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# PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability)

A revisit inspection of Staffordshire Police



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## Introduction

This report sets out Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary's (HMIC's) findings following our inspection revisit to Staffordshire Police on 6-7 April 2016. This revisit assessed progress made against the two causes of concern and three areas for improvement set out in *PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability) – An inspection of Staffordshire Police*, which HMIC published on 15 December 2015. The report is available on HMIC's website: [www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/police-effectiveness-vulnerability-2015-staffordshire.pdf](http://www.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/hmic/wp-content/uploads/police-effectiveness-vulnerability-2015-staffordshire.pdf)

### **PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability)**

In summer 2015, as part of our annual inspections into police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL), HMIC's effectiveness programme inspected how well forces keep people safe and reduce crime. This included an assessment of how effectively forces protect vulnerable people from harm, and support victims, based on findings against four questions:

- 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?

### **What we found in Staffordshire Police in 2015**

HMIC found serious weaknesses in the services being provided by Staffordshire Police to protect and support some victims, most notably victims of domestic abuse. We found that some staff were focused on identifying and protecting vulnerable victims. Where vulnerability was identified and the risk to victims was assessed properly, the force worked well with partner agencies to safeguard and support victims who were identified as being at risk. However, we found significant areas where improvement was needed.

In many cases, Staffordshire Police responded well to victims. Local policing teams generally supported and protected vulnerable people well, but this was not a consistent activity across the force. We found some officers did not always recognise and respond appropriately to victims' vulnerability. The force was assessing the risks

faced by some domestic abuse victims poorly. Victims' needs might not be met fully by the police and partner organisations because the risk they faced had not been routinely recognised and properly assessed leading to the offer of tailored support.

Action taken by staff to respond to reports of missing children was inconsistent, with little evidence of supervision in the early stages. The force recognised the risks posed to children and young people from sexual exploitation and it had made an encouraging start in ensuring it was prepared to tackle this issue.

However, Staffordshire was one of four forces HMIC graded as inadequate at protecting those who are vulnerable from harm and supporting victims, and which we revisited to examine progress against the two causes of concern and three areas for improvement set out in our inspection report.

## Revisit findings: progress against the recommendations from the 2015 vulnerability inspection

In this section we set out the causes of concern, areas for improvement and recommendations from our December 2015 vulnerability inspection and consider what progress the force has made in response to these recommendations.

### Causes of concern from December 2015 inspection report

#### Causes of concern

The force's response to vulnerable people was a cause of concern to HMIC. We were disappointed to find that some Staffordshire Police officers demonstrated judgmental and unsupportive attitudes towards some vulnerable victims. For example, we heard comments which indicated that some victims' allegations were being prematurely judged as false before investigations had started. We also found that some victims were discouraged from reporting domestic abuse crimes by some officers.

Despite the force's provision of training to staff, HMIC found significant weaknesses in a number of areas including the risk assessments at initial point of contact and by response officers. We also observed poor supervision of key processes such as risk assessments, investigation and safeguarding action in relation to vulnerable people.

#### Recommendation

- To address this cause of concern, the force should immediately assess the behaviour of its staff towards vulnerable people and evaluate the effectiveness of its training in relation to vulnerability.

### Revisit findings

Staffordshire Police is addressing this cause of concern, and we found evidence of a cultural change underway within the force. Partner organisations informed us of improving attitudes and behaviours towards vulnerable victims, and we found evidence which supports this assessment.

The force has commissioned an anonymous culture survey to be conducted by Staffordshire and Keele universities to analyse the attitude of Staffordshire officers and staff towards victims of domestic abuse and relevant force processes. Once the results of the full survey have been analysed the force intends to continue working

with the universities to develop and improve the force's approach to vulnerability, using knowledge exchange groups comprising operational officers, police staff and partners. HMIC understands Staffordshire University has secured funding to support this initiative with the force.

