

National child protection inspection post-inspection review

**North Wales Police
22–26 March 2021**

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Introduction

The 2019 inspection conducted by HMICFRS

In July 2019, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) inspected how well North Wales Police keeps children under the age of 18 safe.¹

In October 2019, we published our findings.

We found that the chief constable, his senior team and the police and crime commissioner (PCC) were clearly committed to protecting vulnerable people, including children. This was evident from the PCC's police and crime plan,² the deputy PCC's children and young people strategy and the force priorities.

The Early Action Together programme is a national project funded by the Home Office. It seeks to address the lack of early intervention and preventative activity when adverse childhood experiences are evident. Work with this programme was beginning to have a positive impact on the way that officers think about children and how adverse experiences affect them. This change in thinking was leading officers to intervene earlier in order to break cycles of abuse.

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

We also found that the force was working hard to safeguard the health and wellbeing of its workforce.

Partner organisations and people with an interest in the force's child protection work told us that their working arrangements with the force were strong and effective.

They also said that the police were involved in joint-working arrangements, such as child sexual exploitation co-ordination meetings and the early help panel in Flintshire. They also said that the force was open to constructive professional challenge. Although some arrangements for working with partners needed to improve, the overall picture was positive.

The force regularly reviewed quantitative information on the number of child protection incidents and cases it had. But it had limited information about the quality of

¹ [For more information on our child protection inspections, see our website.](#)

² 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.

outcomes. This made it hard for the force to know whether officers and staff were consistently making the best decisions for vulnerable children.

The case audits we examined showed that the force needed to improve some of its responses to children who needed help and protection. The force had made protecting children a priority and senior leaders were clearly committed to this. But decisions about children at risk weren't consistently better as a result.

Specific areas for improvement included:

- 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 as 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.

We saw examples of good work. Specific areas included:

- The force was committed to the Early Action Together programme.
- The force contact centre used flags on systems to alert attending officers to important issues. We saw many examples of this research being passed to attending officers. This meant that 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.
- Investigations into offenders who make and distribute indecent images of children were carried out quickly.

However, improvements were needed, and we made a series of recommendations aimed at improving North Wales Police's child protection practice.

The 2021 post-inspection review by HMICFRS

In November 2019, the force showed us its action plan for responding to our recommendations. Since then, we have continued to monitor its improvement activity. In March 2021, we conducted a post-inspection review to assess its progress.

At the time of planning our revisit to the force, it was unclear whether it would be possible for us to visit in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We therefore conducted our inspection remotely, using video calls for discussions with police officers and staff, and their managers and leaders, together with online reviews of incidents and investigations.

During this review we:

- examined the force's policies, strategies and other documents;
- interviewed senior leaders, managers and frontline officers and staff;
- sampled 20 domestic abuse incidents and 15 cases related to online abuse; and
- audited 34 child protection cases related specifically to the areas for improvement set out in the 2019 inspection report.

Summary of findings from the 2021 post-inspection review

We were pleased to see that the force has committed significant resources, time and energy to addressing our recommendations and improving the protection of children.

The force has introduced a comprehensive audit process, which allows senior leaders to better understand the performance of officers and staff who carry out child protection investigations. The findings are reported to the protecting vulnerable people strategic meeting, which senior police leaders attend. The force takes action to address areas for improvement and publicise good practice.

For example, in October 2020, the audit process helped the force to recognise that officers weren't consistently speaking to children and discussing their views and concerns, nor were they recording their behaviour and demeanour. This prompted senior leaders to create an online tutorial on these points called 'PVPU bitesize'.

The force has determined the training requirements for specific roles, making it clear which ones need specialist training. For example, the Amethyst team, whose officers deal with rapes and serious sexual offences, is to receive specialist child abuse investigation training due to the amount of child protection work it does. The pandemic has interrupted this training programme, but the force has arranged for it to be provided in June and September 2021.

The force has developed a multi-agency joint investigation training course, working with its child protection partners. Some officers have already benefited from this.

