

An inspection of how well the police and National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children

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Foreword

The internet has made it much easier for adults to groom, sexually abuse and exploit children. It has also made it much easier to access child sexual abuse material, often called indecent images of children. In some cases, offenders even arrange for children to be abused in real time, while they watch online.

Increasingly, children make sexual photographs and videos of themselves. These are often called youth-produced sexual images or self-generated indecent imagery. They may depict nudity or sexual activity. Some children are pressured, tricked or manipulated into sharing this imagery. In some cases, offenders use it to coerce the child into facilitating further offences on their behalf.

This kind of behaviour on the internet proliferates, in part, because of inadequate legal and technological safeguards on internet use. To identify and tackle it, the National Crime Agency (NCA) works with police forces and other law enforcement bodies in the UK and abroad. In 2021, the NCA sent more than 20,000 image-related cases to UK police forces for further investigation. This is more than double the number from four years earlier and it appears to be still rising.

Investigating and preventing online child sexual abuse and exploitation is a complex area of work with many interdependencies. Law enforcement bodies, government departments, child protection agencies, the third sector (charities, community groups and social enterprises) and the tech industry need to work together effectively to tackle the problem, protect children from harm and pursue those who seek to abuse them.

We consulted many of these organisations and inspected six police forces, two [regional organised crime units](#) and the NCA. We also examined data, together with policies and strategies from the police service and Government.

During our inspection, we found dedicated and committed people at all levels. But many of them were working in very difficult circumstances, with limited resources, huge demand and uncertainty about what was expected of them. Consequently, police forces' investigative practices are often poor. Unacceptable delays are commonplace, some children are left at risk and some suspects aren't investigated.

Also, many forces often wait too long before sharing information with their [statutory safeguarding partners](#). This can mean they miss opportunities to refer children and families for support.

The links between national and local leadership and the resulting frontline response should be strengthened.

More needs to be done to stop sex offenders using the internet to groom, sexually exploit and abuse children, and to make it harder for offenders to view and share images of that abuse. Law enforcement bodies need to act more quickly and effectively, with their safeguarding partners, when children are at risk.

As a result, we have made 17 recommendations to the police and other bodies. These are intended to:

- reduce the amount of child sexual abuse material on the internet;
- provide better guidance and training to those who investigate online child sexual abuse and exploitation;
- improve investigations into those who are a risk to children; and
- better protect and support children who have been sexually abused, or who are at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

The police and NCA have unique tools, powers and responsibilities to protect children from harm, to pursue perpetrators and to prevent crime. But the sexual abuse and exploitation of children is part of a wider societal problem. It needs a societal response.

Summary

The identification and investigation of online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) is complex and challenging. It is still a relatively new type of offending and has many characteristics.

Throughout our inspection, we found committed and enthusiastic national and local leaders.

We also spoke to many frontline investigators who care passionately about their work. They are eager to do their best, working long and inconvenient hours, which can have a significant impact on their personal lives. They are exposed to disturbing and traumatic imagery, and routinely interview suspects who pose significant risks to children.

At a national level, we found strong relationships between the police service, National Crime Agency (NCA), Government, third sector and [College of Policing](#). These relationships have developed over many years through established governance boards under the [4P approach](#) for tackling [serious and organised crime](#): pursue, prevent, protect and prepare. We also noted the continued commitment of board members over a number of years, which has strengthened these relationships.

Largely due to the work of the NCA, the boards have a good understanding of the national threat posed by online child sexual abuse and exploitation. The NCA has developed and co-ordinated strategies and tools to tackle that threat. But that effort isn't always translating into consistent and effective practice to make sure children are protected, and those who would seek to abuse them are pursued and brought to justice.

In this inspection, we found considerable differences in approaches between individual forces, and between forces and the NCA. This means children in some areas are being left at risk and suspects aren't always being investigated.

Our key findings are:

- There are no nationally agreed minimum standards of practice.
- There is limited guidance for staff about online CSAE and some of it is outdated. Some forces have developed guidance locally, which results in inconsistent approaches.

- There isn't a definitive training requirement for specialist online abuse investigators. For most other specialist roles (such as child abuse investigation, managing sex offenders, and intelligence officers), the training requirement has been defined.
- Most forces don't have enough performance information to allow senior leaders to understand risk levels, demand or timeliness of investigations.
- Response officers are usually assigned the initial response to self-generated image and grooming cases. Most don't then consider the wider risk posed by a suspect to other children or follow important lines of inquiry.
- Risk assessment and the subsequent prioritisation of cases is often poorly managed, with recommended timescales ignored or not measured.
- There is more demand on the police and law enforcement bodies as the number of offences, images and tech industry reports increase. But police leaders often don't understand in enough detail the risk to children and the impact on resources. This means they can't always arrange, allocate or increase resources to meet that demand.
- Most forces don't share information with their statutory safeguarding partners at the time when significant risk to children is first known. In most cases, information sharing takes place after the police have carried out activity such as a search warrant. This can be many weeks or months after the force first knew about the risk.
- There isn't enough collaboration between the NCA and local forces to make sure the most appropriate people investigate cases.
- The police service isn't using the [Child Abuse Image Database](#) to its full potential. Some forces aren't fulfilling their obligations to contribute to it, and there aren't enough victim identification investigators.

These areas need to be addressed as a priority. This should form part of a wider systemic approach to better understanding the risks children face, and equipping forces and other organisations with the capacity and capability to deal effectively with those risks.

We did find some consistent strengths:

- We saw many examples of [officers](#) and [staff](#) responding quickly to pursue suspects and protect children when risk was identified. They often work extremely long hours and on their days off to achieve the best outcome.
- The forces we visited, the NCA and the regional organised crime units are all aware of the psychological demands placed on these officers and staff. All have enhanced welfare support available to their personnel and monitor their well-being over time. Some have innovative approaches to supplementing this support, such as gradual exposure to images, time away from the office, and well-being days.

We also saw local examples of good practice:

- Dyfed-Powys Police employs an analyst to review data recovered from suspects' media devices and establish whether suspects may have been in touch with other children. The force works collaboratively with the NSPCC to try to identify those children, find out if they have been victims and offer support. It also works to identify and pursue other suspects.
- Nottinghamshire Police has started sharing information with its statutory safeguarding partners at the time the risk to children is first known. The force shows the benefits of a joint approach to assessing risk, planning and co-ordinating activity to protect children.

Conclusion

There is a clear commitment from national leaders in law enforcement bodies to tackle the growing problem of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Existing governance structures at a national level provide a foundation for good oversight and improvement.

The NCA has an important leadership role, and a good understanding of the national demand levels and the risks to children. But the growing amount of child sexual abuse material available online needs legislative intervention. The [Online Safety Bill](#) is a critical opportunity to address this.

To achieve consistently good practice at regional and force level, the police's response also needs improvements. Senior leaders need better processes to understand their local performance, the scale and nature of the demand in their force area, and the risks to children. Officers and staff need clearer guidance, supervision and training so they can meet nationally agreed minimum standards.

Forces should work more collaboratively with their statutory safeguarding partners and agree joint plans to protect children to prevent them from becoming victims. And they should make sure children who do become victims are offered support.

We have made a series of recommendations aimed at improving the consistency of the police's approach and the timeliness of their investigations, reducing the availability of child sexual abuse material, and getting better outcomes for children.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

By 31 October 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection should work with chief constables and chief officers with responsibilities for [regional organised crime units](#) to introduce regional collaboration and oversight structures to support the Pursue board. This should:

- improve the link between national and local leadership and the frontline response;
- provide detailed, consistent scrutiny of performance; and
- meet chief constables' obligations for tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation, as set out in the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#).

Recommendation 2

By 31 October 2023, chief constables, the director general of the National Crime Agency and chief officers with responsibilities for [regional organised crime units](#) should make sure they have effective data collection and performance management information. This is so they can understand the nature and scale of online child sexual abuse and exploitation in real time and its impact on resources, and so forces and the National Crime Agency can react quickly to provide adequate resources to meet demand.

Recommendation 3

By 31 October 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, the director general of the National Crime Agency and the chief executive of the College of Policing should jointly agree and publish interim guidance for all officers and staff dealing with online child sexual abuse and exploitation. The guidance should set out their expectations and reflect the findings of this inspection. It should be incorporated into subsequent revisions and additions to [authorised professional practice](#).

Recommendation 4

By 30 April 2024, the chief executive of the College of Policing, in consultation with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection and the director general of the National Crime Agency, should design and make available sufficient training material to make sure frontline staff and specialist investigators dealing with online child sexual abuse and exploitation can receive the right training to carry out their roles.

Recommendation 5

By 30 April 2025, chief constables should make sure officers and staff dealing with online child sexual abuse and exploitation have completed the right training to carry out their roles.

Recommendation 6

By 31 July 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection should provide the new prioritisation tool to law enforcement bodies.

It should include:

- expected timescales for action;
- clear expectations about who should use it and when; and
- who cases should be allocated to.

Then, 12 months after those bodies have implemented the tool, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection should review its effectiveness and, if necessary, make amendments.

Recommendation 7

By 31 October 2023, the Home Office and relevant National Police Chiefs' Council leads should consider the scope of the [Transforming Forensics Rape Response Project](#) to assess the feasibility of including online child sexual abuse and exploitation cases in it.

Recommendation 8

By 31 July 2023, chief constables should satisfy themselves that they are correctly sharing information and making referrals to their [statutory safeguarding partners](#) in cases of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. This is to make sure they are fulfilling their statutory obligations, placing the protection of children at the centre of their approach and agreeing joint plans to better protect children who are at risk.

