

The Truth Behind My Search for Nicola Bulley: A podcast with the Geo-Profiler Douglas MacGregor.

What happened, Lessons, and the Impact on Underwater Search Operations in the UK

This podcast is the final part of my three-part interview with renowned Canadian Geographic Profiler Douglas MacGregor, reflecting on my career and the many cases I have worked on. This episode focuses on my involvement in the search for Nicola Bulley. Please read all the supporting documents and watch the full podcast to gain a clear understanding of what happened during the search and in the months that followed.

Important: Nicola's family and their representatives have been informed in advance of this release and have no raised objection. (Sensitive content advisory)

Professional Background

In 1999, I took the initiative to fund and pioneer the first side scan sonar trials for forensic search in the United Kingdom, applying this technology specifically to forensic searches for evidence and human remains. This marked a major advancement in search and recovery operations. By 2001, I was working alongside Dr. Mark Harrison, the first UK Police National Search Adviser. Together, we focused on developing trial methods and establishing how this technology could be effectively integrated into police operations. This was a vital step, as reservoirs, rivers, and canals presented immense challenges for traditional diver-led searches. That same year, I was appointed to the list of national experts within what was then called the National Operations Faculty (NOF), an organisation that has since undergone several evolutions.

Through my company, [Specialist Group International \(SGI\)](#), I built a close working relationship with emergency services and government departments. SGI became known for operating seamlessly across land and sea, supporting complex search, rescue, counter-terrorism, and maritime operations.

Over the years, my team and I have been involved in many high-profile cases, recovering human remains and critical evidence from buried, submerged, inland, and offshore locations. SGI has grown into a highly specialist unit equipped with some of the most advanced technology available today.

For more than four decades, I have dedicated my life to specialist search and rescue, serving this country with pride and earning an international reputation for integrity, innovation, and professionalism.

The Disappearance of Nicola Bulley

The disappearance of Nicola Bulley captured global attention, with many left baffled by the circumstances by a mother simply vanishing while out walking her dog. Specialist Group International (SGI), were asked by Nicola's family to assist in the search efforts nine days after Nicola disappeared. Prior to arriving in St Michael's on Wyre, I too found it difficult to comprehend how a person could just disappear in such a benign river and not be found, especially when considerable national resources had already been mobilised to search for her.

Clarifying the Facts

I wish to present a clear account of the events that unfolded during my involvement in the search, the developments in the ensuing months, and the lasting effects this tragic case has had on underwater search operations across certain regions of the UK. This is a comprehensive statement, as I believe it is necessary to outline the facts that led to widespread confusion and speculation.

Release of Unseen Live Side Scan Sonar Footage

For the first time, high-frequency side-scan sonar footage obtained during my search will be presented in the podcast. This data has not previously been made available to the public and has yet to be requested or reviewed by any official authority. Some of the imagery may be highly sensitive; however, it is being released in the public interest to facilitate the learning of critical lessons and to support the advancement of standards in future underwater search operations.

SGL's Search

My team and I arrived on Monday 6 February and we were met by a wall of hungry media, desperate for information, search updates and comments. I immediately asked the Police Search Adviser (PoLSA) if he could send a press officer to the site to assist but I was told there was nobody available. I also asked to see the SIO but was told she too was not available.

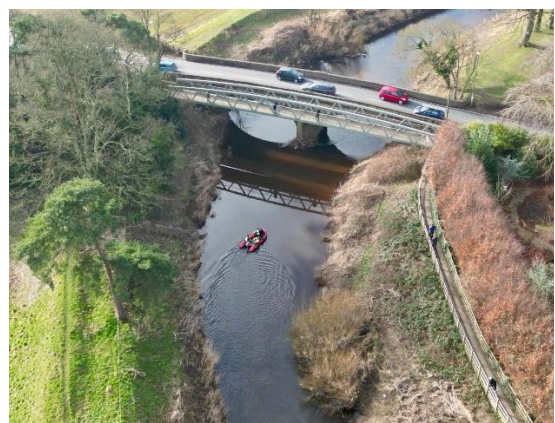
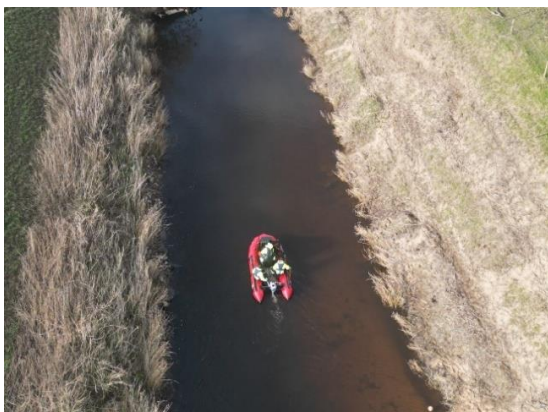
The PoLSA then presented me with a piece of A4 paper stating only that SGL were responsible for our own risk assessments, safety and equipment, similar wording to an email that was sent to me the day before. I signed the piece of paper but was not given a copy. I was given no confidential information or operational briefing other than being told which part of the river they would like us to begin our search.



I advised the PoLSA that we wanted to search the 'hot zone' using our side scan sonar - the area where Nicola's phone and dog harness were found and is the obvious place to begin a search. I wanted to search the stretch of river from the bench down to the weir first. The PoLSA advised me that he believed Nicola had gone over the weir on the day she went missing and we need to focus our search from the weir to the sea. I thought this was very strange, as normally a thorough search would start from the suspected point of entry and our sonar can scan and clear many miles of river in a day so theoretically for complete thoroughness, it would be good practice to scan areas that had already been searched, from the suspected point of entry onwards.

As we started our search down the river we could see the bottom of the river in many places. I couldn't see how Nicola would have been in this area, she would have been grounded on the rocks and shallows and easily be seen by the police helicopter, drones, search and rescue teams or members of the public.

We cleared a large area of the river as negative down to Cartford Bridge but could not go any further as it was too shallow to continue, with the depth of the river only inches deep. It was unbelievable that with all the national assets assisting in the search, Nicola had not been found.



The following day, on 7 February 2023 SGI were tasked with searching from the bench upriver to just beyond Rowanwater as it had not been searched. Nicola had already been missing ten days, and this area had not been searched; their working hypothesis was that Nicola went in at the bench and got carried over the weir. The College of Policing review does not mention any searches being conducted upriver.

Being led by my own professional instincts, I decided the 'hot zone' needed searching from the bench down to the weir even though the police had already advised me that this stretch had already been searched and didn't need to be searched again. It was clear they did not want us in this area. From experience, I felt it necessary to conduct my search as if the area had never been searched at all.

The stretch of the river just before the weir was only inches deep with very clear water and hardly any water flow. My team and I agreed it would not be possible for a body to get past this area without grounding on the rocks or being seen, so we started our search here and went upriver towards the bench at 10:28am. As we passed the island, I noticed a large shadow on the sonar screen at the island which I marked on the software. We continued up to the bench and turned around. There is a large rock shelf in front of the bench that drops off into deeper water in the middle of the river where I saw a tree on the bottom. After the deep area it shallows off to a rough bottom. As we approached the island on the return leg, just six minutes after starting my search, approximately 75 metres downstream from the bench where Nicola's phone and dog harness were found, I saw something significant. The anomaly appeared as one shadow showing what looked like two outstretched arms and the tip of a head between the arms. It was sadly a sonar signature that I have become only too familiar with in my career. In my professional opinion it took human form.



