

# PEEL: Police effectiveness 2015 (Vulnerability)

An inspection of Essex Police



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## Vulnerability in numbers



### Calls for assistance

Calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Essex Police

England and Wales

**244**

**350**

Domestic abuse calls for assistance per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Essex Police

England and Wales

**16.7**

**15.8**



### Crime

Crimes recorded per 1,000 population 12 months to 31 March 2015

Essex Police

England and Wales

**56.3**

**61.6**

Change in recorded crimes (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

Essex Police

England and Wales

**+0.4%**

**+2.2%**

Percentage of total crimes recorded (excluding fraud) as having a vulnerable victim 12 months to 31 March 2015

Essex Police

England and Wales

**17.4%**

**10.7%**

Percentage of total crimes recorded as domestic abuse 12 months to 31 March 2015

Essex Police

England and Wales

**10.6%**

**10.0%**

Change in domestic abuse recorded crime 12 months to 31 March 2015 against 12 months to 31 March 2014

Essex Police

England and Wales

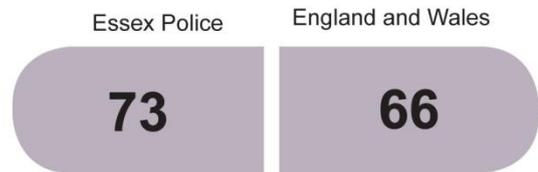
**+14.6%**

**+20.8%**



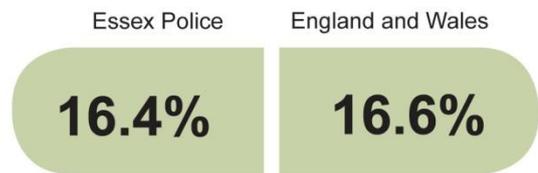
## Domestic abuse arrest rate

Number of domestic abuse arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015

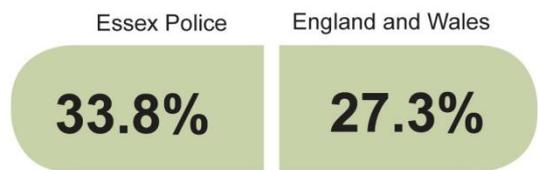


## Charge rate

Charge rate as a percentage of all crimes recorded (excluding fraud) 12 months to 31 March 2015

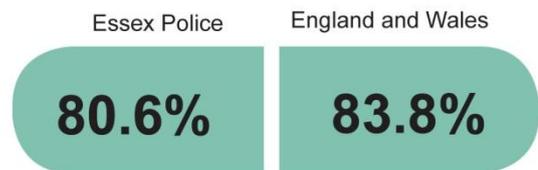


Domestic abuse charge rate as a percentage of all domestic abuse crimes recorded 12 months to 31 March 2015



## Victim satisfaction rate

Victim satisfaction rate 12 months to 31 March 2015



**Data:** for full details on the data used in this graphic see annex A in the vulnerability national report.

## Introduction

The public expects their local police force to support victims of crime by responding to calls for help, putting in place the right support and keeping them informed. It is particularly important that vulnerable people, whether or not they have been a victim of crime, are identified early and receive the support they need.

As part of its annual inspections into police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy (PEEL), HMIC's effectiveness programme assessed how well forces keep people safe and reduce crime. Within this programme, HMIC's vulnerability inspection examined the overall question, 'How effective are forces at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?' We have considered in depth how forces respond to and support missing and absent children and victims of domestic abuse, and assessed how well prepared forces are to respond to and safeguard children at risk of sexual exploitation.

We have looked at four areas:

- How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?
- How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?
- How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?
- How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent children & victims of domestic abuse); and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?

At the heart of this inspection is the protection of people who are vulnerable. A force may therefore be judged as requiring improvement by HMIC where it exhibits shortcomings in one of these areas, even if its performance in other areas is strong, and even if there are many elements of its service that HMIC considers to be good.

This inspection follows up our 2014 domestic abuse inspection and reviews forces' progress on implementation of their action plans following that inspection. A national domestic abuse report summarising the findings across 43 forces is being published at the same time as this report.

During our inspection we collected data and plans from forces, conducted a review of case files and observed multi-agency meetings. We heard from victims of domestic abuse through a number of focus groups across England and Wales and conducted an online survey with practitioners, including Independent Domestic Violence Advocates, outreach and refuge workers, to gauge views on what has changed since the 2014 inspection and inform local practitioner focus groups.

During the in-force inspection, we interviewed chief officers in each force and held focus groups with officers, staff and partners, and made unannounced visits to police stations, force control rooms and specialist teams.

We also worked with the force missing person coordinator (or equivalent) to review cases of missing and absent children, including children considered to be 'repeat absent' and 'repeat missing' and children shown to be at risk of child sexual exploitation.

All forces are subject to significant cost reductions and these issues have been reflected in our efficiency reports published in October 2015. The judgments we are making in this vulnerability report are made understanding the financial challenges forces are facing.

This report sets out the findings from this wide-ranging inspection of Essex Police.

# How effective is the force at protecting from harm those who are vulnerable, and supporting victims?

## Summary



Inadequate

Essex Police is committed to supporting victims and protecting vulnerable people from harm. However, while the force has processes in place to identify and support those people who are vulnerable, the policing response is often poor and routinely fails to meet the needs of victims. There are significant weaknesses in the force's approach to victims of domestic abuse, its response to missing and absent children and its preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation. Given the significant risk that these weaknesses pose to some of the most vulnerable people, HMIC judges that overall the force is inadequate.

While the force has some specialist departments, for example a dedicated team that investigates sexual offences, which respond well to the needs of vulnerable victims, this is not the case across the force. There is a lack of understanding amongst many frontline staff about how to identify, respond to and safeguard vulnerable victims.

