

PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (Vulnerability)

An inspection of Bedfordshire Police



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Vulnerability in numbers



Calls for assistance

Calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

200

350

Domestic abuse calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

16.7

15.8



Crime

Crimes recorded per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

60.7

61.6

Change in recorded crimes (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

+7.8%

+2.2%

Percentage of total crimes recorded (excluding fraud) as having a vulnerable victim 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

17.2%

10.7%

Percentage of total crimes recorded as domestic abuse 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

10.9%

10.0%

Change in domestic abuse recorded crime 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

+37.3%

+20.8%



Domestic abuse arrest rate

Number of domestic abuse arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

72

66



Charge rate

Charge rate as a percentage of all crimes recorded (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

13.8%

16.6%

Domestic abuse charge rate as a percentage of all domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

19.5%

27.3%



Victim satisfaction rate

Victim satisfaction rate 12 months to 31 March 2015

Bedfordshire Police

England and Wales

82.4%

83.8%

Data: for full details on the data used in this graphic see annex A in the vulnerability national report.

Introduction

The public expects their local police force to support victims of crime by responding to calls for help, putting in place the right support and keeping them informed. It is particularly important that vulnerable people, whether or not they have been a victim of crime, are identified early and receive the support they need.

As part of its annual inspections into police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL), HMIC's effectiveness programme assessed how well forces keep people safe and reduce crime. Within this programme, HMIC's vulnerability inspection examined the overall question, 'How effective are forces at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?' We have considered in depth how forces respond to and support missing and absent children and victims of domestic abuse, and assessed how well prepared forces are to respond to and safeguard children at risk of sexual exploitation.

We have looked at four areas:

- How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?
- How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?
- How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?
- How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent children & victims of domestic abuse); and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?

At the heart of this inspection is the protection of people who are vulnerable. A force may therefore be judged as requiring improvement by HMIC where it exhibits shortcomings in one of these areas, even if its performance in other areas is strong, and even if there are many elements of its service that HMIC considers to be good.

This inspection follows up our 2014 domestic abuse inspection and reviews forces' progress on implementation of their action plans following that inspection. A national domestic abuse report summarising the findings across 43 forces is being published at the same time as this report.

During our inspection we collected data and plans from forces, conducted a review of case files and observed multi-agency meetings. We heard from victims of domestic abuse through a number of focus groups across England and Wales and conducted an online survey with practitioners, including Independent Domestic Violence Advocates, outreach and refuge workers, to gauge views on what has changed since the 2014 inspection and inform local practitioner focus groups.

During the in-force inspection, we interviewed chief officers in each force and held focus groups with officers, staff and partners, and made unannounced visits to police stations, force control rooms and specialist teams. We also worked with the force missing person coordinator (or equivalent) to review cases of missing and absent children, including children considered to be 'repeat absent' and 'repeat missing' and children shown to be at risk of child sexual exploitation.

All forces are subject to significant cost reductions and these issues have been reflected in our efficiency reports published in October 2015. The judgments we are making in this vulnerability report are made understanding the financial challenges forces are facing.

This report sets out the findings from this wide-ranging inspection of Bedfordshire Police.

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

Summary



Inadequate

HMIC found that there are weaknesses in the way Bedfordshire Police protects and supports people who are vulnerable. Although we found improvements in these services since last year, particularly for victims of domestic abuse, there remain weaknesses in the way risks are assessed and the way in which the police response is provided. The force needs to make improvements in several areas, most notably in its unreliable and ineffective processes for dealing with missing children and young people. Given the significant risk that the weaknesses pose to some of the most vulnerable people, HMIC judges that overall the force is inadequate.

HMIC acknowledges that Bedfordshire Police has a strong commitment to protecting people. It has reorganised the way it provides policing and invested additional resources to improve services to the public. It has focused particularly on providing extra staff in specialist teams, such as those tackling child sexual exploitation, and domestic abuse, to improve the police response to those who are vulnerable and keep them safe. The force is to be commended for this, especially as the force faces a greater challenge than many other forces in responding to the required budget reductions in this era of austerity.

However, the force needs to go further and improve its approach to identifying risk and the nature of a victim's vulnerability at an early stage so that it can have confidence that it is consistently providing the right response to manage the risk, support and protect people. The force has prioritised THRIVE training for control room staff and most of them have received training. Although still in its infancy, HMIC found the assessment model was not working effectively and the right people were not always sent to deal with the right incidents, or, indeed sent at all. Action is required to ensure the risk to victims is reliably assessed and those deemed vulnerable adequately safeguarded.

The force also needs to ensure that the frontline officers in the new community teams have the appropriate skills and are trained to provide the right tailored response to vulnerable people, ensure they are properly safeguarded and that crimes against them are properly investigated.

The force's response to missing and absent children is poor. HMIC found that too many children are recorded as absent instead of missing and therefore considered to be at 'no risk'.¹ This means that opportunities to protect vulnerable children or, for example, to identify a potential risk of sexual exploitation, may be missed. Even where children are recorded as missing there are weak processes in place including no clear ownership or understanding of who progresses the investigation. The exception to this is that those identified as high risk receive a better service. However, a poor approach to the initial risk assessment means that the force cannot be confident that risks are properly understood and managed. Joint work with partner organisations on high risk missing children is effective.

The force investigates effectively crime which is committed against victims who are assessed as facing the highest risk. In general, the right level of investigative expertise is assigned to cases based on the complexity of investigation. The force has recently introduced a new policing model, which has changed the structure of the force and is intended to better match resources against demand. However, HMIC found that the implementation of the new policing model is extremely problematic with investigative opportunities and immediate safeguarding opportunities being missed and therefore failing to provide tailored support in both missing and absent persons and domestic abuse investigations.

Bedfordshire Police is in the early stages of preparing to tackle child sexual exploitation. It should continue to build upon its approach to ensure consistent operational practice.

Bedfordshire Police is to be commended for having taken immediate action to address the concerns highlighted during this inspection. The force has stopped risk assessing domestic abuse victims over the phone, and has developed a plan to improve officer and staff understanding of risk to better protect and safeguard vulnerable people, particularly children.

Because of the serious causes of concern arising from this inspection, HMIC expects Bedfordshire Police to provide evidence, by 31 January 2016, of its progress in addressing HMIC's recommendations. HMIC will then review the progress of Bedfordshire Police in advance of its autumn inspection and will publish its findings on whether Bedfordshire Police has improved.

¹ A person is classified as absent if they are not where they are expected to be but they are not considered at risk. Whereas, if they are classified as missing the police are obliged to take steps to locate them, as the level of perceived risk is higher.

How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?

Bedfordshire Police needs to improve the way that it identifies repeat and vulnerable victims.

HMIC found there is a strong commitment to improving the service provided to vulnerable people. Protecting vulnerable people is a priority within the police and crime commissioner's (PCC) 2015 police and crime plan, along with an explicit commitment to ensure that children at risk of sexual exploitation get the protection they need. The chief officer team is providing leadership on what needs to change in order to translate the plan into improved practice by frontline officers and staff. The force recognises that it needs to be able to identify correctly vulnerable people and then respond with a service designed to best meet their particular needs.

Identifying those who are vulnerable

Staff in the force control room who answer 999 calls are trained to spot the signs of someone who might be vulnerable and to ensure that the right response is initiated. However, the force has not yet trained all frontline staff and this means that processes to identify vulnerable people are unreliable and ineffective. Opportunities to identify vulnerable people may be missed, and the risks they face are not properly assessed and managed.

We found weaknesses in the way the force initially assesses calls. The computer system used by call-takers does not automatically flag up that the caller is already known to the police as a vulnerable person. A separate system must be accessed manually to check if the caller or the address is known and whether there are any vulnerability indicators. As a result, the previous history of a caller may not be identified reliably when a call is received and therefore the risk poorly understood. This means that the call-taker may not give the response the priority it needs and the response officers will not be fully aware of the situation when they make their judgments on risk and safeguarding at the scene. Together with Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire constabularies the force is due to implement a new crime and intelligence system in 2016 which is expected to address this issue.

Forces define vulnerability in different ways. The majority of forces use either the definition from the government's Code of Practice for Victims of Crime² or that

² *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*, Ministry of Justice, 2013. Available from www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254459/code-of-practice-victims-of-crime.pdf

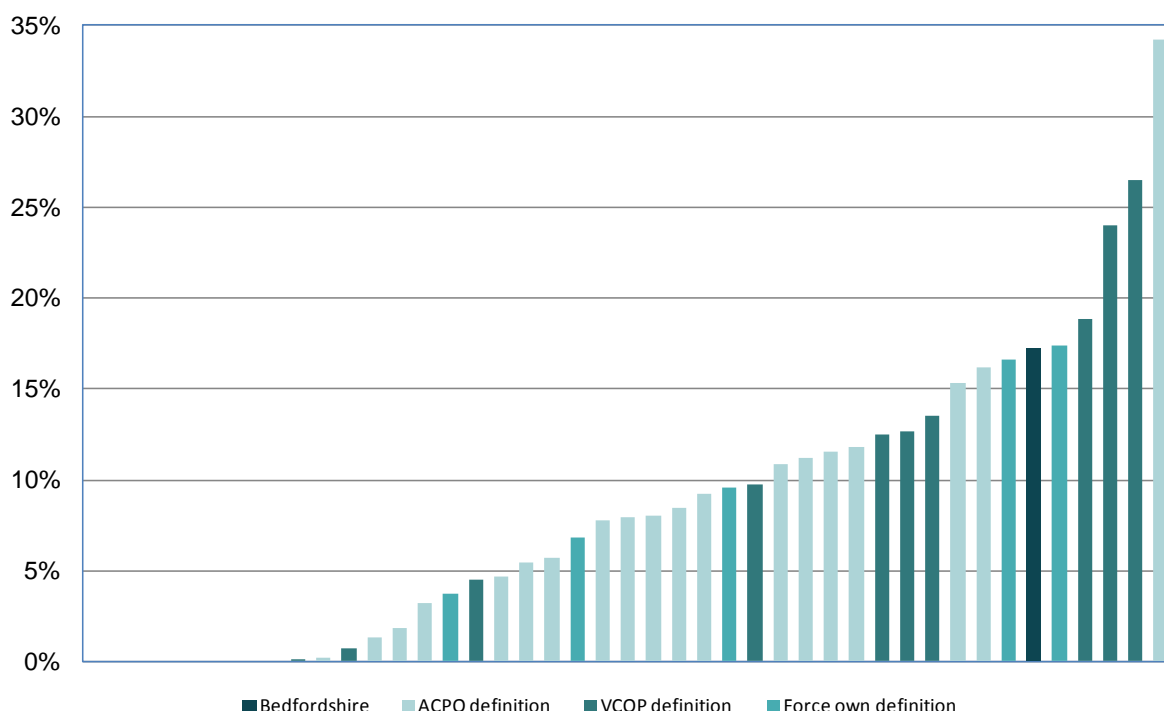
referred to in ACPO guidance.³ Nine forces use their own definition or a combination of these definitions.

Bedfordshire uses the definition from the ACPO guidance and defines a vulnerable adult as:

“Any person aged 18 years or over who is or may be in need of community care services by reason of mental, physical, or learning disability, age or illness AND is or may be unable to take care of him or herself or unable to protect him or herself against significant harm or exploitation.”

The proportion of crime recorded which involves a vulnerable victim varies considerably between forces, from 0.03 percent to 34.3 percent. For the 12 months to 31 March 2015, 17.2 percent of all recorded crimes in Bedfordshire police were identified as involving a vulnerable victim. Eight forces were unable to provide this data at the time of data collection. There is no standard way in which forces are required to record on crime recording systems whether a victim is vulnerable and forces do this differently.

Figure 1: The proportion of police recorded crime with a vulnerable victim identified, by force. For the 12 months to 31 March 2015.



Source: HMIC data return

³ The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) is now the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). *ACPO Guidance on Safeguarding and Investigating the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults*, NPIA, 2012. Available from www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/vulnerable-adults/

Assessing levels of risk and need

The force's approach to assessing the levels of risk victims face and what is needed to keep them safe is inadequate and urgently needs to improve.

Together with its collaborative partners (Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire constabularies), Bedfordshire Police has introduced a structured assessment to be used by call takers based on the level of threat, harm and risk posed by the incident. This is known as THRIVE (threat; harm; risk; investigation; vulnerability and engagement). The approach provides the staff receiving calls for police attendance with a way of making a decision about the relative risk to the individual victim, the level of threat, and the opportunities to investigate a crime. This enables the police response to be more aligned to the risk and threat to the victim. Bedfordshire is the first of the collaborated forces to implement THRIVE in preparation for the implementation of its new policing model in June 2015 and the future collaboration between the public contact centres across the three forces.

Key to the success of the new policing model is the understanding and application of the THRIVE assessment process. The majority of calls for service are received either through the force control room or the front offices across the county. The force has prioritised THRIVE training for control room staff and most of them have received training. Although still in its infancy, HMIC found the assessment model was not working effectively and action is required to ensure the risk to victims were reliably assessed and those deemed vulnerable adequately safeguarded.

Local leadership teams review incidents at the daily management meeting to ensure the risk assessment is appropriate and that the right investigative and safeguarding action is being put in place. However, the lack of understanding and training among staff means that risk is poorly assessed and therefore the right people are not always sent to deal with the right incidents, or, indeed sent at all. Bedfordshire Police should ensure that staff understand THRIVE and that they are capable of applying it consistently and effectively.

Bedfordshire Police has recently reviewed its approach to dealing with people with mental health problems in order to find ways to ensure services better meet their needs.

Understanding the risk to victims and ensuring they are protected and supported

In terms of providing services that best meet the victim's needs, Bedfordshire Police understands the requirements of some vulnerable groups better than others.

The force is improving its understanding of, and response to, people who are vulnerable because of domestic abuse. HMIC found significant weaknesses in the way the force dealt with the risk faced by victims of domestic abuse at its last inspection in 2014. Since then the force has reorganised the way it deals with victims and investigates crimes related to domestic abuse; it has put more staff into its specialist domestic abuse teams and provided more clarity about who is responsible for which victims.

The understanding of, and response to, the needs of missing and absent children is poor. HMIC has serious concerns about the force's current approach to the high number of children in care who, when they go missing, are recorded as absent and categorised as 'no risk'. The weaknesses in these processes mean there is very limited action being taken to understand the reasons behind the absence or to identify if these children are facing any risk while they are absent.

The force is still developing its approach to tackling child sexual exploitation, and it is undertaking a comprehensive analysis of information, including that of partner organisations, to understand better the scale and nature of the problem in Bedfordshire and Luton, so that it can develop an effective response. It has recently completed a self-assessment review of progress against its own action plan and identified the gaps that it needs to address.

In order to provide the most appropriate support to vulnerable victims, the force has invested more resource in the parts of its organisation which work to keep them safe. This has led to the positive step of the creation of several new teams and structures.

This includes a new specialist domestic abuse team, which brings together staff responsible for safeguarding victims with those who carry out specialist investigations into crimes against vulnerable victims. In addition there is a new dedicated child sexual exploitation team, which includes a post funded jointly with partner organisations.

The force has increased work in schools across the county, to raise awareness about staying safe online, sexting and developing healthy relationships to prevent children from placing themselves at risk or becoming victims of crime.

How well does the force initially respond to vulnerable victims?⁴

Bedfordshire Police's response to vulnerable victims is poor. Its processes are weak with poor levels of understanding amongst staff and a lack of a proper risk assessment which means that the force sometimes fails to identify the correct response. Vulnerable victims are not receiving the appropriate response from the police that addresses their needs.

