

National Child Protection Inspections

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Foreword

All children deserve to grow up in a safe environment, cared for and protected from harm. Most children thrive in loving families and grow to adulthood unharmed. Unfortunately, though, too many children are abused or neglected by those responsible for their care; or need to be protected from other adults. Some of them occasionally go missing, or end up spending time in places, or with people, that are harmful to them.

While it is everyone's responsibility to look out for vulnerable children, police forces – working together and with other organisations – have a particular role in protecting children and meeting their needs.

Protecting children is one of the most important things the police do. Police officers investigate suspected crimes involving children, arrest perpetrators, and have a significant role in monitoring sex offenders. A police officer can take a child in danger to a place of safety and can seek restrictions on offenders' contact with children. The police service also has a significant role, working with other organisations, in ensuring children's protection and wellbeing in the longer term.

As they go about their daily tasks, police officers must be alert to, and identify, children who may be at risk. To protect children effectively, officers must talk to children, listen to them, and understand their fears and concerns. The police must also work effectively with other organisations to play their part in ensuring that, as far as possible, no child slips through the net, and to avoid both over-intrusiveness and duplication of effort.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) is inspecting the child protection work of every police force in England and Wales. The reports are intended to provide information for the police, the police and crime commissioner (PCC) and the public on how well the police protect children and secure improvements for the future.

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Summary

This report is a summary of the findings of our inspection of police child¹ protection services in North Wales Police, which took place in July 2019.

We examined the effectiveness of the decisions made by the police at each stage of their interactions with or for children, from initial contact through to the investigation of offences against them. We also scrutinised the treatment of children in custody, and assessed how the force is structured, led and governed, in relation to its child protection services.²

Main findings from the inspection

We found that the chief constable, his senior team and the PCC are clearly committed to protecting vulnerable people, including children. This shows in both the [PCC's police and crime plan](#),³ the deputy PCC's children and young people strategy, and in the force priorities.

Work with the [Early Action Together programme](#)⁴ is beginning to have a positive impact on the way officers think about children, and about how adverse childhood experiences affect them. This is leading to early intervention to break cycles of abuse.

Throughout our inspection, we found examples of good work by frontline officers responding to incidents involving children. Officers and staff we spoke to who manage child protection investigations are committed and dedicated. They often work in difficult and demanding situations.

North Wales Police works hard to safeguard the health and wellbeing of its workforce. The force has a health and wellbeing strategy, and everyone in the protecting vulnerable people unit (PVPU) has an annual welfare screening appointment. More support is available through counselling services if it is needed.

¹ 'Child' in this report refers to a person under the age of 18. See Annex B for this and other definitions.

² [For more information on HMICFRS' rolling programme of child protection inspections, see our website.](#)

³ The PCC has a statutory obligation to issue a police and crime plan within the financial year in which they are elected. This plan sets out the policing priorities for North Wales over the PCC's term of office.

⁴ This national project is funded by the Home Office. It seeks answers to address the lack of early intervention and preventative activity when adverse childhood experiences (ACE) are evident.

The force is also currently recruiting peer supporters. They give informal confidential advice and signpost help available to the workforce, such as local health services or the [Mind Blue Light Programme](#).

Partner agencies and people with an interest in the force's child protection work, such as children's social care services and staff at the sexual assault referral centre, told us that joint working arrangements are strong and effective. They also said that the police are engaged in joint working arrangements such as child sexual exploitation (CSE) co-ordination meetings and the early help panel in Flintshire, and are open to constructive professional challenge. Although some joint working arrangements need to improve, this is positive.

However, the case audits we examined as part of this inspection showed that the force needs to improve some of its responses to children that need help and protection. The force has made protecting children a priority, and senior leaders are clearly committed to this. But decisions about children at risk aren't yet consistently better as a result.

Specific areas for improvement include:

- the practices used when managing those who pose a risk to children, including improving the timeliness of risk assessments and the recording of information, and ensuring reactive management is used appropriately;
- the training provided to members of the workforce who investigate child abuse;
- making sure officers speak to children, watch how they appear and behave, and make sure their concerns and views are heard. This will help shape decisions made about them;
- the response to reports of children missing from home or care; and
- the treatment of children detained in police custody.

The force reviews quantitative information on the number of some types of the child protection incidents and cases it has. But it has limited information about the quality of outcomes. This makes it hard for the force to know if officers and staff are consistently making the best decisions for vulnerable children.

We saw examples of good work. Specific areas include:

- the force's commitment to the Early Action Together programme;
- the force control room. It uses flags on systems to alert attending officers to important issues. We saw many examples when this research was passed to attending officers. This meant they were well informed and were able to make better decisions;

- joint investigations and details of strategy discussions were well-recorded. When completed by specialist officers and staff, these investigations were usually well supervised and conducted; and
- investigations into offenders who make and distribute indecent images of children were quick.

During our inspection, we examined 93 cases where the police had identified children at risk. We assessed the force's child protection practice as good in 23 cases, as requiring improvement in 36 cases, and as inadequate in 34 cases. This shows that the force needs to do more to make sure it gives a consistently good service to all children.

Conclusion

Senior leaders of North Wales Police are determined to protect vulnerable children. They have made it a priority to help those who need support.

Our inspection found that the officers and staff who manage child abuse investigations are committed and dedicated, while often working in difficult and demanding situations. We were particularly pleased to find that the force has placed such a clear and unambiguous emphasis on the welfare of its staff. We also found that, while some improvements are required, senior leaders have developed strong and effective partnership working arrangements. In particular, we were pleased to find the force demonstrated enthusiasm embracing new and innovative ways of working. The Early Action Together programme is beginning to show how better, and more effective preventative approaches can improve the lives of vulnerable children. However, in too many cases we also found practices and decision making were inconsistent. Senior officers are committed to improving service levels. The force needs to do more to make sure that this happens.

We are optimistic that the force will be able to turn its commitment into tangible improvements in the service offered to vulnerable children. By way of example, we were pleased to see that the force acted quickly to address many of the issues we raised during the inspection.

We have made recommendations that, if acted on, will help to improve outcomes for children. We will revisit the force no later than six months after this report is published to assess how it is responding to those recommendations.

1. Introduction

The police's responsibility to keep children safe

Under the Children Act 1989, a police constable is responsible for taking into police protection any child whom they have reasonable cause to believe would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm. The police have a duty to examine that child's case.⁵ Under the Children Act 2004, the police must also make sure that when carrying out their work, they are aware of the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.⁶

Every officer and member of police staff should understand that it is his or her duty to protect children, as part of day-to-day policing. Officers going into people's homes on any policing matter must recognise the needs of the children they may meet and understand what they can and should do to protect them. This is particularly important when they are dealing with domestic abuse or other incidents that may involve violence. The duty to protect children includes any children who are detained in police custody.

In 2018, the National Crime Agency's strategic assessment of serious and organised crime established that child sexual exploitation and abuse is one of the gravest serious and organised crime risks.⁷ Child sexual abuse is also one of the six national threats specified in the Strategic Policing Requirement.⁸

⁵ Children Act 1989, section 46.

⁶ Children Act 2004, section 11.

⁷ [National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime](#), National Crime Agency, 2018.

⁸ The [Strategic Policing Requirement](#) was first issued in 2012 in execution of the Home Secretary's statutory duty (in accordance with section 37A of the Police Act 1996, as amended by section 77 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011) to set out the national threats and the appropriate national policing capabilities needed to counter those threats. Five threats were identified: terrorism; civil emergencies; organised crime; threats to public order; and a national cyber security incident. In 2015, the *Strategic Policing Requirement* was reissued, including child sexual abuse as an extra national threat.

Expectations set out in the *All Wales Child Protection Procedures*

The statutory guidance, [All Wales Child Protection Procedures](#), sets out what is expected of all partner organisations involved in child protection.

Providing social care services is a devolved responsibility in Wales. As a result, the Welsh Government is responsible for child protection. Under the Children Act 1989, the police service, working with partner agencies such as local authority children's social care services, health services and education services, is responsible for making enquiries to safeguard and secure the welfare of any child within their area who is suffering (or is likely to suffer) significant harm.

The police are duty bound to refer to the local authority those children in need they find in the course of their work. The Welsh Government guidance outlines how these duties and responsibilities should be exercised.

The specified police roles set out in the guidance relate to:

- the identification of children who might be at risk from abuse and neglect;
- the investigation of alleged offences against children;
- the force's work with other agencies, particularly the requirement to share information that is relevant to child protection issues; and
- the exercise of emergency powers to protect children.

