

Performance and Resources Scrutiny Programme 2023

Report to: the Office of the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex

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1.0 Purpose of Report

The purpose of this paper is to report on the compliance of Essex Police with its statutory duties under Sections 10 and 11 of the Children Act 2004, and with the statutory guidance set out in the Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 guidance.

2.0 Recommendations

There are no specific recommendations within this report, but the board are invited to note the key areas of compliance highlighted.

3.0 Executive Summary

The report provides a summary of current local multi-agency children's safeguarding arrangements with regards to safeguarding children across Southend, Essex, and Thurrock. It provides a high-level summary of the force's approach in key areas to support the safeguarding of children and detail some current relevant areas of work. It will also set out current areas of concern alongside future areas of focus and development.

Compliance Statement

This year's self-assessment concludes we are continuing to make safeguarding a priority within our force, that we are working closely with our safeguarding partnerships, and we understand our roles and responsibilities. We consider the force to be compliant with its duty under this legislation.

It is recognised there remain opportunities for improvement across different areas affecting children, and Essex Police remains committed to continue to identify good practice, and more importantly areas for development. Just some of the ways we will achieve this are through continuing close working relationships with our partners, being transparent and open to learning identified during participation in national and local reviews such as Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panels (CSPRs) and Domestic Homicide Reviews (DHRs), and then being innovative in the way we share this knowledge with our people.

Finally, 2023 will see the continuing improvement of the analytical dashboards we hold, and the introduction of new ones. There will be a dashboard on Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, and another around Child Protection. Through working with partners such as Agilisys, we will be able to improve outcomes for those children at risk, through data-led approaches which will soon utilise artificial intelligence to support us.

4.0 Introduction/Background

Essex Police is engaged and represented at a senior level in strategic partnership boards across the three local authority areas, including Southend Safeguarding Children's Partnership (SSCP), Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) and Essex Safeguarding Children's Board (ESCB) and various associated subgroups that feed into the main boards.

4.1 Local Arrangements

Within Essex there are three individual multi-agency children's safeguarding arrangements: Southend Safeguarding Children's Partnerships (SSCP), Essex Safeguarding Children's Board (ESCB) and Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP).

5.0 Current Work and Performance

This section of the report will cover how current work and performance demonstrates compliance with Sections 10 and 11 of the Children's Act 2004 as well as the national Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 statutory guidance.

5.1 Police resources involved in improving the wellbeing of children

In the Essex Police Force Plan, there is a clear commitment to support and protect children as a priority, with one of the main efforts being vulnerability. The plan specifies Essex Police will work collaboratively with our partners to build trust and confidence and clarify our purpose and role. It is therefore accepted that protecting the vulnerable is not the job of one or two teams alone; and there are many police resources across the commands involved in improving the wellbeing of children.

Following the National Police Uplift Programme and Police Fire and Crime Commissioner precept investment, Essex Police received an increase in funding for additional officers and staff in 2021/22, many of which went into roles protecting children. In 2022/23 there has been further police officer investment across the force with an officer investment of 200 FTE additional posts and staff investment of 68.4 FTE additional posts.

Much of this year's growth will significantly impact on how we safeguard and protect children in Essex, through our frontline response. However specifically within this growth there are 10 FTE posts created within Quest team and another 10 FTE posts for CAITs.

These increases will directly impact on how we investigate the most heinous and serious offences against children.

5.2 Recent areas of focus

National Vulnerability Action Plan (NVAP)

Essex Police is continuing to embed the NVAP and has improved its governance arrangements this year. The NVAP is a clear, evidence-based, nationally audited action plan that every force has signed up to. The overall aim of the NVAP is to improve policing's response to vulnerability, improve criminal justice outcomes, increase victim satisfaction, and create reductions in overall threat, risk, and harm. Governance of the NVAP within Essex sits with an ACC under the Strategic Vulnerability Board, which has been transformed over the last year from a board largely attended by only vulnerability specialists, to one which now has consistent representation from across the whole force; reaffirming that *safeguarding is everyone's responsibility* as made clear in the national Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance 2018.

Formation of Sunflower Suites

Following the success in 2021 of our first Sunflower Suite created in Grays Police Station, two further suites were formed in 2022 at Southend and Tendering after some necessary estates work. Funding secured through a Proceeds of Crime (POCA) bid during this reporting year has enabled these suites to be decorated and fully equipped. They are comfortable rooms decorated with soft furnishings, and equipped with dimmer lights, a TV, sofa bed, fresh bedding, toiletries, clean clothing, games and even a gaming console. This results in a less emotionally distressing experience for children under police protection, particularly where their stay in police protection extends overnight. Work is ongoing to form an additional suite later this year at Braintree Police Station, which will take the number of Sunflower Suites to four.