(The position of the boat shows hardly any flow on corner before weir down from bench.)



(Red dot shows approximately where Nicola was located)



Bench
↓



(Red dot shows approximately where Nicola was located)

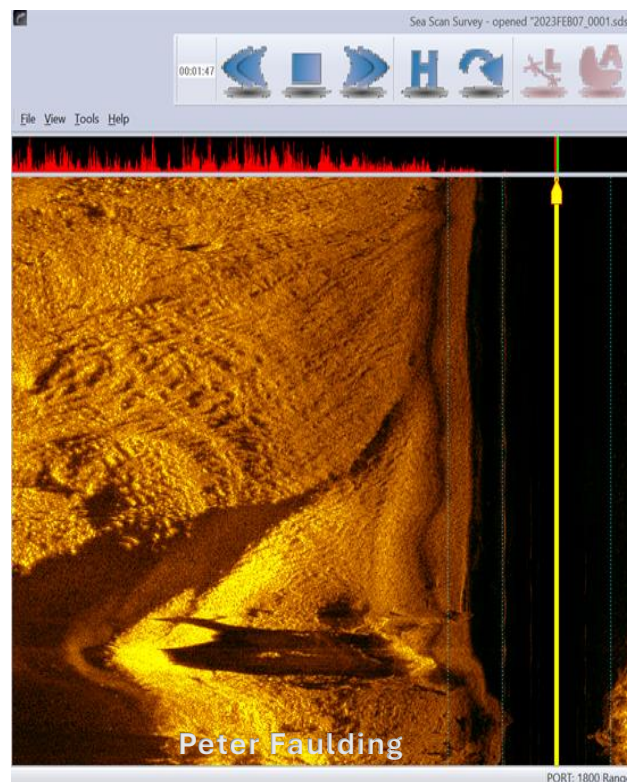
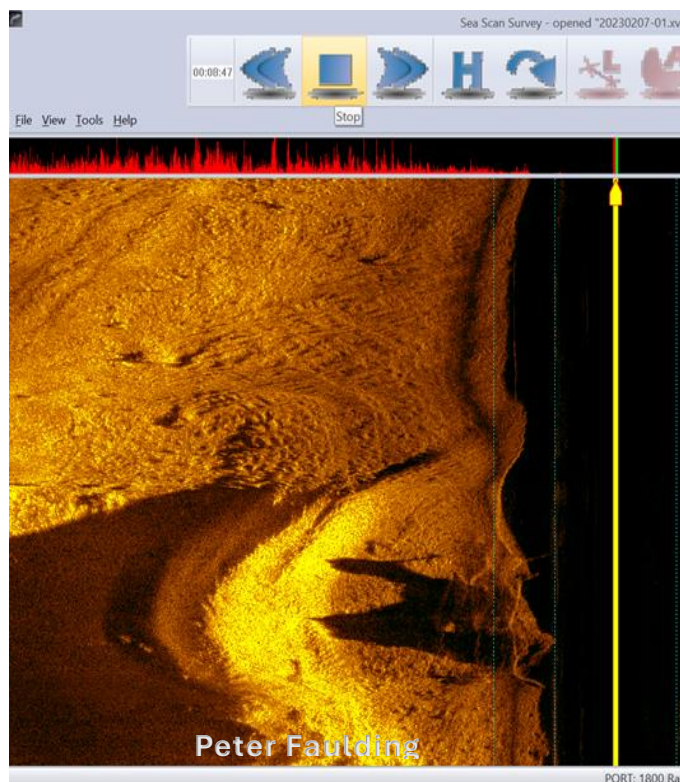
At 10:53am, a screenshot of this image was sent to the PoISA and advised him that I may have located Nicola. I asked for permission for SGI divers to immediately dive the anomaly. The request was declined, and I was advised that the Northwest Police Underwater Search Unit would investigate instead.

I pushed a stick into the riverbank to mark the rough area for the police divers. At 13.21, after a short dive, the police diver reported there was “nothing there.” I was surprised at this result as a sonar anomaly cannot be created by nothing. My diving supervisor and another member of my team witnessed the dive whilst I continued upriver conducting further scans for the purpose of steering the media’s attention away from the dive.



Shortly afterwards I was approached by a journalist on the riverbank. Under pressure and relying on the information given to me by police, I stated on camera that Nicola was not in the river. Those words have often been repeated without the full context and have defined me ever since. I regret the confusion and distress this caused. My statement was based on what I knew at the time: The diver’s assurance that nothing was found, the absence of any other sonar targets in the river, and my professional obligation not to disclose operational information.

Unconvinced by the diver’s findings, later that day, my team and I re-scanned the area several times and obtained more detailed images by moving the boat closer to the riverbank. To clarify, the image captured at 10.34 shows just the symmetrical shadows of the arms. The images captured in the afternoon, show not only the shadow but a clear image of what looks like a body laying on the right side, bent legs, bottom, outstretched arms and a head.



Interestingly, in both the morning and afternoon scans, there appeared to be no ground disturbance around the anomaly or any movement of the shadows. Firstly, if there was 'nothing', there would not be a shadow or a shape, it's impossible. Secondly, for a thorough search to have been conducted, any find including tree branches as was later reported, would need to have been moved to ensure that there was nothing concealed beneath, leaving disturbances and drag marks on the riverbed. These disturbances would have been visible on the sonar scans captured in the afternoon after the police dive, yet none appeared. Additionally, if the find had been moved, the resulting shadow would have shifted and would be different, but there is no difference in either scan.



As an easy explanation: if you stand with your back to the sun with your arms out, a shadow of this will be cast. If you lower one arm, the resulting shadow will be different. Therefore if the object had been moved, the shadows would be different, both in length and direction.

(As shown in photos)

The following morning Wednesday 8th February 2023, I asked the Lancashire PoISA permission to re-scan the 'hot zone' and deploy SGI divers from the weir upstream. Once again, this was declined. Instead, we were directed to search downstream from Cartford Bridge to the sea, an area inaccessible at that time due to the low tide, therefore no more searches could be conducted, and SGI were asked to leave. By then, it was clear SGI were not wanted back in the hot zone.

My team and I did our job: we identified and highlighted the anomaly. I requested permission to dive at that location, but this was declined. I asked again to search the following morning, and that request was also declined. We did everything possible within the law and the framework of the police operation.

Where did Nicola enter the water

I do not believe that Nicola entered the water in front of the bench. The reason for this is that the water immediately at the bottom of the bank below the bench was very shallow; if she fell in there, she would be able to self-rescue and stand up, unless unconscious. If that was the case, she would have been found in the water very nearby. The water speed on the day was not fast enough or deep enough to carry her body downstream and over the weir. The water depth just before the weir was extremely shallow, and with hardly any flow it would not be possible for her body to get past that point. Drowning victims sink to the bottom very quickly and are generally recovered very close to their entry point. Therefore, I believe Nicola went into the water near to where my sonar located her, adjacent to the small strip of woodland to one side of the small island.

The pictures below I took on the 7 and 8 February 2023. Photo 1 shows the shallow water at the bottom of the bank in front of the bench. Photo 2 looking from our boat towards the bench. Photo 3 looking across the bank at the bottom of the bench, and Photo 4 showing the still, shallow water with hardly any flow on the corner leading to the weir. Nicola could not have got past this area. There was not enough depth and water speed to move a body the day Nicola went missing.



Photo 1



Photo 2

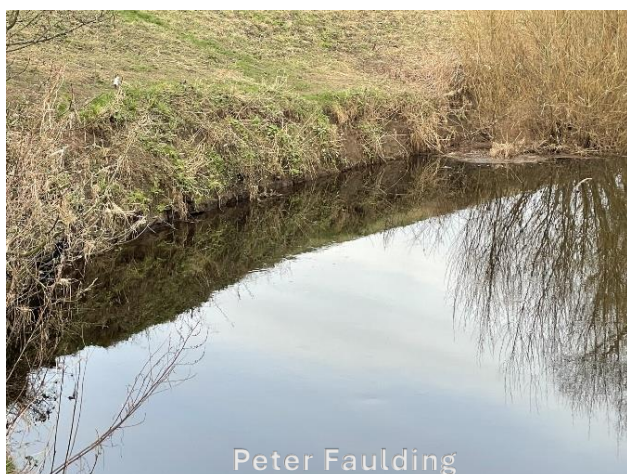


Photo 3



Photo 4

Discovery of Nicola Downstream

Nicola was sadly discovered much further downstream and over the weir. This was because of an exceptionally high tide that took place on 18/19 February 2023. The powerful tidal surge swept over the weir from the tidal section below, flooding the upper, non-tidal stretch of the river where the bench was situated. This surge had sufficient force to lift Nicola's decomposing body from the riverbed, the same area where I had detected her using sonar. As the tide ebbed, the current carried Nicola's body down the river and over the weir, eventually moving her into the lower tidal section. Later that morning, Nicola was found by a member of the public, rather than by the police search teams.

The COP review (page 32) acknowledges this tidal event.

“Sunday 19 February was also the first high tide since Nicola’s disappearance, with 20 cubic metres of water per second moving over the weir. This predicted tidal movement would likely contribute to a floating body on the surface, moving with the tide.”

Police Search

The summary of the river search for Nicola in the CoP Review confirms the focus of the search by divers was primarily in front of the bench, with six dives being conducted in this area. The search of the river down to the weir was surfaced-based and not using sonar. Unfortunately, surface-based searches do not find drowning victims in dark, deeper water.

The COP review (pages 28-29) states:

The river in front of the bench was searched by divers and a wade search was conducted to the weir. and water searches were surface-based, rather than sonar. Water based search teams were conducted using the LFRS, Coastguard and Royal National Lifeboat Institution. On 30 January, the same area of river in front of the bench was searched by divers again, up to the weir. Searches continued on 31 January, 1 February and 2 February, with the river in front of the bench again searched by divers.

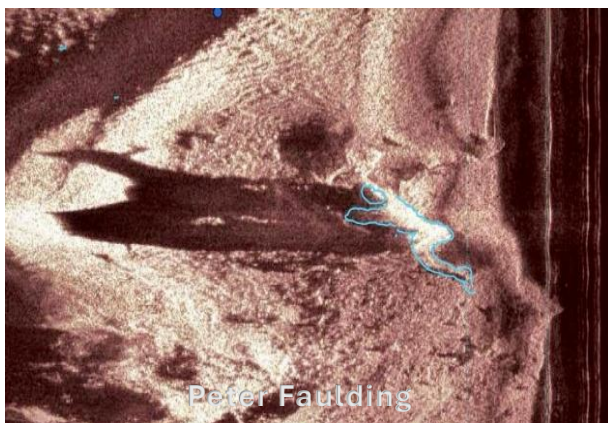
Both the Lancashire Police Search Adviser (PoISA) and the National Police Search Adviser maintained that the river had been thoroughly searched using multiple agencies and advanced sonar technology. Despite these assurances, Nicola was ultimately found in the river.

COP review (page 33) states:

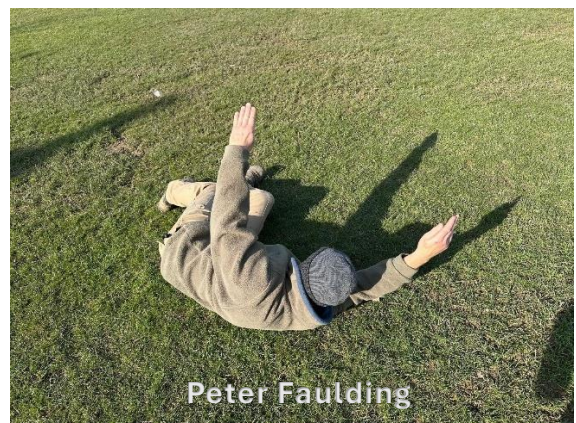
Two reviews were conducted of the search response and activities in this case during the early stages. These were a PoISA independent peer review on 2 February and a review by the national search advisor on 6 February. The PoISA peer review found that: ‘In my opinion the river has been searched extensively from the PLS (place last seen) through the mouth of the river at the point in the estuary where it meets the sea. This has been conducted by multiple agencies including Coastguard, Inshore Lifeboat, Lancashire Fire and Rescue and Underwater Search and Rescue Unit.

Sonar Analysis

Months later after Nicola was discovered, I conducted a thorough and detailed analysis of the sonar data using advanced side scan sonar measuring and enhancement software. This review forced me to confront a difficult truth and what I had suspected from the beginning; the anomaly I detected on 7 February was without a shadow of a doubt, Nicola. The dimensions matched her height, and the sonar image showed a body-shaped outline in a prone position, with bent knees and outstretched arms. In the picture I am recreating that image.



(Sonar scan)



(Recreating the image)

The body of Nicola outlined in blue in the picture above was approximately 75 metres downstream from the bench. Given the calm, non-tidal river conditions, this is the area where I would have expected to find Nicola.

My professional beliefs are supported by the **The COP review (page 33)** which states:

"It is essential for a search strategy to consider the available research and to use experts. This can determine a point when a search will be suspended, if the subject has not been located. Anecdote and experience indicate that most, but not all, victims of drowning are found on – or very close to – the bottom of a watercourse, within a 100m radius of the location of entry".

If SGI had been allowed to dive, Nicola would have been brought home to her family on the 7 February rather than on the 19 February.

Concerns Regarding the Authenticity and Independence of the Reconstruction

Despite my efforts to highlight a significant anomaly identified during my search, this finding was neither referenced during the inquest nor mentioned in the reconstruction process led by a Lancashire Police diver. This I considered odd. The reconstruction was intended to provide an independent demonstration of how Nicola's body would have moved in the water had she entered at the bench. As it was a member of the Lancashire Police dive team that conducted this demonstration, this process did not represent true independent demonstration.

