



RESPONSE BY THE PCC TO HMICFRS INSPECTIONS OF CLEVELAND POLICE

INSPECTION DETAILS

Title of Inspection - Cleveland Police: National child protection inspection

Date Inspection Published - 15 January 2025

Type of Inspection:

- ☒ Cleveland Specific
☐ Follow Up
☐ Partner Inspection

- ☐ National
☐ Thematic

Is Cleveland Police quoted in the Report? ☒ Yes ☐ No

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF REPORT

Children are among the most vulnerable in society. Most children grow up in loving, caring families and reach adulthood unharmed. But some do not - they fall prey to people who coerce them into criminal enterprises or exploit them for sexual gratification. Children who do not grow up in loving, caring families face heightened risks, as do children who go missing from home.

Public services, including the police, have a shared responsibility to look for the warning signs, be alert to the risks and act quickly to protect children.

In February 2024, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) introduced a new child protection rolling inspection programme. For each police force in England and Wales, HMICFRS makes five judgments on how effectively the force safeguards children at risk.

This report sets out the findings of HMICFRS's 2024 inspection of child protection services in Cleveland Police.

In each inspection, HMICFRS focuses on the experiences of children who come into contact with the police when there are concerns about their safety or well-being.

HM Inspector's summary

Cleveland Police has worked hard over the years to improve how it safeguards vulnerable children and families. But there is still much more to do.

Two causes of concern have been identified regarding the performance of Cleveland Police in safeguarding children at risk. These concerns relate to how the Force responds to children that are missing, and how the Force investigates online child sexual exploitation.

The Force does not consistently recognise the risks posed to missing children. Nor does it respond to them effectively. And the Force needs to improve how it investigates cases involving children being sexually exploited online. This includes how it assesses wider risks posed by offenders, and

how it provides support to children and families.

The Force does not have enough trained officers and staff to investigate reports of child abuse, neglect and exploitation. Also, although the Force has worked hard to train its officers and staff, this training does not always result in improving outcomes for children.

The Force needs to make sure it equips officers and staff to recognise risk and consistently record the voice of the child. It needs to make sure it effectively shares relevant information with its safeguarding partners. And it needs to improve how it assesses and responds to children at risk of, or harmed by, exploitation.

Chief officers and senior leaders understand their statutory responsibilities to safeguard children. The Force chairs one of its two safeguarding children partnerships. This demonstrates the Force's investment in partnership working.

However, at an operational level, improvements are needed. Especially to the Force's joint working arrangements in managing children at risk of exploitation.

The dedication and steadfastness shown by officers and staff at Cleveland Police is commended. They are committed to safeguarding children, while operating in an increasingly complex and demanding environment. But despite the efforts of senior leadership, the Force is not yet achieving consistently good outcomes for children. This affects the provision of safeguarding and potentially leaves children at risk.

Progress will be monitored closely within Cleveland Police over the coming months.

Leadership of child protection arrangements

Cleveland Police's leadership of its child protection arrangements requires improvement.

Areas for improvement

The Force needs more officers and staff trained to investigate reports of child abuse, neglect and exploitation

The Force's leaders recognise that many of the officers and staff investigating crimes against children are inexperienced and not fully trained.

Although the Force's specialist child abuse investigation development programme is not mandatory, the programme gives officers and staff a good understanding of the principles set out in the Working together to safeguard children 2023 guidance. It also explains how to work with safeguarding partners to better protect children at risk. But in this inspection, only one in seven officers in the complex exploitation team have completed the programme. And even though the Force has offered the team a range of training, this is having a limited effect on outcomes for children. Officers also are not experienced enough to carry out their role.

In the child abuse and vulnerable adults team, which investigates child abuse and neglect, less than a third of officers have completed their initial crime investigators development programme.

The complex exploitation team should consist of 22 officers, but at the time of this inspection it only had 11 officers in post. Some of its officers and staff are also assigned to long-term investigations, such as complex and lengthy child sexual exploitation investigations, putting more pressure on the team.

The Force needs to record children's demographic information more consistently

HMICFRS found that the Force did not record children's ethnicity in half of its case file reviews (25

out of 50 files). This means the Force cannot accurately analyse the quality of its response to particular ethnic groups. Nor can the Force fully understand potential risk factors affecting people because of their cultural heritage.

HMICFRS was pleased to see Force leaders actively monitoring performance in relation to the recording of personal data. This is an area where they are making some improvement. But there is still more work to do.