In July 2020, the force introduced new guidance for crime management. This includes a triage process, which takes account of risk factors to make sure the force allocates cases to officers and staff with appropriate skills. The guidance also makes it clear what is expected of investigators and their supervisors.

These developments will have a positive impact in the longer term, once the force has provided the training and compliance with the guidance is more consistent.

The force has significantly increased the number of officers and staff dedicated to managing offenders. A detective inspector now has responsibility for the [management of sexual and violent offenders](#) (MOSOVO) teams throughout the force. Three sergeants support him. The force has also added four additional offender managers, meaning that each manager is responsible for fewer offenders.

The force has worked with its partners to introduce [Operation Encompass](#) in all six local authority areas. It has also completed a review of [multi-agency risk assessment conferences](#) (MARACs) and is now developing joint protective plans for victims and children more quickly.

The force contact centre is better at identifying risk and grading the response to missing children. There is usually prompt activity to try to find them. But it needs to improve protective planning for some children who go missing regularly. It also needs to do further work to improve what it does when children return.

Although the force doesn't detain many children after charging them with a crime, we were disappointed to find little improvement in its practice when children are in police custody.

Conclusion

North Wales Police has had, and continues to have, a focus on child protection matters at a strategic level. This includes an emphasis on good practice through training its officers and staff, providing guidance, monitoring performance and carrying out regular audits. It is also continuing to develop [safeguarding](#) arrangements with its partners throughout North Wales.

The force now needs to continue using audits to make sure its work is to an appropriate standard, focusing on areas where most improvement is still needed, in order to make its practice more consistent.

The force still needs to make improvements in some areas of child protection practice, such as when children are detained in custody and consistently speaking to children and listening to their views and concerns.

Despite this, the force has worked methodically to address the recommendations from our 2019 inspection and can demonstrate marked improvements in some areas as a result. This is particularly evident in the management of people who pose a risk to children, when children are reported missing and when it is investigating the abuse and exploitation of children. We are encouraged by the force's progress and confident of its continuing commitment to making further improvements.

2021 findings: Initial contact

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force has put a lot of effort into encouraging officers and staff to speak to children, and record what they say, their behaviour and their demeanour. It has also issued [body-worn video](#) to all those working on the front line. But it still needs to improve, especially in situations where children are being exposed to domestic abuse.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Officers and staff are better at recording the views and concerns of children

Since our inspection, the force has worked hard to encourage its officers and staff to speak to children and record their concerns and views. This has included:

- more focused training, including for new starters;
- an awareness week;
- further guidance provided during the regular development days for officers and staff;
- a new section in the force's vulnerability assessment framework;
- a seven-minute briefing given to all staff; and
- a 'PVPU bitesize' video tutorial on the force intranet.

Our audits show that officers are getting better at speaking to children and recording their behaviour and demeanour. This was evident in cases when children had produced and shared indecent images of themselves. We saw several examples of officers communicating with them to understand their views and concerns. They recorded what the children said and this clearly influenced the officer's decision making.

When the force conducted joint investigations into child abuse, we saw that the police and their safeguarding partners consistently listened to the children and their voice was clear throughout the investigations.

The force still needs to improve

We examined a sample of seven cases where the force searched homes because they suspected an occupier was sharing child abuse images online. We selected the cases because children lived in the home. Officers did not speak to any of the children in those households.

In a similar sample of 15 domestic abuse incidents when children were present, we found officers spoke to children in only six of those cases.

This means that in some cases, when the force shares information with children's social care services, they don't properly understand the effect of parents' and carers' behaviour on children. This could have an effect on decisions made about the children.

The force now issues body-worn cameras to all frontline officers and staff

Since our 2019 inspection, the force has issued body-worn video equipment to all frontline staff. Although it hasn't made it mandatory to use the equipment in any particular circumstances, we saw increased evidence that officers were using it effectively. But in a sample of 20 domestic abuse cases, officers used the equipment in only six.

2021 findings: Assessment and help

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force shares information promptly with its child protection partners. They usually hold strategy discussions promptly, but there are still delays in some cases. They now hold MARAC meetings more often and the force has introduced Operation Encompass.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force shares information promptly

The central referral unit continues to research its cases thoroughly and shares information promptly with the local authorities. The forms that the force uses generally contain an appropriate amount of detail. We were also encouraged to see that when either the presenting information or the research highlights significant risk, the force shares the report with the clear expectation that a strategy discussion should take place.

Since our inspection, the Welsh government has introduced the new [Wales safeguarding procedures](#). The pandemic delayed this.

In March 2021, the force and others involved in child protection work carried out a joint audit of a small sample of cases. They tracked the cases through the information-sharing process and concluded that they were complying with the new procedures.

Our audits confirmed that this was usually the case, especially when the abuse was clear from the outset or took place in a family environment. In these cases, we found that the force and its safeguarding partners held strategy discussions promptly.

The force is good at recording the details of those discussions. Officers clearly document jointly agreed actions. We found that when it needed to take part in a joint visit to a child, these happened without delay. But strategy discussions still usually only have representation from the police and children's social care services.

There are still some delays in arranging joint working

We found that there were delays in holding some strategy discussions. This was particularly evident in situations where risk was escalating, such as a child repeatedly going missing.

We were told that the force has improved how quickly it escalates these issues with its partners, but we found that it needs to do more to prevent delays in agreeing safeguarding plans.

We found that recording of the agreed action from the strategy discussion was poorer in cases where the Onyx team wasn't supporting the child. The team works with children at risk of exploitation.

The force has introduced Operation Encompass

The force has improved the way it shares information with schools by introducing Operation Encompass. The force tells primary and secondary schools throughout the six local authority areas when a pupil has been exposed to domestic abuse at home. This means teaching staff can support their pupils when necessary.

A review of MARAC has taken place and organisations have introduced improvements

During our original inspection, we were told that the MARAC process was going to be reviewed. This review was initially planned to include Welsh Women's Aid. However, cost and practicalities during the pandemic led to the decision to instead conduct the review with local organisations and national domestic abuse charity [SafeLives](#). This was to make sure it was done promptly.

The organisations with responsibility for MARAC have agreed to hold meetings weekly rather than monthly. Although the criteria for referral falls outside of that recommended by Safelives, cases are heard much more quickly. (Safelives suggests a referral is made if there are three incidents in 12 months. In North Wales, the police make a referral when there are three incidents in six months.)

The force and organisations can then concentrate on the most worrying cases. They discuss more complex cases at a monthly meeting where more time can be spent discussing each case.

The force continues to work with its partners to improve information sharing

The force and partners in the Conwy local authority area have agreed to pilot a [multi-agency safeguarding hub](#) (MASH) system. This will involve representatives from different organisations working in the same place to share information and make decisions together. The organisations involved hope this will improve information sharing throughout the partnership and lead to quicker joint decision making. This was in the planning stage at the time of our revisit.

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

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 return home interviews;
- 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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force contact centre is better at identifying risk and grading the response to missing children. There is usually prompt activity to try to find them. However, the force needs to improve its protective planning for some children who go missing regularly. It also needs to do further work to improve what it does when children return.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force contact centre is better at assessing risk to children when they go missing

We found that the force contact centre has got better at identifying risk and grading missing incidents accordingly. Dedicated intelligence staff, called Intelligence 24 officers (i24), support the centre. We saw evidence that contact centre staff do their research well. They are using flags appropriately on their systems and using the [THRIVE](#) model to support their decision making. Their grading of risk was usually correct and the activity to find children was consistent with the grade.

Extra staff now support the managed response unit

In our 2019 inspection, we found that when the managed response unit (MRU) was too busy staff weren't completing initial enquiries in relation to missing children as quickly because they prioritised other matters.

The force has recently introduced a home-based investigation team to conduct many different types of enquiry that team members can do remotely. The team supports the work of the MRU, which means that there is more capacity to carry out the prompt enquiries that are needed when a child is missing.

There is confusion about which IT system to use when children are reported missing

When a child is reported missing, the contact centre logs this on the force's command and control system. This information is automatically copied to the force's Niche system. This is often used to log enquiries, but the Niche system in North Wales isn't designed to be used for missing people cases.