The force is struggling to provide an effective service to victims from the point at which they first contact the police. In the force control room there are significant backlogs of incidents where police have not attended nor contacted the victim after their initial call. HMIC is especially concerned that the backlog contains a high number of domestic abuse incidents. The force is working hard to reduce this backlog, but more needs to be done as the delays mean some victims receive a poor response from the outset and the force is unable to offer them appropriate and tailored support.

Although the force has devoted considerable effort to improving its response to victims of domestic abuse following HMIC's original inspection in 2014, the force's service is still poor in a number of respects. There is confusion about the roles and responsibilities of the officers dealing with victims judged to be at medium and standard risk of harm. This results in safeguarding opportunities in respect of victims being missed. Not all officers responsible for investigating cases where the victim is at high risk of harm are appropriately trained and experienced. The risk to children from households where there is domestic abuse is sometimes overlooked.

The supervision and quality of investigations into missing people has recently improved. However, there is confusion amongst officers, including supervisors, about the use of the categories 'missing' and 'absent'. The risk to missing children is sometimes assessed inappropriately potentially leaving vulnerable children at risk.

Officers do not always understand the link between missing children and child sexual exploitation.

The force is generally unprepared to tackle child sexual exploitation. It currently has a poor understanding of the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation. Frontline staff have limited knowledge and awareness of child sexual exploitation which hampers their ability to identify and respond to cases.

More positively, procedures in the force control room to identify vulnerable victims are generally sound. An increased force focus on offenders has meant that the proportion of those arrested for domestic abuse who are subsequently prosecuted is increasing.

The force is undoubtedly committed to prioritising the protection of vulnerable people. It has reallocated resources to improve the service it provides to some of the most vulnerable members of its communities. For example, it has invested in specialist teams to investigate domestic abuse and support investigations where the internet is used to coerce vulnerable people into sexual activity online. However, HMIC found that some officers and staff in these teams were overwhelmed with caseload at the time of our inspection.

The force recognises the work it has to do. HMIC is encouraged that the force's senior leadership team has already taken a range of actions aimed at addressing the shortcomings identified by this inspection.

Because of the serious causes of concern arising from this inspection, HMIC expects Essex Police to provide evidence, by 31 January 2016, of its progress in addressing HMIC's recommendations. HMIC will then review the force's progress in advance of its autumn inspection and will publish its findings on whether Essex Police has improved.

## **How well does the force identify those who are vulnerable and assess their level of risk and need?**

Essex Police has measures in place to identify and support those who are vulnerable. Responding to domestic abuse and hidden harms, such as parental drug and or alcohol abuse, and the support to victims are prominent in the police and crime commissioner's plan. However, the force has a poor understanding of child sexual exploitation or its relationship with vulnerable missing children. The force's service to vulnerable people is inconsistent and it is failing to meet victims' needs effectively.

## Identifying those who are vulnerable

When the force control room first receives 999 or 101 calls, it has effective measures in place to determine if the caller is vulnerable. A structured method of questioning callers known as THRIVE<sup>1</sup> has been introduced in the force control room. A step-by-step series of questions is designed to enable call handlers to identify the caller's circumstances and accurately determine the nature and urgency of the response that they need. Supervision within the control room is good, with managers available to provide guidance when necessary. This is important due to high numbers of new staff and the continuing process to introduce the THRIVE system.

While HMIC was reassured that the force can identify vulnerability at the first point of contact in the control room, we were not assured that front counter staff in police stations can identify people who are vulnerable and who might need additional support. The front counter staff we spoke to had undergone computer-based training (NCALT)<sup>2</sup> which is designed to help them better understand child sexual exploitation and the national standards required for domestic abuse and missing persons. However, we found inconsistent levels of understanding, which affects the quality of service they provide. Computer-based training packages alone will not ensure that staff are equipped adequately to identify if a person attending a police station is vulnerable. The force has designed a 3-day public protection awareness course which includes inputs on child sex exploitation that it will provide to over 3,000 members of its staff over the coming months.

Forces define vulnerability in different ways. Most forces use either the definition from the government's Code of Practice for Victims of Crime<sup>3</sup> or that referred to in ACPO guidance.<sup>4</sup> Nine forces use their own definition or a combination of these definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> The THRIVE concept assesses threat, harm, risk, investigation opportunities, the vulnerability of the victim and the engagement level required to resolve the incident.

<sup>2</sup> NCALT, a programme designed by the National Centre for Applied Learning Technologies, is a computer-based training system used by many forces to train frontline staff in a range of contemporary policing issues.

<sup>3</sup> *Code of Practice for Victims of Crime*, Ministry of Justice, 2013. Available from [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254459/code-of-practice-victims-of-crime.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254459/code-of-practice-victims-of-crime.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) is now the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC). *ACPO Guidance on Safeguarding and Investigating the Abuse of Vulnerable Adults*, NPIA, 2012, is available from [www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/vulnerable-adults/](http://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/vulnerable-adults/)

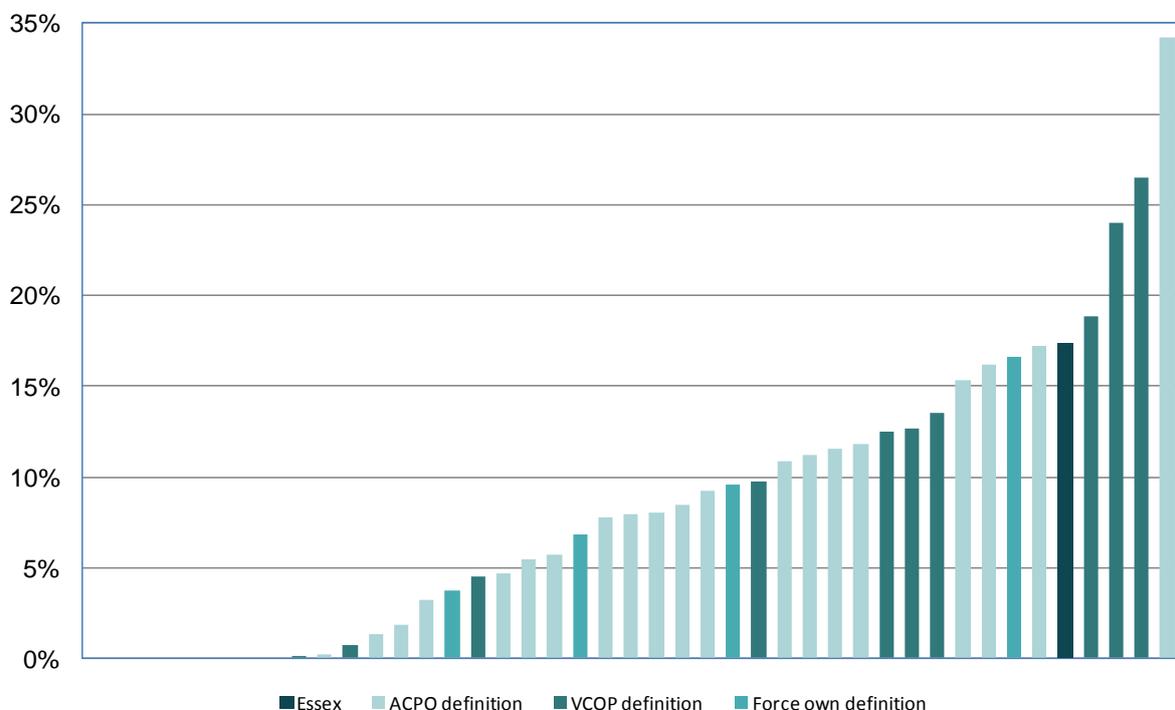
Essex Police uses the government’s Code of Practice for Victims of Crime definition of vulnerability:

- a) you are under 18 years of age at the time of the offence, or
- b) the quality of your evidence is likely to be affected because:
  - i) you suffer from mental disorder within the meaning of the Mental Health Act 1983;
  - ii) you otherwise have a significant impairment of intelligence and social functioning; or
  - iii) you have a physical disability or are suffering from a physical disorder.

The proportion of crime recorded which involves a vulnerable victim varies considerably between forces, from 0.03 percent to 34.3 percent. For the 12 months to 31 March 2015, 17.4 percent of all recorded crimes in Essex Police were identified as involving a vulnerable victim. Eight forces were unable to provide this data at the time of data collection.

There is no standard way in which forces are required to record whether a victim is vulnerable on crime recording systems and forces do this differently.

**Figure 1: The proportion of police recorded crime with a vulnerable victim identified, by force, for the 12 months to 31 March 2015.**



Source: HMIC data return

## **Assessing levels of risk and need**

HMIC inspectors listened to a number of 999 and 101 calls and found that call-handlers demonstrated professionalism, empathy and reassurance in their conversations with callers. Risk and vulnerability is being identified within the THRIVE principles and safeguarding advice is routinely offered. These included advice about securing homes, how to protect children and what to do pending the arrival of response officers.

The force's incident management IT system highlights a caller's previous contact history by way of a number of 'flags' that appear on the computer screen when an address or telephone number are keyed in. Essex Police use a number of these flags including those for domestic abuse, vulnerable person, hate crime, child protection, child abuse and serious sexual offences. However, there is no specific flag for child sexual exploitation or where callers report their children being inappropriately approached online. As an alternative, staff use either a child abuse or serious sexual offence flag. This means that even though the force does have a child sexual exploitation flag on the crime system, at the outset of an incident the force cannot easily identify child sexual exploitation. HMIC is also concerned that patterns of repeated victimisation may be overlooked if there are repeated calls from, or about, the same victim.

## **Understanding the risk to victims and ensuring they are protected and supported**

The force's understanding of the needs of vulnerable victims and the service it provides to them is inconsistent. The service provided to victims by specialist investigative teams is better than elsewhere in the force but a lack of accredited, experienced detectives often undermines the quality of investigations.

The force's child sexual exploitation triage team (CSETT) has established strong links with the county's three local authorities, which has proved effective at establishing care plans for the vulnerable people who most need their support. Some vulnerable young people who are susceptible to being groomed for child sexual exploitation are being assessed by joint agency triage teams. This has led to cases being referred to the force's Serious Crime Directorate to track down perpetrators. However, we found occasions where crimes against young people who have potentially been exposed to child sexual exploitation are investigated by officers without the requisite skills, training or accreditation.

Force procedure is that all missing people should be recorded onto the missing person database COMPACT. Some people who are frequently reported as missing or absent are not always being properly recorded on COMPACT. This limits the force's ability to understand the nature and scale of missing and absent and prevents the force taking the appropriate course of action to protect them.

HMIC acknowledges the force's resolve to increase resources in new investigative teams and adjust operating procedures to ensure that it allocates resources properly to support victims who are vulnerable. The force has assigned constables to schools, who work well to raise awareness of risks to children, reporting concerns to the education authorities and engaging with truants positively. The force has also placed officers in Essex's Joint Domestic Abuse Triage Teams (JDATTs) which brings a number of statutory and partner agencies together to assess the need of victims.

The force has centralised its crime and public protection command. This includes a number of specialist investigative teams such as the dangerous offenders' management, sexual offence investigation and child abuse investigation teams. The force believes that this will raise standards to improve its service to the most vulnerable victims but it is too early for us to assess whether this is the case.

