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**A joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to identification of initial need and risk in Walsall. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.**

The inspection letter published on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2023, contains findings from a joint targeted area inspection concerning child protection that was carried out from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 2022. The inspection is part of the joint inspection programme introduced in November 2021 to examine how local authorities, police, and health services work together to help protect children. This includes assessing the response at the point of identification to child abuse, neglect, and exploitation.

The Walsall inspection is the second joint targeted area inspection that has taken place in the West Midlands policing area since 2016. The first was the joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to children's services in Solihull, published on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February 2022. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) Management Group which is accountable to the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership (WSP), reviewed whether the areas for improvement in the Solihull inspection were relevant to Walsall.

The findings of the Walsall inspection indicated four key areas of improvement, with one concerning West Midlands Police (WMP), outlining the need for improved quality assurance of the multi-agency referral forms (MARFs) that are sent by WMP to the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). Whilst the inspection indicated that the force is effectively using Connect to share detailed and appropriate information into the MASH, the MARFs are not always consistently good quality and are not linked through Connect, resulting in a lack of supervisory oversight in relation to the quality of information.

Alongside actions undertaken by the social care services, WMP is currently working on ensuring that eMARF referrals are sent back to the referrer and that a copy is submitted onto Connect. By retaining the MARFs in this process, they can be audited by supervisors of frontline departments. To ensure compliance, the Central Referral Unit of the Police Protection Unit is progressing work on an audit framework that is being agreed between the children's social care service and WMP.

The inspection also acknowledged the urgent need to establish a process whereby the force can securely share intelligence concerning criminal investigations into online child abuse with the WSP, so that unknown children at risk of abuse can be identified and protected. All partner agencies and indeed everyone that is involved in the lives of children, have a responsibility to identify and share concerns via an effective front-door service. This includes the requirements of effective gathering and analysis of information and of sharing information well.

Although this is part of a wider problem around sharing information, with only data originating from the force being used to inform Walsall's child exploitation profile, there is ongoing work to improve information sharing. The Walsall Neighbourhood Policing Unit (NPU) Commander has informed the office of the pilot of a new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Tracker (MAST), which is a platform allowing safe guarders and

investigators to understand if cases they are looking at have a footprint within partners' incidents/investigations and/or engagements over the past 12 months. This partnership approach includes a third-party social enterprise tech company, and the pilot has gone through the commissioning, design, user acceptance testing and is now functional within the Walsall Borough. It has won national awards and will be observed to see how it can be best rolled out further across the force area.

Other areas that we are assessing include the full communication of the AWARE prompt to all potential users in the police force, which at the time of the inspection had been recently introduced, and consistent use of body worn footage by police officers. As part of the Police and Crime Plan (PCP), we monitor the use of body worn video (BWV) used when officers apply their policing powers, including stop and search and use of force.

The inspection indicated the need for more consistent use of BWV in incidents concerning child abuse and neglect. BWV is an essential tool that offers a chance to increase public trust and confidence in policing by delivering transparency. It can help to secure more successful and speedier convictions and offers a true account of allegations about officer behaviour. The OPCC is currently working with the force to ensure policies and procedures are followed and that governance and oversight is in place so BWV is an effective tool. We will work with Walsall and the wider region to ensure the consistent and appropriate use of BWV.

The ongoing work being conducted by West Midlands Police was recognised by the inspection. This included the integral impact of Operation Encompass and investment into the employment of additional staff as early help officers. The new role was created to focus on multi-agency work in this area and will benefit in providing early help within the community to reduce the escalation of harm to children, which is undoubtedly more effective than reacting when problems become more severe.

The police are often the initial agency to interact with an individual or family in need of support and this new role will help to reduce overall demand on the police. As the PCC states, policing functions must be discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people with their best interests a top priority in all actions and decisions that affect them.

The Walsall NPU Commander highlighted the employment of schools-based officers and the creation of a multi-agency co-located Vulnerability Hub, indicating how important WMP feel the benefits of multi-agency working is to help reduce the risk of harm to children. Joint work across these networks and partnerships will support a collective approach to issues such as criminal and sexual exploitation of children and work towards implementation of the recommendations set out in this inspection.

Yours faithfully,



**Simon Foster**

**West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner**