

Information pack for families of suspects being investigated by the Internet Child Abuse Team

Information pack for distribution to the immediate family of a suspect arrested in relation to child sexual offences.

First published

9 May 2024

Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Child abuse Investigation
Organisation	Bedfordshire Police
HMICFRS Peel Spotlight Report 2021/22	https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectrates.gov.uk/uploads/peel-spotlight-report-police-performance.pdf
Contact	Katy Watts
Email address	katy.watts@beds.police.uk
Region	Eastern
Partners	Police Voluntary/not for profit organisation

Key details

Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	June 2021
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Adults Children and young people Families

Aim

The information pack aims to:

- Signpost vulnerable individuals/families to support services and agencies. This could be a range of services, including, police-led crime-related support services, mental health services and specialist support agencies such as Lucy Faithful Foundation, Samaritans, Childline, Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) network, NSPCC, Citizen's Advice Bureau, Civil Legal Advice, the Internet Watch Foundation and Crimestoppers.
- Provide individuals with important information they are unlikely to retain from a conversation.
- Minimise the time the Internet Child Abuse Investigation Team (ICAIT) spend answering the same questions asked at each incident.
- Provide consistent information to all suspects and families linked to ICAIT investigations.
- Aid police officers to support families by providing a tool that gives a framework for information-sharing.
- Manage expectations of both suspects and families.
- Ensure the partner and/or family of suspects are provided information independently, so they are not solely reliant on information provided by the suspect.
- Highlight the risk being managed by the police by explicitly documenting the aim of the police intervention and bail conditions to safeguard the vulnerable and prevent offending.

- Offer ways for the partner or wider family of a suspect to structure difficult conversations they may wish to have with the suspect or their own wider support network, without the need to divulge specific investigative details.

Intended outcome

- Signpost vulnerable families to support agencies in one clear document to improve multi-agency work and wrap-around support for the families.
- Provide consistent and important information in a physical form. Stress has been shown to reduce the ability to retain information, therefore families may struggle to remember everything the officers have said. Giving the family a physical copy of the information will improve their understanding of the situation.
- The physical form of information will also minimise the time officers spend answering questions due to the family struggling to retain information at such a stressful time. Families with frequently asked questions will be able to turn to the information pack before speaking to officers.
- Manage expectations around the length of investigations and the potential for delays.
- Provide a structure for difficult conversations. Families who find themselves in unprecedented and unfamiliar situations cannot be expected to manage these sensitive and highly emotive discussions with their family unsupported. The pack allows individuals to use a framework that chronologically explains the steps of the investigation and what to expect to any wider family members who were not present at the time of arrest.

Description

Background

The nature of internet child abuse investigations mean the most effective manner of facilitating suspects' arrests and securing evidence is through the execution of a warrant at the suspect's home address. A warrant is a document issued by a legal or government official authorising the police or another body to make an arrest, search premises, or carry out some other action relating to the administration of justice.

The suspect themselves is subject to wraparound care and additional welfare provisions from Bedfordshire Police, such as mandatory mental health assessment in custody and the signposting to various charities and agencies specifically designed to provide care and support for them.

Bedfordshire have found the most harrowing part of the job, beyond the exposure to graphic and often horrendous abuse material, is the heartbreak suffered by the families of such suspects during and following police contact.

The partners and children of the suspects suffer huge shock, fear, disbelief, and confusion at the attendance of a group of police officers. Without warning their loved one is arrested and removed, their home and private life is interrogated and scrutinised by officers, they are made subject of Child Services referrals and the suspect is often bailed away from the address. The system expects them to retain any information the force discloses and comply with any actions demanded. These families are essentially unwitting and unseen victims at the hands of the suspect, and Bedfordshire recognise the gap in support for them as they do not fall into the traditional definition of victims.

This led to the designing of family information packs.

Family Information Packs

Creation

The initiative was discussed and agreed in joint-agency meetings by the managers of the units dedicated to tackling online child abuse from Hertfordshire Constabulary and Bedfordshire Police - the Child Online Safety Team (COST) and ICAIT.

- The information provided by the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) forms the basis of the booklet and the individual force victim services were engaged to encourage their involvement.
- Funding was secured by the individual units in both forces.

Content

- The inclusion of victim service logos and contact details means the booklet contains relevant localised information.
- The family pack recognises that individuals in extreme distress and shock are unlikely to retain any information offered by officers at the time of the warrant.