Every officer and member of police staff should understand their duty to protect children as part of their day-to-day business. It is essential that officers going into people's homes on any policing matter recognise the needs of children they may encounter. This is particularly important when they are dealing with domestic abuse and other incidents where violence may be a factor. The duty to protect children extends to children detained in police custody. These areas of practice are the focus of our child protection inspections.⁹

⁹ Details of how HMICFRS conducts these inspections can be found at Annex A.

2. Context for the force

North Wales Police employs 2,553 people:¹⁰

- 1,487 police officers;
- 855 police staff; and
- 211 police community support officers (PCSOs).

North Wales Police has three policing areas: East, West and Central. Specialist safeguarding resources are located at police stations within the three areas, with some functions located at Police HQ in Colwyn Bay.

The three local areas are aligned to six local authorities and overseen on devolved matters by the Welsh Government. The population of 687,937 is focused around Wrexham and Deeside, and along the coastal strip, which includes the towns of Rhyl, Llandudno and Bangor. Two universities in Wrexham and Bangor house a student population of 25,475 during the academic year.

The force area is mainly rural, with areas of outstanding natural beauty. This includes Snowdonia National Park, which attracts many visitors. The area links to England via the A55 which feeds the port of Holyhead, the second busiest in the UK.

This diverse mix poses many policing challenges. These range from organised crime groups and cross-border criminality to the prevention and investigation of rural and wildlife crime.

In 2013, North Wales Safeguarding Children Board (NWSCB) took over the safeguarding arrangements from the three local safeguarding boards which had operated across North Wales since 2004 (Gwynedd & Mon Local Safeguarding Children Board, Conwy and Denbighshire Local Safeguarding Children's Board and Flintshire and Wrexham Local Safeguarding Children's Board). The NWSCB is responsible for co-ordinating multi-agency safeguarding across the region, and for making sure that outcomes for children and young people across the six local authority areas continuously improve.

An assistant chief constable (ACC) is responsible for child protection throughout the force area. She is supported by a chief superintendent, who is the head of crime services. A detective superintendent is head of the PVPU. They oversee specialist teams responsible for protecting children and vulnerable adults.

¹⁰ [Police workforce England and Wales](#), Home Office, January 2018.

3. Leadership, management and governance

There is a clear commitment to child protection among the chief officers' team and senior leaders

The PCC's [crime and policing plan](#) has five priorities, protecting children and other vulnerable groups being prominent. The deputy PCC's children and young people strategy supports the plan. It focuses on achieving the best outcomes for children in North Wales.

The force's priorities mirror the PCC's. And the ACC leads the force's work on child protection.

The force is heavily involved in the Early Action Together programme.

The force used a precept rise to fund three extra offender managers and three extra domestic abuse officers. These all support victims. During our inspection, the force was also working on priority-based budgeting. The aim was to make sure resources were allocated to meet priorities.

There is structured oversight at strategic and operational levels

The head of PVPU chairs a monthly performance meeting. Senior leaders use these to monitor performance, continuous improvement and the quality of child protection investigations.

This meeting reports to a quarterly PVPU governance meeting, chaired by the head of crime services.

PPU managers attend daily force and management meetings. These are used to discuss child protection issues. There are also fortnightly 'protecting communities' meetings. These deal with longer term issues. Similar force-wide meetings oversee the operational response to matters of most threat, risk and harm.

The force contributes to partnership working arrangements

Working with six local authorities can pose problems. The force is working hard to improve joint working.

Partner agencies say their professional relationships with the force – both at strategic level and on the ground – are good. They can challenge the force where necessary. The force is represented on the NWSCB and is involved in various subgroups.

But some aspects of working with other agencies need to improve. These include the way partners share information, so that joint decisions can be made about the level of risk posed to children; and arrangements for setting up interviews when a child returns after being missing.

We saw good services for children who had suffered abuse – but a missed opportunity to get their feedback

Victims of sexual abuse in North Wales can go to the sexual assault referral centre (SARC). SARC is a joint venture between Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, North Wales Police and voluntary groups. Its services include examining victims and facilities to record video evidence. There is also a live link to courts. This means victims don't necessarily have to attend court.

PCC funding means the centre now has three children and young people sexual violence advisers (CYPSVA). They support child victims through the process and signpost to therapeutic services.

SARC staff and police officers told us that relationships between them were very good.

The CYPSVA service previously held a regular group meeting with some survivors. This was intended to improve their resilience and create a community of shared experience. A result was that the survivors talked about the service they received from North Wales Police. SARC staff then gave the police this feedback. This included guidance about when to involve the CYPSVA, allowing more time to prepare for interviews, and not carrying out video interviews with victims at police stations.

However, the group meetings no longer run. The CYPSVA has offered to hold consultation groups with survivors to specifically understand their experiences with the police. At the time of our inspection, the force hadn't taken up this offer. This feedback would help improve outcomes for children.

Notable practice – we were impressed by how the force is using adverse childhood experience training to improve outcomes for children

The Early Action Together programme involves public health, policing and criminal justice organisations across Wales. It takes a public health approach to policing and criminal justice by intervening early. It also takes preventative measures in dealing with vulnerable people. It aims to address the root causes of criminal behaviour.

A detective chief inspector leads the programme for North Wales Police. Barnardo's holds the training, which all officers and staff will have done by March 2020.

Before the training, the force worked with the six local authorities to understand the services available. In Flintshire, the force set up an early help panel which meets twice a week. They share information with the local authority, signpost families to support and, in more complex cases, create a 'team around the family'. Heads of service in other local authorities we spoke to were keen to use the same model.

In the training, staff learn about adverse childhood experiences and what to look out for. They learn how to complete a vulnerability assessment and are given information about local services. By the end, officers and staff know how to make a referral either to single agency support or early help.

After the initial training, officers get an email with more guidance and easy to follow flow charts, bespoke to each local authority area. Barnardo's trainers then visit police stations after sessions, to offer advice and support if necessary.

The project is continuous. And with continued training and governance, the aim is that staff will make better, child-centred decisions, and officers will find the right help for families.

We saw several examples of officers recognising need when there isn't enough safeguarding. They then helped children and families get the right support. Our conversations with frontline officers reflected this. Those who have had the training said they had a better understanding of the causes of vulnerability. They also said they knew more about increased risk factors.

Many child abuse investigations are allocated to officers who haven't received specialist training

PVPU specialist officers make child protection enquiries when a child under 13 is a victim of a sexual offence or when there is abuse in a family. The Amethyst team investigate rape and penetrative sexual assaults perpetrated against children aged 13 and over. The paedophile and online investigation team (POLIT), CID or local police officers investigate other forms of abuse. This includes non-penetrative sexual assaults against children or online grooming.

At the time of our inspection, 14 of the 18 PVPU detective constables had either completed specialist child abuse investigation training or were working towards it. Officers in other departments weren't required to have this training. This means serious and complex child abuse investigations are allocated to, and supervised by, officers who may not have the skills or experience needed.

The force contributes to free joint training. This is arranged by the safeguarding board for all professionals working with children. Although some officers and staff do attend, it isn't co-ordinated through the training department. Central co-ordination could help the force make better use of this training.

Performance information to understand outcomes for children needs more development

Some quantitative data is reported to the PVPU performance meeting. But the force doesn't have enough information to fully understand how it is helping children at risk of harm.

Detective inspectors who manage teams dealing with child abuse investigations don't routinely receive information about the performance of their teams. They don't have easy access to it either.

We were encouraged to see that the force has started to carry out some audits to assess the nature and quality of work when vulnerable children are involved. The scope, however, was limited. So senior leaders can't be sure that officers and staff are always making the best decisions for vulnerable children. The force needs to do more to check that decisions being made about children meet expectations.

There is evidence that the force recognises the many aspects of abuse and exploitation, and is working in partnership to protect children

This is shown through the North Wales Multi-Agency Criminal Exploitation (County Lines) Needs Assessment. This was completed using police information and many partner agencies to better understand the issues.

As a result, the police and partner agencies developed a joint strategic plan. It places a clear expectation on them all to work together. This will be launched with branding which illustrates that multi-agency commitment.

Working together in this way improves relationships between partner agencies. It results in quicker interventions and offers better protection for vulnerable children.

North Wales Police officers and staff are dedicated and enthusiastic

We found that all the officers and staff we spoke to supported the inspection process. Without exception, they were friendly, polite and keen to talk about their work.

The officers and staff we spoke to who manage child related investigations are committed and dedicated. Their work is often difficult and demanding. Some specialist officers were worried about high workloads, with not enough staff to deal with the number of cases.

The force has invested a lot of time and energy in the health and wellbeing of its staff

The force supports various schemes to improve and maintain the health and wellbeing of its officers and staff. PVPU staff have an annual welfare screening appointment; and counselling services are available for those who need extra support.

The force is also recruiting peer supporters. They give informal confidential advice and signpost to help, such as local health services or the MIND Blue Light Programme. When we inspected, the force was also launching a programme of healthy mind training for its workforce.

The force has trained critical incident debriefs. Many officers and staff told us that debriefs happen regularly after potentially traumatic incidents. Those officers and staff recognised the value of the debriefs and were positive about them.

4. Case file analysis

Results of case file reviews

For our inspection, North Wales Police selected and self-assessed the effectiveness of their practice in 33 child protection cases. In line with our criteria, the cases selected were a random sample from throughout North Wales. We asked the force to rate its handling of each of the self-assessed cases. Of these 33 cases, force assessors graded the practice in 12 as good, in 19 as requiring improvement, and 2 as inadequate. We assessed the same cases. We graded the force's practice in 8 as good, in 15 as requiring improvement, and in 10 as inadequate.

As part of the inspection, we also selected and examined 60 more child protection cases. We assessed the force's practice in 15 as good, in 20 as requiring improvement, and in 25 as inadequate. The files on each type of case had certain features in common.

Cases assessed by both North Wales Police and HMICFRS

Force assessment:

- 12 good
- 19 requiring improvement
- 2 inadequate.

HMICFRS assessment:

- 8 good
- 15 requiring improvement
- 10 inadequate.

Additional cases assessed only by HMICFRS

HMICFRS assessment:

- 15 good
- 20 requiring improvement
- 25 inadequate.

Breakdown of case file audit results by area of child protection

Cases assessed involving enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989¹¹

Enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989:

- 9 good
- 2 requires improvement
- 2 inadequate.

Common themes are that the files:

- include evidence of joint visits and initial action in cases;
- often include records of strategy discussions; and
- show good investigations when joint activity is agreed, and cases are effectively supervised. But:
 - show that the standard of investigation is much lower when cases are given to officers who aren't child protection specialists.

Cases assessed involving referrals relating to domestic abuse incidents or crimes

Referrals relating to domestic abuse incidents or crimes:

- 1 good
- 6 requires improvement
- 6 inadequate.

¹¹ Local authorities, with the help of other organisations as appropriate, have a duty to make enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 if they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

Common themes are that the force:

- assesses risk well at the beginning of a case; and
- offers good safeguarding advice to adult victims. But:
 - often doesn't record the concerns and views of children. This can lead to a lack of understanding of how children were affected and often doesn't recognise the risk posed to other children connected to the adults.

Cases assessed involving referrals arising from incidents other than domestic abuse

Referrals arising from incidents other than domestic abuse:

- 3 good
- 4 requires improvement
- 3 inadequate.

Common themes are that:

- the force responds well initially;
- when offences or safeguarding concerns are identified, this doesn't always result in an investigation; and
- officers often don't speak to children to understand their point of view. But outcomes for children are better when officers speak to them and take account of all the circumstances.

Cases assessed involving children at risk from child sexual exploitation

Cases involving children at risk of child sexual exploitation both online and offline:

- 6 good
- 7 requires improvement
- 9 inadequate.

Common themes are that:

- activity to find those suspected of downloading and sharing indecent images of children is quick; and
- there is some evidence of effective joint working. But:
 - referrals to children's social care in online cases happen too late;
 - investigations aren't as good when not allocated to specialists; and
 - the police can be reluctant to seize mobile devices that might contain evidence.

Cases assessed involving missing and absent children

Children missing:

- 1 good
- 3 requires improvement
- 5 inadequate.

Common themes are that:

- information about missing children is quickly shared with children's social care services; and
- when initial enquiries are made by the managed response unit (MRU), work to find children is quick. But:
- when demand is high in MRU and cases are immediately sent to response staff, activity isn't as quick or as focused; and
- while the force communications centre uses THRIVE¹² and a structured question set to grade the urgency of response, this doesn't always result in the appropriate risk grading or response.

¹² The threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement (THRIVE) model is used to assess the appropriate initial police response to a call for service. It allows a judgment to be made of the relative risk posed by the call and places the individual needs of the victim at the centre of that decision.

Cases assessed involving children taken to a place of safety using or considering powers under section 46 of the Children Act 1989¹³

Children taken to a place of safety by police officers using or considering powers under section 46 of the Children Act 1989:

- 0 good
- 5 requires improvement
- 1 inadequate.

Common themes include that officers and staff:

- usually consider the circumstances of vulnerable children and make good decisions to remove children using appropriate power. But:
 - in some cases, don't liaise early enough and effectively with children's social care services when a court order would be more appropriate;
 - often take children to police stations rather than more appropriate places;
 - don't record decisions to use and end the power; and
 - don't always pursue criminal investigations when offences are committed.

Cases assessed involving sex offender management in which children have been assessed as at risk from the person being managed

Sex offender management where children have been assessed as at risk from the person being managed:

- 2 good
- 5 requires improvement
- 7 inadequate.

¹³ Section 46(1) of the Children Act 1989 empowers a police officer, who has reasonable cause to believe that a child would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm, to (a) remove the child to suitable accommodation and keep him/her there, or (b) take such steps as are reasonable to ensure that the child's removal from any hospital, or other place in which he/she is then being accommodated, is prevented. A child in these circumstances is referred to as 'having been taken into police protection'.

Common themes are that:

- record keeping is poor;
- active risk management (ARMS)¹⁴ assessments aren't completed within set timescales¹⁵ or when there is a change showing increased risk; and
- there are delays in investigating breach of notification offences.

Cases assessed involving children detained in police custody

Children in police custody:

- 1 good
- 3 requires improvement
- 2 inadequate.

Common themes are that:

- custody officers and staff don't have a good enough understanding of when alternative or secure accommodation is needed;
- the police don't press hard enough to find a solution when local authority accommodation isn't available;
- the attendance of appropriate adults at the custody office is timed to coincide with other events, such as interviews, rather than when the child is detained; and
- officers and staff often don't share safeguarding concerns with children's social care when children are arrested.

¹⁴ ARMS is a structured assessment process to assess dynamic risk factors associated with sexual re-offending, and protective factors associated with reduced offending. It is intended to provide police and probation services with information to plan management of convicted sex offenders in the community.

¹⁵ National practice is for ARMS assessments to be done at least every 12 months, or when something happens which may result in a major change to the current overall assessment and risk management plan for the offender.

5. Initial contact

Force control room staff receive comprehensive initial training

The force control room (FCR) manages North Wales Police's response to reported incidents.

The force gives control room operators a thorough package of training and mentors to improve their skills.

New staff receive a five-week face-to-face call handlers course. They learn about THRIVE, the role of the PVPU, the Onyx team, sexual crime, mental ill health and missing persons. At the end of the course, they are allocated a mentor. After completing Police National Computer and Niche¹⁶ training courses, they then carry out call handling duties.

Once competent in call handling, they complete a three-week despatchers course. After four months, their initial training is complete.

Although within the shift pattern for control room staff there is no allocated training day, more training can be given during team meetings. These take place every five weeks.

When members of the public contact the force, it usually assesses risk well and grades the response appropriately

FCR staff receive all calls for service made to the force. Call takers get as much information as they can about the incident and the people involved.

During our inspection, it was clear that call handlers used the THRIVE model to assess risk. They use specific question sets, called 'customer rules engine', and research to better understand the risks. This information is used to grade the response to calls.

The command and control system gets information from Niche. This includes flags and warning markers showing the addresses of registered sex offenders (RSOs) or children on child protection plans.

¹⁶ Niche is a single police information management system.

The force has dedicated intelligence staff within the FCR called i24. They support call handlers by researching information to help with risk grading, and making enquiries in urgent cases. For example, when a child at high risk of harm is missing. During our inspection, it was clear that call takers passed this information to attending officers. This meant officers were aware of the issues relating to the address or family before they go to an incident. This helps them make better decisions.

Although some quality assurance is done in the force control room, we saw examples of risk not being properly understood

There is a quality assurance process in the control room to monitor the performance of the initial call handlers. Each month, a supervisor will quality assure one call from each operator using a template. The template checks 37 areas, including the quality of the THRIVE risk assessment. The theme of the calls changes each month.

The operators then receive feedback. However, through our case audits we saw that assessing risk wasn't consistent.

A mother reported her 13-year-old daughter missing from home. The child had already been missing for 12 hours overnight. She was at high risk of CSE and had been self-harming.

She had been missing overnight twice that same week. On each occasion, she was with a 16-year-old male who posed a risk to her.

The control room noted the significant risk factors present. However, these didn't translate into appropriate activity to find the child. The THRIVE risk assessment was recorded as low and a missing person report wasn't created for five hours.