The force has also formed a practitioners' panel of officers and staff of various ranks, grades and roles and intends to use their operational experience and knowledge to improve practices. A sub-group of this panel is considering how victims and perpetrators can be more effectively signposted to support services.

During HMIC's review of calls, incidents and case files we found evidence of officers and staff showing empathy towards victims, and improvements in the assessment of risk both by call handlers and investigating officers. This improved approach to risk assessment was particularly evident in domestic abuse incidents but less so in respect of missing and absent children.

The broad range of ongoing vulnerability training appears to be contributing to the attitudinal change among officers and staff. Representatives from partner organisations acknowledged that operational officers have improved both their understanding of domestic abuse and their assessment of risk to victims. This is evident in a substantial increase in the use of domestic violence protection notices (DVPNs) and orders (DVPOs)<sup>1</sup> and referrals to the National Centre for Domestic Violence (NCDV).<sup>2</sup> The force is planning to conduct further evaluation of the effectiveness of its training, including self assessment by officers who have been trained, victim feedback and a quarterly forum with partners.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 the magistrates for a domestic violence prevention order (DVPO). The DVPO will be granted for a period of up to 28 days.

<sup>2</sup> The National Centre for Domestic Violence specialises in providing free, fast and effective legal support to survivors of domestic violence, usually by helping individuals obtain injunctions from their local county court. The centre's website is [www.ncdv.org.uk](http://www.ncdv.org.uk)

## Causes of concern from December 2015 inspection report

### Causes of concern

Staffordshire's response to victims of domestic abuse was a cause of concern to HMIC. The force did not require that a formal risk assessment was carried out in all domestic abuse cases. The force specified that only those incidents that had resulted in a recordable crime should be risk assessed or non-crime cases where in the officer's professional judgment a risk assessment was required. Despite this restriction, there were sustained, unacceptably high levels of non-completion of risk assessments even among this smaller number that the force required.

There were processes provided through the MASH, the local vulnerability hubs and neighbourhood officers that provided support for vulnerable victims, however the force could have no confidence that it recognised routinely and assessed properly the risk faced by many persons reporting domestic abuse and, therefore, no confidence that it was properly protecting them with tailored support. Moreover, a significant proportion of domestic abuse cases were being investigated by non-specialist staff and the investigations lacked plans, with poor supervision and there were examples of victims not being kept informed of the progress of their case.

### Recommendation

To address this cause of concern, Staffordshire Police should immediately take steps to ensure that:

- it reviews its policy in relation to the completion of risk assessments take place especially in relation to discretion which is permitted in non-crime cases;
- it supervises effectively the completion and submission of risk assessments;
- officers and staff with the appropriate professional skills and experience carry out investigations and that processes are put in place to supervise them; and
- officers and staff comply with the duties under the code of practice for victims of crime, specifically in relation to keeping victims of domestic abuse informed of the progress of the case.

## Revisit findings

On 11 January 2016 the force changed its domestic abuse policy requiring the mandatory completion of DIAL risk assessments<sup>3</sup> at all domestic abuse incidents including crime and non-crime cases. The force is monitoring compliance with the revised policy with an emphasis on the role of supervisors.

The revised policy requires that all domestic abuse incidents and completed DIAL risk assessments must be subject to a series of reviews. A sergeant conducts the first review before the officer finishes his or her shift. The following day a further review by the staff in the local vulnerability hub takes place. In all cases where the victim has been assessed as high risk, staff -in the MASH<sup>4</sup> carry out a further review. The assistant chief constable is also conducting a daily dip-sample of domestic incidents and providing feedback. In addition the chief superintendent with the lead for vulnerability is holding weekly scrutiny meetings with local commanders. This sustained focus on the risk assessment process has increased the compliance of completing DIAL risk assessments from 56 percent when we inspected in June 2015, to 98 percent at the time of our revisit.