## **How well does the force initially respond to vulnerable victims?<sup>5</sup>**

HMIC found the force's response to vulnerable victims to be mixed. Officers conduct initial safeguarding at the scene and take positive action, which normally results in the arrest of a suspect. However, we found occasions when the needs of children affected by domestic abuse are overlooked. Force supervision of call-handlers and emergency response officers is generally good, which ensures that incidents recorded in the control room are not closed until all necessary initial steps have been taken.

HMIC found a number of shortcomings in how the force manages investigations where a suspect has been identified and has yet to be arrested. This is specifically in relation to suspects circulated on the Police National Computer as 'wanted' for domestic abuse offences. No clear picture exists of how many wanted individuals have yet to be arrested. Whilst the force has a system to prioritise and track down those offenders assessed to pose the greatest risk, it is missing opportunities to involve frontline officers to find these outstanding perpetrators.

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<sup>5</sup> The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks "How well does the force respond to vulnerable victims?" HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the initial response to vulnerable victims, rather than the overall police response to vulnerable victims.

## Response officers

Emergency response officers look after the immediate safety needs of victims at the scene and arrest offenders where criminal offences are disclosed. An increased focus on offenders has meant that the proportion arrested for domestic abuse is increasing, as is the proportion of offenders who are subsequently prosecuted.

Officers routinely complete risk assessments of domestic abuse victims, known as DASH<sup>6</sup> risk identifications. These in turn provide a direct route to the multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)<sup>7</sup> which consider the needs of high-risk victims. Furthermore, the force's new IT platform (Athena) automatically alerts the county's social services of domestic abuse incidents.

However, contrary to the force policy we found that the risk to and needs of children from households where there has been a report of domestic abuse are not always being assessed or responded to. Details of children were not consistently being included in the risk assessments, meaning that safeguarding opportunities and referrals to other organisations are being missed.

Essex Police is experiencing a backlog in recording crimes onto the crime management database. To overcome this, the force has introduced a quick input form (QIF) to speed up entries. HMIC reviewed a number of QIFs and found that:

- none included investigation or safety plans;
- investigation and safeguarding records were limited even when violence had been threatened;
- in some cases details of the investigation were absent; and
- they are being used for domestic abuse cases, contrary to force instructions.

Essex Police has made effective use of body-worn video cameras. Officers with whom we spoke had a positive perception of how this technology gathers high-quality evidence to support prosecutions, but not all officers have access to the equipment or other equipment with which they can record evidence. This has led to some officers taking photos of victims' injuries on their personal mobile phones. This could expose the force to criticism in respect of the integrity of its data storage and potentially undermine prosecutions to the detriment of victims.

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<sup>6</sup> Most forces use the domestic abuse, stalking and harassment and honour-based violence risk identification, assessment and management model (DASH): [www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/risk-and-vulnerability/#approaches-to-risk-assessment](http://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/major-investigation-and-public-protection/domestic-abuse/risk-and-vulnerability/#approaches-to-risk-assessment)

<sup>7</sup> MARACs (multi-agency risk assessment conferences) – meetings where information about domestic abuse victims who are at risk of serious harm is shared with local partner agencies to ensure that comprehensive safeguarding measures are put in place.

There are significant backlogs within the force control room of incidents where police have not attended nor contacted the victim. Of serious concern to us is that the backlog contained 246 domestic abuse incidents. The force has initiated action to reduce the backlog, but still needs to do more as the delays mean a poor response for victims, failing to address their needs or offer appropriate, tailored support.

The force's safeguarding arrangements for high-risk domestic abuse victims are generally effective. This is primarily because the force's central referral unit (CRU) has responsibility for supporting the victim in such cases and draws together timely and appropriate additional support from partner agencies. However, recent adjustments to the CRU remit mean that safeguarding measures for standard and medium-risk victims now rest with investigating officers on local policing commands. This has led to a misunderstanding of responsibilities between investigators and arresting officers as to who is responsible for supporting and safeguarding the victim resulting in inconsistencies in the service provided to victims.

### **Supervision of response to vulnerable victims**

Day-to-day force supervision in the control room is good with frequent reviews being made of incidents handled by staff, with a particular focus on new staff.

Supervisory procedures for initial contact with domestic abuse victims and for reporting people missing are clear. DASH risk assessments are presented to the attending officer's sergeant for ratification and HMIC saw examples where the assessment was changed to reflect concerns raised by supervisors. Furthermore, domestic abuse incidents recorded on the incident management system cannot be closed without a sergeant's approval.

When people are reported as missing an initial risk assessment is carried by a local inspector from the local policing team. Any that are assessed as being of high risk are escalated to the on-call senior officer for review. Throughout the investigation to find the missing person, an officer of at least the rank of sergeant directs the activities and records the outcomes.

HMIC saw some effective follow-up work designed to track down and arrest known offenders as part of a campaign called Operation Shield. Each day, officers are directed to locate high-risk domestic abuse offenders who have not been arrested.

However, it is of considerable concern that the force's systems mean it is unsure how many known domestic abuse suspects are yet to be arrested. The force has no formal review process to track attempts to arrest suspects who have been circulated as wanted on force systems or the Police National Computer. HMIC was present when officers were briefed at the beginning of a shift and found that little or no attention was paid to dangerous offenders and vulnerable people despite these details being available. This indicates that the force is missing opportunities to place high-risk offenders and vulnerable victims at the forefront of their activities.

## **How well does the force investigate offences involving vulnerable victims and work with partners to keep victims safe?<sup>8</sup>**

The force works well with partners to protect vulnerable people. The force plays an important role in Essex's Joint Domestic Triage Teams (JDATTs) which are hosted by the county's three local authorities (Essex County Council, Southend-on-Sea Borough Council and Thurrock Council). These teams consist of staff from a range of local partners who work together to share information about victims, assess risk, agree safeguarding actions and co-ordinate support for victims of domestic abuse and their families.

