



HM Inspectorate of Constabulary in Scotland
Improving Policing across Scotland

Wednesday, 18th August , 2021

PRESS RELEASE

Police Scotland committed to improving response to online child sexual abuse & exploitation

A report published today (Wednesday, 18 August) highlights the progress Police Scotland has made since a strategic review of its response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation, first reported in February 2020.

“The energy, enthusiasm and dedication of the professionals who are responsible for tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation is commendable,” said HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, Mrs Gill Imery.

“This is all the more impressive given the context of the pandemic and other operational demands over the past 18 months. From the outset of the pandemic, Police Scotland recognised that the ‘stay at home’ message could increase the risk of online harms. The use of the internet by children and young people increased as did the threat presented by those who seek to target them for the purposes of sexual abuse and exploitation.

“During the progress review, it was apparent that driving improvement, meeting the increasing demand, and policing this high risk area continues to impact adversely on police officers and staff. I am therefore making a new recommendation that the service develops a specific wellbeing policy with support tailored for staff with specialist roles in tackling online child sexual abuse and exploitation.”

Mrs Imery makes her comments in an update on the progress Police Scotland has made towards meeting the 10 recommendations which followed an HMICS inspection 18 months ago into the service’s response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

HMICS welcomes the steps taken to make improvements. Sufficient evidence of progress has been provided to close the following three recommendations:

Recommendation 3

Police Scotland should ensure a strategic governance framework is in place which provides support, direction, scrutiny and quality assurance to the force’s response to online child sexual abuse.

Recommendation 7

Police Scotland and the National Crime Agency should work together to ensure that all capabilities are being exploited to their full potential and intelligence is shared effectively.

Recommendation 10

Police Scotland should ensure that arrangements for deploying undercover online specialist resources are directed by formal tasking arrangements aligned to risk, priority and demand.

Work is ongoing to address the remaining seven recommendations, which are deemed to have been partially met.

Overall trends in recorded crime highlight the sharp increase in the past year of 11.9% in the taking, distribution and possession of indecent images of children, and an increase of 5.9% in crimes relating to online child sexual abuse and exploitation.

“I commend the efforts to confront the increase in this damaging type of crime through a dedicated resource, and the determination of senior officers to improve the response of the service,” said Mrs Imery.

“Despite improvements, it remains difficult for the police to identify the scale and nature of online child sexual abuse and exploitation. Progress towards improving data quality has been challenging and is interdependent on enhanced recording systems, which would enable more sophisticated analysis.”

HMICS suggests that Police Scotland prioritise an urgent review of its digital forensic capability to ensure that this aspect of the service can meet current and future demand.

HMICS noted that despite the increase in workload there has been no corresponding uplift of resource in respect of digital forensic examinations.

HMICS welcomes the improvements in Police Scotland’s covert activity to target online threats and offenders, and encourages the service to use its positive relationships with other UK forces to learn from their experience when developing its own sustainable model for online covert teams.

During the review, both frontline and specialist officers expressed a desire for more training and awareness in relation to online child sexual abuse and exploitation, although it is recognised that training opportunities have been affected by the pandemic. The review also found there to be minimal knowledge of how the public can report concerns online, or where young people and their families can access support.

In terms of prevention, there are limited interventions aimed at offenders who commit offences of online child sexual abuse and exploitation, however HMICS knows that wider prevention strategies than those provided by police activity are needed to reduce levels of offending.

HMICS is aware that work continues to complete its remaining recommendations and will continue to monitor progress.

Ends

FOOTNOTE

HMICS acknowledges the complexities, interdependencies and timescales associated with some of its 2020 recommendations due to the impact of Covid-19 and factored this into its findings.

Ends notes

NOTES TO EDITORS

The HMICS progress review of the Police Scotland response to online child sexual abuse and exploitation is available to download at the HMICS website www.hmics.scot from 1100hrs, Wednesday, 18th August, 2021.

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