practical guidance to support police officers in the application of their powers to obtain communications data, whether under Grade 1, 2 or 3 requests.
2. Communications data is obtained pursuant to the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (IPA). The Home Office issued the Communications Data Codes of Practice in November 2018, a comprehensive document of approximately 144 pages addressing the exercise of functions under Parts 3 and 4 of the Act.
3. Requests for communications data are submitted by operational officers to Communications Data Investigation Teams, with processes varying depending on the grading of the request.
4. Grade 1, 2 and 3 requests are defined within the Codes of Practice, with Grade 1 relating to an immediate threat to life, Grade 2 to exceptionally urgent matters (including serious concern for the welfare of a vulnerable person), and Grade 3 relating to non-urgent but time-critical issues.
5. While sections 5 and 6 of the Codes of Practice address the application and authorisation processes, there is concern that more practical guidance—similar to Authorised Professional Practice—does not exist to support officers in decision-making.
6. In this case, a Grade 2 application was submitted almost 24 hours after Oliver was reported missing, following which he was located within just over two hours. Evidence was heard that urgent Grade 2 requests may be made verbally, yet there is no clear national guidance setting out when verbal or written applications should be used.
7. The Court is concerned that, without clearer guidance, similar circumstances could arise again.

In providing a response to these matters of concern, various portfolios within the NPCC have been consulted. While Oliver was reported as a missing person, the concerns identified relate more broadly to the use of communications data where there is serious concern for the welfare of a vulnerable person. This applies regardless of whether the individual has been formally reported missing.

From the perspective of the NPCC Missing People Working Group, operational guidance already directs investigating officers to seek advice from their Communications Data Investigators or Single

Points of Contact (SPoCs). These specialists are trained experts in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 and are best placed to advise whether a Grade 1 or Grade 2 application is appropriate.

I am not aware of any national guidance that prescribes when an operational officer must submit a communications data request. Decisions regarding grading, urgency, and whether a request should be made verbally or in writing properly sit with communications data SPoCs. In making those decisions, SPoCs are expected to undertake a risk assessment, apply the statutory thresholds, and fully document their decisions and actions.

The Communication Data Codes of Practice clearly describe the grading structure, as well as the circumstances in which urgent oral authorisation may be appropriate. SPoCs are expected to consider all relevant factors set out within the Codes when determining how best to proceed.

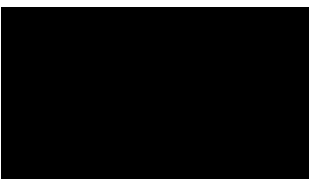
It is also relevant to note that force capabilities vary. For example, West Yorkshire Police operate a 24/7 Communications Data Investigation Unit with an on-duty SPoC at all times, accessible to operational staff. Other forces may still operate on an on-call basis, which can affect local processes but does not alter national legal thresholds. Due to the difference in processes across force areas, each force remains responsible for ensuring that suitable risk-based training is provided for staff. This would be especially true for officers at the rank of Sergeant or Inspector, who would normally undertake a risk assessment and set relevant investigative actions – including the consideration to request communications data.

In providing this response, we have worked closely with the College of Policing, who lead in areas such as setting national policing standards, including the provision of Authorised Professional Practice (APP). I will not seek to repeat the information that they have provided to you, other than to support their comments around the training and national guidance that already exists and is readily available to officers and staff. I welcome their ongoing process of developing further training specifically for the communications data SPoC community, focused on fast-time decision-making.

I am also reassured that the College are in the process of reviewing the Missing Persons Authorised Professional Practice and whether it can be further strengthened. The NPCC remains committed to supporting Forces and other stakeholders to continually improve the wider policing response with respect to investigations where communications data is pertinent.

I hope that this response provides reassurance and addresses the concerns raised by the Court. Please do not hesitate to contact me should you require any further information or clarification.

Yours sincerely,



Chair
National Police Chiefs' Council