

National Child Protection Post-Inspection Review

Northamptonshire Police
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Introduction

The 2018 inspection

In March 2018, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) conducted a child protection inspection¹ of Northamptonshire Police.²

This inspection found that the chief constable, his command team, and the police and crime commissioner (PCC) had a clear commitment to child protection. There was also evidence of good engagement with other organisations that work to keep children safe across the force area. But senior leaders also described how the significant challenges being faced by Northamptonshire County Council led to difficulties when trying to work effectively with partners.

The commitment to protecting children was evident throughout the force. We found that specialist officers and staff managing child abuse investigations were committed and dedicated, often working in difficult and demanding circumstances. The response to incidents of sexual exploitation, with a dedicated team working to protect vulnerable children in Northamptonshire, was also innovative and effective.

But we identified a number of areas where the force needed to improve to ensure children in need of help and protection receive the right support. In particular, we had significant concerns about:

- managing sexual and violent offenders;
- responding to missing children;
- the quality of investigations involving children allocated to non-specialist teams; and
- significant backlogs of electronic devices awaiting examination, leading to delays in investigations.

We published a report on our findings in July 2018. This included a series of recommendations aimed at improving the service provided to children in Northamptonshire.

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

² 'Child' in the report refers to a person under the age of 18.

The 2019 post-inspection review

In 2018, the force gave us its action plan. This set out how it intended to respond to our recommendations. Since then, we have continued to monitor the force's improvement work.

In March 2019, we conducted a post-inspection review to assess progress. The review included:

- examining documents, including policies and action plans;
- interviewing officers, managers (including senior managers) and staff; and
- auditing 21 child protection cases (specifically on the areas for improvement set out in the 2018 report).

Summary of findings from the post-inspection review

Although the force has made a number of recent changes, overall progress since our initial inspection has been slow. As a result, in some areas, the force is not effectively managing risk yet.

Senior leaders know about the areas that need further improvement and are candid about the difficulties in managing the complex and increasing demands associated with effectively protecting children. They also know that more needs to be done to ensure that all children in need of help and protection receive the appropriate care.

We found the force has changed the way it approaches child protection work to meet these demands. The force has prioritised improving joint working, its scrutiny and oversight of child protection, and the way it monitors and manages its policing response. But even where changes have already been made, the results for children have not always been better, so the force needs to make sure new processes work effectively.

We found that the force relies too much on numerical data to measure how well it is looking after children's interests. It should look for better ways to measure the quality, as well as the quantity, of outcomes for children. This would mean a better standard of performance monitoring. Senior officers and managers would then have the scrutiny and analysis they need to assess how well officers and staff are helping children who need to be kept safe.

In some investigations, supervisors are not consistently challenging the progress of enquiries or adding value by giving direction that will help focus and drive officers' activity forward. We also found that officers are not challenging or escalating matters when local authorities do not provide alternative accommodation for children who are remanded in custody. This was something we also reported in 2018.

Members of staff take on work that partners should be doing. This includes looking for accommodation for children detained in police custody from outside the Northamptonshire area and placing assessments about sexual or violent offenders on the national ViSOR³ database on the National Probation Service's behalf.

Despite this, as we reported in 2018, specialist officers and staff who manage child-related investigations are committed and dedicated to their work. Senior leaders also continue to focus on child protection and on improving the police response to all vulnerable people.

As a result of this sustained focus, we found there had been a significant decrease in the number of outstanding visits to registered sex offenders. We also found that the force has improved its understanding of the reasons children go missing by completing a problem profile. This is positive and helps the force identify and reduce the risks vulnerable children face.

We audited the force's work in 21 case files. No cases were assessed as good. We assessed the force's practice as requiring improvement in ten cases, and inadequate in 11.

We are particularly concerned about delays and backlogs in several critical areas of child protection work. We found delays in investigating online cases with frequent drift in investigations; a significant backlog of electronic devices awaiting examination by the hi-tech crime unit (HTCU); information about missing children obtained from return home interviews not recorded on police systems promptly; a significant backlog of risk-management plans for sex offenders awaiting supervision; and cases dealt with by the non-specialist force investigation team (FIT) taking longer than they should, with a frequent failure to recognise the wider risks children face.