Recommendation 9

By 31 October 2023, chief constables and [police and crime commissioners](#) should make sure their commissioned services for children, and the process for referring them for support or therapeutic services, are available for children affected by online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Recommendation 10

The Home Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should continue working together to make sure online safety legislation requires the relevant companies to develop and use effective and accurate tools and technologies to identify child sexual abuse material, whether or not it was previously known. These tools and technologies should prevent that material being uploaded or shared, including in end-to-end encrypted services. Companies should also be required to locate, remove and report the presence of that material to the designated body.

Recommendation 11

By 31 July 2023, chief constables and police and crime commissioners should review the advice they publish, and, if necessary, revise it, to make sure it is consistent with the National Crime Agency's [ThinkUKnow \(Child Exploitation and Online Protection\)](#) material.

Recommendation 12

By 31 October 2023, chief constables in England should satisfy themselves that their forces' work with schools is consistent with the national curriculum and National Crime Agency educational products on online child sexual abuse and exploitation. They should also make sure this work is targeted based on joint analysis with their safeguarding partners.

Recommendation 13

With immediate effect, chief constables should satisfy themselves that their crime allocation policies make sure online child sexual abuse and exploitation cases are allocated to those with the necessary skills and training to investigate them.

Recommendation 14

With immediate effect, chief constables should make sure their force meets any existing recommended timescales for activity targeting online child sexual abuse and exploitation, and arrange their resources to meet those timescales. Then, six months after the new prioritisation tool is implemented, they should carry out a similar review.

Recommendation 15

By 31 October 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, chief officers with responsibilities for [regional organised crime units](#) and the director general of the National Crime Agency (NCA) should review the process for allocating online child sexual abuse and exploitation investigations, so they are investigated by the most appropriate resource. This should include a prompt way of returning cases to the NCA when forces establish that the case needs NCA capabilities to investigate it.

Recommendation 16

By 31 October 2023, chief constables should work with their local criminal justice boards to review and, if necessary, amend the arrangements for applying for search warrants. This is to make sure the police can secure warrants quickly when children are at risk. This review should include the feasibility of remote communication.

Recommendation 17

By 31 July 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, the director general of the National Crime Agency and the chief executive of the College of Policing should review and, if necessary, amend the information packs given to families of suspects to make sure they are consistent nationally (notwithstanding local services) and that they include information that is age-appropriate for children in the household.

Introduction

Background

Strategic Policing Requirement

In July 2012 the Home Office published the first version of the [Strategic Policing Requirement \(SPR\)](#). It was issued in execution of the Home Secretary's statutory duty to set out what were, in their view, the national threats at the time of writing and the appropriate national policing capabilities needed to counter those threats. In February 2023, the Home Office published a new version of the SPR.

It aims to support [police and crime commissioners \(PCCs\)](#) and chief constables to balance local and national priorities effectively, and drive improvements to their forces' response to serious and cross-boundary crime. PCCs are required to have regard to the SPR when issuing or varying their police and crime plans. They must keep these plans under review in light of any changes the Home Secretary makes to the SPR.

Chief constables must have regard to both the police and crime plan and the SPR when exercising their functions. PCCs will hold them to account for doing so. In 2015, the Home Office added child sexual abuse to the SPR as it is a threat of national importance, saying:

“Its potential magnitude and impact necessitate a cohesive, consistent, national effort to ensure police and partners can safeguard children from harm.”

The SPR defines child sexual abuse as follows:

“Forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening. The activities may involve physical contact, including assault by penetration (for example, rape or oral sex) or non-penetrative acts such as masturbation, kissing, rubbing and touching outside of clothing. They may also include non-contact activities, such as involving children in looking at, or in the production of, sexual images, watching sexual activities, encouraging children to behave in sexually inappropriate ways, or grooming a child in preparation for abuse. Sexual abuse can take place online, and technology can be used to facilitate offline abuse. Sexual abuse is not solely perpetrated by adult males. Women can also commit acts of sexual abuse, as can other children.”

Our 2015 report

In July 2015, we published our report [*Online and on the edge: real risks in a virtual world*](#), which was an inspection into how police forces dealt with the online [*sexual exploitation*](#) of children.

In that report, we said that dealing with child sexual exploitation in a virtual world needed a different style of policing from the conventional methods of the past. Forces needed to understand the nature and potential scale of the online exploitation of children to make sure more was done to protect them from harm and bring perpetrators to justice.

We made a series of recommendations aimed at improving the police's understanding and response to what was then a relatively new concern.

Expectations set out in the 2018 Working Together guidance

The statutory guidance published in 2018, [*Working together to Safeguard Children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*](#), sets out what is expected of all organisations involved in child protection. These include local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, schools and voluntary organisations.

The specific police roles set out in the guidance are:

- identifying children who might be at risk from abuse and neglect;
- investigating alleged offences against children;
- inter-agency working and information sharing to protect children; and
- using emergency powers to protect children.

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

In March 2020, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse published its [*Internet Investigation Report*](#).

This investigation examined the nature and extent of the use of the internet to facilitate child sexual abuse, including by sharing indecent images of children, viewing or directing the abuse of children via online streaming or video conferencing, and grooming or otherwise co-ordinating contact offences against children. It also considered the experiences of victims and survivors of child sexual abuse enabled by the internet, and the adequacy of the response of the Government, law enforcement bodies and the tech industry to online child sexual abuse.

The chair and panel made recommendations to the Government for reducing the amount of child abuse material available online.

In October 2022, the inquiry published its final report, making 20 recommendations. Two recommendations relate specifically to online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Government

In January 2021, the Government published its [Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy](#). This sets out the Government's plan to prevent, tackle and respond to all forms of child sexual abuse. It focuses on:

- tackling all forms of child sexual abuse and bringing offenders to justice;
- preventing offending and re-offending;
- protecting and safeguarding children and young people; and
- supporting all victims and survivors.

Ofsted review

In June 2021, Ofsted published its [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#).

This thematic review revealed how prevalent sexual harassment and online sexual abuse was for children and young people. The review didn't analyse whether the issue was more or less prevalent for different groups of young people, but it found that the issue was so widespread, it needed to be addressed for all children and young people.

Girls said that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse, such as being sent unsolicited explicit sexual material and being pressured to send nude pictures, were much more prevalent than adults realised. Ofsted surveyed just over 800 children and young people aged 13 and over. It found:

- 80 percent of girls said being put under pressure to provide sexual images of themselves happened a lot or sometimes between people their age;
- 73 percent of girls said having pictures or videos that they sent being shared more widely without their knowledge or consent happened a lot or sometimes between people their age; and
- nearly 90 percent of girls and nearly 50 percent of boys said being sent explicit pictures or videos of things they didn't want to see happened a lot or sometimes to them or their peers.

Worryingly, the frequency of these [harmful sexual behaviours](#) means that some children and young people consider them normal. It is concerning that, for some children, incidents are so commonplace they see no point in reporting them.

Internet Watch Foundation

The Internet Watch Foundation works with the Home Office alongside partner agencies and bodies including the National Crime Agency (NCA), the [National Police Chiefs' Council](#), the College of Policing and local forces. It works to view, hold, categorise and ultimately remove child abuse content from the internet across all open platforms.

In 2021, the [Internet Watch Foundation reported](#) it had investigated more cases of child sexual exploitation that year alone than in the first 15 years of its existence. It found that self-generated imagery was the fastest-growing type of child sexual abuse material.

The police's responsibility to keep children safe

Under [section 46 of the Children Act 1989](#), a constable may remove into police protection any [child](#) they have reasonable cause to believe would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm. The same Act also requires the police to inquire into that child's case.

Under [section 11 of the Children Act 2004](#), the police must also keep in mind the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

Every [officer](#) and member of [police staff](#) should understand it is their day-to-day duty to protect children. Officers going into people's homes for any reason must recognise the needs of any child they meet, and understand what they can and should do to protect them.

Sections 11 (England) and 28 (Wales) of the Children Act 2004 place duties on a range of organisations and individuals to make sure their functions, and any services that they contract out to others, safeguard children.

Section 8(1) of the Crime and Courts Act 2013 confirms that the NCA is subject to sections 11 and 28 of the Children Act 2004.

About us

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) independently assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of police forces and fire and rescue services, in the public interest. In preparing our reports, we ask the questions that the public would ask, and publish the answers in an accessible form. We use our expertise to interpret the evidence and make recommendations for improvement.

Our terms of reference

Our terms of reference were to address the following question:

How effective are police forces, the NCA and regional organised crime units at identifying and safeguarding children affected by online sexual abuse and exploitation?

The inspection also assessed how effectively these organisations prevented and investigated this type of crime.

It focused on the effectiveness of the police approaches to:

- identifying and safeguarding children at risk, and working with partner organisations to protect children at risk or suffering trauma from online sexual abuse and exploitation;
- investigating and managing crimes, including use of technology and [digital forensics](#);
- how children are supported through the criminal justice system, including those children who have committed sexual offences; and
- preventing online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Methodology

Our inspection took place between February and August 2022. During our inspection, we carried out the following:

- We established an external reference group and regularly discussed our findings and approach. It included representatives from the police service, Government, and the charity and voluntary sector. We are grateful to the external reference group for its continued support and expertise, which have been invaluable. A full list of members is given in [Annex A](#).
- We conducted fieldwork in six police forces, two regional organised crime units and the NCA. During this fieldwork, we reviewed documents, policies and case files. We interviewed leaders, managers, operational officers and staff. We also hosted focus groups.
- We carried out interviews with those in national leadership roles.
- We reviewed [force management statements](#).
- We reviewed relevant literature.
- We reviewed data we collected from police forces in England and Wales.

Leadership and governance

National leadership

National leadership of the response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) is co-ordinated through strands of activity under the [4Ps model](#) of tackling serious and organised crime: pursue, prevent, protect and prepare.

Governance comes from three boards: Pursue, Prevent and a combined Prepare and Protect board. They report to a strategic governance group chaired by a National Crime Agency (NCA) director.

They each have similar terms of reference, and were created to provide a centralised governance and reporting process. As they are interlinked, there is cross-representation on each board. This comes particularly from:

- the [National Police Chiefs' Council \(NPCC\)](#) lead for child protection, who chairs both the Pursue and Prevent boards;
- the NCA's threat leadership director, who chairs the strategic governance group; and
- the NCA's threat leadership deputy director, who chairs the Prepare and Protect board.

We found good representation at the board meetings, with national leaders from several organisations attending them and contributing to them. These included the College of Policing, Home Office, third-sector organisations and representation from Ofcom. The meetings we saw showed a clear commitment to tackling online CSAE.

The boards oversee activity to tackle the threat from online CSAE. They should also give assurance to the NCA strategic governance group that there is an effective and efficient multi-agency response, in line with the responsibilities agreed with the NPCC.

The boards approve and take responsibility for actions, which are recorded within the CSAE strategic action plans. They oversee the implementation of those actions and report on progress to the strategic governance group.

One of the boards' functions is to provide a centralised reporting process for the collation of management information. This is so they can monitor the success of the activities at a national, regional and local level.

There is significant evidence that the boards and their members have worked hard to tackle the threat of online CSAE for many years, and that they continue to do so.

At the time of our inspection, ongoing work included:

- commissioning an academic review of the [Kent internet risk assessment tool \(KIRAT\)](#), and working with the College of Policing to make sure training is available to all officers and staff who need it;
- developing a prioritisation tool to help all those people investigating the various strands of this work to understand risk and make better decisions;
- providing educational support and understanding of the [dark web](#); and
- working with tech industry partners to make child sexual abuse material harder to find on the internet.

But we did find that the management information collated and reported at the meetings had unintended consequences. Police forces, regional organised crime units (ROCU) and the NCA are required to submit data, which is collated by the NCA and presented to the Pursue board. During this inspection we found some forces were focusing their efforts on areas that the board scrutinised, and not prioritising other areas, despite the evident risk. We also saw that the timeliness of activity wasn't included in the data the board received. This is an important measure of performance because the longer it takes law enforcement bodies to act on known risks to children, the longer children are at risk of abuse. We are reassured that, as a result of our inspection, the Pursue board is already working to improve this area.

The amount of data gathered is huge, and there is limited time in board meetings for members to scrutinise it. The people attending and chairing the boards also do this work in addition to their day-to-day roles. For example, the NPCC lead for child protection is a deputy chief constable of a large police force, as well as carrying out this national role.

Detailed performance scrutiny at a local or regional level would give forces a better opportunity to identify good practice and areas for improvement. Forces could then report this information to the Pursue board, so it can use it to inform its strategies and decisions.

The Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR) also requires PCCs and chief constables to work collaboratively across force boundaries to make sure they have enough resources for their operational needs. A regionally based collaboration and oversight structure would improve the link between the frontline response and the strategic leadership.

Recommendation 1

By 31 October 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection should work with chief constables and chief officers with responsibilities for [regional organised crime units](#) to introduce regional collaboration and oversight structures to support the Pursue board. This should:

- improve the link between national and local leadership and the frontline response;
- provide detailed, consistent scrutiny of performance; and
- meet chief constables' obligations for tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation, as set out in the [Strategic Policing Requirement](#).

Management information and oversight

Many investigations linked to online CSAE are initiated because of intelligence reports from the US-based National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) or other sources. That means these cases aren't reported through a control centre where there is real-time oversight of response times and outcomes.

When acting on these intelligence reports, the police often need to do more work to identify a suspect and understand the risk the suspect poses. We found that some forces managed this work on standalone systems, with only a few people able to use and access the information on them. This makes it difficult for senior leaders to understand levels of risk and the demand on resources at any particular time. We saw examples of intelligence development taking several weeks. In some cases, forces knew about risks to children long before they recorded the investigation on open systems. This meant they couldn't supervise or manage the risks effectively, and it also negatively affected how well forces could prevent further risk.

None of the forces we visited could show us comprehensive management information that informed them:

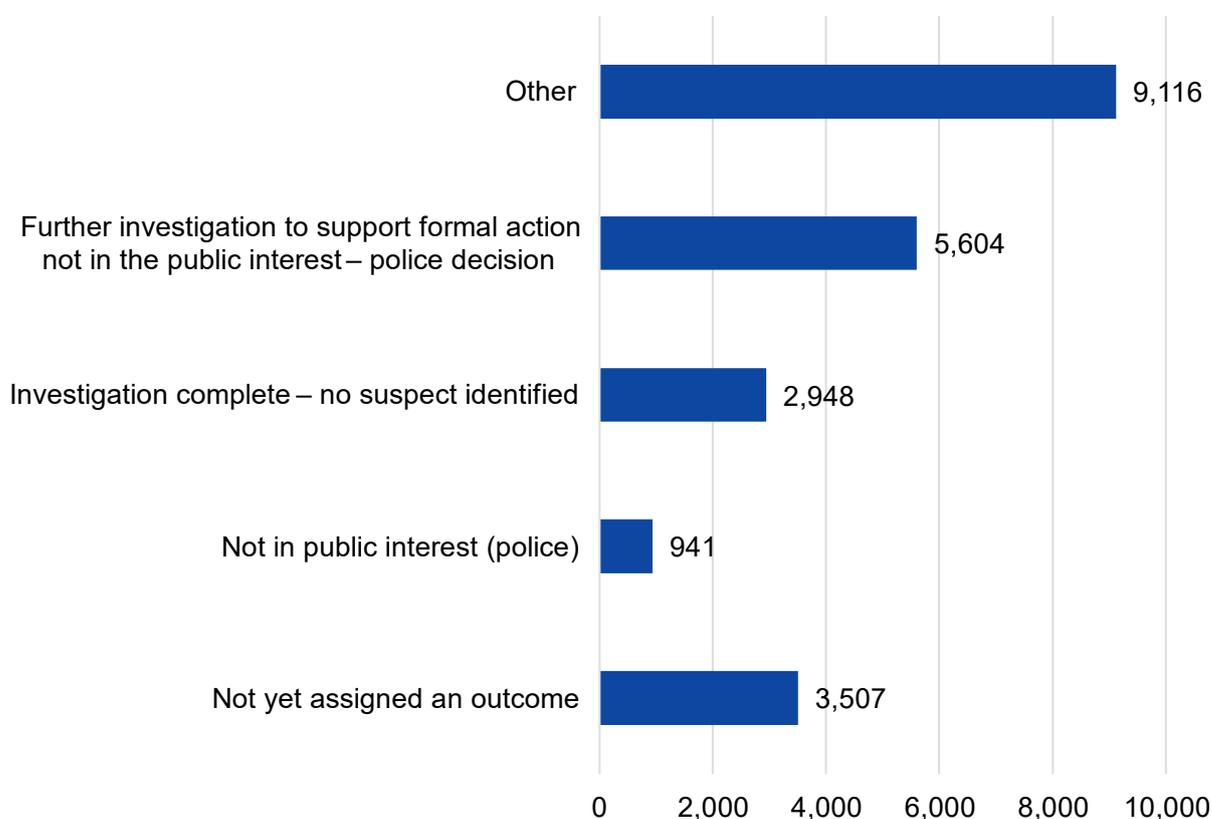
- how long cases took to develop;
- how long it took the force to act; or
- how long it took for the force to complete an investigation.

The type of investigation forces carry out also affects their resources. For example, when a force records an offence because a child has shared an image without being coerced or tricked, then a less complex, less time-consuming response is usually needed.

In the year ending 31 March 2021, 22,116 crimes were recorded of [take/make/distribute indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of children](#). Of those, 29.6 percent (6,545 of 22,116) of offences were assigned an outcome of ‘not in the public interest – police’ (outcome 10) or ‘further investigation to support formal action not in the public interest – police decision’ (outcome 21).

At the time of our inspection, the Home Office didn’t request data on the age of suspects in these cases through the [annual data requirement](#), so forces weren’t required to collect it. It is probable that most of these cases involved children making images of themselves. But this lack of data means the demand on resources, or the nature and scale of this type of offending, isn’t properly understood.

Figure 1: Take/make/distribute indecent photographs or pseudo-photographs of children offences by outcome across forces in England and Wales in the year ending 31 March 2021



Source: Home Office police-recorded crime and outcomes data for England and Wales. Excludes Dyfed-Powys, Greater Manchester, Kent, Staffordshire, West Midlands and Wiltshire. The ‘other’ categories are listed at [Annex B](#).

At the time of this inspection, Nottinghamshire Police had recently completed a [problem profile](#) about online CSAE. Although limited to those cases dealt with by its specialist team, it did give senior leaders a good understanding of the levels of demand and risk, and it made recommendations for staffing levels.

West Yorkshire Police had recently carried out a comprehensive review of its approach to the protection of [vulnerable people](#). It identified several areas that needed further resources and prioritised recruiting investigators into those roles. Subsequently, we saw resources allocated to online CSAE. This resulted in fewer delays in the force taking action.