Main findings

- Chief officers and senior leaders understand their statutory child protection and safeguarding responsibilities, but there is no child-centred strategy in place
- The Force still needs to improve the quality of its performance data
- There are regular monthly performance meetings in local policing areas, but many senior district leaders do not use the data well enough to reduce risk to some vulnerable children
- The Force has worked hard to train its officers and staff, but the training is not always having the desired results
- The Force has invested in the welfare of its workforce, but high workloads are having a negative effect on the wellbeing of some teams

Working with safeguarding partners

Cleveland Police is adequate at working with safeguarding partners.

Area for improvement

The Force needs to work more effectively with its safeguarding partners

The Force has worked hard over the last few years to provide effective and consistent representation at its safeguarding children partnerships with Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees, and South Tees. This includes representation at their executive boards. This helps it to make effective contributions to multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.

When the Force's safeguarding partners were spoken with, they told HMICFRS that the police representatives who attended the various partnership subgroups were sufficiently skilled and knowledgeable. HMICFRS also saw good police participation at partnership subgroups.

But at an operational level, improvements are needed. HMICFRS did not always see a good understanding or application of the Working together to safeguard children 2023 guidance. For example, in 14 out of 31 cases, HMICFRS did not find a record of a strategy discussion taking place where one was required. Additionally, the Force's joint working arrangements in managing children at risk of exploitation needs to improve.

Main findings

- The Force understands and carries out its statutory responsibilities to safeguard children
- The Force learns from local and national reviews to improve the effectiveness of local safeguarding arrangements for children
- The Force works well with local and national partner organisations on safeguarding arrangements for children
- The Force invites partners to its daily district meetings

Responding to children at risk of harm

Cleveland Police is inadequate at responding to children at risk of harm.

Cause of concern

The Force does not consistently recognise the risks posed to missing children, or respond to them effectively

In this inspection HMICFRS mostly found the Force's response to missing children to be poor. Officers and staff in the control room did not always recognise the risks, and HMICFRS saw examples of inconsistent grading of risk, which affected the Force's subsequent response to missing children. This was despite the Force having access to information on relevant risk factors, including the risk of child sexual exploitation.

In the year ending 31 March 2024, HMICFRS data shows that the Force assessed 6.9 percent of missing children incidents as high risk. Over the same period, the national average of incidents of missing children assessed as high risk was 11.5 percent. But HMICFRS found children who are looked after by local authorities - and who are often especially vulnerable - experience a poorer service from the Force. Over the same 12 months, it assessed just 1.7 percent of missing children incidents from local authority care as high risk, compared to the national average of 14.2 percent.

HMICFRS found similar evidence in its case file reviews. In three of the six missing children case file reviews, the Force graded the children as being at medium risk of harm, when it should have graded them as high risk. In all three cases, the Force had not considered additional risks associated with exploitation or victimisation.

HMICFRS carried out further analysis on ten additional missing children incidents assessed by the Force as high risk. HMICFRS found that the Force places too much emphasis on a 'threat to life' when assessing incidents as high risk. The College of Policing authorised professional practice, and the Force's policy on missing children, defines serious harm as "a risk which is life threatening and/or traumatic, and from which recovery, whether physical or psychological, can be expected to be difficult or impossible". The Force is not considering how other vulnerabilities such as the risk of exploitation affect the risk to children when they are missing. The Force's approach to assessing risk significantly reduces its ability to protect some of the most vulnerable children.

The Force's response to most of the missing children incidents, HMICFRS reviewed, was not good enough. Trigger plans were often ineffective. Referrals to safeguarding partners were submitted in only half of the cases, and HMICFRS found prevention interviews were not always comprehensive.

Officers should conduct prevention interviews with a child who is no longer missing and has returned home or to a place of care. But HMICFRS found the quality of information recorded in interview notes to be poor in all six missing children case file reviews. Officers rarely recorded important information, such as where the children went, who they were with and what had happened to them during the time they were missing. Too often, officers did not physically see the children. Instead, they completed the prevention interviews by talking with care home staff or by speaking to the child on the telephone.

This means the Force does not always gain the information it needs to assess whether a child has been the victim of offending, to assess whether they are at risk of exploitation, or to reduce the likelihood of them going missing again. This means when a child does go missing again, they may be at risk of significant harm. A better response from the Force would help to make sure the child is found and returned safely.

Recommendations

With immediate effect, in respect of missing children, Cleveland Police should make sure that:

- officers and staff responsible for grading the risks of incidents involving missing children are sufficiently trained and able to appropriately assess the risks using all relevant information held by or available to the Force;
- risk assessments are appropriate in all cases;

- that its response is proportionate to the level of risk;
- investigations into cases of missing children are effective from the first point of contact;
- the Force works with its partners to improve the quality of prevention interviews so that the voice of the child is clearly recorded; and
- the Force policy and guidance for responding to missing people is up to date, and that it is consistent with the College of Policing's authorised professional practice, including the definition of serious harm.

