

# Staffing and the child abuse investigation unit

This page is from APP, the official source of professional practice for policing.

First published 21 January 2014 Updated 24 February 2022

Written by College of Policing

14 mins read

Police officers and police staff involved in the investigative process must have the appropriate qualifications, competencies and skills. See also the [Police Reform Act 2002](#) and [Workforce Modernisation](#).

## Response and neighbourhood policing teams

These teams should be kept informed about child abuse and safeguarding children issues in their particular geographic area, as applicable to their roles. This is particularly important when neighbourhood policing teams can assist in the risk management of individual offenders (for example, by enforcing civil orders or by conducting unannounced curfew checks or police watch activities). Team members can be key sources of information about concerns for children that are provided by, or obtained from, the community. The information they provide can assist in the continual [risk identification](#) process and in longer-term risk-management processes. See forthcoming APP on identifying and managing risk.

Response and neighbourhood policing teams can also use community information to identify child abuse offenders and those who present a current and significant risk to others. Some child abuse-related issues might require a neighbourhood problem-solving plan to be prepared, for example, if particular communities are identified as under-reporting child abuse. Neighbourhood policing teams should work with child abuse investigation units for information gathering and enforcement issues, as appropriate to their role profiles (for example, police officers linked to schools or children's homes).

## Specialist investigations and departments

One of the key elements of an effective police response to child abuse is a holistic, whole family approach to the investigation and related police and multi-agency action. For this reason, forces

should have systems to ensure that the necessary connections are made between those in a force who specialise in investigations relating to child abuse, and those indirectly linked to such investigations (for example, specialist units and officers dealing with domestic abuse, sexual offences, trafficking and hi-tech crime). To assist with this approach, investigators should consider the [\*\*CPS guidance on Disclosure of Material to Third Parties\*\*](#), where beneficial.

The main principle in all investigations is the welfare of the child – regardless of the environment in which the abuse occurs (for example, family, institution or online) and context or crime type (for example, prostituting or trafficking a child). In most cases of child abuse this will, by necessity, involve specialist child abuse investigators. Some forces have found it particularly beneficial to bring together within one unit, the functions of investigating child abuse, domestic abuse, vulnerable adult abuse, sexual offences, and the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders.

## Child abuse investigation units

### Definition

The term child abuse investigation unit refers to the variety of groupings of police officers whose primary function is investigating child abuse. Other terms include:

- child protection investigation unit
- child protection team
- child protection unit
- child abuse investigation team

Police forces have a number of structures and terms of reference for their child abuse investigation units, and some have units that deal with a wider scope of work than child abuse (for example, domestic abuse and wider public protection issues such as the management of sexual offenders and violent offenders). Forces have the discretion to decide on the most suitable term to use for such a unit.

To avoid undermining the status of a child abuse investigation unit within the police service and to avoid confusion, the name of such groupings should reflect that they are police officers and staff investigating serious crime. The child abuse investigation unit should be fully integrated into the

structure of the police force and should not be disadvantaged with regard to staff, accommodation, equipment or resources.

## Investigation of crimes relating to child abuse

These include criminal investigations into child abuse where the suspect is in a position of trust or responsibility in relation to the child. This could include a parent, carer, family member, professional, babysitter or youth worker. Investigations must also include child protection considerations, for example, the child's developmental needs, parenting issues, family and environmental factors, and require the involvement of children's social care.

The child abuse investigation unit also considers cases where the ambiguity of the circumstances may undermine a child-focused approach (for example, child trafficking or child sexual exploitation) where the suspect claims that the child is in some way consenting to, or complicit in, the offence. The role of the child abuse investigation unit is important in such cases because its specialist investigators are in the best position to provide advice on, and contribute to, child-focused multi-agency working (for example, involvement of children's social care).

## Other specialist investigations

In certain cases the role of the child abuse investigation unit is to advise and direct a substantive investigation and address any safeguarding issues relating to siblings or other children affected. This role may also include giving specialist advice to other agencies which investigate child abuse such as children's social care and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

The wider role of the child abuse investigation unit is to promote the work of child abuse investigations both within and outside the police service. Officers and staff should advise those responsible for investigating child homicides and child deaths. If there are sufficient appropriately trained officers in the unit, they should take responsibility for such investigations either exclusively or in conjunction with the force major investigation team.

Where child abuse investigation unit officers are required to take a lead role they should be competent as an SIO at PIP level 3 and Specialist Child Abuse Investigator Development Programme trained. If no such officer is available, a senior officer should make a policy entry explaining how the identified officer is suitably qualified and supported.

Where the unit does not lead the investigation, a suitable member of the unit should be nominated to:

- assist the SIO
- liaise with children's social care
- deal with any other safeguarding children issues relating to the family

## Prioritisation of online perpetrators who pose a risk of harm to children

The following definition has been agreed by NPCC to enable forces to focus on those perpetrators who pose the highest risk of child sexual abuse.