The force also has a separate system for missing people called iTrace. But officers and staff don't use it consistently and tend to use it for more complex cases only. This means that the force holds important information about where a child may have been or who poses a risk to them on different systems. That makes risk assessment and decision making more difficult.

There are good plans in place for some children

When a child is known to be at risk of exploitation, the Onyx team develops comprehensive plans to help prevent them going missing, and to help find them more quickly when they do. But if a child goes missing frequently and the force does not allocate them to the Onyx team, the planning is less clear. Staff highlight some of these children at the force tasking and co-ordination group meetings, but the planning and approach is inconsistent.

The force is aware of this and intends to introduce a new patrol briefing and 'trigger plan' process.

There is insufficient curiosity when a child returns home

When a child is reported missing, officers usually submit a referral form to let children's social care services know. But when children return, we saw that too often officers do not complete a prevention interview, or when they do, the interview lacks investigative focus. This means the force is missing opportunities to understand important information about where children have been and the risk they were exposed to.

The force and PCC continue to work with local authorities to receive information from return home interviews

Whether a child receives a return home interview and in what circumstances differs between the six local authorities in North Wales. The force has worked with the local authorities to better understand when it can expect to receive information from these interviews, but it still can't be sure it receives all the information it needs.

We acknowledge that the force and the PCC have worked hard to try to improve this situation. They are continuing to work with the local authorities to find a solution.

2021 findings: Investigation

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force has introduced new guidance on crime management to make sure it allocates cases to those with the appropriate skills. Although it still needs to improve in this area, we saw many examples of good investigations. The force is quicker at sharing information about people who are sharing child abuse images. Officers are good at communicating with children who produce indecent images of themselves. But the force doesn't examine many devices that may contain these images.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The new crime management guidance makes sure the force allocates cases to the most suitable team

The force introduced a new crime management process and guidance in July 2020. A detective sergeant reviews cases to take account of complexity, severity and other risks, such as the vulnerability of the victim. The detective sergeant then allocates it to the team with the most appropriate skills. The guidance also clearly describes the activity the force expects from its investigators and supervisors.

This is relatively new guidance. We saw some cases where the way the investigating officer recorded activity wasn't yet in line with the force's expectations. For example, in most cases allocated to the protecting vulnerable people unit (PVP), officers didn't record a clear investigation plan. In some cases, there was insufficient oversight from a supervisor or the force closed the investigation too soon.

We saw several examples of good investigations

During our audits, we saw several examples of good child protection investigations, which focused on both safeguarding the child and investigating criminal offences. We saw cases when there had been prompt strategy discussions, with actions agreed and clearly documented. And we saw cases with good supervision, a determination to follow lines of enquiry and a focus on getting the best result for children.

When the force allocates investigations to officers who aren't child protection specialists, they had support from specialists, such as the Onyx team. For example:

The force discovered that a 14-year-old girl who was in foster care was pregnant. She was known to be at risk of exploitation. The force allocated the case to the CID to investigate the criminal offences while the Onyx team spoke to and worked with safeguarding partners to support the child and gather further information.

As the father's identity was unknown, officers did not know who was posing most risk to the child. The officers involved clearly recorded their plan for the investigation and the joint decisions they took with other safeguarding partners to mitigate further risk. Supervisors provided clear oversight.

The child was reluctant to co-operate with the investigation, but by persistently following various lines of enquiry the investigating officers traced an 18-year-old suspect. Officers arrested and interviewed the subject.

Problems obtaining enough evidence prevented a prosecution. But the Onyx team continued to work with the child and partner organisations to share information and agree activity to help keep her safe.

The force now involves children's social care services more promptly when they suspect someone is distributing child abuse images

The force's online investigation team investigates the online sharing and distribution of indecent images of children. In cases where officers believe the suspect has access to children, we were pleased to see that the team now shares information sooner with children's social care services. This means that the force can gather further information, understand risk and make joint plans more quickly.

We saw that officers work well with children who share indecent images, but the force is still missing opportunities to examine devices and recover images

We found that officers are good at working with children and their carers when the child has shared indecent images of themselves with their peers. Officers demonstrated a focus on the views and concerns of the children and acted in their best interest. They also provided advice about internet security to the children and their parents or carers.