HMIC observed that the process for tracking actions and holding partners to account at MARAC meetings was not as comprehensive as seen in other force areas. Essex Police believes that the establishment of JDATTs will improve this position by ensuring that only victims requiring a full multi-agency response are referred to MARACs.

HMIC also saw evidence of the force's child sexual exploitation triage team (CSETT) representing the force at multi-agency meetings in the county's three local authority areas where vulnerable children are discussed. This means that children who are identified on force intelligence systems as being susceptible to child sexual exploitation can be brought to the direct attention of children's social care for safeguarding plans to be put in place.

### **Investigation of crime involving vulnerable people**

HMIC examined the case files of 40 investigations,<sup>9</sup> in some of which vulnerable victims were identified. HMIC also interviewed investigators in specialist investigative units and frontline officers who are also allocated crimes for investigation.

When officers deploy immediately to victims, the service they provide is generally good. However, the quality of service deteriorates when a delayed response is assessed to be more appropriate. Standards of investigation also vary greatly. HMIC found evidence of high-quality investigations in some specialist teams but a lack of professionalism and poor supervision elsewhere.

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<sup>8</sup> The question within the PEEL inspection methodology asks "How well does the subsequent police action and work with partners keep victims safe?" HMIC has amended the heading in this report to make it clear to the reader that this section focuses on the investigation of offences involving vulnerable victims, rather than the police's initial response to vulnerable victims.

<sup>9</sup> HMIC reviewed a sample of rape, burglary, offences of serious violence and actual bodily harm cases. In most forces the review consisted of 10 cases from each crime category but in some larger forces the sample was increased to 15. The file review was designed to provide a broad overview of the identification of vulnerability and the effectiveness of the investigation.

HMIC is concerned that the force is not managing individual officers' workloads appropriately with some officers reporting that they are overwhelmed. In addition it is of concern that investigations are not always allocated to officers with the requisite skills and those staff charged with the allocation of crimes do not always understand the roles and responsibilities of investigators.

The police on-line investigation team (POLIT), which contains skilled and experienced staff, has a high workload and some cases had not been reviewed for three months, which may mean that victims are not receiving the appropriate response and support from the police.

Due to these workload pressures inspectors found evidence of online abuse investigations being undertaken by local policing team officers with only entry-level accreditation as investigators. In these cases the POLIT will conduct an initial assessment of the investigation for risk, suggest lines of enquiry and signpost partner agencies that can support victims. The POLIT will provide further advice or take on the investigation once an offender has been identified.

HMIC found weaknesses in some domestic abuse and sexual offence investigations. For instance, investigations lacked proper recording of first accounts of offences, did not use enough video interviews to record the evidence of vulnerable victims and their safeguarding arrangements were not sufficiently robust.

Force supervision of investigations is generally good with more detailed supervision of more serious crime. In such cases, we found regular entries by frontline supervisors and detailed investigation plans. When examining investigations in respect of more commonly occurring crimes, HMIC found there is less consistency in supervision. We noted a particular issue in the investigations where individuals had been arrested and prosecution files had been passed from emergency response officers to other investigators. The handover of these cases is not generally documented. This means that officers to whom investigations are allocated are unaware of the full scope of the activity undertaken by the arresting officers. Successful prosecutions could be undermined as a result. This is of particular concern because some of the cases HMIC reviewed involved high-risk domestic abuse victims.

## **Compliance with the code of practice for victims of crime**

All police forces have a statutory duty to comply with the code practice for victims of crime. The code sets out the service that victims can expect from all organisations, including the police, with a role in the criminal justice system.

HMIC found that staff understand the victim's code requirements and generally appreciate that addressing the needs of the victim is an integral part of a successful investigation. Furthermore, good use is being made of Essex Police's crime reporting system, Athena, which prompts investigators to keep victims informed of developments in the case at appropriate intervals.

Staff have a sound theoretical knowledge of victim personal statements.<sup>10</sup> These statements make courts aware of the psychological impact of becoming a victim. However, we found that staff use them inconsistently. Some officers doubted the value of these statements and others cited workload pressures as the reason why they are not routinely taken. This is disappointing as HMIC's crime inspection in 2014 reported that the force should do better in this area.

More positively, we found that the force makes effective use of so-called special measures to vulnerable victims, for example a facility to give evidence by video link rather than attending court.

## **How well does the force respond to and safeguard specific vulnerable groups (missing and absent & victims of domestic abuse), and how well prepared is it to tackle child sexual exploitation?**

The first three questions have explained how the force identifies those that are vulnerable, the response that is provided to them and what action the force takes with partners to investigate crimes and to work with partners to keep victims safe. This question looks specifically at how Essex Police deals with three specific areas of vulnerability: domestic abuse, missing and absent children and its preparedness to deal with child sexual exploitation.

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<sup>10</sup> The victim personal statement (VPS) gives victims an opportunity to describe the wider effects of the crime upon them, express their concerns and indicate whether or not they require support. Provisions relating to the making of a VPS and its use in criminal proceedings are included in the Code of Practice for Victims of Crime (Victims Code), which was published on 29 October 2013 and came into force on 10 December 2013.

## Missing and absent children

Although the force's initial response to missing people is of a good standard, we found inconsistencies in how it prioritises investigations.

HMIC observed confusion amongst officers, including supervisors, regarding whether they should categorise a missing person as absent or missing.<sup>11</sup> It is common force practice for absent cases to be kept under review and escalated to the missing category only if the circumstances cause any subsequent concern. Some officers believed the absent category could be applied to missing children and others did not. Without clarity on this matter there is a risk that the force may not routinely recognise missing children and offer support tailored to meet their needs.

In recognition of the harm to which missing people are exposed, the force has invested in two missing person coordinators (MPCs) who check the missing persons database known as COMPACT<sup>12</sup> to ensure compliance with force instructions.