Response officers

Bedfordshire Police officers who respond to vulnerable people are sympathetic and are generally knowledgeable about what makes someone vulnerable. Those attending domestic abuse incidents can refer to a checklist to ensure that the assessment of risk is done properly. The force has provided a useful booklet for officers to leave with a victim that contains details of where to access specialist support services, the victim's police reference number, the officer's contact information, and the result of the risk assessment. This ensures that the victim understands what action has been taken by the officer to keep them safe and where they might go for additional support.

Frontline officers are aware of the immediate safeguarding options available to them for victims. These include installation of panic alarms, allocation of mobile phones, increased home security through the bobby scheme⁵ and the facility to immediately relocate vulnerable victims. They also know where to go for specialist advice in relation to other types of incidents (such as child sexual exploitation).

Supervision of the response to vulnerable victims

Not all supervisors have been trained in the new risk assessment process and as a result there is an unreliable and ineffective approach to the scrutiny of risk assessments. This means that the quality of the investigation, handover and risk assessment is also inconsistent and therefore the quality of the service to victims, especially in domestic abuse cases, still requires improvement.

⁴ The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks "How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?" HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the initial response to vulnerable victims, rather than the overall police response to vulnerable victims.

⁵ 'Bobby scheme' is a crime prevention charity which can provide victim's homes with added security measures including locks/bolts/better lighting/alarms.

How well does the force investigate offences involving vulnerable victims and work with partners to keep victims safe?⁶

Bedfordshire Police has responded well to addressing the weaknesses found during HMIC's domestic abuse inspection in 2014, in particular its response to high-risk victims of domestic abuse. Implementing the action plan has improved the way the force provides services to keep victims safe. Partner organisations also recognise the improvement, particularly the force's increased emphasis on prioritising risk and vulnerability.

Investigation of crimes involving vulnerable people

HMIC examined 40 crime investigation files,⁷ in some of which vulnerable victims were identified. HMIC also interviewed investigators in specialist investigative units and frontline officers who are allocated crimes for investigation.

Generally, staff with the right investigative skills are allocated to cases involving a vulnerable person, and the resulting investigations are of a good standard, and clearly focused on the needs of the victim.

The force is using specialist officers and staff to safeguard and protect victims. Staff working within these units either have the appropriate level of training or are working towards it. However, some of the generalist staff who do not work within the unit and provide the initial response to reports of rape or sexual offences (known as rape first contact officers), and the specialist staff who interview vulnerable victims and witnesses are not appropriately trained to deal with such vulnerable victims. This means that victims may not consistently get tailored support from the force. HMIC also found evidence of untrained agency staff carrying out tasks more appropriately dealt with by specialists. The force should assure itself that it only uses appropriately trained staff that can routinely recognise need and ensure appropriate support is given.

The investigations into crimes against vulnerable victims, undertaken by specialist staff are well planned, and there is evidence of effective checking and supervision. However, records of supervisory activity are not always updated in a timely manner.

⁶ The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks "How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?" HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the investigation of offences involving vulnerable victims, rather than the police's initial response to vulnerable victims.

⁷ HMIC reviewed a sample of rape, burglary, offences of serious violence and actual bodily harm cases. In most forces the review consisted of 10 cases from each crime category but in some larger forces the sample was increased to 15. The file review was designed to provide a broad overview of the identification of vulnerability and the effectiveness of the investigation.

In some of the specialist safeguarding teams, officers are struggling to cope with their level of work.

The force should ensure the use of specialist staff remains aligned to public protection demand and they are not abstracted to deal with other generalist investigations.

Compliance with the code of practice for victims of crime

All police forces have a statutory duty to comply with the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime. The code sets out the service that victims of crime can expect from all organisations, including the police, who have a role in the criminal justice system.

Not all victims of crime in Bedfordshire are being offered the opportunity to make a victim personal statement, explaining how the crime has affected them, as set out in the code of practice.⁸ This is a victim's right, can add weight to prosecution evidence and help both to secure a successful outcome and make it clear to the offender the consequences and gravity of their behaviour. The force should make sure this is explained and offered consistently, and in good time.

Victims should also be kept updated about the progress of their case. Generally, Bedfordshire Police does this well. We found evidence of frequent force contact with the victim and updates at key points with bail and charge decisions.

Working with partners

There is a range of positive work between the police and partner organisations across Bedfordshire and Luton to protect those who are vulnerable and support victims. This includes both other public services and those provided by the voluntary sector. The force works closely with the voluntary sector to share information and to support and safeguard victims and is able to refer vulnerable victims to independent domestic abuse and sexual assault advisors.

The force and its partner organisations are in the early stages of developing their response to identify mental health issues at the first point of contact and to improve the joint response to vulnerable people.

⁸ The victim personal statement (VPS) gives victims an opportunity to describe the wider effects of the crime upon them, express their concerns and indicate whether or not they require support. Provisions relating to the making of a VPS and its use in criminal proceedings are included in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victims Code), which was published on 29 October 2013 and came into force on 10 December 2013.