It is astonishing that the evidence produced from this recreation was included and accepted in the official inquest, whilst my own findings of an identified anomaly during my search was overlooked and not given due consideration. Furthermore, his account and interpretation of events were accepted without any further critical examination or scrutiny. When a person drowns, they go quickly to the bottom. The police diver was wearing a buoyant rubber drysuit and needed to paddle himself down the river and over the weir due to the lack of depth and water flow necessary to independently propel himself using natural water flow. In fact, there was very little water flow, documented in a video I took of a stick floating in the river. The diver also discussed the underwater searches but did not make any mention of the dive of my sonar target.

This situation gives rise to serious questions regarding the authenticity and independence of the reconstruction, supporting a predetermined outcome. The lack of objective review and the disregard for alternative findings compromise the credibility of the process and undermine confidence in the conclusions drawn.

Below is a link to a copy of the reconstruction by a Police diver from Lancashire Police:

[Nicola Bulley's final moments recreated by cop in river who shows how quickly current can move](#)

Presenting Evidence During the Review Interview

Having been excluded from the inquest, my first opportunity to present my evidence was during the College of Policing Review. Although I engaged openly, the review process left me with deep concerns. I approached this review with the expectation that it would function as an independent and impartial forum to present all my evidence for thorough examination.

During the meeting, I was requested on four occasions to sign a non-disclosure agreement, which I declined because I considered transparency to be crucial. The questions I was asked suggested the outcome had already been decided with limited interest shown in my search methods, findings, or supporting evidence. I offered the review team full access to all my search information including the live sonar data and proposed a follow-up meeting to further explain and verify my findings. My offers were ignored. A detailed letter sent by recorded delivery and by email to the HM Coroner for Lancashire also went unanswered.

For reference, the questions I was asked during this review meeting and my answers, can be found on our website: [Specialist Group International \(SGI\)](#), under the title Nicola Bulley.

Confidential Media Briefing

Just prior to the publication of the College of Policing review, a select group of journalists were invited to a confidential online briefing on a non-reportable basis which focused on my sonar imagery. During this unprecedented meeting, two images were presented, and attendees were informed that my findings were not credible. The information shared with the press on a non-reportable basis was narrowly framed, deliberately excluding the crucial live sonar data evidence that supported my conclusions. This disgraceful approach had a direct influence on subsequent one-sided media coverage and formed part of a broader effort to undermine my credibility, rather than enable a fair and objective assessment of the evidence.

I was only made aware of the full details of this media event several months later, following a Freedom of Information request that a member of the public sent to me. At no stage was I afforded the opportunity to respond to these claims or provide necessary context to my work. The Freedom of information documentation confirming this event is also available on our website: [Specialist Group International \(SGI\)](#), under the title Nicola Bulley.

The College of Policing Review Document

When the review was published, an astonishing 16 pages were dedicated to me personally, with my name mentioned 58 times, and Specialist Group International referenced 30 times. In a national review intended to evaluate an entire police investigation, our team was repeatedly highlighted, indicating a disproportionate focus on our involvement while no individual police officers or experts were named. Additionally, the review included many inaccuracies, errors, omissions, and distortions, presenting a grossly inaccurate and misleading picture of SGI's involvement. This highly unprofessional approach gave the impression that the report was more concerned with shifting focus away from Lancashire Police than with establishing the facts.

Furthermore, the College of Policing's own Fairness and Openness Policies were not upheld during this process. The review contained direct and detailed criticisms of my work, yet I was not given sight of these comments in advance, nor afforded an opportunity to respond prior to publication. Compounding this, I was only provided with an embargoed version of the final report at 14:45, just hours before its public release, leaving no meaningful chance to correct inaccuracies, add relevant context, or exercise any right of reply. This process fell well below the standards of transparency, accuracy and fairness that the College of Policing is supposed to exemplify and set for others. Copies of the relevant documents are below.

Had I been given the opportunity, I could have addressed numerous inaccuracies and provided important context. For the purpose, of this statement, however, I will focus on the most significant issue below: the investigation of the sonar target.

All additional inaccuracies can be found at the end of this document, following my statement.

On the day of the review's release, a press conference was held by the College of Policing. Recognising that I had become the scapegoat for the whole police operation, a reporter asked, 'the report is highly critical of independent dive expert Peter Faulding, and how on earth was this allowed to happen?' International headlines supporting the review's unfair criticism of me followed, no doubt strengthened by the secret media briefing held a few weeks prior. This has created significant and lasting damage to both my own and my company's reputation on an international scale.

Additionally in this press conference an unusual and bizarre claim that 'Nicola could not have been found any sooner' was made with no supporting justification or explanation. This comment affects public confidence and acknowledges the true lack of resources and specialist expertise, setting an unacceptable standard for underwater search.

The Review's Investigation of the Sonar Target

The College of Policing concluded that my sonar target was "sufficiently investigated," relying on three elements: diver findings, GPS coordinates allegedly matching those provided by SGI, and opinions from external experts. This conclusion was then used to dismiss my findings. I strongly disagree with their conclusion for the following reasons:

1. Diver findings

The divers initially stated they found "nothing" when they investigated my anomaly, a claim later repeated during the investigation and in the letter to me dated 2nd November 2023 from Dr Ian Raphael, College of Policing.

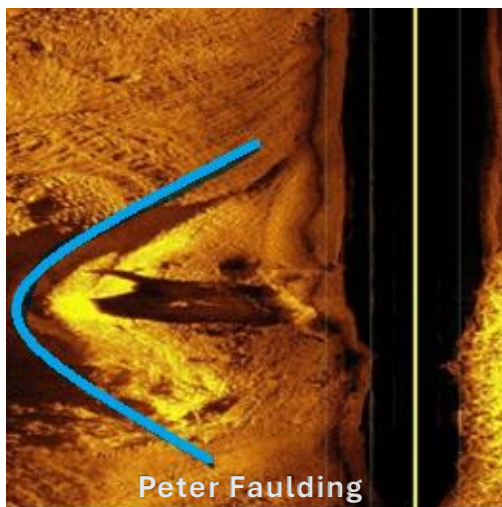
"The Team is very grateful to you for providing all the sonar images and for not publicising their existence. Discussion of this matter could have caused Nicola's family and friends further distress. The Review Team checked with the Search Team at Lancashire Constabulary. They acknowledged that they had received this information from you and undertook a search in the area of the sonar images. They found nothing there."

However, **The COP review (page 105)** review later described the find as "tree branches" a detail never previously mentioned.

The diver who undertook this dive was able to confirm that the dive took place at 13:21 and the find was found to be tree branches underwater and, therefore, cleared as negative. It is relevant to also add that this same area had previously been searched by the NWPUSMU on 28 and 31 January, using both sonar equipment and dive methods. These had also proved negative.

The Cop review (page 105) states:

The diver stated: 'I am actually 100% sure that there was no body in that part of the water at that time. It is not very often I dive in such an unobstructed body of water with such a flat bottom and with visibility.'



Blue line shows sand bank. Not a flat bottom

In fact, the riverbed was not flat, Nicola was laying within a curved sandbank as shown on the side scan sonar imagery marked in blue. This raises serious questions as to the diver's account.

