

18 October 2016

Sir Thomas Winsor
Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary
6th Floor
Globe House
89 Eccleston Square
London
SW1V 1PN

Dear Sir Thomas

Letter on the effectiveness of the police in protecting children, based on evidence from Ofsted's inspections of local authority children's services 2015/16

I am writing to alert you to my growing concerns about the failure of some police forces to take their child protection responsibilities seriously.

In the past year, more than half of Ofsted's 42 inspections of local authority children's services identified serious weaknesses in the contribution made by the police to safeguarding children.

As I outline below, inspectors found evidence of cases where police forces were not:

- sharing information about domestic abuse cases in a timely way
- notifying social workers quickly enough when children went missing
- attending important child protection conferences
- carrying out joint child protection visits with social workers
- tackling DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) backlogs.

Some or all of these weaknesses were found in many of the local areas inspected last year. This was exemplified in Ofsted's recent inspection of Stockton-on-Tees children's services where we had serious concerns about the approach of Cleveland Police to child protection.

Sharing information about domestic abuse cases in a timely way

The failure of the police to share information in a timely way is a recurring theme in many of our reports this year, particularly in relation to domestic abuse. For example, in Bury, inspectors found notifications of domestic abuse were being sent in batches to the local authority, rather than being sent as soon as each individual incident arose. As a result, children were being left without help at a critical time.

In Medway, police had not shared notifications until some weeks after individual incidents were reported, while in the Wirral, inspectors found referrals could take up to four weeks. The slow pace of police referrals was also an issue identified during our inspection of Slough. In each of these areas, the level of risk faced by the children concerned was not being identified swiftly or effectively. As a result, inspectors could not be sure that children were receiving the help and protection they needed and deserved.

Notifying social workers quickly enough when children went missing

Inspectors have found instances when the police did not respond quickly enough to the issue of children going missing from care. In Bromley, for example, delays by local officers in notifying social workers of these incidents meant it was unclear whether the children concerned had returned home safely or had still to be traced.

Attending important child protection conferences

Although police attendance at these meetings is required by statutory guidance, this does not always happen. Inspectors have come across cases where the local authority had to take decisions about children and their families without access to vital information from the police. This was found to be a problem in Bury, in Peterborough, in West Sussex and also in Dorset, where in over a third of child protection conferences the police were not in attendance.

Carrying out joint child protection visits with social workers

Inspectors found that the police are not always working collaboratively with social workers on the frontline. In Doncaster, joint interviews to establish evidence were not happening soon enough, while in Southend, specialist officers were not available to carry out joint visits. This meant that social workers had to carry out potentially dangerous child protection visits on their own. As a result, they were unable to immediately remove children from danger as it is only the police who have the necessary powers. In other areas, such as Torbay, we found that police did not communicate with social workers before taking action, including instances where children were taken into police protection without any discussion about alternative options.

Tackling DBS backlogs

Delays by the police in vetting people to work with children was another common problem. In Wandsworth, a backlog led to 23 approved in-house carers being unavailable to support vulnerable families. In Dorset, a failure by police to complete DBS checks promptly led to delays in clearing potential adopters which meant children were having to wait too long before they could settle with a family.

Concerns about Cleveland Police

The most serious concerns about the role of the police in protecting children in the past year followed our recent inspection of Children's Services in Stockton-on-Tees.

While inspectors found the overall quality of provision by the local authority to be good, the lack of support from Cleveland Police meant that the Safeguarding Board was judged to require improvement.

Inspectors found police officers were often unavailable to attend strategy discussions when a child might have been at risk of significant harm. Although officers did send written information to support discussions, social workers had to interpret this themselves. The lack of police involvement in these discussions also meant that under official Department for Education guidance, these sessions lacked the evidence needed to agree formal intervention measures.

In one disturbing case, Ofsted's lead inspector also had cause to question the decision by the police to close an investigation even though there was clear evidence that the children concerned had suffered non-accidental injuries. It was only through the intervention of the local authority, prompted by my inspectors, that this case was reopened and further investigated by the police.

Inspectors also found that police officers had been instructed not to attend initial child protection conferences in respect of unborn babies.

When the lead inspector spoke to the Chief Constable about these concerns, she was told that additional officers had been allocated for child protection work from September 2016 and that in the interim, police attendance at child protection strategy meetings would be prioritised and facilitated through video-conferencing technology. However, throughout the remainder of the inspection there was little evidence of this proposal being implemented.

Overall, inspectors found an unacceptable and potentially dangerous gulf between the stated priorities of Cleveland Police in relation to its support for child protection and the practice observed in the course of the inspection of the local authority's children's services.

While I am confident that across the country there has been a steady improvement in the multi-agency response to child sexual exploitation (CSE) and other child safeguarding issues, the problems we highlighted in the Stockton-on-Tees inspection are by no means confined to one police force.

Where forces give a high priority to the issue of child protection, we see senior officers playing a leading role in LSCBs (Local Safeguarding Children Boards) and making sure decisions are carried through to the front line. In these areas, expert police resource is being made available to quickly locate missing children, undertake proactive work to divert offenders, identify high-risk CSE areas and carry out effective risk assessments in cases of domestic abuse.

However, there is mounting evidence to indicate that this is not happening in a significant number of police forces.

I would like to be reassured that every Chief Constable recognises the vital role that the police have to play in protecting our most vulnerable children from harm. They are the ones armed with the intelligence to identify where organised abuse may be taking place and to spot emerging patterns of criminal activity.

We need to make sure that the task of coordinating the strategic response to these matters is given to officers with sufficient experience and knowledge to carry out the job effectively. All of us need to be confident that those officers who are sent to represent the police at multi-agency meetings are of the right seniority and have the right support behind them to take the decisions necessary to keep children safe.

I fully appreciate that in the current climate, police forces are facing many competing pressures and demands on their limited resources. However, my worry is that if Chief Constables fail to give this issue sufficient priority, we may see a repeat of the sort of catastrophic failings we saw a few years ago in places like Rotherham, Oxford and elsewhere.

I hope you will find the content of this letter useful as you plan your next programme of safeguarding inspections. I look forward to working closely with you in my remaining few months in post as both our inspectorates continue to shine a spotlight on this vital issue.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Michael Wilshaw
HM Chief Inspector