We are also particularly concerned about some of the decisions regarding registered sexual offenders who breach the restrictions placed upon them. A breach of these restrictions is likely to be a criminal offence and the offender could be arrested and prosecuted. However, we found that where the breach is deemed to be 'low level', the force routinely issues warning letters, taking the view that formal action is not in the public interest. While prosecution may not be appropriate on every occasion, we found that offender managers are making decisions to warn offenders without thinking enough about why breaches are occurring. We have made a new recommendation to the force about this.

Overall, Northamptonshire Police recognises the challenges it faces. It also understands what it must do to provide consistently good outcomes for children. But significant risks remain, due to limited progress since our 2018 inspection.

³ ViSOR is the violent and sex offender register used nationally by the police, probation and prison services for managing offenders.

While we are assured the force continues to focus on child protection matters, we remain concerned about the areas outlined within this report. We will therefore revisit the force to assess progress no more than 12 months after publishing our report.

Post-inspection review findings

Initial contact

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Northamptonshire Police should immediately:

- review its processes to ensure that its staff can easily draw together all available information from police systems in order to better inform their responses and risk assessments; and
- review its processes for supervision of the decisions made when police attend incidents where children are at risk or vulnerable.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

We found that the force had launched an internal campaign to raise staff awareness about child protection and their safeguarding responsibilities. This is positive, but the force needs to do more work to ensure that staff draw together all available information to inform their assessments and decision making. Backlogs of information about children that is waiting to be placed on to police systems are frustrating progress in some areas.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force has recently established an internal communications campaign to raise staff awareness

The force has used training and emails as part of its efforts to raise awareness among officers and staff regarding safeguarding and vulnerability. In February 2019, it launched Operation Marvel, a planned year-long internal communications campaign aimed at encouraging frontline officers to be professionally curious; to look for signs of vulnerability; to know when to challenge and escalate; and to give a voice to those who may otherwise go unheard. The force will use a survey of officers and staff will judge the strategy's effectiveness. But it has no plans to assess whether the campaign succeeds in improving working practice in the areas it seeks to target, for example capturing the voice of the child.

The force needs to do more work to ensure staff can draw together all available information to inform assessments and decision making

A better understanding of why a child has run away can provide vital information to agencies and make it possible to develop more effective risk management plans.

We found evidence that the local authority conducts and shares return home interviews⁴ with children. These can provide a wealth of information, particularly when the child is running away more often and/or is reluctant to speak to the police. But it is taking too long to upload details from these interviews on to police systems. As a result, potentially important information could be missed when risk assessing and investigating future incidents of a child going missing. At the time of the inspection, there was a backlog of 201 reports, which were waiting to be uploaded.

Improved response to incidents involving victims of domestic abuse where children were present

In 2018, we reported concerns that the force was sometimes scheduling appointments to respond to incidents involving victims of domestic abuse where children were present, rather than assigning an immediate (attendance within 20 minutes) or prompt (within an hour) response. For this inspection, we sampled six domestic abuse cases where children were present or resided within the family. In two of the six cases, the victim was seen as part of a scheduled appointment. But this was appropriate on both occasions and the scheduling resulted in only a short delay.

The force's response to the other four cases was appropriate and quick, and it is positive that information about previous incidents at the same address had been found and added to either the DASH⁵ risk assessment or public protection notice (PPN)⁶. However, the two cases the force referred to the multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)⁷ did not include a record of the minutes or actions from the meeting.

⁴ The local authority is responsible for conducting interviews with children within 72 hours of them returning. These interviews provide an opportunity to uncover information that can help protect children from the risk of going missing again, from risks they may have been exposed to while missing, or from risk factors in their home.

⁵ DASH is a checklist to help professionals identify the level of risk a victim of domestic abuse, stalking, harassment and so-called honour-based violence faces.

⁶ Public protection notices are used when the police encounters vulnerable children so it may share information with partners to develop a protective plan.

⁷ 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.

More work is needed on using flags to highlight important information about risk or vulnerability

The IT systems the force uses can flag important information about risk or vulnerability. For instance, the force uses flags to identify five children who repeatedly go missing in the county. This means that frontline officers and staff have access to important information when dealing with an incident. They can then put in place well-informed safety plans to manage any risk they identify.

The force doesn't use flagging to identify the addresses of registered sex offenders (RSOs) on the force command and control system (STORM). That means officers attending apparently unrelated incidents at addresses of RSOs will not know that they have offended previously, unless they carry out wider checks of other force systems. As a result, officers may miss opportunities to act or identify early any significant change in an RSO's circumstances that should trigger further assessment of the individual.

It was good to find that the force is making use of neighbourhood beat profiles to provide information about RSOs to officers. But the positive impact is being frustrated because the profiles are not kept current and so contain out-of-date information in some cases.

Assessment and help

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Northamptonshire Police should undertake a review within three months to ensure that the force is fulfilling its statutory responsibilities as set out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children*.⁸ As a minimum, this should include:

- examining the referral processes to ensure that risk is being identified effectively and shared in a timely manner with external agencies when appropriate; and
- providing guidance to frontline staff that identifies the range of responses and actions that the police can take to ensure immediate safeguarding concerns are addressed which contribute to multi-agency plans for protecting children in these cases.

⁸ *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, HM Government, 2018. The 2018 inspection of Northamptonshire Police commenced before 4 July 2018, when HM Government published the new document replacing *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (2015).

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The current referral process is not efficient. The force applies thresholds inconsistently, with no further action in some cases where the police has raised concerns. Access to internal safeguarding advice and guidance, on the other hand, has improved.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we were concerned about the completion rates of PPNs, the effectiveness of the referral and assessment processes within the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH),⁹ and the impact on developing protective plans. During this inspection, we found many examples of completed PPNs. However, we also found some cases that required a PPN for children but it had not been completed. It is up to individual officers to complete a notice and make sure it is submitted. There is no requirement for supervisors to oversee these notices.

Assessment of PPNs is not taking in wider intelligence or information

The police referral unit receives a PPN where there is concern about a child's welfare or vulnerability. The unit, which has two police staff, decides whether the PPN has met the statutory threshold¹⁰ to be sent on to the MASH. If not, it is either sent for the attention of staff within early help¹¹ or no further action is taken.

The referral unit's assessment process does not include checks on either the police national computer or the police national database, and it is not undertaken jointly with any other partner organisations working within the MASH. This restricts the basis for making decisions for intervention and help, and the opportunity to fully understand a child's circumstances, because other partners within the MASH are likely to have relevant information that would support this process. As a result, potential opportunities to intervene and safeguard children at an earlier stage are being missed.

Other organisations working within child protection have raised concerns about the large numbers of PPNs the police are completing. We were told that the referral unit is trying to cut the numbers of PPNs being submitted to the MASH.

⁹ A multi-agency safeguarding hub is a location in which public sector organisations with responsibilities for the safety of vulnerable people collaborate. These organisations work alongside each other, share information and co-ordinate activities.

¹⁰ Local safeguarding Children's Boards publish the local threshold criteria, covering sections 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989.

¹¹ Early help provision is intended to provide effective multi-agency support for vulnerable people, including children, before risks become acute.

In January 2019, the police completed 1,483 PPNs. Of these, 791 were submitted to the MASH; 501 were not shared with any agency; and the remainder went to early help.

As reported above, the police referral unit only submits to the MASH the cases they find have met the threshold. The local authority also undertakes a threshold assessment on those cases. This is inefficient and creates some duplication. Partners make different decisions and opportunities for joint working are lost. No further action is taken in some cases despite the police raising concerns. We were told that the force has discussed this problem with its partners.

Children's social care services should give feedback about the decisions they have made. This should include the reasons a case might not meet the statutory threshold for referral (i.e. if they decide to take no further action). As of this year, the authority is writing feedback letters to the police. However, we heard reports that the information is extremely limited and does not give details of the action taken or any protective plans put in place.

Access to internal safeguarding advice and guidance has improved

The force's intranet offers guidance and support for officers and staff on child protection matters. This provides clear links for accessing advice when dealing with incidents involving children. The guidance is being supplemented through Operation Marvel and the associated messaging and videos on the police's responsibility to keep children safe.

Investigation

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, the force should take action to improve child protection investigations by ensuring that:

- investigations are allocated to teams and individuals with the skills and experience necessary to manage them effectively;
- investigations are supervised and monitored, with supervisor reviews recording clearly any further work that may need to be done;
- decisions reached at meetings are recorded on police systems to ensure that staff are aware of all relevant developments to assist in future risk management; and
- regular audits of practice are conducted, which include assessments of the quality, timeliness and supervision of investigations.

Within three months, the force should improve its practice in cases of children who go missing from home. As a minimum, this should include:

- improving officer and staff awareness of their responsibilities for protecting children who are reported missing from home, in particular, those cases where it is a regular occurrence;
- improving supervisory oversight required to drive activity to trace children who are reported missing from home; and
- ensuring there is consistency in how information obtained from return home interviews conducted with children is being relayed to the force, to assist in the formulation of plans to reduce the frequency and risk of future episodes.

Within six months, the force must take steps to reduce delays in the HTCUC.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The cases the force investigation team manages are still being delayed. A concerted effort from the force has seen the backlog reduced, but some cases have still not been allocated.

Because of high workloads, supervisors do not always have enough time to support and direct their staff to a high standard. The force needs to do more work to improve the consistency of decision making, risk management, and outcomes for children.

It is still taking too long to examine electronic devices seized by the police, with 624 items waiting to be examined at the time of the inspection. But the force is using specialist software to track and investigate the sharing and distribution of indecent images of children.

The response when a child goes missing remains inconsistent. The force is not effective or efficient in allocating an officer to attend such reports.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

There are still delays within cases managed by the force investigation team

In 2018 we reported our concerns regarding the force investigation team and the significant delays in case progression. Current backlogs within the team are still causing delays. But the force has been working hard to reduce these from previous highs of around 300 in February 2019. During this inspection, we found 158 unallocated crimes, the oldest dating back to December 2018.

Staff within the FIT, many of whom are student officers, also support other activity that takes them away from their investigations. We were told this makes it harder for

them to reduce backlogs and manage daily demands, such as dealing with individuals who have been arrested and detained in police custody.

To improve understanding, the force has started to produce a report detailing crimes that have a child as a victim or suspect. This aim of this approach is to ensure that vulnerability and risk are identified early on and not missed within the current backlogs.

We found drift and delays in investigations. We also found that supervisors were not consistently challenging the progress being made or asking whether officers were following identified lines of enquiry. Case files do not always show how the work being done is effectively meeting the child's needs, reducing risk and improving outcomes.

Members of the FIT highlighted that five different inspectors had supervised officers and staff over a 12-month period.

Specialist officers within the child protection team , are working jointly with partners, but there are some delays in information from meetings being provided to the police

We reviewed and sampled cases undertaken by the child protection teams. We found that, broadly, strategy meetings take place and are well recorded, with the agreed outcomes available on the force IT system. But there are delays in children's social care services sending the minutes for these meetings to be uploaded on to the police systems.

It is positive that strategy discussions can now be recorded in audio format. But we did not see any examples of this facility being used.

The police online investigation team is currently under-resourced

The primary function of the police online investigation team (POLIT) is to arrest and investigate those who seek to abuse or exploit children online. At the time of the inspection, there were 181 active cases and supervisor should review each one every 28 days. With only one supervisor currently in post instead of two, it is not possible to do the reviews. We also identified that these reviews focus on the delays in items being examined rather than on the risks to keeping a child safe that such delays may generate.

There were also 12 warrants awaiting allocation to the POLIT team and two were related to high-risk cases. A shortage of officers – currently six instead of nine – is making it difficult to allocate warrants for execution. The force also takes away staff for other duties at weekends due to shortages in other teams. These delays are affecting case progress and risk management.