Operation Henderson

Op Henderson is a joint initiative between Essex Police, and different partners from all three Essex local authorities, British Transport Police, and the railways. It aims to raise awareness of the vulnerability of young people to exploitation and abuse at stations and transport networks in parts of Essex. In 2022 two successful days of action were coordinated, and then a further one took place on 5th April 2023, with further dates being planned in the next 12 months.

Operation Makesafe

Op Makesafe is a countrywide initiative educating our business community to spot and report Child Sexual Exploitation. Last year several test-purchasing operations were undertaken with support from our Volunteer Police Cadets at hotels around the county to check hoteliers' recognition of, and response to, potential child exploitation in their establishments. This was supported by partners from Social Care and provided feedback and free training to all businesses visited. Further operations are planned for later in 2023.

Operation Encompass for Domestic Abuse

Op Encompass is a national scheme introduced to enable police to share data with schools around pupils exposed to domestic abuse. The Encompass referral is made directly to a trained 'key safeguarding adult' at the child's school to enable silent or overt support dependant on the needs and wishes of the child. The aim is to reduce the harmful adverse impact of domestic abuse on children and their emotional wellbeing. It provides schools

with a greater understanding about why a child may be presenting in a particular way, allowing them to provide early support and care or apply reasonable adjustments for children in the aftermath of domestic abuse incidents. A recent presentation to ECC Headteachers on VAWG highlighted this issue with headteachers asking for more information to assist with safeguarding. Op Encompass is well established in Thurrock and Southend, with 90% of eligible schools signed up to the programme. The Force is looking for solutions to bring Op Encompass to the 650 schools in the Essex County Council area to bring them in incrementally.

Essex Police is preparing for when Essex County Council goes live with this across all 650 schools in its area, with a plan for this to begin first with schools in Castle Point and Rochford, and then incrementally throughout all other schools.

Operation Feedback

Missing children investigations remain a priority for the force, with two thirds of all missing person cases being children, many of whom go missing frequently and do not wish to engage with police on their return. Children often do not want to confide what is troubling them and causing them to go missing. Operation Feedback was created by the missing persons thematic lead, running between November 2022 and January 2023, a model whereby an officer in plain clothes would undertake three planned visits to see any child who is reported missing frequently. These visits sought to enable rapport to be formed between the officer and the child to identify the reasons behind them going missing, and any opportunities for intervention. A report into the findings of this operation has been commissioned and is due shortly, but early indications are that results are promising, and further work is planned which will be discussed later in this paper.

Sort Your Settings Project

In 2022 in partnership with the ESCB we initiated the *Sort Your Settings* and *#StaySafe Online project*. We created a landing page on our website with simple advice for parents and guardians on keeping their children safe online. To attract people to this advice we have been liaising with retailers to add a QR code either as a sticker on purchases of games consoles, online games, and any internet enabled devices, or as a giveaway card with the purchase of such items, which when scanned would bring the user to our landing page. Utilising this opportunity to share this advice at the point when access to online gaming platforms will commence encourages parental/privacy settings to be utilised. A pilot in Tendering is planned for this Spring to include this QR code on billboards, and there remains ongoing discussions to roll this out to other games and technology vendors in Essex in 2023.

Delivery in Schools in Collaboration with ECFRS Education Programmes

Our Children & Young Persons Officers (CYPs) have been attending primary and secondary schools in Southend and Harlow in collaboration with Essex County Fire & Rescue Service (ECFRS) as part of some of their Education Programmes. In Southend, our CYPs have visited schools to deliver presentations on knife crime, gang awareness, gender-based violence, and CSE. In Harlow CYPs have accompanied training staff from ECFRS into schools to answer questions from students, which had a positive impact on perceptions of police by young people. They have also been delivering presentations in secondary schools around the dangers of self-creating and sharing of indecent images of children. There was also an input delivered to 450 headteachers on VAWG within educational establishments focusing on the behaviour of young boys and opportunities for intervention and education.

Embedding of AWARE Principles Across the Force

The AWARE¹ contextual safeguarding principles help develop professional curiosity and ensure consistency in recording when dealing with children at incidents – even if they are not directly involved (e.g., at a DA incident). AWARE is a mnemonic to help officers observe and note down what is happening around the child, in a consistent and high-quality way, to gather information and identify early safeguarding opportunities. These have been communicated force wide in the last year, having been presented to all Command teams by a SLT from C&PP Command. It is included as part of the vulnerability interview questions for found children, as well as forming part of CAIT assessments when undertaking visits. Use of the AWARE principles is contributing to deeper and much better intelligence, ensures we are more acute in recording observations at incidents where children are involved or present, and in turn can provide better context to partners when referring any safeguarding concerns.

Development of a Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) Dashboard

C&PP Command's Proactive DCI, along with our Performance Analysis Unit (PAU), are developing a new Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation (CSAE) Dashboard which will support tasking and coordination, and which is intended to be shared with partners also. An initiation iteration has been designed, and further work is ongoing to test this and prepare it for use later in 2023.

Audit and Inspection Team Review of MOSOVO

In July 2022, an inspection of MOSOVO was initiated to look at the supervision of Registered Sexual Offenders (RSOs) in Essex. This review identified that MOSOVO workloads were extremely high, and there were missed opportunities for more robust and thorough assessments of risk and intervention. The review did however recognise it took place at the juncture when 13 new Constables, 3 new Sergeants and a new Detective Inspector were being introduced as part of the Police Uplift Programme, and that all these new staff had quickly been trained and embedded. Since this review MOSOVO have changed how they undertake Active Risk Management System (ARMS) assessment, and these have greater attention on crime prevention with a specific focus on children. There has also been a notable overall reduction in outstanding ARMS assessments.

Operation ASK

Operation Ask relates to children residing in Southend, Essex and Thurrock subject to a Child Protection Plan (CPP) under the Children's Act 1989 following a Child Protection Conference. A new procedure was published in March 2023 which outlines any address in Essex where a child subject to a CPP resides is flagged on STORM. The objective is to ensure officers/staff attending an address for any reason are aware, prior to attendance, that a child subject of a plan is in residence. Thus encouraging a child safeguarding mindset, even where attendance does not directly relate to child concerns. This procedure provides additional occasions for police to engage with children and better hear their voice. Further work is ongoing around Operation Ask looking at how information regarding children on Child Protection Plans can also be made immediately clear on ATHENA whenever a family is researched, increasing the opportunity for this to be clear to anyone investigating concerns for these children from any Force using ATHENA.

¹ AWARE Principles - Appearance, Words, Activity, Relationships & Dynamics, Environment

5.3 Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018

The Working Together 2018 guidance sets out key roles for organisations and agencies to deliver effective arrangements for safeguarding, the three statutory local safeguarding partners, which includes the local policing body and chief officer of police for a police area.

Leadership:

The Force has strong oversight and governance. The ACC for C&PP and Criminal Justice oversees safeguarding of children within C&PP Command. The ACC holds a quarterly Strategic Vulnerability Board attended by representatives from all Commands, who report on activity, risks and issues, and oversee activity under the NVAP. The Head of C&PP Command is a Detective Chief Superintendent supported by two Detective Superintendents who lead on Proactive & Partnerships and Investigations, and a senior police staff equivalent responsible for the strategic oversight of vulnerability across the force. Through this structure, the safeguarding of children is championed throughout the organisation.

Listening to Children:

Dedicated Children and Young People (CYP) officers work with vulnerable young people through engagement with education, youth clubs and social care to identify support networks for young people and create referral pathways to divert potential victims of exploitation. The focus is on building self-confidence, respect for self and others, and contributing to society.

A Voice of the Child steering group continues to operate and present a formal and consistent process across Essex Police that is tracked and audited and focuses on contextual safeguarding. This group is progressing several actions, including some focusing on how as an organisation we can measure police-initiated contact with children, for which there is at present a gap, and as previously mentioned, the continuing of Operation Encompass, and embedding of the AWARE principles.

CSE procedure sets out that officers investigating must be aware children may be hidden from view and may show loyalty to those exploiting them and in cases of trafficking involving children a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) form must be completed and forwarded to the UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC).

It is recognised children are often the overlooked victims in domestic abuse incidents between adults. The Operational Change Project is bringing changes within C&PP with the creation of a Domestic Abuse Review Team (DART+) from July, who will deliver a single and consistent standard of risk assessment and maintain strong working relationships with partners and stakeholders to implement a range of victim-focused safeguarding options. This will undoubtedly help to reduce emotional and physical distress for children caught up in domestic abuse incidents.

Whistleblowing:

Every police officer and member of staff has received training in the Essex Police Code of Ethics, which defines the expectations and standards of behaviour for everyone who works in policing.