The force's action plan developed to address the HMIC findings from the December 2015 inspection report outlines its intention to sustain compliance with the revised policy. We found a strong focus on quality of risk assessment through regular meetings with the vulnerability hubs, use of the practitioner's panel and oversight by the force gold meeting.

In the five domestic abuse cases reviewed as part of the revisit, the victim had been risk-assessed and the officer had submitted a DIAL, which a sergeant had reviewed. The supervisors' reviews were of good quality and the rationale was recorded consistently. In one case a sergeant appropriately re-assessed the risk from medium to high and in another case a sergeant directed an officer to obtain more detail to ensure the victim received the right support. We were pleased to find that children were seen and spoken to and their demeanour recorded.

HMIC welcomes the improvement that the force has made in achieving such high levels of DIAL compliance and quality reviews in a relatively short time. The domestic abuse case files that we reviewed were completed to a high standard and it appears the internal scrutiny processes, including at a senior level within the force and the requirement for supervision have contributed to this.

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<sup>3</sup> Staffordshire Police's domestic abuse risk assessment form is called a domestic incident assessment log (DIAL).

<sup>4</sup> A MASH (multi-agency safeguarding hub) co-locates principal safeguarding agencies to better identify risks to children (and in some areas, vulnerable adults), and improve decision-making, interventions, and outcomes. A MASH enables the multi-agency team to share all appropriate information in a secure environment, and ensures that the most appropriate response is provided to effectively safeguard and protect the individual.



The change in policy and the improving culture towards victims has resulted in the force identifying a greater number of high-risk victims than previously. Figures provided by the force show that MARAC<sup>5</sup> referrals between January and March 2016 have more than doubled (up from 204 to 529), when compared to the same time period in 2015. The additional workload this has created presents a considerable challenge for Staffordshire Police and its partners in the MARAC process. HMIC was told by police officers, staff and partner practitioners that they needed more independent domestic violence advisors (IDVAs)<sup>6</sup> to support and safeguard victims. The force is now holding additional MARACs across the force area and a more dynamic approach is evolving. The force is supporting this with additional resources, as a short-term measure; however this is not a sustainable position.

HMIC understands that the force and partner agencies are engaged in discussions with the office of the police and crime commissioner to secure funding for additional IDVAs, which is encouraging. It is clear that the commitment of the force and partner organisations across Staffordshire and in Stoke-on-Trent, to provide a consistent quality service to victims of domestic abuse assessed as high risk, will require a long-term sustainable solution to support the MARAC process.

The force is also providing mandatory domestic abuse training for operational staff, up to the rank of chief inspector, in the form of public protection unit development days. The training incorporates inputs from an IDVA, the NCDV and a particularly thought-provoking account from a victim of domestic abuse who explains her variable experience of the service she received from Staffordshire Police.

Staffordshire Police is taking active steps to improve standards of investigation and compliance with the *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*.<sup>7</sup> The force has put in place minimum standards for the recording of investigative activity and contact with victims, and has assigned every officer at chief inspector level and above to teams or units across the force to raise standards of the team by intervention, guidance and advice.

During our 2015 PEEL effectiveness (vulnerability) inspection, HMIC found that this approach was beginning to raise investigation standards, however the force acknowledged that this would need to be sustained to achieve lasting improvement.

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<sup>5</sup> MARACs (multi-agency risk assessment conferences) are local meetings at which information about high-risk domestic abuse victims (those at risk of murder or serious harm) is shared between local agencies.

<sup>6</sup> IDVAs (independent domestic abuse advisors) are advocates who work separately from the police to address the safety of victims (and their children) who are at high risk of harm from intimate partners, former partners and family members.

<sup>7</sup> *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*, Ministry of Justice, 2015. Available from: [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/476900/code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/476900/code-of-practice-for-victims-of-crime.pdf)

More recently, dip-sampling conducted by a senior detective has identified that supervision of investigation still requires improvement. The force has issued guidance for supervisors and the senior officers assigned to improve investigations across the force. Local managers have access to performance information about the use of investigation planning and victim contracts, which we found are steadily increasing. The force monitors progress via its quarterly force effectiveness meeting.

The force generally allocates more complex and high-risk crimes to specialist CID resources, however its approach remains that safeguarding and investigation is the responsibility of everyone in policing. In order to provide greater clarity and support more consistent crime allocation, a revised force crime allocation policy is awaiting chief officer approval. This will place increased emphasis on consideration of risk and vulnerability. A series of management meetings held every morning scrutinise the allocation of cases to ensure appropriate allocation and resourcing. However, we would encourage the force to ensure effective and ongoing supervision following the scrutiny at the morning management meetings. The force is continuing to invest in training for investigating officers; and Operation Liberty briefings reinforce the requirement to put the victim at the heart of investigations.

In the five domestic abuse cases that we reviewed, we found that investigations were generally good with evidence of effective supervision, particularly in the early stages of investigations leading to timely and appropriate action to resolve incidents quickly. However, we found inconsistent levels of supervision during the course of some ongoing investigations. This appeared to be less of an issue among CID officers and the Cannock local policing team, where the force has deployed detectives to work alongside uniformed investigators. Generally, the force allocates cases to officers commensurate with their investigative ability, and takes vulnerability into account.

We found that the force uses victim contact contracts appropriately, and regularly addresses victims' needs. We found that generally the force updates victims in line with their wishes, but this is not an entirely consistent practice. We heard from IDVAs that some victims of domestic abuse feel they are still not being regularly updated on their case.

## Areas for improvement from December 2015 inspection report

### Areas for improvement

The force should improve its initial assessment and response to incidents involving vulnerable people. The force should do this by:

- providing training on the identification of vulnerable people and assessment of risk to staff who work in call-handling, control rooms or on the front desk of police stations; and
- using approved force processes designed to support the assessment of risk and with effective supervision of their decision-making.

### Revisit findings

The force uses the THRIVE<sup>8</sup> system to assess risk and harm, and incorporates it in induction training for staff in the contact services department.<sup>9</sup> The force has held a series of vulnerability 'raising awareness' sessions with contact centre staff, which include input from partner organisations and a victim of domestic abuse. A substantial proportion of contact services staff have received this training and the force is planning to complete the training for all relevant staff including those who work on the front desks at local stations.

The force requires its call takers in the force contact centre to use a standard set of questions to identify the vulnerability of the caller. However in our 2015 PEEL vulnerability inspection we found this was rarely used. The force has now reviewed the question set and decided to discontinue its use, instead relying on the vulnerability considerations within the THRIVE process.

During our review of five call and incident logs, which pre-dated the decision to discontinue use of the question set, HMIC found call takers in Staffordshire were empathetic towards victims and asked relevant questions to assist in the identification of risk in a calm and professional manner. We found some use of the vulnerability question set, but only one case where it appeared to assist the call taker in identifying and recording vulnerability. In other cases, it was used after the call had

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<sup>8</sup> THRIVE stands for threat, harm, risk, investigation opportunities, vulnerability and engagement.

<sup>9</sup> Contact services is the department within Staffordshire Police which deals with calls for service from the public, comprising 999 and non-emergency control room operators in the control room at headquarters as well as customer service assistants working on the front desks of police stations.

concluded or was not used at all, with the call taker's decisions regarding vulnerability and risk based on professional judgment.

In all cases examined by HMIC call takers successfully identified risk including evidence of dynamic re-assessment and escalation in appropriate cases, resulting in appropriate deployment of resources. We heard from managers that immediately after incidents they dip sample calls to supervise the call takers' decisions. However, we found variable understanding among managers regarding the requirement to complete this work. It was not clear whether all supervisors were conducting the monitoring and supervision of calls with the same regularity or volume. The force should ensure that its staff who work in call-handling, the contact centre or on the front desk of police stations are consistently supervised in their initial identification of vulnerability.

## **Areas for improvement from December 2015 inspection report**

### **Areas for improvement**

The force should improve its response to missing and absent children, so that:

- officers and staff use the missing and absent categories appropriately;
- the force fully understands the factors that escalate the risk of harm to children; and
- the initial stages of an investigation include effective supervision to direct appropriate and timely enquiries and safeguarding action.

### **Revisit findings**

The force is working hard to improve its approach to missing and absent children, however further work is required, particularly regarding how to use the absent category correctly and understand risk factors. The force recognises this and is introducing a revised policy for managing missing and absent investigations, which clarifies the assessment of risk and the use of the absent category.

Since HMIC's vulnerability inspection findings in 2015, the force has strengthened its procedures, for instance introducing obligatory reviews of missing person incidents by contact centre supervisors. Where the use of the absent category is considered, the decision must be reviewed and validated by the force contact centre manager or duty officer. Contact services senior management are required to dip-sample this process to ensure compliance. Force cadre inspectors have received briefings and

guidance material to support them in supervising and directing the response to missing/absent episodes. The public protection unit missing person co-ordinators review all cases daily to highlight any concerns and they also conduct a small number of monthly case audits. A senior officer within the public protection unit reviews a monthly management profile, that incorporates a broad range of missing persons information. This provides greater detail and improves the understanding of risk within the public protection unit. The force has provided missing persons toolkits to staff to improve their understanding, and is also planning to provide training from May 2016 onwards.

Despite this broad range of activity, HMIC found that the force is continuing to categorise some cases as absent where there are apparent risks and vulnerabilities. We found incidents where investigating officers failed to recognise and respond to identified risk factors. As a result, some cases are not being handled with the right level of urgency, potentially exposing children to the risk of harm.

We found examples of good practice, with very effective and timely investigative activity and comprehensive investigation plans. HMIC also found some supervisors assuring the quality of response and appropriately increasing the resources to locate the missing child, by re-assessing the risk. However, this was not a consistent practice. In some cases we found a lack of co-ordinated activity, with supervisors' inputs serving only to reinforce inappropriate decisions regarding risk.

The force records missing persons information on the Compact system, including intelligence from return interviews and trigger plans. This information is readily accessible to investigators and is available potentially to assist in the early resolution of subsequent missing episodes. We found examples where investigators effectively used information from previous missing episodes to direct activity in subsequent cases, but this was not consistent. We also found that in some cases investigators did not fully take into account or act upon information, such as suggested fast track/priority actions or information to assist with their assessment of risk.

The force's revised missing and absent policy provides greater clarity for its officers and staff. The policy explains that serious consideration must be given to any underlying vulnerabilities when considering whether a child should be classified as missing or absent. In particular the policy states that for a person to be considered as absent the force must be satisfied that, given the circumstances and information the force holds, there is no apparent risk. The policy requires that this decision be reviewed after six hours. Where the individual is a looked after child the policy acknowledges there is always likely to be some risk or vulnerability balanced against the presenting circumstances.

The force has commenced a three-year research project with Dundee University regarding the co-ordination, mobilisation and success in police investigation of missing persons. Two local policing teams are about to pilot a new relationship with

care providers, to develop a more consistent joint approach to managing missing children; and the force plans a review of missing and absent investigations in Staffordshire, to be completed by another force.

The force has clearly demonstrated its determination to develop its response to missing and absent children. However the changes the force has made are not fully part of routine practice, and so HMIC does not consider this as fully effective. The force will need to continue its remedial actions to properly address this identified area for improvement.

## **Areas for improvement from December 2015 inspection report**

### **Areas for improvement**

The force should also improve how it works with partners to share information and safeguard vulnerable people. It should adopt minimum standards and consistent working practices within vulnerability hubs, neighbourhood policing teams and investigation units. These improvements should also identify the most suitable system for recording all safeguarding activity.