Main findings

- The Force website provides advice and information that is beneficial for children and those who care for them
- The Force's control room is using research appropriately to highlight risks to children
- The Force uses a scheduled appointment system in its control room to effectively manage non-critical demand
- The Force's response to missing children incidents is frequently poor
- The Force's supervision of missing children incidents is inconsistent
- The Force does not always understand the links between missing children and child exploitation
- The Force responds to domestic abuse incidents well, but does not always recognise risks in incidents involving children
- Frontline officers use police protection powers well
- Officers prioritise finding suitable accommodation when taking children into police protection

Assessing risk to children and making appropriate referrals

Cleveland Police requires improvement at assessing risk to children and making appropriate referrals.

Areas for improvement

The Force needs to make sure it equips officers and staff to recognise risk and consistently record the voice of the child, and effectively share relevant information with its safeguarding partners

During the inspection, HMICFRS found that officers did not always record the voice of the child before sharing public protection notices (PPNs) with safeguarding partners. Officers had recorded the voice of the child in only 24 of the 50 cases HMICFRS reviewed. HMICFRS found that the Force routinely checks whether officers are submitting PPNs. But it does not regularly review or audit the quality of these submissions, whether internally or as part of a multi-agency audit programme.

When personnel recorded children's views, these were appropriately detailed, and their living conditions described well. HMICFRS expect to see this in all PPNs, as it helps other safeguarding partners to better assess the needs of children and promote their welfare. But in too many cases, personnel did not document interactions with children well enough.

The Force needs to improve how it responds to child sexual exploitation

The Force told HMICFRS it has a process for assessing children at risk of, or harmed by, exploitation. But officers and staff in the complex exploitation team told HMICFRS this process is confusing and disjointed. HMICFRS agree. Cases are allocated to specialist officers through a multi-agency child exploitation referral process. The Force has child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation guidance documents that describe this. But HMICFRS did not see how the Force's processes reflect these guidance documents.

The Force shares information about children at risk of exploitation - including those who are missing - as part of a multi-agency process often referred to as a multi-agency child exploitation panel. The Force told us multi-agency safeguarding partners refer cases to its complex exploitation team. But the Force does not know how many children this team is managing. The link between the vulnerable children discussed at the multi-agency exploitation panel meetings, and those managed by complex exploitation team officers are unclear and inconsistent.

HMICFRS also saw that there are multiple meetings to manage children at risk of exploitation, with a range of different titles. Some meetings are daily, while others are weekly or scheduled on an ad-hoc basis. This inconsistency is contributing to the Force's fragmented approach to managing child sexual and criminal exploitation. The Force cannot always be sure there is a consistent level of service to all children at risk of exploitation.

The Force needs to resolve this urgently to make sure that effective governance is in place. It also needs to make sure that officers and staff have the necessary skills, experience and training to carry out their roles.

Main findings

- The Force's understanding of child sexual exploitation has some weaknesses
- The Force is not always recognising how to support children at risk of child criminal exploitation
- The Force's protecting vulnerable people hub provides a support function to improve the quality of referrals from domestic abuse incidents
- The Force has a clear process for overseeing the domestic violence disclosure scheme, but this does not always include children
- The Force provides good multi-agency planning and support for victims and children affected by domestic abuse
- The Force regularly completes PPNs for children brought to custody
- The Force is not always recognising when to initiate strategy discussions or meetings
- There is good attendance by the Force at initial child protection conferences

Investigating reports of abuse, neglect and exploitation of children

Cleveland Police is inadequate at investigating reports of abuse, neglect and exploitation of children.

Cause of concern

The Force should improve how it responds to and investigates cases involving children who are sexually exploited online

HMICFRS found that the Force has clear processes and policies in place to help officers and staff investigate reports of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. But uniform response officers, who often conduct the initial investigations, do not understand these processes well enough.

In five of the six case files reviewed, HMICFRS found that uniform response officers did not recognise children's vulnerability or assess risks posed to children well enough. And they did not complete public protection notices consistently. This means some children may have been left unprotected. And in four of the six case files, uniform response officers did not signpost victims to adequate support or guidance for families affected by online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

The Force should also review how it allocates the investigation of cases involving children being sexually exploited, whether online or through in-person contact. In the inspection, HMICFRS found the Force's allocation of exploitation cases was not consistent. Some online investigations were allocated to non-specialist uniformed officers, who did not have the skills and training to investigate these complex cases. And in reports of criminal or sexual exploitation, it is not clear how the Force decides whether to allocate investigations to the complex exploitation team or to the criminal

investigation department. HMICFRS did not always find a rationale to support the allocations in these cases. This means children are getting an inconsistent service from the Force.