Additionally, my sonar images from later that same day revealed no drag marks or disturbances on the riverbed, which would be expected if branches or any object had been moved. For a thorough search to have taken place, tree branches would have needed to have been lifted and shifted to ensure there was nothing beneath them, leaving visible marks on the riverbed.

SGL's 1800 kHz side scan sonar is sensitive enough to record drag marks and even footprints. If the anomaly had been moved the shadows cast would change in shape, size or direction. The shadows in the morning and afternoon scans were identical with no marks present on the riverbed indicating that the anomaly had not been disturbed.

These inconsistencies raise important questions about whether the precise anomaly was identified, whether it was investigated thoroughly, or whether the account provided later had been altered.

2. GPS coordinates

The report states that SGL provided GPS coordinates on the day - this is untrue. The only reference point that I provided to the police divers was a stick pushed vertically into the ground on the riverbank to mark the approximate area to search, as evidenced in several photographs taken by the media. GPS coordinates were only later provided in a letter I sent to the College of Policing review team on 27 October 2023.

The COP Review (Page 105) states:

The dive team was later contacted by the review team regarding this find and confirmed a dive had taken place on 7 February, following the sonar imagery presented by Mr Faulding and SGL. The dive team worked from the GPS coordinates provided by them, along with a marker that they had placed on the riverbank.

The diver provided their own record of this dive to the review team. The coordinates of the images that they record of that dive match exactly those of SGL's images. This diver also provided the primary dive evidence to the coroner at the inquest into Nicola's death.

The GPS coordinates were never provided until 27th October 2024. The inquest into Nicola's death was in June 2024.

It is also important to note that GPS does not function underwater. The claim that the diver's search matched SGL's GPS co-ordinates demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of sonar operations and appears to be an attempt to retrospectively validate that the correct area was searched.

3. Contradictory statements

Divers claimed they were "100% sure there was no body" supported by a description of clear water visibility. However, the PoISA described the water as "really dark" and suggested Nicola may have gone over the weir. These accounts cannot both be correct. Without clarification or corroborating evidence, the conclusion reached cannot be relied on.

The COP review (Page 30) states:

'The PoISA lead later described 'the water as having been really dark'

4. Expert reviews

Perhaps the most serious issue is the reliance on two unnamed sonar experts. Neither was given access to the full live side scan sonar dataset or the enhancement tools necessary for proper evaluation, despite my repeated offers to provide these for analysis. Both opinions were based solely on a single still image in PDF form. Their identities, relevant experience in locating drowning victims and reasoning have not been disclosed.

As someone with decades of experience using sonar in forensic searches across the UK, I can say with certainty that no credible sonar assessment can be based on a single still image alone. A proper evaluation requires access to the full dataset. Anything less is incomplete.

The first government expert based their view only on the original sonar shadow image that I provided to the review team in London. It wasn't until I later submitted more detailed images and urged the review team to review the full dataset in my letter dated 27th October that a second expert from Cranfield University was consulted. However, once again their assessment was based only on a still image. It is unknown whether this expert was shown just the original image or the enhanced images provided later. However, their assessment is quoted in the report using an ellipse [...], which suggests either part of their statement was omitted or edited. To fully understand what was said, the original unedited statement should be obtained.

The COP review (Pages 105-106) states:

To supplement this, and to provide an independent view, the review team contacted a leading government sonar specialist for their opinion of the sonar images taken by SGI on 7 February. expert view that they had 'low confidence that the images were that of a human casualty'.

Mr Faulding later contacted the review team on 26 October and provided further images of this find. To provide additional expert and independent opinion, these and the earlier sonar images were assessed by a lecturer from Cranfield University. They stated: 'The target cannot be positively identified as a human body based on the data presented. [...] In my opinion, this target would be classed as a low probability of confidence for human remains. I would recommend the target be inspected by divers or a robotic camera system following high priority targets in the dive area.'

This review concludes that this find was sufficiently investigated by the search team, at the time, and was established to be a negative finding. This was additionally supported by the expert opinion of the images from two independent scientists, which were received during this review.

The statement confirms that neither expert formed their opinion using the full range of evidence available, specifically the live sonar data and instead relied solely on just images alone. Furthermore, the second expert's opinion appears not only edited but presented in a way that suggests he was not engaged in a proper or formal review of the findings. This is highly significant as critical evidence was deliberately disregarded raising serious concerns about the thoroughness, independence, reliability and overall integrity of the review process.

Their assessments were reported back to me just a few days after I sent the enhanced images of 27th October in the reply letter dated 2nd November 2023 from Dr Ian Raphael, College of Policing:

"Their views are articulated in different ways and the conclusion of all those views is that the images you provided are of low certainty to be a human body.

In the Review Report we describe information that you provided to the Review Team and the actions taken. The Report is unlikely to include any of the images.

The Review Team has met with Nicola's family and has shown them the images. We felt it important to do so to give them the information about the search for Nicola and what we have done to check that the action that was taken was appropriate. As you might imagine, the family were quite upset and we ask that the images are not released to the public. We cannot stop you from disclosing the images but would ask that you respect the feelings of Nicola's family."

Why would Nicola's family be upset if they were shown the images of either nothing or tree branches?

It is important to highlight that although the police dive team and government teams are quoted as also using sonar, neither expert was asked to review that sonar data to confirm or challenge their conclusions, leaving them inevitably unreliable and another significant gap in the integrity of the review.

5. Independent expert opinion - Neil McDonagh

In contrast, Neil McDonagh's independent sonar analysis stands out for its transparency and thoroughness. Unlike the unnamed experts, Neil clearly sets out his professional background, extensive and relevant experience and the clear, evidence-led reasoning behind his conclusions. His methodical approach allows a proper understanding of how the evidence supports his findings. Niel has extensive search and rescue experience and was trained by a leading sonar specialist in the US.

Having reviewed the available information, Neil concluded that the sonar anomaly represented a highly credible target that was consistent with human form, a contrary assessment to the previous opinions. His well-reasoned and substantiated opinion highlights the shortcomings of the anonymous assessment, which lacked transparency and detail.

6. Conclusion

- The diver findings were inconsistent and questionable
- The GPS evidence was misrepresented
- Accounts of water visibility were contradictory
- The expert reviews were limited, anonymous and based only on still images
- Most importantly, an independent expert has provided an evidence-based assessment resulting in very different conclusion. His assessment supports my finding.

These issues raise important questions about the sonar anomaly investigation. The inconsistencies, omissions, and lack of transparency underline the need for further independent scrutiny. Until the facts are examined openly and comprehensively, the conclusions cannot be considered reliable.

The consequences and wider issue

Sadly, the people most affected by this flawed review are the families of missing persons and drowning victims. Over the past decade, efficiency drives, and budget cuts have led many police forces across the UK to disband their dedicated underwater search teams. Today, only eleven such units remain across the United Kingdom. Thames Valley Police underwater search unit was disbanded in 2014. In 2015 Sussex Police disbanded their Underwater Search and Marine Unit. Their equipment including their rigid inflatable boat was sold to Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service, which later also disbanded its underwater search capability. In some regions, there is now no meaningful marine capability at all.

