

PEEL: Police effectiveness 2016

A vulnerability revisit inspection of Bedfordshire Police



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Introduction

This report sets out the findings of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS)¹ following our revisit inspection of Bedfordshire Police on 12 and 13 April 2017. The revisit inspection assessed the force's progress against the one cause of concern and the four areas for improvement in respect of protecting those who are vulnerable from harm and supporting victims that were identified in our 2016 effectiveness report, which we published in March 2017.²

PEEL: Police effectiveness 2016

In autumn 2016, as part of our annual inspections into police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL), HMICFRS' effectiveness programme inspected how well forces keep people safe and reduce crime. To reach a judgment on the extent of each force's effectiveness, our inspection answered the following question:

- How effective is the force at keeping people safe and reducing crime?

To answer this, we explored the areas of policing that we consider to be of particular interest and concern to the public, including in relation to the following question:

- How effective is the force at protecting those who are vulnerable from harm, and supporting victims?

Five forces were graded as inadequate in how effective they were at protecting those who are vulnerable from harm, and supporting victims. HMICFRS revisited the following four forces between April and June 2017 to examine progress against the causes of concern set out in our 2016 effectiveness inspection reports: Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Humberside and Nottinghamshire. In respect of the fifth force rated as inadequate (the Metropolitan Police Service), the Home Secretary commissioned HMICFRS to publish quarterly updates on the force's response to our inspection findings.

¹ This inspection was carried out before 19 July 2017, when HMIC also took on responsibility for fire & rescue service inspections and was renamed HM Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services. The methodology underpinning our inspection findings is unaffected by this change. References to HMICFRS in this report may relate to an event that happened before 19 July 2017 when HMICFRS was HMIC. Citations of documents which HMIC published before 19 July 2017 will still cite HMIC as the publisher.

² *PEEL: Police effectiveness 2016 – An inspection of Bedfordshire Police*, HMIC, 2017. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/peel-police-effectiveness-2016-bedfordshire/

What we found in Bedfordshire Police in 2016

We continued to have serious concerns about the quality and consistency of decision-making within the force control room in relation to missing and absent³ children. Given the seriousness of these shortcomings, and the risk posed to very vulnerable young people, we considered the force was inadequate in how it protects vulnerable people. The process of assessing calls about missing children was poor, and the review of the initial risk assessment determining whether a case requires a 'missing' or 'absent' police response was inconsistent. In some cases, assessments were being made without the relevant information from intelligence checks that might have led to immediate police action to locate and safeguard vulnerable missing young people. Additionally, the control room was categorising some cases incorrectly, with some being categorised as 'absent' rather than 'missing'. We remained concerned that some children and young people were still being exposed to potential risk of harm, and that serious delays prevented the force from providing an appropriate and timely police response to safeguard vulnerable children and young people.

Bedfordshire Police did some things well. It had improved its understanding of the nature and scale of vulnerability, specifically sexual exploitation, but recognised that it needed to do more to understand repeat domestic abuse victims, and missing and absent children.

³ A person is classified as absent if they are not where they are expected to be but they are not considered at risk. Whereas, if they are classified as missing, the police are obliged to take steps to locate them, as the level of perceived risk is higher.

Revisit findings: progress against the recommendation and areas for improvement from the 2016 effectiveness inspection

In this section, we set out the cause of concern, recommendations, and areas for improvement from our 2016 effectiveness inspection, and our findings from the 2017 revisit inspection.

Cause of concern from 2016 effectiveness inspection report

Cause of concern

The force's response to missing and absent children and young people – and in particular the way it determines whether a case should be treated as 'missing' or 'absent' – was exposing some children and young people to potential risk of harm.

Recommendation

To address this cause of concern the force should:

- immediately review its approach to reports of missing children and ensure it risk assesses them correctly and responds appropriately.

Area for improvement

- The force should make better use of trigger plans for persistently missing children, adults, and children at risk of sexual exploitation, to improve the force response.

Revisit findings

In our 2016 effectiveness inspection, we had serious concerns about the force's overall response to missing children and young people: not just the force control room response, but also with regard to other aspects which influenced the force's response, such as cultural attitudes and capacity in the specialist team

Bedfordshire Police has made several recent improvements in its response to missing and absent children and young people; in particular, its decision-making as to whether a case should be treated as 'missing' or 'absent' is better. This includes a new policy in which the force control room inspector decides whether an individual is categorised as missing or absent following the call-taker's application of the

THRIVE⁴ risk assessment. This determines what level of investigation is undertaken by the police. However, during our revisit inspection we found that the new policy is not yet fully understood, and that risk assessment decisions are not always based upon all the available intelligence and information, and are not always clear on the level of risk to the individual. While we did find some good examples, the police response is inconsistent, and children and young people are not always being adequately safeguarded.

The chief officer team is committed to improving the force's understanding of vulnerability, and is providing an extensive training programme to all frontline officers and staff. The chief officer lead described the ambit of the programme as being much wider than missing persons. It is focused on improving officer and staff understanding regarding children and safeguarding; for example, looking for signs of neglect when attending incidents, and checking on the welfare of children at domestic incidents. The training does not cover risk assessments for missing persons, and the chief officer lead accepted that it could be adapted. The force control room staff have all been trained. At the time of our revisit inspection, the remainder of frontline officers and staff were due to complete it by June 2017.

The force has made a significant investment in safeguarding and public protection. However, during our revisit inspection, the force acknowledged that the specialist team dealing with vulnerable missing children was under pressure due to a high workload and insufficient resources. This in part is due to the improvement in the assessment of 'absent' children and young people, who are now more appropriately identified as 'missing'. We visited the child sexual exploitation and missing people investigation team (CMIT). The team described a recent occasion when only two staff were on duty with approximately 22 missing cases to deal with. The force is attempting to address the resource and demand challenge, and is providing greater resource flexibility, particularly over the weekend. However, this remains a concern, and while the force is taking a risk-based approach, it must ensure that resources are sufficient to deal with demand, and that vulnerable children and adults are safeguarded adequately.

Bedfordshire Police has recently been working more closely with children's homes to establish more effective ways of working together to safeguard missing children and young people. The chief officer lead is supporting closer working through local events, to increase the quality of information and intelligence and to improve joint problem-solving approaches to persistently missing vulnerable children. We also assessed the force's progress in this regard as part of our autumn 2017 effectiveness inspection.

⁴ The threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement (THRIVE) model is used to assess the appropriate initial police response to a call for service. It allows a judgment to be made of the relative risk posed by the call and places the individual needs of the victim at the centre of that decision.

The force does not have effective trigger plans for those children and young people who are persistently missing or absent, which means that they are not located and safeguarded as quickly as they should be. The force recognised that it needed to improve, and is reviewing the use of trigger plans in the force control room to locate persistently missing children and young people. The CMIT detective inspector is leading this work and is working with other forces to identify good practice. While this is being developed, the force should ensure that the trigger plans held in the force control room are up to date, with relevant intelligence and information available to inform officers of possible locations, associates, habits and other useful information relating to the missing person, so that they are quickly located and safeguarded.

Areas for improvement from 2016 effectiveness inspection report and revisit findings

Area for improvement

- The force should provide DASH training to frontline staff to improve the quality of the assessments and ensure an improved quality of service to victims.

Revisit findings

The force is in the process of reviewing 60 DASH⁵ booklets with Cambridge University. This is so that staff can use the booklets more effectively to make a meaningful and useful risk assessment. The force is also using body-worn video camera footage of domestic abuse incidents to inform the review and to plan training for frontline staff.

Area for improvement

- The force should ensure that it has sufficient resources in the domestic abuse Emerald team to deal effectively with demand and provide specialist training to staff to increase the specialist capability.

Revisit findings

The force has prioritised the allocation of additional funding and resources to the domestic abuse Emerald team and is making progress with a plan to ensure that all staff receive the appropriate specialist training.

⁵ DASH is a risk identification tool for frontline officers when responding to victims of domestic abuse, stalking and harassment.

Area for improvement

- The force should ensure that it understands and addresses the cause of the decline in the arrest rate and the high outcome rate where the victim does not support police action.

Revisit findings

The force has seen some initial improvements in arrest rates. It is developing additional specialist support for victims of domestic abuse to improve the outcome rate where the victim does not support police action. This is a positive start. We also reviewed the force's progress in this regard as part of our autumn 2017 effectiveness inspection.

Conclusions and next steps

Conclusions

Bedfordshire Police has made some progress in improving its approach to missing and absent children, but still has much more to do. The force recognises this, yet it remains a cause of concern. The force must continue to improve its risk assessment procedures and consider all the available intelligence and information when determining whether a child is missing or absent. The force has introduced a new policy to ensure that inspectors in the force control room authorise the categorisation of a missing or absent child or young person, and identify the risk. During our revisit inspection, we found the new policy is not yet clearly understood and in some cases not all aspects of the relevant information, intelligence and level of risk are being considered or recorded before the inspector's determination is being made.

The number of children and young people the force assessed as 'absent' has reduced significantly. While this is positive, as more children and young people are being identified as 'missing' and action is taken to locate and safeguard them, the force recognises that it needs to ensure that it has sufficient resources in place to respond to the increase in demand.

The force does not yet have effective trigger plans for those children and young people who are persistently missing or absent. Its approach remains inconsistent and ineffective, with plans that contain out-of-date information and intelligence; this means that the force is not consistently providing children and young people with appropriate safeguarding when they need it.

Next steps

HMICFRS will continue to monitor Bedfordshire Police's progress against the cause of concern set out in this report and previously in our autumn 2016 effectiveness report,⁶ published in March 2017. We have also assessed progress in our autumn 2017 effectiveness report, published in March 2018.⁷

⁶ PEEL: *Police effectiveness 2016 - An inspection of Bedfordshire Police*, HMIC, 2017. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/peel-police-effectiveness-2016-bedfordshire/

⁷ PEEL: *Police effectiveness 2017 – An inspection of Bedfordshire Police*, HMICFRS, 2018. Available from: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/publications/peel-police-effectiveness-2017-bedfordshire/

Annex A – Methodology

The revisit inspection methodology included:

- a presentation by the force on progress since the original inspection;
- a review of supporting documentation provided by the force;
- a focus on the progress the force has made addressing the cause of concern and areas for improvement identified in our 2016 inspection; and
- reality testing in the control room and with the specialist team that deals with missing and absent children (the child sexual exploitation and missing people investigation team).