The force also works through an established multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)⁹ serving the Luton local authority area, bringing principal professionals together to ensure information about vulnerable victims is shared quickly and decisions are made to safeguard children as quickly as possible. It recognises the value of this joint working in improving the safeguarding and protection of vulnerable victims and is working with partners across Bedfordshire to develop this approach. The force has recently set up a single MASH that covers both Bedford borough and Central Bedfordshire council areas.

Multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASHs)

HMIC found that there is effective work carried out through the Luton MASH to provide immediate and appropriate safeguarding advice to frontline officers to protect vulnerable victims. The newer Bedfordshire MASH is showing effective joint working as well. Grouping together police and partner organisations enables closer and more effective working, risk assessment and safeguarding arrangements.

There is multi-agency representation in the MASHs, however gaps remain. HMIC noted that police supervisors remain located with the force public protection unit rather than in the MASH and representatives from education services are not co-located with the other agencies. This limits the effectiveness of the MASH approach. The force is clearly determined to establish a fully functioning MASH in all areas of the force to share information about vulnerable children and adults, and needs to continue to work with partners to ensure that all are engaged.

Referrals to social services in all three local authority areas where there are concerns regarding child protection are made directly from the public protection unit and the specialist domestic abuse investigation unit. There are different referral arrangements in each of the areas. We found examples of inconsistent practice and of child protection referrals not being made. This means that the force cannot be confident that all vulnerable children receive the services they need to keep them safe.

⁹ A multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) brings together into a single location principal safeguarding agencies to better identify risks to children (and in some areas, vulnerable adults), and improve decision-making, interventions, and outcomes. The MASH enables the multi-agency team to share all appropriate information in a secure environment, and ensure that the most appropriate response is provided to effectively safeguard and protect the individual.

The force actively participates in multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)¹⁰ with professionals from other bodies in order to safeguard those considered to be at the highest risk of harm. As part of the inspection, HMIC observed a risk assessment conference and found good participation by those present with clear evidence that the MARAC was effectively safeguarding victims and children through information sharing and joint action planning.

How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent & victims of domestic abuse), and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?

The first three questions have explained how Bedfordshire Police identifies vulnerable people, the response that is provided to them and what action the force takes to investigate crimes and to work with partners to keep them safe. This question looks specifically at how Bedfordshire Police deals with three specific areas of vulnerability: domestic abuse, missing and absent children and its preparedness to deal with child sexual exploitation.

Missing and absent children

The force's approach to managing missing and absent children is poor. The police treat cases of people who are missing from home more seriously and with greater urgency than those who are considered to be absent. The assumption is that an absent person is expected to return of their own accord without the need for a police investigation. Approximately four out of five children who go missing in Bedfordshire are classified as absent as opposed to missing. In Bedfordshire absent children are considered to be at 'no risk'. This is in part as a result of the agreement with the local authority that missing children from care will automatically be classified as absent in the first instance. Only if they fail to return after an agreed period will they be reassessed as missing and a proper investigation will begin. This means that the force may be missing opportunities to properly protect and safeguard children in care, who are among the most vulnerable. This approach is at odds with the newly adopted THRIVE principles, which recognises that risk should be assessed on an individual basis and the police response tailored accordingly.

The force has taken some positive steps to increase the level of understanding and an awareness of a potential risk of sexual exploitation faced by young people who regularly go missing. There is some good engagement with partner organisations which includes the multi-agency missing person and young people panel and the

¹⁰ MARACs (multi-agency risk assessment conferences) – local meetings where information about high-risk domestic abuse victims (those at risk of murder or serious harm) is shared between local agencies.

child sexual exploitation panel. These both provide the opportunity to identify the risks of the child being groomed for child sexual exploitation, and to address them appropriately for missing children. However HMIC is concerned that for this large number of absent children who are in care, the force's processes for assessing the risks they face are weak. They are also not carrying out proactive enquiries or a 'return interview'. The police response is poor, because of the lack of safeguarding and tailored support for vulnerable children and young people, and the missed opportunity to obtain information or intelligence to identify potential risks in terms of child sexual exploitation.

HMIC is disappointed to find that, on occasions, officers are making judgments that a child who is perceived as 'streetwise' faces less risk than one who is not. This indicates a lack of understanding and recognition of risk and vulnerability. Although the force has provided some training, more should be done to ensure all staff are properly assessing risk and acting accordingly.

There is also a lack of clarity among staff about who is responsible for missing person's investigations. The force needs to be clear about who leads and supervises an investigation and the role other departments play in supporting the person's safe return. The police should conclude their enquiries with a visit to the person after they have been found, this is known as a 'safe and well check'. Though this is a vital component of any enquiry, these checks are not being carried out in Bedfordshire in every case. This means the force is not seizing an important opportunity to identify the reason why a person went missing and, together with partners, put in place an effective plan to safeguard the individual and prevent them from going missing or absent again.

There is a specialist missing person unit which is well-resourced with experienced and dedicated staff that oversee all children and adults reported as missing or absent, and provide advice and guidance to frontline staff on assessing risk and progressing investigations. However, HMIC is concerned to find examples where missing children have been incorrectly recorded as absent, which means that the level of risk is not recognised routinely and therefore inadequate action is taken.

The force is in the process of undertaking a comprehensive analysis of the issues associated with missing and absent children and is currently working with partner organisations to include their data to gain a better joint understanding.

Preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation

The force has made some progress in ensuring it is prepared to tackle child sexual exploitation. This inspection has focused on actions and activities the force has taken to understand and identify the extent to which children are at risk of child sexual exploitation and the policies, practices and procedures it is putting in place to tackle it. It did not test the quality of how the force conducted these complex

investigations with other agencies such as children's services as these issues are covered in HMIC's rolling programme of child protection inspections.¹¹

Child sexual exploitation is recognised by all staff as a force priority and there are several examples of specific police operations to tackle the problem. Where suspected offenders of child sexual exploitation have been identified, concerted action has been taken to deal with them.

The force does not currently have a full understanding of child sexual exploitation in Bedfordshire and Luton. It has analysed police data to better understand the nature and scale of the problem but recognises that this is of limited value without the inclusion of partner organisations' data. Further work has been commissioned to complete the analysis.

The force has set up a child sexual exploitation unit consisting of a detective sergeant, four detective constables, a dedicated intelligence officer and a dedicated communications officer. HMIC is concerned that the unit is being used to respond to child abuse cases rather than child sexual exploitation and therefore the capacity of the unit is being diminished. The force should review the allocation of work to the unit, particularly in light of the implementation of the new operating model.

There is an increased level of awareness of child sexual exploitation issues throughout the force, through campaigns such as 'Say something if you see something'. Intelligence submissions from staff have increased from two or three a month to 100. The lead chief officer with responsibility for this area sits on the police's national child sexual exploitation working group.

Bedfordshire Police has provided child sexual exploitation training to investigators. Development work for child sexual exploitation is at an early stage, mainly focused around publicity and promotion. For example, Crimestoppers funding is being used to produce leaflets and run a press day, sharing ideas and material from other forces to launch a campaign. The force is working with a local university to improve engagement with young people and this will culminate in a children's conference.

There has been limited work completed in terms of identifying child sexual exploitation linked to organised crime gangs and therefore the force has not found any instances of where this is happening. Much more needs to be done to learn from other forces in terms of how the force can prepare to tackle child sexual exploitation.

Bedfordshire Police should build upon these approaches to ensure that child sexual exploitation risk is identified at an early stage and that continuing investigation and

¹¹ HMIC's National Child Protection Inspections, available from www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmic/our-work/child-abuse-and-child-protection-issues/national-child-protection-inspection/

protection of the young people involved is carried out by staff with the right level of expertise, working in partnership with the right agencies.

HMIC is encouraged to see that the force has recently carried out an assessment of its progress in tackling child sexual exploitation and it has identified a number of areas that need improving.

Domestic abuse

Investigating domestic abuse crime is a priority for Bedfordshire Police and it has made good progress in improving this area of work following previous inspections. HMIC had serious concerns following the domestic abuse inspection in 2014 and a subsequent re-visit soon after did not allay these concerns. During October and December 2014, HMIC conducted further re-visits and found very early signs of improvement. Further details are contained within the public report published in May 2015. HMIC is encouraged that the force has made some good progress in implementing its domestic abuse action plan. However, it still needs to make improvements in its work in this area.

The force is doing some good work to safeguard victims and the improvements to the services are clearly recognised by partner organisations. Additional resources have been allocated to the investigation of high risk domestic abuse cases, which is positive, however the vast majority of domestic abuse that the force deals with is not classified as high risk. The force would like to increase the number of medium risk and standard risk investigations undertaken by specialist investigators. However there are currently no plans in place to enable them to do so and they continue to be investigated by community officers. The force is aware that the implementation of the new operating model presents risks on the lack of skilled frontline officers now dealing with domestic abuse. While staff in the specialist investigation unit provide a level of oversight and are able to offer guidance and advice, there is recognition by the force and partners that there is still more to do to improve the level of skills and understanding of the issues among frontline officers.

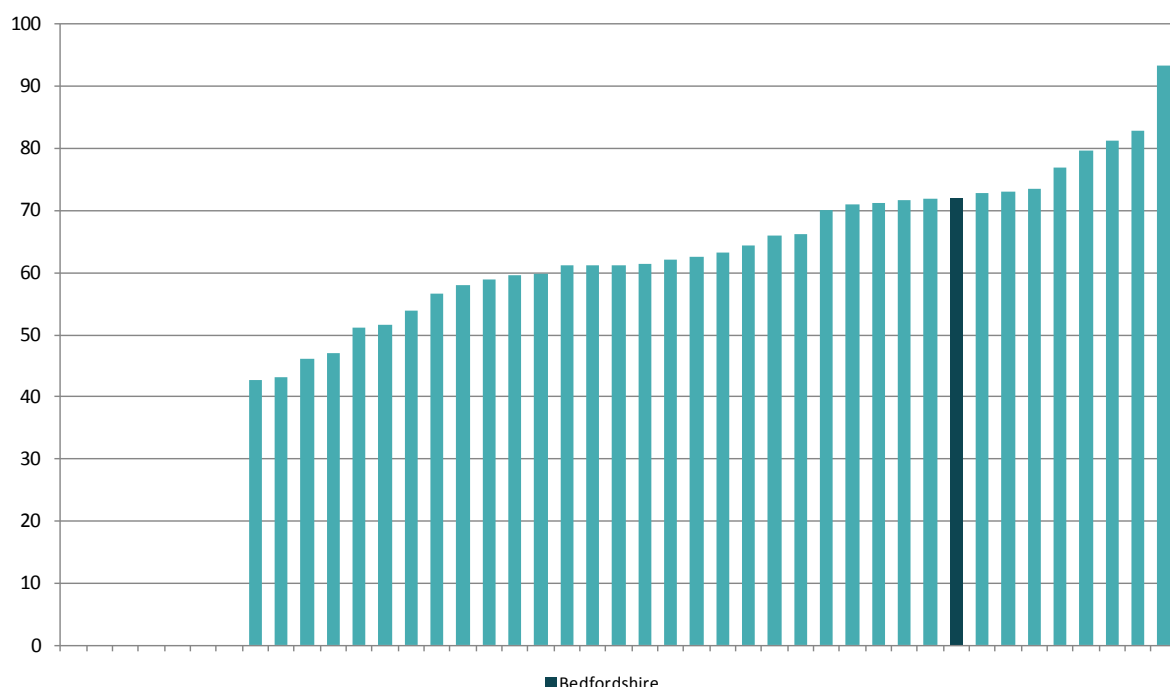
HMIC has serious concerns that the formal domestic abuse risk assessments are, on occasions, being completed over the telephone without an officer seeing the victim in person. While there may be subsequent police attendance at an incident, it is not always the case. This may result in a failure to effectively recognise and assess risk and a victim of domestic abuse (and other family members) not being appropriately safeguarded with tailored support. For example, opportunities to spot physical and emotional signs of domestic abuse upon the victim (and family members); and the condition of the home environment which may give cause for concern and initiate urgent safeguarding measures by police and social services, may be missed. The force should urgently review its current approach and seek expert opinion on the risks of adopting such a method and review the telephone risk assessments completed to date.

In the 12 months to 31 March 2015, recorded domestic abuse increased by 37 percent against the previous 12 months and accounted for 11 percent of all police recorded crime. Across England and Wales during the same period there was a 21 percent increase, with domestic abuse accounting for 10 percent of all police recorded crime.

As shown in figure 2, for every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded Bedfordshire made 72 arrests.

While Bedfordshire Police operates a positive approach to arresting suspects for domestic abuse, arrest rates where an offence has been committed at a domestic incident is falling and is of concern.

Figure 2: The number of arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes by force, for the 12 months to 31 March 2015



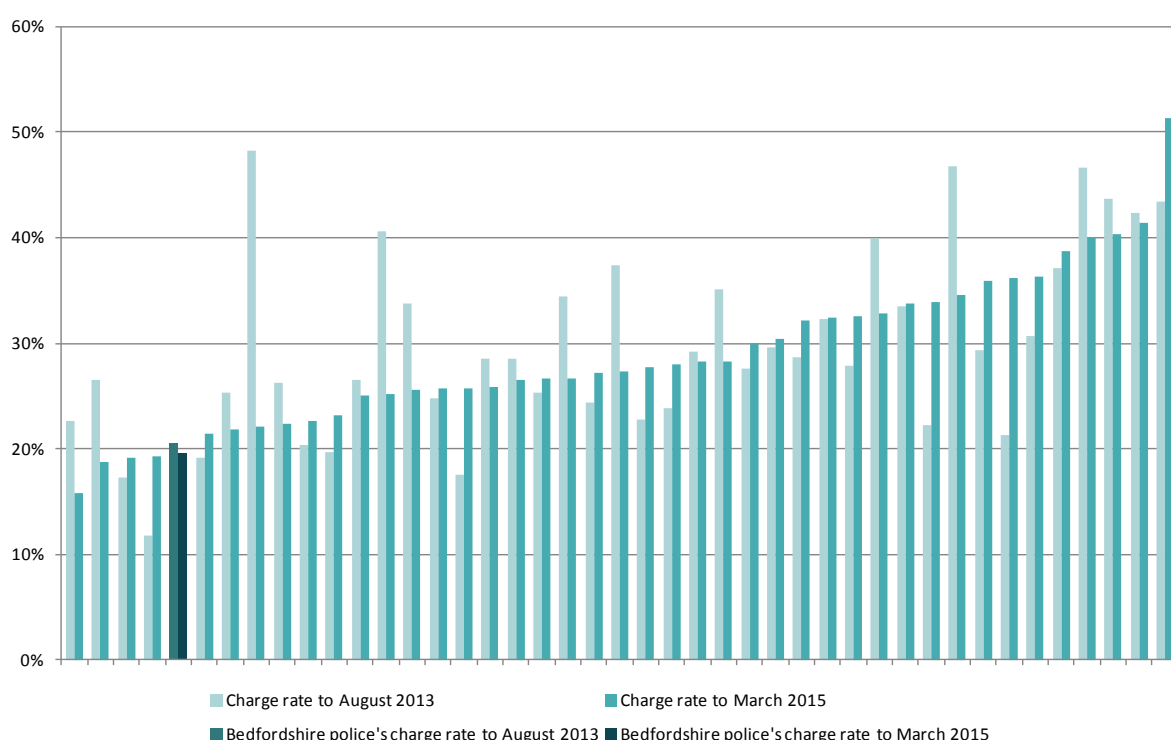
Source: HMIC data return

HMIC reviewed a sample of domestic abuse files, and found a good standard of investigation that was centred on the victim. Where the nature of the victim's vulnerability was identified appropriately there was clear and obvious safeguarding activity including referrals to partner organisations where this was needed. However, this was not always recorded on case management systems in a consistent fashion. And where there were no obvious vulnerability issues, safeguarding was not mentioned at all. This was usually the case with domestic abuse that did not result in a crime.