The only UK underwater search units remaining are listed below: this leaves much of England exposed.

Metropolitan Police	North West (NWUSU)
Avon & Somerset	Yorkshire & Humber
Devon & Cornwall	Northumbria
South Wales	Police Scotland one team
Nottinghamshire	Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI)
Lincolnshire	

*Fire & Rescue services in the UK do not operate underwater search teams. (Divers)

For many years, SGI stepped up to fill this critical gap, serving as the official underwater search provider for six police forces across the southeast of England: Thames Valley, Hampshire, Surrey, Sussex, Kent, Essex.

Our team was approved for police, government, to include diving operations for HMRC. We are equipped with advanced underwater search technology and a full maritime capability. SGI have a proven track record of seamlessly working alongside police and emergency services, locating and recovering vital evidence and drowning victims, providing closure to families.

This partnership worked effectively for many years with six police forces having a local and reliable on-call team to call upon. On average, SGI recovered numerous drowning victims each year, often locating and recovering them within three hours of starting a search.

For transparency, our financial model was straightforward. SGI charged only for time spent on deployment, at a rate of £400 per hour. The significant costs of maintaining a specialist underwater team meant no profits were made from these operations; in fact, the unit was subsidised through wider company income. For the police, this provided a cost effective, professional and responsive solution for the six forces we supported, enabling professional swift recoveries and timely closure for families.

Naturally, one might ask, if not for financial gain, what's in it for SGI? For us, we do this work because we have seen first-hand the despair and agony that families endure when a loved one goes missing. Our expertise and specialist equipment can bring a swift end to that suffering by quickly locating and recovering victims.

Since Nicola's case however, SGI has been sidelined amidst information that does not reflect the full facts, leaving large area of the UK without any official underwater search provision. Families are often told "police are searching"

when in fact no divers are deployed. Instead, highly dedicated Lowland Rescue volunteers attend, who provide an invaluable service and are highly dedicated, but they do not have a diving capability.

The few remaining police underwater search teams now travel long distances to cover the whole country, often cutting operations short due to stretched resources. Tragically this has led to drowning victims going undiscovered for days or weeks, frequently found in the same area where they were last seen, usually by members of the public. SGI regularly receives calls from heartbroken families who feel unsupported and are pleading for help. Helicopters and drones do not find drowning victims. Initially Fire & Rescue respond for the initial first few hours, but then the operation becomes a recovery rather than rescue operation.

The COP review (Page 36) acknowledges the resourcing issue. Under its conclusions, it states:

The search capability and resourcing in this case could not rely on an on-call capability. It is recognised that this is a national challenge for searching. Instead, goodwill was demonstrated by staff to fill these resourcing gaps.

The COP review (pages 34-35) states:

At the conclusion of the investigation, a debrief was held of the search resources. Issues were highlighted around refreshments, non-technical equipment, clothing and goodwill. These issues appear to be replicated nationally and have been the subject of a report titled 'Understanding police search, an analysis of their morale and welfare' (August 2022) commissioned by the Police Search Governance Board to address national challenges in terms of resilience, welfare and improvements to the role. The need for this review is supported by findings from this investigation.

This review highlights that underwater search in the UK is not fit for purpose and lacking technical search equipment and expertise. If a major incident occurred in the UK waters, we have no urgent response capability.

The COP review (page 35) states:

There is currently no on-call facility for the dive teams. Any requests for resourcing are therefore in addition to officers' ordinary roles and are conducted on a goodwill basis. While some of the team volunteered to attend and dive on 28 January, there were none available on 29 January. A decision was made to conduct water surface-based searches using other search resources. While there is not a national on-call capability for dive resources, mutual aid requests for resourcing support can be made via NPoCC. In this case, a mutual aid request was conducted, and the services of the South Wales dive team were used.

Underwater search is complex, specialist and emotionally demanding work. It requires vast amounts of equipment, expertise and experience under pressure. The decision to exclude a proven, local resource like SGI at a time when policing capabilities are shrinking is difficult to understand when measured against the need of families.

Recent cases in Surrey illustrate the human cost of this approach:

Peter Lawson

- Missing 10 days before surfacing in Shepperton.
- No divers were deployed.

Glen Godfrey

- Missing six months, despite police divers searching twice in Staines Reservoir he was not located.
- He was later discovered in Staines Reservoir by a lone reservoir worker after floating to the surface.
- Glen could have been found much sooner had an experienced sonar operator been deployed.

Darius

- Missing for five days in the River Thames in Surrey.
- His body surfaced on 30 August, recovered by Surrey SAR.
- No divers were deployed.

This issue is not new. In 2016, after the tragic drowning of Ellis Downes in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, Thames Valley Police led three days of searches using marine units, sonar and fire & rescue along with Lowland rescue volunteer's unit, yet they were unable to locate him. His family turned to SGI and Ellis was found within 40 minutes by SGI divers near to where he had drowned.

Following this, the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) acknowledged the national shortage of underwater search capability and recommended that approved private dive teams should be considered. SGI was subsequently appointed as Thames Valley Police's and five other forces official underwater search team, ensuring families would not face such failures again.

Despite these lessons, contrary recommendations have now been implemented after Nicola's case, and we are back to square one with police forces across a large part of the UK, particularly across the southeast, having no meaningful underwater search capability.

This is not a matter of policy; it is a matter of compassion and professionalism. Families in crisis deserve the reassurance that everything possible is being done to find their loved ones.

Reflection

As I reflect on the past two years, I'm struck not only by the challenges I have faced but also the importance of ensuring that lessons are learned from this tragedy. What matters most is that families are better served in the future.

I'm deeply grateful for the overwhelming support I've received from the public, my family, my team, professional colleagues, and many police officers across the UK. That support has been a constant reminder that this work is bigger than any one individual. It has strengthened my determination to continue campaigning for truth, transparency, and higher standards in underwater search, not only for Nicola, but all families who deserve answers.

Royal Recognition and Renewed Commitment

A particularly powerful reminder of the value of our work came on 7 February 2024, when Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal visited Specialist Group International's (SGI) headquarters. This visit marked a significant milestone, recognising 30 years of dedicated service in specialist search and recovery.

For my team and I, it was a humbling and memorable moment. The Royal visit served as a clear affirmation of the importance and impact of our efforts. It strengthened my resolve to continue our mission, ensuring that in the future, every family can have confidence that every possible measure will be taken to find their missing loved ones as swiftly as possible.

Restoring Confidence Through Collaboration

The restoration of effectiveness and confidence in underwater search operations depends on genuine collaboration. All parties involved including police teams, independent specialists, and voluntary organisations must work together, combining their expertise, knowledge, and equipment. Only through this united approach can we improve outcomes, locate missing persons more swiftly, and provide families with the closure they desperately seek.

Urgent Need for Reform

To facilitate these crucial changes, a working group should be established, comprising of representatives from government, police, and subject-matter experts. The current system is inadequate and demands urgent reform. Immediate action is now required to ensure the effectiveness and reliability of underwater search and recovery efforts for all families in crisis.