### **Definition of high harm [1]**

An identified subject(s) is suspected of having a sexual interest in children

AND

Is known or suspected to have an immediate opportunity to offend against a child of similar age to their sexual interest, for example an interest in boys aged 14 to 16.

OR

The child is under thirteen years of age (in England & Wales), or has a disability. (Research indicates that children with a disability are four times more likely to be victims of child sexual abuse.)

In order to focus on risk within volume, the definition does not include the sharing of indecent images of children (IIOC), and so rules out the large volume of industry referrals from the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) and Peer to Peer file sharing cases, which are subject to separate prioritisation processes, unless there are other aggravating factors, or further information that places such cases within the definition of high harm.

The definition specifically references children under the age of 13. The rationale for doing so is to align with legislation in the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which uses distinct differences between sexual assaults on children; sections 5 to 8 specifically distinguish 'rape and other offences against

children under 13yrs', as against sections 9 to 15a, which are termed 'child sex offences', due to arguments regarding ages of consent and age verification issues. The definition has specifically been drafted however, not to rule out children aged 13 and over, and can be applied to offending against children of all ages.

Note: The opportunity may be present by the subject having immediate and sustained access to children through being:

- a parent or guardian
- a close family relative or friend
- in a position of trust
- in likely contact through their occupation or via:
  - other ad-hoc access (such as babysitting or childminding)
  - online grooming (targeting children in the UK or overseas)
  - online live streaming (targeting children in the UK or overseas)

OR

There is no immediate opportunity to directly offend against a child, but the subject's behaviour is aggravated by the scale, severity and extent of the risk and harm they present, for example through a combination of one or more of the following:

- directly targeting child victims (real or perceived) online or in person
- being a registered sex offender, archived RSO, subject of a Sexual Risk Order or subject of multiple Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme applications suggesting concerning behaviour
- producing first generation imagery (noting that the age of both the victim and the suspect are relevant, because self-generated/peer-to-peer sharing between children under 18 would be a safeguarding concern, but not necessarily a high harm issue)
- conspiring with others to commit or promote CSA offending
- accessing CSA dark web sites/forums that have entry criteria such as the production of first generation images
- administering or moderating a CSAM website
- travelling extensively and/or overseas to commit CSA offences
- causing or inciting children to engage in sexual activity

- using blackmail or sextortion
- participating in live streaming of child sexual abuse or other CSA for commercial gain

## Advisory role

Depending on local arrangements, the child abuse investigation unit should also provide advice, or have a more direct role in the following investigations:

- **domestic abuse** cases involving children as direct or indirect victims of the abuse, or relating to a household where children are normally resident
- **missing persons** enquiries involving children
- **child trafficking** cases
- cases involving **abusive images** of children
- crime committed by a child where welfare concerns arise about that child
- professional standards department investigations relating to police suspected of committing offences relating to child abuse or domestic abuse where there are children in the family

Forces have different local arrangements for investigating certain crime types (for example, human trafficking and offences involving the internet). Where child abuse features in an investigation, the force child abuse investigation unit is a central point of reference. Whether the unit is leading the investigation, contributing to it or acting in an advisory capacity depends on local policies. In every case there needs to be consideration of the skill set, staff training and resources available to the unit to enable it to carry out its role effectively.

## Leadership

A proactive approach to leadership is key to a child abuse investigation unit's effectiveness. It includes leadership of the unit as a whole and of those undertaking direct supervision of officers. Leadership also includes ensuring that the profile of the unit's work is such that it attracts the most highly skilled investigators and is seen as a key element of a career in criminal investigation. The responsibilities of managers and supervisors, including their accountability for the child abuse investigation unit, should be clearly documented in policy and role descriptions. The terms of reference for the child abuse investigation unit should be published and made available to all staff. The work of units should be highlighted, supported and championed by the chief officer lead.

The role of the unit supervisor can include substantive responsibilities relating to investigating child abuse and safeguarding children, and staff management. It is a demanding role and can be shared between several supervisors. It is essential that the supervisor's own workload does not detract from their supervisory functions. Their manager should, therefore, routinely monitor their workload.

Particular attention should be paid to managing stress relating to workload and the nature of the work.

Supervisors should take an active role in ensuring that a thorough investigation is carried out. They should be routinely involved in reviewing the progress of all aspects of child abuse investigations, including identifying risk factors. For example, supervisors should check a sample of evidence files to assess quality and ensure that all lines of enquiry, particularly those relating to the suspect and the allegation, are pursued. Supervisory reviews of completed investigations should be signed off before they are filed. The results of any reviews may be relevant to the officer's personal development record, in accordance with force policy.

## Multi-agency roles

Examples of multi-agency working by supervisors and managers in the child abuse investigation unit include:

- supervising the process of managing referrals to and from other agencies
- representing the police on the local safeguarding children board subgroups, where appropriate
- advising on and participating in serious case reviews (child practice reviews in Wales)
- participating in the **MAPPA** process, as appropriate
- participating in child protection conferences

For further information see:

- Forthcoming APP on working with partners
- APP on managing sexual offenders and violent offenders

## General staffing issues

### Staff selection and vetting

All police officers and staff must be subject to national vetting standards. These should be appropriate to their role, meeting all relevant security requirements needed to safeguard children. Child abuse investigation unit staff should be subject to management vetting, and psychological pre-employment screening should be considered. These processes should be described in any advertisements for posts.

