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An inspection of the effectiveness of the police and law enforcement bodies' response to group-based child sexual exploitation in England and Wales. Response from Simon Foster, West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner.

Published on December 8th, 2023, this inspection delves into the effectiveness of police and law enforcement bodies' responses to group-based child sexual exploitation (CSE) in England and Wales. The examination covered six police forces across both regions, two regional-organised crime units (ROCU), and the National Crime Agency (NCA), conducted between September and December 2022. Despite West Midlands Police (WMP) not being one of the directly inspected entities, the ensuing report and its recommendations bear relevance to all force areas nationwide. A comprehensive survey involving all 43 forces in England and Wales was conducted to gauge their response to group-based CSE, with select findings highlighted in the report. Nationally, the Inspectorate pinpointed one area for improvement and put forth nine recommendations.

A significant aspect of my responsibilities as Police and Crime Commissioner involves holding the Chief Constable accountable, a task intricately woven into the fulfilment of the priorities outlined in the Police and Crime Plan, all while aligning with the Strategic Policing Requirement (SPR). The SPR emphasises the imperative of addressing CSE as a national and collaborative threat that transcends the capabilities of individual forces. Recognising the complexity of this issue, WMP diligently monitors CSE, employing the expertise of the Serious Organised Crime and Exploitation team (SOCEX). This specialised team collaborates closely with key partners and communities, operating within high-risk Local Policing Areas (LPAs) to effectively reduce and disrupt instances of group-based CSE.

Group-based CSE represents a form of abuse perpetrated by organised crime groups, underscoring the alarming extent to which systematic grooming and sexual abuse of children pervades both England and Wales. Consequently, the imperative lies in the implementation of the Inspectorate's recommendations, ensuring that West Midlands Police's handling of vulnerable victims reaches the highest possible standard. In addition to recognising admirable practices, the Inspectorate pinpointed four recommendations and one area of improvement for police forces specifically, to advance the prevention, disruption and officer knowledge around group-based CSE offences. Here, I outline the responses for addressing and implementation of these recommendations in the West Midlands:

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‘By 31 December 2024, all chief constables should make sure that their forces have problem profiles for child sexual exploitation, each of which should include an assessment of the nature and extent of group-based child sexual exploitation. This should include relevant data from local partner agencies and should be updated frequently, at least annually’

The inspection highlighted the crucial necessity for the creation of regular 'Problem profiles,' offering profound insights into victims affected by group-based CSE and the actual scale of offences within the force area. Incorporating this recommendation would significantly enhance the force's ability to identify emerging crimes, pinpoint priority hot-spot locations, and address other high-risk issues. This, in turn, would streamline the disruption and prevention of group-based CSE, thanks to a consistently updated knowledge base. The implementation of 'Problem profiles' would not only contribute to a more effective response but also have a profound impact on resource allocation dedicated to group-based CSE. By gaining a comprehensive understanding of the true extent of CSE crime, the force could allocate its existing resources more efficiently. Notably, WMP has already initiated work on developing a problem profile. Currently, each local authority possesses relevant information and data, and WMP is actively in the process of obtaining these profiles through the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) leads.

‘By 31 December 2024, all chief constables and the relevant business user groups for police record management systems should make sure there are sufficient measures in place to identify group-based child sexual exploitation’

Similar to the previous recommendation, the Inspectorate recommended that the Chief Constable needs to ensure that there are suitable measures in place to identify group-based CSE via police record management systems (RMS). Record management systems store, retrieve, retain and archive police records and files. The force applies flags and warning markers on record management systems to track crimes. It is important for the Chief Constable to consult with the relevant business user groups in order to make sure there is a flag inputted for group-based CSE, to increase the opportunity to identify links between individuals, whether victims or offenders and further protect vulnerable people. I understand that WMP are currently working to add a question asking whether a crime is CSE group-based during the crime recording process. Therefore, when an officer has confirmed group-based CSE for a relevant crime, this will allow searches on performance systems to review volumes and incidents in greater detail.

‘By 30 June 2024, all chief constables of forces that are yet to receive the Hydrant Programme’s continuing professional development offer should arrange it’

The Hydrant Programme, aligned with the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) Child Protection and Abuse Investigation Working Group, initially focused on coordinating responses to non-recent child sexual

abuse. However, it has since expanded its scope to assist forces in addressing various child protection and abuse investigation issues nationwide. It is noteworthy that Hydrant is currently collaborating with WMP and is scheduled to provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) sessions for WMP officers.

‘With immediate effect, all chief constables should take effective steps to eradicate victim-blaming language in their forces’

The inspection underscored the imperative to address and eradicate victim-blaming language within the force, revealing numerous instances of inappropriate descriptive language used by police officers. In response, the Inspectorate recommended ongoing efforts and training to ensure that all officers and staff involved in addressing group-based CSE possess the necessary knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively. In August 2023, WMP implemented a new Victims Strategy aimed at enhancing the current service and placing a strong emphasis on improving officer compliance with the Victims' Code. This strategic initiative, combined with the Inspectorate's recommendation, promises a significant reduction in any potential victim-blaming language within WMP. Notably, WMP has undertaken Operation Soteria within the force, supporting their approach to handling rape and serious sexual offences. This operation includes workshops, training sessions, and awareness programs for officers and staff. To assist officers in capturing the voices of children, WMP has developed the AWARE go-to guides and question sets. Furthermore, frontline staff has undergone training sessions on the AWARE principles.

‘Area for improvement, all chief constables should work with their statutory safeguarding partners to review, promote and make sure that relevant group-based child sexual exploitation disruption and prevention initiatives are implemented effectively in their forces.’

A key insight from the inspection emphasises the imperative for the force to meticulously review and enhance the promotion of their group-based CSE disruption and prevention initiatives, ensuring their current effective implementation. Within the West Midlands, each local authority is overseen by a Chief Superintendent who serves as the strategic lead on the safeguarding board. The local authorities devise individual strategies for addressing CSE and outline their respective approaches to implementation. The local SOCEX hubs play a pivotal role by consolidating tactical level operations and intelligence to support these strategies. I advocate for increased collaboration among the police, partners and local authorities to implement successful disruption and prevention initiatives.

The inspection also brought to light a notable gap in understanding regarding preventative measures against group-based CSE. Most inspected forces were found to be unaware of the Home Office's 'Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit,' developed in 2019 to support frontline practitioners in safeguarding young people and children from CSE, including group-based CSE. I encourage that the Chief Constable of

WMP to ensure the force is not only aware of the Home Office toolkit but also takes steps to provide comprehensive training and education to officers. This training will aim to equip officers with a thorough understanding of group-based child exploitation, enabling them to grasp the necessary prevention and disruption measures crucial for reducing instances of this criminal activity.

Summary

I welcome the insights provided by this inspection, recognising its crucial role in identifying specific areas requiring progression and development in the response to group-based CSE. Even though WMP were not subjected to direct inspection, the valuable insights the report offers into current operational practices are appreciated. These insights will be integrated in my continuous and dedicated efforts to enhance accountability and ensure that WMP not only meets but exceeds the recommendations set forth in the inspection, thereby fostering a robust and responsive approach to combatting group-based CSE within the region.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S Foster', written in a cursive style.

Simon Foster

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner