

National Child Protection Inspections

Merseyside 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 still abused or neglected by those responsible for their care; they sometimes need to be protected from other adults with whom they come into contact. Some of them occasionally go missing, or end up spending time in places, or with people, harmful to them.

While it is everyone's responsibility to look out for vulnerable children, police forces – working together and with other agencies – have a particular role in protecting children and making sure that, in relation to their safety, their needs are met.

Protecting children is one of the most important tasks the police undertake. Police officers investigate suspected crimes involving children and arrest perpetrators, and they have a significant role in monitoring sex offenders. They have the powers to take a child in danger to a place of safety, and to seek restrictions on offenders' contact with children. The police service also has a significant role, working with other agencies, to ensure the protection of children and safeguard their 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 well with other agencies to ensure 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 children are protected and their needs are met, and to 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 Merseyside, which took place in April 2018.

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 police and crime commissioner (PCC) have a clear commitment to child protection, and this is reflected in both the police and crime plan and the force's priorities. There is strong evidence of work progressing at a senior level to improve the force's ability to manage the risks affecting children. This commitment is also reflected in the strong and effective partnership working we found across the five local authorities in the force area.

Throughout the inspection there were examples of good work by individual frontline officers responding to incidents involving children. Officers and staff we spoke to who manage child investigations are committed and dedicated, often working in difficult and demanding circumstances. We were also pleased to find that welfare support for members of the workforce managing such cases is available (and used) via the occupational health unit, and is mandatory for those in the specialist sexual offending and abusive image units.

The force has made renewed efforts to improve the awareness of staff about vulnerability and their safeguarding responsibilities. This was evident during the inspection and has resulted in a better understanding by staff of the risks faced by vulnerable children and how to respond when they are encountered.

The criminal exploitation of children, often across county and force boundaries, by organised criminal networks poses significant challenges to the police service nationally. Vulnerable children who are moved between areas by criminal networks may be exploited sexually, forced to sell drugs or engage in other illegal activities.

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: www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmicfrs/our-work/child-abuse-and-child-protection-issues/national-child-protection-inspection/

We were pleased to find senior leaders in Merseyside Police clearly recognise and have responded to the risks posed to children who are being criminally exploited in these ways. The force has developed a detailed understanding of the prevalence, nature and scale of criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation within the force area. The Merseyside child exploitation and child protection plan drives activity to keep children safe. It is comprehensive and balances safeguarding child victims with activity to locate and arrest those who pose a risk to children. In addition, the force has produced problem profiles for criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation of children to provide a greater understanding of both established and emerging high-risk concerns. We found the documents to be thorough and informative, with clear recommendations.

Although we found that the force has a clear focus on reducing risk and wider vulnerability for children, this has not yet translated into consistently effective practice.

The case audits we undertook as part of this inspection highlight that some of the force's responses to children in need of help and protection require improvement – in some cases as a matter of urgency. While we found that the force has prioritised the protection of children and the commitment to this by senior leaders is unambiguous there are not, as yet, consistently better decisions being made about children at risk. Further, in a number of the cases we examined, there was limited information recorded on force systems. Information about investigative or safeguarding activity was inconsistent and there was often little information about the development of a multi-agency protective plan.

Specific areas for improvement include:

- ensuring the concerns and views of children (including their behaviour and demeanour) are obtained, to help influence decisions made about them;
- the management of missing children assessed as having no apparent risk (absent), which we found is not always appropriate;
- making sure information about investigative or safeguarding tasks and the agreed outcomes from discussions with partner agencies are recorded on force systems;
- backlogs in visits to registered sex offenders;
- delays in speaking with some victims, meaning the negative effect on the victim is not understood early enough and rapport-building and gathering evidence for future risk management are both less effective; and
- delays in the attendance of appropriate adults to support the overall welfare needs, rights and entitlements of children detained in police custody.

In addition, the force's performance measures currently focus on the quantity of child protection incidents and cases. There is only limited qualitative data about outcomes, which makes it difficult to assess whether officers and staff are consistently making the best decisions for vulnerable children.

During our inspection, we examined a total of 87 cases where children were identified as being at risk. We assessed the force's child protection practice as good in 17 cases, as requiring improvement in 41 cases and as inadequate in 29 cases. This demonstrates that the force still needs to do more to ensure it provides a consistently good service for all children.

Conclusion

Senior leaders are unambiguous in their commitment to protecting vulnerable children and have prioritised the protection of those in need of support.

Throughout the inspection, we found that officers and staff who manage child abuse investigations are committed and dedicated, often working in difficult and demanding circumstances. However, in too many cases we found practice and decision making to be inconsistent. The force needs to do more to ensure that its evident commitment at a senior level to improve is leading to better decisions being made in all cases.

We were encouraged to note that the force was already taking action to address the gaps in service it had identified in its self-audits before our inspection and took prompt action to address many of the issues raised during the inspection. This is positive and underlines the commitment of senior leaders to continually improve the service provided to vulnerable children.

We have made recommendations which will help to improve outcomes for children. We will revisit the force no later than six months after the publication of this report to assess how it is managing the implementation of those recommendations.

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 he has 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.³ The police also have a duty, under the Children Act 2004, to ensure that their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.⁴

Every officer and member of police staff should understand his or her duty to protect children as part of the day-to-day business of policing. It is essential that officers going into people's homes, for any policing matter, recognise the needs of the children they may encounter, and understand the steps they can and should take in relation to their protection. This is particularly important when they are dealing with domestic abuse or other incidents in which violence may be a factor. The duty to protect children extends to children detained in police custody.

In 2018, the National Crime Agency's strategic assessment of serious and organised crime established that child sexual exploitation and abuse represents one of the highest serious and organised crime risks.⁵ Child sexual abuse is also listed as one of the six national threats specified in the *Strategic Policing Requirement*.⁶

³ Children Act 1989, section 46.

⁴ Children Act 2004, section 11.

⁵ *National Strategic Assessment of Serious and Organised Crime*, National Crime Agency, London, 2018, available at: www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk

⁶ 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 at the time of writing, 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 to include child sexual abuse as an additional national threat. See *Strategic Policing Requirement*, Home Office, March 2015, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/strategic-policing-requirement

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*⁷, sets out the expectations of all partner agencies involved in child protection (such as the local authority, clinical commissioning groups, schools, and the voluntary sector).

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 use of emergency powers to protect children.

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

⁷ *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, HM Government, March 2015, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2

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

2. Context for the force

Merseyside Police has approximately 5,706 people in its workforce⁹. This includes:

- 3,834 police officers;
- 1,619 police staff; and
- 253 police community support officers.

The force provides policing services to the metropolitan area of Merseyside. The police force area covers 250 square miles with approximately 65 miles of coastline in the north west of England. Although there are some affluent areas, Merseyside has a high level of poverty.

Merseyside Police covers the city of Liverpool and surrounding towns. Around 1.4 million people live in a mainly urban setting. The resident population is increased by a very large number of university students and the many people who visit, socialise in, commute into, or travel through the area each year.

There are five local authorities within the Merseyside area: Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and the Wirral. Each authority has a local safeguarding children board (LSCB)¹⁰.

The most recent Ofsted judgments for the local authorities are set out below.

Local authority	Judgment	Date published
Knowsley	Requires improvement	June 2017
Liverpool	Requires improvement	July 2014
Sefton	Requires improvement	June 2016
St Helens	Requires improvement	January 2015
Wirral	Inadequate	September 2016

⁹ Statistics on police workforce numbers in the 43 police forces in England and Wales and the British Transport Police are available at: www.gov.uk/government/statistics/police-workforce-england-and-wales-30-september-2017

¹⁰ LSCBs have a statutory duty, under the Children Act 2004, to co-ordinate how agencies work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and ensure that safeguarding arrangements are effective.

Merseyside has five established multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs), one in each local authority area. A range of partners from both statutory and non-statutory agencies are represented within the MASHs to ensure information is shared effectively.

An assistant chief constable (ACC) is responsible for child protection throughout the force area. The ACC is supported by a detective chief superintendent and two detective superintendents who oversee specialist teams responsible for protecting children.

3. Leadership, management and governance

Safeguarding is a priority for the force and the PCC, and this is reflected both in the police and crime plan 2017–21 and the force's Community First strategy 2018–20. This commitment to protecting children was evident throughout the inspection and clearly understood by officers and staff.

The force has a culture of continuous improvement and uses a variety of methods to inform its workforce about their safeguarding responsibilities. These include 7-minute video briefings which support learning on a particular theme, the chief constable's video blog and routine training which includes child protection and safeguarding. We found that this has resulted in a better sense of awareness among frontline officers and staff.

Throughout the inspection, partners and other interested parties described professional relationships and engagement as positive and told us this supported more effective joint working. They stated the force had a good understanding and knowledge of the risks to children, routinely shared information and contributed to the development of joint protective plans for vulnerable children. However, we were told that aspects of joint working, such as the conduct of interviews with children¹¹ and the understanding of thresholds¹² for intervention when making a referral to children's social care services, were regarded as areas that required further development.

Senior leaders have recognised the emerging challenges faced by those children who are being criminally exploited. They have developed detailed profiles to inform a more sophisticated understanding of the prevalence, nature and scale of criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation and are using this information to inform their planning and response.

The force holds daily management meetings at both force-wide and local policing levels. We found these provide good, structured oversight of issues of risk and significant cases or investigations. Chaired by a senior officer, they provide a clear focus on safeguarding and vulnerability and support a more effective response to issues of immediate concern.

¹¹ Joint investigative interviews should be determined at a strategy discussion/meeting between the police and children's social care services. While the police are responsible for criminal investigations, the planning and delivery of joint investigative interviews involving both a police officer and social worker should be determined by what is in the best interests of the child, and which professional has the rapport with and understanding of that child. All practitioners involved in joint interviews must be trained in accordance with *Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings* guidance and be occupationally competent.

¹² LSCBs publish the local threshold criteria, covering Section 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989.

The force has well-structured governance arrangements for child protection, which include a protecting vulnerable people board and a continuous improvement board. However, the force does not have enough performance information to improve its understanding of outcomes for children at risk of harm. Although the force IT system (Delphi) does provide information on performance, qualitative outcome data is limited.

Additionally, the force does not undertake routine internal safeguarding audits to assess the nature and quality of operational practice when vulnerable children are encountered. The consequence of this is that senior leaders cannot be certain that officers and staff are consistently making the best decisions for vulnerable children. The force needs to do more to check that decisions being made about children are in line with their expectations.

4. Case file analysis

Results of case file reviews

During our inspection, Merseyside Police selected and self-assessed the effectiveness of its practice in 33 child protection cases. The cases selected were a random sample from throughout Merseyside, in accordance with HMICFRS criteria;¹³ we asked the force to rate its handling of each of the self-assessed cases. Of these 33 cases, force assessors graded the practice in 22 of the cases as good, and as requiring improvement in 11 cases. In none of the cases did the force grade its practice as inadequate. We also assessed these 33 child protection cases: we graded the force's practice in 3 as good; in 16 as requiring improvement; and in 14 as inadequate.

We selected and examined a further 54 cases as part of the inspection: we assessed the force's practice in 14 as good; in 25 as requiring improvement; and in 15 as inadequate.

Cases assessed by both Merseyside Police and HMICFRS

Force assessment:

- 22 good
- 11 requires improvement
- 0 inadequate

HMICFRS assessment:

- 3 good
- 16 requires improvement
- 14 inadequate

Additional cases assessed only by HMICFRS

HMICFRS assessment:

- 14 good
- 25 requires improvement
- 15 inadequate

¹³ The case types and inspection methodology are set out in annex A.

Breakdown of case file audit results by area of child protection

Cases assessed involving enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989¹⁴

Enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989:

- 1 good
- 6 requires improvement
- 4 inadequate

These are cases in which a child has been identified as in need of protection, so is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. We found:

- delays in some cases in speaking with victims;
- records of strategy meetings and conferences do not always include all the details and actions from the meeting;
- inconsistent use of flags;
- evidence of joint working and its outcomes, particularly strategy meetings, is not recorded in any detail; and
- a small number of reported crimes have not been recorded.

Cases assessed involving referrals relating to domestic abuse incidents or crimes

Referrals relating to domestic abuse incidents or crimes:

- 2 good
- 4 requires improvement
- 4 inadequate

Common themes include:

- variable quality in the primary investigation of domestic abuse incidents;

¹⁴ 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 concerns and views of children living in households where there is domestic abuse are not always recorded;
- good evidence of secondary risk assessments being completed in the MASH after the submission of vulnerable person referral forms;
- cases assessed as high risk have good safeguarding interventions; and
- investigations by the protecting vulnerable people unit are generally of a good standard with evidence of appropriate investigative and safeguarding activities.

Cases assessed involving referrals arising from incidents other than domestic abuse

Referrals arising from incidents other than domestic abuse:

- 2 good
- 3 requires improvement
- 4 inadequate

Common themes include:

- good initial safeguarding activity;
- poor and inconsistent recording practices, leading to an incomplete picture on intelligence systems; and
- good use of police protection powers.

Cases assessed involving children at risk from child sexual exploitation

Cases involving children at risk of child sexual exploitation both online and offline:

- 6 good
- 8 requires improvement
- 5 inadequate

Common themes include:

- good victim engagement and evidence gathering;
- investigations are conducted promptly and effectively;
- concerns and views of children are not routinely recorded;
- joint investigations are limited;

- inconsistent recording of strategy meeting outcomes, including any joint planning and actions; and
- lack of meaningful supervision of cases – investigation plans are endorsed but are often not checked again.

Cases assessed involving missing and absent children

Children missing:

- 0 good
- 4 requires improvement
- 4 inadequate

Common themes include:

- the initial response to locate a child is often appropriate, but early intervention and long-term inter-agency planning can be ineffective;
- assessment of risk often focuses on the most recent missing episode; and
- inappropriate use of 'no apparent risk (absent)' for children reported missing despite information indicating elevated risk factors.

Cases assessed involving children taken to a place of safety under section 46 of the Children Act 1989¹⁵

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

- 1 good
- 7 requires improvement
- 2 inadequate

Common themes include:

- officers consider the circumstances of vulnerable children and make effective decisions to remove children;
- inconsistent recording of the rationale supporting decisions to take children into police protection;

¹⁵ Under section 46 of the Children Act 1989, the police may remove a child to suitable accommodation if they consider that the child is at risk of significant harm. A child in these circumstances is referred to as 'having been taken into police protection'.

- limited evidence of the concerns and views of the child being sought; and
- where a criminal investigation took place there were delayed interviews and drift in the progression of investigations.

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:

- 3 good
- 5 requires improvement
- 2 inadequate

Common themes include:

- evidence of good information markers (flags) on police systems which highlight information relevant to the sexual offending unit;
- neighbourhood teams do not help with monitoring registered sex offenders;
- a backlog in visits to registered sex offenders; and
- low active risk management system (ARMS)¹⁶ completion rate.

Cases assessed involving children detained in police custody

Cases involving children in police custody:

- 2 good
- 4 requires improvement
- 4 inadequate

Common themes include:

- custody officers and staff have a good understanding of the conditions under which bail can be denied;
- when local authority accommodation is not available, this situation is not escalated;

¹⁶ ARMS is a structured assessment process to assess dynamic risk factors known to be associated with sexual re-offending, and protective factors known to be associated with reduced offending. It is intended to provide police and probation services with information to plan the management of convicted sex offenders in the community.

- a lack of vulnerable person referral form submissions for those arrested;
- evidence of long delays in appropriate adults attending custody when a child has been arrested; and
- referrals to the healthcare practitioner are not consistently documented.

5. Initial contact

Merseyside Police has invested in a range of child protection and exploitation training for both its frontline and specialist officers and staff about their roles in safeguarding. We found that this training has increased the sense of awareness and responsibility officers and staff have when they meet children who may be vulnerable. The force recognises the need to continually review the training needs of its workforce and is in the process of developing a detailed organisational skills matrix to support its ability to provide appropriate training in a timely way.

We saw some good examples of officers responding quickly to clear and specific concerns about children. Officers attend promptly, effectively carrying out preliminary tasks such as ensuring the immediate safety of children and making an assessment about how best to proceed. We saw evidence that, where appropriate, officers complete an electronic vulnerable person referral form to make a referral to children's social care services. We also found officers undertake good initial enquiries and use their powers to arrest or protect when necessary.

Domestic abuse between parents took place in the presence of their two children, a 12-year-old boy and 16-year-old girl. The police attended and arrested the male perpetrator. Officers spoke with the mother and her children at the scene and made relevant referrals, prompting a multi-agency response that included children's social care services providing the family with support. The perpetrator was charged and later convicted at court.

Four girls aged between 12 and 13 years old were reported as missing. Officers quickly identified they were at risk of sexual exploitation, resulting in prompt action to locate them. Two of the girls later disclosed they had been sexually assaulted. Appropriately skilled officers spoke with them and made referrals to children's social care services. Following referral, a strategy discussion and joint investigation took place. Two of the children were placed into foster care. The investigation was still in progress at the time of our inspection.

Merseyside Police's response to reported incidents is managed by officers and staff within the joint police and fire command and control centre (JCC). They have recently all received training on THRIVE¹⁷ and the National Decision Model¹⁸, which are used to assess each incident. They also have access to several electronic

¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ The National Decision Model is the primary model used by the police in the decision making and assessment process.

drop-down lists (standard operating procedures) which provide guidance on areas to consider when dealing with specific types of cases. We were pleased to note that these include question sets that specifically consider the concerns and views of the child when the force receives a call for a domestic crime, incident or concern for safety.

Officers and staff working in the JCC use 'call assist' software to obtain details on both the caller and the address. The software also gives access to information on people associated with the caller, locations and vehicles, a call history and any previous incidents. This provides a wealth of information to the call taker and attending officer, helping to inform the assessment of risk. This is good practice and provides the force with the opportunity to make better and more timely decisions about the risks faced by children. However, the JCC does not have any routine quality-assurance processes, meaning that the decisions made by officers and staff in the JCC are not always assessed.

In 2018 the force introduced a social media desk situated within the JCC, which gives the public the opportunity to report non-urgent incidents through Facebook and Twitter. The force also uses social media to provide important messages to the public. The introduction of this desk is extremely positive because it provides children and young people with an additional, more familiar, way to communicate with the force.

The response officers we met during the inspection stated they would speak with children when attending incidents such as domestic abuse. They also told us that body-worn video cameras are compulsory for such calls, so that all interactions and observations are recorded. Officers could explain the signs they would look for that might indicate children are being neglected, such as the cleanliness of the house and presence of items such as food, clothing and toys. They also clearly understood the need and reason to record details on the vulnerable person referral form, such as the school a child attends and which GP surgery they are registered with, so that information shared with partner organisations supported better protective planning.

The force shares information on children affected by domestic abuse incidents with schools each day (through the MASH), enabling better support to be provided for the child. This process operates in all schools within Merseyside and is known as Operation Encompass. This approach allows schools to contribute to the development of protective plans and provide support to children exposed to domestic abuse.

