

Early sharing of information in online child sexual exploitation cases

Prioritising safeguarding of children through early referrals to children's social care (CSC).

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Child abuse Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) Digital, data and analytics
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Region	East Midlands
Partners	Police Local authority
Stage of Implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	June 2022
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Children and young people Communities Families Victims
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Aim

The aim of this practice is to share information with children's social care (CSC) in cases of online child exploitation and child sexual abuse material at the earliest opportunity, and prior to the police enforcement action.

The sharing of this information early on is intended to alert CSC to individuals who are at risk of significant harm as soon as possible, and to commence the further flow and exchange of information through strategy discussions with supervisors and practitioners within the police and social services.

The overall aim of this practice is to place the safety of children at the forefront of action taken by the police and social care, accepting that urgent safeguarding is a priority over the criminal investigation.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of early sharing of information in online child sexual exploitation cases are to:

- improve the safeguarding of children
- decrease the risk of significant harm to individuals involved
- improve the flow and exchange of information
- obtain information held by CSC which affects police risk assessment and prioritisation

Description

Background

The reason why this new practice was implemented was two-fold.

Firstly, prior to this process, it was the usual practice for the police to complete a public protection notification (PPN), which was sent to CSC, at the point of taking enforcement action. It was recognised that this meant there was a period between the time when children were identified as being at risk, and the point at which enforcement action was carried out. This period could run into weeks or even months and this new practice seeks to prevent this situation from arising.

Secondly, it was recognised that CSC often hold information which would have a material impact on the risk assessment carried out by the police prior to enforcement action, and that had this information been available to the police earlier, it would have prompted a more effective response. This new practice also seeks to ensure that information of this nature is made available to the police at the earliest opportunity, this aspect of the practice has developed from the initial stage of early information sharing.

Description

Nottinghamshire Police internet child exploitation team (ICET) receive referrals from the National Crime Agency (NCA) - child exploitation and online protection (CEOP) relating to the possession, making and distribution of indecent images of children. regional organised crime units (ROCU) also refer cases involving the on-line sexual exploitation of children regarding individuals who have engaged with children online to commit offences.

Once received, the referrals are reviewed by intelligence officers within ICET, a crime reference number is allocated and checks of police systems are carried out. In addition to the police systems, some non-police systems are also checked. Intelligence Officers also complete the risk assessment and prioritisation tool.

It is through these checks that an intelligence picture develops which often leads to the identification of children to whom the perpetrator has access to and who are therefore considered to be at significant risk of harm.

All cases are then brought to the attention of detective sergeants (DS) within ICET who review the case, complete a PPN, allocate the case to an investigating officer and determine and diarise a date for enforcement action.

The completed PPN is sent to one of the two Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) which cover the city and county areas. This is the vehicle by which information regarding the case is shared with CSC. Included within the PPN are three questions which have been agreed with CSC:

1. Is the subject / family currently open to CSC, and if yes, why?
2. Is the subject / family known to CSC such as have there been any previous child in need plans, child protection plans, pre-court proceedings or consideration to removing the child / children from the parent's care?
3. Have there been any previous safeguarding concerns in respect of the family?

Once received in the MASH, the case is reviewed and shared with CSC. The relevant social worker is then able to make direct contact with the DS and further information shared, or a strategy discussion can take place if necessary. It is at this stage that further information can become available from social care which impacts on the risk assessment and can lead to timescales being reviewed and changed accordingly.

Evaluation

The practice has not undergone formal evaluation at this stage but has been subject to scrutiny by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) during inspection and has been identified as promising practice.

Since inception in June 2022 there have been over 280 PPNs shared with CSC prior to enforcement. Prior to this date Police would have taken positive action and retrospectively shared information with Social Care. The overarching message to our staff and officers working in this area of business is that 'safeguarding' is the priority.

It should be highlighted that it will depend on the referral and the potential suspect named in the referral and their access to children that would instigate the need for a PPN to be submitted. It is therefore difficult to put a quantitative figure of PPN submissions that is seen as "positive" or "negative" for example as each force will differ.

Overall impact

Sharing information with CSC earlier on in investigations of this type has led to more information being exchanged and for strategy meetings to take place where appropriate. There has been improved partnership working with CSC who have accompanied officers on enforcement action where necessary.

This sends a clear message to staff that safeguarding of children is of the upmost priority. It is also noted as mentioned that there has been no impact on the investigative side of ICET as initially thought there could be. This is however due to the relationship with social care and open communication from the outset.

Learning

The following are seen as barriers to implementation of early sharing of information in online child sexual exploitation cases:

- A significant amount of work had to be undertaken by the Detective Inspector with responsibility for the two MASH in Nottinghamshire to get 'buy-in' across all areas.
- Nottinghamshire has two MASH and this structure lends itself to this process being implemented successfully across the whole area. This is not the same for every force and some policing areas are covered by multiple local authorities with different safeguarding structures. MASH's do not exist in all areas, whilst others have multiple hubs. Careful consideration would be needed in how to engage all partners so as to get buy-in across the entire policing area.
- The questions asked within the PPN had to be carefully considered to ensure a degree of proportionality was maintained and CSC were content with what was being asked such as the initial sharing was not overly burdensome or bureaucratic.
- A change in focus was required in some cases where early safeguarding could lead to the loss of digital evidence, with perpetrators becoming aware of police activity prior to enforcement. An acceptance that safeguarding is a priority over the investigation is required. In reality, we have not seen investigations being jeopardised.
- In the early stages, some PPN's resulted in request from CSC to send a further PPN once enforcement action had been taken, and that the case would be closed until that time. These instances have become less frequent as the practice has become embedded.

- Sufficient staffing of supervisors within ICET who are able to carry of strategy discussions with social care representatives.

Best available evidence

HMICFRS identified practice – <https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/inspection-online-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-of-children.pdf>

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