- The pack aims to provide clear and concise information that describes the reason for police attendance, the aims and objectives of the investigation, manages expectations about the timescales involved, defines unfamiliar police terms, and offers insight about potential outcomes.
- The pack signposts the families to support agencies including wellbeing provisions such as the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Police support hubs and the Samaritans, as well as legal and financial support and child protection specialists such as the NSPCC.
- The pack contains a safeguarding sheet that serves as a prompt to obtain the correct details for the individuals living at the address. This is filled in by the safeguarding officer on scene to ensure occupants' details are correct and highlights the need for safeguarding referrals as appropriate (then completed by the safeguarding officer or officer in charge once back at the station) and ensures Child Services referrals are discussed in-person at the earliest opportunity.
- Information includes recognition of the emotions they are likely to be feeling, a summary of relevant legislation, the next steps that will be taken to investigate suspected offences, short and long term outcomes. It also includes an explanation of policing terms and jargon including remand, bail, or Sexual Harm Prevention Orders (SHPO) for example.
- An introduction to partner agencies is made to explain the roles and responsibilities of organisations such as the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) and Children's Services who may become involved.

In Practice

The booklets have been an established provision for over two years and are an embedded part of daily work for the ICAIT team.

- Each warrant has a dedicated safeguarding officer allocated.
- It is this officer's responsibility to create the family pack which includes the booklet described as well as leaflets to relevant partner agencies that offer further support.
- The pack is also supplied with the officer in charge's name and direct contact details. This is important as it can be used to assist information sharing with their wider support network.

Bedfordshire police offer a physical or digital version of the information to increase accessibility.

- A physical copy can be left by the allocated safeguarding officer upon engagement and the option of an email with a digital copy is also offered.

- The format accepted is dependent upon the preference of the person engaged and the force has experienced several personal reasons that may influence decision-making. These have been reasons such as having a hard copy to use as an aid to structure difficult conversations with children or family members and requesting a digital version to ensure safekeeping/ease of reference in a secure place without the risk of visitors to the home overseeing the pamphlet.
- The leaflets have also been produced in the languages most frequently encountered in the force's area.
- The detective inspector for the Cyber Team in Bedfordshire authorises re-ordering booklets when the supply runs low.
- Given each person handles information in different ways (for example, audibly or visually) the information pack is another way to ensure that the people the force meet receive communication that is effective, helpful and impactful.

Overall impact

This initiative can not be measured through performance outcomes, but feedback has been gathered from the officers using them.

The family pack is seen in a positive light by all the ICAIT team, as it ensures they have the confidence to structure their own difficult conversations with the family of a suspect. Additionally, when the team leaves an address, their discomfort is eased somewhat by having the ability to leave a professional and informative document behind instead of a warrant.

Moreover, anecdotal feedback from officers, staff and police community support officers (PCSOs) indicates that the force has seen a reduction in calls following the arrest of a suspect regarding what certain phrases mean and what the next stages of the process are.

Feedback has also been received from partners of several of the suspects. The feedback has been that the leaflets have prompted them to do their own research.

Learning

The fact the families of suspects do not have the same provisions as victims has been a longstanding issue that ICAIT have been trying to tackle given the lasting and devastating impact

upon the families' wellbeing.

- Transparency and reassurance are always needed in conversations regarding the family pack, obtaining the correct contact details for individuals living at the address and making referrals to relevant agencies. The best approach is to ensure it is completed face-to-face.
- A clear and organised way of re-ordering the form is a must. Bedfordshire Police have experienced the physical booklets running out and there being a delay in getting them back in stock due to a lack of knowledge from the force on how to re-order them and who should be contacted for this request.
- The inclusion of localised support services in addition to the NPCC guidance means any changes of contact numbers, websites or remits needs to be communicated to ensure the force is not distributing out-of-date information.

A presentation by Lincolnshire Police regarding a dedicated family liaison officer is in the process of being shared to the Bedfordshire Police executive team and the police and crime commissioner to fund a dedicated indirect victim officer. Their responsibility would include provision of a support service to assist a suspect's family with navigating the entire investigation process from execution of the warrant to the court procedure - and beyond if required.

Copyright

The copyright in this shared practice example is not owned or managed by the College of Policing and is therefore not available for re-use under the terms of the Non-Commercial College Licence. You will need to seek permission from the copyright owner to reproduce their works.

Legal disclaimer

Disclaimer: The views, information or opinions expressed in this shared practice example are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or views of the College of Policing or the organisations involved.

Tags

Child sexual exploitation Safeguarding