Vetting should include enquiries into the following matters, which could raise issues regarding their suitability to carry out a role in child abuse investigations:

- any complaints or professional standards investigations
- any occupational health issues
- existing civil orders relating to the applicant, including any child contact restrictions related to suspected child abuse
- records held of children who are the subject of a child protection plan and who are related to the applicant

## Staff welfare and support

The ethos in police forces towards child abuse investigations should reflect the central role of debriefing, supervision and support for people working in traumatic circumstances.

In order to fulfil their duty of care to employees and the requirements of health and safety legislation, supervisors and managers should be aware of the balance of work within the team, the welfare of individuals and the quality of their work.

## Supervisors

Supervisors should monitor closely the workload of child abuse investigators. Consideration needs to be given to implementing mandatory and/or voluntary counselling and/or welfare support for all staff working in this field. A mandatory system provides staff with a more accessible opportunity for support which, for various reasons, they may not wish to be seen to seek out.

Supervisors and investigators should be aware of the impact that evidence and details of the case may have on their colleagues.

The disturbing nature of child abuse investigations (including offences relating to images of children) can be a traumatic experience for staff. Some individuals may not, therefore, wish to work on certain types of investigations or a particular investigation. In these circumstances staff should consult a supervisor, who should respond appropriately. If a member of staff requests not to be involved in such an investigation, the supervisor should deploy them only in the most urgent of circumstances. Requests may be made at the outset of the investigation or during it. The reasons for the request and the action taken by the supervisor should be recorded.

## **Welfare services**

Everyone involved in child abuse investigations should be aware of and make use of the welfare services provided by their force, where appropriate. This includes staff not directly involved in the investigation but who may come into contact with potentially disturbing aspects of the evidence, for example, transcribers. Supervisors should discuss any emerging difficulties encountered by their staff and provide advice regarding welfare services available within their force. They should also actively monitor those who undertake such investigations and offer support accordingly.

Investigations that include extensive and repeated exposure to disturbing images, such as those involving child abuse, may require a particularly proactive approach to staff welfare and support. Staff who do not deal directly with images can be just as vulnerable as those who do. Forces should have policies to ensure that there are regular reviews of the individuals and posts involved in child abuse investigations.

## **Training and development**

Police officers and staff should receive training and development in aspects of investigating child abuse and safeguarding children, as appropriate to their role. For example, everyone involved in responding to concerns for children needs to be sufficiently trained to have the confidence to challenge (from a police and law enforcement perspective) the views of other professionals, including doctors and children's social care staff. All professionals have a responsibility to question, probe and challenge to assist decision making and consideration of new evidence or information.

Staff need to be given sufficient time to carry out training, for example, allocated periods to complete distance learning.

Forces should work towards a system whereby specialist investigators are recruited solely from experienced investigators or are required to qualify on successful application to the role. Child abuse investigations are categorised as serious and may also be **complex**. Child abuse investigation unit staff should, therefore, receive training commensurate with the investigations they undertake.

The College of Policing Specialist Child Abuse Investigator Development Programme is a developmental route that supports achievement of competence and comprises the following key features:

- a requirement to complete the **College of Policing Initial Crime Investigators Development Programme**
- specialist knowledge and training in child abuse investigation
- workplace assessment and registration in accordance with the criteria set out in PIP
- a requirement to undertake multi-agency training provided by the local safeguarding children boards and training with children's social care colleagues in investigating cases that require a joint response

Any force that develops its own training programme for child abuse investigation unit officers needs to demonstrate that such training:

- meets the standards and learning outcomes as described in the Specialist Child Abuse Investigator Development Programme, and
- takes account of **HM Government (2018) Working Together to Safeguard Children** and **Welsh Assembly Government (n.d.) Safeguarding Children: Working Together Under the Children Act 2004**

Staff required to interview children in order to gather evidence should be appropriately trained in accordance with (both of the following):

- **Ministry of Justice (2022) Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings: Guidance on interviewing victims and witnesses, and guidance on using special measures**
- College of Policing Specialist Child Witness Interviewing modules of the Specialist Child Abuse Investigator Development Programme

The recruitment, selection and training policies for specialists should be reviewed to ensure that staff who are not already competent at PIP level 2 are provided with the opportunity to achieve this through additional training and assessment while in post. Staff involved in investigations relating to child abuse images should have access to the appropriate training, in particular that provided by CEOP.

## Training for supervisors and senior investigators

Child abuse investigation unit supervisors and managers should have undertaken multi-agency training provided by the local safeguarding children board so that they understand the roles of other agencies and work effectively together. Joint training with children's social care staff, so that both organisations cooperate, should minimise the impact of investigations on a child.

### Tags

Child abuse