The collection and analysis of data in respect of online CSAE can be problematic. There isn't a specific offence of 'online CSAE'. Online CSAE offences may be recorded as possessing, making or distributing images. Meanwhile, offences recorded as grooming may or may not be enabled by the internet, and many physical offences may have been initiated online. In addition, offences are reported from different intelligence sources.

However, during this inspection we asked all 43 territorial forces in England and Wales to give us data about the numbers of cases referred to them by the NCA and generated through [intelligence](#) throughout the year. We found:

- some forces couldn't give us this data;
- some forces weren't able to divide their cases by source (for example, referrals from the tech industry or use of intelligence systems); and
- some of the data forces gave us wasn't accurate.

To make sure they have enough officers and staff available, forces need to fully understand demand, what level of risk it represents and how complex the investigations are.

Recommendation 2

By 31 October 2023, chief constables, the director general of the National Crime Agency and chief officers with responsibilities for [regional organised crime units](#) should make sure they have effective data collection and performance management information. This is so they can understand the nature and scale of online child sexual abuse and exploitation in real time and its impact on resources, and so forces and the National Crime Agency can react quickly to provide adequate resources to meet demand.

Authorised professional practice and guidance

It is important that local operational officers and staff are aware of the national boards' activities when they affect operational activity. This is so they can be sure the way they are working is consistent with the expectations of national leaders.

Currently the link between the Pursue board and local forces relies on the assistant chief constables who lead each ROCU. They attend board meetings and are expected to share information from the board with their local forces and bring issues to the board. But attendance is inconsistent as operational or other activity may prevent them from attending. And subsequent time constraints may prevent them from either analysing and discussing regional information, or contacting and disseminating information to each force in their regions.

We found that the process at this senior level wasn't robust enough to make sure key information was received from and reached frontline staff. For example, at the time of our inspection, the Pursue board had led important work to review the KIRAT risk assessment, and the College of Policing, along with the NCA, had developed new online training. All staff responsible for KIRAT risk assessments must complete this training. But we found few officers and staff in forces knew about the review or their training requirement.

The College of Policing is responsible for giving information and support to frontline policing to provide consistency and a better service to the public. The College produces [authorised professional practice \(APP\)](#), which is guidance on how to deal with different types of crime or incident – from first response through to investigation, legal issues and public protection.

The SPR says:

“In order to ensure a consistent approach to child sexual abuse across England and Wales, chief constables should ensure that:

- a. officers are following the APP on child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation from the College of Policing; [and]
- b. their force is operating to the agreed definitions of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation as outlined in the APP.”

The APP suggests internet-based lines of inquiry when dealing with abuse. But it doesn't relate specifically to the investigation of online CSAE. Nor does it provide minimum standards and expectations.

The College of Policing has produced guidance for officers for when children make sexual imagery of themselves. This is in the form of a [briefing note](#), which was last updated in 2016. This guidance gives some help to officers on making decisions and choosing lines of inquiry. It says a child-centred approach may often be appropriate and that officers shouldn't criminalise children unnecessarily. It encourages officers to carry out checks on the individuals involved.

But the guidance is limited for cases where children produce images as a consequence of grooming or other coercion. It doesn't address the broader risk posed by offenders, or what harmful sexual behaviours look like. Nor does it set standards for investigating, recovering images, identifying victims or using the [Child Abuse Image Database \(CAID\)](#).

And we found forces didn't always replicate this guidance in their local policies. For example, some forces expect their officers to give advice to children and carers, including telling them to reset a phone or device to factory settings. This can lead to evidence being lost. It can also result in missed opportunities to identify suspects who may be grooming other children.

The Child Abuse Image Database

CAID brings together all the relevant images that the police and NCA encounter. Forces then use the images' unique identifiers (called hashes) and metadata to improve how they investigate these crimes and protect children.

The Home Office developed CAID in collaboration with the police, tech industry partners, and British and international small and medium-sized enterprises. CAID was introduced to seven police forces in December 2014 and was rolled out across UK territorial police forces and the NCA the following year.

Once an investigating officer has viewed and [graded images](#), the grading pack (a file containing all the images relating to a case) should be uploaded to CAID. This updates the database with any previously unseen images. If three officers grade the same image, the image is certified, meaning no one has to examine it again in future investigations.

But in some cases, investigators or prosecutors determine that enough images have been graded to give the courts adequate sentencing powers. This can lead to forces ignoring all the other images related to those cases, which means they miss the opportunity to certify them. This is a problem because it slows future investigations. It can also expose officers and staff to unnecessary trauma as images have to be viewed more often.

We also saw long delays in forces uploading grading packs. In one force, some grading packs that hadn't been uploaded were two years old. During this inspection we asked forces to tell us how many packs they had that hadn't yet been uploaded as of 31 March 2022. We were pleased to find that 11 forces didn't have any, but 2 forces had more than 300. Across the 40 forces in England and Wales that were able to give us relevant data, 1,655 packs hadn't yet been uploaded to CAID. We don't know how many images they contain.

The triage equipment that officers use to quickly identify images at the homes of suspects relies on the CAID hash values. If the images aren't on CAID, they may be missed.

When children make images and share them, it is often reported to the police because the sharing has gone beyond the intended recipient, or because a groomer has duped or coerced the child. As part of our inspection, we examined these types of cases, and we didn't find many instances of forces recovering images from devices, following victim identification processes or uploading images to CAID. As a result, if officers and staff see these images again, they won't know if the child is safe, or under what circumstances the image was made.

CAID also has facial recognition tools. This means that if a child's image already exists on the database, officers and staff can link the cases and explore further lines of inquiry. But we found officers and staff rarely used these tools. This means investigators are missing opportunities to establish whether a child has been the victim of previous online abuse and to identify them on the database.

Forces also use CAID when an image is reported through the NCMEC. The NCA uploads images to the database straight away so the investigating officer can access them. This helps forces identify children, suspects and the environment before or at the time investigators visit a suspect's home.

But we found that the hardware some forces used for this purpose wasn't good enough, with officers viewing images in very low resolution. In one force, investigators had to photograph a screen using a mobile device so they could share facial images to help identification, rather than using appropriate software.

Some forces told us IT infrastructure problems affected how well they could interact with CAID.

CAID is a vital tool to help identify child abuse imagery on the internet and prompt its removal. It also helps speed up investigations through image certification, and it prevents officers and staff from being unnecessarily exposed to those images.

It is essential that CAID is kept as up to date as possible so that triage tools are effective. This will become increasingly important as more companies are required to report child sexual abuse material they detect, and if automated technologies increase the volume of content being reported. Keeping CAID up to date would make sure that triage and analysis processes used by law enforcement bodies are more effective and efficient. This will help them prioritise the cases in which children are at most risk of harm.

Victim identification investigators

The primary role of a victim identification (VID) investigator is to identify and protect children who are victims of sexual abuse or at risk of abuse. They also identify offenders and locations where abuse is taking place, using CAID investigative tools to review devices seized in investigations.

VID investigators can use CAID to send alerts to VID investigators in other force areas and seek help to identify children seen in child sexual abuse images. They can also add [intelligence](#) markers to images to support future investigations.

When victims are identified, the force VID investigator is responsible for updating the CAID database to confirm who the victim is and that the case has been investigated. They refer the case to the NCA [child exploitation and online protection](#) investigations VID team, which confirms the identification and shares this with [Interpol](#)'s international child sexual exploitation database. This ensures that if investigators find these images in a subsequent investigation, they will know the child is safe.

The CAID business and technical guidance says all forces must have VID investigators. As of 31 March 2022, 41 of the 43 forces in England and Wales had VID investigators, with 24 forces having a single VID investigator. We found that some staff carried out that role part-time, and, in some forces, there were vacancies waiting to be filled. This affects how well a force can proactively work nationally and across the force area to identify and safeguard victims.

Two of the forces we visited didn't have a VID investigator in place. This meant they had contributed very little to CAID. As a result, important [intelligence](#) markers, and victims' and offenders' identities, may also be missing from the database.

Internet tools

From around 2012, law enforcement bodies in the UK began to use internet-based tools to help identify those who possess and share child sexual abuse imagery. It quickly became clear that so many people possessed that material, it was impossible to pursue them all.

As a result, over time, a prioritisation tool was developed to help identify those most likely to commit physical offences. And in 2015, the Pursue board issued guidance to forces on approaching and prioritising this large amount of investigative work.

Over the past seven years, UK law enforcement bodies have used this information to safeguard thousands of children and identify thousands of individuals who have a sexual interest in them. This is a significant achievement. It means officers have been able to assess those individuals, their circumstances, their access to children and their offending history, helping them take action to prevent harm or further harm to children.

Because of this, there has been a marked reduction in offenders in the UK offering to share material through some channels. The number of cases identified through these systems is now much more manageable.

But despite this progress, we found that the guidance on making decisions about which cases to follow up hadn't been updated since it was issued in 2015. And we saw some forces still using that guidance regardless of the risk they had identified. We found that one force had more than 100 cases with legitimate lines of inquiry that it hadn't followed in the previous 12 months.

Some forces follow up all cases and other forces have drawn up their own criteria as to which cases to pursue. We found the criteria were often based on the team's capacity rather than the apparent risk. This means that children can be at more risk of sexual abuse in one area of the country than they might be in another. It also means that some at-risk children won't be identified, and some suspects won't be pursued.

Training

The College of Policing offers nationally available learning and development sessions that consider the experiences of adult and child victims, and help officers to recognise and protect vulnerable people. Forces also have the flexibility to design and provide their own learning and development to meet local needs and priorities. There isn't a specifically agreed training package for online CSAE investigators.

