

National Child Protection Post-Inspection Review

Merseyside Police
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Introduction

The 2018 inspection

In April 2018, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspected how well Merseyside Police keeps children¹ safe.²

This inspection found that the chief constable, his senior team, and the police and crime commissioner had a clear commitment to protecting children. We also saw strong evidence of work at a senior level to improve the force's ability to manage the risks affecting children. This commitment was evident in several areas. For example, there was:

- strong and effective partnership working across the five local authorities in the force area;
- a detailed understanding among officers and staff of the prevalence, nature and scale of the criminal and sexual exploitation of children;
- commitment and dedication shown by child protection staff, who are often working in difficult and demanding circumstances; and
- good officer and staff awareness of vulnerability and safeguarding responsibilities.

However, we identified several areas where the force ought to improve so its standard of service to children in need of help and protection was consistently high. Specifically, we noted that the force could improve by:

- making sure the concerns and views of children are listened to and recorded, and their behaviour and demeanour noted, to help inform the decisions made about them;
- managing missing children cases in which the child has been assessed as not being at apparent risk;
- making sure information about investigative or safeguarding tasks, and the outcomes agreed with partner agencies, are recorded on force systems;
- making timely visits to registered sex offenders (RSOs);

¹ 'Child' in the report refers to a person under the age of 18.

² [For more information on our child protection inspections, see our website.](#)

- speaking to victims early enough to fully understand the effect on them, build rapport and gather evidence for managing future risks; and
- making sure appropriate adults are available to support the general welfare needs and rights and entitlements of children who are in police custody.

In August 2018, we published a report on our findings. This included a series of recommendations aimed at improving the service provided to children in Merseyside.

The 2019 post-inspection review

Six weeks after our report was published, the force gave us its action plan. This set out how it intended to respond to our recommendations. Since then, we have continued to monitor its improvement work.

In April 2019, we assessed progress in a post-inspection review. The review included:

- examining documents, including policies and action plans;
- interviewing officers, managers (including senior managers) and staff; and
- auditing 23 child protection cases on the areas for improvement set out in the 2018 report.

Summary of findings from the post-inspection review

Merseyside Police has acted on the recommendations we made after the 2018 inspection. The force has used our findings to help it understand which factors affect the quality and consistency of its service to children.

It has taken significant steps to improve how children are protected and the way its workforce responds to those in need of help.

The force's responses to our recommendations aim for long-term, sustainable changes rather than temporary quick fixes. Some changes have already been put in place and others are being developed. This long-term approach is sensible in an increasingly complex area of police work, where demands often change.

To support these changes to its work, the force is using audits to assess outcomes and provide assurance. Audit findings are reported at both protecting vulnerable people and crime scrutiny meetings, and the force takes further improvement steps if needed.

Senior leaders continue to engage with and seek to influence the strategy work of statutory partner agencies so there is greater consistency in responses to protecting children. The force also recognises the statutory partnership arrangements required by the Children and Social Work Act 2017.³

Clear governance structures for child protection provide oversight, scrutiny and support for local and specialist work. Senior leaders are evidently committed to responding to change and making improvements when they are called for.

The force also makes good use of technology to support its service provision in several areas, including operational activity, risk management and performance monitoring.

The force's IT system (Delphi) helps it assess performance quantitatively. Descriptions of individual investigations and data give a greater understanding of the qualitative value of its services. The system's capability is improving, and it is clearly valuable in giving senior leaders an insight into where and how the strategic direction of the organisation is translated into action on the frontline.

There are still areas in which the force is aware it needs to improve. These include:

- ensuring an appropriate adult is provided early on for a child being detained in police custody;
- working with partner agencies to avoid a child continuing to be detained after they are charged;
- assessing the risk to a child who goes missing;
- recording information or action taken; and
- ensuring consistent supervision and review of cases.

However, we are confident that the force will continue with the positive progress it has made so far in protecting children, supported by the strong leadership that is overseeing investigations and response.

³ The Children and Social Work Act 2017 replaces local safeguarding children boards. It requires each safeguarding partner in a local authority area (specifically the local authority, the NHS clinical commissioning group and the chief officer of police) and any other agencies (schools, for example) to make arrangements that they consider are needed to allow them to work together in exercising their functions.

Post-inspection review findings

Initial contact

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, Merseyside Police should ensure that its officers always record their observations of a child's behaviour and demeanour in records of domestic abuse incidents so that better assessments of a child's needs are made.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force has invested significant time and effort in improving its officers' and staff's understanding of the voice of the child. This is to ensure that a child's needs and concerns are recorded and understood, and remain prominent in incidents.

Senior officers have been supporting this work in several areas, such as in briefings and training, and by sharing an animated film.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force uses an animated film to raise staff awareness

Merseyside Police launched its Voice of the Child initiative in October 2018, when a seven-minute animated film was provided to the entire workforce. The initiative was complemented with screensavers on computers, 7 at 7 briefings (that is, seven-minute briefings at 7.00am) and the force's Breeze training package, which was launched in January 2019. This focuses on the views of the child and has so far been completed by 2,227 officers and staff.

Employees we spoke to were aware of the importance of the internal campaign and some had completed the training. But despite a reported increase in the inclusion of the views of the child, the quality of entries on the force systems varied. This had already been identified and the force is working hard to achieve consistency.

In most of the sample of domestic abuse cases we reviewed in this inspection, the voice of the child was missing. There were also examples of children who were present at domestic abuse cases not being spoken to or approached by attending officers. We also saw cases where the risk to children outside the immediate family wasn't considered.

To better understand what is working and what needs further attention, the force is auditing crimes. Examples of both good and poor examples are discussed with individual officers and at a monthly crime scrutiny meeting so that broader systemic issues can be dealt with at force level.

More recently, the force has put in place a mandatory two-day vulnerability course, which will be evaluated by a North West university after six months.

Assessment and help

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Immediately, Merseyside Police should improve practice in cases of children who go missing from home. As a minimum, this should include:

- improving staff awareness of their responsibilities for protecting children who are reported missing from home and, in particular, those cases where it is a regular occurrence; and
- improving staff awareness of the significance of drawing together all available information from police systems, including information about people who pose a risk to children, better to inform risk assessments.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we reported that some cases involved children who were wrongly classed as being at no apparent risk. The wider risks to these children weren't identified at the earliest opportunity, which, in turn, delayed the development of a suitable protection plan.

In 2019, we found the force has put in place a range of initiatives to raise awareness of the vulnerability of children reported missing, and it has significantly reduced the number of those assessed as being at no apparent risk.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The response to missing children is improving, with a smaller number of children assessed as being at no apparent risk

Previously, we found that 240 children and young people had been recorded as being at no apparent risk (some assessments of which were found to be inappropriate) between February and April 2018. In April 2019, this figure had reduced to just eight, which is extremely positive.

The change in approach and subsequent reduced numbers is partly the result of awareness raising sessions with both officers and staff in the joint police and fire command and control centre, where Merseyside Police's response to reported incidents is managed, and with frontline staff. This work has been supplemented by reviews to make sure practice is suitable, meetings with inspectors who oversee the response to missing children to reinforce messages, and force newsletters.

This all-encompassing approach aims to make sure the force responds proportionately to find a child who is reported missing, and when they are found, that a prevention interview is conducted with them. This is especially important for children who go missing frequently.

Work is still needed if the force is to be as consistent as it aims to be in managing and responding to cases involving missing children. Specifically, we noted that:

- risks to children still tend to be under-recognised after assessment, with some language use indicating that there is a minimising of risk (for example, 'They're a regular');
- available intelligence and information about risk and vulnerability wasn't used in the supporting rationale for determining the risk level, so the level wasn't accurate;
- the quality of supervisor and inspector reviews is mixed, with most being copy-and-pasted generic summaries and not all cases being reviewed; and
- activity to find missing children is too often desk-based, with limited proactive work taking place.

Investigation

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, Merseyside Police should improve its child protection and exploitation investigations, paying particular attention to:

- improving staff awareness, knowledge and skills in this area of work;
- ensuring a prompt response to any concern raised;
- undertaking risk assessments that consider the totality of a child's circumstances and risks to other children; and
- improving the oversight and management of cases (to include auditing of child abuse and exploitation investigations to ensure that standards are being met).

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, the force had well-established referral processes for child sexual exploitation cases and had significantly invested in increasing its workforce's awareness of criminal exploitation.

However, the recording of decisions and information about risk was inconsistent. This made it difficult to assess what was happening in cases, and supervisors didn't always record their oversight of an investigation.

In 2019, we found good examples of the initial police response to exploitation incidents, with supervisors providing meaningful oversight of investigations in the early stages.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Investigations are being allocated to investigators with suitable specialist skills

The force convenes a crime scrutiny panel, chaired by a senior officer, to review trends and themes emerging from audited investigations. The meetings aim to improve quality by making sure investigations are effective, have a clear focus on victim care and are supported by investigation plans, with good suspect management and, ultimately, the right outcome for the victim. This includes child protection cases.

We found that investigations are now being more appropriately allocated to investigators based on the force investigation allocation model.

There are examples of good initial response to child exploitation incidents. We examined incident logs and found that supervisors have created a checklist to help the attending officer in their response and investigation. However, in some of the cases, the advice had either been overlooked or there was no record of whether it had been acted on.

We also saw good examples of investigations that remained child-centred throughout. Supervisors had retained a meaningful oversight of the investigation in these cases, which had been supported by plans to guide investigators and concluded appropriately.

A report to police raised concerns of a relationship between a 15-year-old girl and a 29-year-old man. This prompted an immediate strategy discussion and a joint visit with children's social care services to the child, who gave more information. The suspect was identified, and it was established that he had no immediate access to other children. He was arrested, and a search of his premises uncovered evidence of his relationship with the child in question. Both the recording of enquiries and supervisory oversight was excellent. The entries were clear and extensive and included the voice of the child, who was safeguarded. The police investigation was continuing at the time of inspection.

The recording of joint working isn't always recorded effectively on police systems

We saw evidence of joint working with children's social care services when an incident was deemed to meet the statutory threshold for intervention by that body. However, joint working hasn't been recorded on police systems in all cases.

In some incidents, children who were at risk were identified, but no vulnerable person referral form (VPRF) had been completed. A VPRF should be triggered when other children connected to the victim could also be at risk from a perpetrator under investigation, but this hasn't always been recognised by the investigating officer. This means children could be left exposed to harm, and further investigative opportunities might be lost.

Officers are investing time in understanding the views of the child to better understand risk

There were some excellent examples of officers taking the time to understand the views of children at incidents. Some were well recorded and provided a broader understanding of risk as the child experiences it. But this isn't always being done consistently by all officers, and some cases are marked as not applicable, despite a child's presence at an incident.

Decision making

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, Merseyside Police should take steps to ensure that all relevant information is properly recorded and is readily accessible in all cases where there are concerns about the welfare of children. Guidance to staff should include:

- what information should be recorded (and in what form) on systems to enable good quality decisions; and
- the importance of ensuring that records are made promptly and kept up to date.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, although there were examples of prompt and effective investigations, details of safeguarding were often not recorded. This created a gap in the information available to officers and staff.

In 2019, we found the force is using new technology to help make its approach to safeguarding more effective and efficient. The technology makes information available automatically to officers attending incidents.

The force is working hard to manage the number of vulnerable person referrals and to respond to requests for information, which has resulted in a backlog in the new vulnerable persons referral unit (VPRU).

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force is using new technology to help increase the effectiveness and efficiency of its approach to safeguarding

The force's trialling of new technology to automate functions that will increase the effectiveness and efficiency of its approach to safeguarding is extremely positive. Among the examples we saw was a referral builder, which reduces the need for research into individuals named on a VPRF by drawing data automatically from established police databases instead. Though it is too early for us to comment on its effectiveness, we find the early indications of its success encouraging.

The call assist function used in the control centre helps inform officers of any known risks at incidents they are attending. They can draw on this information from previous incidents to help with their decision making. When they attend an incident of domestic abuse, their handheld device automatically gives details, where applicable, of the three most recent incidents linked to the people or address involved and

whether children have been present. This helps officers manage immediate risk while assessing any potential future risks to children.

The new vulnerable persons referral unit has a backlog of cases

The VPRU was set up in March 2019. At that time, there were already 2,000 outstanding matters – 1,500 referrals and 500 requests for information. The force has worked hard to address this, and those numbers have been reducing; however, the total rose again to more than 1,000 after Easter. The force intends to introduce weekend cover from mid May 2019 to help deal with the backlog.

Managing those posing a risk to children

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, Merseyside Police should:

- review its approach to providing appropriate information on registered sex offenders to response and neighbourhood officers;
- ensure that the risks posed by registered sex offenders are managed effectively; and
- review the accuracy of the data held on ViSOR (the violent and sex offender register) in relation to overdue visits.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we found that the links between the sex offender unit and neighbourhood policing teams were underdeveloped throughout the force area, and that 98 visits to registered sex offenders (RSOs), including those assessed as high risk, were overdue.

The 2019 inspection identified that the force had improved neighbourhood policing teams' knowledge about RSOs and that fewer visits to RSOs were outstanding.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Staffing levels have increased

The sex offender unit has had an investment of specially trained agency staff to cope with demand. A further increase in offender managers is planned by December 2019.

The ratio of RSOs to offender managers is 70:1. For agency staff who manage low-risk RSOs, including offenders under reactive management (that is, managed without formal visits), it is 102:1, or 73:1 if reactively managed RSOs are excluded.

The force needs to ensure that maintaining these ratios is manageable by the officers and staff within the unit.

There are far fewer overdue visits to RSOs

The force has significantly reduced the backlog of visits. During the 2019 inspection, there were only two that were outstanding. However, in turn, this has created a significant number of ViSOR supervisory tasks that had yet to be completed, as is detailed below.

Briefing of neighbourhood police teams on RSOs has improved

The Corvus system is used to brief frontline officers and staff on all new high-risk and very-high-risk RSOs, or about specific intelligence or concerns. A new function of the Delphi system gives access to information on those RSOs being reactively managed. This is positive.

Using the Delphi system provides an opportunity for frontline staff to gather wider intelligence about low-risk and medium-risk offenders who might pose a threat to children. Since these offenders are now generally managed reactively, it is important that local officers know when RSOs are in their areas, because they are more likely to have contact with them through routine local policing.

The force has decided that RSOs can be managed reactively without using the nationally recognised risk assessment system. Also, unless there is a significant change, those assessed as presenting a low or medium risk no longer need to have an active risk management strategy (ARMS)⁴ assessment completed at least once every 12 months. The force should ensure these decisions don't create any additional risks in the effective management of RSOs.

The overall quality of investigations requires improvement

In the cases we examined, we often found that the safeguarding response to child protection concerns had been delayed and there was poor record keeping and no feedback from children's social care services about what had happened since a referral. This means it is unclear to officers and staff from police records whether children have been safeguarded and what support or protection measures have been put in place.

⁴ ARMS is a structured assessment process to assess dynamic risk factors known to be associated with sexual re-offending, and protective factors known to be associated with reduced offending. It is intended to provide police and probation services with information to plan the management of convicted sex offenders in the community.

An RSO with convictions for indecent images of children was discovered to be having contact with his four-year-old nephew. It took nearly four weeks for this information to be shared with children's social care services, potentially leaving the child at risk during that period.

The quality of investigations in general requires improvement. The officers we spoke to sometimes showed a lack of investigative thinking and professional curiosity when they had minimal supervision. At the time of this inspection, 354 ViSOR supervisory tasks had yet to be completed. These tasks included approving RSO risk assessments and associated management plans.

Police detention

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within six months, the force should undertake a review (jointly with children's social care services and other relevant agencies) of how it manages the detention of children. This review should include, as a minimum, how best to:

- ensure that all children are only detained when necessary and for the absolute minimum amount of time;
- ensure that custody staff appropriately record the decisions made and action taken while children are detained;
- assess, at an early stage, the need for alternative accommodation (secure or otherwise) and work with children's social care services to achieve the best option for the child; and
- improve the timeliness of appropriate adult support for children who are arrested.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we reported that when the local authority fails to find accommodation for children being detained, the force doesn't always challenge the decision or seek a resolution by escalating the issue to senior officers.

There was also a consistent weakness of children not receiving early support from an appropriate adult, with long delays before the adult's attendance at the custody suite, which often coincided with the police interview of the child.

In 2019, we found that a child's need for local authority accommodation isn't assessed at an early stage, and that when accommodation isn't provided, the decision still isn't escalated. Delays also remain in getting an appropriate adult to support a child in custody.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

A child's need for accommodation is not assessed early enough, and when accommodation isn't provided, the situation isn't escalated

Custody officers don't always understand the threshold for seeking secure accommodation,⁵ as was evident in the custody records we reviewed. The need for accommodation isn't assessed early enough to put in place the necessary arrangements during office hours. It is often considered only after the child has been charged with an offence. When the local authority didn't provide accommodation, there was little evidence of escalation to senior officers or of officers making subsequent requests to the local authority while the child was in custody.

Juvenile detention certificates aren't detailed enough

Juvenile detention certificates, which outline to a court the reason why a child should be remanded in custody, aren't detailed enough. They primarily relate only to secure accommodation, don't consider alternative non-secure accommodation and lack rationale. The understanding of thresholds by officers and staff requires further work.

Data about children remanded after charge, requests and transfers to local authority accommodation isn't easily retrievable

Data about how many children are remanded after charge and the number of requests and transfers to local authority accommodation can't be easily retrieved. There is also no clear performance framework for children detained in custody.

There are still delays in getting appropriate adults to support children in custody

Generally, when a child arrives in custody, efforts are made to inform an appropriate adult about their arrest. However, in many of the cases we reviewed, there were still delays in the adult's arrival at the custody suite, which often coincided with the time of the police interview.

⁵ Under section 38(6) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, a custody officer must secure the move of a child to local authority accommodation unless he certifies it is impracticable to do so or, for those aged 12 or over, no secure accommodation is available and local authority accommodation would not be adequate to protect the public from serious harm from him.

Next steps

There has been, and continues to be, a focus on child protection matters at a strategic level, and long-term planning for sustainable improvements is in place.

The force has taken some important steps to address the recommendations and put in place some good initiatives to help improve the awareness of its officers and staff. Nonetheless, some areas need further work to ensure improvements are achieved or to refine the changes made. Merseyside Police now needs to build on this positive work to achieve consistency.