We found that most of the suspects the POLIT team arrests had been released under investigation, meaning they had no restrictive conditions placed on them.

There were 121 suspects in this category at the time of inspection. No records are being kept of safeguarding planning or risk management for suspects who have access to or contact with children within this category. In addition, the force is not reassessing risk to victims during this period. This can be significant due to the backlogs in the HCTU, with some lasting for many months or years. But suspects do undergo monthly welfare checks from local officers during this period.

There are still delays in the examination of electronic devices seized by the police

Considerable backlogs remain in HCTU, coupled with a lack of storage capacity for the data being extracted from devices. There are now 624 items waiting to be examined. At the time of our last report, the figure was 344 items. The oldest indecent images of children (IIOC) case waiting for allocation within the digital triage team is from April 2017. The oldest IIOC awaiting examination is from October 2016.

We heard that this work is not routinely outsourced, partly because of the high cost of using external providers.

The assistant chief constable chairs a fortnightly meeting to address the backlogs. This includes a drive to prioritise introducing mobile phone examination kiosks. During this inspection, we heard that five kiosks would be in use from March 2019. While this will help deal with the large numbers of phones awaiting examination, it will not at that point include cases connected to sexual offences or IIOC.

At the moment, and as we previously reported, there is still no triage facility for examining devices.

The child abuse image database is not being updated

HCTU staff do all viewing and grading work regarding IIOC. There is currently no force victim identification officer¹², and images are not uploaded on to the national child abuse image database (CAID).¹³ As a result, details of child victims and relevant images are not going into the system to help with future investigations. This undermines the police's ability to quickly identify victims, not only locally but also nationally. It also means the force is missing opportunities to reduce the amount of time officers and staff must spend viewing and grading images.

¹² The role of this officer is to identify victims and potential victims and upload confirmed indecent data to the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID).

¹³ The Child Abuse Image Database (CAID) is a national database of images of child sexual abuse seized during police raids on individuals and on sites that trade in the content. It aims to help police forces co-ordinate investigations of online child sexual abuse offenders, and to identify and protect victims.

The force uses specialist software to track and investigate the sharing and distribution of indecent images of children

The HTCUC also uses various specialist software programmes to track and investigate the sharing and distribution of indecent images of children and manage referrals from the National Crime Agency's child exploitation and online protection command (CEOP). These referrals are allocated to POLIT to take forward after intelligence work has been completed. At the time of the inspection, there were no notification backlogs and officers were working on 25 CEOP referrals.

One specialist system is not being used routinely to identify suspects sharing IIOC. In the month prior to our inspection, the system had picked up 124 incidences of an IIOC being shared. Nine of these indicated that further work should be conducted but this has not been done due to demand pressures.

These examples highlight the significant workload being held and managed within the HTCUC. Delays in examining digital devices seized by the police (which can be up to two years) can also have adverse effects on investigations, the confidence of victims, the welfare of suspects, and the continuous management of risk. This requires urgent action.

The response to missing children remains inconsistent

The force missing team works alongside the missing children team from children's social care services. This is extremely positive and is improving information sharing and joint working. Staff view this as effective.

There is also a missing person problem profile (dated December 2018), which comprehensively assesses the issues within the force and clearly identifies the threat, risk and harm with associated recommendations. The force has identified clear issues that need development and work so it can improve its approach to missing children. These include the need to draw all information from systems to inform the risk assessment and the subsequent police response.

Inspectors who are involved in missing cases receive training. However, frontline staff have had no training in the last six months on their responsibilities to safeguard and investigate missing children.

The force decided on 26 February 2019 to pilot an approach where no-one under 18 years could be classed as 'no apparent risk' (i.e. absent rather than missing) or 'low risk'. We found that the communication about this change did not include staff from the missing team.

Cases of missing children, particularly those in the care of the local authority, sometimes receive no police response despite the presence of risk indicators. Some calls remained outstanding without a timely response.

THRIVE¹⁴ is not being applied consistently or to maximum benefit within the control room for these cases. This affects the quality and accuracy of the risk assessment for missing children.

We found that an inspector in the control room showed a lack of understanding, which was evident in some risk reviews. In one incident, a high-risk case was downgraded to medium by an inspector. The rationale for this records that, while the child was having sex with older men, this was not a criminal offence, and that police could not confirm the existence of the men named on a list the child had. This minimising language demonstrates a lack of understanding of the risks linked to trafficking, grooming and exploiting children.

The way resources are allocated to reports of missing children is not efficient

An inspector in the control room must review a missing child incident and apply a risk grading before the force allocates a resource. This introduces unnecessary delays. In the eight missing incidents reviewed, only one was allocated a resource. The others were outstanding for several hours. During this time, the child returned of their own accord or was found by a carer/parent before the police attended.

A 14-year-old child who lives with her foster mother went out and failed to return at an agreed time. Her foster mother called the police on a Sunday evening to report her missing, stating she was concerned.

The control room recorded the incident, identifying that it was out of character for the girl to go missing, that she suffers with anxiety, and has previously self-harmed. The risk level was assessed as medium.

Over 10 hours later, on Monday morning, an update on the log stated that no officers were available to deal with the report. An inspector placed a review on the log confirming that they were aware that the call still needed an officer to be deployed to establish the full details and locate the child.

An officer went to the home address on Wednesday to conduct a search – three days after the initial report to the police. The girl was subsequently found safe and well later that day.

This poor response potentially left this child exposed to risk while missing, due to a lack of action and prompt allocation of an officer to investigate.

¹⁴ THRIVE is a risk assessment tool that considers six elements to assist in identifying the appropriate response grade based on the needs of the caller and the circumstances of the incident, namely: threat; harm; risk; investigation; vulnerability; and engagement.

The missing team is only aware of missing children from a record created on the force IT system (COMPACT). The team cannot see cases of missing children that are still held on an incident in the control room that have not yet been allocated an officer to initiate the investigation.

Investigation plans are not evident within COMPACT and missing episodes are not viewed as an investigation to find a child. Risk reviews are not routinely completed and there are no set timescales for repeat reviews to occur. An inspector makes updates on COMPACT every 24 hours to review the missing investigation, but these updates are inconsistent and often do not prioritise tasks that will drive activity to locate the missing child.

The recording of child abduction warning notices is good

The use of child abduction warning notices (CAWNS) can be effective in disrupting contact between a vulnerable child and an adult where there are concerns that the child may be at risk of harm from exploitation. These notices are considered as part of an investigation and safeguarding plan. We found the recording of CAWNS is good. On all the records we viewed, we found that staff had placed detailed information on the force IT system showing the child, subject and address, with the details of the issues and an expiry date.

The force is developing the use of trigger plans¹⁵ for children who repeatedly go missing (in line with the College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice for missing persons). These plans should outline the most important actions to be taken if a person is missing, to assist in finding that person as quickly as possible.

At the time of the inspection, the force had only two 'live' trigger plans in place. It has compiled a list of the top five children who regularly go missing, but no trigger plans are currently in place to help find any of those children when they are reported missing.

¹⁵ A trigger plan is a plan to locate a child quickly when they go missing.

Decision making

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Northamptonshire Police should immediately take steps to ensure that all information relevant to the use of powers under section 46 of the Children's Act 1989¹⁶ is properly recorded and is readily accessible in all cases where there are concerns about the welfare of children. Guidance to staff should include:

- what information should be recorded on systems to enable good quality decisions;
- the importance of ensuring that records are made promptly and kept up to date and visible to all, to assist in future safeguarding and risk management decisions; and
- the proper process to be followed to appropriately challenge decisions made about children with which the force may disagree.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

We found decisions to remove a child from their family by taking them into police protection and to a place of safety were well considered and in the best interests of the child.

Children subject to police protection are taken to designated locations. Social care services arrange this under a new scheme to minimise the use of police stations as a place of safety.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

When there are significant concerns about children's safety, officers deal with these incidents well, using their powers appropriately to remove children from harm's way. It is a very serious step to remove a child from their family by way of police protection and in the cases examined, decisions were in the best interests of the child.

Frontline officers also recorded the living conditions for children with a PPN, using body-worn video to gather evidence.

¹⁶ 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 remove the child to suitable accommodation.

Children subject to police protection are taken to designated locations other than police stations

Under a pilot scheme (due to run from February to May 2019), children subject to police protection are taken to designated locations that the children's social care services first response team arranges. This minimises police station use. Although it is too early to assess impact, this is a positive development. Taking a child to a police station is rarely in their best interests and should be a last resort.

The force has provided guidance on the actions and oversight inspectors (designated officers) must provide¹⁷. However, we found that officers did not always record some information relevant to the use of powers (such as the minutes from subsequent strategy discussions). This requires further work.

Managing those posing a risk to children

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

The force should immediately undertake a review of how it manages RSOs to ensure that all necessary action has been taken to mitigate the risk they pose to children.

Within six months, the force must ensure:

- all staff within the MOSOVO unit should be properly trained to use the ViSOR database used for managing sex offenders.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we had serious concerns about the force's ability to manage RSOs, putting the public – and children in particular – at potential risk of serious harm. The force has since reviewed the dedicated management of sexual and violent offenders (MOSOVO) team that manages RSOs and produced an improvement plan to address the findings.

This has resulted in significant improvements, such as a fall in the number of outstanding visits, which managers scrutinise on a daily basis.

¹⁷ The designated officer is responsible for inquiring into cases in which the police take children into their protection.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Officers and staff are now trained in using the ViSOR database

In 2018, we found that supervisors and staff within the MOSOVO team were unable to use ViSOR properly as a case management system. We are pleased to report that those working within MOSOVO, with the exception of the detective inspector, have all now received training in using ViSOR.

As a result, the team no longer uses standalone spreadsheets to manage its work. Record-keeping within the ViSOR system has improved and is more aligned to ViSOR standards than it was during our 2018 inspection.

The police officers in the team manage high and very high-risk offenders, while police staff members manage low and medium-risk offenders. The police officer ratio of offenders to manager is approximately 1:40 and for police staff it is 1:70. This is an improvement as we previously reported that the ratios were approximately 1:80 for both officers and police staff. This is in excess of what is reasonable.

There is a backlog of risk management plans awaiting approval

There is a backlog of risk management plans for RSOs awaiting supervisors' approval. The current backlog is 250, dating back to December 2018. This inhibits the supervisor's ability to check the quality of the proposed plans to manage the known risks and either approve or direct further work be undertaken.

The force has problems collecting accurate active risk management system (ARMS) information because of the way it used ViSOR in the past. As a result, the force cannot outline the current position in relation to ARMS¹⁸ compliance. ARMS enables the force to ease some of its demand by focusing on the RSOs posing the highest risk. The force is aware of the issue and is working to overcome it.

¹⁸ ARMS is a structured assessment process to assess dynamic risk factors known to be associated with sexual re-offending, and protective factors known to be associated with reduced offending. It is intended to provide police and probation services with information to plan the management of convicted sex offenders in the community.

RSOs are not routinely prosecuted for committing what the force deems to be 'low-level' breaches of the restrictions placed upon them

During this inspection, we identified that the force is using a new process to deal with low-level breaches of notification requirements¹⁹ by RSOs. Officers record offences properly and give them a crime number. At this point, we found that officers record a decision that formal action (i.e. prosecution) against the offender is not in the public interest²⁰ and the crime is closed. The force then sends a warning letter to the RSO.

This approach is not in line with the College of Policing's national guidance for managing sexual and violent offenders. This guidance stresses that "respectful skepticism" should be central to managing MOSOVO offenders. The routine use of warnings with little or no consideration of the reasons for non-compliance misses important opportunities to identify patterns of behaviour that may indicate increasing risk. This approach may also undermine future attempts to prosecute, and so protect the public, if previous breaches have not been dealt with robustly.

We recognise that, on occasion, prosecution for a minor breach may not be beneficial. This could be the case if, for example, the breach is an isolated occurrence and the wider circumstances demonstrate an offender is being managed effectively and is engaging. But this should not be routine and there should be a clearly documented rationale for it.

From the cases examined, it is evident that supervisors are deciding to issue warning letters based on incomplete information and without fully considering the wider circumstances and risks. This approach prioritises managing demand over mitigating risk and does not support informed and appropriate decision making. The force should carry out a review and reassure itself that it is using this process appropriately and is not managing demand. We have made a new recommendation about this.

¹⁹ Notification requirements, sometimes known as the 'sex offenders register', requires anyone convicted of a sexual offence to go to a police station to provide personal details including about movements (for example, if going abroad) and, if homeless, where they can be found.

²⁰ National Crime Recording Standard (NCRS): outcome 10 – not in the public interest.

Police detention

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within six months, Northamptonshire Police should, in conjunction with children's social care services, review how it manages the detention of children. As a minimum, it should:

- ensure that all children are only detained when necessary and for the absolute minimum amount of time;
- ensure that officers and staff in the custody suite assess at an early stage a child's need for alternative accommodation (secure or otherwise) and work with children's social care services to achieve the most appropriate option for the child;
- ensure that custody staff comply with their statutory duties to complete detention certificates if a child is detained for any reason in police custody following charge;
- ensure that custody staff make a record of all actions taken and decisions made on the relevant documentation; and
- improve the timeliness of adequate appropriate adult support for children who are arrested.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

Custody officers know they need to find alternative accommodation for children who are charged with an offence and refused bail. However, when alternative accommodation cannot be found, senior leaders do not routinely escalate this with children's social care services.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Custody officers know they need to find alternative accommodation for children refused bail, but planning and escalation need to improve

In the cases we examined where the force detained a child in the police station after being charged, we found evidence of requests to local authorities for accommodation. This shows that custody staff know that children need to be transferred out of police detention. But the requests are not always for the right type of accommodation, and the force is not making them soon enough for all the arrangements to be put in place.

We also found that not enough detail is being recorded on juvenile detention certificates (which outlines to a court why bail was refused). Further work is needed to ensure staff understand how and why detention certificates should be completed.

Where the local authority does not provide accommodation, there is little evidence that senior officers are told there is a problem so they can escalate the issue with the local authority. As a result, children stay in detention after they have been charged and so continue to be detained unnecessarily.

The force is using its audit process to better understand its performance when children are detained

A custody panel has recently been established to review all cases where a child is denied bail after being charged with an offence. This is positive and should allow partners to improve joint working in this area. But the group has yet to meet. The force also conducts audits for cases where children have been remanded in custody. This is to understand the reasons bail is denied and to help inform discussions with partners.

The force is getting better at giving children early access to an appropriate adult

When a child is arrested, efforts are generally made to contact appropriate adults. We still saw instances of delays in the adult's arrival at the custody suite, but there was evidence that the situation is improving.

Support is available for children in custody

A healthcare professional (HCP) should see all children when they arrive in custody. Although we found that HCPs are available to children in custody, they do not always see them.

The liaison and diversion team in custody provides support to a range of vulnerable groups, including those experiencing mental health problems, alcohol and drug addiction or learning difficulties, as well as children.

Next steps

This report highlights that, despite some progress made by the force, we have not seen the improvements needed to provide consistently good outcomes for vulnerable children in Northamptonshire who need help and protection.

While we are assured that the force continues to focus on child protection matters, we remain concerned about the areas outlined in this report. Considering this and that many of the areas of concern we found mirror those identified in the recently published serious case reviews,²¹ we will revisit the force no more than 12 months after publication to further assess progress.

2019 recommendation

Northamptonshire Police should immediately carry out a review of the use of warning letters for RSOs in breach of their notification requirements, when the force assesses that formal action is not in the public interest.

²¹ Two serious case reviews related to the deaths of [Child Ak](#) and [Child Ap](#) were published on 5 June 2019.