We asked all the forces we inspected to tell us what learning and development they had given to their officers and staff about online CSAE. Their answers depended on the role of the officers.

None of the forces had a defined training requirement for specialist online CSAE investigators. Some forces didn't insist they were accredited investigators. Most of the specialists had been given image-grading training.

None of the forces we visited required those specialists to have additional child protection or joint working training, although some had received specialist child protection training while in another role.

This is different to other aspects of policing that require specialist skills and knowledge. For example, when police are responsible for the management of sex offenders – many of whom will be on the sex offenders register as a consequence of an online CSAE investigation – officers need to have completed an accredited offender managers development programme and to be trained in the use of specific computer systems.

Specialist teams

Forces generally use specialist resources based on the type of offence, rather than the level of risk posed to children.

We found that all forces had a specialist team to deal with online CSAE offences. Their roles and responsibilities differ from force to force, as does the name of the team. We found that these teams dealt mainly with cases of child sexual abuse imagery that was reported to UK policing by the NCMEC, or cases generated through access to [intelligence](#) systems that monitor internet activity.

This means these specialists almost exclusively deal with image offenders, when their skill and experience might benefit other cases. For example, when an individual grooms a child, law enforcement bodies can use a variety of tactics to identify them. But we saw several examples where officers and staff without much experience of this type of work didn't explore these wider aspects. This means forces may be missing opportunities to identify suspects.

In one force we also saw that the specialist team prioritised NCMEC referrals over intelligence-led enquiries. In many cases the risk was greater in the intelligence-led cases. Some of that prioritisation was influenced by the type of data that had to be collected and reported to the national Pursue board.

Most teams told us they didn't have enough resources for the amount of work they had to do. This is supported by the fact that most forces are unable to meet nationally recommended timescales, where they exist, including forces that have recently reviewed their resources.

Recommendation 3

By 31 October 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, the director general of the National Crime Agency and the chief executive of the College of Policing should jointly agree and publish interim guidance for all officers and staff dealing with online child sexual abuse and exploitation. The guidance should set out their expectations and reflect the findings of this inspection. It should be incorporated into subsequent revisions and additions to [authorised professional practice](#).

Recommendation 4

By 30 April 2024, the chief executive of the College of Policing, in consultation with the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection and the director general of the National Crime Agency, should design and make available sufficient training material to make sure frontline staff and specialist investigators dealing with online child sexual abuse and exploitation can receive the right training to carry out their roles.

Recommendation 5

By 30 April 2025, chief constables should make sure officers and staff dealing with online child sexual abuse and exploitation have completed the right training to carry out their roles.

Risk assessment and prioritisation tools

At the time of our inspection, officers had limited tools available to help them understand risk and make decisions in accordance with it.

Law enforcement bodies across the country recognise and use KIRAT. It was reviewed shortly before our inspection, and in mid-2022 the College of Policing introduced updated training.

Officers and staff use KIRAT when they suspect a man of possessing or distributing child sexual abuse imagery. The tool helps them assess how likely the suspect is to commit physical offences against children. Once they have completed the assessment, the tool gives a risk grading that should help forces prioritise cases in line with recommended timescales.

KIRAT hasn't been tested for cases where women or children are suspects. There isn't a similar tool for those circumstances. It also doesn't consider how likely the suspect is to commit other online offences. Nor does it focus on individual additional vulnerabilities of children the suspect has access to. For example, a child in the home may have a special educational need or disabilities, or may already be on a child protection plan.

Once forces have completed a KIRAT assessment, the recommended timescales for activity are:

- very-high risk: 24 hours
- high risk: 7 days
- medium risk: 14 days
- low risk: 30 days.

We found cases that were graded as very-high risk generally led to swift enforcement, usually within the 24-hour timescale.

But in almost all other investigations we reviewed during this inspection, forces didn't meet the KIRAT timescales linked to high, medium or low risk. High-risk referrals were, on many occasions, only just out of the expected timescale. But medium- and low-risk referrals often missed the timescales by a significant margin.

Most forces don't monitor the timeliness of their response enough, even when they have created their own timescales. In some forces they don't monitor it at all.

Case study

In September 2020, a force received a report from the National Crime Agency that a suspect had uploaded two videos to a social media site. They were of a nine-year-old girl being raped.

The force carried out some prompt enquiries and established that the suspect was a 17-year-old boy. He was living at the same address as his 12-year-old sister and his two brothers, aged 10 and 15.

This didn't prompt any further investigation. In July 2021, a supervisor reviewed the case, by which time the suspect was an adult. The force carried out a KIRAT assessment, which incorrectly graded the risk as low. The force didn't monitor the timeliness of low-risk cases.

In March 2022, we visited the force and found nothing further had been done. This was almost 18 months after the force knew of the risks to children at the address.

We referred this case back to the force to quickly take action to make sure those children were safe.

In the same force, we found that the person responsible for the risk grading was getting a large number of gradings wrong. Their supervisor hadn't had any training in connection with KIRAT. As a result, that force area had more than 30 cases in which suspects identified as having a sexual interest in children, and who were living with children, were graded incorrectly as a low risk.

At the time of our inspection, the Pursue board was overseeing work to finalise a prioritisation tool covering all online CSAE offending types. This will help police forces, ROCUs and the NCA to be more consistent. The tool's success will rely on there being enough staff available and on staff being properly trained. Forces will need to adopt the tool and use it nationally. They will need guidance from the NPCC lead for child protection on timescales for action. The Pursue board should monitor the speed of forces' response to online CSAE offences to make sure the tool is meeting expectations.

Recommendation 6

By 31 July 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection should provide the new prioritisation tool to law enforcement bodies.

It should include:

- expected timescales for action;
- clear expectations about who should use it and when; and
- who cases should be allocated to.

Then, 12 months after those bodies have implemented the tool, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection should review its effectiveness and, if necessary, make amendments.

Welfare

The NCA and all the forces and ROCUs we visited recognised the increased risk posed to officers who investigate this type of abuse. The officers we met were committed and enthusiastic, often working long hours at short notice. They are expected to view imagery, read graphic descriptions of abuse, and interview those with a sexual interest in children about their offending.

We were pleased to see enhanced support for them. We saw offers of regular psychological screening and access to counselling. Peer support was encouraged, along with time away from desks and images.

Promising practice: Nottinghamshire Police use a combination of approaches to prevent harm to its officers and staff

Nottinghamshire Police told us new starters to the specialist department received a graded and staged introduction to child abuse images. On joining the team, they are exposed to the least disturbing images, and given time to reflect and discuss how they feel with a supervisor. Only if they are content to stay in the role do they begin to view more traumatic imagery. This builds resilience and makes sure they are suitable for the role.

All staff in the team receive access to professional psychological support from an external provider and are offered an appointment every six months. Their ongoing well-being is monitored to identify any changes in their mental health.

Leaders also encourage strong peer support and regular one-to-one meetings between staff and their supervisors. As a result, concerns can be quickly escalated. This, combined with scheduled and ad hoc time away from images, creates an environment of care.

Officers and staff we spoke to commented favourably on this approach and felt supported in the role.

Initial response

Crimes reported by the public

When a parent, carer or child reports online sexual abuse or exploitation directly to the police, we found control rooms were usually good at recognising risk. They mostly use the [THRIVE](#) risk assessment model to identify and grade risk, then arrange a response.

Officers usually see children when they report incidents of grooming, or when images children have taken have been shared more widely than they intended. We found many examples of attending officers being sympathetic and taking time to understand the circumstances.

But the way forces respond to reports from the public varies.

One force we visited allocated cases involving child abuse material to a specialist team. A detective sergeant manages the investigation and gives guidance to frontline officers and staff about what to do, what lines of inquiry to follow and how to recover evidence.

But most forces assign these cases to response and neighbourhood officers. Most of these officers we spoke to weren't confident about dealing with these cases. Some knew of specialists to ask for advice and most knew they shouldn't criminalise children, but none had received specific training. Most were unaware of any guidance they should follow, and few could name local support services for the children affected.

We were reassured that officers generally recognised children at risk of being harmed and acted in some way to try to help. But this is often by advising families to block the suspect on that particular platform and to reset the phone to factory settings. This often happens without the force carrying out further investigation. We saw very few examples of forces recovering images, completing victim identification and adding images to the Child Abuse Image Database.

We also found that officers often didn't consider the risk posed by the suspect to other children. They don't always follow lines of inquiry to find out who the suspect is and whether they are approaching other children. For example, we didn't see any evidence of officers considering searching the [Police National Database](#) to establish if another force was investigating a similar offence with someone using the same phone number or username.

Victims are often concerned about how long they will be without their phone if they hand it over to the police. Significant steps have been taken to resolve this problem for rape victims. Government investment in technology and equipment, through the [Transforming Forensics Rape Response Project](#), means that in these cases, police shouldn't keep phones for more than 24 hours. We saw some forces beginning to expand that level of service beyond rape victims. This means there is an opportunity to recover images more quickly in online child sexual abuse and exploitation cases, which will encourage reporting, support victims and lead to better outcomes.

Recommendation 7

By 31 October 2023, the Home Office and relevant National Police Chiefs' Council leads should consider the scope of the [Transforming Forensics Rape Response Project](#) to assess the feasibility of including online child sexual abuse and exploitation cases in it.

Crimes identified by regional organised crime units

Through undercover policing of the internet, [regional organised crime units \(ROCU\)](#) can identify people with a sexual interest in children. Interaction with those individuals may reveal that they pose a significant risk. Some are clearly seeking out children to abuse or exploit online, or at a physical meeting.

We found ROCUs were good at identifying those who pose the highest risk. They work quickly to establish who those people are, where they live and where they could be apprehended. At the time of our inspection, most ROCUs relied on good working relationships with local forces so they could quickly report their concerns and arrange for local officers to promptly arrest suspects. We saw many examples of this type of undercover policing leading to the arrest and conviction of those seeking to abuse children. As a result, they are prevented from harming children.

On some occasions, conflicting priorities within the force mean there can be delays when the force is already committed to attending other incidents, especially in forces with limited resources. We are aware that senior leaders are considering using the police uplift programme to increase the arrest and investigative capacity in ROCUs in response to this.

We found the response from forces was usually quick, meaning the risk to children was reduced. For example, West Midlands Police has a clear procedure when the ROCU reports a concern. The force allocates these cases to the [public protection unit](#) priority team. This team has the resources to quickly locate and arrest the suspect, often straight away.

Tech industry referrals

A large proportion of investigations begin when social media and other tech companies identify child abuse material on their platforms. They make reports to the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC). When the NCMEC believes the person who uploaded the material lives in the UK, it refers the case to the National Crime Agency (NCA).

The number of annual referrals increased each year from 2017 to 2021. In response to this, the NCA has employed analysts to make sure it only sends cases that constitute criminality and have potential lines of inquiry to forces for further work. Despite this triage, between 2017 and 2021 the number of cases the NCA sent to UK forces increased by 138 percent. In 2021, the NCA received 104,388 cases. It sent 20,038 cases to forces for further investigation, up from 8,421 in 2017.

When a referral arrives at the NCA, staff there make an assessment about what further work should be done and who should do it. This is informed by what they already know about the suspect and where the suspect lives.

If the suspect isn't known and the matter doesn't appear to be complex enough to need NCA resources, staff send the case to the force where the suspect is believed to live. That force then begins intelligence development to identify the suspect and assess the risk they pose.

It is very important for the system to be efficient and to move information swiftly. We found that the team carrying out this work in the NCA researched cases as quickly as possible to mitigate the risk to children.

There are good processes and tools to help staff decide which cases they should send to forces, which should stay within the NCA, and what level of research is needed.

Where it appeared that delays had occurred, we found that this was usually because an image had only recently been recognised as containing child abuse, even though it had been uploaded some weeks previously. In these cases, staff at the NCA often didn't make the situation clear to forces, sometimes resulting in misunderstandings by the force and difficulties in obtaining search warrants.

We spoke to NCA staff responsible for those cases that stay with the agency for further intelligence development. We found that they appreciated the focus should be on protecting children. When they identify risk, they quickly allocate cases to investigative resources or send them to forces.

We also found that the NCA approached bulk data in innovative ways, working with partners such as HM Revenue & Customs, and exploiting the skills of tech industry analysts to tackle huge demand. This will become increasingly important as the number of offences continues to increase, as is predicted.

Internet-based intelligence tools

Police forces and the NCA both use internet-based intelligence tools. These help them identify people who share child sexual abuse material.

The NCA has provided comprehensive guidance on how to use these tools, but the expectations for which cases investigators should follow up are out of date, so we found significant differences in how forces and the NCA used them.

Each case highlighted by these tools is an opportunity to identify who is responsible for sharing that imagery. As such, they indicate to law enforcement bodies those people with a sexual interest in children and with the motivation to act on that interest and share child abuse imagery with others.

Until the individual is identified, the risk they pose to children isn't known. They could be employed in a position of trust or be a dangerous sex offender. But some forces and the NCA choose not to follow up some of these leads because they use the Pursue board's 2015 guidance on approaching and prioritising investigative work, which is now outdated.

As we stated above in the section [Internet tools](#), one force we inspected had more than 100 cases with legitimate lines of inquiry that it hadn't followed in the 12 months before we visited.

Assessment, help and prevention

Information sharing

The framework for child protection is the same whether a person reports a concern or the concern is identified through police intelligence. But the response is often different.

Many police officers and staff members we interviewed about their response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation (CSAE) accepted they often didn't share information at the time they first became aware of the risk to a child. They told us this was because they believed a social worker might want to visit the family before the police could arrange a search warrant at the address where the child was at risk.

This practice doesn't take account of the force's obligations. More importantly, it doesn't take account of risks to children. Most officers and staff accepted that sharing information and agreeing a joint plan with [statutory safeguarding partners](#) was in the best interest of children.

As we have said many times before in our [child protection inspection reports](#), a partnership approach is needed – one that places the needs of children at the forefront of joint decision-making, without diminishing the police response. This would create an environment where officers can work directly with other organisations to discuss individual cases and decide how to respond.

Promising practice: Nottinghamshire Police has started to share information with children's social care services much sooner

Nottinghamshire Police has recently set the expectation that, when a case involves access to children, the force will share information with children's social care services as soon as it knows the risk.

Although this approach was in the early stages of development when we visited, we reviewed six investigations in which it was followed. In all six of these investigations, officers or staff shared the information as soon as the force established children were at risk of significant harm. This led to more information being exchanged and, when necessary, a strategy meeting took place. The force also worked with children's social care services when searching the suspect's home.

When it uses this approach, the force promptly shares information about risk to children with social care services, which can help assess risk on all available information and determine if immediate intervention is needed.

Recommendation 8

By 31 July 2023, chief constables should satisfy themselves that they are correctly sharing information and making referrals to their [statutory safeguarding partners](#) in cases of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. This is to make sure they are fulfilling their statutory obligations, placing the protection of children at the centre of their approach and agreeing joint plans to better protect children who are at risk.

National Crime Agency approach

The NCA isn't a [statutory safeguarding partner](#) in the same way local forces are. But it does have the same obligations to share information when there is a significant risk to children.

The NCA has employed a team of child protection advisers, who are all qualified social workers. In the cases we reviewed we saw that they supported investigations well. They focus on the outcomes for children directly or indirectly affected by online sexual abuse and exploitation. They also show an in-depth knowledge of the obligations placed on the NCA by the [Children Act 1989](#) and the [Working Together](#) statutory guidance.

We also saw examples of prompt discussions with local [statutory safeguarding partners](#) to share information and agree activity, often ahead of NCA activity. We found the NCA's approach was better than in some police forces.

When staff deliberately delayed sharing information, or shared information partially, those we spoke to were clear about the specific reasons for this. For example, in some of those cases, sharing the information would have put at risk other children who hadn't yet been identified.

We were also encouraged to find the NCA's child protection advisers supported investigations through the planning phase. They are available to help conduct video interviews with children and to give investigation teams advice and guidance.

Staff told us child protection advisers often attended searches to give their expertise in understanding the environment and, more importantly, to interact with children so they can understand their personal experience.

Case study

The National Crime Agency became aware of a man who was offering to share child sexual abuse imagery online. Staff quickly identified that he lived with children and they completed a KIRAT risk assessment. They graded the case medium risk.

A child protection adviser reviewed the case and made a referral to children's social care services. Between them, they arranged a strategy meeting and agreed that there should be a joint investigation.

Two days later, the National Crime Agency executed a search warrant at the suspect's home. A child protection adviser attended with officers, where they were able to speak to the suspect's children to understand their experiences. They also spoke to the suspect's partner to explain what would happen.

The suspect was interviewed and released on bail with conditions to prevent him having unsupervised access to children.

All of this was completed in ten days.

Access to other services

Most force areas have a [sexual assault referral centre \(SARC\)](#). When a person is the victim of a sexual assault, they may be invited to the SARC for examination. Most SARCs are also the main way for victims to access support services such as therapeutic services, [independent sexual violence advisers](#) or children's independent sexual violence advisers.

Assessing SARCs wasn't within the scope of this inspection, but in our recent [joint thematic inspection of the response to rape](#), we heard from officers and investigators that the SARC function was recognised as effective.

Similar positive reports came from survivors, who said SARCs gave holistic, person-centred support that doesn't just focus on the incident.

When a child is the victim of online sexual abuse or exploitation, we found that officers didn't always consider making referrals to SARCs. And some of these centres aren't specifically commissioned for online abuse cases.

Children may not need a physical examination and they may not have suffered physical trauma, but by not referring them to SARCs, officers are missing opportunities for victims to access therapeutic services. These services could help children deal with the trauma they may have experienced. These services could also help prepare children should any images of them become public again in the future.

Staff members in one SARC told us they had tried to compare the number of cases the SARC had received with the number of cases reported to the police, to make sure all sexual offence cases were being referred to them. But the local force couldn't give them basic information about reports of sexual offending.

Sharing an indecent image of a child is a crime, whatever the age of the person sharing. This is a part of a group of crimes that are 'state' offences, which means the Crown is recorded as the victim. The child subject of the image may be linked to the crime, but not recorded as a victim. This means they won't be referred to victim services under the [Code of Practice for Victims of Crime](#), so they may also be omitted from referrals to support services. This means children may be missing another opportunity for access support services.

Recommendation 9

By 31 October 2023, chief constables and police and crime commissioners should make sure their commissioned services for children, and the process for referring them for support or therapeutic services, are available for children affected by online sexual abuse and exploitation.

Preventing offending

We said in our report [The police response to burglary, robbery and other acquisitive crime – Finding time for crime](#) that the best way to stop crime is to prevent it from happening in the first place. But crime prevention isn't only the police's responsibility. Forces need to work effectively in partnership with other agencies. In the case of online CSAE, the Government also has an important role to play.

The National Police Chiefs' Council's national policing prevention strategy says forces must address the underlying causes of crime and use partnership-based problem-solving. To achieve the aims of preventative policing, forces need to be good at the three main types of prevention:

1. Primary prevention, which aims to stop problems before they happen. It typically means strengthening communities and social structures.
2. Secondary prevention, which targets people at high risk of offending or re-offending, to divert them from becoming involved in crime. This might be through, for example, effectively managing registered sex offenders.
3. Tertiary prevention, which means reducing or preventing existing and reoccurring problems by tackling the vulnerability of the victim or location, or reducing the offender's motivation.

Primary prevention

The online world's communities and social structures don't always function in the same way as those in the physical world. This means acting to strengthen them poses problems at a local, regional and national level for police forces and their partner agencies.

The Lucy Faithfull Foundation has been carrying out work with child sex offenders since 1995, with a view to intervening at an early stage to prevent abuse, or to prevent harm from reoccurring. It also works to find new ways to protect children. Its [Stop It Now!](#) campaign, helpline, live chat and secure messaging service aims to give concerned people somewhere to go to for help, whether those concerns are about themselves or others.

More recently, with support from the Home Office and the Prevent board, the foundation has been working with regional organised crime units to deter people who may be having thoughts of approaching children online. Now, when officers are concerned about someone online who hasn't yet committed offences, they have the option of sending that person a link to Stop It Now! Although this work is in its early stages, we understand it is prompting some individuals to get help.

This is important secondary prevention, but it doesn't tackle the prevalence of, and easy access to, child sexual abuse material online.

In its final report, the [Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) panel found:

“Increased access to and use of the internet have enabled a section of society to misuse it to distribute indecent images of children; to groom and manipulate children to commit sexual acts on-screen, often for the purpose of sexual exploitation; and to live stream the sexual abuse of children from around the world, including from the UK. Those affected live in fear that images of them being sexually abused remain available on the internet indefinitely. The harm done to children and their families is incalculable.”

Legislation has an important part to play to prevent this offending from happening in the first place. The Online Safety Bill is an opportunity to substantially reduce the amount of child sexual abuse material available in the UK. It is also an opportunity to make it much more difficult for offenders to contact children by requiring tech companies to enforce their age restrictions.

Making it mandatory for tech companies to pre-screen known child sexual abuse material before it is uploaded to a site or added to a message would play an important role in dealing with this content. It could prevent images being shared and prevent children being retraumatised. Children could also be more confident that images of them wouldn't reappear in the future.

Preventing young children from accessing some services would also reduce the opportunity for groomers to contact them.

We therefore support the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse panel recommendations that:

- the Government introduces legislation requiring providers of online services and social media platforms to implement more stringent age verification measures; and
- the Government makes it mandatory for all regulated providers of search services and user-to-user services to pre-screen for known child sexual abuse material.

For companies working with the support of the Internet Watch Foundation, pre-screening in this context relies on the image being known to law enforcement bodies. This makes it even more important that when the police attend incidents of image sharing, they recover those images and add them to the Child Abuse Image Database with the relevant victim identification.

But many images appear online that are new or not previously known about. Through the [Safety Tech Challenge Fund](#), the Government is providing funding for the development of innovative prototype technologies that help detect child sexual abuse material in and around end-to-end encrypted environments, while upholding user privacy. During testing, this technology showed it is possible to detect known CSAE and previously unknown CSAE to prevent it being shared or uploaded to the internet.

Recommendation 10

The Home Office and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology should continue working together to make sure online safety legislation requires the relevant companies to develop and use effective and accurate tools and technologies to identify child sexual abuse material, whether or not it was previously known. These tools and technologies should prevent that material being uploaded or shared, including in end-to-end encrypted services. Companies should also be required to locate, remove and report the presence of that material to the designated body.

Secondary prevention

In addition to the work of the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, there is an existing legislative framework designed to prevent convicted sex offenders from committing further offences. It requires offenders to comply with certain restrictions on their activities. Legislation also exists to place specific restrictions on individuals, depending on the offences they have committed. For example, an offender may be prevented from using the internet.

All forces have specialist teams to manage registered sex offenders. Their effectiveness is beyond the scope of this inspection. But we have seen many examples of effective offender management preventing reoffending.

During this inspection we spoke to many frontline officers about how they responded to online CSAE. As we said in the [Initial response](#) section of this report, those officers often have little guidance to inform their understanding and decision-making. They were clear that, wherever possible, children shouldn't be criminalised. But we found that few of them recognised or understood harmful sexual behaviour in children.

Better understanding of harmful sexual behaviour, and sharing this information with safeguarding partners, would make opportunities for the right professionals to work with children to help stop that behaviour escalating.

Tertiary prevention

All the forces we visited had a website with areas containing public safety advice and guidance. Some had specific areas relating to online sexual abuse and exploitation. These also contained useful links to external services.

Some forces didn't have any guidance specifically for children or their parents and carers. Where there was guidance, it didn't necessarily link to the NCA guidance. This means messages to the public aren't consistent nationally.

We saw that some forces worked with schools through designated schools' officers or neighbourhood teams. The aim of some of this work is to raise awareness of the risks associated with sharing images and keeping safe online. Sometimes this is as a consequence of a particular concern in a school. It can also be part of a more routine relationship with schools.

Innovative practice: Welsh forces consistently and effectively work with schools to build trust and support social education

In Wales, the Government supports a programme called [SchoolBeat](#). This involves school crime prevention officers forming relationships with schools and their pupils. They give lessons on the themes of substance misuse, personal safety, safeguarding, behaviour and community.

The programme has a consistent approach to making sure all children aged 5 to 16 in Wales receive the same accurate and up-to-date information.

Officers work closely with pastoral leads in schools to support their personal and social education curriculum. We found these officers were passionate about their role. They spoke positively about the trusted relationships they developed with pupils and teaching staff.

This is particularly important so children can feel confident about reporting concerns and knowing something will be done.

As Ofsted found in its [Review of sexual abuse in schools and colleges](#), sexual harassment behaviours in some schools in England have become so commonplace, they are seen as normal.

The police interaction with schools in England is more sporadic than it is in Wales (see Innovative practice, above). Several forces in England no longer work regularly with schools. We found those that did had developed their own educational material about online harms. Again, they aren't necessarily consistent with the [ThinkUKnow \(Child Exploitation and Online Protection\)](#) nationally recognised material developed by the NCA and educational partners. This is available on the NCA's website and through training events.

Ofsted recommended that schools put in place a curriculum that specifically includes sexual harassment and sexual violence, including online. This should include time for openly discussing topics that children and young people find particularly difficult, such as consent and sending sexual images.

Ofsted also recommended multi-agency partners work to improve relationships and communication with schools of all types in their local area, tailoring their approach to what their analysis indicates are the risks to children and young people in their local area.

Recommendation 11

By 31 July 2023, chief constables and police and crime commissioners should review the advice they publish, and, if necessary, revise it, to make sure it is consistent with the National Crime Agency's [ThinkUKnow \(Child Exploitation and Online Protection\)](#) material.

Recommendation 12

By 31 October 2023, chief constables in England should satisfy themselves that their forces' work with schools is consistent with the national curriculum and National Crime Agency educational products on online child sexual abuse and exploitation. They should also make sure this work is targeted based on joint analysis with their safeguarding partners.

Investigation

Intelligence development in forces

When forces receive cases – whether from the National Crime Agency (NCA) or by using internet tools to identify a suspect – we found different forces used different approaches to making and recording enquiries. Again, there isn't specific national guidance to help investigators, so forces adopt local procedures.

We were concerned that in some forces, the focus wasn't always on establishing if there were children at a suspects' home. For example, we saw forces requesting information from education colleagues, but not health colleagues. This means pre-school children may be missed.

Some forces complete a range of checks with social care, education and health services, often through requests to the local [multi-agency safeguarding hub](#). We found forces making consistent checks with the Disclosure and Barring Service, and HM Revenue & Customs, but they generally took longer.

Some forces wait until all checks are returned before carrying out a risk assessment, even though they may know the risk to the child much sooner.

We also saw differing approaches to managing information from checks. Some forces store requests and responses in email systems or in standalone computer systems with access limited to just a few people. This makes it very difficult to track whether an agency has responded or whether there is a particular problem receiving timely information from other organisations.

Force investigations

We found inconsistent investigative practice nationally. We would expect to see consistent investigations from specialist officers. But training requirements aren't defined for these roles, and expected standards and guidance haven't been set nationally.

We did see some good investigations by both non-specialist and specialist staff. Better investigations were characterised by officers and staff recognising the risk to children. They understood the need to act promptly and resources were available to complete the required activity. Better investigations also had supportive supervision.

Case study

A 14-year-old girl with autism was being groomed through a social media account.

Her father reported the matter to the police and asked that she be seen by a female officer. The force made sure a female officer saw her on the same day. The officer talked with the girl and found out the girl had sent the suspect a naked image of herself. She had also physically harmed herself at the suspect's request. The image had since been deleted and the girl didn't want to be involved in a prosecution.

But the officer recognised the need to take further action to prevent harm to others. She took screenshots of the messages, provided the family with some online safety guidance, and promptly made a referral to children's social care services so the family could receive extra support.

At the time of our inspection, the officer had already begun to make enquiries to trace the suspect. A supervisor was regularly reviewing the ongoing investigation.

Case study

In July 2021, a force received information from the National Crime Agency about a [category A](#) video being uploaded to the internet. The case was allocated to a specialist team, which quickly began [intelligence](#) checks. The team discovered that the address where the video had been uploaded was a house of multiple occupancy.

The team carried out further prompt enquiries and established who was responsible for the video. The suspect was employed at a local school.

Within 48 hours, officers arrested the suspect, searched his home and seized media devices. They found images of his ten-year-old cousin. The images had been manipulated to make her look naked.

Officers compiled a thorough family tree of the suspect and shared this information with children's social care services. They arranged a meeting with the [local authority designated officer](#) and the suspect was suspended from work. At the time of our inspection, he was on bail and was about to be charged with multiple offences.

We also found some good use of investigative tools, and officers and staff with specialist skills helping to search homes.

Some forces regularly deploy trained digital media investigators when searching suspects' homes. We found that when these investigators were deployed, they gave good support to the investigation, helping to find hidden media devices in homes, triaging those devices and helping to make decisions about which devices to seize.

Some forces routinely take photographs of the premises they search. This allows them to make comparisons if child abuse images are later found on devices, helping them establish if the images were made at those premises.

Promising practice: Dyfed-Powys Police employs an analyst to identify children at risk and other suspects

Dyfed-Powys Police uses an analyst to review webchat information taken from suspects' computers. The analyst creates a list of the usernames the offender has communicated with, helping to identify other potential offenders and children.

The analyst prioritises the cases. The force immediately further investigates the most concerning cases so it can pursue suspects and refer children to the NSPCC. The NSPCC can then interact with the children online and make sure they are safe.

This has led to numerous children being identified and safeguarded.

The force is also working with a local university to devise an artificial [intelligence](#) programme that can be used on social media platforms to alert children when they are being groomed.

But not all the forces we visited consistently used investigative tools well. We found that too many investigations were poor. This is partly due to delays in developing intelligence, carrying out risk assessments and taking action. Often these delays are many months long. We also found that supervision was sometimes ineffective. Together, these problems expose children to risk for long periods of time.

Case study

A force received information from the National Crime Agency that a suspect had uploaded and downloaded child sexual abuse material numerous times.

The suspect had previously been investigated twice for sexual offences against children aged between 14 and 17. He was living with his 15-year-old sister.

The force allocated the case to a specialist team, but it didn't complete a risk assessment until four days after it knew the man was living with his sister. The case was graded as very-high risk.

Eleven weeks passed before the force took action and arrested the man. At this point, the force shared information with children's social care services, but we found no evidence of a strategy discussion. The man was then released on bail back to the same address to continue living with his sister.

Case study

A force became aware of a suspect sharing child abuse imagery and began work to identify him. Two months later, the force identified him and established that he lived with a seven-year-old child.

The force didn't complete a risk assessment until another four months later, as it had waited for all its risk assessments to be returned. It incorrectly graded the risk as low.

We visited the force nine months after the force had received the initial information. The case was with a supervisor in a specialist team, but they still hadn't allocated it to an investigator.

National Crime Agency investigations

The NCA is responsible for investigating the most complex cases or those that cause the highest harm. In six of the eight cases we audited, we found a good standard of investigation. There is a focus on intervening quickly when investigators identify children as being at risk.

Like the forces we visited, the NCA didn't have comprehensive management information at the time of our inspection. This means it couldn't track, in real time, how long cases took to develop, how long it took to act, or how long it took to complete an investigation. But each investigation had a clear investigative strategy and policy written by a [senior investigating officer](#). This was supported by effective and visible supervision on records, and by clear safeguarding advice and guidance from the child protection advisers.

We saw that the NCA was agile in allocating tasks to the most appropriate team. For example, during our inspection, a case relating to a teacher was quickly allocated to a team on a Wednesday. The NCA made arrangements to intervene and planned a search warrant for the Saturday morning of the same week.

The NCA generally works separately from police forces. Although the NCA's cases are more complex and require a high level of oversight, more collaboration between the NCA and forces would provide an opportunity to share good practice.

Investigation by the appropriate resources

As we have previously said, the US-based National Center for Missing and Exploited Children sends UK cases to the NCA. The NCA, in turn, refers these investigations to the relevant police force, without carrying out further inquiries, as soon as it knows the general location of the suspect. So forces don't know the risk level and complexity of these cases until they have carried out further investigation.

This process has developed over time. It means cases aren't delayed unnecessarily while the NCA carries out further work. It also means NCA resources aren't overwhelmed.

But it does mean that forces sometimes discover during their enquiries that an individual poses a high risk of harm, or that the case is more complex than first thought. If that information had been known sooner, the NCA may have retained the investigation, as the following case demonstrates.

Case study

A suspect uploaded the highest category of child abuse imagery of young boys to the internet. The National Crime Agency forwarded the information to a local force for further enquiries.

The force established that the suspect was an under-16s coach at a football club.

The force arrested the suspect and seized his devices, which contained large amounts of child abuse imagery.

At the time of our inspection, the force was making enquiries to establish if any of the imagery related to the children the suspect coached.

There is a national process that allows forces and [regional organised crime units](#) to refer complex and high-risk cases to the NCA. But during our inspection, we didn't see this process being used for online child sexual abuse and exploitation cases, and no one we spoke to could give us an example of when it had been used.

The process may not be fast enough for this type of case. There should be a process to examine how forces can refer relevant cases more quickly to the NCA for investigation. This is so investigations that need NCA capabilities can receive the right resources.

Recommendation 13

With immediate effect, chief constables should satisfy themselves that their crime allocation policies make sure online child sexual abuse and exploitation cases are allocated to those with the necessary skills and training to investigate them.

Recommendation 14

With immediate effect, chief constables should make sure their force meets any existing recommended timescales for activity targeting online child sexual abuse and exploitation, and arrange their resources to meet those timescales. Then, six months after the new prioritisation tool is implemented, they should carry out a similar review.

Recommendation 15

By 31 October 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, chief officers with responsibilities for [regional organised crime units](#) and the director general of the National Crime Agency (NCA) should review the process for allocating online child sexual abuse and exploitation investigations, so they are investigated by the most appropriate resource. This should include a prompt way of returning cases to the NCA when forces establish that the case needs NCA capabilities to investigate it.

Managing offenders

Use of powers

We found that investigators usually considered the age and circumstances of a suspect when deciding what action to take. The investigators we spoke to understood that, when children were suspected, the response needed to be significantly different to make sure they weren't unnecessarily criminalised.

We found that most investigators considered what powers to use when planning to take action. In most cases in which the suspect is an adult, they approach a magistrate to apply for a search warrant if needed.

In some forces this can be done remotely, which is an efficiency brought about by working through the pandemic. In others this option isn't available, so gaining access to magistrates is time-consuming. In these forces, officers rely on their search powers following an arrest. This creates risk, as a suspect may not be at home when officers first visit and may have the opportunity to dispose of evidence.

Suspects are usually arrested rather than being invited to a police station for interview. This is positive because it means the police can impose [bail](#) conditions when they release a suspect. We saw forces often using bail effectively to stop suspects having access to children.

Recommendation 16

By 31 October 2023, chief constables should work with their local criminal justice boards to review and, if necessary, amend the arrangements for applying for search warrants. This is to make sure the police can secure warrants quickly when children are at risk. This review should include the feasibility of remote communication.

Suicide prevention

All of the forces we visited were acutely aware of the increased likelihood that suspects in sexual offence cases will harm themselves, attempt to take their own life, or succeed in taking their own life. All have some form of policy to carry out a risk assessment on a suspect's release and give suspects relevant contact numbers for support services.

Promising practice: Some forces provide detailed information and links to support services to help prevent suspects harming themselves

In West Yorkshire, the organisation [Safer Lives](#) provides a support service for offenders. West Yorkshire Police notifies the Safer Lives team when a suspect is arrested, and the team works with both the offender and their family, giving emotional support and advice. The officer in the case also keeps in regular contact with the suspect.

If appropriate, the force also gives the suspect's partner a family information pack, explaining what will happen and where the suspect and their family can get help. We saw similar packs in most of the other forces we visited.

In Bedfordshire, the pack provides information about how a suspect can get help and gives contact details for the Lucy Faithfull Foundation. It also gives information about the Inform Plus programme, a ten-week course for individuals who have been arrested, cautioned or convicted for internet offences involving indecent images of children.

Although most forces we visited offered an information pack for suspects' families, we didn't see any of them providing a pack aimed at children. This is a missed opportunity to better support the children of suspects.

Recommendation 17

By 31 July 2023, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for child protection, the director general of the National Crime Agency and the chief executive of the College of Policing should review and, if necessary, amend the information packs given to families of suspects to make sure they are consistent nationally (notwithstanding local services) and that they include information that is age-appropriate for children in the household.

Annex A: Expert reference group membership

- Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire
- National Police Chiefs' Council
- The Lucy Faithfull Foundation
- Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme
- Ofsted
- Internet Watch Foundation
- Care Inspectorate Wales
- Home Office Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Unit
- Association of Police and Crime Commissioners
- Child Abuse Image Database team
- College of Policing
- National Crime Agency

Annex B: Crime outcome categories listed as 'other' (figure 1)

- Charged/summonsed
- Caution – youth
- Caution – adult
- Taken into consideration
- Offender died
- Penalty Notices for Disorder
- Cannabis/Khat warning
- Community resolution
- Not in the public interest – Crown Prosecution Service
- Prosecution prevented: suspect under age
- Prosecution prevented: suspect too ill
- Prosecution prevented: victim/key witness dead/too ill
- Evidential difficulties: suspect not identified; victim does not support further action
- Evidential difficulties: suspect identified; victim supports action
- Evidential difficulties: suspect identified; victim does not support further action
- Prosecution time limit expired
- Responsibility for further investigation transferred to another body
- Diversionary, educational or intervention activity, resulting from the crime report, has been undertaken and it is not in the public interest to take any further action.

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