

An Inspection of how well the police and National Crime Agency tackle the online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

Published on the 5th April 2023, the inspection contains findings on how well the police and National Crime Agency (NCA) tackle online child sexual abuse and exploitation (online CSAE). West Midlands Police (WMP) was one of six forces inspected between February and August 2022. Part of the Police and Crime Commissioner's role is to hold the Chief Constable to account, having regard to the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR), when fulfilling their duty.

Tackling Child Sexual Abuse is part of the SPR, which shapes the measures set out in the Police and Crime Plan (PCP). As outlined in the PCP, the office requires an annual report from the force, on whether it is meeting the SPR and this is something that we monitor closely. The latest SPR report was submitted to the Strategic Policing and Crime Board (SPCB) in April 2023. The report indicated that WMP have a dedicated Online Child Sexual Exploitation Team (OCSET), which investigates child abuse imagery offences and associated offenders who pose a risk to children.

In order to gain a detailed response for this inspection, the office reached out to OCSET, within WMP Public Protection Unit (PPU) and the below responses have been written in conjunction with the OCSET. The inspection provided a number of recommendations which can be grouped into the following areas:

1) Effective collaboration and sharing of information, including data and performance

The inspection recommended that there is a need for improved regional collaboration and consistent scrutiny of performance. The office was informed that OCSET performance is reviewed both internally and externally.

Internally, performance is measured on the number of open investigations, outstanding suspects and positive outcomes. There are also internal audits and dip samples of the wider PPU department on their compliance with the Victim's Code, crime data integrity and whether reviews conducted by supervisors include reviewing the use of risk assessments.

A recent example, is the audit conducted by the audit team within our office in January 2023. The PPU's response to child abuse was audited on information sharing, partnership working and performance. Externally, OCSET are required to feed data back into the NCA on a range of different factors, including the number of referrals actioned, number of children safeguarded, the stages of each investigation and the outcomes.

In addition, OCSET provided the office with a detailed breakdown of how intelligence referrals are made from both NCA intelligence referrals and intelligence from the Child Protection System (CP-Sys), which captures peer to peer paedophile activity. OCSET also provided detail of their risk assessment process.

As part of force policy, the team go beyond the Kent internet risk assessment tool (KIRAT) when the suspect has access to children. This policy allows such subject referrals to be further scrutinised and considers factors such as conspiracy with others and if the suspect is a registered sex offender (RSO). By combining the risk assessments, OCSET can accurately assess and prioritise risk.

The inspection further emphasised the importance of correctly sharing information with the statutory safeguarding partners. The office was informed by OCSET that upon receipt of intelligence relating to the sharing of Indecent Images of Children (IIOC), checks are conducted promptly to identify whether there are children living at the suspected address. Where there is high risk, referrals are made to the safeguarding partners, via the Multiple Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH). Safeguarding those children at risk is the force's foremost priority and safeguarding plans are always recorded on the Connect crime portal for reference.

However, all forces are experiencing barriers with informing partners and making referrals and this is not an issue unique to the West Midlands. OCSET have devised a delivery plan with two main aims in this area:

1. Establishing a framework with partners, within each of the 7 local authorities, to ensure that there is sufficient knowledge of offence types and police tactics to inform good decision making and;
2. Establishing an appropriate method of requesting information from partners, that confirm presence of children at the address during the research stage.

Progress has been made in regards to the second aim as the office was informed that one of the Chief Inspectors within OCSET has established links with Health partners within Birmingham, which are consulted by the NCA in relation to their knowledge of children at an address for referrals. This is being explored as an avenue for obtaining child details when intelligence is received.

2) Appropriate Training

The inspection recommended that ongoing work should ensure that all officers and staff dealing with online CSAE have the correct training to carry out their roles. Likewise, it was also recommended that the force's crime allocation policies should ensure that CSAE cases are allocated to those with the necessary skills and training to investigate them.