But devices often weren't examined, either physically by the officer or by forensic experts. This means that indecent images may remain inadvertently on devices. It also means that officers didn't make important checks to make sure no one had circulated the images more widely. The fact that the force currently doesn't have the facilities to electronically triage devices may have affected officers' decisions about seizing them.

2021 findings: Decision making

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force has provided additional training and guidance to those responsible for authorising the use of protection powers. Officers take children to police stations as a last resort and usually for the shortest possible time. There is now better oversight of the use of these powers, but recording needs to improve.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Guidance and training have improved the use of police protection powers

Since our 2019 inspection, the force has provided further guidance and training to frontline inspectors. It has also supplemented this with online learning materials, which it has recorded and made available through the force's intranet.

An additional designated officer's form has been created to improve recording of the use of the power. It has a section to record the designated officer's reviews and handovers to colleagues. Officers should also use it to document the circumstances in which the power ended.

In all the cases we audited, officers used the power appropriately, a clear rationale was recorded for taking children into police protection and discussions with children's social care services took place promptly.

Although officers took some children to police stations, this only happened when there wasn't an alternative and the force kept them there for as short a time as possible.

There is better oversight of the use of the power

Use of the power is now discussed each day at the PVPU daily tasking meeting, which provides better oversight of the initial response to recording information and investigating offences. But we saw some examples of delay to investigations and officers not recognising broader risk to children.

Recording is better but the force needs to improve further

We saw an improvement in recording, but there are still too many instances when it isn't clear if the designated officer has handed over their responsibility, or when and under what circumstances the power ended.

2021 findings: Managing those posing a risk to children

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

We recommend that North Wales Police immediately acts to improve its management of registered sex offenders (RSOs), paying particular attention to:

- how it allocates offenders to managers;
- how it completes [active risk management system](#) (ARMS) assessments;
- how it deals with those offenders who don't comply with notification requirements; and
- how it records information.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force has invested in extra resources to improve the management of offenders. It has improved its assessment of risk, working with its partner organisations and monitoring the behaviour of offenders. But it needs to do more to make sure that when registered sex offenders fail to tell the police about changes to their circumstances, officers record and investigate those offences.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Increasing staff levels, restructuring, training and better oversight have improved offender management

Since our inspection, the force has carried out a significant review of its approach to the management of offenders. There is now a detective inspector (DI) who has force-wide responsibility for MOSOVO teams and [MAPPA](#), providing clear leadership and better oversight of the team's work. A dedicated detective sergeant in each policing area supports the DI. There are four extra offender managers, which means that the ratio of offenders to managers is now within reasonable levels.

In addition to reviewing regular performance data, the DI holds a monthly panel with his sergeants. They discuss cases that are particularly challenging or need to be escalated to other organisations.

The force also works with other Welsh forces to review each other's practice.

The force has supported one of the sergeants to become a nationally accredited trainer, so the officer is now able to train the whole team. Consequently, we found that

almost all of the team managing offenders had received appropriate training for their role.

The force is better at assessing the risk posed by registered sex offenders

The force has improved its understanding of the risk posed by registered sex offenders. We saw that it had completed ARMS assessments for more than 90 percent of managed offenders. Those we examined had usually been completed to a high standard and showed that offender managers had further investigated what the offender said where necessary.

We also saw examples of managers working with their partner organisations, such as children's social care services and the probation service, to share information and therefore better understand risk. The force records this activity well and so it is still available if the manager changes.

Managers are allocated specific offenders and work more closely with frontline officers

In 2019, we saw that when offenders were due for a visit, the force often allocated them to a new manager rather than one who had worked with them before. This meant that managers weren't consistently seeing the same offenders.

The force has changed this approach and now all managers have a specific cohort of offenders. This makes it easier to see changes in behaviour or circumstances that require further investigation.

The force nominates neighbourhood police officers as a single point of contact to support the management of more problematic offenders. They help by briefing their colleagues about the risks those offenders pose and arranging activity to manage that risk.

The force uses reactive management in line with best practice

The force has changed the way it moves registered sex offenders from active to reactive management. It does that now if an ARMS assessment suggests that the offenders 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 is made on a case-by-case basis. The manager then places a flag on the offender's record on the Niche system and the team receives an alert if that offender is involved in any other incidents reported to the police.

The force still does not consistently record or investigate breaches of notification requirement

When offenders breach their notification requirements or court orders, the force often fails to record offences as a crime or investigate them. This means that the force will not fully understand an offender's behaviour. Nor will sentencing courts know about these offences when offenders are before them for other matters. The force needs to do more to make sure officers properly record and investigate these offences.

2021 findings: Police detention

Recommendation from the 2019 inspection report

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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

Although the force doesn't detain many children after charging them with a crime, we were disappointed to find little improvement in its practice when children are in police custody. There are long delays in the attendance of appropriate adults. Healthcare professionals don't see children when they should. And the force doesn't share enough information with children's social care services about vulnerable children who have been arrested.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force doesn't usually detain children overnight after charge

During this inspection we found that only three children had been detained overnight after charge in the previous six months. A total of nine children were detained after charge in the whole of 2020. We also saw evidence that the force is quicker to contact the relevant local authority to arrange alternative accommodation. But we saw examples of custody sergeants not understanding when they needed to ask for alternative accommodation. We also saw that when the local authority misunderstands the legislation, this isn't always escalated at the time, meaning the force still detains some children when it shouldn't.

Opportunities for additional training for custody staff are limited

Since our 2019 inspection, the force has changed the shift pattern of officers and staff who work in custody suites, so they now have three days a year for training. We were told that two of these days are taken up with officer safety training and first aid, which are mandatory. The other day usually covers legislation changes.

This is different to the regular training the force provides for local policing services, which custody officers and staff don't attend. At the time of our inspection, the regular training day included information about the links between missing children and exploitation. This means those working in the custody suites may be less well informed about issues relating to vulnerability.

Often, the force still does not refer detained children with complex needs to children's social care services

As we highlighted in 2019, many children who officers bring into police custody have complex needs. They are often vulnerable and need support to keep them safe. In many cases, they need a referral to children's social care services. During that inspection, the force changed its policy to make it mandatory to submit a referral form when officers arrest a child. But this wasn't accompanied by any governance or checks to make sure officers were submitting the forms.

None of the cases we audited in this revisit resulted in a referral form being submitted.

Recognition of the greater vulnerability of detained children remains inconsistent

In 2019, we noted that healthcare professionals did not assess all children in the custody suite. During our recent review, we saw examples of when a child clearly needed an assessment, but officers or staff did not request it. This meant that officers may not have been aware of injury or other increased risk to the child.

We continued to see 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. 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 often weren't there to offer early support for their overall welfare needs, rights and entitlements. This can mean that there is a significant delay in a child seeing anyone other than the police.

Custody officers often don't record at what time they contact an appropriate adult or explain any delays. This means the force doesn't properly understand the reasons for delays.

Officers arrested a 15-year-old boy for criminal damage and breach of court bail after he cut off his electronic tag. He was known to be vulnerable and already on the child protection register. He was arrested late at night even though he committed the offence two weeks earlier.

An initial risk assessment revealed that he was injured and had ADHD, but there is no record of him being seen by a healthcare professional. He didn't see his appropriate adult until 11 hours after being detained. The custody officer recorded making enquiries to find secure accommodation, even though it wasn't appropriate in this case.

Officers charged the boy at about midday but he wasn't taken to court until the following day. In total, he was detained for 31 hours. Officers did not send a referral to children's social care services.

Next steps

North Wales Police has made good progress in response to our 2019 recommendations. But the force recognises that it still needs to improve in some areas to provide consistently better outcomes for children.

But we are confident that the force understands where it needs to improve. We are also satisfied that senior leaders have plans to make these improvements and to monitor progress.

As part of our routine monitoring of all police forces, we will continue to evaluate the force's performance in relation to these recommendations and instigate closer scrutiny if necessary.

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