Essex Police has a specific 'Reporting Wrongdoing' procedure, owned by the Professional Standards Department (PSD), within which circumstances concerning whistleblowing and associated legislation are contained. There are various methods of reporting concerns, clearly identifiable through the Force PSD intranet page; this includes confidential and anonymous reporting mechanisms. Our confidential reporting platform continues to be regularly used, and the Force frequently raises awareness of any serious wrongdoing by our people to encourage reporting and guide everyone in our organisation to always behave in accordance with the Code of Ethics.

Last year the Force launched its 'Professionalism in Policing Strategy' which is built on five pillars. As part of this there has been the introduction of a new team within PSD with a focus on Prevention and Engagement. The Professionalism Engagement Officers will be the front line in preventing opportunities for wrongdoing and corruption by educating the workforce and our partners about the risks and indicators of wrongdoing. They will engage with the workforce and our partners at a variety of levels to take the lead in delivering against the Forces Professionalism Strategy and building confidence to report and challenge wrongdoing.

Considering the Baroness Casey Report into the Metropolitan Police, Commands across Essex have decided to hold 'listening circles' for all officers and staff to be able to express any concerns they have around culture, misogyny, homophobia, racism, or inappropriate behaviour that they may not feel comfortable to report themselves, or discuss with, our Professional Standards Department. This aims to provide a forum to discuss attitudes and behaviours which are known to be a gateway to higher-level attitudes and behaviours and offer opportunity for early intervention and prevention of such behaviours escalating.

Allegations concerning those working with Children:

All complaints and investigations are conducted in line with Force policy and procedure and national guidance, with complaints made against officers and staff being overseen and adjudicated by the nominated Appropriate Authority for each respective command area within Essex.

Force policy also makes clear that PSD should be informed of any 'notifiable association,' which is any association, other than during official police business, where a police officer or member of police staff comes into contact on more than one occasion with any person knowing or believing them to be a criminal.

Essex Police works closely with the Local Authority Designated Officers (LADOs). They have responsibility for managing allegations against adults who work with children and provide advice, information and guidance to employers and voluntary organisations around allegations and concerns regarding paid and unpaid workers. Where any concerns are investigated pertaining to an adult who works with children, a referral to LADO will be made in the initial phases so that they can monitor progress, ensure the child's voice is heard, and their resources and expertise can support safeguarding.

Escalation processes:

The Force Child Abuse Investigation procedure specifically directs staff to the partnership SET procedures developed in response to the Working Together to Safeguard Children

2018 guidance. SET Procedures set out what should happen in any local area when a child or young person is believed to need support, including the escalation process.

The SET Procedures are well embedded across the organisation and form a central part of compliance and practices within the daily operations within the C&PP Command. SET Procedures are clear regarding agencies' responsibilities for ensuring staff are competent and supported to escalate concerns and disagreements appropriately about a child's wellbeing within and between organisations, ensuring they escalate concerns if they remain dissatisfied. There is a well-established escalation process up the chain of command. SET Procedures also set out the process for capturing professional disagreements made at a Child Protection Conference.

Information Sharing:

Under Section 17 (child in need) and Section 47 (child suffering/likely to suffer significant harm) of the Children Act 1989, officers have a responsibility to refer a child to Children's Social Care when it is believed or suspected that these thresholds have been met. It will be determined by discussion with Social Care if the referral reaches the threshold for Section 47 (Children's Act 1989) enquires, following which information can be shared without the consent of the parties involved.

The Force Child Abuse Investigation procedure specifically includes a section regarding information sharing, with a focus on making and receiving referrals. A well-embedded practice for sharing information with partners is utilised via the PP57 Essex Police Request for Children's Services form for Southend and Thurrock, and with referrals being made to Essex via the Essex Social Care online portal. This year we will be making improvements to our PP57 referral process via the creation of a new online version which will bring improvements to both partners and us by simplifying the process, making it faster to refer, allow all referrals to be audited, and provide data which can then be used to further improve how we share referrals.

Information sharing with partners is supported by the 'Overarching Safeguarding across geographical Essex' Information Sharing Protocol (ISP) which facilitates the exchange of personal and sensitive information in the interests of protecting children, young people and adults from actual or potential harm. In addition to this, Crime & Public Protection Command have been working with Essex County Council and Thurrock Council to sign off a new Information Sharing Agreement (ISA) which will allow the regular sharing of anonymised data to assist the work of subgroups of the safeguarding partnerships.

Information sharing is further supported through engagement with and attendance at strategy meetings, case conferences, and other appropriate discussions. Whenever there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, there is a multi-agency strategy discussion to determine the child's welfare and plan rapid future action. Participation in strategy meetings requested by Children's Social Care of the Triage Teams is consistently 100%, and CAIT police staff attend all initial child protection conferences consistently 100%, as well as relevant review conferences, to share enhanced information and expertise to inform decision-making, ensuring the child is at the centre of the process.