There was no evidence of any supervisory oversight. The child was eventually found in the street with the 16-year-old male. She was returned home and a joint protective plan was later agreed to help keep her safe. However, at the time of our inspection there had been no investigation into the behaviour of the 16-year-old male.

Frontline officers can recognise vulnerability and some signs of abuse but often miss risks which aren't obvious

As well as the Early Action Together training, the force is offering its workforce a two-day vulnerability training course. It is child-centred and deals with missing children. It also covers subjects such as forced marriage and human trafficking. The force also makes use of:

- online training;
- internal communications by email;
- 'need to know' bulletins;
- chief officer blogs; and
- screensaver reminders.

However, not all officers have done the training yet. It will take until spring 2020 for this to happen. Those who haven't had it, may have had no face-to-face training for several years as there isn't time set aside in their shift patterns for training days.

Frontline policing teams we spoke to who had done the training were aware of child protection issues. Most were confident in recognising vulnerability or signs of abuse in children, especially those exposed to domestic abuse and neglect. Most were also confident about recognising the signs of CSE and links to children who go missing.

However, officers who hadn't received the training were less confident. And most weren't confident about recognising the signs of the criminal exploitation of children. We also saw through our case audits that when risks other than the presenting one are present, officers often didn't consider them when making decisions.

Care home staff reported a 15-year-old girl missing. She was known to be at risk of CSE. The initial response to the missing episode was good, with many enquiries made to trace her.

However, four hours after the original report, she contacted the police herself. She was over 20 miles away. She was intoxicated and reported that her top and bra were missing.

When officers arrived, a young male was with her. However, they didn't take his details. The girl was arrested for being drunk and disorderly. She was later charged with the offence.

There was no record that anyone spoke to her about how she came to be where she was and what had happened to her and no evidence of safeguarding. The circumstances in which she was found weren't shared with children's social care.

We saw some good examples of officers responding quickly to clear and specific concerns about children

When the concern is clear and specific, officers often attend quickly. They carry out initial tasks well, such as making sure the immediate safety of children and assessing how best to proceed. We also found officers are good at making initial enquiries and using their powers to arrest or protect when necessary.

The grandfather of a two-year-old child called the police because his daughter had sent him a text saying her partner had threatened her life.

FCR staff researched those involved and completed a THRIVE risk assessment. They then passed relevant information to the attending officers, who quickly arrested the suspect.

Officers then spent time with the mother and child, and made sure the child was safe. They found out what had happened and discussed other issues affecting their vulnerability. The officer noted the child was extremely upset by the incident and wrote a comprehensive report to share with children's social care.

There was a strategy discussion, followed by a child protection conference. Multi-agency protective plans were put in place to safeguard the child in the longer term.

Officers often don't speak to children or record their behaviour and demeanour

In the cases we reviewed, we often found that the police hadn't always spoken to children, or recorded their concerns, behaviour and demeanour.

How a child behaves gives important information about how an incident has affected them. This is especially true where the child is too young to speak to officers, or where there may be a risk if this happens with a parent or carer present. The police should watch how the child behaves. This will help them assess the child's needs. It will also help them decide if the child should be referred to social care services.

Officers we spoke to understand the benefits of body-worn video cameras when capturing evidence, specifically in domestic abuse incidents. However, cameras aren't always used. They aren't personal issue and we were told the equipment can be unreliable. The force knows this and is making improvements.

A mother called the police to report that her ex-partner was breaching his restraining order. This had been imposed because of his previous violence towards her. Their eight-year-old son had been on a child protection plan because of the emotional abuse he had suffered as a result.

The man had breached the order several times. However, the mother was increasingly concerned because he had pulled up in his car and tried to persuade their son to get in the car with him.

The child had been very upset by the incident. Officers attended and spoke to the mother but not the child. The man also had a child in his new relationship. However, at the time of our inspection, three months after the report, he hadn't been arrested. There were no enquiries about the welfare of his other child either.

Recommendations

We recommend that North Wales Police acts within three months to make sure that children's concerns and views are obtained and recorded (including noting their behaviour and demeanour). This will help influence decisions made about them.

6. Assessment and help

The force has developed an efficient system for sharing information with children's social care

When an officer is concerned about a child they submit a form CID 16. Staff in the central referral unit (CRU) review all CID 16s. Researchers check the family history and identify other risk factors and information. This is added to the form. A sergeant reviews the information and shares it with children's social care. We found that in almost all cases this was done quickly. There were no backlogs in cases waiting for research or sergeant review.

Vulnerability assessments help officers identify risk which doesn't meet safeguarding thresholds

Officers told us they were more confident about assessing vulnerability after they received the Early Action Together training. When risks don't meet the threshold for safeguarding, but families need support, they are able to refer or signpost to that support service.

In these situations, the officer completes a problem-solving worksheet. It explains their rationale and outcome for the family. The officer records this on Niche so it is available if the family comes to notice again.

This means families can quickly get support for their needs.

Strategy discussions are held quickly, and outcomes recorded but opportunities to make earlier joint decisions are missed

When a CID 16 is shared with children's social care they decide whether the child is likely to be at risk of significant harm. This is based on the information and their own checks. In these situations, a CRU sergeant and a social care manager have a telephone discussion.

Other professionals, from health or education for example, aren't involved in these discussions. This means valuable specialist knowledge or extra information may be missed.

Also, when children's social care decides the threshold for intervention isn't met, the police and other agencies don't have opportunity to challenge that decision.

The force is keen to improve information-sharing arrangements and joint decision making

Senior leaders recognise the value of a team working side by side to assess information and make joint decisions. Partner organisations piloted this system in Wrexham, but it wasn't successful.

However, the early help panel in the Flintshire area has showed that this can be achieved. We were told that there had been cases where the information from one agency didn't show there was a significant concern. When all agencies shared their information at the panel, it was clear there were significant concerns and the matter was escalated.

All the local authority heads of service we spoke to agreed that better information-sharing and earlier joint decisions would mean better outcomes for children. The force and its partners should consider how to achieve this.

Specialist officers are available to promptly visit children when a decision is made to conduct a joint investigation

When a joint investigation is needed, a police officer and social worker will visit the child. They spend time building trust with the child and create an environment where the child feels confident talking about the abuse they may have experienced.

To make sure that a specialist officer is available for these joint visits when necessary, there is a designated PVPU duty officer in each area. This means it is rare for a joint visit to be delayed because police aren't available which is good.

However, there are cases when it is clear from the start that a different team will investigate the case, for example the Amethyst team. This means that having spoken to the PVPU officer initially, a child will have to meet different officers and the established rapport may be lost. The force should consider how to manage that transition to make sure the victim's confidence and trust is maintained.

We found good contributions are made to long-term multi-agency safeguarding plans

North Wales Police employs two dedicated staff to research for and attend child protection conferences¹⁷. They go to almost all initial child protection conferences to discuss and agree long-term safeguarding plans. They supply reports when they can't make it.

When a child is made the subject of a protection plan, this is flagged on Niche. This means staff know about risks to the child when they attend incidents.

There is a good understanding of the risks to those children most at risk of CSE, but others carry out the investigations

The Onyx team identifies those at most risk of CSE across North Wales.

Where there is a CSE concern, the team research and contribute to multi-agency assessments of risk. Those assessed to be at highest risk are allocated to the Onyx team. The team keeps in touch with those children and their families, manage the risk, support and build their trust.

They attend multi-agency meetings held in each local authority area. This means they can contribute to joint planning about these children and those who pose a risk to them. Onyx staff create risk management plans, which are added to Niche. Patrols can then quickly understand the child's circumstances and make decisions based on the information.

When an assessment reveals a child is at a medium risk of harm, the team places a flag on Niche.

Frontline staff and partner agencies told us that through the work of the Onyx team, they were well informed about children at risk of CSE and the activities to safeguard them.

However, the Onyx team doesn't have capacity to carry out investigations when offences are revealed. They are allocated in the same way other child abuse investigations are. We saw that most exploitation investigations were carried out by teams who don't receive specialist child abuse investigation training.

¹⁷ A child protection conference brings together family members, the child (where appropriate), and those professionals most involved with the child and family, to make decisions about the child's future safety, health and development.

We saw long delays to assess risk in CSE cases

When there is a concern that a child is at risk of CSE, the agency receiving the information will complete a sexual exploitation risk assessment framework. It will also share its concerns with children's social care services. A social worker will then complete the risk assessment with the child concerned.

The social worker will decide if a strategy discussion is needed, to share information and decide on the next steps. A result of the strategy discussion may be that a multi-agency strategy meeting is needed. All partner agencies will share the information they have at this meeting and create a joint protective plan for the child.

Onyx staff told us that there can be long delays in this process, especially if a child isn't already known to children's social care services. Through our case audits, we saw delays of up to two months before the risk to the child was fully understood.

The force has merged its Onyx and modern slavery teams to improve its response to criminal exploitation

The force had decided to merge both teams shortly before our inspection. The aim is to better tackle criminal exploitation and county lines issues.

The same detective inspector is now leading both teams, which will be called the exploitation team. During our inspection, the inspector was still considering the work of both teams and the terms of reference for their responsibilities, which hadn't yet been written. As a result, it was too early to measure the impact of this change.

There is a good service offered to victims of domestic abuse, but missed opportunities for joint protective planning for some children

The domestic abuse officers (DAO) within the PVPU review incidents of domestic abuse each day. They give valuable safeguarding advice to victims of domestic abuse and work with independent domestic violence advisers to protect victims.

They make sure victims know when their abuser has been violent to others through the domestic violence disclosure scheme (DVDS)¹⁸. They also apply to court for domestic violence protection orders (DVPO) when prosecution hasn't been possible.

¹⁸ The scheme was introduced to set out procedures that could be used by the police in relation to disclosure of information about previous violent and abusive offending by a potentially violent individual to their partner where this may help protect them from further violent and abusive offending.

There is a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)¹⁹ meeting every month in each of the six local authority areas. A detective inspector chairs the meetings.

DAOs make a referral to MARAC when a DASH²⁰ risk assessment indicates risk is high, when there have been three incidents involving a couple in six months or when it is decided through professional judgement this is required. However, SafeLives²¹ guidance recommends a MARAC referral for three incidents in 12 months.

Deviation from the guidance was a joint decision by MARAC partners to be able to manage demand. But it means that some families won't be referred to MARAC and opportunities for joint protective planning are missed.

This is important for cases that fall below the threshold for children's social care services intervention. Through the Early Action Together programme, officers are told if domestic abuse incidents aren't suitable for vulnerability assessment, and if a CID 16 must be submitted. This is because exposure to domestic abuse is an adverse childhood experience and cumulative exposure to it has an increasingly detrimental impact on children. Therefore, when the matter doesn't meet the threshold for children's social care services to be involved, an opportunity to create a joint protective plan may be missed.

The force was aware of this problem and has asked Welsh Women's Aid²² to help it review its approach to MARAC.

¹⁹ A MARAC is a locally held meeting of statutory and voluntary agency representatives to share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse, at which any agency can refer an adult or child whom they believe to be at high risk of harm. The aim of the meeting is to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase an adult's or child's safety.

²⁰ DASH is a checklist to help professionals identify the level of risk a victim of domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and 'honour-based' violence faces.

²¹ SafeLives is a national domestic abuse charity responsible for the concept of MARAC.

²² Welsh Women's Aid is a national charity in Wales working to end domestic abuse and violence against women.

The force has recognised it can do more to support children exposed to domestic abuse by sharing information with schools, but is yet to implement the scheme

Operation Encompass is a scheme in which the force, when called to an incident of domestic abuse at a child's home, informs a 'key adult' at their school before 9.00am the next weekday morning. This helps the school offer the child support, practical help and information.

Senior leaders told us that they have agreed to use the scheme throughout the force area. However, IT problems mean it isn't yet in place.

There is good activity to locate missing children when the risk is recognised

In four of the nine case files we audited, there were examples of quick and effective work to trace children reported missing when the risk was higher.

We saw evidence of very good work to find missing children. It is encouraging that missing children are discussed at daily force and management meetings.

A 13-year-old girl was reported missing by her care provider. The risk assessment was good: FCR staff used THRIVE and the customer rules engine to understand that she was at risk of CSE and had recently self-harmed.

The case was graded appropriately and the MRU worked quickly to trace her. She was found with a friend in Chester within 30 minutes.

Identifying risk factors was inconsistent

When a child is reported missing in North Wales, the call handler is expected to complete a THRIVE assessment and use the customer rules engine to assess risk. The lowest risk grading given to children missing in North Wales is medium. This shows that the force recognises that children are at more risk than adults.

However, we found that FCR staff don't always recognise risk factors, such as a child being on a child protection plan or at risk of CSE. This can affect the response level.

The MRU is good at completing immediate enquiries, but at times of high demand, isn't able to do so

Once details of the missing episode are taken from the caller, the enquiry is usually passed to the MRU and a response patrol. The MRU completes enquiries that don't need a patrol to be sent. These include contacting hospitals, locating CCTV and sending information to area patrols.

The response officer is expected to make community-based enquiries with supervision from their sergeant in medium-risk cases or their inspector in high-risk cases.

We found that when the MRU is involved in initial enquiries, activity to trace children was quick and more effective. When they weren't involved, we saw a poorer response.

At busy times, the MRU stops taking on new tasks, regardless of what they are. This means that if a child is reported missing when demand in the MRU is high, the response isn't likely to be as good.

A 15-year-old girl was reported missing by her foster mother. She had been missing many times before and was at risk of CSE. This incident was at a time when the MRU wasn't dealing with missing persons, owing to high demand.

Although she hadn't been seen for over 12 hours, no enquiries were made to trace her. Officers attended her address two hours after the initial report. Fortunately, while they were there, she returned home of her own accord.

The force makes limited use of trigger plans²³

Risk management plans produced by the Onyx team when a child is at high risk of CSE include a trigger plan if the child goes missing. This has information about who may pose a risk to them, what joint plans are in place and suggested immediate enquiries.

The force doesn't create similar trigger plans for other children who often go missing. This means time can be wasted assessing risk and researching systems.

²³ A trigger plan is a plan to find a child quickly when they go missing.

Opportunities to understand why children go missing are being lost

Return home interviews (RHIs) uncover information that can help protect children from going missing again, including risks they may have been exposed to while missing and risk factors in their home.

An RHI is a conversation between a child and a trained professional when they return from a missing episode. In England, Department for Education statutory guidance requires local authorities to offer this service and it must be conducted by an independent person. In Wales, the All Wales Protocol for missing children recommends that a similar service is offered.

However, it must be agreed who the most appropriate person to talk to the child should be. This could be a police officer or social worker. Where local agreement exists, a suitable independent person should be used.

Previously, the PCC gave time-limited funding for Barnardo's to carry out these interviews with all children reported missing. This ended in 2018. North Wales Police and the six local authorities didn't have agreed plans in place to offer this or a similar service after that. As a result, far fewer children have been offered an RHI.

At the time of our inspection, local authority heads of service told us that an agreed joint protocol had been written, but was awaiting approval by the NWSCB. This will give partner agencies a better understanding of the services available. However, in the meantime, opportunities to understand why some children go missing are being lost.

The force doesn't know enough about the standard of its practice when children go missing

Sergeants and inspectors carry out regular reviews when a child is reported missing. This makes sure that work to find them is done in a timely and effective manner. Cases are reviewed every day by missing-from-home co-ordinators, and areas for improvement or good practice are reported to the missing persons strategic group. However, the force doesn't have a framework for regularly auditing the quality of its overall practice in cases of missing children. As the strategic responsibility for missing people doesn't lie with the PVPU, this doesn't form part of the audits for the PVPU performance meeting, either.

Such a framework would allow the force a better understanding of how well it responds when people go missing.

The force is developing relationships with care providers to improve responses to children who go missing from care

The force has introduced a pilot scheme in Wrexham called the Philomena protocol. It encourages carers, staff, families and friends to gather information that could be useful if a child goes missing from care.

This will save time when children are reported missing, as enquiries to trace them will focus on the most recent information. This innovative scheme may also help to improve working relationships with care providers.

Recommendations

We recommend that, within six months, North Wales Police carries out a review with children's social care services and other relevant agencies. Its aim will be to make sure the force is meeting its responsibilities as set out in the All Wales Child Protection Procedures when it comes to assessing risk, sharing information and developing joint protective plans.

We recommend that, within three months, North Wales Police improves its practice with regard to children who go missing from home. As a minimum, this should include:

- making sure its officers and staff recognise risk factors;
- taking account of those risk factors in its work to locate missing children;
- working with local authority partners to fulfil joint obligations to carry out RHIs;
- making its officers and staff aware of their responsibilities for protecting children who are reported missing from home, especially where this happens regularly; and
- demonstrating awareness of the importance of investigating where a child has been, and who with.

7. Investigation

We found some examples of investigating officers using a good mix of investigative and protective approaches

This combined approach makes sure the force keeps the safeguarding of children at the heart of its efforts, while also investigating crime.

We saw good examples of investigative activity, particularly when serious offences were reported. This included acting promptly to arrest suspects and using bail conditions to manage the risk they pose to others. We also saw good child-centred decisions. The better-managed cases included meaningful supervision, with actions clearly recorded on Niche.

