Internet child exploitation – officer welfare

Monitoring officer's welfare of new joiners to the Internet Child Exploitation Team (ICET).

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Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Organisational
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Ethics and values Leadership, development and learning Operational policing Organisation including workforce
Organisation	Nottinghamshire Police
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Region	East Midlands
Partners	Police
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	March 2023
Scale of initiative	Local

Key details

Target group	Adults Workforce

Aim

The investigation of prolonged serious sexual and physical abuse of children can prove very stressful for the officers and staff involved. Child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and indecent images of children (IIOC) are likely to contain some of the most harrowing accounts and images of abuse investigators will encounter throughout their careers.

The emotional and psychological impact upon staff can trigger vicarious trauma including compassion fatigue due to depression, anxiety, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Investigators may also experience desensitisation, hypervigilance, and overprotectiveness, especially in relation to their own children.

In an effort to maintain officer's welfare and create a culture within the team which values and prioritises the emotional health of officers, new joiners to the team are exposed to this harmful material on a staged and assessed basis.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of monitoring officers' welfare are to:

- prevent harm to officers investigating cases involving CSAM and IIOC.
- maintain high welfare standards for officers.
- create a culture of care and support for officers.
- ensure officers are not forced into a role which is harming them.

Description

A wellbeing strategy for teams investigating child abuse cases is essential to support officers and staff, especially those exposed to this material on for a long period. In recognising the potential harms these investigations can cause of those investigators, one of several approaches is to

expose new joiners to the team to CSAM and IIOC on a staged basis.

By utilising the tools officers use for grading this material, such as Griffeye, it is possible to expose new officers and staff to the least disturbing images, separated from the more disturbing images. There follows are period when the member of staff can reflect on this and has the opportunity to discuss this with supervisors and other officers.

Only when officers feel able to view more disturbing images are they exposed to it. The idea is that by following a staged process, resilience and coping mechanisms can be identified and built. Officers who feel unsuited to the role are able to say so without any embarrassment. Exposure to the most disturbing images can be built over time, allowing officers the opportunity to engage with the other strands of wellbeing support and discuss their concerns with supervisors.

This approach compliments other existing wellbeing support and has put in place the following processes:

- All staff receive access to professional psychological support from an external provider every six months.
- Regular one-to-one discussions with supervisors. Regular welfare days with time spent away from the office.
- Ad-hoc time away from viewing the material.
- Sharing of coping mechanisms between officers.
- Advice and support from accredited trainers of image grading.
- Regular de-briefs and workload reviews.
- Supervisor vigilance around stress signs amongst officers.
- A culture of openness and discussion is encouraged, where it is okay to say that you are not okay.

Evaluation

The practise 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 (HMICFRS0 during an inspection and has been identified as promising practice.

Below is quote from a newly recruited officer on ICET in Nottinghamshire:

When I started, I was introduced to the content gently by different members of the Internet Exploitation Team. Both team members undertook the slow process of explaining what Categorising of Indecent Images of Children means and what each category entails. After speaking about this verbally and going through these, we proceeded to view some Griffeye cases with Category C, B and then A material over time with the officer ensuring I was comfortable before continuing. Throughout, they were incredibly supportive and would always refer back to the wellbeing guidance, making the point that welfare is of utmost importance in this office and that we all take care of one another. Welfare guidance is continually referenced, and welfare walks / screen breaks as well as the mandatory counselling.

Overall impact

The overall impact has been difficult to measure as it is part of a combination of approaches to maintaining officer wellbeing. It has however attracted favourable comments from officers within the team who provided positive feedback regarding the organisational focus on staff and officer wellbeing.

Although difficult to put a quantitative measure on the overall impact, the officer sickness rate is well below force average and the staff feel valued and supported in dealing with IIOC offending. This practice has also assisted in the retention and recruitment of staff with the ICET due to the identification that staff welfare is of the upmost priority.

Learning

The force recognised some barriers to implementation:

- supervisors failing to recognise the potential harm that this work can cause
- supervisors failing to focus on proactively mitigating against these harms
- failing to accept that, at some point, officers and staff may struggle with mental ill-health due to the traumatic material they are dealing with
- creating an openly supportive workplace culture where investigators are empowered to seek support without feeling they appear 'weak', or unable to do their job

From a practitioner's perspective it is key that all supervisors and senior leaders ensure that staff wellbeing is at the forefront of every aspect of dealing with IIOC. Supervisors need to ensure they promote breaks and create a culture of openness and transparency where staff and able and willing to ask for help and support if needed though regular 1:1's.

It is also critical that if there is a point where a staff member requests to leave the team due to a wellbeing concern, that this is allowed and occurs swiftly to ensure no detriment to staff wellbeing. In many departments across policing there will always be challenges of demand verses capacity.

It is essential in ICET teams that staff's ability to move to a different team at the earliest opportunity once a wellbeing issue is raised is not blocked or delayed by senior leaders. This also portrays the message to officers considering a role within this area of Policing that they have an assurance that if they are impacted by the graphic and emotive nature of the work, then they will be supported.

Best available evidence

https://assets-hmicfrs.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/uploads/inspection-online-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation-of-children.pdf

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Tags

Child sexual exploitation　　　Safeguarding