

Police and Crime Committee - 1 December 2016

Transcript of Agenda Item 10 - Child Protection Investigations in the Metropolitan Police Service

Steve O'Connell AM (Chairman): We shall now reconvene on any other business the Chairman considers urgent, which is in essence item 10, reflecting on and early comments or thoughts around child protection investigations in the MPS. I welcome very much Commander Nick Downing, Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). It is really good he could come along at short notice, only a week after publication.

The context is that in a couple of weeks' time in our question-and-answer session (Q&A) [on 15 December 2016] we understand that Assistant Commissioner (AC) Martin Hewitt, MPS, will be attending and we can ask further questions around that. We also understand that Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC) will be revisiting, shall we say, the MPS three to four months into the New Year to see what you have achieved and what you have done. It will be appropriate that this Committee, again at that stage, to do some more work around that.

We will continue on this but today we want to have an early conversation with you to understand your action plan that you were asked to put into place early on and what you have already instigated at a relatively high level so that we can understand that and take those questions on for two weeks' time. Initially, it is probably worth setting a bit of a scene around it. Tell us what you have already put in place and talk to us a little bit about the plan that you are drafting to improve on what was a poor report.

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): Thank you, and thank you for the opportunity to come here today. It is never good to start off with an apology but Assistant Commissioner Martin Hewitt sends his apologies. He has been appointed as the Safeguarding Children lead for London and that addresses one of the number one concerns of the HMIC.

In relation to that, I just want to reiterate that there have been a number of chief officers working in the area of child protection. I am one of them. My colleague, [Commander] Stuart Cundy, from Specialist Crime, is one of the other ones as well. We all will work to AC Martin Hewitt.

A couple of points I just wanted to make. First of all, we welcome the report. The findings, although hard to read, give us the impetus to go forward and improve the lives of children across London. I also want to draw out a comment made in the report about our staff. The HMIC recognised that our staff work with genuine commitment, dedication and empathy to protect and help children and young people. This is an extremely challenging area with changing environments and threats, and this work is frequently distressing for our staff as well. There is a health and wellbeing element to what we have to introduce to our plan. It is important that we recognise the work that our staff do across London every day.

We recognise that significant change is required in both behaviours and our knowledge. We need to equip our staff with the right resources, awareness and training to do a good job and to keep children at the heart of everything we do. We look at the new challenges in protecting children online, through social media and with gangs. It is not just in the home, it is also on the street as well.

The final point I wish to make before going into some of the things we have done is that our partnerships across London, which are really strong, are absolutely integral to how we protect children. We need to get stronger and we need to work as one and we would welcome future inspections to be joint inspections.

On the immediate response, I have already mentioned that AC Martin Hewitt has been appointed as the single chief officer lead. As soon as we had the verbal debrief for the HMIC report, Deputy Assistant Commissioner Graham McNulty called together a goal group with all the strategic leads from the various departments to address the early findings and to come up with some solutions. We introduced an audit and continuous improvement team to review every single one of the cases that HMIC had said required improvement or was inadequate. From that review, we can say at this time that no child has come to harm and no additional people have been charged or cautioned. That is something we want to build for the future. We recognise that in the report it says that our self-assessment was not very good. Having our own continuous improvement team to gather the learning and mitigate any risk is really important.

Not only that, we want external scrutiny. We have already set up an external scrutiny panel, which has on it the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and Child Protective Services. Some cases we are saying we think are complete and dealt with to a satisfactory standard we want reviewed and then we will gather the learning from those as well. We are broadening the external scrutiny with the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) and developing a child safeguarding advisory board that is engaging with academics, the NSPCC, Barnardo's and the Howard League for Penal Reform. Then there is scrutiny to make sure our plans going forward are viable, robust and understood by colleagues, the public and interested parties.

We have looked as well at and are developing the action plan. It is in draft form at the moment. It is going to cover some key areas. First of all, leadership, management and governance; initial contact with a child; our investigation; our decision-making; and our management of those who pose a risk to children. We are going to theme it in those five areas.

We are going far wider than just HMIC recommendations. We are looking at our serious case reviews, our domestic homicide reviews and previous reports and recommendations that have been made. We are looking at national learning, working with the College of Policing and looking at HMIC inspections of other forces. We are not alone. We were number 13 on the list and the reports are very similar, albeit it has been recognised that our report was more severe. We are working with the Home Office and Greater Manchester Police as well because their response was recognised as good practice. We are going to bring that into our plan.

Then there are the emerging challenges and horizon-scanning. What is the future threat? I do not think we can underestimate what that online threat is. Yesterday, AC Hewitt was talking about sextortion. Online grooming, bullying and harassment cause problems for child protection.

I have already mentioned the development of our self-inspection continuous improvement and we want to embed that in our new headquarters function. We are already developing a new model of policing for London - we have two pathfinder sites - in January and part of that model will be a protecting vulnerable people strand. We will be bringing our specialist functions from child abuse and sexual offences to our local investigation around community safety units and hate crime. Then we will have officers dealing with child abuse, child protection issues and child exploitation in one place, locally.

We need to broaden that out as well to our neighbourhoods, looking at our increase in dedicated ward officers and our investment in schools. This does not start at senior school. For me, we need to invest in primary schools as well and early intervention to make children's lives better in London. Shall I pause?

Steve O’Connell AM (Chairman): This is good. This is really helpful. This Committee’s Safeguarding Working Group, chaired by Caroline [Pidgeon MBE AM] in 2014, issued a report and we will be asking some questions based on some very strong recommendations out of that report. We have some questions to ask MOPAC and the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime around that in a couple of weeks’ time.

You touched upon, towards the end of your presentation, the new design of policing in London, the new borough design and the new local design with dedicated ward officers. Again, this is something this Committee will be looking at closely and how that will possibly impact on it.

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): I am sure.

Steve O’Connell AM (Chairman): It is clearly a complex area. You said that the MPS would welcome future investigations into the whole partnership piece, which sounds like it makes some sense. I will pause there.

Len Duvall AM: I asked for this to go on the agenda because in your opening statement you said it was not a good report. This is a damning report and does not reflect well on the MPS at many levels. There is no doubt about that. We should not underestimate this issue in this report for all sorts of reasons.

There probably are a number of reasons why we need to understand what goes on. When we come back to it, we will want to talk about how we got ourselves into this particular issue, not just thinking about how we get out. I am all for reviewing the partnership work but the MPS needs to focus on its work and this issue and not try to widen it out. That is the next stage, the future around that, because something has desperately gone wrong here for this to happen at this level. It is damning and horrendous.

For me, when we come back, I would like some answers around some bits of the future. Some of my colleagues will say, if I can pre-empt it, that there are some changes in the reforms going on in the MPS. We want to know, in terms of the response and the changes in response, where there are going to be carrying caseloads and what the implications are for this work under that system in the future. How quickly can you get us to a position where we can have confidence that if a police officer is confronted with these issues, they are going to be dealing with it appropriately and properly?

The borough mergers may cut across some of your work around joint working. There are some core procedures boroughs operate but around the fringes there is wiggle room and local issues. What we want to understand is how the MPS is going to deal with those issues. You might have two or three borough mergers with one police service servicing those three boroughs. They might be used to dealing with Borough A and in Boroughs B and C they might have a different practice. We want to be assured about this. It is no good people saying, “We have some pilots to do it”. We want to know that people have been thinking about this. They should have been thinking about it.

There is a bit in the final HMIC report about the national issues in trying to say, “MPS, this will be all right if only you stop dealing with volume crime”. That is not understanding what the London volume crime piece is. We would like to hear from the Assistant Commissioner about how he is going to deal with HMIC because the volume crime that we are most concerned about around this table is violent crime, which we think the MPS has underestimated particularly over the last four years. While we value that certain crime is going down in some areas, violent crime is going up. We understand the domestic piece. We are talking about violent crime going on between our young people, that volume crime. Before you start screening that out, concentrate on some of those issues.

Overall, Chairman, we are looking for the MPS to describe, under pressures of falling police numbers over the coming years, how you are going to deal with this and what those issues are. Your first response is welcomed. I wish we were not in this situation. I bet you wish you were not in this situation. It is a start but there are some other deeper questions that we want to understand about how we have got into these issues.

We know there were some conversations about the MOPAC 7 [crimes]. I would like honest reflection from the MPS on the loss of experience and knowledge. We have a relatively young workforce. What is the system? What is the plan about getting underneath the skin of these issues and a new way of working, which is being driven by the reduced resources you have at your disposal to deal with some of these issues? I hope, Chairman, when we come back to it, it is an informed, frank, no-holds-barred exchange. We want to get further from initial responses and to get into some wider issues around the future of the MPS policing and this particular issue.

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): I agree with the statements you make. We need to look in-depth. If I can just clarify something, at no point am I suggesting we pass over responsibility for this report to our partners, in no way. We are looking internally. We are reflecting internally. This is our report, it is about us and we will take the steps to address what we should be doing as the MPS. It is integral to protecting children and protecting the most vulnerable in society that we have to work in partnership but this is our report, it is on us and absolutely it was an unsavoury read, I agree.

Len Duvall AM: Thank you for that answer.

Steve O'Connell AM (Chairman): Just to echo Len's thoughts around prioritising, this is a period of change. The MPS's budget is shrinking. The number of officers may shrink. You need to attend to this, as Len said, horrendous report and think about resourcing around that, remembering that London has an issue, as we have just talked about, with serious youth violence and knife crime and also, to many of us in our localities, those crimes that local teams are dealing with, burglary and anti-social behaviour. These are still important to people. It is a question of how far this pendulum goes. We would be interested to hear the detail around that, which Len has picked up on.

Andrew Dismore AM: I wanted to come in on the borough merger point because one of my boroughs is one of the pilots. Camden is merging with Islington. We met the superintendent the other night at the Safer Neighbourhoods Board. She is going to be in charge of the vulnerable people strand or whatever it is called. It is not entirely clear to me how that is going to work and I am not sure she was entirely sure how it was going to work, either. It is supposed to be coming in in January [2017] and so we do not have long to go.

Can you give us an indication of how you think it is going to work at borough level, bi-borough level or tri-borough level?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): We are bringing together our child abuse teams and our sexual offences team under one detective superintendent lead for safeguarding. That will bring on [our work] on protecting vulnerable people and that brings our community safety units together as well.

If you look at the duplication of effort that has happened before, a number of sexual offences are in a domestic setting but we would deal with them as individual cases and not bring them together. That is just inefficient and it is not good for the victim. Bringing the teams together for one response and having the experts together as well will be better for the victim in the long run. There will be one front door for referrals, as well. We have Multiagency Safeguarding Hubs across London in every borough. We have the tri-borough in Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster, but one front door and one point for

referrals so that nothing gets lost. Then it can be assessed there, triaged there and the right assets put towards it, whether that is from the police or partnership.

Having that single governance structure across there will bring consistency, which can only be better for the victims of crime, in my opinion. We need to look and really study what the pathfinder sites do. We need to listen to the victim as well. Is this service better? That is what matters here. We need to make sure the children are not forgotten. Our initial response when a child before you needs help is good because he or she is there in front of you.

What we want to do is make safeguarding business as usual. It should be the norm that every time we go to a house we are thinking more widely than, "This is a burglary and we are looking at the victim of a burglary". We want to look at what else is happening. There has been a violent crime. Who else is affected? Are there children affected? It is widening our scope. Quite a lot of that is education and awareness, empowering our staff to do that and giving them the time to do that as well. That answers a bit of the question around the response.

It is my responsibility, it is my police community support officers' (PCSOs) responsibility and it is the responsibility of all my colleagues across London to be safeguarders. It should not be only a specialist team-only responsibility. That is why we want to make it at the heart of neighbourhoods as well around our dedicated ward officers knowing who the most vulnerable are within their community. That is important to us and that should be what we are doing every single day. The model is bringing experts together to provide a better service for the victims. I want to see what that evaluation says and make sure it is the right way for us to work in the future. It makes absolute sense but let us pilot it in the pathfinder sites and make sure we listen to the victims as well.

Andrew Dismore AM: Getting back to Len's point, I do not know if there is a different process at the moment in Islington [Borough Command Unit (BCU)] compared to Camden but you have two boroughs coming together that may have a different approach to these things. How do you overcome that?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): We have the policing approach, which should be consistent. That is where the leadership is going to be really important, the superintendent and the BCU Commander, to ensure that the same processes are within both boroughs. We have to be cognisant of the partners as well. Different partnerships and different local authorities have different processes. We have to be reflective of that and work together with our partners to get that consistent approach. I have not visited specifically the MASH at Islington or Camden but that is what we need to do to make sure that we are working as uniformly as we possibly can and that the child or the vulnerable person is at the heart of everything we do.

Andrew Dismore AM: Are you just doing this in the two pilot mergers at the moment or are you doing it everywhere?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): The protecting vulnerable people strand at the moment is just in the two pathfinder sites. We evaluate that and there is going to be ongoing consultation. It is a step process and you are here to hold us to account on that evaluation as well.

Steve O'Connell AM (Chairman): As you say, this will be affecting the work of the new dedicated ward officers and the PCSOs and there may be significant skills uplift.

Tony Arbour AM: A couple of questions on the practicalities of doing what you are suggesting, given that HMIC firstly says that there is a shortage of officers who are trained to fill the vacancies that already exist. You

are talking about the open door and more training. Where do you think you are going to find these people who are going to do it?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): We constantly review where our resources are and what activity they are doing. That happens monthly at our Deputy Assistant Commissioners postings meetings where we prioritise where the assets are. We have 32,000 police officers in London. That is the most we have ever had. It is realigning those officers to the priorities that are at the forefront.

Tony Arbour AM: I understand that but clearly there are specific skills that are required. If those people already existed among your 32,000 you would not have the vacancies that already exist, would you?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): There is an ongoing challenge across policing across the country around detectives, but the training is far wider than doing a specialist course. Already, since when we heard the early piece of this report, we have trained, over a day, 10,000 officers in child sexual exploitation, missing and Every Child Matters, and that is going to be a rolling programme. It is empowering and giving different levels of training to frontline staff, whereas the specialists working in the area will have enhanced training. They should have that already. That is the piece we need to work on and have a consistent training plan that is not just over three or six months but is over a year, three years or five years to ensure that we have the right skills placed in the right areas. I believe there is a duty for us to raise awareness across all of our staff around these critical issues of safeguarding.

Tony Arbour AM: I understand that, but the urgency is not over three or five years, if there is a training period as we were talking about; the urgency is now. I am very conscious of the very bad press that the MPS has had by seeking to recruit officers who are trained to use firearms. We are depleting neighbouring police forces. There is a risk that this is going happen with this as well, is there not? The problem exists here and now and, because of this very severe criticism you have, you are going to want to make it better as soon as you can. What I am saying to you is this. The easy way of doing it is to recruit people who already have this training and already have this competence, is it not?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): At the moment that is not part of the plan that we are developing. We are looking internally. We want to make this absolutely core business from our first responders all the way to our specialists. We consistently and continuously review our resources to place those officers. I understand the point you are making about specialist training and we need to look at making sure that those we place in these specialist roles get the right training. At the moment there is no plan to try to take officers from around the country who are specialists in this area.

Tony Arbour AM: I appreciate it is not your problem, but when we deal with this formally, when deal with the matter in a fortnight's time, it is important to flag up. It is all very well to talk about the 32,000; you are not going to have 32,000 as time passes. Time is going to get harder and harder and already there have been loads of initiatives over the past few months to divert people from doing their existing jobs. In effect, you are cannibalising what you already have and the proposal that you have just made is that you look internally - I think that is what you said - and you want to resource this internally, which is going to cannibalise things even more. That will mean that the remaining officers are going to be infinitely more thinly spread. That is right, is it not?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): No, we are realigning our resource to a new way of working.

Tony Arbour AM: Does "realigning" mean slimming down?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): No.

Tony Arbour AM: It does not?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): I disagree.

Tony Arbour AM: If I was an officer who had been dealing with the MOPAC 7 [crimes] -- because you will recall some criticism has been made in relation to this HMIC report. It said, "It has all come about because we are looking at the MOPAC 7". OK? The suggestion is that people should be removed from dealing with the MOPAC 7 crimes, which are not going to go away; they are still going to be there. There is still going to be theft; there is still going to be all that kind of thing. If you are going to staff this up from your internal resources, you will be taking people away from the work they are currently doing, will you not?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): We need to look at what our policing priorities are. We need to work with MOPAC on the Police and Crime Plan and to understand what the policing priorities are for London. We are suggesting a model where we are realigning our current assets into BCUs with the BCU model.

Yes, there is a recognition that we have to do things differently. We need to invest in prevention and reducing the demand that is there and trust our officers to go out and provide the best level of service to the people of London that we want them to. This should be business as usual in the fact that there is potentially a child at risk and how we then problem-solve.

Tony Arbour AM: I understand that and you are dealing with the matter very manfully. In a fortnight's time we are going to want to do that. As I have indicated, "realigning" is perhaps going to be the fashionable way in which the MPS says, "This is how we are coping". I will not pursue the matter further here, but clearly there is a problem because if you are saying that everything has to come from existing resources, then Peter is going to be robbed to play Paul, is he not? You do not have to comment.

Steve O'Connell AM (Chairman): Let that sit. I think you get the gist of one particular concern of the group.

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): I understand the concern and of course I will feed that concern back.

Steve O'Connell AM (Chairman): That is something that we will revisit in a bit more detail.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM: I do not know if off the top of your head you are able to give us any idea of the caseload that staff in this area are currently having to deal with and what the supervisory ratio is. If you are not able to give that today, it would be helpful to have it next week to help us prepare for our hearing in a couple of weeks.

In terms of the staffing, you have your establishment, if I recall, and a large number of women work in this area. A large number have children and go on maternity leave and so we had always encouraged you to over-staff in order that you would be at your establishment the whole time. Are you able to give us the real figures at the moment in terms of staffing?

Commander Nick Downing (Metropolitan Police Service): I do not have the real numbers in staffing. There were 17,000 child abuse and sexual abuse investigations in the last 12 months. It is a high volume. That does not then look into domestic abuse as well and you add that in the family setting. Numbers alone probably do not give the complexity of some of the challenges. I do not have the makeup of staffing available now but I can make that available for you.

Caroline Pidgeon MBE AM: Greater detail on that will help us for our hearing in a couple of weeks. Thank you.

Steve O'Connell AM (Chairman): Other questions, colleagues? This was really useful because we have had the early heads-up. We have talked about the five areas and the action plan. We have had the opportunity to give you some of our early concerns that we will revisit certainly in more detail in a couple of weeks with AC Hewitt [Professionalism Command, MPS]. That probably is it for the moment.