HMICFRS did not find that the Force made effective use of its own investigative tools, such as the child abuse image database or other digital forensic tools, in any of the six cases reviewed. When specialist advice is not obtained by frontline officers, it means potential evidence on digital devices is not recovered. This is because, too often, frontline officers are not seizing devices. In all six case file reviews, the wider risks that the perpetrators posed to other children were not considered. This included the two cases investigated by specialist trained officers in the Force's online investigation team.

Recommendations

With immediate effect, Cleveland Police should take steps to make sure:

- it allocates all exploitation investigations to officers and staff who have the appropriate knowledge and skills;
- officers and staff have the knowledge, skills and appropriate tools to identify children at risk from online child sexual exploitation and share these concerns with partners to make sure children get the right help;
- it effectively uses the Police National Database by completing intelligence checks during investigations;
- it follows all reasonable lines of enquiry to identify suspects; and
- it signposts all victims and families to available guidance and support.

Main findings

- The Force has effective arrangements to respond to the sudden and unexpected deaths of children, but the officers who need training have not received it
- The Force's initial investigation of reports of online child sexual exploitation is inadequate
- Specialist teams usually carry out good child protection investigations
- Too often the Force relies on children's social care services to decide whether a criminal investigation is required
- Some investigations are poorly supervised

Next steps

Within eight weeks of this report's publication, Cleveland Police should tell HMICFRS in writing how it has addressed or intends to address the areas for improvement, causes of concern and recommendations specified. It would be helpful for this information to be in an action plan.

FORCE RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

All new reports into the Force follow a specific process which involves informing the Governance of Audit and Inspection (GAIN) Board, chaired by the Deputy Chief Constable, of the report's publication and identifying an Executive Lead to monitor/drive progress of the actions going forward.

The process in relation to the National Child Protection Inspections (NCPI) differs to other HMICFRS inspections. Within 28 days of the Force receiving the draft report there was a requirement to provide the NCPI review team an improvement plan to address the recommendations relating to the Causes of Concern.

Subsequently within 8 weeks of the final report being published, the Force has to provide an update in relation to the recommendations and the Areas for Improvement (AFIs). However, by the time the final report was published the broader improvement plan, including updated recommendations and the Force's plans to address the AFIs was already with the NCPI review

team, as acknowledged in the HMICFRS press release that supported the publication of the final report.

The Force has worked through each section of the report's findings and is pleased to confirm that many aspects have already seen considerable improvement; much of which can be evidenced by significant performance improvements and outcomes for children.

The Force continues to work closely with HMICFRS who will be following-up on the actions during a visit in February.

The process for closing actions is depicted by HMICFRS, as they award each action a level; the Force complies with the appropriate course of action, linked to this level, to formally close the actions.

The Executive Lead for the report is ACC Baker.

The Force continues to actively work to satisfy all recommendations and AFIs which are discussed regularly in the relevant Force Governance meetings.

PCC RESPONSE TO INSPECTION

Comment by the PCC:

The PCC fully endorses HMICFRS's recommendations for improvement. The findings from the inspection show that, despite Cleveland Police working hard over the years to improve how it safeguards vulnerable children and families and the efforts and dedication of officers and staff, the Force needs to urgently improve its response to children who are missing and how it investigates online child sexual exploitation. The PCC recognises the need for the Force to take immediate action.

The PCC acknowledges police and partners have a crucial role to play in protecting and safeguarding the most vulnerable people in Cleveland's communities, especially children, to prevent them being exposed to exploitation and harm. Where young people are identified as 'at-risk' of criminality, the PCC understands agencies must work quickly to consider appropriate and meaningful interventions to prevent escalating behaviour.

The PCC's Police and Crime Plan 2024-29 recognises that sadly, young people can be vulnerable and at risk of becoming involved in criminality. The PCC pledges to work with organisations to educate teachers, professionals and parents about the signs of criminal and sexual exploitation of children - and ensure they know how to reach out for support if they think a young person may be at risk. The plan highlights that education is key to make sure young people understand the dangers and risks they may face. The PCC wants to see better educational provision for young people on topics such as knife crime, hate crime, exploitation, healthy relationships and antisocial behaviour.

The PCC has received fortnightly briefings from senior police officers and there has been no delay by the Force in addressing the concerns raised by HMICFRS. The PCC recognises that the Force has responded promptly and comprehensively to the inspection findings and has already put plans in place to address areas for improvement.

The PCC will closely monitor the progress of the Force to ensure children in Cleveland are effectively safeguarded and protected from harm.

At the Scrutiny Meeting, scheduled to be held on 4 March 2025, the PCC will seek assurance from the Force that:

- all of HMICFRS's recommendations, referenced for immediate action, have been implemented; and

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• areas for improvement and causes of concern are being sufficiently addressed. |
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