HMIC is concerned that not all missing people including some children are recorded on COMPACT. On occasions, investigations of people who are repeatedly reported as missing are recorded on the force control room's software as an alternative. These systems weaknesses mean that the MPC is not aware of these cases so they are not subject to their oversight, potentially overlooking the opportunity to link repeat occurrences of people being reported as missing.

Understanding of the link between vulnerable missing children and child sexual exploitation among many frontline staff is poor. HMIC found cases relating to missing children that had been graded as medium risk despite warning markers for child sexual exploitation in respect of that child and evidence of repeat missing episodes which would justify a high risk grading. We also noted occasions when officers inappropriately described children that went missing frequently as being 'streetwise', and consequently downgraded their risk assessment.

Staff do not always complete return home interviews which means that the force, along with partner agencies, does not understand why children go missing and how vulnerable they are. A Barnardo's position has recently been funded by the force to assist with return home interviews of vulnerable children within the Essex local authority area. In addition, a more recent venture between the police and crime commissioner, the force and the Children's Society provides child sexual exploitation support workers to engage with children at risk of exploitation, including those who repeatedly go missing.

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<sup>11</sup> A person is classified as absent if they are not where they are expected to be but they are not considered at risk. Whereas, if they are classified as missing the police are obliged to take steps to locate them, as the level of perceived risk is higher.

<sup>12</sup> COMPACT is a national missing person's case management computer system to manage missing person enquiries.

## **Preparedness to tackle child sexual exploitation**

Essex Police is unprepared to tackle child sexual exploitation. This inspection has focused on actions the force has taken to understand and identify the extent to which children are at risk of child sexual exploitation and the policies and practices the force is putting in place to tackle it. It did not test the quality of how the force conducted these complex investigations with other agencies such as children's services because these issues are covered in HMIC's rolling programme of child protection inspections.

At a strategic level, the force's child sexual exploitation problem profile,<sup>13</sup> which is designed to provide a comprehensive understanding of this type of crime, is underdeveloped. A rigorous programme to flag incidents, intelligence reports and reported crime, which would help inform the profile, is not yet in place. Profiles are designed to inform resourcing decisions, police activity and training requirements. HMIC believes that the under-developed profile is a factor in Essex Police's incoherent approach to child sexual exploitation.

HMIC found that the knowledge, understanding and awareness of child sexual exploitation amongst frontline officers is extremely limited. Officers are not routinely making links between missing children and child sexual exploitation. During our inspection we had cause to refer several cases to the force for immediate action as vulnerable children had not been properly recognised or safeguarded.

Despite these issues of considerable concern HMIC did find some evidence of good practice. For example, we saw dedicated schools constables working well to raise awareness, bring their concerns to the education authorities and work with truants. Similarly, force youth officers have received extensive training to recognise the precursor signs of child sexual exploitation and engage well with the child abuse investigators. The CSETT is working increasingly more closely with partner organisations to safeguard vulnerable people.

The challenge for Essex Police is to understand more fully the problem of child sexual exploitation, to share this knowledge across the force and ensure that the force's response to children at risk of sexual exploitation becomes routine.

## **Domestic abuse**

In 2014, HMIC reported that Essex Police's response to victims of domestic abuse was fragmented. While domestic abuse was a priority within the force and we had found evidence of high-risk victims receiving a good service from the police, the

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<sup>13</sup> A problem profile is intended to provide the force with greater understanding of established and emerging crime or incident series, priority locations or other identified high-risk issues. It should be based on the research and analysis of a wide range of information sources, including information from partner organisations. It should contain recommendations for making decisions and options for action.

service to victims at lesser risk was not as assured and there were shortcomings in training and supervision.

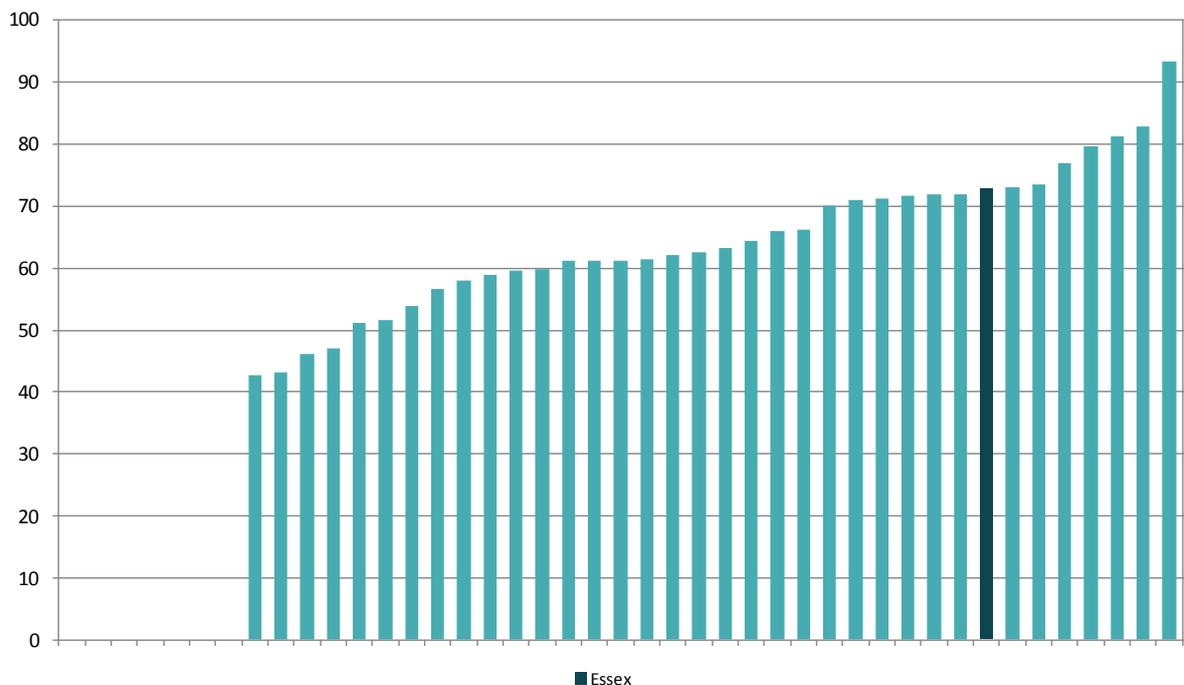
The force currently has a domestic abuse action plan which is being managed by the domestic abuse project board and is subject to chief officer oversight. In spite of some progress being made, for example the establishment of specialist domestic abuse investigation teams, a number of previously identified recommendations for improvement have not been adequately addressed.

HMIC's domestic abuse inspection in 2014 included ten recommendations as to where Essex Police should improve its service to safeguard victims and manage offenders. The force reports that 90 percent of the elements of these recommendations have been completed with those outstanding elements being incorporated into broader work streams designed to improve service delivery.

In the 12 months to 31 March 2015, recorded domestic abuse increased in Essex by 15 percent against the previous 12 months and accounted for 11 percent of all police recorded crime. Across England and Wales during the same period there was a 21 percent increase, with domestic abuse accounting for 10 percent of all police recorded crime.

As shown in figure 2 below, for every 100 domestic abuse crimes recorded Essex Police made 73 arrests.

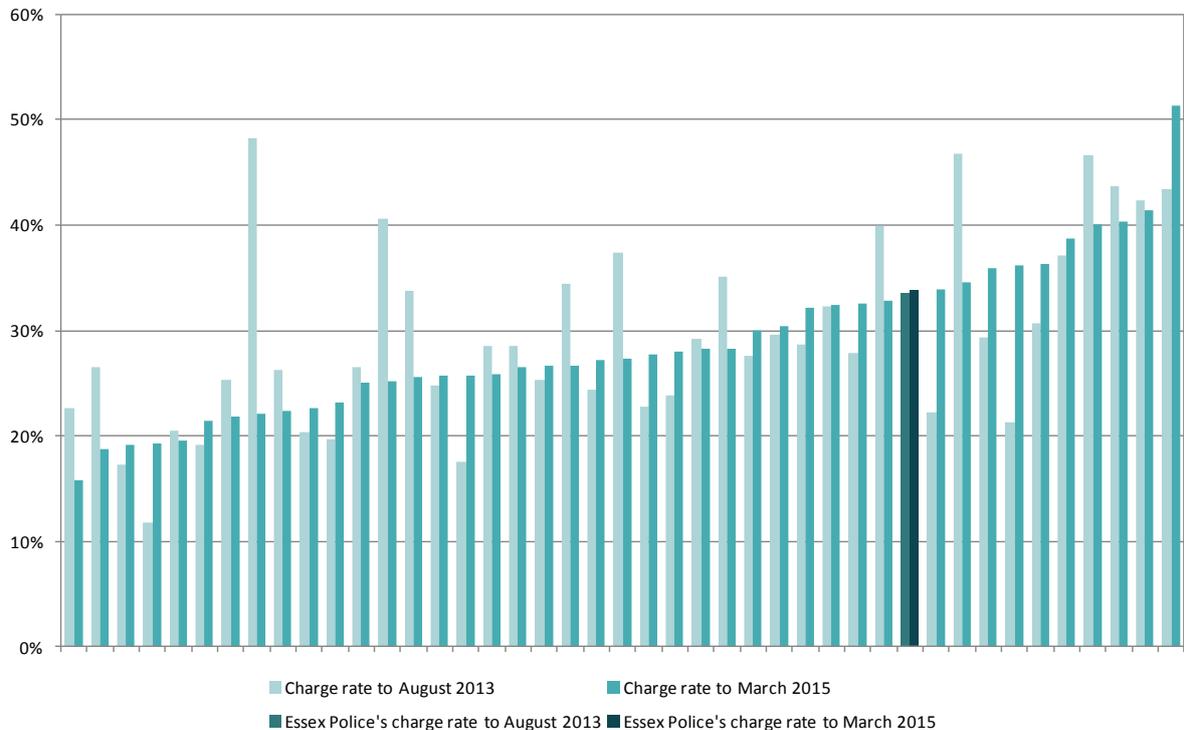
**Figure 2: The number of arrests per 100 domestic abuse crimes by force, for the 12 months to 31 March 2015**



Source: HMIC data return

The force's charge rate for domestic abuse recorded crimes for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 was 34 percent, compared with 27 percent for England and Wales. The force charge rate is the same as it was at the last HMIC domestic abuse inspection (12 months to 31 August 2013) when the England and Wales rate was 30 percent.

**Figure 3: Domestic abuse charge rate for the 12 months to 31 March 2015 compared to the 12 months to 31 August 2013**



**Source: HMIC data return**

HMIC also examined the force's use of new legal powers to protect victims. Domestic violence protection orders (DVPOs) were introduced in England and Wales in 2014 to prevent a suspected offender from returning to a victim's home or contacting the victim. The force began using DVPOs in June 2014; it made 326 applications to magistrates' courts for their use, of which 303 were granted. Fifty-four DVPOs have been breached. Breaches occur when the offender fails to comply with the condition of the order and is taken back before the magistrates' court. This represents a DVPO breach rate of 18 percent compared with the England and Wales rate of 17 percent.<sup>14</sup>

While HMIC acknowledges the force's efforts to take positive steps to arrest offenders and place them before the courts, we remain concerned that force roles and responsibilities for safeguarding are sometimes unclear.

<sup>14</sup> The England and Wales figure is based on data provided by 35 forces.

