

National Child Protection Post-Inspection Review

Sussex Police
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Contents

Introduction	3
The 2018 inspection	3
The 2019 post-inspection review	4
Post-inspection review findings	6
Initial contact.....	6
Assessment and help	8
Investigation	11
Decision making	13
Managing those posing a risk to children.....	14
Police detention	16
Next steps	18

Introduction

The 2018 inspection

In June 2018, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) conducted a child¹ protection inspection of Sussex Police.²

This inspection found that the chief constable, his senior team and the police and crime commissioner (PCC) are clearly committed to protecting vulnerable people, including children. There was strong evidence that senior officers were working to improve the way the force manages risks to children and to meet the continuing increase in demand for child protection.

This commitment was evident in several areas such as:

- putting more officers and staff into specialist functions responding to vulnerable and at-risk children;
- investing time and energy in improving the health and wellbeing of its officers and staff; and
- making officers and staff more aware of how children are vulnerable and of their safeguarding responsibilities.

However, we identified several areas where the force needed to improve to ensure that its standard of service to children in need of help and protection was consistently high and in line with its own expectations.

Specific areas for improvement included:

- recording observations of children's behaviour and demeanour – for instance whether a child seems sad or happy, confident or frightened, to better assess a child's needs;
- not using the assessment 'no apparent risk' for children reported missing if there are any risk factors;
- improving staff awareness of the importance of drawing together all available information from police systems so that risk assessments have a sounder basis;

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

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

- reviewing the use of the investigations and resolution centre (IRC)³ to ensure child protection cases within that team are being managed effectively, and that staff are trained to undertake child protection investigations; and
- earlier assessment of the need for alternative accommodation (secure or otherwise) for a child who may be detained in police custody after charge, and working with the local authority to identify the most suitable accommodation.

In November 2018, we published a report on our findings. This included a series of recommendations to improve the service provided to children in Sussex.

The 2019 post-inspection review

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

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

- examining documents, including policies and action plans;
- interviewing officers, managers (including senior managers) and staff; and
- auditing 22 child protection cases (specifically on the areas for improvement set out in the 2018 report).

Summary of findings from the post-inspection review

Sussex Police has taken steps to address the recommendations we made after the 2018 inspection to improve the protection of children in Sussex.

The force's responses to our recommendations aim for long-term, sustainable changes rather than temporary quick fixes. Some changes have already been put in places; others are in progress. These changes are being tested to provide assurance of their effectiveness and outcomes.

More officers and staff have been appointed to some areas of the public protection teams. This is in response to problems of demand previously identified by both the force and our inspection team. We found that capacity, workloads (staff carrying more than 20 investigations each) and vacancies within the safeguarding investigation units (SIUs) remain of concern for senior leaders. The force is

³ The force investigations and resolution centre manages low threat, harm and risk incidents and crimes.

committed to the wellbeing of its officers and staff and so has been working to reduce workloads.

In 2018, we reported that auditing cases would reassure senior leaders that the decisions the workforce make about children are in line with what they expect. We are pleased to find that the force has since put in place an audit regime to better understand the quality of the work of officers and staff in child protection investigations. Findings are reported to a monthly vulnerability board meeting chaired by the local policing assistant chief constable and attended by senior officers, and the force takes further improvement steps if needed.

Senior leaders continue to engage with and seek to influence the strategy work of partner agencies. This has included proposals for future safeguarding arrangements in response to the Children and Social Work Act 2017⁴ – including the development of the Pan-Sussex Strategic Leadership Group. These proposals are being implemented. The force is confident that the foundations are now in place to help determine joint priorities and improve the efficiency and consistency of practice across Sussex, working with its safeguarding partners.

The force has also worked hard to improve the culture and understanding of its workforce about their responsibilities to safeguard vulnerable children. There is now evidence of officers talking to children to understand their concerns and inform decisions. This helps them to properly assess need and manage risks.

Further work is still needed to fully embed some of the changes, which the force recognises. For example, dealing effectively with the increase in prevention interviews for missing children and managing child exploitation cases. However, the overall response Sussex Police now provides to children in need of help and protection is much more effective than when we reported in 2018.

⁴ The Children and Social Work Act 2017 replaces Local Safeguarding Children Boards and requires each safeguarding partner in a local authority area (specifically the local authority, the clinical commissioning group and the chief officer of police) and any relevant agencies (schools, for example) to make arrangements that they consider appropriate to work together in exercising their functions.

