

Beatbullying's response to the consultation "Policing in the 21st century: reconnecting police and the people", specifically the role and future of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP).

Beatbullying is a proud strategic partner of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) and has some concerns about its future and its proposed role and position within a newly created National Crime Agency (NCA).

CEOP was set up in 2006 as an affiliate of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). However, there are indications and arguments that such an affiliation does not work effectively; indications that suggest the proposal for CEOP's functions to sit within a newly created NCA will not improve the benefits for children and young people.

CEOP has a clear and single focus on child protection, and its remit must continue to centre on protecting children from exploitation and abuse. Positioned within a broader organisation or agency, such as SOCA or the proposed NCA, whose focus and remit on tackling crime is much broader, there is a danger that the child protection focus is less prominent. An effective child protection organisation must have child protection running through its core, from its strategic direction to its operational delivery, with high levels of knowledge and understanding of the specific issues surrounding child protection across all levels of management and governance. Child protection must sit at the top of the organisation and flow all the way down. If child protection was only one of several areas of responsibility subsumed within a larger agency, the person in charge of child protection is unlikely to sit at the top and consideration for child protection is unlikely to be given priority when considering all forms of crime. Decisions could be made to the detriment of the child protection focus, and without child protection running priority across the agency, the effectiveness of its work would be lessened.

Beatbullying supports the Home Office White Paper on CEOP, published in 2010, proposing CEOP becomes a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB). Only by a continuation of CEOP's current position, or a move towards independence, would CEOP be able to function effectively as a dedicated and specialised child protection agency.

A key element of CEOP's success has been its ability to form partnerships with a range of organisations, both in the public and private sector. Beatbullying and CEOP's partnership has been extremely successful in reaching children, young people, parents and professionals with crucial messages, information and advice on keeping children safe, online and offline. A relative independence to build and manage these partnerships, whether with industry or third sector organisations, has been a clear strength of CEOP to date. Cross-sector partnership, utilising different skills, has enabled CEOP to be so successful, both in terms of raising awareness and education of child protection, and in terms of intervening and providing support to vulnerable young people in danger of harm. CEOP's ability to retain its partnership approach is crucial, and it would be lost if it became part of the NCA. There is a concern that such partnerships would not be able to exist and thrive to the same extent, if the partnership was with the NCA.

Beatbullying is not suggesting that the NCA is not the right solution for a national police service. However, it is not a dedicated child protection agency, and there is a need for such an agency as CEOP to exist independently – maintaining a close working relationship with the NCA without explicitly being part of it.

Whilst naturally there is a much needed law enforcement element to CEOP, it has good recognition amongst young people, it has a good reputation and a strong brand, which is not overtly focused on law enforcement. CEOP involves child protection specialists working alongside police officers, with industry, government and education all playing an integrated role. The vulnerable young people CEOP works with and aims to protect must be considered at all times and Beatbullying is concerned that the NCA would not have this same relationship with or perception by young people. The public profile of CEOP is likely to be damaged in the eyes of the very people it is seeking to reach and protect, should it be viewed to be as the police or overtly part of the police. CEOP's independence from law enforcement, whilst still maintaining a close working relationship with the NCA, is crucial if it is to continue to protect children and young people from exploitation and abuse.

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