The force operates a model which separates the crime investigation and prosecution of domestic abuse perpetrators from the provision of safeguarding support to victims. This model has been adopted by other forces and it can work effectively. But it is ineffective in Essex. Weaknesses in the force systems and processes mean that too often it makes false assumptions that safeguarding arrangements are in place.

For example, specialist domestic abuse investigators, in units known as Juno teams, believed that arresting officers or the specialist domestic abuse safeguarding team were making referrals to support agencies and others for medium risk domestic abuse cases when they were not.

This problem is compounded by the remit of the Juno teams being altered resulting in ineffective processes to ensure victims receive appropriate support. The Juno teams now only investigate domestic abuse allegations relating to high-risk victims. Originally Juno teams investigated crimes relating to medium risk victims as well. These cases are now being investigated by officers on local policing commands, who have less expertise – there is consequently less assurance that victims will receive the service they need. Independent domestic abuse advocates (IDVAs)<sup>15</sup> who work with victims were concerned that there were occasions when their clients either had too little information about the progress of their case or were repeatedly contacted by different departments in Essex Police in an uncoordinated way.

HMIC also has concerns about the experience and accreditation of staff within the Juno teams. These teams took many staff from the disbanded force prisoner handling team. We found that many had not been given any specialist training for the roles that they are now undertaking. The level of demand has resulted in high levels of stress-related sickness which has increased the pressure on remaining staff in the teams.

More positively, the force is piloting two so-called triage cars with an IDVA and a police officer in each to provide a rapid, joint response to high-risk domestic abuse victims. HMIC commends the force for this approach.

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<sup>15</sup> IDVAs (independent domestic abuse advisors) are advocates who work separately from the police to address the safety of victims (and their children) who are at high risk of harm from intimate partners, former partners and family members.

## Summary of findings



Inadequate

HMIC has significant concerns about the capability of Essex Police to protect vulnerable people from harm and support victims. There are serious weaknesses in the force's arrangements to safeguard and investigate cases involving vulnerable people.

The force's response to victims of domestic abuse is poor. There is confusion as to roles and responsibilities amongst officers in medium and standard risk cases resulting in safeguarding opportunities being missed. Not all officers charged with investigating high risk cases are appropriately trained and experienced. These shortcomings were highlighted in HMIC's crime inspection in 2014. The force is not always assessing or responding to the needs of and risk to children from households where there is domestic abuse.

The supervision and quality of investigations into missing people have improved. However, we found confusion among officers, including supervisors, about the use of the categories missing and absent. These weak processes are leading to inappropriate risk assessments that are leaving vulnerable children at risk. It was clear that officers do not always understand the link between missing children and child sexual exploitation.

The force is unprepared to tackle child sexual exploitation. The force has a poor understanding of the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation and knowledge and awareness among frontline staff are limited which adversely affects their ability to identify and respond to cases.

## **Causes of concern**

- The force's response to victims of domestic abuse is a cause of concern to HMIC because of a lack of effective and reliable force processes to respond to and safeguard victims. The force needs to improve its processes for the identification of and response to children affected by domestic abuse. There is confusion about responsibility for safeguarding those victims assessed as at medium or standard risk, and a lack of properly recorded safety plans. The force needs to improve its investigation of offences, specifically the quality of handover of investigations and ensuring that staff with appropriate professional skills and expertise carry out investigations. There is a lack of a process to monitor outstanding perpetrators of domestic abuse to ensure they are arrested at the earliest opportunity.

## **Recommendation**

To address this cause of concern HMIC recommends that the force should take immediate steps to ensure that:

- staff understand how children can be affected by domestic abuse and there is a process to ensure they take safeguarding actions, and make referrals to other organisations who have a role in safeguarding;
- it clarifies roles and responsibilities of officers and staff for safeguarding victims of domestic abuse who have been assessed as at medium or standard risk, and establishes a process to ensure safety plans are properly recorded on systems;
- officers with the appropriate professional skills and expertise carry out investigations and that processes are established to supervise the handover of cases to ensure they are of the necessary standard; and
- it establishes a process to monitor outstanding perpetrators of domestic abuse to ensure action is taken to arrest them at the earliest opportunity.

## **Causes of concern**

- The force's response to child sexual exploitation is a cause of concern to HMIC. The force has a poor understanding of the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation, as the problem profiles it uses to assess this are under-developed. Knowledge and awareness among frontline staff are limited which adversely affects their ability to recognise, assess and respond to cases with tailored support, including making links between persistent missing children and the risk of being exploited. Some staff are conducting online investigations into paedophile offences without the necessary skills or experience. Workload is excessive within the police online investigation team, resulting in delays. The force does not make sufficient use of video interviews for vulnerable victims and overall HMIC is concerned that its safeguarding arrangements for children at risk are not robust enough.

## **Recommendation**

To address this cause of concern the force should immediately take steps to ensure that:

- it understands the nature and scale of child sexual exploitation by re-assessing available information, including that of partners;
- it improves frontline staff knowledge and understanding of the factors to identify child sexual exploitation, and how to respond to cases;
- officers with the appropriate professional skills carry out investigations involving children as victims, specifically in relation to cases of online paedophilia cases and their workloads are supervised to ensure they can do so effectively; and
- its safeguarding arrangements are robust in relation to children who are victims of child sexual exploitation.

### **Areas for improvement**

- Essex Police should improve its initial response to reports of incidents, specifically in relation to cases where police have been unable to attend, to ensure it reassesses risks and takes appropriate safeguarding action. This was evident in relation to reported cases of domestic abuse but may apply to other cases.
- Essex Police should improve its initial investigation of cases involving vulnerable victims, particularly ensuring greater officer access to photographic and video recording equipment. This will provide better evidence of injuries and scenes, and ensure compliant storage and retention of images.
- Essex Police should improve its response to missing and absent children, specifically in relation to officer and staff understanding and use of the categories missing and absent, and of the factors that escalate the risk of harm to children.