

National Child Protection Post-Inspection Review

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offender managers are managing more than 100 offenders each. This is significantly more than we found in 2016 (when they were managing between 50 and 60 offenders each). Further work is required (in the case of online abuse, as a matter of particular urgency) to ensure that children are effectively protected from those who pose a risk to them.

Significant concern: online child sexual abuse and exploitation

We found that the current arrangements for investigating online cases involving IIOC and sexual exploitation are not working. We reviewed 34 online cases. Twenty-nine of these were assessed as either inadequate or requiring improvement, 15 of which were sent back to the force because we considered they contained evidence of a serious problem – for example, a failure to follow child protection procedures and/or a child potentially at risk. There are continuing resourcing problems and backlogs. We also have significant concerns that cases that are dealt with by non-specialists result in notably poorer outcomes than those that are dealt with by specialist teams.

In addition, we found that the processes the MPS has in place for examining devices that are suspected of containing IIOC are ineffective. For example, because of the limited capacity of the digital examination team, only two devices can be sent for full examination. But, because non-specialist investigators have limited access to digital triage (which provides an initial assessment of whether IIOC are present), they must make uninformed decisions about which devices they should send. In addition, because of the volume and backlogs in the digital examination team, some devices are returned without being checked at all. As a result, investigations may be poor, victim confidence undermined and safeguarding opportunities missed.

This significant and concerning risk has been recognised by the force and several internal recommendations have been made to address the issues. These should be acted on swiftly to reduce the current risk. We acknowledge that the increase in online exploitation of children is a national problem. However, because of our acute concerns, we have made a further recommendation in this report about the improvements that are required.

Case file results

During this inspection, we examined 303 cases where the police had identified children at risk. We assessed the child protection practice as good in 93 (31 percent) cases, requiring improvement in 127 (42 percent) cases and inadequate in 83 (27 percent) cases. Many of the elements that required improvement or were inadequate were like those identified in 2016.

While fewer cases in the file sample were graded inadequate, proportionately we still referred the same percentage of cases back to the force (17 percent) during this inspection as we did in 2017. We do this if we think cases we are examining potentially contain evidence of a serious problem – for example, because child protection procedures have not been followed or a child has been left at risk of potential harm.

Overall, these results indicate that consistency of effective practice remains weak. We found that opportunities to act quickly and decisively to protect children and to prevent offending are still being missed. We found that lack of supervision along with the high workload of investigators is contributing to drift and delays in investigations. These inconsistencies are affecting the development of effective and timely protective plans. This is not in the best interests of victims and means that children may be left at risk.

Conclusion

There has been a clear commitment by leaders both in the MPS and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) to respond to the findings from our 2016 and 2017 inspections. Some very positive progress and improvements have been made as a result, against an extremely challenging policing backdrop. However, the improved leadership and better understanding of child protection cases across London must translate more quickly into significant and sustained improvements in the experiences of children who need help and protection.

One of our main ways of assessing the experiences of children is through case file reviews. Approximately two-thirds of those cases we reviewed did not meet the required standard. While we judged fewer cases to be inadequate than in previous inspections, many of the problems we identified remain constant. For instance, we continue to find poor-quality supervision of child protection cases, which has been an enduring problem for the force since we first reported. A recent decision not to proceed with providing training to improve frontline supervision is therefore disappointing.

We also found that the management of RSOs and the response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation has in some respects deteriorated since we last inspected. This is of significant concern.

The MPS told us that it anticipates work to ensure that children receive consistently improved responses will take a further two years. Senior leaders must assure themselves that this timescale is justifiable, given the extreme vulnerability of many of the children who come into contact with the force. We would also now expect to see clearly articulated time frames and milestones that are agreed and established, and can be closely monitored to give the force and others overseeing this work clarity on exactly how and when improvements will be achieved.