In addition, the Force forms part of multi-agency Missing and Child Exploitation (MACE) and Risk Management Meetings (RMM), chairing some of these. These meetings

concentrate on the safeguarding and welfare of children at risk of exploitation who go missing, focussing on disruption opportunities and collection of evidence to support prosecutions, alongside wider operational activity to tackle CSE threats through analysing local trends, patterns, and hotspots. This year there have been changes made to the attendance of both MACE and MACE2 meetings to ensure that there is consistent attendance of by Chief Inspectors, which has been achieved through the extension of invitation to LPA Divisional Commanders as well as those working in C&PP and the Serious Violence Units (SVU).

Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC) provide a forum where agencies share information concerning high-risk victims of domestic abuse, and then produce co-ordinated action plans to increase the safety of those victims, their children or family members. The aims of MARAC include the opportunity to increase the safety, health, and wellbeing of victims of domestic abuse – adults, children, and any other family members – and to determine what risks the perpetrator poses to any particular individual or to the general community, including any children. The Force conducts research of families discussed at MARAC in preparation for the respective SET MARAC meetings, with focus including child safeguarding. In particular, the officers embedded in MASH engage in daily discussions with Children's Social Care regarding referrals for children and young people.

Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPR) occur in cases in which abuse, or neglect is known or suspected, and the child died or was seriously harmed. The purpose is to identify improvements to be made to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. The Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership (LSCP) is informed of such a case and undertakes a Rapid Review within 15 working days of being notified, with all agencies involved taking part, before determining if a Child Safeguarding Practice Review is required. The LSCP can then make recommendations and consider learning.

Recruitment:

Essex Police vets all staff in accordance with the Vetting Code of Practice (VCOP) applied to all police forces in England and Wales, providing a 3-tier vetting clearance level determined by the level of access required to both assets and data.

In addition, the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) Unit is responsible for completing all DBS applications made by those seeking to work in regulated activity with children and/or vulnerable adults. DBS also completes all Barring referral requests, providing information regarding an individual for consideration to exclude them from working within the child, adult or both sectors.

Knowledge, Training and Supervision:

The Initial Police Learning Development Programme (IPLDP) provides every probationer officer with a broad overview of investigative and safeguarding activity. Further training provision is given in the 3-day Public Protection Awareness Programme course and the Initial Crime Investigators Development Programme (ICIDP), which captures front-line officers' responsibilities for safeguarding children and how to report concerns to partner agencies.

In terms of more focussed C&PP training, CAIT accredited detectives can complete the Specialist Child Abuse Investigators Development Programme (SCAIDP), giving them the

right support to plan, conduct and supervise allocated (serious or complex) child abuse investigations, and form effective co-operative working practices with other statutory and voluntary agencies to bring about the best possible outcome in relation to allegations of child abuse. They also undertake Achieving Best Evidence (ABE) and National Child Death training courses as well as training to become a Sexual Offences Trained Officer (SOTO). Officers are required to complete a Personal Development Portfolio (PDP) to evidence competency against key criteria.

C&PP SLT members have attended the College of Policing Public Protection Senior Leaders Course during this reporting year and are required to complete an operational competency portfolio demonstrating senior leadership across a wide range of Public Protection matters.

Last year the Strategic Vulnerability Centre (SVC) published the Officer's Guide to Vulnerability, which was an entirely digital document designed to assist every member of staff and officer across the force in their everyday role to identify, assess and respond to vulnerability. This guide pulled together all the key information pertinent to each strand of vulnerability, signposted to key legislation and procedures, and encased toolkits designed to support officers in recognising children in need or at risk, and how to react to this in partnership with other agencies.

All teams have a unique 'Perfect Profile' which allows a strategic view of training needs at all levels across the force. These have all been reviewed recently and this ensures all essential and desirable training required for our people are mapped correctly to enable identification of gaps and to allow planning for future gaps. In terms of understanding how training is used by staff, in C&PP regular ABE and investigation reviews are completed by supervisors, with Case Action Plans (CAPs) set by officers and supervisors requiring regular ongoing review, alongside 3-monthly DI reviews, 5-monthly DCI reviews, and 6-monthly Supt reviews in place for Released Under Investigation cases. Learning from reviews is used to target appropriate training.

A C&PP Training & Skills board meets every 6 weeks, chaired by a DCI, which identifies training gaps across various departments, identifies role-specific training required, enables officers to achieve and maintain their accreditations via CPD events, and discusses general improvements in training provision.