The force's charge rate for domestic abuse recorded crimes for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 was 19 percent, compared with 27 percent for England and Wales. This is a decrease since the last HMIC domestic abuse inspection when the force rate was 21 percent for the 12 months to 31 August 2013, compared with 30 percent for England and Wales.

The force is unable to explain adequately the reasons for the fall in the charge rate but should ensure that it understands the reasons for it. The chart below shows how Bedfordshire Police compares to other forces.

Figure 3: Domestic abuse charge rate for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 compared to the 12 months to 31 August 2013



Source: HMIC data return

The prosecution rate for domestic abuse has declined and HMIC is not confident that the force understands the reasons for this. The force is missing opportunities to utilise domestic violence protection notices (DVPNs)¹² to protect victims of domestic abuse in those cases that are not prosecuted.

HMIC also examined the force's use of new legal powers to protect victims. Domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs) were introduced in England and Wales

¹² DVPNs (domestic violence prevention notices) 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 domestic violence prevention order (DVPO). The DVPO will be granted for a period of up to 28 days.

in 2014 to prevent a suspected offender from returning to a victim's home or contacting the victim. The force began using DVPOs in June 2014; it made 26 applications to magistrates' courts for their use, of which 25 were granted.

One DVPO has been breached. Breaches occur when the offender fails to comply with the condition of the order and is taken back before the magistrates' court. This represents a DVPO breach rate of 4 percent compared with the England and Wales rate of 17 percent.¹³

Summary of findings



Inadequate

Bedfordshire Police needs to address urgently the serious weaknesses in its arrangements for protecting vulnerable people from harm and supporting victims.

There is still more work to do in relation to domestic abuse to ensure victims receive a reliable and effective response. HMIC has serious concerns about the way Bedfordshire Police responds to and protects missing children, particularly looked-after children.

There is a strong commitment within the force to improve the services to protect vulnerable people. The force has invested extra resource in its specialist services that support those who are facing the greatest risks. However, HMIC has serious concerns that there are significant weaknesses in the way the force assesses risks which means that vulnerable people do not always get the response from the police that is needed to keep them safe.

There are also gaps in the training and awareness of frontline staff about how they should identify risk and vulnerability, and the steps they should take to protect and safeguard vulnerable people, particularly children. The force has made a good start in preparing to tackle child sexual exploitation and should now build on this initial approach with partner organisations.

Bedfordshire Police has taken immediate action to address the concerns highlighted during the inspection including stopping the assessment of domestic abuse victims over the phone.

¹³ The England and Wales figure is based on data provided by 35 forces.

Causes of concern

The force's response to missing and absent children is a cause of concern to HMIC. A high number of children in care who go missing are recorded as absent and categorised as 'no risk'. This means there the force is taking limited action to understand the reasons behind the absence or to identify if these children are facing any risk while they are absent. Frontline staff lack understanding and recognition of the risk and vulnerability factors, and who is responsible for conducting investigations. We consider the police response to be poor, not only because of a lack of safeguarding and tailored support for vulnerable children and young people, but also in the missed opportunity to obtain information or intelligence to identify potential risks in terms of child sexual exploitation.

Recommendation

- To address this cause of concern the force should review immediately its approach to reports of missing children and ensure measures are put in place to assess and safeguard them effectively.

Causes of concern

The way the force assesses the level of risk and needs of vulnerable victims is a cause of concern to HMIC. We found that too few staff understand the process to assess risk and vulnerability (known as THRIVE) and have not yet been trained in using it. This means that the force assesses poorly risk and vulnerability and therefore does not always send the right people to deal with the right incidents, or indeed, send them at all.

Recommendation

- To address this cause for concern the force should immediately ensure that all its frontline staff understand THRIVE and puts in place processes to ensure they apply it reliably and effectively.

Causes of concern

The force's response to victims of domestic abuse is a cause of concern to HMIC. Risk assessments are on occasions being completed over the telephone without an officer seeing the victim in person. While there may be subsequent police attendance at an incident, this is not always the case. This may result in a failure to effectively recognise and assess the risk and a victim of domestic abuse (and other family members) not being appropriately safeguarded with tailored support. In addition, we found inconsistencies in the quality of investigation and handover of domestic abuse cases.

Recommendation

- To address this cause of concern the force should review immediately its approach to risk assessing victims of domestic abuse without the attendance of an officer and take steps to ensure any changes deemed necessary to protect victims are implemented.

Areas for improvement

- The force should improve its response to cases of children who are at risk of sexual exploitation by ensuring that the staff from the specialist team who have the appropriate professional skills and expertise have the capacity to investigate such cases.
- The force should improve its initial response and investigation of cases involving vulnerable victims, including reports of rape or sexual offences, by ensuring staff with the appropriate skills are available to respond and support victims.
- The force should improve its compliance with the code of practice for victims of crime specifically in relation to victim personal statements.
- The force should improve the way it works with partners to share information and safeguard vulnerable people, specifically in relation to making referrals to other organisations of children at risk.