Post-inspection review findings

Initial contact

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Sussex Police should immediately undertake, and then act on, a review of which child protection cases are taken by the investigations and resolution centre and consider whether it would be better to deal with any elsewhere. The review should cover whether they are being managed effectively and whether the staff are appropriately trained to undertake child protection investigations.

Sussex Police should take action within three months to ensure that its officers always record their observations of children's behaviour and demeanour, so that their needs can be better assessed.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we reported our concerns about the effectiveness of the IRC in child protection cases. We recommended a review of the IRC to assess whether cases involving children are most suitably and effectively managed them. In response, the force reviewed the work of the IRC and has made sure child protection cases are no longer dealt with by that team.

An internal communications campaign was launched in February 2019 to raise awareness of the need to record observations of a child's behaviour and demeanour.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force has reviewed the work of the IRC and acted on its findings

In 2018, we found that the IRC dealt with some cases involving indecent images of children and adults. We sampled some of those cases and were concerned to find that the police had seized no devices containing images. In others, they did not pursue lines of enquiry to identify perpetrators or other children who might have been affected.

We are pleased to find that a review has been undertaken, which reported in December 2018. As a result of the review, the force has changed the way the IRC operates so that it no longer deals with any incidents involving domestic abuse or a child.

Current child-related investigations have been re-allocated to frontline staff, and no further child protection cases are being managed by the IRC. The IRC will continue to manage certain incidents in which, for example, a child is a witness to a road

traffic incident, but there is now a new triage system in place, involving a supervisor checking that each case allocated to the IRC is suitable and does not involve child protection investigations. The force has also begun to dip-sample cases to ensure that the cases allocated to the IRC are appropriate.

Officers and staff within the IRC have had extra training

We reported on the need to upskill officers and staff within the IRC about safeguarding and investigating, and this has also been addressed. IRC staff are now PIP 1-accredited⁵ investigators, have worked on attachment to a multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)⁶ and can consult a SCADIP-trained⁷ detective for specialist advice. This is extremely positive and reflects the force position that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility.

We also examined the IRC's current work and found that the cases it manages are suitable. There were also no delays created by the triage system now in place.

The force has established an internal 'Think Child' communications campaign

A significant amount of time and effort has been invested in raising staff awareness and knowledge of the importance, purpose and requirement to capture the voice of the child.

The 'Think Child' campaign, launched in February 2019, is a prominent and consistent internal communications campaign to raise awareness of child protection and safeguarding. It involves briefings by senior leaders and training for officers and staff, supported by specialist advice.

SCARF⁸ is an important element of recording and sharing information on the vulnerability and voice of the child. This form has been updated since our last inspection so that any observations about a child, and possible impact on them, are recorded more effectively.

⁵ Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP) provides a structured development to embed and maintain investigative skills for police officers and staff. PIP 1 is priority and volume crime investigations.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Specialist child abuse development investigation programme (SCADIP).

⁸ A single combined assessment risk form (SCARF) is used by Sussex Police to complete an assessment of vulnerability and make a referral to external safeguarding organisations.

Officers and staff told us that the campaign and amended form had resulted in more calls to the SIUs seeking advice, and an improvement in both the quantity and quality of SCARF submissions.

However, we found that the forms aren't yet being consistently filled in with all required details. And there is inconsistency in the information included in a referral, which varies in quality and is sometimes limited. This means that decisions about safeguarding children could be made without having the complete picture.

The force has been using an animation clip called 'Ollie's Story' to bring to life the importance of the voice of the child. It shows the potential impact of police house searches or arrest of a family member when a child is present. The force has shown the animation to public order and firearms officers and staff who may be involved in similar scenarios. Staff we spoke to had received the briefings and were able to explain what is expected of them in recording the voice of the child.

The force has audited domestic abuse cases and found an improving picture in documenting the voice of the child. We also found this picture replicated in our child protection audits, but not in all cases, especially when a child is under two years old or asleep at the time of the incident.

Assessment and help

Recommendations from the report of the 2018 inspection

Sussex Police should immediately improve practice in cases of children who go missing from home. As a minimum, this should include making staff more aware of:

- their responsibilities for protecting children who are reported missing from home, especially where this happens regularly; and
- the importance of drawing together all available information from police systems, including information about people who pose a risk to children, so that risk assessments may be more soundly based.

Sussex Police should, within six months, undertake a review to examine the referral processes to ensure that they identify risk to children effectively and provide the necessary information to external agencies.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

During our initial inspection, we were concerned about the decisions the force contact, command and control department (FCCCD) made about children reported missing. We found its use of 'no apparent risk' for such children especially concerning because it creates limitations in being able to develop a plan to protect the child. In response, the force has acted on these concerns by removing the category 'no apparent risk'.

We also found previously that the MASHs across Sussex all worked in different ways. For example, some hubs refer cases to early-help providers for assessment once they have examined and discussed them, even if they may not meet the statutory threshold. Other hubs do not pass on all referrals that officers submit, or check them against partners' databases. When this happens, there is no opportunity to make a wider assessment of risk, or to identify additional support for a child or their family. Senior leaders are working to address some of these problems, and the partnership has recently developed a new Pan-Sussex Strategic Leadership Group.

The force has updated its SCARF risk assessment form (used for referrals and for providing information to external agencies) so that greater detail about children coming to notice is recorded more effectively.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

The force is improving its response for children who go missing from home

During our initial inspection, we found that the police often recorded as 'unauthorised absence with no apparent risk' children who are missing from the care of the local authority. Instead, they should have conducted a thorough risk assessment using all the available information on police systems.

In November 2018, the category 'no apparent risk' was removed by the force. This change helps to make sure that a child's risk is correctly assessed at first contact and the response to investigate, locate and safeguard the child is suitable.

The introduction, in January 2019, of divisional missing person teams overseen by detective inspectors and co-ordinators is positive. This is intended to provide a greater focus on the response to missing children. However, the staff have not received training for their new role.

Staff in the FCCCD are competent in assessing risk

We have found that supervisors and staff in the FCCCD are both confident and competent in assessing risks to missing children. Call handlers work through an assessment of the risk before applying a grading, even when the person making the report isn't concerned about the child's welfare.

The force also has response plans, which are held on police systems, for children who are frequently reported missing. These plans are used by the FCCCD staff to establish threat, risk and harm. They are also used to prioritise activity by both call handlers and response officers to find a child.

Reports of missing children are managed on the police IT system (Niche) and a marker is immediately placed on to the police national computer (PNC) as an early safeguarding tactic. This marker alerts any police force or member of staff conducting a check on the child to their missing status, before a full missing report is compiled. This early safeguarding tactic is good practice, but the PNC marker is not always used. Further work with staff is still needed to gain consistency.

In the missing children reports we examined, risk assessments were found to be appropriate to the circumstances. Call handlers had clearly checked police systems and used the information drawn from them to inform the level of risk for that child.

Following the report of a missing girl, the initial response to the call by the FCCCD was good. The call handler was able to establish the child's vulnerabilities from checking police systems, which informed the risk assessment, and which was appropriate to the circumstances and intelligence. Before attending the child's home address, the responding officers made effective decisions and searched the area. They located the girl and made sure she was safeguarded.

Child protection training provided to FCCCD staff is good

The training provided to FCCCD staff on child protection and vulnerability is good, with training days that are well received and relevant. The '60 second' briefings are emailed to each member of staff, and reinforced by weekly briefings by supervisors. Staff also said that they regularly use the force intranet information pages known as 'How Do I?' to help where necessary.

Prevention interviews don't always happen

All children who are missing should have a prevention interview⁹ when they are found or return home. Interviews with children at this stage can provide important information about the reasons why they are running away, particularly when they run away frequently. But resourcing problems mean that these checks don't always happen when they should, if at all. Where they do take place, the quality is inconsistent. The checks are not being prioritised and can remain for more than a day within the FCCCD without being allocated to an officer. Often, in the meantime, the child goes missing again and the police have missed the opportunity to establish information about the episode and check on the welfare of that child.

⁹ The police have a responsibility to ensure that the returning missing person is safe and well. The purpose of the prevention interview is to identify any continuing risk or factors that may contribute to the person going missing again.

This happens most often in cases involving looked-after children who are regularly reported missing.

Senior leaders are working with safeguarding partners

In 2018, we found that the four established MASHs all worked in different ways. For instance, some hubs did not share with other safeguarding partners all referrals that officers submitted, or check them against partners' databases. This meant that the opportunity to make a wider assessment of risk, or to identify additional support for a child or their family was lost. The force was aware of these inconsistencies and was trying to address them by influencing children's social care services in each authority as to how child protection concerns were responded to.

The force told us that it had worked with its safeguarding partners to develop a Pan-Sussex Strategic Leadership Group. The work of this group is intended to help determine joint priorities and improve both efficiencies and consistency of practice across Sussex.

Investigation

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, Sussex Police should produce a plan to improve its child protection and exploitation investigations, paying attention to:

- undertaking risk assessments that consider the whole of a child's circumstances and risks to other children; and
- improving the oversight and management of cases (to include auditing child abuse and exploitation investigations to ensure that standards are being met).

