



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

Wednesday, 26 February, 2020

PRESS RELEASE

Police Scotland's response to online child sexual abuse reviewed

Online child sexual abuse is not given enough prioritisation by Police Scotland and the department most suited to tackling the growing problem is under resourced, states a report published today (26 February 2020).

Mrs Gill Imery QPM, HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, said: "Online child sexual abuse can take many forms but is, first and foremost, child abuse."

"This review focuses on Police Scotland's response to online child sexual abuse, however the scale of the challenge is such that it cannot be met by law enforcement alone. I believe there should be more consideration of rehabilitation and treatment interventions for some offenders, allowing the police to focus on those who pose the greatest risk to children."

The review found there are real challenges to capturing the true nature and extent of online child sexual abuse, which are not unique to Scotland. The way in which reports of crime are recorded makes it difficult for police to understand the actual level of offending online.

Difficulties in recording accurately the prevalence of online child sexual abuse are compounded by a lack of dedicated analytical support, and an absence of centralised intelligence assessment capability.

HMICS acknowledges the clear commitment from current post holders at the most senior levels in Police Scotland to work together to tackle online child sexual abuse. Responsibility for tackling different elements of online child sexual abuse is shared across different areas within Specialist Crime Division and local policing divisions. There was evidence of work in progress, however at the time of the review, Police Scotland had no overarching strategic response to a growing problem.

Police Scotland has introduced effective processes to create and manage National Online Child Abuse Prevention packages, which are dealt with well at a local level. However, the review found that the strategic direction was unclear, therefore officers and staff were unable to link their operational activity to the overall aim.

Police Scotland's response is generally reactive, with very little evidence of proactivity. Vigilante groups, known as Online Child Abuse Activist Groups, are unregulated and untrained, and have been identified correctly as a risk.

Mrs Imery said: “One of the main proactive tactics would be to deploy undercover online specialist officers, however this does not often happen. If Police Scotland had a more robust approach to its proactive capability, the opportunities for Online Child Abuse Activist Groups to operate would reduce.”

The review highlights that online child sexual abuse rarely features as a priority when specialist resources are being allocated through formal tasking arrangements, and HMICS suggests that specialist support functions need to focus on those most in need of protection rather than the more traditional focus on drugs and firearms.

It also encourages Police Scotland to review the distribution of posts across its Specialist Crime Division given that Public Protection, the department best placed to respond to online child sexual abuse, has least resources to tackle the ever-increasing demand.

There are 10 recommendations for Police Scotland contained within the report which HMICS will monitor against progress.

Ends

NOTES TO EDITORS

Definition –

Online offending in the form of taking, distributing or viewing of indecent images of children, online grooming, inciting children to commit sexual acts online and live streaming of sexual abuse is child sexual abuse.

The HMICS Online Child Sexual Abuse Review is available to download at the HMICS website www.hmics.scot from 1100hrs, Wednesday, 26 February, 2020.

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