A pizza delivery driver reported to the ambulance service that a man was looking after two young children while drunk. The ambulance service contacted the police and a patrol quickly went to the address.

Officers found a man drunk and asleep. His two children, aged five years and one year, were there. The officers checked on the welfare of the children and found the one-year-old had a heavily soiled nappy. There were other soiled nappies lying around the house.

Officers arrested the man. They then held a strategy discussion with children's social care services. They agreed that the children's mother was the most appropriate person to look after the children and that PVPU officers should conduct a criminal investigation.

Decision making and investigative activity was well recorded. A detective sergeant oversaw the investigation and was clearly also involved in planning it.

Investigations are poorer when they are allocated to non-specialist officers

Many child protection investigations are allocated to officers who aren't within the PVPU. This means they haven't received specialist child abuse investigation training.

We found the standard of joint working was much lower when child protection cases were allocated to officers not working within PVPU. There was limited evidence of contact with children's social care services. There was also less evidence of cases being supervised, and less meaningful involvement from first and second line managers.

These cases often involve child offenders perpetrating sexual offences against child victims. We saw that, in these situations, officers didn't consider safeguarding in relation to the perpetrator, the cause of their behaviour or the risk posed to others.

Limited supervisory oversight and absences are leading to drift and delay in some investigations

In most of the cases we reviewed, we didn't see that a sergeant had discussed the case with the investigating officer and agreed an investigation plan, even when the case was complex.

We saw very few cases where an inspector had reviewed investigations, either within the PVPU or in other teams. Sergeants and inspectors supervising investigations told us they don't have enough time to properly review them.

Those carrying out these investigations told us that absences through sickness or temporary deployment meant their workloads were too high. As a result, there was drift and delay in some investigations.

A 13-year-old girl told her teacher she had been raped several weeks earlier by a 15-year-old boy she had been in a relationship with. The teacher reported this to children's social care services. There was a prompt strategy discussion about the victim, but not the suspect.

A PVPU officer and social worker visited the girl, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to proceed with her complaint. The investigation was allocated to the Amethyst team and a sergeant reviewed the case and identified lines of enquiry.

However, another officer then took over the case and little investigative activity followed. At the time of inspection, two months had elapsed. No further consideration had been given to the safeguarding issues in relation to the 15-year-old, nor had he been seen. There was no more supervisory oversight.

Some delays are because of issues the force cannot easily influence

The force is good at using intermediaries – that is specially trained staff who help vulnerable victims and witnesses give complete, coherent and accurate evidence.

This helps the police communicate effectively with child victims. Use of an intermediary should be considered before interviewing any child. They will offer support and help the child to give the best possible evidence, making sure their views are heard. During our inspection, we found delays in using intermediaries. This is a national problem, and one we have found in previous inspections.

Some delays were because of difficulties in accessing records held by other agencies to check for material that must be disclosed to the defence.

The force understands the importance of supporting and updating children in such circumstances.

Investigation into online CSE is usually good, but information isn't shared soon enough with children's social care services

The force has a POLIT. The team investigates the sharing and distribution of indecent images of children online. It also deals with referrals from the National Crime Agency's child exploitation and online protection command (CEOP).

The force carries out a risk assessment when CEOP refers a case. Using police information and that provided by partner agencies, the force finds out if the suspect lives or works with children.

High-risk cases are dealt with immediately. This usually results in action on the same day. We saw no delay in dealing with medium- and lower-risk cases.

However, officers don't share information with children's social care services until they have taken action. Although activity usually takes place quickly, which means risk is reduced, this doesn't take account of peaks in demand.

More importantly, it is a missed opportunity to share information with partner agencies to better understand the risks to children and discuss protective plans ahead of proposed activity.

Frontline officers are sometimes reluctant to seize devices, so miss investigative opportunities

We saw cases when the police had responded to reports of children who had been targeted by individuals inciting them to share indecent images of themselves. Officers safeguard and advise those children identified in the initial report. However, they are sometimes reluctant to seize and examine mobile devices belonging to victims. If examined, these devices may have evidence that could identify offenders.

A 14-year-old girl was incited to send explicit images of herself to adult males via social media. Other perpetrators had previously targeted her and attempted to meet her.

Officers spoke to the child and her parents. They gave good advice about keeping safe, and shared information with partner agencies so she would receive extra support. However, it was six weeks before her device was seized and examined. This meant she still had indecent images of herself, so was vulnerable to being targeted again.

Recommendations

We recommend that, within three months, North Wales Police should improve its child protection and exploitation investigations, paying particular attention to:

- allocating investigations to teams with the skills, capacity and competence to carry them out well;
- improving the way cases are overseen and managed; and
- sharing information with children's social care services at the time that a risk to a child is known.

8. Decision making

The use of police protection powers was usually appropriate in the cases we audited, but children are often taken to police stations

We found that the police response was generally good when the force clearly defined a case as a child protection matter from the start. We saw examples of officers and staff making effective decisions to protect children. When there were significant concerns about the safety of a child – for example, a parent assaulting their children or being drunk while looking after them – officers handled incidents well.

Officers use their protective powers appropriately to remove children from harm. It is a very serious step to remove a child from a family. In the cases we examined, decisions to take a child to a safe place were well considered and made in the child's best interests.

However, we found that when the powers are used, children are often taken to a police station. This should happen only in exceptional circumstances. For example, when local authority accommodation isn't available.

A witness called the police, reporting that they had seen parents assaulting one of their children while waiting to disembark from a ferry at Holyhead.

Officers were quickly deployed, stopped the vehicle concerned and arrested the parents. Two children, aged eight and six years, were in the car.

Officers made the right decision to exercise their protective powers. However, the children were taken to a police station to wait for a PVPU detective and a social worker.

We found that record keeping was often poor and officers don't always investigate potential offences

We found some examples where the force had carried out investigations quickly and effectively, and others where they hadn't. During our inspection, it was clear that officers and staff don't always record on police systems details of safeguarding and joint working with partner agencies, or the fact that there has been a discussion. Authorising officers often don't record when and in what circumstances the powers to remove a child from harm ended, or details of the long-term protective plan.

Children's social care services had arranged with a family for their 12-year-old son to be placed with a family friend because he posed a risk to his younger sister. However, they believed he wasn't being properly cared for there and requested an urgent strategy discussion.

Partner agencies decided that the police and children's social care services would visit the boy immediately to make an assessment. During their visit, it became clear that he was being left alone most days and his living conditions were poor.

Police officers correctly decided to exercise their protective powers and he was taken to a foster carer.

Although records relating to the initial use of these powers were good, they were in place for 72 hours. There was no record of any review of the powers or who the designated officer was, as there had been a change of officer shifts in the meantime. The records also didn't show exactly where the child was taken, who transported him or when police protection ended.

The potential criminal neglect offences weren't investigated further, either.

Recommendations

We recommend that, within three months, North Wales Police works with its partner agencies to make sure:

- a child is taken to an appropriate place of safety when these powers are used;
- offences are properly investigated; and
- all relevant information is properly recorded and made readily accessible in all cases where there are concerns about the welfare of children.

Guidance to staff should include:

- advice on what information they should record on their systems, and in what form, to help them make good decisions; and
- an emphasis on the importance of making sure records are made quickly and kept up to date.

9. Trusted adult

It is important that children can trust the police. In some, but not all, child protection cases we looked at, officers had carefully considered how to approach a child and/or their parents or carers, and found the best way to talk to them. This sensitivity builds confidence. It also creates stronger relationships between the police and the child and/or their parents or carers.

The force works well with partner agencies, family members and other people to protect children when they need immediate safeguarding. When this happens, its carefully considered and sensitive approach helps keep vulnerable children safe.

A school contacted the police when a ten-year-old boy walked out after an angry exchange with another pupil. The FCR inspector recognised the potential risks and immediately sent a patrol. Officers found the child with his grandfather, who had seen him in the street and picked him up in his car.

The officer took time to speak to the child to understand why he had walked out. They waited for his younger sibling to finish school for the day and the officer spoke to him about his concerns, too. The officer made enquiries at the school and was provided with more information that showed concerns about the children's living conditions. The officer then visited the family home and spoke to their mother. They noted that conditions at the house were indeed poor.

The officer planned for the boys to stay with their grandparents and completed a thorough report. The force quickly shared the report with the children's social care services team already working with the family, so they could arrange more protective planning.

The force communicates well with children in the community

North Wales Police has a team of 16 school community police officers. They work with agencies such as Barnardo's, the NSPCC and Healthy Schools, which focuses on pupils' wellbeing. The aim is to highlight issues that affect pupils' welfare and safeguarding.

The force also delivers the All Wales School Liaison Core programme, known as SchoolBeat, in all 442 schools in its area. It works with schools to educate pupils about issues such as CSE, domestic abuse, and drug and substance misuse.

It also has a well-established cadet scheme for 14- to 18-year-olds in all its six local authority areas. There are currently 120 cadets from a range of social backgrounds. The force arranges activities at weekends and in the school holidays. These include

classroom sessions on important values, as well as assisting High Sheriffs (a ceremonial office, with two office holders in North Wales) and taking part in charity work and Crimebeat initiatives (that is, projects developed by young people that help make their communities a safer place to be). The cadets also take part in uniformed parades, ceremonies and events.

Cadets are encouraged to involve their parents or carers and their peers in discussions and activities concerning citizenship and policing.

To improve its work with younger children, the force had launched a Mini Police scheme at the time of our inspection. This is currently operational at just one primary school in Wrexham, but the force hopes to extend it.

We also found good work being carried out with children through local schemes such as a water-sports summer camp and football sessions in the Colwyn Bay area. PCSOs also often visit the breakfast club for 16- and 17-year-olds living in supported accommodation in Wrexham.

If these schemes were overseen more centrally, their benefits could be shared throughout the force.

10. Managing those posing a risk to children

We are concerned for several reasons about how the force manages those who pose a risk to children

The sexual and violent offenders' unit (SAVOU) is made up of three teams of offender managers – one in each policing area. They are under the command of each area's PVPU detective inspector. The inspector is also responsible for all other PVPU activity in their area.

A detective sergeant supervises each team daily. In the Central policing area, the sergeant also has responsibility for day-to-day supervision of domestic abuse, and in the West area, because of staff shortages, for all PVPU matters too. Most of those with responsibility for leading, managing and supervising the SAVOU teams told us they don't have time to give this enough attention.

Not all offender managers and their sergeants have received the specialist training needed for their role. In the Central area, the sergeant and all but one manager hadn't, at the time of our inspection. The force recognises this and has tried to arrange training. However, this is having an impact on work.

Across the force, the ratio of offenders in the community to managers is 72:1. This is above reasonable levels. However, 13 percent – a relatively low figure – have been assessed as presenting a high or very high risk. Higher-risk offenders need more supervision, increasing demand. Encouragingly, the force has used the aforementioned council tax precept rise to recruit three more managers. When they are in post, this will bring down the ratio to 55:1, which is considered reasonable.

Too many risk assessments haven't been completed

The College of Policing's authorised professional practice says forces may use either active or reactive management approaches for RSOs. Active management involves visiting the offender. Officers receive training in using ARMS assessments.

National practice is for ARMS assessments to be done at least every 12 months, or when something happens that may result in a major change to the current overall assessment and risk management plan for the offender.

We found that 27 percent of offenders hadn't had an ARMS assessment in the 12 months before our inspection. This means the force didn't fully understand the risk posed by 171 offenders.

We also found that the performance was significantly different across the force. The Central team had completed 87 percent, whereas the West team had completed 66 percent. The West team of four managers completed only 31 ARMS assessments in the 12 months to May 2019. This amounted to each manager having completed fewer than one risk assessment per month.

Although we noted that few visits are overdue, there isn't consistency about who conducts them

Effective offender management needs a manager to build a rapport with the offender. Good offender management relies on that rapport, so the offender trusts the manager to seek help when they need it. The manager will also see changes in behaviour or circumstances that would prompt more investigation.

The nominated manager in the East and Central areas is the administrator. The administrator allocates visits to the team, rather than the same manager visiting the same offender. In the West area, however, managers have an allocated cohort.

Record keeping was poor

When an offender manager completes an ARMS risk assessment, they should consider the risks and develop a risk management plan (RMP). This reduces the risk the offender poses to the public. The sergeant must review and approve each RMP.

We noted that offender managers in North Wales completed a new RMP after every visit to an offender. Managers believed that a flaw in the database meant this was needed, when, in fact, it isn't.

We found that these RMPs didn't reflect current risk. It also means each offender manager is completing them and each sergeant reviewing and approving them unnecessarily, in most cases. During our inspection, there were 557 RMPs awaiting approval by a sergeant in the Central area alone.

We also saw many examples of important activity not being properly recorded on an RSO's record – for example, whether a disclosure had been made to their current partner about their offence history or the outcome of protective planning meetings.

We saw delays in acting when offenders breached notification requirements

An RSO who was high-risk registered that he had no fixed address. He was told he needed to report to a police station every seven days. He stopped going to the police station in February 2019 and breached his probation supervision requirement. However, there was no immediate action to try to trace him.

The matter wasn't recorded on the police system until May 2019 and he was arrested later that month. His whereabouts and activities weren't known for three months and there was no record of efforts having been made to find him.

SAVOU officers haven't had the time to build good enough links with their colleagues in response and neighbourhood policing roles

This is particularly important when moving offenders from active to reactive management. Without regular visits, SAVOU relies on information from community-based officers to track changes in behaviour. However, frontline staff told us they have little day-to-day contact with SAVOU. They receive some information about RSOs, but this is generally about high-risk offenders being released from prison.

The command and control system will pull flagged information from Niche, including RSOs' addresses, when there is a call. But officers might not recognise important things they see while on patrol, so fail to report them.

To manage perceived demand, the force moved some offenders to reactive management, contrary to authorised professional practice

The force may move RSOs from active to reactive management. This can be done if an ARMS assessment suggests they present a low risk. The offender manager must also be satisfied that the offender hasn't committed offences or presented any risk during a three-year period, and has no separate court order in place. The decision should be made on a case-by-case basis.

Using both active and reactive management effectively should allow the force to focus on those RSOs posing the most risk. It may also ease demand a little by allowing reactive management for those RSOs who fit the criteria.

The force carried out a pilot in its Central area to manage the demand on the team. It decided reactive management would be appropriate for all offenders who had been assessed as low risk and who hadn't offended for three years, as well as those who are medium risk and hadn't offended for five years.

In the case files we audited, we found the decision to move them to reactive management wasn't recorded. In one case, an offender also had a sexual harm prevention order in place, and the ARMS assessment wasn't current. In another case, the police hadn't been the lead agency for three years.

This practice contradicts authorised professional practice and means that those offenders who should be more closely monitored weren't being visited. As a result, changes in circumstance or behaviour wouldn't have been noticed unless an incident had been reported. What's more, because links with frontline staff weren't as good as they could have been, information from officers on patrol would have been limited.

We were pleased that the force reacted swiftly and stopped this pilot during our inspection.

Recommendations

We recommend that North Wales Police immediately acts to improve its management of RSOs, paying particular attention to:

- how it allocates offenders to managers;
- how it completes ARMS assessments;
- how it deals with those offenders who don't comply with notification requirements; and
- how it records information.

11. Police detention

More monitoring has resulted in fewer children being arrested, but not in improvements when children are detained

The decision to arrest a child should be made only when it is absolutely necessary. The force monitors cases in which children are detained after charge and reviews each one to identify good practice and learning.

Far fewer children have been arrested for several years as a result. In 2014/15, the force arrested 1,363 children, whereas in 2018/19, there were 557 arrests.

It is positive that the force had already identified areas for improvement. However, we didn't see that this had resulted in better outcomes for children. Following their initial training, custody staff are allocated only one day a year for refresher training. This is because of the force's shift pattern. We were told that this pattern is changing in September 2019, which will offer more opportunities for continued professional development. The force is confident that this will improve practice.

The recognition of the greater vulnerability of detained children is inconsistent

We were pleased to see that custody officers usually consider the vulnerability of children when they are brought into custody. However, none of the custody suites in North Wales has a separate booking-in facility for children. As a result, they are usually put in detention rooms or separate wings to keep them apart from adults.

Not all children are assessed by the healthcare professionals in the custody suite. We saw examples when an assessment was clearly needed, but not requested by officers or staff – for example, when a child had been detained using force. This meant injury or other increased risk may not have been understood.

Detained children with complex needs are often not referred to children's social care services

Many children brought into police custody have complex needs. They are often vulnerable and need support to keep them safe. In many cases, a referral to children's social care services is needed. However, when we reviewed case files, we found the number and quality of referral forms submitted for children in custody was inconsistent.

The force responded quickly during our inspection and put in place a new policy to make sure officers consider submitting a CID 16 whenever a child is arrested.

We found delays in appropriate adults attending to support children in custody

We found that children detained in North Wales don't consistently receive early support from an appropriate adult. Guidance under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) states that once an appropriate adult is identified, that person should be asked to come to the custody centre as soon as possible.

In some of the cases we examined, there were long delays before an appropriate adult arrived. They generally arrived in time for the child to be interviewed, but they often weren't there to offer early support to meet their overall welfare needs, rights and entitlements. This can lead to delays in a child seeing someone other than the police.

A 16-year-old boy was arrested for burglary at a shop. He had self-harmed recently and had a history of suicide attempts, mental health concerns and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. The custody officer decided he should be visited every half hour, but didn't arrange for a healthcare professional to see him.

Attempts were made to contact his father to act as his appropriate adult, but he couldn't be found. The boy was detained overnight and his father was contacted the following morning. He refused to attend the police station.

A youth offending team worker then attended to act as his appropriate adult, but this was 14 hours after the boy's initial detention.

When officers charged the boy, they asked if he wanted to speak to his father. He refused and was abusive about him. However, officers didn't probe this further to understand the problems in his family and whether his wellbeing was being affected. A CID 16, to share this information with children's social care services, wasn't submitted, either.

Custody officers don't have a good understanding of when alternative or secure accommodation is needed

The local authority is responsible for providing suitable alternative accommodation for a child charged with offences and denied bail. Only in exceptional circumstances would this not be in their best interests – for example, if bad weather made it impossible to transport them. In rare cases, such as when a child is at high risk of causing serious harm to others, secure accommodation may be needed.

We found there is confusion about when this legislation applies – for example, secure accommodation was determined to be the best option in cases when it was clear children weren't presenting a high risk to others.

Juvenile detention certificates outline to a court the reason a child should be remanded in custody. They are essential to make sure that the police are accountable. They also enable forces to check how well they are meeting their responsibilities under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984.

We found that these certificates aren't always completed or attached to custody records. This means that important information, such as that justifying detaining the child in police custody overnight, isn't being recorded or shared with the court.

When local authority accommodation isn't available, custody officers don't ask their managers for help to find a solution

Custody officers don't ask senior leaders to get involved when the local authority can't find appropriate alternative accommodation. The force also doesn't raise these cases at the time with senior leaders in the local authority. This means children are being detained unnecessarily for long periods.

A 17-year-old boy was found in possession of a lock knife and cannabis. He was arrested and taken to the police station. His appropriate adult didn't attend until six-and-a-half hours later.

He was eventually charged with possession of a lock knife and cannabis, and a burglary. The custody officer refused bail and requested secure accommodation from the local authority. The reason recorded was because they believed he would commit further offences. This doesn't meet the criteria.

The matter wasn't discussed with a more senior officer, so the child was detained unnecessarily.

Recommendations

We recommend that, within three months, North Wales Police should carry out a review of how it manages the detaining of children. This should be done jointly with children's social care services and other partner agencies. The review should include, as a minimum, how best to:

- make sure that appropriate adults promptly attend the police station;
- make sure officers consider the needs of the child and refer them to children's social care services, when necessary;
- make sure custody officers are clear about when secure accommodation is needed or not needed;
- 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
- when alternative accommodation can't be found, escalate the problem to find a solution.

Conclusion

The overall effectiveness of the force and its response to children who need help and protection

Senior leaders in North Wales Police show a clear commitment to making sure that child protection and safeguarding vulnerable people are priorities. We found that the force is committed to improving its services for children.

The force has worked hard with partner agencies to teach its officers and staff about adverse childhood experiences, and to attempt to break cycles of harm by providing early intervention.

We found many good examples of North Wales Police engaging with children and young people – for example, through the SchoolBeat programme, the police cadet programme and local initiatives. However, we noted that more work is needed to make sure the decisions made about and for children take their views into account and the impact on them is considered carefully.

It is important that senior leaders can test the nature and quality of decision making and its effects on children. Processes for assessing performance don't emphasise this enough. A framework that focuses on the outcomes for children who need protection would help the force improve in this area. It would also make sure that the service offered meets leaders' expectations.

The force collaborates well with the local authorities in its area. However, we found several areas of practice that need more work to achieve the best outcomes for children.

Senior leaders know there are inconsistencies and areas for improvement in the service given to children. We welcome the force's response, its engagement with us and its willingness to act quickly to address areas of concern identified through the case file audits we carried out during our inspection.

As we highlighted earlier, we found some examples of good work by frontline officers responding to incidents involving children. However, in our review of cases, we found there are inconsistencies and areas for improvement. The force needs to address these to make sure all children are kept safe.

Our recommendations aim to help the force improve in these areas.

Next steps

Within six weeks of the publication of this report, we require an update of the action the force has taken to respond to those recommendations where we have asked for immediate action.

North Wales Police should also provide an action plan, within six weeks of the publication of this report, setting out how it intends to respond to our other recommendations.

Subject to the update and action plan received, we will revisit North Wales Police no later than six months after the publication of this report to assess how it is managing the implementation of all the recommendations.

Annex A – Child protection inspection methodology

Objectives

The objectives of the inspection are:

- to assess how effectively police forces safeguard children at risk;
- to make recommendations to police forces for improving child protection practice;
- to highlight effective practice in child protection work; and
- to drive improvements in forces' child protection practices.

The expectations of organisations are set out in the statutory guidance *All Wales Child Protection Procedures*. The specific police roles set out in the guidance are:

- the identification of children who might be at risk from abuse and neglect;
- investigation of alleged offences against children;
- inter-agency working and information-sharing to protect children; and
- the exercise of emergency powers to protect children.

These areas of practice are the focus of the inspection.

Inspection approach

Inspections focus on the experience of, and outcomes for, children following their progression through the child protection and criminal investigation processes. They assess how well the police service has helped and protected children and investigated alleged criminal acts, taking account of, but not measuring compliance with, policies and guidance.

The inspections consider how the arrangements for protecting children, and the leadership and management of the police service, contribute to and support effective practice on the ground. The team considers how well management responsibilities for child protection, as set out in the statutory guidance, have been met.

Methods

- Self-assessment of practice, and of management and leadership.
- Case inspections.
- Discussions with officers and staff from within the police and from other organisations.
- Examination of reports on significant case reviews or other serious cases.
- Examination of service statistics, reports, policies and other relevant written materials.

The purpose of the self-assessment is to:

- raise awareness in the service about the strengths and weaknesses of current practice (this forms the basis for discussions with HMICFRS); and
- initiate future service improvements and establish a baseline against which to measure progress.

Self-assessment and case inspection

In consultation with police services, the following areas of practice have been identified for scrutiny:

- domestic abuse;
- incidents in which police officers and staff identify children who need help and protection (such as children being neglected);
- information-sharing and discussions about children who are potentially at risk of harm;
- the exercising of powers of police protection under section 46 of the Children Act 1989 (taking children into a 'place of safety');
- the completion of section 47 of the Children Act 1989 enquiries, including both those of a criminal nature and those of a non-criminal nature (section 47 enquiries are those relating to a child 'in need' rather than 'at risk');
- sex offender management;
- the management of missing children;
- child sexual exploitation; and
- the detention of children in police custody.

Annex B – Definitions and interpretations

In this report, the following words, phrases and expressions in the left-hand column have the meanings assigned to them in the right-hand column. Sometimes, the definition will be followed by a fuller explanation of the matter in question, with references to sources and other material that may help the reader.

child	person under the age of 18 years
multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)	mechanism through which local criminal justice organisations (police, prison and probation trusts) and other bodies dealing with offenders work together in partnership to protect the public from serious harm by managing sexual and violent offenders; established in each of the 42 criminal justice areas in England and Wales by sections 325 to 327B of the Criminal Justice Act 2003
multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)	locally held meeting of statutory and voluntary agency representatives to share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse; any agency can refer an adult or child whom they believe to be at high risk of harm; the aim of the meeting is to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase an adult or child's safety, health and wellbeing; organisations that attend vary, but are likely to include the police, probation, children's, health and housing services; more than 250 MARACs are currently in operation throughout England and Wales
multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)	working location in which public sector organisations with responsibilities for the safety of vulnerable people collaborate; it has staff from organisations such as the police and local authority social services, who work alongside one another, sharing information and co-ordinating activities to help protect the most vulnerable children and adults from harm, neglect and abuse

police and crime
commissioner
(PCC)

elected entity for a police area; responsible for securing the maintenance of the police force for that area and securing that the police force is efficient and effective; holds the relevant chief constable to account for the policing of the area; establishes the budget and police and crime plan for the police force; appoints and may, after due process, remove the chief constable from office; established under section 1 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011

registered sex
offender (RSO)

person convicted or cautioned for a sexual offence as set out in Schedule 3 to the Sexual Offences Act 2003, or who has otherwise triggered the notification requirements (for example, by being made subject to a sexual offences prevention order), who is required to provide personal details to the police, including details of movements (for example, if going abroad) and, if homeless, where they can be found; registered details may be accessed by the police, probation and prison service