

Operation Swordfish – a holistic approach to investigating child exploitation

Operation Swordfish was implemented to protect and safeguard exploited children, by improving the oversight and coordination of investigations through a holistic approach.

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Key details

Does it work?	Untested – new or innovative
Focus	Diversion Prevention
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Intelligence and investigation Operational policing
Organisation	Sussex Police
Contact	Jon Gillings
Email address	jonathan.gillings@sussex.police.uk
Region	South East
Partners	Police Local authority
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.
Start date	November 2024

Key details

Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people

Aim

In 2023, a West Sussex (WSX) child subject of criminal exploitation was murdered outside of the force area. At the time of their death, the child had been subject to child exploitation for almost three years. Following their murder, a rapid review instructed that a detailed audit of those crimes was to be conducted.

While each investigation was carried out to an acceptable standard, they identified:

- a lack of coordination between investigations, meaning the full picture of risk faced and posed went unseen
- a lack of supervisory oversight and accountability
- missed opportunities to look at escalation through to tactical tasking and coordination group (TTCG) and additional resources
- missed opportunities to protect, safeguard and prevent harm to children
- no consistent point of contact in relation to that child for partners leading to friction and impacting confidence

Sussex Police's primary allocation policy sets out how crimes are allocated for investigation. The policy is an incident-based approach, with crime allocated according to severity, geography, and temporal factors. This can result in an individual who is the victim or suspect of multiple crimes, being investigated or supported across a range of departments, divisions, units, sections, and officers in charge (OIC's).

This inevitably leads to a lack of coordination and duplication, potentially inhibiting the progress of individual investigations while extending the timeframe within which further crimes and harms can be perpetrated.

Operation Swordfish aims to improve the oversight and coordination of investigations, to ultimately protect and safeguard exploited children more effectively. The approach towards investigations shifts the focus away from investigating a behaviour or incident, but to look holistically at the child's circumstances and associations to identify the source of any risks.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Swordfish are to:

- enhance coordination and oversight to maximise opportunities to safeguard and disrupt child exploitation
- identify, disrupt and bring to justice those responsible for exploiting children
- enhance ownership, accountability and improved engagement with partners
- improve service delivery

Description

During the initial scoping, over 80 children were identified who met the Operation Swordfish criteria, linked to over 320 open investigations and approximately 270 individual OIC's, confirming a lack of co-ordination across investigations.

As part of Operation Swordfish, each child is allocated to a detective sergeant to take ownership and responsibility. All cases related to that child as a victim or witness (regardless of investigation level) are then distributed within that detective sergeant's team. The sergeant maintains oversight using the force's standard supervisory review processes. The focus here is to identify common factors, intelligence gaps, and ensure that the child is recognised as central to police effort.

Criteria for Operation Swordfish

Children assigned to the Operation Swordfish approach have been designated as 'red' risk within one of the three divisional multi-agency exploitation (MACE) meetings and are associated to two or more open crime investigations as a victim or suspect. A 'red' risk designation is assigned to a child if they are being sexually and/or criminally exploited at present.

Process

- A missing team coordinator reviews each 'red' risk graded child to identify if they meet Operation Swordfish criteria.
- If the criteria are met, the child's case is taken to the local hub intelligence meeting (HIM) for discussion and allocation.
- The missing team coordinator then adds an operational flag on Niche (police record management system) and a flag on the Police National Computer (PNC).
- An overview of the risk to the child and police involvement, including activity progressed under proactive investigation, is tracked and discussed at HIM.
- The HIM chair confirms that the flag has been added to Niche and PNC.

Actions

1. All investigations related to the child are identified and assigned to a detective sergeant for allocation within their team. This is regardless of the level of the crime, when, or where it occurred.
 - Where the child is being criminally exploited, the detective sergeant will be based in the Criminal Investigations Department (CID).
 - Where the child is being sexually exploited, the detective sergeant will be based in the child protection team.
 - Where the child is subject to both criminal and sexual exploitation (excluding instances where the sexual offence is restricted to online offending), the detective sergeant will be based in the child protection team.
2. The nominated detective sergeant then assumes the role of responsible officer (RO).
 - The RO allocates the investigations related to the child to investigators within their team.
 - The RO maintains supervisory oversight and responsibility for each of the cases, coordinating investigative activity to ensure that the totality of the incidents is recognised and opportunities to safeguard and disrupt are not missed.
 - The RO creates an administrative Niche record and instigates a proactive investigation with the objective of targeting and disrupting the source of that risk. The investigation is monitored through the local HIM.
 - The RO requests all known associated intelligence is provided by the intelligence team.

3. The RO is expected to attend the divisional multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meeting when the child they have been allocated is being discussed.

Overall impact

During the first nine months of implementation, there has been:

- positive feedback from partners in terms of improved connectivity between policing and the broader child protection network
- greater coordination across investigations, leading to identification of risk and escalation through national intelligence management (NIM) processes
- increased approaches to regional and specialist assets for investigative support and targeting
- identification of unmanaged risk
- increased proactive investigations focused on building holistic risk pictures
- decrease of OICs, from 270 individual to an equivalent number of ROs for children who qualify for Operation Swordfish (currently 58), providing improved oversight and coordination.

Learning

The support from partners has been critical for the successful implementation of Operation Swordfish, from the supply of information to planning meetings with relevant people.

Additionally, the strong engagement in planning and delivery has been important, with clear and strong escalatory pathways where responsibilities are not being met.

Significant focus has been required to shift officers' focus from being incident-based to being child-centred.

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