The Essex Police College holds a budget for training, including safeguarding training, enabling officers and staff to apply for access to any multi-agency training provided at a cost by other organisations and the respective local safeguarding children's partnerships. C&PP Command is engaged in ad hoc training seminars that are co-hosted by police with Social Care focussed on topic-specific areas regarding children and investigative improvements.

All training is supported using e-learning training packages, alongside a varied programme of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Officers and staff have access to the Virtual Crime Academy which is a platform designed to support investigations and the safeguarding of vulnerable persons and children by pulling together essential news, learning and reference materials, policy and procedure updates, local guidance, learning the lessons, and professional development opportunities.

In March this year, the Strategic Vulnerability Centre hosted a force-wide learning event called 'Working Smarter & Be the Change' which was opened by the Deputy Chief Constable and attended by officers and staff from across the force. The event shared innovative ideas and learning from a wide range of cases in recent years, and centred around key themes which included CSE, missing children, and professional curiosity. All presentations were recorded and made available to everyone who was unable to attend on the day.

Personal Development Reviews (PDRs) are undertaken every 6 months, providing opportunities to review performance, set relevant SMART objectives, and to assess training and developmental needs of individuals.

Powers:

Where it is believed a child needs immediate protection as they are suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm, the attending officer must ensure the immediate well-being of the child, including seeing the child and, if appropriate, speaking to them.

Section 46 of the Children Act sets out specific immediate powers which officers can utilise to remove a child to a place of safety for up to 72hrs; however, the exercise of these powers should be undertaken only where it is not possible to leave a child in any given situation without them being at risk of significant harm. Our Police Protection Powers procedure makes explicit reference to the fact children should only be taken to the police station in exceptional circumstances, i.e., where no local authority accommodation is available, and they should not be taken into a custody suite.

In the last 6 months the numbers of children taken into Police Protection has reduced by 65% meaning less trauma for children being removed from their family. This correlates with work undertaken by the Operations Centre Detective Inspector, who has been working with frontline teams to improve knowledge and provide more training around the alternatives to taking a child into police protection, and how better results for children can be achieved with good knowledge of partnership tools. There is also the planned addition of a fourth Sunflower Suite which will be at Braintree Police Station; so that a traumatic experience is made to be less stressful for children taken into Police Protection.

Section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 (MHA) affords police a power to detain any person (including any child) who appears to be suffering from a mental disorder, who needs immediate care or control, and take them to a place of safety. Last year an amendment was made to our S.136 MHA Procedure to discourage the use of this legislation for children, but instead to utilise S.46 of the Children Act to help ensure that children are not unnecessarily institutionalised or stigmatised by the process. It also allows for wider use where any disturbed child is in a dwelling, and therefore unable to be detained under the MHA.

Further powers are available to officers under Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984 and Section 49 of the Children Act 1989, for children under 16 or under 18 in the care of a Local Authority respectively, to secure a Child Abduction Warning Notice (CAWN). CAWNs can assist in safeguarding vulnerable young people, disrupting the criminal activity of adults associating with them against the wishes of the parents or local authority carers, and can be used where arrest or prosecution for any substantive offences is not available or appropriate at that time.

6.0 Implications (Issues)

The National Picture

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) reported in October 2022 that new analysis of police-recorded crime data revealed that the number of child sexual exploitation crimes had increased by 10% within the last year. They reported nationally there had also been an increase in the number of counselling sessions for sexual exploitation increasing from 5,962 to 6,230².

Within the NCA's most recent National Strategic Assessment of Serious Organised Crime (SOC) in 2021, it outlined that the nature of offending nationally has changed, in that the use of technology in SOC has increased and adapted significantly; and this could have future implications for child sex offences. This is echoed in other more recent publications from organisations working within the field of Child Protection, which outlines criminals are utilising technology to offend at a far higher rate, and this is predicted to rise.

Britons are the third largest consumer of indecent images of children behind only America and Canada. The NCA estimates that there are 300,000 people in this country who pose a sexual threat to children online and UK referrals of child abuse images online are up 1000% since 2013. The NCA has identified the 10 most horrific dark web platforms have 2.88 million registered accounts. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse has found of the millions of indecent images of children circulating online, the majority were on the open web.

The improvements in industry identification of indecent images and artificial intelligence means that service providers are finding more illegal images on their sites than ever before. This, together with the public and political pressure on service providers to address this issue, will inevitably mean that referrals to Essex via the NCA will continue to increase.

