

HMI Zoë Billingham's assessment of Bedfordshire Police – Transcript

Hello. I'm Zoe Billingham and I'm Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary for Bedfordshire Police.

I am one of five inspectors of constabulary, and our role is to inspect police forces on behalf of the public. Each year we produce an annual assessment of how each force is performing.

In its PEEL inspections this year, HMIC found some areas of serious concern in the performance of Bedfordshire Police in keeping people safe and reducing crime. In view of these findings, I have been in regular contact with the chief constable and I am reassured by the positive way in which the force has acknowledged and responded to the issues we have raised. However, significant improvement is needed in a number of areas.

I do not underestimate the very significant challenges that the force faces, including its historically low funding position and the complex demands of policing an area like Luton. I am satisfied that the chief officer team in Bedfordshire Police is fully committed to making changes to the way the force organises itself to secure the necessary improvements.

I welcome these changes and commend the force for the determination it shows to improve policing services for the public.

While the force's crime investigation is good, and it works well to stop some re-offending, it needs to improve how it prevents crime and anti-social behaviour, including the way it tackles serious and organised crime.

I am particularly concerned about the force's inadequate approach to protecting vulnerable victims. Problems highlighted in the inspection include weaknesses in the assessment of risk at the first point of contact, including incidents involving vulnerable people such as victims of domestic abuse; and inconsistencies in the force's response to missing children and young people. However, I am most encouraged that the force has taken immediate action to address these concerns. I also commend the force for being the first in the country to have secured female genital mutilation protection orders, and in doing so protecting two young girls from atrocious harm.

I am satisfied that the force recognises the difficulty of its future financial position, and I am pleased by the strong collaborative arrangements it has with Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire Constabulary through which it is realising efficiencies. However, I remain concerned that the savings the force has made over the past four years have reduced its capacity to respond to the demands on its services, and it is now struggling to meet the public's needs. Our efficiency inspection concluded that Bedfordshire Police's financial position is not sustainable in the long term.

The force has some good examples of public engagement in Luton, but needs to do more to understand the needs of the diverse communities across all of Bedfordshire.

I very much welcome the actions that are being led by the new chief constable to address the concerns that we have identified and the impressive commitment of the officers and staff throughout the force to keeping the public safe.

For the year ahead, I will be particularly interested to see how Bedfordshire Police develops a new way of working and how its services to the most vulnerable people in its communities improve.