In Closing

I respectfully request that Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer and Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood consider inviting those responsible for commissioning and preparing the College of Policing review including officers from Lancashire Constabulary and the unnamed sonar experts to appear before the Home Affairs Select Committee. It is important to address the significant questions raised by this case, as well as broader concerns about how a report containing so many factual inaccuracies and errors was released to the public, thereby causing further reputational damage to the British police service. At a time when the public trust in policing is already fragile, publishing a report in the form significantly risks further undermining confidence. This was neither a thorough nor independent investigation. The people of the United Kingdom deserve transparency, accountability, and leadership they can trust.

I am fully prepared to meet with them, to share my evidence and experience, and to contribute constructively towards reforms. Such engagement is crucial in restoring public trust and ensuring that families never again endure unnecessary delays or uncertainty when searching for missing loved ones.

This podcast and supporting statement have been produced for Nicola, for her family and for every family who, amid the most unimaginable grief, in their darkest hour, deserves the certainty that everything possible is being done to find their missing loved one and bring them home as fast as possible.

“True leadership is about admitting mistakes, learning from them, and making the changes to rebuild trust.

[Peter Faulding](#)

Further Misleading Statements within the COP report: [The College of Policing Review Document](#)

Further inaccuracies and misleading statements in the College of Policing report

Non-Disclosure Agreement

The report claims that I signed a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) drafted by the CoP's legal team when I arrived at the search site. This assertion is categorically false.

At no point was I asked to sign an NDA. I was never presented with such a document, nor was any discussion around an NDA held. The only document I was asked to sign was a brief, one-page form outlining my own responsibility for health and safety—completely unrelated to confidentiality or disclosure. I signed this form, was not provided a copy, and have received no further documentation to date. I also provided a statement confirming this in my official interview with a college of policing review team.

Despite these facts, the CoP has proceeded to publish a report stating that an NDA was signed—without being able to produce any evidence of such a document. The alleged NDA has never been presented and this glaring contradiction undermines the credibility of the report and raises serious concerns about the accuracy and integrity of its content.

In Person Briefing

The report claims that a POLSA (Police Search Advisor) provided me with a comprehensive in-person briefing on the terms of my engagement in the investigation and search. This is also false. I was not given any such briefing. The only instruction I received was that I was acting independently of Lancashire Police, responsible for my own health and safety and where to begin my search. No discussion regarding confidentiality or operational terms took place at any point.

Speaking to the media

The COP review (Page 103) states that I was advised by a Chief Inspector for Lancashire Police about not speaking to the media. This is categorically false. At no point was I ever spoken to by any senior officer from Lancashire Police regarding media communications or anything at all despite me specifically requesting a press officer to attend. Had I been explicitly instructed not to speak to the media, I would have complied immediately.

In reality, there was no coordinated media strategy in place, nor was there a press officer appointed by Lancashire Police to manage media relations. As a result, I was left to manage the intense media presence on my own and, by default, became the public face of the investigation.

The fact that they apparently made the NDA request yet failed to appoint a press officer or put a media cordon in place, allowing the media storm to unfold unchecked, shows a complete failure not just in communication, but in basic operational control.

Photo opportunity

The report also falsely claims that on February 9, that I requested a photo opportunity involving a member of the chief officer team, the family, and myself. This allegation is entirely untrue. I never made such a request. In fact, I had already left the scene and was on my way home on February 9 (which is imbedded into my flight navigation software which cannot be edited).

The COP review (Page 101-102) states:

On 9 February, there was discussion about Mr Faulding where a further action was raised regarding his activities in relation to his engagement with the family. He had also requested a photo opportunity to take place at the scene with

a member of the chief officer team, the family and himself, which was declined through the gold group meeting. It was clear, from the recording of these meetings, that some of the behaviour and activities demonstrated by Mr Faulding caused challenges to the investigation.

Digging

The COP review (Page 102 – 103) claims that I was “digging with a spade” and that I stated that I believed I had “identified a body deposition site” is entirely false. I categorically deny making that statement or using those words at any time and I have witnesses to support this.

The COP review (Page 102 – 103) states:

In addition to his continued media presence, Lancashire Constabulary presented examples of when Mr Faulding operated outside of the terms of engagement with the search direction. This included an incident on 8 February, when he was observed digging with a spade in woodland near the river. This search activity had not been sanctioned by the PoISA lead and Mr Faulding had not undertaken any forensic precautions to ensure the safe recovery of forensic evidence. This activity fell outside of the agreed terms of engagement, where any forensic recovery should not be undertaken. When challenged at the time by the police, Mr Faulding stated that he believed this to be an area of recently disturbed earth, indicating a possible deposition site. This location had previously been searched and eliminated as part of the initial police search response on 27 January. Following this assertion, it was re-assessed by the PoISA lead, who comprehensively documented why they considered the area had not been recently disturbed. Mr Faulding had also informed the family that he thought he had identified a body deposition site (the location or believed location site of a deceased body). As part of this review, Lancashire Constabulary suggested that this had caused unwarranted distress and false alarm. Lancashire Constabulary also stated that the activity of Mr Faulding resulted in the diversion of police resources to the family to remedy the situation.

This account is not only grossly inaccurate, but it also ignores the detailed evidence and formal statement that I provided during my interview. As a highly experienced forensic search specialist, I observed what appeared to be an area of disturbed ground with unnatural features with reeds placed in front of a tree stump, which in my experience seemed completely out of place in this location. I gently scraped away the reeds and noticed cut marks in the ground, which means this area had been excavated previously. I then followed the cut marks down to a depth of about 1 inch (as shown in picture 2, below). I advised the Lancashire Police Inspector that this needed to be further investigated, as it could contain buried evidence linked to the disappearance of Nicola. It was at this point that the Police Inspector told me to fill it back in and walk away. He made no notes, and his response to my question of “what are you going to do with this”, was “we’ll deal with it later” and he walked off. That was the true extent of the hole that was alluded to in the CoP report, and clearly not big enough to be considered as a body deposition site. My actions were witnessed by a member of my team and a friend of the family. I am very meticulous with record keeping on all operations and the photos below are proof of my account.



Photo 1 (08/02/2023, 16:43)



Photo 2 (08/02/2023, 16:46)



Photo 3 (08/02/2023, 17:00)



Photo 4 (08/02/2023, 17:00)

There was no cordon in place at the time, no designated crime scene, and numerous individuals were moving freely through the same area. Yet once again, I have been singled out in the report, in what appears to be a deliberate attempt to discredit and falsely reinforce a narrative against me.

Furthermore, I pride myself on professionalism and compassion and would never make such insensitive remarks, particularly in the presence of a grieving family member. To suggest otherwise is not only untrue but deeply unfair. The report's portrayal deliberately paints me as out of control and lacking empathy—both of which are completely contrary to my character and conduct.

Challenges

The claim that I created challenges for the investigation team is both inflammatory and defamatory. The report states that the challenges that I created were significant enough to warrant Gold-level meetings, yet at no time was I approached or spoken to by any officer, given any briefing or feedback. Behind closed doors, issues were being discussed—but not addressed. This kind of ineffective, circular decision-making was emblematic of the entire search effort.

Comparing sonar equipment

The COP review (Page 99) claims that SGI did not possess equipment superior to what police could access. This is factually incorrect.