POLIT investigate referrals made by the NCA where intelligence shows the distribution of indecent images of children online. They are also responsible for the investigation of all Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) related Undercover Online referrals (UCOL) and, since 1st January 2022, all Online Child Activist Group (OCAG) offences. Nationally there have been significant year on year increases in the volume of these referrals and Essex has broadly followed this trend. There have been increases over the last 6 years and are forecast to increase again over the next 2 years.

The Home Office has set an expectation that forces will resolve cases considered to be potentially high risk, and the Essex POLIT has historically been one of the leading forces in relation to the volume of referrals that are initiated. POLIT have experienced an increase this year in reactive referrals, which is the result of higher than anticipated volumes of online child activist groups and undercover online referral investigations in this period. The total investigations dealt with by POLIT in last year's reporting year was 484 (reactive referrals and proactive investigations), and in this reporting year was 596, a 23.1% increase). This year-on-year increase is being seen across all C&PP teams who are undertaking investigations, with a total of 6045 investigations being recorded between March 2021 and February 2022, and 6651 investigations being recorded between March 2022 and February 2023, which is an overall increase of 10%.

² <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2022/child-sexual-exploitation-crimes-up-10-in-the-last-year/>

Funding contributions

The Working Together 2018 guidance makes it clear statutory partners have equal responsibility for safeguarding children and therefore, arguably, the contribution and financial responsibility to the local safeguarding children's partnership (LSCP) effort ought to be more closely aligned and shared in such a way that a disproportionate burden does not fall on any one agency.

In previous years, the funding provision by Essex Police has been agreed to be equitable and proportionate in supporting local arrangements, with the SSP budgets being split equally between social care, health, and police. Last year Thurrock requested an increase in their allocated funds, which was approved and allocated. It is anticipated in the current climate our other LSCPs will also request an increase in our contributions for this financial year, however these have not yet formally been made, and any increase would require a funding growth bid.

6.1 Links to PFCC Police and Crime Plan Priorities

The work of the Force in safeguarding children links to the following priorities in the PFCC Police and Crime Plan 2021 - 2024:

- Protecting vulnerable people and breaking the cycle of domestic abuse
- Reducing violence against women and girls
- Improving support for victims of crime
- Increasing collaboration.

6.2 Demand

The PA Consulting Demand Analysis Report back in November 2017 noted demand was increasing across many areas in Public Protection, with particularly notable rises in domestic abuse, missing persons, and adult safeguarding demand. It noted significant further staff may be needed to cope with increasing demand and to enable a shift back towards preventative policing.

The report was correct in its predictions, as there continues to be a year-on-year increase in the overall volume of crimes relating to child abuse. Figures show an increase of 8.2% in the number of CAIT investigations between Feb 22 and Feb 23; from 3,449 to 3,732. MOSOVO has seen a 12.9% rise, from 653 to 737. POLIT has seen an increase of 23.1%, from 484 to 596 investigations. Child Triage and MASH numbers in the same period were down 28.5%, however, this reduction reflects the triage team's efforts to be more efficient in its crime recording through the encouragement of Social Care to share more information at the point of referral, rather than make additional disclosures in strategy discussions which previously has led to recording multiple crime reports of matters which could have been included earlier.

We have a young and inexperienced workforce, and the nature of C&PP work, which is complex, creates additional challenges. Presently, of C&PP's total constable workforce, 39.3% are accredited detectives, and we are understaffed by 11.8% overall, with a 13.6% understaffing at constable grade. Within the C&PP teams who are working directly with child victims, 52 of the 160 officers are trained and accredited with the SCAIDP, which is 32.5% of the total.

6.3 Risks/Mitigation

This paper does not intend to provide further detail except to note the previously mentioned risks in section 6 (implications), the increasing volume of potential offenders for online Child Sexual Abuse/Exploitation, and to also refer to C&PP Command recruitment challenges. There have been active recruitment campaigns throughout this reporting period; however, the challenge is not just about volume, but about the proportion of officers and staff relatively new in service and experience working in a command that deals with high harm, complex cases.

Risks and associated mitigating actions are covered in the C&PP Vulnerable Groups Quarterly Report and internally they are placed on the C&PP operational risk register. There remains three AFIs open which will be reviewed following the undertaking of the next HMICFRS inspection.

In preparation for an anticipated HMICFRS inspection focusing on Child Protection, C&PP have this year undertaken a self-assessment to examine areas to develop and the plans to improve. This assessment focused on 11 areas, which analysed 32 specific questions. Five of the 11 areas have been RAG assessed as Green, and the remaining six as Amber. The command was intentionally cautious in their assessment, striving to reach to the highest standards, and this self-assessment is informing the command's plan for change over the next 12 months.