Summary of post-inspection review findings

The force has amended its control strategy¹⁰ so that both child sexual abuse and exploitation are recorded using the single term 'child exploitation'.

An action plan is now in place to improve investigations, supported by an audit schedule. The audits provide insights into how child protection and exploitation cases are managed, assessed and responded to.

Frontline officers and staff have also had training and guidance in identifying child protection risks and exploitation, and in building a rapport with a child.

¹⁰ A control strategy sets out the operational priorities for the police force.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

An action plan is in place to improve investigations

The force has implemented an action plan to improve the quality of its investigations. To support this work, audits are now in place, providing the force with a greater understanding of child protection, exploitation and neglect cases. Audits have identified gaps in the breadth of research into a child's previous history and the recording of a child's concerns or views on the effect of the incident on them (the voice of the child). This information has enabled the force to act and put in place specific responses to these problems.

The response by frontline staff to reports of sexual and criminal exploitation of children is good

We found that there is generally a good response by frontline officers and staff to reports of sexual and criminal exploitation of children, with appropriate steps taken to protect them and submit SCARFs. These staff also now have access to a sexual and criminal exploitation aide memoire, which lists important steps to be taken when dealing with these incidents and is available on their hand-held terminals.

However, the increase in volume of SCARFs has highlighted some delays in them being assessed by the MASH in West Sussex. Consequently, some strategy meetings are delayed, which has the potential to hold up the development of safeguarding plans. At the time of the inspection there was a backlog of 273 cases. We were told that as a short-term solution staff would be offered overtime to address the backlog.

The range of structures and processes for dealing with child exploitation is confusing

The different structures and processes for dealing with child exploitation across Sussex are causing confusion among officers and staff. Outcomes from meetings and activity to manage risk and safeguard children is not always evident on police systems. There are several ways to record information relating to victims and suspects. This can make it difficult to review information and fully understand a child's circumstances.

We found that actions and activity outlining what was being done were unclear in some cases, being dealt with across multiple meeting processes. The minutes from meetings were not always documented within the systems, and actions weren't always implemented. The effect is that it is unclear what meaningful action is being taken to mitigate and respond to risk and complex needs.

Suspects are also not consistently flagged on police systems, and therefore opportunities to mitigate or establish their risk to children may be missed.

A 12 year-old-girl was contacted by several men who asked her to send indecent images of herself to them. A member of the girl's family reported this contact to the police.

There was then a series of delays. It was six days before a strategy meeting was held, 19 days before the girl's laptop and phone were recovered by the police and three months before the items were examined.

There is no flag to highlight that the girl is at risk of child sexual exploitation. Although it is recorded that safeguarding is in place, it is unclear what has been done, by whom and what actions are being taken to mitigate further risk to the girl.

There are meetings to discuss intelligence about perpetrators and locations known to be hotspots for exploitation. But partner agencies aren't invited to the meetings so information held by them might be missed.

Minutes from the multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) escalation meeting are recorded on a stand-alone system, making it difficult for officers and staff to see what intelligence has been gathered and what investigations are underway. The force recognises this problem, and the need for officers and staff to be better informed about where information is recorded.

Decision making

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

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

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

Summary of post-inspection review findings

Previously, record keeping wasn't always good enough. Staff didn't always record enough details on police systems about safeguarding, joint working with other agencies, or the concerns and views of the child.

The force has now produced guidance called 'How Do I?' on its intranet for officers and staff, with training on how to record child exploitation cases. It is also updating or producing new templates to make sure important information is properly recorded.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

New templates and guidance have been developed to improve how information is recorded

The force has developed several templates and guidance documents to help staff record information, including activity in police custody.

One template is for recording strategy meetings and has been reviewed to test compliance by officers in completing the forms. Results show a marked improvement in recording strategy meetings, particularly in West Sussex.

However, in our audits we still found that safeguarding activity or associated plans aren't always recorded or evident in the force systems. More work needs to be done to record details consistently and to make the new practice permanent.

Managing those posing a risk to children

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

Within three months, Sussex Police should review its approach to providing appropriate information on registered sex offenders to response and prevention team officers.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we found ineffective links between the violent and sex offender register (ViSOR) team dedicated to multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)¹¹ and local police teams. The force at that time didn't routinely inform local officers about registered sex offenders (RSOs) living in their areas.

In response to this, records of all RSOs living in the community have a history marker placed on them in the police command and control system (WebStorm). Their details are available on the briefing and searching hub, which all officers and staff can access. This has led to more intelligence submissions and better working relationships with officers and staff outside the ViSOR team.