SGI operates an 1800 kHz side-scan sonar—the highest frequency commercially available. No UK police force uses this frequency. Higher sonar frequencies produce clearer, more detailed images, making this a technical advantage.

Furthermore, sonar effectiveness depends not just on the hardware but on operator expertise. I have decades of experience in underwater search and recovery, including successful location of drowning victims using sonar technology.

The report's claim is therefore both inaccurate and misleading. It dismisses the distinct advantages of SGI's equipment and experience—advantages that were unavailable through standard police resources.

These repeated factual errors seriously undermine the credibility of the report and call into question the integrity of its conclusions.

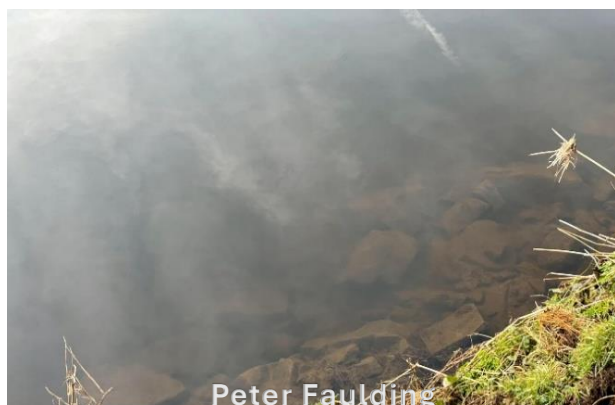
Water depth at the bank below the bench

The COP review (page 16) states:

The depth of water at the suspected point of entry was 4.6m.

This statement is misleading, the water at the foot of the bank could not have been 4.6 meters at the entry point at the bottom of the bank.

I took this picture at the alleged entry point in front of the bench on the 7th February 2023. The PoISA confirmed to me it was six inches higher on the day Nicola went missing on the 27th January. You can see by the depth of the water shown in my picture and the screen grab from the reconstruction of the Lancashire Police Officer, that there is a large rock shelf at this location. If Nicola had entered the water at this point, it was so shallow, providing she was conscious at the time, she could have easily stood up and self-rescued.



Misrepresentation of river data

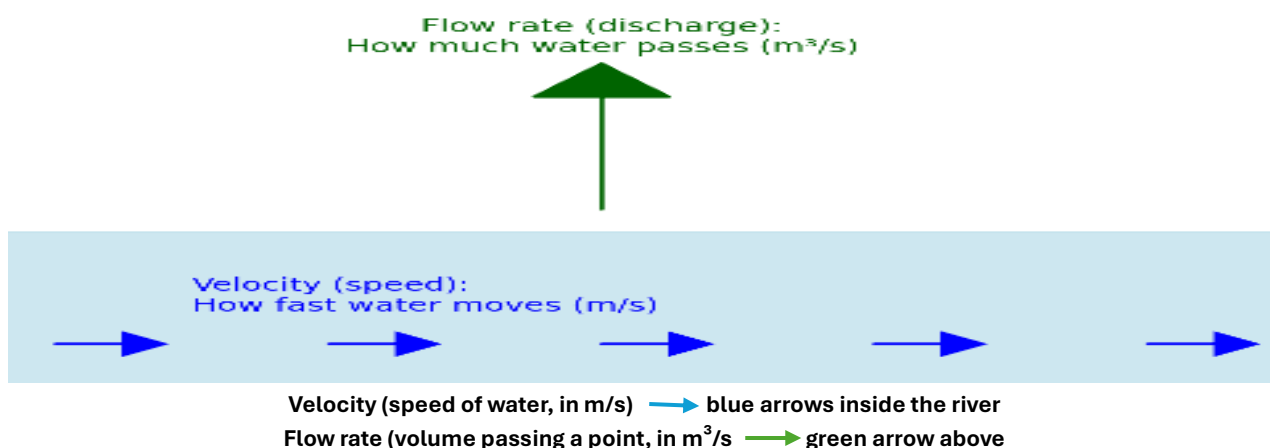
The COP review (Page 16) states:

The depth of water at the suspected point of entry was 4.6m. The river current was calculated as 3.8m per second,

This is factually incorrect. The official Environment Agency flow meter at St Michael's on the day recorded a discharge of approximately 3.8 cubic metres per second (m^3/s). This is a measure of volume — the amount of water moving past a fixed point — not the speed of the river.

The review misquoted this figure as if it were a velocity reading, claiming the river itself was moving at 3.8 m/s. In reality, 3.8 m/s is the speed of white-water rapids, not a shallow river that was only around two feet deep at the bench. Video evidence from 27 January confirms the Wyre was moving slowly and calmly, nothing like the torrent described in the report.

River Flow Rate vs Velocity (Current)



By confusing flow rate with velocity, the review exaggerated the difficulty of the search conditions and presented a misleading picture of the environment. This fundamental error undermines confidence in the accuracy of the report as a whole.

The COP review (Page 16) showed 3.8 cubic metres per second of water flowing past, **not** 3.8 metres per second of river speed. It confused volume with speed, creating a false impression that the Wyre was a raging torrent when footage proves it was calm and shallow.

Follow this link to see a video, which I took on the 8 February 2023 at 15:56 which shows a stick I threw in the river in front of the bench. I watched the stick for 20 minutes: it circled slightly but mostly remained in that location, demonstrating that Nicola could not have been washed away, down the river as stated in The COP review.

<https://youtu.be/oN8VGXRgptg?feature=shared>

Removal from the NCA Experts Database

On 16 February 2023, I received a letter from the National Crime Agency, which was followed by a further letter on 21 February 2023. Both letters notified me of my suspension from the expert database; however, neither offered any explanation for this action. It is important to note that, on the same day as the first letter, Lancashire Constabulary also referred themselves to the Independent Office for Police Conduct regarding the public release of Nicola's personal information.

Shortly thereafter, The Times published an article entitled "Nicola Bulley underwater search expert taken off list of experts", which cited a 'law enforcement source'. This coverage shifted the focus of media headlines away from Lancashire Constabulary and towards the development concerning my removal. The public nature of my removal from the national list of experts cancelled decades of effective service, which had been built on dedication, innovation, and professionalism. Furthermore, this action caused significant and lasting damage to both my own and my company's reputation on an international scale. In the following two years, similar headlines and narratives continued to circulate, perpetuating this theme.

I want to make it absolutely clear that neither I nor Specialist Group International have accepted, nor sought, any form of payment or benefit in relation to this matter from the Daily Mail of the Podcast channel. Our only aim is to encourage openness, help improve future police operations, and to ensure that both my own position and that of Specialist Group International are properly understood.

The public rightly expects high standards from those entrusted with upholding the law, and it is in everyone's interest that these standards are consistently met. Transparency is essential for building and maintaining trust, and it also allows constructive improvements to be made where needed.

I will continue to cooperate fully with the appropriate channels so that the facts are clarified and positive steps can be taken moving forward.

Some of the non-watermarked images included have been supplied by various publications and remain their copyright. Only the watermarked photographs marked 'Peter Faulding' are my own, and these are released for public and media use without restriction

All supporting documents can be found on our website: [Specialist Group International \(SGI\)](#)