6.4 Equality and/or Human Rights Implications

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 1 states that a child: "*means every human being below the age of eighteen years...*" This is reinforced by the Children Act 1989, Section 105, definition of a child as: "*a person under the age of 18*".

The Working Together guidance also defines a child as, "*anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday*", this definition aligns with the definition set out by the Force in its Child Abuse Investigations procedure.

A child is classified as vulnerable by virtue of their age, supported through provisions in legislation, namely the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999, and the Victims Code of Practice.

The close working partnership arrangements will continue to better facilitate a common ethos and co-ordinated approach to innovate, drive change and address issues affecting children across Essex, Southend, and Thurrock.

Essex Police will do everything it can by working with partners to reduce any opportunity for harm, including protecting and safeguarding vulnerable children.

6.5 Health and Safety Implications

N/A

7.0 **Consultation/Engagement**

In preparation of this report, the following documents have been used to inform the content:

- The Children Act 2004
- Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2018
- Force policies and procedures
- SET Procedures
- Force SharePoint Pages (intranet)
- The NCA Annual Report 2022/23

In addition, the following have been approached to provide an opportunity to contribute to the content of this paper:

- C&PP Command
- Risk Policy & Co-ordination Officer
- The Continuous Improvement and Analytics Directorate
- Professional Standards Department
- Finance Department

8.0 **Actions for Improvement**

Essex was subject to a HMICFRS PEEL inspection in 2022, the results of which were published in October 2022. It rated the Force Adequate for Protecting Vulnerable People, adding that whilst we understand the nature and scale of vulnerability, we needed to do more to maintain and improve the wellbeing of staff involved in protecting vulnerable people, in particular children. The Force Performance Board is continuing to work through the AFIs and recommendations from this inspection.

We currently have three open national child protection investigation thematic recommendations which were given to all forces (one of which is reducing the unnecessary criminalisation of children) these have all been evidenced and are awaiting to be reviewed following our next inspection by HMICFRS.

9.0 **Future Work/Development and Expected Outcome**

A full C&PP review was undertaken between 2021 and 2022 which looked at the command's practices and processes, the results of which are now being considered as part of the Operational Change Projects, with one of the three strands focusing on Investigation and Safeguarding and Crime and Public Protection.

The government has this year introduced the Victims and Prisoners Bill into Parliament, which introduces further measures to compliment the Victims' Code. Once legislated, this new bill will enshrine all 12 victim's rights into law, and so significant work is ongoing in preparation for this. Right 4 is especially important for child victims of crime, and so Essex Police is working closely with partners to ensure child victims will not just consistently be referred to support services, but those support services are tailored to the individual needs of each victim.

Essex Police is working on the assumption they will be notified by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire Rescue Services (HMICFRS) later this year of an inspection which will focus on Child Protection.

Missing children investigations in Essex are a priority for the Force, and particularly so given that 67% of all missing persons cases involved children last year. Following the success of Operation Feedback, which identified considerable benefit from investment in building rapport over several visits with vulnerable repeat missing children, a pilot for a missing persons unit to continue this work will be run in south Essex later this year.

In addition to piloting a missing persons unit, additional Flex training is being delivered in the spring which will focus on the importance of compassion and empathy as supposed to routine process when it comes to debriefing found missing children. A key theme of this training will be around awareness of 'adultification,' and the notions sometimes innocence and vulnerability are not recognised when dealing with some children, particularly from ethnic minorities, and it absolutely must be.

Following the successful delivery of two new dashboards powered by Microsoft Power BI for High Harm and The Victims Journey, provider Agilisys have been commissioned to create a new Child Safeguarding dashboard. An initial concept has been designed and is currently undergoing User Acceptance testing (UAT) by users from across the force, although particularly from within C&PP Command, and aims to be delivered for use by the summer.

This year a new Mental Health Prevention Team (MHPT)³ has been created within C&PP Command to support frontline teams in responding to matters of mental health by working closely with partners to improve our response and advance the interoperability between partners and ourselves. One area of work they will be focussing on is the hidden demand surrounding mental health in children, and so working closely with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) they will be seeking to understand what the pressures and demands are, and what can be done to mitigate the risks associated with this. They will also be liaising with national leads to understand what research has been undertaken in this area and seek to utilise this to ensure we have the very best working practices when dealing with children experiencing mental health.

³ Mental Health Prevention Team (MHPT) is the proposed name for this new team, but awaits ratification.