



Inspecting policing
in the public interest

Joint inspection of multi-agency child protection arrangements

Pilot inspection: West Mercia Police

April 2013

© HMIC 2013

www.hmic.gov.uk

About this report

Joint inspection of multi-agency child protection arrangements

HMIC has been working jointly with Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission, HMI Probation and HMI Prisons to develop a multi-agency inspection framework which will examine the delivery of child protection services provided by a range of agencies working in each local authority across England. The joint inspection framework has come about as a result of recommendations made in the *Munro Review of Child Protection*, which was published in May 2011 and is available from the Department for Education's website (www.education.gov.uk).

Pilot inspection programme

The inspections are due to start formally in June 2013, and over a three-year period will cover all local authority areas. Before this, a pilot inspection programme will ensure that:

- each inspectorate is looking at the right areas of activity for the agency it has primary responsibility for; and
- the inspectorates can work together to provide the multi-agency oversight that is required.

Pilot inspection in West Mercia

In November 2012 HMIC conducted an unannounced inspection of the child protection services delivered by West Mercia Police within the Herefordshire local authority area. HMIC identified a number of areas where further improvements should be made. All the findings are detailed within the report.

West Mercia Police was selected to take part in the pilot inspection programme as it is a force covering both urban and rural environments across a range of local authority boundaries, each authority being separately responsible for child protection.

The HMIC inspection took place a short while after Ofsted had conducted its child protection inspection of the services delivered by Herefordshire Council. The inspections were conducted independently and neither inspection affected the findings of the other. The Ofsted inspection report can be downloaded from the Ofsted website (www.ofsted.gov.uk).

Summary of findings

Inspectors considered a range of evidence, including:

- Examination of; Case files, referral forms, records on the Force crime systems and missing people files.
- Interviews with staff including; Assistant Chief Constable Karen Manners, Detective Superintendent Amanda Blakeman, Detective Chief Inspector Damian Barratt; representatives from Child Protection Team, the Domestic Abuse Team and the Offender Management Unit.

Strengths

- Throughout the inspection it was apparent that staff responsible for managing child abuse investigations or involved within child protection procedures were knowledgeable, committed and dedicated to providing good outcomes for children identified as being at risk of harm.
- The centralisation of Protecting Vulnerable People (PVP) Teams across West Mercia is regarded as a positive development, providing dedicated leadership, consistency of delivery and economies of scale whilst introducing new initiatives across the force area. It also creates greater flexibility and enhanced resilience in the use of specialist PVP staff.
- The force has a strong commitment to the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Board with representation from both local policing and PVP. This ensures appropriate engagement from the full range of policing teams that contribute to child protection.
- The force has a commitment to conducting audits within child protection and a dedicated Detective Inspector has completed work with other partners in all Local Safeguarding Children Boards. This has revealed gaps in service provision which are subject of remedial action. This is a mature approach to improving and maintaining effective child protection.
- The force ensures that all specialist child protection officers are trained through both the Initial Crime Investigators Development Programme (ICIDP) and the Specialist Child Abuse Investigator Development Programme (SCAIDP).
- PVP Teams are integrated within the local policing area Daily Tasking Meetings and this ensures PVP is a key part of daily local policing activity. The Daily PVP Tasking Meeting ensures critical issues receive good supervisory oversight with a full range of PVP issues being considered.

- Front-line staff have good levels of awareness of child protection and a number of interventions were seen where good protective activity was undertaken with partners agencies, including the Emergency Duty Team.
- Children are seen as an important element of High Risk Domestic Abuse case management. There were clear links between the victim protection plans completed by the police and child protection plans completed by Child Social Care (CSC). There was evidence of timely and effective communication across agencies that contributed to children being successfully protected.
- The force use of Compact (an IT system) ensures that all reports of Missing Children are notified to the local authority automatically. The force also ensures the local authority is made aware when the children return so that 'return' interviews can be completed.
- It is acknowledged that the West Mercia Police is developing information sharing arrangements with its partners within Herefordshire and inspectors view its plan to create a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub as a critical feature. HMIC is particularly interested in this development and will examine progress during future child protection inspections.
- Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is now regarded as a priority within West Mercia and the force is responding with its partners. HMIC accepts that the response in West Mercia is at an early stage of development. CSE will be one of the areas examined during the forthcoming multi-agency child protection (MACP) inspections.

Areas for Improvement

- The number of children denied bail after charge who continued to be detained in police custody was inappropriate. Other opportunities to accommodate the children had not been fully explored, for example making use of non-secure local authority accommodation. It is unclear what strategic arrangements have been negotiated with partners to facilitate the accommodation of children in such situations.
- For a number of children who had been detained in police custody pre-charge there were unnecessary delays in having access to an appropriate adult. On one occasion the first mention of an appropriate adult on the custody record was over 15 hours following his arrival at the police station. Children also spent long amounts of time in police custody without any contact from persons outside of police custody staff.

- The force forwards a large number of referrals and notifications to CSC regarding children and young people. A number of these were assessed as being below the threshold where CSC would normally undertake any activity. CSC no longer provides the force with feedback over what they have done with the referrals or notifications, including those where explicit child protection concerns have been raised. The force should seek feedback from CSC regarding the quality of their referrals to ensure that unnecessary submissions are not being made, and for those relating to explicit child protection concerns, to ensure children are being assessed promptly and with the appropriate level of priority.
- A number of referrals resulting from domestic abuse incidents were assessed by officers as relating to children at risk of significant harm and had been passed to CSC on this basis. The Specialist PVP Child Abuse Investigators are not aware of these referrals being made and often CSC staff do not conduct Strategy Discussions¹ in respect of the children named. This potentially puts children at further risk of harm. The force should ensure that all such relevant referrals, involve the Specialist PVP Child Abuse Investigators and result in a Section 47² Strategy Discussion.
- The Hereford PVP relies heavily on paper records with manual files being maintained in addition to some of the same documents recorded electronically on force systems. Hard copies which are not on force systems are not accessible to anyone outside of the PVP office, especially out of hours. The force should review this practice to reduce duplication and ensure all relevant documents are accessible to those who need it.
- There was evidence that Specialist PVP Child Abuse Investigators maintain duplicate sets of records in relation to their enquiries and investigations. Officers were completing 'Investigation Logs' as well as completing investigative chronologies within the crime or non-crime records, often 'cutting and pasting' the information from one to the other. In addition to the duplication of effort, inspectors noted concerns that 'Investigation Logs' were being held on officers' personal computer drives and, therefore not available to anyone else through force systems. The force should review this practice to reduce duplication and ensure relevant information is available to those who need it.

¹ Multi-agency meeting to determine risks children face and what actions need to be taken to mitigate those risks.

² The aim of the Section 47 enquiry is to determine whether action is needed to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child or children who are the subject of an enquiry.

- The recording of Strategy Discussions within Section 47 enquiries was inconsistent and inspectors found a number of cases containing no records of the discussion at all. In other cases it was unclear what had been discussed and what decisions had been made. The force should ensure that Strategy Discussions are properly documented with the decisions made and actions agreed clearly outlined. (Section 47 enquiries are conducted to determine the best way to protect children and young people who are suffering, or likely to suffer significant harm)
- Within domestic abuse incidents it was not always clear that officers were focused on the needs of the child. Few of the referrals to CSC reviewed by inspectors contained any indication of the impact that the incident had on the child/children. As this is important information for CSC and assists in their decision making, the force should ensure that officers include all such information in their referrals.
- Within the Domestic Abuse Unit, staff gather information about individual officer's performance in completing Domestic Abuse Stalking and Harassment (DASH) risk assessments. This information is rarely used despite issues being repeatedly raised relating to specific officers. The force should review their use of this performance information to develop staff and ensure the DASH risk assessment is completed accurately.
- The 'Compact' Missing Person Management system identifies children who have regularly gone missing, but it was unclear how this information is being used for child protection purposes. Repeat missing episodes are a useful indicator for children being at risk of harm but despite a number of children being identified as having gone missing in excess of three occasions no further assessment or harm reduction activity was instigated. The force should review this area of activity to ensure opportunities to protect children at risk of harm are not being missed.