The force provided figures for the number of domestic abuse incidents involving children for the period January to April 2018. The data indicates that 3,506 children were affected by these incidents. However, despite officers and police staff being aware of vulnerability, in the cases we reviewed we found the concerns, behaviour and demeanour of a child are not recorded consistently.

A child's demeanour provides important information about the adverse effect of an incident on a child, especially in those cases where a child is too young to speak to officers or where to do so with a parent present might present a risk. It should be used to inform both the initial assessment of the child's needs and whether there should be a referral to children's social care services.

The force is making use of its 7-minute briefings and the chief constable's video blog to highlight and raise awareness of the importance of the voice of the child, and to make sure officers note the child's concerns and views, whether these are verbal or expressed through their behaviour at incidents.

The force has also introduced a daily dedicated sergeant, who ensures that domestic abuse incidents are resourced appropriately and important activities such as completing the Merseyside Risk Identification Tool (MeRIT)¹⁹ and vulnerable person referral forms are performed. The involvement of a dedicated supervisor provides a further opportunity to improve the recording of a child's views and concerns, but at present the focus is on checking on compliance with the process rather than the quality of the information recorded or the decisions made.

Force information systems use electronic markers known as 'flags' to highlight important information about risk or vulnerability to officers and police staff. This helps to identify children who may be at risk, for example those who are the subject of a child protection plan, have previously been taken into police protection or are at risk of sexual exploitation. This information helps frontline officers and staff assess risk when dealing with an incident and put in place safety plans to manage any identified risk.

Recommendation

- Within three months, Merseyside Police should ensure that its officers always record their observations of a child's behaviour and demeanour in records of domestic abuse incidents so that better assessments of a child's needs are made.

¹⁹ Agencies in Merseyside use the Merseyside Risk Indicator Toolkit (MeRIT) to assess the level of risk for domestic abuse incidents.

6. Assessment and help

Merseyside has five established multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs), one in each local authority area (Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and the Wirral). Each MASH has a different range of partners embedded in the hub, from both statutory and non-statutory agencies, to support effective information sharing and joint decision making and planning. In addition to the police, agencies represented include: children's social care services, the community rehabilitation company, education, health, housing, the National Probation Service, youth offending services and Catch 22.

The police role in the MASH varies in each area, with different hub teams adopting different processes. Some of these processes are inefficient, creating duplication of work. The force told us that it is reviewing MASH processes, with the aim of introducing a central unit to receive all vulnerability referrals. It is working with partner agencies to ensure the processes in all five MASHs operate consistently.

We noted that the MASH at the Wirral had been experiencing significant demand challenges, particularly in relation to requests for strategy discussions. In response, the police team had put in place a process to manage the requests, but we found this process was inefficient and created further delays. At the time of the inspection, we found a backlog of 108 cases classed as low level awaiting review. We informed the force during the inspection, which responded by providing additional support to that team and by taking the necessary steps to amend inefficient processes.

We were pleased to find that the force is working with partner organisations to identify risk and vulnerability at an earlier stage, through co-located early help hubs based throughout the force area. These hubs operate according to agreed principles and governance is shared between the police and relevant local authority. The purpose of the early help hubs is to provide effective multi-agency support for vulnerable people, including children before risks become acute. This is achieved by aligning the resources of the force and its partners, including those in the voluntary sector, to focus on an agreed cohort of people in order to reduce the threat, harm and risk posed by, and to, them. Many of these cases involve children in a family setting. The emphasis is on reducing the level of need, exposure to adverse childhood experiences and progression to child in need or child protection plan status.

The referral process into the MASHs to share concerns with partner agencies is clear and well established. However, although police officers have a good understanding of the referral process and generally send information about child protection matters promptly to the MASH, they are less sure about submitting concerns when children are arrested.

During the period April 2017 to March 2018, 7,298 vulnerable person referral forms in relation to child protection concerns were submitted to the five MASHs for further assessment. However, currently the force does not obtain data on how many of those referrals then progress to assessment by partner agencies and the development of protective plans.

We found good evidence of secondary risk assessments being completed by the police in the MASH after a domestic abuse incident, and no apparent delays in the processing of referrals. This helps with further research by partners and/or referrals to supportive services such as children's social care services and access to an independent domestic violence adviser.

Partner agencies we spoke with said that, when making a referral to children's social care services, the force's understanding of thresholds for intervention to support a child's needs was an area that required further development. In one area, we were told that as many as 60 percent of referrals did not meet the threshold for statutory assessment.

In some of the cases we audited, we found that information, particularly about strategy meetings, safeguarding plans and contact with children and families, was frequently incomplete or missing. Although there is evidence of inter-agency and multi-agency working, there is often no record of what happened or was agreed at a strategy meeting to direct activity. This means that officers dealing with a case may not have a full understanding of the risks, any current safety plans and which agency is overseeing and coordinating the support for a child. We also found that when strategy meetings and conferences are recorded, the information does not always include all the relevant details and actions from the meeting and therefore cannot support co-ordinated multi-agency planning.

Domestic abuse cases assessed as high risk are referred to a multi-agency risk assessment conference (MARAC) so that longer-term safeguarding plans can be made. Each local authority holds a MARAC every fortnight, usually chaired by the police. There is good attendance from statutory and non-statutory agencies. Minutes were examined and the meetings appear to provide an effective response to risk in these cases with all agencies actively engaged.

The force has recently introduced a retraction clinic for domestic abuse cases (held jointly with a victim, an independent domestic abuse advisor and police officer) to support victims who want to retract their complaints. The force reported that of 13 victims who attended the clinic, five decided to change their mind and stay engaged in the criminal justice process. Although these numbers are small, the early outcomes are positive.

The force also makes use of domestic violence prevention notices and orders²⁰, and the domestic violence disclosure scheme²¹. However, in Birkenhead we identified a backlog of 40 authorised disclosures waiting to be shared with relevant parties. This delay creates a potential and unnecessary risk for those cases where a decision has been made to disclose. The force has recognised this risk and has allocated officers and staff to clear the backlog.

Eight missing person coordinators provide an overview of all children missing from home within their respective areas. They review risk levels for those children reported missing and escalate any concerns to a senior officer. Coordinators also analyse patterns of routine absence to identify escalating and cumulative risk and work with partners to put in place protective plans to reduce occurrences and protect the child concerned. Force policy states that all children aged under 13 years who go missing and those who go missing 9 times in 90 days should have missing person action plans. At the time of our inspection there were 16 active missing person action plans that the coordinators were responsible for writing and monitoring.

Catch 22 conducts return home interviews in all local policing areas other than Liverpool, where the interviews are the responsibility of the local authority. The information from these interviews is sent to the missing person coordinator team and is uploaded onto police systems and used to inform future decision making. Interviews with children at this stage can provide a wealth of information about the reasons why they are running away, particularly where this is becoming more frequent and the child is reluctant to speak to police or other agencies. A better understanding of why a child has run away can provide vital information to partners and support more effective risk management and should inform planning and decision making about future safeguarding action.

We found that decision making in the JCC concerning incidents involving missing children did not have sufficient oversight. Consideration is not being given to the wider vulnerabilities faced by children, with some being classified as no apparent risk (that is, absent rather than missing) where clear indications of risk were apparent.

We reviewed the cases of 240 children and young people who had been recorded as no apparent risk between February and April 2018. We were pleased to find that none of them was younger than 13 years old, which is in line with force policy. However, we sampled 11 cases that involved children aged 14 to 16 years old and assessed 5 (45 percent) to be inappropriately classed as no apparent risk. The wider

²⁰ DVPNs may be issued by an authorised police officer to prevent a suspected perpetrator from returning to a victim's home and/or contacting the victim. Following the issue of the DVPN the police must apply to magistrates for a DVPO. The DVPO will be granted for a period of up to 28 days.

²¹ The domestic violence disclosure scheme, often referred to as Clare's Law, enables the police to disclose information about a partner's previous history of domestic abuse or violent acts.

risks to these children were not identified at the earliest opportunity and this, in turn, delayed the development of an appropriate protective plan.

A 14-year-old boy (in the care of the local authority) was reported as missing and was classified as medium risk. However, when he was reported as missing in similar circumstances less than two weeks later he was classified as no apparent risk, with the following rationale 'though young appears to be street smart, able to interact'. No reason for the change in risk assessment was recorded.

The force JCC inspector reviews all missing people to ensure action and risk is appropriate, but not those classed as no apparent risk. These cases are reviewed by a more junior manager in the JCC, meaning the force has a two-tier approach to missing children.

A 16-year-old boy living in a care home was reported as missing and was assessed as no apparent risk. He had been reported missing on 95 occasions. Since mid-February 2018 he had been reported missing 20 times; 18 of these were assessed as no apparent risk. However, he was flagged as at risk of child sexual exploitation, and an action plan considered him as high risk when missing. An escalation letter had been sent to the director for children's services for the area, because of the high number of missing incidents, identifying him as continuing to be at risk. Since the escalation letter he has been reported missing a further six times and on each occasion he has been assessed as at no apparent risk. We referred this case back to the force.

Recommendation

- Immediately, Merseyside Police should improve practice in cases of children who go missing from home. As a minimum, this should include:
 - improving staff awareness of their responsibilities for protecting children who are reported missing from home and, in particular, those cases where it is a regular occurrence; and
 - improving staff awareness of the significance of drawing together all available information from police systems, including information about people who pose a risk to children, better to inform risk assessments.

7. Investigation

We found some good examples of investigating officers demonstrating an appropriate mix of investigative and protective approaches. This combined approach is necessary to make sure that the safeguarding of children remains central to the force's efforts while criminal investigative opportunities are pursued.

A case reported as a sexual assault against a 14-year-old girl by a 15-year-old boy showed the force conducted an effective investigation. This included the early collection of potential forensic evidence, medical examinations, and arrest and interview of the suspect. A specialist officer supported the victim and contacted children's social care services to inform them of the safeguarding arrangements made after the release of the suspect from custody. The case showed strong evidence of good partnership activity, instigated and pursued primarily by the police, together with effective supervisory oversight, investigative review and structured approach to managing the investigation. The case was still in progress at the time of our review.

On 1 May 2018, Merseyside Police, the PCC and the five LSCBs introduced the new Merseyside child exploitation and missing children protocols, which have common referral, risk assessment and flagging processes. This will help all agencies follow a consistent approach. While too early to be evaluated this, like several other initiatives we saw during our inspection, underlines the force's recognition and commitment to continually improve the service it provides.

A strategic multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meeting is chaired by a detective superintendent. This is an important meeting for leaders to decide future plans and work for the agencies involved. Local MACE meetings chaired by the police and children's social care services are also held.

The force has a comprehensive child sexual exploitation policy and well-established referral processes for exploitation, which cover all of Merseyside. Concerns from police and partners are discussed at a weekly pre-MACE threshold meeting. This is good practice and improves the timeliness with which interventions can be implemented prior to the monthly MACE meeting. The force reported that between April 2017 and March 2018 there were 820 recorded cases of child sexual exploitation, of which 477 were discussed at the MACE.

The force has made significant investment in increasing the workforce's awareness of criminal exploitation. While this is positive, it is also a relatively recent development and consequently while the response officers we spoke with displayed an appropriate understanding and knowledge of the signs of child sexual exploitation and how to respond to them, they were less well informed about children at risk or subject to criminal exploitation.

We found good examples of investigations being conducted promptly and effectively, with partner agencies involved at an early stage. However, we also found a lack of evidence of joint working in some cases. In the 11 section 47 cases we reviewed, only 2 cases had clear evidence of joint visits taking place. While there will be occasions when this is appropriate we found cases where children's social care services were asked to examine a child's injuries, speak to a parent about their alcohol abuse contributing to the neglect of their children and speak to a child about an assault. These aspects relate to the investigation of crime and are the police's responsibility.

The recording of decisions and information about risk is inconsistent across the force. This makes it difficult for officers and staff to assess what is happening in cases without significant amounts of research. Investigation plans are set at the beginning of a case, which supervisors generally endorse, but they do not always record a further review or that they have oversight of the investigation.

A 14-year-old girl was at risk of child sexual exploitation from two males aged 21 and 24. The initial call to the police related to a missing episode. The force attended promptly, but the focus was on the return of the child rather than the risks these two men presented. A referral was completed which led to a multi-agency safeguarding response through the MACE meeting. Although the initial plan was for an appropriate joint visit, this had not taken place and had been left as a single agency intervention by children's social care services.

Perpetrators and victims of exploitation should be flagged on police systems. Removal of a child sexual exploitation flag due to a reduction in risk must be agreed on a multi-agency basis, which is good practice. This ensures current risk and information from agencies is understood, before any decision to remove a flag. The force's flagging of victims is generally good, but is not as consistent for identified perpetrators. The force currently has 425 active child sexual exploitation flags.

We found too many cases where safeguarding plans held on police systems were neither sufficiently detailed nor comprehensive. They did not appear to consider the cumulative effect of repeated incidents on the welfare of children, and instead took a short-term reactive approach to events. This means that there was a lack of longer-term planning to reduce risk and improve outcomes, particularly for those at risk of neglect or living within chaotic households.

Child abduction warning notices (CAWNs) are an effective way of disrupting contact between a vulnerable child and an adult where there are concerns that the child may be at risk of harm from exploitation. These notices should be considered as part of an investigation and safeguarding plan. At the time of inspection the force had 152 CAWNs in place, of which only 18 notices had been issued in the 12-month period April 2017 to March 2018. These low numbers demonstrate the limited use that is being made of them as a tactic for disruption and protection.

Merseyside Police uses intermediaries – a specially trained individual – to support vulnerable victims and witnesses to give complete, coherent and accurate evidence. This is particularly useful in helping the police to communicate effectively with child victims. Before interviewing any child, the use of an intermediary should be considered to support and help the child to give the best possible evidence and ensure that the child's views are heard. However, the force told us that delays can be encountered in obtaining the services of intermediaries which means that valuable evidence may be lost. This is a national problem, and one that we have encountered in previous inspections.

During the period January to December 2017, Merseyside Police received 1,052 invitations to attend initial child protection conferences (ICPCs) to agree a long-term safeguarding plan and attended 92 percent (970) of them. We were told that when force representatives do not attend an ICPC, a report is sent to the conference.

Recommendation

- Within three months, Merseyside Police should improve its child protection and exploitation investigations, paying particular attention to:
 - improving staff awareness, knowledge and skills in this area of work;
 - ensuring a prompt response to any concern raised;
 - undertaking risk assessments that consider the totality of a child's circumstances and risks to other children; and
 - improving the oversight and management of cases (to include auditing of child abuse and exploitation investigations to ensure that standards are being met).

8. Decision making

We found that when a case is clearly defined as a child protection matter from the outset, the police response is generally appropriate. We observed examples of effective decision making to protect children. When there are significant concerns about the safety of children, such as parents leaving young children at home alone or being drunk while looking after them, officers handle incidents well, using their powers appropriately to remove children from harm's way. It is a very serious step to remove a child from their family by way of police protection,²² and in the cases examined, decisions to take a child to a place of safety were well-considered and in the best interests of the child, despite some deficiencies in recording information relevant to the use of powers.

A member of the public reported that a neighbour was intoxicated and appeared injured. Police immediately attended the scene, located the neighbour and quickly identified that she had a two-year-old child. The mother was arrested for child neglect and taken to hospital, and the child was taken into police protection. The police contacted children's social care services who attended the scene to collect the child. The child's grandparents were found and were assessed as being suitable carers. The child remained with the grandparents, in an agreement between children's social care and the family.

Although we found some examples of investigations that had been conducted promptly and effectively, details on safeguarding and joint work are often not recorded on police systems or lack specific information about the protective plans made. The concerns and views of the child are not documented in sufficient detail to understand them. This creates a gap in available information and might mean appropriate measures are not put in place to protect and support children.

²² 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 school and a family member reported to the police that a mother was drunk while with her two children. Police officers were deployed immediately and children's social care services were informed. The police located the mother (who had a previous conviction for neglect) and the two children, who were both taken into police protection. The children were later placed with a foster carer. We did not find a documented investigation plan or evidence of supervision. Neither did we find evidence of an effective investigation being conducted – no witness statements were obtained nor was the mother interviewed. Although children's social care services were pursuing care proceedings, we found limited evidence recorded on force systems of the details of a protective plan and what, if any, joint working had taken place.

Recommendation

- Within three months, Merseyside Police should take steps to ensure that all relevant information is properly recorded and is readily accessible in all cases where there are concerns about the welfare of children. Guidance to staff should include:
 - what information should be recorded (and in what form) on systems to enable good quality decisions; and
 - the importance of ensuring that records are made promptly and kept up to date.

9. Trusted adult

We found that in some (though not all) child protection cases, officers consider carefully how best to approach a child and/or their 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 their parents or carers and police. When immediate safeguarding is needed, we found that the force works well with external organisations, family members and other people to better protect children. In the cases where this happens, the force's carefully considered and sensitive approach enables effective safeguarding outcomes for vulnerable children.

A female child reported that she was being blackmailed by a 17-year-old boy to send indecent images of herself over the internet. The police made an early referral to children's social care services, resulting in a discussion between the police and a social worker about the appropriateness of interviewing the child. Help, support and guidance were offered to both the girl and her family. This was recorded within the police systems. The police report includes the child's views and concerns, indicating they were listened to and considered during the investigation. Clear records show the family are being kept informed of the progress of the case. The investigation is very well recorded within the police system, with information cross-referenced where required. At the time we reviewed this case, the investigation was continuing.

The force has many initiatives that aim to influence children and young people's behaviour and divert them from criminal activity, as well as to help understand their concerns. This includes:

- a community engagement unit which works in partnership with the Youth Offending Service, Crown Prosecution Service and criminal justice units to help prevent the unnecessary criminalisation of young people and looked-after children;
- work with Mermaids, a charity that supports transgender children and their parents or carers;
- a police volunteer cadet programme; and
- an officer seconded to the Merseyside Fire and Rescue Service which runs a 12-week Prince's Trust team programme to help 16 to 25-year-olds back into education, training or work and keep them from the criminal justice system.

The PCC also runs a youth advisory group which meets monthly. The group has approximately 30 members from throughout the county who have a variety

of backgrounds. They discuss a broad range of matters, including how the criminal justice system deals with victims of domestic abuse, policing legislation such as stop and search and how young people are dealt with in custody. Consulting with young people about the way in which services are delivered is positive and underlines the commitment of the PCC to engage children and consider their views when commissioning and developing services.

10. Managing those posing a risk to children

Merseyside Police has a centralised team (sex offender unit – SOU) dedicated to multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)²³. Centralising the team has increased the capacity of the force to manage demand and allows a smooth transition of cases if a registered sex offender (RSO) moves address within the force area.

At the time of inspection, there were 2,256 RSOs in Merseyside and 1,769 of them were being managed within the community. Of those being managed within the community, 277 were graded as high risk and 6 as very high risk.

In January 2017, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) issued guidance that either active or reactive management approaches should be used for RSOs. Officers are trained in the use of active risk management system (ARMS)²⁴ assessments. National practice for police ARMS assessments is that they must be completed at least every 12 months or at the point of a significant event, where the circumstances are likely to result in a major change to the current overall assessment and risk management plan.

If an RSO has an ARMS assessment that indicates low levels of risk and the offender manager is satisfied they have not committed offences or presented any risk for a three-year period, the force may move from active management (where visits are required) to reactive management (for which visits do not occur).

At the time of our inspection, approximately 51 percent of offenders had received an ARMS assessment. As a result, 62 RSOs had been moved to reactive management.

The use of active and reactive management is still in its early stages. If it is used effectively, it should allow the force to ease some demand by focusing on the RSOs posing the highest risk. However, the force needs to do more work to ensure RSOs have a current ARMS assessment.

²³ 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 agencies may become involved; for example the Youth Justice Board will be responsible for the care of young offenders.

²⁴ ARMS is a structured assessment process to assess dynamic risk factors known to be associated with sexual re-offending, and protective factors known to be associated with reduced offending. It is intended to provide police and probation services with information to plan the management of convicted sex offenders in the community.

The force 'flags' RSOs on its police records management system (Niche) and the command and control system, which notifies the RSO's offender manager should they come to the notice of the force for any reason.

We found that links between the SOU and neighbourhood policing teams are underdeveloped throughout the force area. Local officers are not routinely informed about the RSOs living in their areas, other than when they are due to be released from prison or are wanted. Neighbourhood policing teams play a vital role in the development of community intelligence and so the force may be missing opportunities to gather information about those who pose a risk to children. These teams could be particularly helpful in supporting ongoing risk assessments and identifying when an offender should be moved from reactive to active management.

A charity received an anonymous call reporting a concern for the safety of three children. Officers attended, saw the children and found the house to be clean, warm and well stocked with food. The mother of the children was at the address, along with a female RSO who stated she only stayed at the address once a week. The attending officer recorded that they believed the call to be malicious. However, the records do not show whether the officer knew the visitor was an RSO. A vulnerable person referral form was completed with a recommendation of no further action. The RSO's index offence was not against young children, but did involve a level of manipulation of younger people. The SOU supervisor reviewing the incident identified that the original call may not have been malicious. The RSO was later visited by the offender manager. Further intelligence indicated that the RSO may have been supplying drugs to children, encouraging them into a 'den' in a park and exploiting them. This intelligence was dealt with by neighbourhood officers who executed a warrant at the home of the RSO. It should have been part of a wider risk management plan involving communication between the SOU and local officers to manage the risks. Although the drug dealing may not relate to sexual offending, it brings the RSO into contact with children who are put at risk of potential harm. This should be considered as part of the continuing assessment of risk. In this case the risk management plan was not updated as additional information became known.

At the time of our inspection, the ratio of RSOs to offender managers was approximately 100:1, which is significantly higher than what is considered reasonable (approximately 50:1). This creates potential additional risk, both in terms of managing these offenders effectively and in maintaining the wellbeing of the workforce. In addition, we found that the force had 98 visits to RSOs, including those assessed as high risk, that were overdue. However, the violent and sex offender register (ViSOR) data indicate that the number of outstanding visits was far higher than this. We informed the force during the inspection advising that it needed to investigate this mismatch in the data on outstanding visits to RSOs and must make sure it is fully aware of the risk.

As numbers of RSOs increase, collecting and disseminating intelligence about them and managing them appropriately becomes increasingly demanding. Although the ViSOR team is well resourced to provide effective administrative support to the offender managers, those managers reported limited opportunities to be proactive because of the high numbers of RSOs. At the time of our inspection, the force was in the process of recruiting two new members of staff for the SOU.

In our review of cases, we found that the quality of risk management plans for RSOs was inconsistent. Plans that are tailored to the RSO were of a good standard, however, some plans contained limited analysis of an individual's circumstances and no specific detail of what is being done to manage the risk.

We found some examples of the force providing effective safeguarding and working proactively.

The police received a call from the father of an RSO, raising concerns that the RSO was in a relationship with someone believed to be 16 years old. The force responded swiftly to the safeguarding concerns raised by the relevant agencies. The police and children's social care services worked together to protect the child and to increase the protective factors relevant to the RSO to try to reduce his risk. The child took part in assessments and was told about the risks posed by the RSO. At the time of our review, the case was continuing.

It is also positive to note that the force uses civil orders (sexual harm prevention orders and sexual offences prevention orders) to protect the public and restrict RSOs, limiting their ability to commit further offences. There are currently 1,157 offenders who have an order to help manage them. The SOU also manages a small number of people (who are not RSOs) who are the subject of sexual risk orders.

The force has an abusive image unit (AIU) which is a proactive team investigating the sharing and distribution of indecent images of children online. This team also deals with referrals from the National Crime Agency's child exploitation and online protection command. At the time of our inspection, there were 28 cases awaiting development which the force reviewed weekly.

Staff within the AIU regularly release those suspected of committing an offence from custody while a criminal investigation is ongoing. Currently police bail is put in place for a brief period until children's social care can develop and implement a safeguarding plan at which point the suspect is 'released under investigation'. As part of this plan suspects are asked to agree to a voluntary set of conditions, overseen by children's social care, intended to limit their access to children. The force does not currently use its power to extend statutory bail conditions and as a result does not have enforceable restrictions in place to limit access to children for those who may pose a risk. This is not an intended or appropriate use of the 'released under investigation' category.

Recommendation

- Within three months, Merseyside Police should:
 - review its approach to providing appropriate information on registered sex offenders to response and neighbourhood officers;
 - ensure that the risks posed by registered sex offenders are managed effectively; and
 - review the accuracy of the data held on ViSOR in relation to overdue visits.

11. Police detention

Many children brought into police custody have complex needs and are likely to be vulnerable and in need of safeguarding support. In many cases a referral to children's social care services is warranted. However, in our review of case files we did not find any recorded evidence of referral forms submitted for children in custody.

The force has a daily custody management meeting where current concerns are discussed, focused primarily on vulnerability. In addition, when a child is detained overnight before or after being charged, or for longer than 15 hours, an inspector must review the detention log and provide a reason for any delays. Inspectors are also required to dip-sample detention logs every month to check compliance with the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE)²⁵ and other areas such as welfare.

The force also has a custody scrutiny panel that meets every other month, which it introduced in January 2018. Minutes examined from this meeting indicate it is well supported by partners and is attended by a director of children's services, representatives from the LSCB and the police and the youth offending team. Its purpose is to examine the arrest and custody of children and young people in Merseyside.

Healthcare practitioners and a mental health team provide services to detainees in the force custody centres. They have access to medical records, which can help to safeguard children in police custody. They ask the detained child if they have any concerns and if necessary undertake a mental health assessment. We found that healthcare practitioners and the mental health team regularly meet with children in custody, but this is not being recorded consistently on the detention log. The advice provided by these professionals influences the risk assessment and care provided to a child and should be documented.

We also found a consistent weakness in safeguarding children in police custody, in that children are not receiving early support from appropriate adults. PACE guidance states that once an appropriate adult is identified, they should be asked to attend the custody centre as soon as practicable. However, in most of the cases we examined, we found 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 of their overall welfare needs, rights and entitlements. This can lead to significant delays in a child seeing someone other than the police.

²⁵ More information on PACE is available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/pace-code-c-2017

A 14-year-old boy was arrested on suspicion of robbery. His parents arrived at the police station but were not allowed to see their son until an interpreter arrived, some 13 hours after his detention was authorised. He then received information on his rights and entitlements. During one welfare check the boy was found crying, but there was no documented consideration of allowing the appropriate adult to speak with him. The boy was later charged.

A 17-year-old boy seen acting suspiciously was found to be in possession of a knife. He was arrested and taken to police custody. Shortly after his detention was authorised, concerns were raised about his mental health. The boy's father was contacted, but he refused to have the child returned to the family home. We did not find any documented evidence of contact with children's social care services and no record of an appropriate adult attending for the boy's rights and entitlements. He later received a full mental health assessment and was detained in custody as a place of safety while a secure bed was found. He remained in custody for over 28 hours.

If, when charged with an offence, a child is to be denied bail and detained, the local authority is responsible for providing appropriate accommodation. Only in exceptional circumstances (such as during extreme weather) would the transfer of the child to alternative 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 needed.

We found that custody officers and staff have a good understanding of the conditions under which bail can be denied and of the police and local authority's responsibility to seek, and be provided with, appropriate alternative accommodation in those cases where bail is considered unsuitable.²⁶ However, when the local authority fails to find appropriate alternative accommodation, this is not always challenged or escalated in order to seek a resolution. This results in children being unnecessarily detained in police custody.

²⁶ Under section 38(6) of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, a custody officer must secure the move of a child to local authority accommodation unless he certifies it is impracticable to do so or, for those aged 12 or over, no secure accommodation is available and local authority accommodation would not be adequate to protect the public from serious harm from him.

A 17-year-old boy was arrested on suspicion of possession with intent to supply controlled drugs. During his detention, he said that he had consumed five ecstasy tablets. There was no documented evidence in the case file that this was acted on, with either a referral to a healthcare practitioner or a revised risk assessment. Attendance of an appropriate adult was arranged to coincide with the interview 12 hours after detention was first authorised. The boy was charged and bail was refused. The children's social care services emergency duty team was contacted, but it advised that no accommodation was available. There was no documented evidence of escalation to or by an inspector. A juvenile detention certificate was completed, but there was no record of a vulnerable person referral form being submitted.

Juvenile detention certificates, which outline to a court the reason for a custodial remand, are essential for police accountability and enable forces to monitor how well they are discharging their responsibilities under PACE. We found these certificates, where required, are in most cases completed correctly and held electronically within the force's records management system (Niche).

Recommendation

- Within six months, Merseyside Police should undertake a review (jointly with children's social care services and other relevant agencies) of how it manages the detention of children. This review should include, as a minimum, how best to:
 - ensure that all children are only detained when absolutely necessary and for the absolute minimum amount of time;
 - ensure that custody staff appropriately record the decisions made and action taken while children are detained;
 - assess, at an early stage, the need for alternative accommodation (secure or otherwise) and work with children's social care services to achieve the best option for the child; and
 - improve the timeliness of appropriate adult support for children who are arrested.

Conclusion

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

Senior leaders in Merseyside Police demonstrate a clear commitment to making sure that child protection and safeguarding is a priority for the force. The force is working hard to improve its workforce's awareness of vulnerability and wider child exploitation. However, there is as yet no evidence of consistent improvements in outcomes for all vulnerable children.

It is important that senior leaders can test the nature and quality of decision making, and what that means for children. Current performance processes do not place sufficient emphasis on this. A framework that focuses on the outcomes for children who need protection would help the force to enhance its understanding of outcomes and make sure that service provision is in line with their expectations.

In the force's own case file audits, carried out before our inspection, it identified gaps in service provision. The force has taken action to improve these areas, which is a clear demonstration of its responsiveness and the importance it places on such matters.

Senior officers work well with partner agencies and LSCBs in all the local authorities in Merseyside. This is helping the force explore opportunities to reduce the number of groups and meetings that require police attendance. The force is also involved in a review of the current MASH model in Merseyside to provide improved consistency in its management and response to child notifications.

We found many good examples of Merseyside Police engaging with children and young people, such as through the police cadet programme, mini police (involving primary school children) and schools' officers. However, we found that further work is required to ensure that the decisions made about and for children take account of their views and consider carefully the impact on them.

We also found some good examples of individual officers responding to incidents of concern involving children protecting those in need of help through a child-centred approach. Despite this, there are inconsistencies and areas for improvement that we have identified in our review of cases, which the force needs to address to make sure all children are safeguarded appropriately.

Our recommendations aim to help the force make improvements in these areas. The force has demonstrated its commitment to children during our inspection. It has reviewed its practice and responded to emerging risks. We are therefore confident that the force is working to improve both its support for, and engagement with, those children who need help and protection.

Next steps

Within six weeks of the publication of this report, HMICFRS will require an update of the action the force has taken to respond to the recommendations that should be acted on immediately.

Merseyside Police should also provide an action plan within six weeks of the publication of this report to specify how it intends to respond to the other recommendations made in this report.

Subject to the update and action plan received, we will revisit Merseyside 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 agencies 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*²⁷. 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.

²⁷ *Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, HM Government, March 2015, available at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2

Methods

- Self-assessment – practice, and management and leadership.
- Case inspections.
- Discussions with officers and staff from within the police and from other agencies.
- 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 in need of help and protection, e.g. children being neglected;
- information-sharing and discussions about children 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.

Term	Definition
child	person under the age of 18 years
multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA)	mechanism through which local criminal justice agencies (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 well-being; agencies that attend vary, but are likely to include the police, probation, children's, health and housing services; over 250 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 coordinating 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 about 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