¹¹ Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) are in place to ensure the successful management of violent and sexual offenders. Agencies involved as responsible bodies include the police, probation trusts and prison service. Other agencies may become involved; for example, the Youth Justice Board will be responsible for the care of young offenders.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Information on registered sex offenders is now available to local officers

So that staff outside the force ViSOR team know about all RSOs being managed in the community, a history marker is placed on WebStorm. This alerts call handlers in the FCCCD and officers attending calls or investigating crimes that an RSO is linked to either an address or a mobile number for that incident.

Training packages have been put together for all teams across the force to help raise awareness of RSOs and how they are managed. Officers we spoke to confirmed that they had received the training as well as specific briefings on RSOs and how they are managed, which they found to be helpful in improving their knowledge and understanding.

Officers also told us that they receive tasks¹² for sex offenders, and that further information is held within the briefing and searching hub so that relevant details on individual RSOs are available to officers outside the ViSOR team. However, we found that not all officers and staff knew about these systems holding information on RSOs and therefore further awareness raising by the force is required to close this gap.

As a result of these changes, the ViSOR team told us that they had received more intelligence submissions and had formed better working relationships with other teams.

However, our ViSOR audits showed some problems with the wider availability of information held in police systems. Updates from SCARF referrals about the level of contact agreed by children's social care services between a child and an RSO is not recorded on Niche, although the information is on ViSOR. This means that people outside that team can't see that information.

¹² Information tasks are the prioritised collection of information; for example on an individual such as a sex offender.

Police detention

Recommendation from the report of the 2018 inspection

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

- ensure that children are only detained when necessary and for the absolute minimum amount of time;
- ensure that custody staff record properly the decisions made and action taken while children are detained; and
- 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.

Summary of post-inspection review findings

In 2018, we found that most reviews of children being detained were done remotely without consulting the child or meeting them. And when a local authority didn't find suitable alternative accommodation for a detained child, the police didn't always question the outcome or press for a resolution, resulting in children being held in police custody unnecessarily.

We note that there hasn't yet been a joint review with children's social care services of detaining children as we recommended in our 2018 report. However, we acknowledge the training and information that has been provided to officers and staff, and the small numbers of children now being detained after charge, which is positive.

Detailed post-inspection review findings

Officers have been trained in managing detained children

Custody sergeants now have a shift pattern that allows them seven training days per year, following changes made to the previous pattern. Training currently focuses on child detention and expediting investigations so that children aren't in custody longer than necessary.

We examined the course training plan and were pleased that it clearly describes the responsibilities and expectations for detaining children. It also outlines the role of the local authority in finding alternative or secure accommodation.

Staff have been given information about what accommodation local authorities should provide

The custody IT system now prompts officers to record decisions and actions taken relating to detained children.

Each custody sergeant has been given a child remand flowchart explaining the thresholds for requesting accommodation from local authorities. There is also an internal review process that gives feedback to staff when decision making in child detention cases wasn't correct.

Face-to-face reviews of the continuing detention of children are now in place

Inspectors involved in overseeing children detained in custody have been given specific guidance about expediting enquiries, mandating face-to-face detention reviews, and encouraging early reviews.

We saw evidence in our case audits that all this guidance has translated into practice, and that fewer children are detained after charge. The audits also showed good decision making in most cases of where a child was detained after charge, supported by evidence of staff seeking secure accommodation – the provision of which is a national problem.

There is a monthly custody legitimacy meeting to discuss providing accommodation, appropriate adults and juvenile detention certificate compliance. The meeting helps the force to understand where there may be difficulties in custody and what is needed to overcome them. Although it does include some partner agencies it doesn't involve representatives from children's social care services, which would add value to such a meeting. There was also no clear pathway for passing the findings from this group to wider strategic meetings, either directly with children's social care services or through local safeguarding children's boards (LSCBs)¹³.

¹³ LSCBs have a statutory duty, under the Children Act 2004, to co-ordinate how agencies work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and ensure that safeguarding arrangements are effective.

Next steps

There has been, and continues to be, a focus on child protection matters at a strategic level at Sussex Police. This includes the continuing work to develop partnership safeguarding arrangements across Sussex and to deliver our 2018 recommendations. The force is refining and improving its response to protect children who are vulnerable and at risk.

While improvements are still needed in some areas, there have been important steps towards addressing the recommendations. Sussex Police has put in place some good initiatives to make officers and staff more aware of the importance of listening to children.

The force now needs to become more consistent in its practice and continue the assurance work begun with the audits. This will give the force the information it needs to understand how children who need help and support are affected by its practices.