### **Revisit findings**

The force has begun working with Staffordshire and Keele universities to use knowledge exchange groups to determine a uniform structure and standard set of operating procedures for vulnerability hubs. This work has commenced and HMIC observed a workshop attended by all of the force's vulnerability hubs to compare practices and discuss how consistency can be achieved. The force is extending its work with the universities to include the MARAC process.

Some immediate standardised practices have already been introduced to review DIAL risk assessments on a daily basis. During our file review we noted that vulnerability hubs were systematically and consistently reviewing risk assessments. The force agreed these changes to the practices for domestic abuse in conjunction with the MASH and partners, and plans a similar collaborative approach for any wider changes generated through the knowledge exchange groups. The force plans this work to coincide with activity being conducted by the police and crime commissioner to develop standardised commissioning of victim services across Staffordshire.

The force responded immediately to HMIC's findings and implemented changes to ensure that safeguarding information is now only recorded on its Guardian system. Since January the MASH and all vulnerability hubs have held weekly telephone conferences. This was focused initially on implementation of the new domestic abuse policy and associated working practices. However, this has developed into a forum for ensuring consistent working practices more generally.

## Conclusions and next steps

### Conclusions

Staffordshire Police is showing a clear ambition to respond to HMIC's *PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability) – An inspection of Staffordshire Police* report, and has already implemented several positive changes. However, some of the changes the force is making are likely to take some time to progress.

HMIC found evidence of a positive cultural change within the force. Partner agencies who work with Staffordshire Police to safeguard victims of domestic abuse informed us of early improvements in the knowledge of staff and their attitudes towards vulnerable victims.

The force has commissioned an anonymous culture survey to be conducted by Staffordshire and Keele universities to analyse the attitude of Staffordshire officers and staff towards domestic abuse victims and relevant force processes. The force intends to continue working with the universities to use the results to further improve the force's approach to vulnerability through a series of knowledge exchange groups involving operational officers, police staff and partners.

The force is planning to evaluate the effectiveness of its training, including self-assessment by officers following training, obtaining victim feedback and holding a quarterly forum with partners.

The force has changed its domestic abuse risk assessment policy and this is already improving how it safeguards vulnerable victims. In the five domestic abuse cases HMIC reviewed, we found evidence that effective supervision and greater scrutiny has improved the assessment of risk for victims of domestic abuse. The force has recognised that it must collaborate with partners to ensure the MARACs function effectively and manage the increased number of victims of domestic abuse now being identified as high risk.

The force is taking active steps to improve standards of investigation and compliance with the *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*. However, we found inconsistent levels of supervision during the course of some ongoing investigations and domestic abuse support workers reported that some victims of domestic abuse feel that they are still not being updated regularly. It is clear that the force will need to sustain its continuing focus on investigation to effect lasting improvement.

Staffordshire Police is working hard to improve its approach to missing and absent children, although further work is required. The force recognises this and has some longer term plans to help it achieve the required improvements. The force has revised its policy for managing missing and absent investigations, which clarifies the



assessment of risk and the use of the absent category. These changes are relatively recent and are not yet routine across the force.

The force has started an initiative with Staffordshire and Keele universities to use knowledge exchange groups to determine a uniform structure and standard set of operating procedures for vulnerability hubs. A more consistent approach to domestic abuse has already been achieved. The force is collaborating with partners to ensure the effectiveness of any changes.

It is evident that chief officers and other senior leaders in Staffordshire Police are taking a very active role in driving the required changes. Most encouragingly, staff at all levels of the force appear to support these changes. The work the force is undertaking to improve its overall response to vulnerability is being underpinned by a force-wide cultural change.

## **Next steps**

HMIC will continue to monitor Staffordshire Police's progress against the two causes of concern and three areas for improvement set out previously in this report and in our *PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (vulnerability) – An inspection of Staffordshire Police* published on 15 December 2015. We look forward to seeing further progress during our effectiveness inspection in autumn 2016, and under our National Child Protection Inspection programme.