

National Child Protection Inspections

Kent Police
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Foreword

All children deserve to grow up in a safe environment, cared for and protected from harm. Most children thrive in loving families and grow to adulthood unharmed. Unfortunately, though, too many children are abused or neglected by those responsible for their care; or need to be protected from other adults. Some of them occasionally go missing, or end up spending time in places, or with people, that are harmful to them.

While it is everyone's responsibility to look out for vulnerable children, police forces – working together and with other organisations – have a major role in protecting children and meeting their needs.

Protecting children is one of the most important things the police do. Police officers investigate suspected crimes involving children, arrest perpetrators, and have responsibilities to monitor sex offenders. A police officer can take a child in danger to a place of safety and can seek restrictions on offenders' contact with children. The police service also has a significant role, working with other organisations, in ensuring children's protection and wellbeing in the longer term.

As they go about their daily tasks, police officers must be alert to, and identify, children who may be at risk. To protect children effectively, officers must talk to children, listen to them, and understand their fears and concerns. The police must also work effectively with other organisations to play their part in ensuring that, as far as possible, no child slips through the net, and to avoid both over-intrusiveness and duplication of effort.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) is inspecting the child protection work of every police force in England and Wales. The reports are intended to provide information for the police, the police and crime commissioner (PCC) and the public on how well the police protect children and secure improvements for the future.

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Summary

This report is a summary of the findings of our inspection of police child¹ protection services in Kent, which took place in April 2019.

We examined the effectiveness of the decisions made by the police at each stage of their interactions with or for children, from initial contact through to the investigation of offences against them. We also scrutinised the treatment of children in custody, and assessed how the force is structured, led and governed, in relation to its child protection services.²

Main findings from the inspection

We found that the chief constable, his senior team and the PCC are highly committed to protecting vulnerable people, including children. This is reflected in the PCC's police and crime plan, which lists safeguarding as one of the force's priorities; in the force's control strategy, which includes a clear focus on child protection throughout; and in the way the force organises itself. This strong emphasis on protecting children was evident throughout the inspection and is clearly understood by leaders and staff. This is impressive and positive.

In 2017, the force made significant changes to its operating structure. This included investing in new teams that focus on different aspects of vulnerability and child protection – for example, missing and child exploitation teams (MCETs) and vulnerability investigation teams (VITs). Since September 2017, the force has increased the number of officers dedicated to vulnerability from 166 to approximately 600.³ We were pleased to see that there are good staffing levels within the teams dedicated to managing those posing a risk to children, such as registered sex offenders (RSOs).

Throughout the inspection, we found good evidence of senior leaders working to improve the ways that the force manages risks to children and meets the continuously increasing demand for child protection. Partners and stakeholders told us about strong and effective joint working arrangements.

We also found examples of good work by frontline officers responding to incidents involving children. The officers and staff we spoke to who manage child protection

¹ 'Child' in this report refers to a person under the age of 18. See 'Definitions and interpretations' for this and other definitions.

² [For more information on HMICFRS's rolling programme of child protection inspections, see our website.](#)

³ [Annual Report 2017 - 2018](#), Kent Police and Crime Commissioner, 2018, page 9.

investigations work in difficult and demanding circumstances but are committed and dedicated. However, we found that they often lacked experience or were not fully trained.

The case audits that formed part of this inspection highlight the need to improve some of the force's responses to children in need of help and protection. While the force is clearly committed to improving child protection, decisions about children at risk aren't yet consistently better as a result.

Specific areas for improvement include:

- the initial assessment and assignment of calls for assistance, to ensure that the response is appropriate;
- speaking to children – particularly very young ones, recording their behaviour and demeanour, and making sure their concerns and views are heard and inform decisions for their welfare (the force had instigated an impressive campaign to address this issue just before our inspection; but it was too early for us to assess how successful this is);
- considering the wider risks posed to children when they are missing or living in homes where domestic abuse (DA) features, to enhance protective planning;
- in supervision of investigations, to make sure investigative opportunities are pursued and cases aren't unnecessarily delayed;
- making sure children aren't inappropriately kept in police detention or brought to police stations as a place of safety for prolonged periods;
- fully assessing the level of risk in child protection cases before sharing concerns with safeguarding partners, so that referrals are made when needed; and
- ensuring that supervision within offender management teams includes a focus on cases where the offender is a risk to children, or when vulnerable children and adults are identified by staff.

During our inspection, we examined 77 cases where the police had identified children at risk. We assessed the force's child protection practice as good in 18 cases, as requiring improvement in 29 cases, and as inadequate in 30 cases. This shows that the force needs to do more to make sure that it provides a consistently good service for all children.

Conclusion

At all levels, Kent Police is clear in its commitment to protecting vulnerable children and have made it a priority to protect those in need. Senior leaders consulted widely with staff and included their ideas so that the force is focused on protecting children. This has meant real and positive change to frontline activity and the culture of policing, and has seen a realignment of resources and staff to support the achievement of the child focus strategy.

The force demonstrates its understanding of what child protection means and how it wants to improve and develop its services to protect children. For example, the outputs of accurate case auditing by the learning and development team is useful for improving investigations.

Our inspection found that the officers and staff who manage demanding child abuse investigations are committed and dedicated. However, in too many cases we found inconsistent practice and decision making. Other aspects also gave us particular concerns. These include how the force manages the welfare of children while they are in police detention; the current process for referring child protection concerns to the local authorities; and how the force manages its use of the powers for taking children into police protection.

We were encouraged to note that the force was already acting to correct the lack of specialist training and gaps in service identified in its self-audits before our inspection. The force took prompt action to address all issues raised during the inspection, which is positive and underlines its commitment to continuous improvement.

We have made recommendations that will help improve outcomes for children if the force acts on them. We will revisit Kent Police no later than six months after the publication of this report to assess how it is responding to them.

1. Introduction

The police's responsibility to keep children safe

Under the Children Act 1989, a police constable is responsible for taking into police protection any child whom they have reasonable cause to believe would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm, and the police have a duty to inquire into that child's case.⁴ Under the Children Act 2004, the police must also ensure, when carrying out their functions, that they have regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.⁵

Every officer and member of police staff should understand that it is their duty to protect children, as part of day-to-day policing. Officers going into people's homes on any policing matter must recognise the needs of the children they may meet, and understand what they can and should do to protect them. This is particularly important when they are dealing with DA or other incidents that may involve violence. The duty to protect children includes any children who are detained in police custody.

In 2018, the National Crime Agency's strategic assessment of serious and organised crime established that child sexual exploitation (CSE) and abuse is one of the gravest serious and organised crime risks.⁶ Child sexual abuse is also one of the six national threats specified in the Strategic Policing Requirement.⁷

Expectations set out in *Working Together*

The statutory guidance, [*Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*](#), sets out what is expected of all partner organisations involved in child protection (such as the local authority, clinical commissioning groups, schools and the voluntary sector).

⁴ Children Act 1989, section 46.

⁵ Children Act 2004, section 11.

⁶ [*National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime*](#), National Crime Agency, 2018.

⁷ The [*Strategic Policing Requirement*](#) was first issued in 2012 in execution of the Home Secretary's statutory duty (in accordance with section 37A of the Police Act 1996, as amended by section 77 of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011) to set out the national threats and the appropriate national policing capabilities needed to counter those threats. Five threats were identified: terrorism; civil emergencies; organised crime; threats to public order; and a national cyber security incident. In 2015, the *Strategic Policing Requirement* was reissued including child sexual abuse as an additional national threat.

The specific police roles set out in the guidance are:

- identification of children who might be at risk from abuse and neglect;
- investigation of alleged offences against children;
- inter-agency working and information-sharing to protect children; and
- the use of emergency powers to protect children.

These areas of practice are the focus of our child protection inspections.⁸

⁸ Details of how HMICFRS conducts these inspections can be found at Annex A.

2. Context for the force

Kent Police has a workforce of approximately:

- 3,453 police officers;
- 2,148 police staff;
- 300 police and community support officers (PCSOs);
- 288 members of the special constabulary; and
- 300 volunteers.

The force serves a population of approximately 1.8m people across a large geographic area with multiple towns (some bordering London), rural areas and coastal communities along a 343-mile coastline. There is a mixture of wealth and acute deprivation.

Kent is the UK's gateway to Europe. Approximately 34m passengers move through the county each year, with 10,000 freight vehicle movements per day. This, and its proximity to Europe, demands significant policing commitment. Kent Police must manage and respond to transient, organised criminality including terrorism, drug importation, people trafficking, modern slavery, immigration and those seeking asylum.

Cross-border activity adds demand, particularly from looked-after children and London-based gangs. Kent and Essex police forces share a border and collaborate to investigate some aspects of serious crime. They also share some specialist support services, such as digital forensic examination.

There are 12 district councils in Kent with 2 local authorities, Kent and Medway. The local authorities have separate children's service arrangements, but some collaborative working groups exist – for example, a regular meeting to help tackle county-wide child exploitation.

The most recent Ofsted judgment of the services for children in need of help and protection provided by the local authorities is as follows:

Local authority	Judgment	Date published
Kent	Good	March 2017
Medway	Requires improvement	November 2015

A joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to children present at a scene of DA in Medway took place in June 2018. [A letter outlining the findings was published in August 2018.](#)

In September 2017, Kent Police introduced a policing model called New Horizon, which prioritised responding to community vulnerability and child protection within its activities. The model is supported by the PCC and provides a clear strategy so that members of the public understand the way policing is being directed towards making their communities safer.

Most policing activity in Kent is provided by staff aligned to three divisions:

- North (Medway, Dartford & Gravesham and Swale);
- East (Folkestone, Ashford, Canterbury, Dover and Thanet); and
- West (Maidstone, Tonbridge & Malling, Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks).

The force retains some central units that provide specialist services more effectively from a single place. For example, the headquarters (HQ)-based force control room (FCR) and Ashford central referral unit (CRU). The investigation teams for public protection units (PPUs) are based and operate within the divisional structure, receiving additional support and strategic oversight from HQ staff.

Kent Police's child protection policy is stated on [its website](#). The priorities for the force in responding to child abuse and neglect are to:

- protect the lives of children and ensure that in the policing of child abuse the welfare of all children is paramount;
- investigate all reports of child abuse and neglect, and protect the rights of the child victims of crime;
- take effective action against offenders so they can be held accountable through the criminal justice system, while safeguarding the welfare of the child; and
- adopt a proactive multi-agency approach to preventing and reducing child abuse in line with the agreed arrangements of Kent and Medway's local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs).

Governance

The governance for child protection in Kent Police comprises:

- a child-centred policing board chaired by an assistant chief constable;
- a force protecting vulnerable people board chaired by the detective chief superintendent; and
- a force performance committee chaired by the deputy chief constable (DCC).

3. Leadership, management and governance

The chief officer and senior leaders show a clear commitment and have invested in resources to support a focus on child protection

Safeguarding vulnerable people is a priority for the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner (PCC). A strong commitment to protecting children was evident throughout the inspection, clearly understood by staff and reflected in the work to develop Kent's policing model.

Force leaders are visible. They have acted in collaboration with the workforce to place the objective of protecting vulnerable people (PVP) at the heart of how the force is organised. Staff told us that they know senior leaders are committed and dedicated to helping them achieve their objectives to raise the quality of child protection.

The New Horizon model made significant changes to the force's operating structure and required investment in new teams with specific terms of reference to cover all aspects of vulnerability and child protection – for example, MCETs and VITs. It also placed specialist PCSOs in community safety units dedicated to vulnerable adults, missing children, victims of DA, and young people.

This year (2019), the PCC made an investment to allow the force to employ 180 additional police officers and 14 members of staff. The new posts are assigned to frontline public protection and investigative roles that support the objectives of the policing plan. This illustrates active governance that makes informed decisions, and places resources and capability to support the objectives of the plan.

The force needs to develop the way it uses information to deploy its workforce and measure performance

Senior leaders chair a force resourcing board and associated meetings that inform strategic decision making. They are supported by information and data from the force's intelligence and management systems and use resource allocation modelling to align capability and demand. The force has recently updated its information systems with the introduction of Athena.⁹

Despite this approach, we saw that the force wasn't consistently aligning workforce and demand. When we visited North division, we were told by officers that they were unable to manage the volumes of cases because of staff shortages. Then, there was

⁹ Athena is an information system used by several police forces to manage police investigations, intelligence, custody and case preparation.

only one deployable detective and 16 investigations awaiting allocation, including assault, CSE and attempted rape. The oldest of these cases was four weeks old. We were told by managers that East division was the only one with a full complement of staff on its VIT while the other two divisions were below strength. Managers and officers we spoke to acknowledged that East was the busiest division, but they felt the current resourcing allocation was inflexible and contributed to backlogs for investigations. They also told us of their fear that investigative delay could expose children to risk and harm.

Daily management meetings (DMMs) are held every morning in each division and followed by a force DMM so that senior managers are made aware of, and can effectively respond to, immediate concerns about vulnerable children and those who pose risk. A senior officer chairs the meeting and PVP managers attend.

Police leaders acknowledged that currently data was mainly used for quantitative assessments of performance. In missing children incidents, for example, senior leaders will be told the length of time missing and frequency of a child's missing episodes but rarely given any context.

The lack of context – analysis or qualitative assessment – reduces the value of data. The analysis of qualitative information would help managers understand the impact of their strategy, the effectiveness of operational activity in reducing the number of missing children and their associated vulnerability.

We also heard of an ambition to develop datasets to provide a stronger understanding of qualitative performance for child protection and other aspects of vulnerability. The force is working with external organisations to improve its effectiveness in critical areas – for example, working with the University of Cambridge to research DA risk management.

Existing, mature safeguarding partnerships could be developed to improve outcomes for children

We found evidence that the whole workforce is aware of the wider context in which child abuse occurs. For example, staff were mindful of the vulnerability of children who were missing from home to risks associated with criminal exploitation and trafficking. They understand the importance of partnership working, and the level of community engagement needed to tackle the complexities of child abuse and exploitation.

We noted strong professional relationships, contributions to multi-agency working and engagement with partners at both strategic and practitioner levels. The force has appropriate representation on both LSCBs in its area and is involved with many of the sub-groups. For example, the multi-agency CSE action plan developed for

Kent is now implemented by a joint LSCB and multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) sub-group.

The independent chairs of both LSCBs and the local authority directors with responsibility for children's social care (CSC) spoke highly of Kent Police and its engagement with all levels of the safeguarding partnerships. There are clearly relationships in place that allow different agencies to provide joined-up services for vulnerable children. All parties reflected that existing relationships encouraged open dialogue and appropriate challenge. However, this inspection has identified areas where police leaders and their safeguarding partners could further enhance the safeguarding provision for children. These are covered in detail later in the report but in summary Kent Police should:

- review the thresholds for passing notifications of children affected by DA to the local authority;
- make suitable, safe places available for children who have been taken into police protection, so they are not brought to police stations; and
- provide suitable accommodation for children in police detention who are charged with an offence and denied bail.

The force's learning and development team provides targeted support to help staff achieve their safeguarding objectives

The force has a good understanding of its strengths and weaknesses in managing the demands arising from vulnerability and child protection.

A well-resourced and effective learning and development team (L&DT) is in place that provides reliable, high-quality information to senior leaders. This team is also tasked when there are concerns about particular policing challenges and the current resources available to deal effectively with demand. For example, the DCC commissioned a review of the capability of the paedophile online team (POLIT) and digital forensic unit to update the force's understanding of so that it could align sufficient resources and capability to meet the challenges associated with this area of risk.

L&DT is also commissioned to audit cases and bring learning to the attention of members of staff so that sustainable improvement and service delivery are part of force culture. It was positive to see that the force's own assessment of case audits prior to our arrival was robust.

The team organises leadership events to highlight learning from local and national case reviews, and matters identified by the force's inspection team to support the New Horizon objectives. For example, the force identified that the views and

thoughts of children were not often sought when officers and staff were dealing with incidents. This meant that records and decisions did not properly or sufficiently consider the impact of these adverse experiences. This was addressed as a priority theme at a leadership event where young people and victims told their stories to show police the context and importance of listening to children's voices. Event attendees are expected to champion the theme, 'The voice of children'. Briefing material and intranet articles support and help them reinforce the main messages and explain what is expected of all staff.

We heard from staff in many roles that the message was clear, and that practice changed after the event. We also saw associated innovations, such as the amendment of force briefing notes to include V-VOWS¹⁰, so that a child's situation and lived experience are at the forefront of case information.

Staff responding to child protection concerns need more/ongoing training

Kent Police, along with other forces, has experienced challenges in recruiting and retaining detectives. The New Horizon model adds to the demand for skilled investigators in child protection roles.

Some of the workforce we spoke to had concerns that they were in roles that they weren't fully trained for, which made them feel underqualified and vulnerable. For example, not all officers in the teams responsible for child protection investigations had completed the specialist child abuse investigators development programme (SCAIDP).

Force leaders are aware of this weakness and concern and have taken steps to accelerate training.

Vulnerability training for all staff members is ongoing. A bespoke, three-day PVP course adapted from the College of Policing (COP) vulnerability training¹¹ was in place and we were told that 2,145 staff had completed it. L&DT evaluated the course. It has since been refined to a two-day course that is intended to be core training for the workforce. Student officers complete this course and other safeguarding training as part of their induction programme.

The force is working to develop its capacity to meet demand. A major objective is to increase the number of officers entering the detective pathway and retain them in the

¹⁰ V-VOWS is a briefing format used by Kent police to include: Voice of the child, Victim, Offender, Witnesses and Scene.

¹¹ A one-day vulnerability training package, supported by a self-assessment, equipping frontline officers and staff to identify signs of vulnerability and take effective action at the earliest possible opportunity.

role once accredited. The force has made a realistic assessment that it will take up to four years to achieve the desired strength in this area. It has appointed an investigative skills development officer to co-ordinate support for detectives including continuing professional development (CPD) and financial assistance for course materials. Senior leaders recognise the need to work effectively with other agencies in child protection and support staff to attend relevant courses organised by safeguarding partners.

Kent Police supports workforce health and wellbeing

Staff have access to occupational health nurse advisers and a physician, as well as health support including vaccinations and (internally delivered) physiotherapy services. There is an advice line for managers that aims to provide immediate support, reducing the need for unnecessary referral form completions. Counselling and welfare support are provided in-house, and by external providers when additional therapy is needed. Any member of staff self-referring who has a PVP or specialist role – such as a child protection officer – is prioritised for support. There is also peer support for trauma risk management in place.

The force promotes 'Feel well, live well' programmes to help boost resilience and support leaders and staff with mental wellbeing. During the early stages of this programme, PPU managers were required to attend. However, all staff are now able to access this training on an ongoing voluntary basis.

PPU managers also arranged a bespoke wellbeing workshop for staff working to protect children from sexual exploitation and online paedophiles.

The force also supports a health and wellbeing forum to help it understand the concerns around attendance management and workforce welfare. Senior managers attend the force support forum that co-ordinates the approach to workforce welfare so that they can support staff – for example, by funding an external psychological screening process for those in specialist roles (with 893 assessments scheduled in 2019 at the time we inspected).

4. Case file analysis

Results of case file reviews

For our inspection, Kent Police selected and self-assessed the effectiveness of its practice in 33 child protection cases. In accordance with HMICFRS criteria, the cases selected were a random sample throughout Kent.

Of these 33 cases, force assessors graded the practice in 7 as good, in 19 as requiring improvement and in 7 as inadequate. We also assessed the same cases. We graded the force's practice in 5 as good, in 18 as requiring improvement and in 10 as inadequate. The files on each type of case had certain features in common.

Cases assessed by both Kent Police and HMICFRS

Force assessment:

- 7 good
- 19 requires improvement
- 7 inadequate

HMICFRS assessment:

- 5 good
- 18 requires improvement
- 10 inadequate

Additional cases assessed only by HMICFRS

HMICFRS assessment:

- 13 good
- 11 requires improvement
- 20 inadequate

Breakdown of case file audit results by area of child protection

Cases assessed involving enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989¹²

Enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989:

- 5 good
- 4 requires improvement
- 2 inadequate

Common themes are that the files include:

- evidence of joint visits and initial action in cases; but
 - inconsistent records of strategy discussions;
 - in sexual allegation cases, evidence of delays in visiting scenes and arranging medical examinations;
 - inconsistent records of further working with other authorities once the case is past its initial stage, or what the outcomes were; and
 - evidence of sometimes limited and ineffective supervisory oversight.

Cases assessed involving referrals relating to domestic abuse incidents or crimes

Referrals relating to DA incidents or crimes:

- 0 good
- 2 requires improvement
- 9 inadequate

Common themes are:

- inconsistent risk assessments in the FCR;
- unnecessary delays both in responding and investigating;
- referrals to partners often missed or delayed;

¹² Local authorities, with the help of other organisations as appropriate, have a duty to make enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 if they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.

- the voice of children not always sought and recorded, which can lead to a lack of understanding how they are affected; and
- supervision inconsistent and without clear plans to expedite crime investigation or progress safeguarding activity.

Cases assessed involving referrals arising from incidents other than domestic abuse

Referrals arising from incidents other than DA:

- 3 good
- 3 requires improvement
- 4 inadequate

Common themes are that:

- the force responds well initially; but
 - there is limited and ineffective supervisory oversight; and
 - there are often unnecessary delays in the investigation.

Cases assessed involving children at risk from child sexual exploitation

Cases involving children at risk of CSE both online and offline:

- 5 good
- 6 requires improvement
- 2 inadequate

Common themes are that:

- the initial response is usually good, with risk identified, although there are sometimes delays in seeing children; and
- there is some evidence of effective joint working; but
 - children who are not the subject of the initial call are often not seen or spoken to;
 - the initial investigation is inconsistent – for instance, the police may be reluctant to seize mobile devices that might contain evidence;
 - enquiries to identify and locate potential perpetrators are often not pursued; and

- there is a lack of effective supervision of cases, leading to drift and delay.

Cases assessed involving missing and absent children

Children missing:

- 3 good
- 4 requires improvement
- 1 inadequate

Common themes are that:

- the FCR inconsistently uses THRIVE¹³ to assess and grade the risk to the child;
- some frequently missing children do not have response plans;
- not all relevant information about the lifestyle and circumstances of vulnerable children is contained on the force system;
- information from return home interviews is not routinely recorded; and
- the investigation stops when the child is found – failing to recognise the risk posed to them by where they were, or whom they were with.

Cases assessed involving children taken to a place of safety under section 46 of the Children Act 1989¹⁴

Children taken to a place of safety by police officers using powers under section 46 of the Children Act 1989:

- 2 good
- 3 requires improvement
- 3 inadequate

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ Section 46(1) of the Children Act 1989 empowers a police officer, who has reasonable cause to believe that a child would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm, to (a) remove the child to suitable accommodation and keep him/her there, or (b) take such steps as are reasonable to ensure that the child's removal from any hospital, or other place in which he/she is then being accommodated, is prevented. A child in these circumstances is referred to as 'having been taken into police protection'.

Common themes include that officers:

- consider the circumstances of vulnerable children and make effective decisions to remove children with appropriate use of the power; and
- liaise early enough with emergency CSC services; but
 - do not always record subsequent strategy discussion outcomes and joint plans;
 - use police stations inappropriately as places of safety; or
 - consistently record agreement to end the use of police protection powers.

Cases assessed involving sex offender management in which children have been assessed as at risk from the person being managed

Sex offender management where children have been assessed as at risk from the person being managed:

- 0 good
- 5 requires improvement
- 3 inadequate

Common themes are that:

- supervision is superficial and does not sufficiently direct investigations;
- risk to children and vulnerable adults is not consistently identified and recorded;
- referrals to safeguarding partners are delayed and insufficient; and
- wanted offenders are not risk assessed appropriately or sufficiently prioritised.

Cases assessed involving children detained in police custody

Children in police custody:

- 0 good
- 2 requires improvement
- 6 inadequate

Common themes are that:

- when local authority accommodation is not available, the police don't press hard enough to find a solution;
- custody records are inconsistently completed;
- not all staff in the custody suite environment are aware of their responsibility to safeguard detained children and update records with relevant information;
- the attendance of appropriate adults at the custody office is timed to coincide with other events, such as interviews, rather than when the child is detained; and
- officers do not submit referrals about children's vulnerability when they are arrested.

5. Initial contact

Kent Police has reorganised its operating structure to improve the way it deals with a wide range of community vulnerabilities. Staff are trained to emphasise a child-centred approach for all incidents where children are present or thought to be at risk. This includes situations where children are suspected of committing offences or there are concerns about a child's behaviour.

A 14-year-old boy, whom his mother believed to be staying with friends, was reported missing because she hadn't seen him for two days. She said that her son was prescribed medication for mental ill health, had significant learning difficulties and was supported by the child and adolescent mental health service. This was his first missing episode in Kent, where the family had been living for six months. He had been reported as missing from their other address on six previous occasions.

The FCR recognised his high vulnerability and prioritised activity to trace him and take safeguarding action. Police officers made extensive enquiries and located him shortly after midnight at a friend's house. The officers took time to engage and speak with him, assessing and recording his vulnerability, and he agreed to return home to his parents. A child protection referral was made to CSC, which contained information to help continuing work with the boy and his family. The investigating officer updated the force's missing persons system with the information that the officers were able to gather by listening to the boy.

We saw some good examples of an increased awareness of children's vulnerability that prompted immediate protective action and a timely referral of concerns to CSC via the force's central referral unit. Frontline staff benefited from having been trained in risk assessment, THRIVE¹⁵ and the National Decision Model (NDM)¹⁶. We also saw examples of briefing notes with rich child-centred information for handing cases over to colleagues.

The initial response was good in cases where the police are contacted about incidents that are clearly child protection matters. However, although the force attends most child protection calls in a timely way, there are occasions when the response is insufficiently prioritised. There was evidence of this in our case audits.

¹⁵ THRIVE is a risk assessment tool that considers six elements to help identify the appropriate response grade based on the needs of the caller and the circumstances of the incident, namely: threat, harm, risk, investigation, vulnerability and engagement.

¹⁶ The [National Decision Model](#) is the primary model used by the police in the decision making and assessment process.

An inconsistent response to time-critical and high-risk incidents

When we spoke to staff, we were told that a consequence of demand management at busy times within the FCR was that in some situations staff used THRIVE as a tool to help manage the number of outstanding calls, rather than to identify the actual level of risk for the incident. This meant that in some cases high vulnerability was not always fully prioritised by FCR staff for police officer attendance. Instead, some child protection incidents were assigned for scheduled appointments. In some of these cases, we saw that delays in visiting meant missed opportunities to gather evidence, and victims losing their confidence in the police and refusing to engage further.

A timely police response is particularly important in sexual assault allegations so that evidence can be secured to support or refute allegations. In one report of a sexual assault we saw (in which an adult had kissed a child victim), the FCR assigned the response as an appointment. This meant that forensic evidence retrieval for proving or disproving the case was compromised and the risk the adult posed to others wasn't considered at an early enough stage.

A flagging system is used on the force's systems to alert staff to risk and vulnerability within locations or for individuals. These flags were largely present in the incidents and cases we saw, but we saw some cases where there were delays in updating systems when new information became available. For example, force systems are not immediately updated after initial child protection case conferences, but only when the minutes from the meeting are received from the local authority (the timeliness of this varies from case to case). This can mean that frontline staff are not aware of all risks and vulnerability when dealing with incidents involving a child and their family.

During our visit to the FCR, we found and reviewed nine incidents flagged on the system as DA cases that were awaiting resolution by diary appointment. Four of the nine incidents were incorrectly flagged as DA. Three were correctly flagged and responded to appropriately. In the two remaining cases, FCR decisions were incompatible with the level of risk described by the callers and the intelligence the force held within its records about the vulnerability within the households calling for assistance. In one of the cases, there were previous concerns of high levels of DA that had been raised at a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC¹⁷). The other call reported direct threats from an adult relative to assault a child who was one of four siblings in the household.

¹⁷ A MARAC is a locally-held meeting of statutory and voluntary agency representatives to share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse, at which any agency can refer an adult or child whom they believe to be at high risk of harm. The aim of the meeting is to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase an adult's or child's safety.

The risk assessment and supervision process within the FCR was ineffective for both incidents because it didn't identify and reinforce the need to prioritise police attendance. This led to a delayed response of over three weeks in one case and four days in the other.

We also saw cases where the victims withdrew their complaints when the police attended because the response was insufficient to gain their confidence.

In one case we saw, there was a 15-day delay in allocating an officer to a DA investigation. This meant that the children who had been present during the incident in their home were not provided with appropriate safeguarding support or referred to other agencies for assessment, support and early help.

The force control room and frontline officers don't always have sufficient information to respond effectively to missing children

The force uses response plans to co-ordinate activity to find and safeguard children who are regularly reported as missing from home and considered to be vulnerable. We saw examples of positive practice and engagement by the force's MCET officers with frequently missing children. This included intensive multi-agency work to address risk and reduce missing episodes.

Officers create intervention plans for frequently missing children, so they can record and monitor information about their lifestyle and any risks, together with what is being done to safeguard them. This information would be of great value to staff responding to reports of a child being missing. But we found that intervention plan information was not always accessible to other officers or included in response plans (because it was held in standalone local systems).

We sampled six other cases where children had been reported missing from home at least three times in the preceding three months and found there were no response plans associated with them. This meant that information held by the force was not immediately available in a clear and ready format to assist frontline officers in their enquiries to find and safeguard them.

A 16-year-old boy was reported missing 40 times between January and April 2019 (he was also missing during our inspection). He was being managed by MCET and there was an intervention plan in place, but because it was recorded on a standalone system this information wasn't visible to all staff. There was no response plan in place to direct activity and inform risk when this child was missing. There was a flag on the force's Athena system that he was at risk of sexual exploitation but there was no indication of safeguarding activity being overseen by MCET.

The force has supervisory processes in place that don't consistently prioritise the response to vulnerability

The active resolution team, which is part of the FCR, reviews outstanding incidents that are more than four hours old and considers means to resolve them, such as using return phone calls and scheduling appointments. Although this process is overseen by a supervisor, we saw occasions when DA incidents with children in the household hadn't been responded to immediately. Instead, they were scheduled for later appointments (sometimes several days later). This practice reduces the effectiveness of safeguarding and fails to recognise the ongoing trauma experienced by children who are routinely exposed to DA. Delays in police attendance reduce the quality of risk assessment, meaning that referrals to CSC may not be made or are incomplete.

The force is committed to maintaining high standards and accuracy in recording crime. It has established an investigation management unit (IMU) that is responsible for reviewing incidents, identifying crime and assigning investigations for progression. Force leaders wanted to improve the accuracy of crime recording so that offences weren't overlooked and were properly investigated. We were told that for safeguarding and child protection the IMU and ART have access to specialist advice from the CRU. The force is working to reduce the numbers of outstanding cases within the FCR and IMU and has instigated a twice-weekly audit process to help identify issues and workforce training needs. However, we were told of unintended consequences of the current system. In some cases, where high risk and high vulnerability cases are not initially recognised and assigned to priority response, there can be significant delays in starting investigations because cases are only assigned after the IMU process.

The initial response to domestic abuse incidents does not always include listening to and observing children in the household

How a child behaves provides important information about how an incident has affected them. This is especially true when they are too young to speak to officers, or where having a parent present might present a risk. The police should carefully observe a child's behaviour and demeanour to inform their initial assessment of the child's needs. Body-worn video (BWV) is a helpful tool to record this. The officers we spoke to were aware of its importance in capturing evidence, specifically in DA incidents.

The frontline response to DA incidents, however, was inconsistent. Initial evidence-gathering opportunities were not always completed by responding officers. We saw cases where it would have benefited the children involved if initial witness statements had been taken, local house-to-house enquiries made and digital

evidence from electronic devices secured by the responding officers. We were told that BWV camera recording was mandatory for DA incidents, but the crime reports we saw didn't always include this information. This meant that the voices of children and their lived experience were not immediately apparent on referrals and/or available to investigators.

Investigating officers within the force's VITs told us that too many of their assigned investigations had been reported following police attendance by diary appointment arranged by the FCR. Delays reduced the quality of the information and evidence available to them. This was compounded by insufficient research into the individuals involved and incomplete risk assessments. The force had identified these issues prior to our inspection and has instigated a 'root and branch' training programme for all staff to emphasise the importance of listening and making records of children's accounts, behaviours and demeanours.

Recommendations

Immediately:

- We recommend that Kent Police should review its assessment processes within the force control room, to ensure that child protection incidents are appropriately prioritised. This should include the creation of response or 'trigger' plans for those children frequently reported missing.

Within three months:

- We recommend that Kent Police should take steps to ensure that it records all relevant information properly and makes it readily accessible in all cases where there are concerns about the welfare of children. Guidance to staff should include:
 - reinforcing the importance of 'golden hour' principles to secure best evidence of offences;
 - ensuring that children's concerns, behaviour and demeanour are recorded; and
 - making sure that effective safeguarding measures are implemented.

6. Assessment and help

Clear guidance, improved processes and supervision are needed to make better-quality child protection referrals in domestic abuse cases

The force recognises the adverse consequences for children living in households where DA occurs and has issued guidelines to assist officers responding to these situations. Officers dealing with DA incidents where children are affected are instructed to seek safeguarding advice from specialists within the force's CRU.

There is guidance that when there are concerns for the safety or welfare of a child, the officers dealing with DA incidents should consider taking immediate protective action. Or, where the risk of harm is considered lower, officers should record details of the effects of the incident on any children present on a referral report to the CRU. Specialist staff within the VITs review DA incidents and check that reports have been made – if not, they complete this task. However, this approach means that on occasion the full context of risk to children may be unrecognised by the responding officers and not subsequently identified in a secondary review. That means that the CRU won't always receive a referral with a risk assessment level based on incident evaluation, the demeanour of children and comprehensive research of those in the household.

The quality of many of the referrals for children affected by DA (that we saw) was inadequate. Some were sent as standard risk without any reference to research, and in conflict with information we found in police records that indicated risk was escalating. Officers weren't consistently evaluating the lived experiences of the child or making suggestions as to what needed to be done to support them. Supervision in these cases was frequently ineffective because it didn't challenge the assessment or add value to the quality of the referrals. We were concerned that, despite some cases being accepted for joint investigation, there was no process in place for CSC to update the force with the outcomes of its referrals. This means that referring officers are not always informed of case outcomes and that future incidents may be responded to without the benefit of relevant information.

The force operates a domestic abuse notification system that prioritises children assessed as at higher risk and helps manage high referral caseloads within the CRU and for both local authorities. The agreement between local authorities and police is that:

- the police will not make referrals or notify CSC for standard risk DA cases where children are affected unless the case involves an unborn child or a child under the age of one;

- the CRU won't conduct any research or triage for these cases either before or after the decision not to refer to CSC; and
- DA notifications will not be passed to any other agency.

We found that no quality assurance of these cases is undertaken by police managers or with safeguarding partners. This would provide senior leaders with reassurance that the practice is safe and doesn't increase risk or reduce opportunities for vulnerable children. The ability of the police to assess the impact on children of the escalating and cumulative risks caused by routine exposure to DA is undermined by this approach. Children can suffer significant trauma as a result of exposure to even lower or 'standard'-risk cases. The ability to more effectively recognise patterns of risk over time will assist the force to improve its protective responses to children in these circumstances.

Kent Police is attempting to implement Operation Encompass, a scheme that has proved an effective way of engaging schools and educational staff in safeguarding children who are exposed to DA in other parts of the country. It involves passing information about children affected by DA to their schools so that staff are aware of their situation and can offer support.

The scheme is being trialled in some areas of Kent but more needs to be done to engage partners and convince them of the benefits for children before it is widely adopted.

Good operational support for frontline staff

The force supports its frontline staff as they work to reduce community vulnerability and respond to incidents where children are at risk by providing specialist advice and fast-track access to other agencies. A significant investment has been made in staffing its CRU on a 24-hour basis and co-locating specialist staff alongside teams from other agencies including CSC, the local authority emergency duty team, health service staff, probation and immigration officers. We saw this as a positive arrangement and heard that it also covered the smaller local authority area of Medway for out-of-hours child protection purposes.

This is a positive development and demonstrates the willingness of Kent Police and its partners to implement learning from other inspections. Frontline officers can contact the CRU for specialist advice and assistance without delay. This is particularly useful when children are found in high-risk situations and need immediate support from other agencies – for example, when children are taken into police protection and there is a need to find them somewhere safe to stay.

Strategy meetings are held promptly and well documented when the risk is made clear in referrals

The co-location of the CRU with the local authority 'front door'¹⁸ supports good and timely participation in initial multi-agency case assessment. CRU supervisors participate in initial strategy meetings for children whose cases aren't already open to CSC. This arrangement provides a consistent and appropriate level of representation for new child protection referrals.

CSC and officers from the force's VITs have strategic discussions when there are new concerns requiring police involvement in open cases.

We found that the details of strategy discussions and outcomes are usually clearly documented on the force's systems in these circumstances. This means that officers dealing with subsequent incidents can make decisions based on a full understanding of current risks, in line with joint protective plans.

Information-sharing processes with partners for the earlier identification of risk could be improved

Not all the advantages associated with multi-agency co-location are being achieved within the current operating processes. In Kent, the police CRU is co-located within the local authority's front door arrangement. However, the value of the CRU co-location is reduced because its staff are not routinely completing research on police systems for notifications and referrals. For example, when a frontline officer submits a child protection referral, the CRU makes an assessment as to whether it meets the partnership threshold for referral to CSC based solely upon the information in that report. We were told by officers and their supervisors that the CRU does not, at this stage, make any additional checks on police databases. Consequently, police referrals with limited information are passed to CSC staff who then decide if a strategy meeting should be held without the benefit of any extra information held on police systems. This means that, in cases of children where there are repeated 'low-risk' incidents, no referrals are made, or a referral may be made without the details of other incidents where there is relevant information relating to the child's vulnerability.

¹⁸ The '[front door](#)' in a social care context is the arrangement that local authorities have in place to respond to an initial contact from a professional or member of the public who is concerned about a child. At the front door, local authorities provide advice and make decisions about how they will act on information about the health, wellbeing and safety of children.

Another force contacted Kent Police requesting a welfare check for a 12-year-old girl who had expressed suicidal tendencies while staying at her father's home. A referral was made via the CRU that was passed on to CSC without any research into police records.

We reviewed police records and found relevant, helpful information including details of the girl's family and siblings that ideally should have been included in the referral for safeguarding purposes. The records indicated that the girl was frightened of her father and that he had previously threatened to take her abroad to his country of origin. A court order preventing him from taking her abroad without permission was referenced. There had been concerns for this child's mental health and wellbeing for several years, although current plans to support her were not included in the records.

We were unable to find a reference that said the other force had been updated, which would have helped them make a referral to the CSC team where her father lived.

We found a good contribution to long-term multi-agency safeguarding plans

The police and other frontline organisations refer DA cases assessed as high risk to a MARAC to make intensive safeguarding plans. These meetings are held regularly and chaired by detective inspectors (DIs) or social work managers.

We observed a meeting where five cases, referred from various agencies, were considered. It was chaired by the VITs DI and well attended, with representatives from CSC, independent domestic violence adviser (IDVA)¹⁹ services, schools, health, adult social care, and including an education officer, a safeguarding nurse from A&E and the MARAC co-ordinator.

Children lived with families in four of the cases discussed. In each of these cases, CSC had been informed of the incidents and started safeguarding activity including:

- holding strategy meetings;
- commencing section 47 investigations;
- considering support from early help services;

¹⁹ The main purpose of independent domestic violence advisors (IDVAs) is to address the safety of victims at high risk of harm from intimate partners, ex-partners or family members; to secure their safety and that of their children.

- undertaking children and family assessments; and holding initial child protection conferences (ICPCs)²⁰.

When a case is heard at a MARAC, a flag is placed on the force's system to alert staff to the vulnerability of those involved.

In one of the cases discussed, the multi-agency response had been timely. An ICPC had recognised the high risk of harm and decided it was necessary to include the three-year-old on a child protection plan for neglect due to DA. In this case, the perpetrator had previously been convicted of harassment against the child's parent and sentenced to a community order. A non-molestation order was granted by the court in February 2019. The perpetrator had breached it on three separate occasions but not yet been arrested. The MARAC wasn't advised of any enhanced police activity to apprehend the suspect. This meant that, despite good multi-agency safeguarding activity to support the family and child, the risk remained high.

We saw examples of good risk assessment and engagement with vulnerable children

The MCETs are complemented by community-focused staff who engage with vulnerable children to protect them from crime and abusive harm. They work in collaboration with other locally focused professionals such as PCSOs and local authority community wardens, focusing on young people on the cusp of criminality and attempting to divert them from criminal influences. This is positive activity generating an abundance of useful information that can be used to reduce risk and disrupt those who are a threat to these vulnerable children.

The force has Operation Raptor in place to deal proactively with those who exploit children including county lines organisations and gangs. Operation Raptor teams execute search warrants and disrupt offenders, many of whom are children involved in the supply and distribution of controlled drugs. We were told that team managers had recently evaluated operating practices and identified a gap. There was little interaction between the proactive teams and the MCETs even though they were dealing with similarly vulnerable children. The membership and agenda of meetings to tackle gang activity will be changed to include MCET information.

²⁰ A child protection conference brings together family members, the child (where appropriate), and those professionals most involved with the child and family to make decisions about the child's future safety.

Recommendations

Immediately:

- We recommend that Kent Police should review referral processes for domestic abuse cases involving children to ensure that relevant information and risks are shared appropriately with the local authority (this should include a review of processes within the central referral unit processes to ensure that cases involving cumulative risk and hidden harm are correctly identified).

7. Investigation

We found some good examples of investigating officers using an appropriate mix of investigative and protective approaches. This way of working helps the force keep safeguarding children at the heart of its efforts at the same time as investigating crime.

There are teams in place with clear terms of reference, but not all staff have received training

The force has invested significantly in assigning additional staff to work in its VITs.

VITs deal with most crimes committed against children:

- within the family;
- by a person in a position of trust;
- by someone visiting the child's household regularly;
- by RSOs; and
- in cases involving online crime where identifiable children are at risk.

They also deal with historical or institutional crime when the victim is now an adult but the abuse occurred during their childhood.

VIT staff link closely with colleagues from other agencies to safeguard children and investigate allegations of child abuse. These investigations can be challenging for officers because of the nature of the offences, or because of the vulnerability of the victims and methods of the perpetrators. Officers require additional training and specialist skills if they are to be fully effective in this complex investigative environment. The nature of some offences can require that investigators have specialist knowledge. In addition, greater supervisory inputs are needed to direct and progress cases. Our case audits showed that some investigations were superficial and not effectively pursued. We attribute this to a lack of investigative skills and poor supervision of staff.

At the time of our inspection, the force had not been able to provide SCAIDP training for all VIT staff involved in child protection work. There was also a significant shortfall in the numbers of substantive detectives, meaning that many investigations were assigned to inexperienced or trainee investigators.²¹

Force leaders and managers from L&DT told us that training was scheduled to address this training and skills gap within the coming year. We were pleased to hear that they had identified it and had a plan to close it, because the staff we spoke to told us of the difficulties they had in confidently investigating some of the cases.

High caseloads, inexperienced staff and inconsistent supervision undermine effective investigations

Officers on VITs have an open caseload of around 12 to 20 crimes each. We were told by managers and officers that this level of casework has an impact on their ability to consistently progress investigations without delays. Delays in investigations were also found in some of the investigations we audited. Child protection investigators have additional tasks to complete compared with detectives investigating other types of crime.

These tasks include joint home visits, visits for medical examinations, obtaining third party material for the Crown Prosecution Service's case files, compiling case conference reports and attendance at ICPCs. Compiling conference reports can take several hours and ICPCs can take half a day. They inevitably reduce staff capacity to progress their investigations without delay.

The force generally has a good blend of police officers and staff. However, a notable exception appears to be when it uses VIT detectives to support child protection case conferences. Many other forces have developed effective teams of police staff for this function – the investigating officer only attends when the complexity of the case demands it.

In many of the investigations, we found an absence of consistent and effective supervision. We were told that cases should have a supervisory review at least every two weeks, but the practice for many of these was only monthly. This lack of supervisory input, coupled with inexperienced staff, affected the quality of many of the investigations, resulting in delays, missed lines of enquiry, insufficient safeguarding activity and the loss of victims' confidence.

²¹ Police detectives as part of the College of Policing (COP) Professionalising Investigation Programme (PIP) must first complete PIP level 1 – Initial Crime Investigators Development Programme (ICIDP). Those carrying out serious and complex investigations should be accredited at PIP level 2.

A DA incident where children aged two and seven years were present was reported to police. The suspect (the children's father) had a history of mental health illness, drug abuse and violence. He had threatened the victim, taken money and left the house. The initial response to this incident was poor. The victim was not seen for 13 days and there was no record of the children being seen or spoken to once the police did eventually attend. A referral to CSC was delayed, making it unclear how the children were being safeguarded during the intervening period.

The situation escalated, and the victim called police reporting that the suspect had sent messages threatening to assault and kill her if he couldn't see his children. She was worried because he had assaulted her in the past and friends told her that he was trying to find out where she and the children were staying. A medium-risk DA assessment was submitted, and the children's school and nursery were informed so that they could offer safeguarding support.

A crime report was created but no investigation plan was set to prioritise actions or safeguard the family. The suspect was arrested a week later and told officers he couldn't remember what he had said or done, or the exact wording of his messages. There was no record of police obtaining any other evidence such as by examining phone or text records. Because the victim was reluctant to support a prosecution, the case was closed.

The Athena crime management system flags to supervisors when a review is needed. We were told that DIs were assisting with some of the first-line case supervisions. Supervisors were frank with us and explained that in some situations – for example when holding vacancies – this meant that sergeants had too many staff and cases to supervise effectively. They also told us of a consequence of the force's practice of assigning inexperienced and trainee detectives to demanding investigative roles that created additional demands on supervisory capacity. Investigators told us they wanted the consistency and timeliness of supervision to improve. They said supervision gives them confidence to progress cases and is an opportunity for them to raise their own welfare and development issues.

Kent Police has taken the initiative to help children give evidence and ensure that their voice is heard

It is essential for police investigators to communicate effectively with child victims. Before interviewing any child, officers should consider using an intermediary²² to support. Intermediaries can help the child give the best possible evidence and ensure that their voice is heard.

Kent Police uses intermediaries – specially trained individuals – to help vulnerable victims and witnesses give complete, coherent, accurate evidence. In some of the cases we saw, we found delays in obtaining intermediary services. This is a national problem.

The force has worked with a leading, independent organisation that provides intermediary services to train 13 members of staff in the forensic questioning of children (FQC). Children can now be assessed by FQC-trained staff, who identify the best way for investigators to communicate with them. In some cases, FQC officers plan and interview the children themselves. This approach supports the child and reduces investigative delays. The quality of interviews is maintained by trainers regularly dip-sampling cases and providing feedback to officers.

An allegation of physical and sexual assault on a six-year-old child was being investigated. A strategy meeting identified the need for an intermediary. The service provider was unable to assign an interviewer for over six weeks from the time of the investigating officer's request. It was agreed with CSC that a Kent Police FQC should assess the child. Consequently, they were able to complete the achieving best evidence interview, reducing the delay by three weeks.

An allegation of rape of a four-year-old child by an older child in the same family was made. A joint investigation commenced. After a home visit and strategy meeting, the investigators agreed on the need to interview the victim. The service provider couldn't send an intermediary within the time frame necessary to best support the child, so a force FQC completed an assessment and was able to plan and interview the child within four days of the initial report.

²² Intermediaries communicate with and on behalf of vulnerable victims and witnesses as they move through the criminal justice system. Their functions were established by section 29(2) of the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999.

Teams work with partners to proactively investigate criminal exploitation and reduce child vulnerability

Partner agencies appreciate the establishment of MCETs and the leadership Kent Police has shown in tackling risk to vulnerable children. A force-wide MASE meeting extended its terms of reference to include the broader vulnerabilities of children at risk from all forms of criminal exploitation. This approach better supports proactive interventions and investigations.

Operation Raptor investigates county lines drug supply and gang activity. When children are involved, and particularly when they are arrested, officers consider the child's lived experience to understand their role in offending behaviour and the extent of exploitation by others. Referrals are made to signpost vulnerability to partner agencies.

Officers are actively pursuing those who exploit children, and gathering evidence to support criminal charges. When there is insufficient evidence for criminal prosecutions, they consider how they can use civil orders to disrupt perpetrators of exploitation. For example, some officers we spoke to were working on an application for a slavery trafficking risk order²³ to put significant restrictions on a named individual and minimise risk to children in the area.

The overall effectiveness of safeguarding activity was undermined by inconsistency in holding strategy discussions and recording these decisions

The investigation of child abuse is a multi-agency responsibility. A multi-agency approach should lead to the best outcome for children. Strategy discussions between police, CSC and other relevant professionals such as health are an important driver for effective investigation. They should be held as early as possible.

We saw examples of these discussions happening day and night in Kent – it is in these circumstances that timely interventions and actions to safeguard children happen. However, we also saw inconsistency in holding strategy discussions.

²³ Part 2 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015: Slavery and Trafficking Risk Order. STROs can be applied for by the police, the National Crime Agency, an Immigration officer, or the Labour abuse authority to a Magistrates' Court. STROs can be made in respect of an individual who has not been convicted of a slavery or trafficking offence. The Court must be satisfied that there is a risk that the defendant may commit a slavery or human trafficking offence and that the STRO is necessary to protect against the risk of harm from the defendant committing the offence. STROs enable action to be taken where this is necessary to prevent serious harm to the public notwithstanding the absence of a conviction. STROs may impose any restriction the Court deems necessary for the purposes of protecting the public from harm.

Kent Police schedules non-urgent strategy discussions to take place every Thursday and Friday. We were concerned that, in many of the cases we reviewed, there were no records of police requesting strategy discussions when new information arose. The outcomes of strategy discussions were not always recorded. This means that risk is not fully recorded and evaluated to assist others working to support a child. It means that for some children safeguarding activity is delayed or based on limited source information.

A mother of two children aged two and six years reported a DA incident where she had been threatened by an ex-partner. The children were present during the incident and she feared the suspect would harm her and them.

The FCR completed a risk assessment, identifying that the suspect had been violent to his previous partners. Despite this, the assigned police response was an appointment three days later. When police spoke to the victim, she told them that she was concerned her youngest child had been assaulted by her ex-partner. The officers didn't ask the children about this, or related matters. However, they referred to this in the risk assessment.

Crime reports were not generated until four days after the visit to the victim. This meant a delay in notifying CSC about the children's situation. There was no consideration of a strategy discussion being held in relation to investigating the assault or for child protection. The crime was subsequently closed because there was no evidence of an offence. The suspect was arrested 13 days later, but only because a further incident occurred. Supervision in this case was ineffective because it failed to drive investigation or safeguarding activity.

Body-worn video is a useful investigative tool

Kent police has invested in purchasing (BWV) cameras to assist its frontline staff and enhance evidence that would support vulnerable victims. Officers we spoke to were very positive about the use of BWV as a method of gathering high-quality evidence. They were clear about the force's need to use BWV when responding to DA incidents, especially to capture the demeanour of any children present and what they said about the situation.

A social worker contacted the VIT office requesting assistance. She had visited a mother and her one-year-old twins on two occasions in one week. The accommodation was dirty. The children were also dirty and seen to be eating food from the floor. The mother appeared to be drunk. The social worker had worked with the family for 12 months and said this behaviour was out of character.

VIT officers visited the family address with the social workers, using BWV to record the living conditions. They agreed that the mother was incapable of looking after the children and that they were being neglected. The mother was arrested, and the twins were taken into police protection and then to emergency foster placement. The arresting officer made a detailed crime report, including a list of actions that needed completing. The matter and actions taken were properly recorded on force systems.

In most cases, we saw that when BWV was available it was clearly noted on the crime reports and child protection referrals so that investigators could use it. Unfortunately, a technical issue that the force was working to resolve meant that investigating officers weren't always able to quickly access the video footage. (Access had been reduced to the officers issued with cameras and some supervisors.) This meant that BWV hadn't always been available in time for interviews with DA perpetrators. Some investigations were delayed.

Increasing demand for online child protection investigations creates delays in assigning cases and assessing digital evidence

The force has a POLIT that investigates the sharing and distribution of indecent images of children online. The team also deals with referrals from other forces and the National Crime Agency's child exploitation and online protection command. At the time of the inspection, 580 cases were being investigated including online grooming allegations and aggravating sexting. Despite recent increases in staff, the unit struggles to meet increasing demand from:

- reported grooming cases; and
- investigations generated by a growing number of self-appointed paedophile hunters.

This increased demand means that the POLIT must focus investigations on high-risk cases. The team assesses the level of risk using internationally recognised methods.

Demand associated with prioritising high-risk referrals means that the POLIT's current practice was not to routinely initiate all its notifications on the Child Rescue

Coalition²⁴ system – CPSys – because the risk assessment on this system was believed to be less accurate than some other sources of intelligence. This practice may mean that Kent Police delays or even misses opportunities to deal with some offenders because CPSys notifications are not routinely actioned.

POLIT staff develop cases by completing risk assessments using the Kent Internet Risk Assessment Tool²⁵ and research to support applications for obtaining search warrants for suspects' premises. At the time of our inspection, there were no outstanding high-risk cases but a backlog in actioning 25 medium and low-risk warrants, with a further 42 cases still in development.

Information on cases in development is not currently contained in the force's Athena intelligence system. However, crime files are given a POLIT reference number so that staff are aware that intelligence is held separately.

The POLIT staffing has recently increased and has a good mix of police staff and officers for its various functions. Many of the officers have child abuse investigation team experience. All are accredited to PIP level 2 and police staff are nationally accredited in grading indecent images of children. We were told that the team was very busy with high workloads and currently investigating 111 cases of sexual grooming. It worked jointly with CSC on these investigations and made referrals via the CRU so that checks with other agencies could be made and strategy discussions held without delay.

Some of the cases involved suspects from professional backgrounds who work with children. POLIT officers made sure that local authority designated officers (LADOs) were involved so that employers were correctly informed and the full implications of the suspects' activity were considered.

²⁴ Child Rescue Coalition is an international charity that helps police identify those actively engaged in the abuse of children by tracing owners of computers who are distributing indecent images of children.

²⁵ The Kent Internet Risk Assessment Tool (KIRAT) is used to assess the level of risk posed by a suspect who possesses and views indecent images of children on the internet, and likelihood of that person becoming a contact offender – someone who commits sexual offences against children.

A warrant was executed at the home address of a male suspect by the POLIT after research indicated that a computer there was being used to distribute indecent images of children on the internet. Several exhibits were seized for forensic examination and the suspect was arrested. The investigating officers discovered that the suspect worked with vulnerable children at a school. His partner's teenage daughter also lived in the house and he had contact with his step-grandchildren. Appropriate referrals were made to CSC and the LADO. A timely strategy discussion took place, which led to a joint approach to the partner's daughter at school. No additional concerns or disclosure arose from this activity. The suspect was released under investigation while the results of the digital forensic examination were assessed.

A search warrant was executed at a suspect's address where the POLIT had intelligence that indecent images of children were being distributed.

The male denied having indecent images and claimed to only view adult pornography. He had an extensive digital library contained within numerous computer hard drives. These were seized for forensic examination and he was arrested.

Officers made a referral to the LADO because the suspect was a lecturer and teacher. They also contacted their legal services for advice on how to inform the agency the suspect worked for of the circumstances of his arrest. The suspect was bailed pending the findings of the forensic examination.

Both examples illustrate competent and professional investigative activity to identify sexual offenders and work with partners to protect children. However, in each case, we saw significant delays in progressing forensic examinations and grading images. There was also inconsistent supervision and long delays between supervisory reviews.

The digital forensic unit (DFU) is split between two sites servicing Kent and Essex police forces. There is heavy demand from the two forces. To help manage the workload, all submissions are now rigorously assessed against a 'risk of harm' scoring matrix, and only two computers or hard drives can (normally) be submitted at one time. Prior to submission, investigating officers are encouraged to seek advice and prioritise exhibits in a triage process. POLIT investigations account for approximately 70 percent of the cases within the DFU. The team currently wait about three to four months for computers to be examined.

A weekly DFU performance meeting is held where the manager and team leaders monitor the timeliness of cases. Despite recent progress on reducing waiting times, significant numbers of cases remained uncompleted outside the target times. Previously, the forces outsourced some exhibits for examination but found it to be an inefficient and expensive process. DFU staff regularly provide advice and guidance

to investigating officers. They will attend scenes and support operational staff when they encounter technical problems that require specialist support.

Recommendations

Within three months:

- We recommend that Kent Police should produce a plan to improve its child protection investigations, paying attention to:
 - undertaking risk assessments that consider the whole of a child's circumstances and risks to other children;
 - improving the oversight and management of cases (to include auditing child abuse and exploitation investigations to ensure that standards are being met);
 - the accuracy and timeliness of recording activity and planning; and
 - ensuring that investigations are allocated to those with the skills and experience to manage them effectively.

8. Decision making

The use of police protection powers²⁶ was appropriate in all the cases we audited but record keeping was often poor

It is a very serious step to remove a child from a family by way of police protection. When there are significant concerns about the safety of children, such as parents leaving young children at home alone or being intoxicated while looking after them, officers handle incidents well. When assessing the need to take immediate action, they use their powers appropriately to remove children from harm's way.

In the cases we examined, decisions to take a child to a place of safety were well considered and made in the best interests of the child.

Although we saw cases where officers made enquiries to safeguard children promptly and effectively, there wasn't always a full record of it on police systems. There weren't always details of strategy discussions with CSC either, including agreed actions to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. The use of the power of police protection has a maximum time limit of 72 hours and a record should be made when it ends. However, when the power was rescinded before the maximum time had elapsed (such as when a child was passed to the care of a family member), these details were rarely entered. Nor in these circumstances were there any details of what the longer-term protective plan was likely to be.

The records we saw of children in police protection show that frequently it is some hours before designated officers review the use of the power and necessity for it to remain in place. Often, we found only one review recorded, despite the child being at a police station for a significant period. This means that the force is insufficiently reviewing the welfare of the children against the proportionality and necessity of continued use of the power.

²⁶ Section 46(1) of the Children Act 1989 empowers a police officer, who has reasonable cause to believe that a child would otherwise be likely to suffer significant harm, to (a) remove the child to suitable accommodation and keep him/her there, or (b) take such steps as are reasonable to ensure that the child's removal from any hospital, or other place in which he/she is then being accommodated, is prevented.

Children remained at police stations for inappropriate periods of time

This lack of oversight can mean that there is an inability and absence of appropriate challenge to CSC to urgently accommodate a child somewhere more appropriate than a police station. Statutory and professional guidance states that a child should only be taken to a police station as a place of safety in exceptional circumstances. However, Kent Police records show that children are invariably taken to police stations unless there is an immediate relative or other suitable person available to care for them. On occasions, they are at the police station for a significant time period. This is not in their best interests.

We saw several examples that show that, when the care of the child is passed to social workers, the child is then returned to the same location they were removed from. This means that children may be returned home by CSC before the cessation of the power, without the informed agreement of police who are satisfied that the likelihood of significant harm has been mitigated.

Recommendations

Within three months:

- We recommend that Kent Police should take steps to ensure that it records all relevant information properly and makes it readily accessible in all cases where children are taken into police protection. Guidance to staff should include:
 - guidance as to what information they should record (and in what form) on their systems to enable good-quality decisions; and
 - an emphasis on the importance of ensuring that records are made promptly and kept up to date.

9. Trusted adult

It is important that children can trust the police. We saw that, in some child protection cases, officers consider carefully how best to approach a child and/or the parents or carers and explore the most effective ways in which to communicate with them. Such sensitivity builds confidence and creates stronger relationships between the child and/or the parents or carers and police. We found that the force works well with external organisations, family members and other people to protect children when they need immediate safeguarding. For individuals in cases where this happens, officers' sensitive approaches are hugely important in providing appropriate help to children and their families.

A 17-year-old girl who was regularly reported missing had built trust and a rapport with an MCET officer. The officer became aware that she was in distress and contacted her. As trust had already been established between them, the girl felt able to speak openly. She told the officer that she was heavily using drugs and felt her life was on a downward spiral. The officer listened to her, offered support and said she should stay in touch with them. Then the officer immediately made a referral to CSC, who held an urgent strategy meeting. A social worker updated the case some days later, thanking the officer for their considerate and timely referral. This meant that CSC was able to act with the right level of intervention to address the acute situation facing the child, and the chronic concerns about her drug addiction.

A children and young persons manager co-ordinates and leads Kent Police's engagement with young people. The role includes managing the youth justice team and co-ordinating activity with safeguarding partners.

Kent Police is also supporting efforts to decriminalise young people. It works with partners to assess youth justice cases for appropriate out-of-court disposals. For example, the force has achieved significant reductions in youth reoffending rates by working closely with the Kent Youth Justice Board.

The force has prioritised activity to engage with young people and promoted a 'Youth ambassadors' scheme across all areas, roles and ranks. Approximately 150 members of staff are empowered to challenge all aspects of the force's practice so that it meets the needs of vulnerable children. They are also responsible for implementing change and initiatives, such as a campaign highlighting the importance of listening to the voice of the child.

Kent Police looks for ways to support vulnerable victims and is currently collaborating with a charity and Canterbury Christchurch University. It is piloting the use of Oliver, a 'justice facility' dog, which is present in video-recorded interview rooms to support vulnerable children and adults. These specially trained dogs are widely used by law enforcement agencies in the USA and help to put witnesses at ease during evidential interviews, which are recognised as being a very stressful experience for vulnerable people.

There are 20 youth engagement officer posts spread across Kent's 13 districts. PCSOs in these roles provide short-term interventions with young people who are believed to be vulnerable – for example, children believed to be on the edge of gang membership and those who may become involved in knife crime. The team works closely with other youth services to provide joint training – for example, to reduce self-harm and promote mental health awareness among teenagers. They regularly visit schools where there is a risk of knife crime becoming an issue, giving preventative advice and reassurance.

Approximately 450 young people aged between 13 and 17 are volunteer cadets. The force deliberately targets its cadet selection and recruitment towards youths from disadvantaged backgrounds. It has proved a successful strategy for the force to increase trust and engage with young people. The cadets play a major role in organising an annual open day for schoolchildren at the force HQ, which in 2018 was visited by 3,000 Year 6 pupils.

10. Managing those posing a risk to children

There are good staffing levels in the team dedicated to managing those posing a risk to children

Kent Police's management of sex offenders and violent offenders (MOSOVO) team is dedicated to multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)²⁷.

At the time of inspection, the MOSOVO team consisted of police officers and staff managing 2,510 RSOs. We found that the staffing levels allowed a sufficient ratio of offender managers to offenders to allow most visits (to evaluate RSO risk) to be completed by pairs of officers. We saw from records that they completed manual checks and used safeguarding software to check contents of computers and devices.

MOSOVO is based in units covering the three force divisions. These are managed by a DI. The senior officer is a detective chief inspector who also has responsibility for the POLIT.

Most of the offender managers had been trained in MOSOVO and active risk management (ARMS) assessments. They were supported by divisional ViSOR²⁸ co-ordinators who help administer MAPPA 2 meetings and updates from home visits, allowing offender managers to focus on the risk posed by RSOs. A central team holds performance management data including numbers of offenders, their risk status and the timeliness of visits.

In 2017, the National Police Chiefs' Council issued guidance that forces may use either active or reactive management approaches for RSOs. Active management requires visiting the offender. National practice is for officers to complete police ARMS assessments at least every 12 months, or when something happens that may result in a major change to the current overall assessment and risk management plan for the offender.

A force may move individuals from active to reactive management. This can be done if an ARMS assessment suggests that an RSO presents a low level of risk, and the offender manager is satisfied that the offender has not committed offences or presented any risk for a three-year period. The use of both active and reactive

²⁷ Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) are in place to ensure the successful management of violent and sexual offenders. Agencies involved as responsible bodies include the police, probation trusts and prison service. Other organisations may become involved: for example, the Youth Justice Board will be responsible for the care of young offenders.

²⁸ ViSOR, a national database used by police, prisons and probation for the management of offenders.

management, effectively carried out, should allow the force to focus on those RSOs posing the greatest risk. At the time of our inspection, 93 percent of offenders had been police ARMS assessed.

Communication between MOSOVO and neighbourhood police teams can be developed further to enhance safeguarding activity

Collecting and sharing intelligence about RSOs, and managing them appropriately, is becoming increasingly demanding as their numbers increase.

There is a single approved premises²⁹ in Kent for accommodating RSOs. The MOSOVO team maintains an accurate list of the residents with information about the risk they pose and provides this to the local neighbourhood team. This practice recognises the vital role of locally based officers in protecting communities and developing community intelligence to protect children and other vulnerable people.

Locally based officers play a vital role in the development of community intelligence. They can be particularly helpful in supporting ongoing risk assessments and identifying when to move an offender between reactive and active management.

We found that the links between MOSOVO and officers involved in neighbourhood policing were inconsistent. The ViSOR logs we saw did not benefit from information supplied by officers from locally based teams and there was no regular liaison process in place to develop relationships. Information recorded on ViSOR is not automatically available in Athena. There are markers in Athena that can flag RSOs to inform others that additional information is available on ViSOR, but these were not consistently applied.

Improvements in briefing and task allocation would help offender managers learn more about the activities of specific RSOs or to monitor existing concerns and monitor the effectiveness of safeguarding measures.

A positive activity we saw was that new and concerning information on high-risk RSOs was included in briefing slides for local officers.

²⁹ Approved premises are recognised under the Offender Management Act 2007 and are residential units which house ex-offenders in the community. They were formerly known as probation or bail hostels.

Inconsistent recording and referral of risks to children and vulnerable adults

Offender managers are aware of the need to make referrals to the CSC via the CRU when they have information about risk to children or vulnerable adults. They should also escalate concerns to line managers for consideration at MAPPA meetings.

We were concerned that, on occasions, supervisors were signing off risk assessments with copies of actions from ARMS assessments as an administrative process, rather than scrutinising the quality of the risk plan.

Some records are insufficiently completed to ensure that all persons or children at risk are identified and referred to other agencies. This is compounded when supervision lacks insight and fails to provide direction on how to effectively investigate concerning offender behaviours. Our eight audits of sex offender records raised concerns about the thoroughness and effectiveness of offender management and supervision within the units. Three of the cases were inadequately managed. We considered that improvements in record keeping and offender management were needed in the other five. We also found significant safeguarding concerns for children and vulnerable adults that had not been sufficiently mitigated by police activity.

An RSO with convictions for child sex offences was being managed in the community. The RSO was recorded as high risk because of repeatedly developing relationships with women who had access to children.

During a visit in June 2018, the officer discovered that the RSO's sister was pregnant. CSC was informed of the impending birth – they requested a referral on the birth of the child. The ViSOR record for December 2018 indicates that a referral was made but there is no reference number for it. The force's Athena system doesn't contain a reference either. On the next home visit, three months later, the RSO had started a relationship with a female teacher. There is no record of whether that information was validated with the RSO to find out if he had disclosed his risk, or if a LADO had been involved to jointly assess any risk implications from the RSO's association with a teacher. The offender manager records on ViSOR that they can't find the original referral to CSC and will re-refer the information – once again, no reference number is recorded. This means that the referral about the potential vulnerability of the child isn't visible to police officers because the ViSOR report isn't visible on the Athena system.

A high-risk RSO who has convictions for sexual assaults on young children and possessing indecent images of children changed address and went unmanaged for over a year, meaning that the force did not comply with national guidance for visits and risk assessment. This omission has recently been addressed by offender managers. However, the record lacks any meaningful supervisory inputs. Offender managers arrived early for a scheduled visit and discovered the RSO had contact with his sister's grandchildren. The RSO's sister is aware of his convictions but doesn't accept his guilt. There were significant concerns about the RSO's behaviour and his risk to the children. The offender managers' subsequent referral to CSC was urgently required but delayed without explanation for seven days after the identification of risk. Twenty-two days later, there was no record on ViSOR or Athena of whether CSC had received the referral and what was being considered to safeguard the children. The RSO was subject to a sexual offences prevention order (SOPO), which specifically restricted his contact with children. The offender managers were aware of the SOPO because they recorded checking his devices and considering technical support for their next visit. However, there was no consideration of investigating the potential breach in respect of access to children.

The risk levels of wanted or missing RSOs are not consistently assessed to reflect their risk to the community

There is a wanted/missing policy in MOSOVO that includes quarterly review periods and central oversight to ensure close monitoring of wanted RSOs. However, we saw evidence in two of our audited cases of wanted offenders being incorrectly recorded on ViSOR, which meant that they were not included in the central unit reviews.

Kent Police has a wanted person bureau (WPB) that manages plans to arrest all wanted suspects. There is a single process and we saw strong evidence that it was being applied.

Assessments should reflect the offender's potential risk to the public rather than primarily relying on crime type for the wanted level prioritisation.

In one case, we saw the GREEN level applied to a wanted RSO, which meant that he was not circulated on the police national computer (PNC) for five months. In another case, the RSO was managed as a high-risk offender who posed a risk to children. The WPB assessed him as GREEN, so he was also not circulated immediately on the PNC. He remained at large at the time of this inspection.

Recommendations

Within three months:

- We recommend that Kent Police should review its approach to providing appropriate information on registered sex offenders to neighbourhood police teams and ensure that staff in the MOSOVO teams understand their responsibilities to make appropriate referrals when they consider that a child may be in need of safeguarding support.

11. Police detention

We found delays in the attendance of appropriate adults to support children in custody

Many children suspected of committing criminal offences have complex needs and are likely to be vulnerable and in need of safeguarding support. Kent Police has been successful in reducing the number of children arrested and brought into police detention. This has resulted in significantly fewer children being detained across the force area. This is positive – it is not in a child’s best interests to be kept in custody.

However, the force has yet to achieve a comprehensive approach that prioritises safeguarding and a child’s welfare throughout the detention process. Guidance in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE) states that once an appropriate adult is identified, officers should ask that person to attend the custody centre as soon as practicable. In some of the cases we examined, there was evidence of long delays in the attendance of appropriate adults. Their attendance generally coincided with the interview of the child, rather than providing early support for their overall welfare needs, rights and entitlements.

Custody officers reported that in the late evenings there was a problem arranging the attendance of appropriate adults who were not family members. This means that young people won’t always benefit from the presence of an appropriate adult while being charged or refused bail.

The custody centres now have healthcare professionals and outreach workers from Liaison and Diversion (L&D) services available to assess the vulnerability of those held in police custody. Despite the positive presence of staff from L&D, we found that opportunities to improve the safeguarding of children in custody were being routinely missed. Staff from L&D are not employed by the force and do not have access to force IT systems. They were unable to update custody records or review any safeguarding or relevant information about children detained in custody that would help them plan and make referrals. This also means that information about risk or vulnerability obtained by the L&D staff in relation to detained children is not effectively or consistently communicated to custody staff to inform protective planning.

There is a lack of understanding of the need to find alternative accommodation and to escalate this to senior levels when none is available

The local authority is responsible for providing somewhere suitable to stay (alternative accommodation) for children charged with offences, denied bail and detained. Only in exceptional circumstances (such as during extreme weather) would the transfer of the child to such accommodation not be in the child's best interests. In rare cases – for example, if a child presented a high risk of serious harm to others – secure accommodation might be necessary.

We found a widespread lack of knowledge among custody staff regarding the threshold required to request alternative or secure accommodation from the local authority. The force had no data to show where children were detained once bail was declined. Custody officers seen during reality testing had very little knowledge of the process to transfer children to local authority accommodation, believing that once a child has bail denied the use of secure accommodation was the only accommodation that should be considered.

We were told that all custody staff participate in periodic training sessions. Staff receive annual CPD days, the last being in July 2018. Staff also benefited from video conference training of CSE awareness in February 2019. Other guidance on custody practice and procedure was available to staff on the force's intranet site. Unfortunately, some of this material was inaccurate and insufficient.

The force's intranet has a custody section that includes a 2015 custody concordat between the force and local authority regarding the transfer of children to more appropriate accommodation, but this is out of date. It does not mirror current national guidance and the contents do not fully describe recommended custody processes. In recent times, meetings with partners to review the concordat arrangements do not appear to have taken place. The guidance and training available to custody officers is very limited and this partly explains why the force's responsibilities to children denied bail are not being fully met.

Custody officers should always complete juvenile detention certificates that outline to a court the reason why a child has been remanded in custody. These are essential to ensure that the police are accountable. They also enable forces to monitor how well they are discharging their responsibilities under PACE. Not all the cases we saw had a detention certificate attached to the custody record. The detention certificates we saw were of insufficient quality, lacking rationale to explain why the child had not been transferred to alternative local authority accommodation.

There was no record of custody staff escalating the problem to senior managers when the local authority did not provide alternative accommodation. Insufficient action has been taken by police leaders to address the unavailability of

appropriate alternative accommodation for detained children with their safeguarding partners and the local authorities. Consequently, children continue to be detained unnecessarily overnight in police custody.

A 15-year-old girl was missing from foster care. She was found by police late in the evening and returned home. She didn't want to be left there and became aggressive, kicking the officer twice on her shin and arm. The girl was restrained and arrested for assaulting the officer and taken to a police station. On arrival her behaviour calmed, and she co-operated with the custody procedure, answering questions about herself. She disclosed a history of self-harm and some other issues concerning mental health. She stated that earlier that day she had consumed a small amount of alcohol. Her answers were recorded.

The custody record was unclear when she was seen by a healthcare professional or that person's identity. There is a record of a discussion with a night-duty social worker about the availability of appropriate accommodation during the daytime, but not as an option for releasing her under investigation or on bail (rather than her remaining overnight in police detention).

An entry was made on a detention of juvenile certificate of the outcome of the discussion. The girl's detention was reviewed while she was asleep. No record was made to indicate that she was made aware of the outcome of the review and the reasons for her continued detention. An appropriate adult did not attend until 14 hours after her detention was initially authorised, and then this attendance was primarily to facilitate the interview. Following the interview, she was charged with assault and granted bail for the court appearance.

There are no records of any further communication between the police and CSC, or of a referral via the CRU to update social workers on the full facts surrounding this incident that could help them safeguard this vulnerable child.

The force is aware they can charge costs back to the local authority if they are unable to provide accommodation, but this does not happen.

Force policy requires that the CRU is informed of all children detained in custody so that the local authority is notified without delay. The policy is that, for every child likely to be detained overnight, a strategy discussion with CSC should be held with the purpose of supporting the child and obtaining suitable alternative accommodation. However, we did not find any evidence of this taking place within the records of the CRU or during our visits to custody suites.

The force does not collect data about children declined bail following charge or for those detained overnight for investigative purposes. Similarly, no management information is collected to support the policy for notifying the CRU of a child's arrest and detention.

The absence of any partnership or internal force scrutiny means that senior leaders from the police and local authority, and particularly the local authority, are not fully aware that they are not fully meeting the responsibility to support some highly vulnerable children within the criminal justice system. Consequently, senior leaders are failing to recognise and respond to the needs and best interests of children in custody.

Recommendations

- Immediately:
 - We recommend that Kent Police should undertake a review jointly with children's social care services and other relevant organisations to satisfy itself that its management of children in police detention is appropriate and reflects the standards of current national best practice.

Conclusion

The overall effectiveness of the force and its response to children who need help and protection

Senior leaders in Kent Police show a clear commitment to making sure that child protection and safeguarding vulnerable people are priorities. We found that the force is committed to improving its services for children.

The force has invested a great amount of thought and effort into understanding the needs of the public it serves, and it has adapted its entire focus and the composition of its workforce to meet the demand for better levels of response and service for public protection.

In the period before the inspection, Kent Police had faced some significant challenges. Preparations for the UK leaving the European Union were further complicated by the implementation of the new Athena IT system. While some of these issues contributed to, or compounded, a number of the issues we found (in particular, those related to the timeliness of the police response or the effectiveness of supervision), we were pleased to find that senior leaders clearly recognised that this did not obviate the need to ensure that children in need of help and protection were offered the appropriate support.

At the time of our inspection, we found that not all the force's arrangements and processes were fully effective in supporting its ambition to ensure that children receive the appropriate help in a timely way.

This meant that:

- response to incidents where children were at risk was frequently delayed and referrals were not properly completed;
- evidence, including the effects of crime on children, was sometimes lost or not sufficiently recorded;
- there were delays in investigations and opportunities to pursue offenders;
- supervision was insufficient;
- the deployment of inexperienced staff undermined effective case management;
- risk evaluation of cases and referrals was insufficient to identify cumulative or emerging risk; and
- some children were held inappropriately in police detention or at police stations for long periods of time waiting for safe accommodation.

It was clear from what staff said to us that the workforce is committed and dedicated. But there has been insufficient supervision and training for young-in-service officers and particularly detectives who are placed on investigation teams. Those in specialist roles are expected to conduct enquiries that are complex and challenging, but many have not received the appropriate training.

It is important that senior leaders can test the nature and quality of decision making, and its effects on children. The force has an excellent learning and development team that provides managers with information on performance gaps and to support improvement planning. An example is a recent force-wide campaign to reinforce (to all staff) the importance of listening to the voice of the child.

The force engages well with local authority partners including LSCBs, and fully participates in multi-agency operational activity to address vulnerability in areas such as child exploitation, gang membership and children missing from home.

We have highlighted examples of good work by individual officers responding to incidents of concern involving children. However, we found that there are inconsistencies and areas for improvement in our review of cases that the force needs to address to make sure that it safeguards all children appropriately.

Senior leaders know that there are inconsistencies and were working at the time of our visit to sustain improved services for children. We welcome the response of the force, its engagement with us and its willingness to act quickly to address the areas of concern identified through the child protection case audits carried out during this inspection.

Our recommendations aim to help the force make improvements in these areas.

Recommendations

Immediately:

We recommend that Kent Police should review its assessment processes within the force control room, to ensure that child protection incidents are appropriately prioritised. This should include the creation of response or 'trigger' plans for those children frequently reported missing.

We recommend that Kent Police should review referral processes for domestic abuse cases involving children to ensure that relevant information and risks are shared appropriately with the local authority (this should include a review of processes within the central referral unit to ensure that cases involving cumulative risk and hidden harm are correctly identified).

We recommend that Kent Police should undertake a review jointly with children's social care services and other relevant organisations to satisfy itself that its management of children in police detention is appropriate and reflects the standards of current national best practice.

Within three months:

We recommend that Kent Police should take steps to ensure that it records all relevant information properly and makes it readily accessible in all cases where there are concerns about the welfare of children. Guidance to staff should include:

- reinforcing the importance of 'golden hour' principles to secure best evidence of offences;
- ensuring that children's concerns, behaviour and demeanour are recorded; and
- making sure that effective safeguarding measures are implemented.

We recommend that Kent Police should produce a plan to improve its child protection investigations, paying attention to:

- undertaking risk assessments that consider the whole of a child's circumstances and risks to other children;
- improving the oversight and management of cases (to include auditing child abuse and exploitation investigations to ensure that standards are being met);
- the accuracy and timeliness of recording activity and planning; and

- ensuring that investigations are allocated to those with the skills and experience to manage them effectively.

We recommend that Kent Police should take steps to ensure that it records all relevant information properly and makes it readily accessible in all cases where children are taken into police protection. Guidance to staff should include:

- guidance as to what information they should record (and in what form) on their systems to enable good-quality decisions; and
- an emphasis on the importance of ensuring that records are made promptly and kept up to date.

We recommend that Kent Police should review its approach to providing appropriate information on registered sex offenders to neighbourhood police teams and ensure that staff in the MOSOVO teams understand their responsibilities to make appropriate referrals when they consider that a child may be in need of safeguarding support.

Next steps

Within six weeks of the publication of this report, HMICFRS requires an update of the action the force has taken to respond to the recommendations that we have asked to be acted on immediately.

Kent Police should also provide an action plan within six weeks of the publication of this report specifying how it intends to respond to our other recommendations.

Subject to the update and action plan received, we will revisit Kent Police no later than six months after the publication of this report to assess how it is managing the implementation of all the recommendations.

Annex A – Child protection inspection methodology

Objectives

The objectives of the inspection are:

- to assess how effectively police forces safeguard children at risk;
- to make recommendations to police forces for improving child protection practice;
- to highlight effective practice in child protection work; and
- to drive improvements in forces' child protection practices.

The expectations of organisations are set out in the statutory guidance [Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children](#). The specific police roles set out in the guidance are:

- the identification of children who might be at risk from abuse and neglect;
- investigation of alleged offences against children;
- inter-agency working and information-sharing to protect children; and
- the exercise of emergency powers to protect children.

These areas of practice are the focus of the inspection.

Inspection approach

Inspections focus on the experience of, and outcomes for, children following their journey through the child protection and criminal investigation processes. They assess how well the police service has helped and protected children and investigated alleged criminal acts, taking account of, but not measuring compliance with, policies and guidance.

The inspections consider how the arrangements for protecting children, and the leadership and management of the police service, contribute to and support effective practice on the ground. The team considers how well management responsibilities for child protection, as set out in the statutory guidance, have been met.

Methods

- Self-assessment of practice, and of management and leadership.
- Case inspections.
- Discussions with officers and staff from within the police and from other organisations.
- Examination of reports on significant case reviews or other serious cases.
- Examination of service statistics, reports, policies and other relevant written materials.

The purpose of the self-assessment is to:

- raise awareness in the service about the strengths and weaknesses of current practice (this forms the basis for discussions with HMICFRS); and
- initiate future service improvements and establish a baseline against which to measure progress.

Self-assessment and case inspection

In consultation with police services the following areas of practice have been identified for scrutiny:

- domestic abuse;
- incidents in which police officers and staff identify children who are in need of help and protection, e.g. children being neglected;
- information-sharing and discussions about children who are potentially at risk of harm;
- the exercising of powers of police protection under section 46 of the Children Act 1989 (taking children into a 'place of safety');
- the completion of section 47 Children Act 1989 enquiries, including both those of a criminal nature and those of a non-criminal nature (section 47 enquiries are those relating to a child 'in need' rather than 'at risk');
- sex offender management;
- the management of missing children;
- child sexual exploitation; and
- the detention of children in police custody.

Annex B – Definitions and interpretations

In this report, the following words, phrases and expressions in the left-hand column have the meanings assigned to them in the right-hand column. Sometimes, the definition will be followed by a fuller explanation of the matter in question, with references to sources and other material which may be of assistance to the reader.

child	person under the age of 18 years
child abduction warning notice	non-statutory notice issued when the police become aware of a child spending time with an adult who they believe could be harmful to them; a notice is used to disrupt the adult's association with the child, as well as warning the adult that the association could result in arrest and prosecution
multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)	mechanism through which local criminal justice organisations (police, prison and probation trusts) and other bodies dealing with offenders work together in partnership to protect the public from serious harm by managing sexual and violent offenders; established in each of the 42 criminal justice areas in England and Wales by sections 325 to 327B of the Criminal Justice Act 2003
multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC)	locally held meeting of statutory and voluntary agency representatives to share information about high-risk victims of domestic abuse; any agency can refer an adult or child whom they believe to be at high risk of harm; the aim of the meeting is to produce a co-ordinated action plan to increase an adult or child's safety, health and wellbeing; organisations that attend vary, but are likely to include the police, probation, children's, health and housing services; over 250 MARACs currently in operation throughout England and Wales
multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)	working location in which public sector organisations with responsibilities for the safety of vulnerable people collaborate; it has staff from organisations such as the police and local authority social services, who work alongside one another, sharing information and co-ordinating activities, to help protect the most vulnerable children and adults from harm, neglect and abuse

Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted)	non-ministerial department, independent of government, that regulates and inspects schools, colleges, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, education and training in prisons and other secure establishments, and the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service; assesses children's services in local areas, and inspects services for looked-after children, safeguarding and child protection; reports directly to Parliament
police and crime commissioner (PCC)	elected entity for a police area; responsible for securing the maintenance of the police force for that area and securing that the police force is efficient and effective; holds the relevant chief constable to account for the policing of the area; establishes the budget and police and crime plan for the police force; appoints and may, after due process, remove the chief constable from office; established under section 1, Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011
registered sex offender (RSO)	person convicted or cautioned for a sexual offence as set out in Schedule 3 to the Sexual Offences Act 2003, or who has otherwise triggered the notification requirements (for example, by being made subject to a sexual offences prevention order), who is required to provide personal details to the police, including details of movements (for example, if going abroad) and, if homeless, where they can be found; registered details may be accessed by the police, probation and prison service