All OCSET officers are either fully trained detectives, or are working towards their qualification including Serious Child Abuse Investigation Development Programme (SCAIDP). All 3 Sergeants within the department are Investigative Supervisor/Manager Development Programme (ISMDP) trained. OCSET informed the office of a range of work that is being done to boost the number of trained officers and staff members.

In January 2023, 18 OCSET officers were trained in using the Child Abuse Image Database (CAID), when previously only 2 of the intelligence staff members were trained. This has meant that all OCSET officers have access to CAID, improving functions such as victim and scene identification. In February 2023, a second detective sergeant was trained on the CP-Sys, ensuring that there is resilience in place, as previously there was only 1 sergeant who specifically monitored the higher risk Fighting International Internet Paedophiles (FIIPs) within the CP-Sys.

Additionally, all OCSET officers have been trained in the new 'Review Tool' which allows them to examine evidence on digital devices and produce CPS approved Streamline Forensic Reports (SFRs). In March 2023, all new OCSET officers received NCA approved IIOC 'grading' training and all officers have been trained in Digital Forensics triage.

3) Improved Procedure

The inspection recommended that there should be efficiency in meeting existing recommended timescales for activity targeting CSAE. Issues around waiting times were addressed in the previous HMICFRS inspection, concerning how well the police use digital forensics in their investigations.

The Digital Triage Capabilities for online CSAE cases remain long and the turnaround time between submitting devices for full forensic examination and their subsequent upload onto the Review Tool is still a lengthy 6-12 months. This means OCSET officers have an ever-increasing backlog of open investigations and subsequent suspect/child safeguarding matters to manage. This exponentially increases due to the demand of new referrals coming in. We were informed by OCSET that work is in place with Social Services to mitigate this risk, but nevertheless it remains.

As of February 2023, there are nearly 500 total open investigations. OCSET informed us that realistically, they will always have a relatively high number of open investigations. However, the percentage of these that are pre-enforcement is monitored. Those post-enforcement could be awaiting digital forensic downloads for a significant period of time, although in these instances, the risk has been appropriately managed. It was also recommended that the force should work with the Local Criminal Justice Board (LCJB) to review, and if necessary, amend arrangements for applying for search warrants. This is to ensure that police can secure warrants quickly when children are at risk.

The OCSET informed the office that once intelligence packages are developed, they are allocated to the 2 investigative sergeants for review, who assess whether they are suitable for warrant or non-warrant enforcement. As part of their February 2023 delivery plan, the OCSET detailed that they were running efficiently enough to deal with 2 or 3 warrants a week and that the majority of resources are used for teams during warrant execution, which includes the Operational Support Unit (OSU) and Digital Forensics team, who regularly attend warrants for support. For example, the Digital Forensics Team assist in warrants, which may involve complex digital work such as Bitcoin, dark web connections, and to conduct on scene triage of devices.

Additionally, the OCSET have a new warrant application process through the calendar app 'Team Up' which allows officers to book a slot for a high-risk warrant on the same day. Dedicated urgent slots are available

each day and high-risk intelligence referrals are always brought to attention for early engagement with Social Services.

4) Specific Recommendations for PCCs alongside Chief Constables

It was recommended that the commissioned services for children and the referral process for support or therapeutic services are available for victims of online CSAE. As part of our audit on the PPU's response to child abuse, we found evidence of good practice from the Child Abuse Investigation Team (CAIT) in making additional support referrals where relevant, for instance in mental health support, as part of collaborative work with Local Authority child services. Likewise, the force's revised draft child abuse policy included an additional section on OPCC child support services, providing a list of organisations and contact details to act as a point of reference for officers.

As part of the aforementioned SPCB report on Strategic Policing Requirements, WMP detailed how they aim to ensure that all victims of child sexual abuse are appropriately supported. The force utilises NCA approved intermediaries to assess victims' needs to maximise evidential disclosures, as well as specialist Child Sexual Violence Advocates (CHISVAs), to ensure support from a variety of agencies across the region, to assist victims through the criminal justice journey.

Yours faithfully,



Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner