LEARNING THE LESSONS

IOPC Independent Office for Police Conduct

Improving policing policy and practice



CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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WELCOME



No conversations about us, without us

Welcome to issue 48 focusing on children and young people, the second edition to be guest edited by members of the IOPC Youth Panel.

Let's meet the editorial team...

We are the IOPC Youth Panel, a group of 42 young people aged 16 to 25 from diverse communities across England and Wales. Established in 2018, the Panel is dedicated to understanding young people's experiences, identifying solutions to increase trust and confidence in policing and the police complaints system, and driving systems change nationally.

We each have our own reasons for joining the Panel: some of us joined because of our lived experiences or interest in policing; others joined to improve police interactions with young people, make the complaints system more accessible or uplift the voices of young people who can feel silenced or underrepresented. We all share a desire to make sure young people's voices are heard and taken seriously. Ultimately, we want to create positive change.

We wanted to co-produce this edition because young people deserve a seat at the table, helping to shape conversations from the beginning, challenging assumptions and bringing our experiences and ideas directly to policing. Through this edition, we shaped messages for policing, highlighting issues that matter to young people and showcasing ideas for change.

This edition includes nine case studies we helped select, drawn from real incidents investigated or reviewed by the IOPC. In these cases, we have highlighted our reflections on the opportunities to improve interactions with young people. We made sure articles focused on topics that are important to young people, including mental health, safeguarding, exploitation and knife crime. We are proud to have contributed youth-led articles exploring young people's views and experiences of policing and the complaints system, and our vision for change.

If there is one message we want policing to take from this edition, it is that you cannot improve young people's trust and confidence without listening to them and acting on what they say. Young people's concerns should be taken seriously, and assumptions should not be made about who we are or how we will behave.

We want young people to be respected and involved as partners in improving policing. Lasting trust comes from genuine engagement, transparency, accountability and meaningful action.

We hope this edition provides useful insights and learning that support ongoing conversations around improving policing interactions with children and young people.

THE IOPC YOUTH PANEL

We would like to thank the team from Leaders Unlocked who supported the IOPC Youth Panel throughout this work. Find out more about Leaders Unlocked at www.leaders-unlocked.org

Content warning

This magazine contains descriptions of incidents involving issues such as death and serious injury, self-harm, exploitation, mental ill health, violence against women and girls, strip search, physical restraint, Taser and alcohol and drugs.

See page 49 for organisations you can contact if you are affected by any of the issues in this publication.

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Key to case topics

- Call handling
- Custody and detention
- Investigation management
- Investigation
- Mental health
- Neighbourhood policing
- Personal safety
- Professional standards
- Public protection
- Stop and search
- Taser
- Guidance

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Young people's views and experiences of policing and the complaints system

IOPC Youth Panel members **Ashaz**, **Cara**, **Lauren**, **Morgan**, **Richa** and **Zack** discuss how their peer-to-peer research can help drive systems change.

The IOPC Youth Panel is a group of young people dedicated to identifying solutions to increase young people's trust and confidence in policing and the police complaints system.

We undertake national influencing work to drive systems change which is youth-led and evidence-based. We engage other young people through collaborations and peer-to-peer research activities, such as community-based workshops and an annual survey, to better understand their views and experiences of policing and the police complaints system.

National Policing Survey 2026

Between October 2025 and January 2026, we conducted our fourth annual survey, gathering the views of 1,594 young people aged 13 to 25 from across England and Wales. We heard responses from young people in all 43 police force areas.

The survey aimed to examine young people's views and experiences of policing and the police complaints system, and explore trends in their levels of trust. Here are some of our key findings:

Views of the police:

- **Finding:** 66% said they trust the police in their area either a fair amount or a great deal, and 68% said they thought the police in their area treated young people fairly.
- **Action needed:** Police should look at the areas where young people trust the police the most, see what the police are doing to gain the trust of young people and implement those things countrywide.
- **Finding:** 55% said they feel young people's voices are not being heard by their local police force either not much or not at all.
- **Action needed:** Police should strengthen youth engagement through youth advisory groups, genuine co-production with young people when developing policies and training, and regular feedback on how young people's views have influenced decisions.
- **Finding:** 69% said they would be quite or very likely to go to the police if they were a victim of crime.
- **Action needed:** Police should build on this confidence by ensuring victims receive timely communication, compassionate support and positive experiences throughout investigations.

The top five issues young people would like police to focus on in 2026 are:

- knife crime (25%)
- sexual violence (17%)
- safer streets (11%)
- drug dealing/use (8%)
- anti-social behaviour (7%)

Views of the police complaints system:

- **Finding:** 60% said they would not know how to make a complaint about the police if they needed to, and only 20% had heard of the IOPC.
- **Action needed:** Greater promotion of the complaints system through schools, social media and youth organisations. Police and the IOPC should provide simple, accessible guidance to make young people aware of the complaints system, how it works and how to use it.
- **Finding:** 68% said they would be fairly or very willing to make a complaint if they had a bad experience with the police. But only 28% said they thought their complaint would make a lot or a fair amount of difference. This gap suggests that young people want to be able to trust and utilise the system, but there is currently a lack of faith that their complaint will be listened to, taken seriously and have an impact moving forward.





- **Action needed:** Police and oversight bodies should demonstrate how complaints lead to learning, accountability and improvements to strengthen confidence in the system.

Build-a-Cop workshops

Build-a-Cop is a youth-led activity developed by the IOPC Youth Panel that helps young people draw and design their ideal police officer by exploring the characteristics, qualities and behaviours they would like to see in policing.

Throughout February and March 2026, we facilitated ten youth-led, peer-to-peer workshops in educational, community and online settings, engaging with more than 300 young people to gain their insights.

Using features of the human body, such as the head, eyes and heart, as a framework, young people worked together to build their ideal officer, encouraging discussion and collaboration.

- They highlighted the importance of officers who are trained in mental health, equality, diversity, safeguarding and de-escalation, while having a strong understanding of the law and appropriate use of police powers.
- They wanted officers who listened, communicated clearly and balanced professionalism with approachability, avoiding bias and profiling.
- They consistently identified kindness, integrity, transparency and positive policing relationships as essential qualities.

Overall, the workshops highlighted that young people want policing that is people-centred, empathetic, accountable and grounded in fairness.

The activity was really effective at unleashing young people's creative side, making the sessions much more accessible to a wide range of young people, including those who aren't so confident in group discussion, have different communication preferences or are neurodivergent. It allowed young people to contribute in different ways, ensuring everyone's voices are heard and represented.

Collaborations for systems change

We have also worked collaboratively with other youth forums, both within and beyond the policing sector, to take collective action on shared priorities and bring about impactful systems change.

For example, earlier this year we collaborated with the YourPolice.UK Youth Advisory Group and NHS Youth Forum, sharing views, experiences, learning and solutions to advance our call for all police officers to receive training in trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity and mental health. ■

You can read more about the work of YourPolice.UK in their article.

You can find out more about our peer-to-peer research at www.policeconduct.gov.uk/about-us/engaging-with-communities/our-youth-panel

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Ashaz, Cara, Lauren, Morgan, Richa & **Zack** are members of the IOPC's Youth Panel.



Photo: Alamy

Our case studies: an overview

David Lee introduces the themes featured in this edition's IOPC case studies.

The IOPC oversees the police complaints system, reviewing police complaint handling and investigating the most serious and sensitive matters involving the police. We also share learning from our work, to improve police policy and practice and increase trust and confidence in policing.

The nine case studies included in this magazine are based on real investigations and reviews the IOPC has completed. They have been selected because they highlight key themes seen in our work, and because of the opportunities they represent to spark discussion and reflective thinking.

Many of the case studies highlight the distinct vulnerabilities of children and young people. It is crucial that those under 18 years old are treated as children, irrespective of their presented or assumed maturity and age. The National Police Chiefs' Council Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy recognises that for young people, aged 18 to 24 years old, vulnerability can remain and maturity takes time to develop. We ask you to reflect on whether your organisation's existing training, guidance and policies embed a child-centred policing approach that promotes safeguarding and the welfare of every child.

A consistent theme in the case studies is the importance of effective communication, which takes account of a child or young person's level of understanding and communication needs. These cases are designed to help you consider how you can adapt your approach when interacting with children and young people to support de-escalation, ensure they understand what is happening and are aware of their rights.

> **"It is crucial that those under 18 years old are treated as children, irrespective of their presented or assumed maturity and age"**

Other case studies raise concerns about adultification bias. We share these case studies to help you reflect on how to avoid making assumptions about a child's maturity, physical appearance or behaviour, to prevent adultification bias from occurring.

All the case studies include reflective questions, designed to unpack key learning. We ask you to consider these questions to identify how you and your team can better engage with and approach future incidents involving children and young people. By doing so, you can help them to have trust and confidence in policing.

We encourage readers to complete our five-minute feedback survey (see below). This helps us to understand how useful you found this edition and how we can continue to improve the magazine. ■

David Lee is the Learning and Improvement Lead at the IOPC.



YOUR FEEDBACK NEEDED

To complete the survey, which is open until 6 January 2027, please visit: www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/LearningTheLessons48ChildrenandYoungPeople

CASE STUDY 1

Stop and search and use of force on a 14-year-old Black child

This case was independently investigated by the IOPC.

Three officers (PCs A, B and C) and a sergeant (A/PS D) responded to a report of a robbery at knifepoint.

The suspects were described as four Black males, approximately 14 years old, one wearing a dark blue hoody.

PCs A, B, C and A/PS D stopped a Black boy (Child E) in a blue hoody talking on a mobile, walking away from where the robbery occurred.

PC A told Child E that they were stopping him for a search under section 1 of the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984* (PACE). PC B took Child E's mobile from his hand. PC A and A/PS D placed Child E in handcuffs.

PC A explained that Child E matched the description of a reported suspect, and that officers were searching him for any stolen items or knives. When asked if he had anything on him that he shouldn't, Child E replied, "No".

PC A patted down Child E. Body-worn video (BWV) showed PC A telling Child E to stop tensing up. Child E swore and said, "You don't like Black people".

Child E didn't appear to understand the reason for the search. This was later confirmed in his mother's complaint to police.

Although Child E was told he was going to be searched, there was no evidence that officers explained to him what the search would involve.

PC A unzipped Child E's hoody to search him and he was bent forward by PC A and A/PS D. He appeared to resist as the officers restrained him.

A/PS D said, "Get on the floor then" and PC A and A/PS D lowered Child E to lay face down on the ground.

While Child E was on the ground, A/PS D knelt over his legs. A/PS D later stated that this was to prevent Child E kicking out at the officers.

Bystanders told officers that their actions were wrong and that Child E looked in pain.

Two additional officers, PCs F and G arrived.

The officers repeatedly told Child E to calm down. PC B knelt over Child E's legs and said, "We need to search you mate. You're about two foot tall and you're acting like you're six-foot mate. Act your age." Child E said he was acting his age and was in year 10 at school.

PC F introduced himself and asked Child E his name. He also asked where Child E had been and if he had any injuries from the search.

Child E gave his name, said he had been at school and his hand was hurt after being taken to the ground.

The search concluded. Officers lifted Child E to his feet. Video footage showed Child E crying and swearing at officers to take the handcuffs off him.

PC A told Child E to stop swearing or he would be arrested. He asked Child E if they could have a conversation "adult to adult".

G NSPCC: Safeguarding children who come from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities

Adultification

Adultification is a form of bias where children are viewed and treated as older than they are. (…) Adultification can impact any child but it disproportionately affects Black children, who might be viewed primarily as a threat rather than as a child who needs support.

More information

https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/children-from-black-asian-minoritised-ethnic-communities#racism-bias-and-stereotypes

> **"The IOPC investigation found it was unclear why Child E remained in handcuffs after the search concluded, with no stolen items or a knife found"**



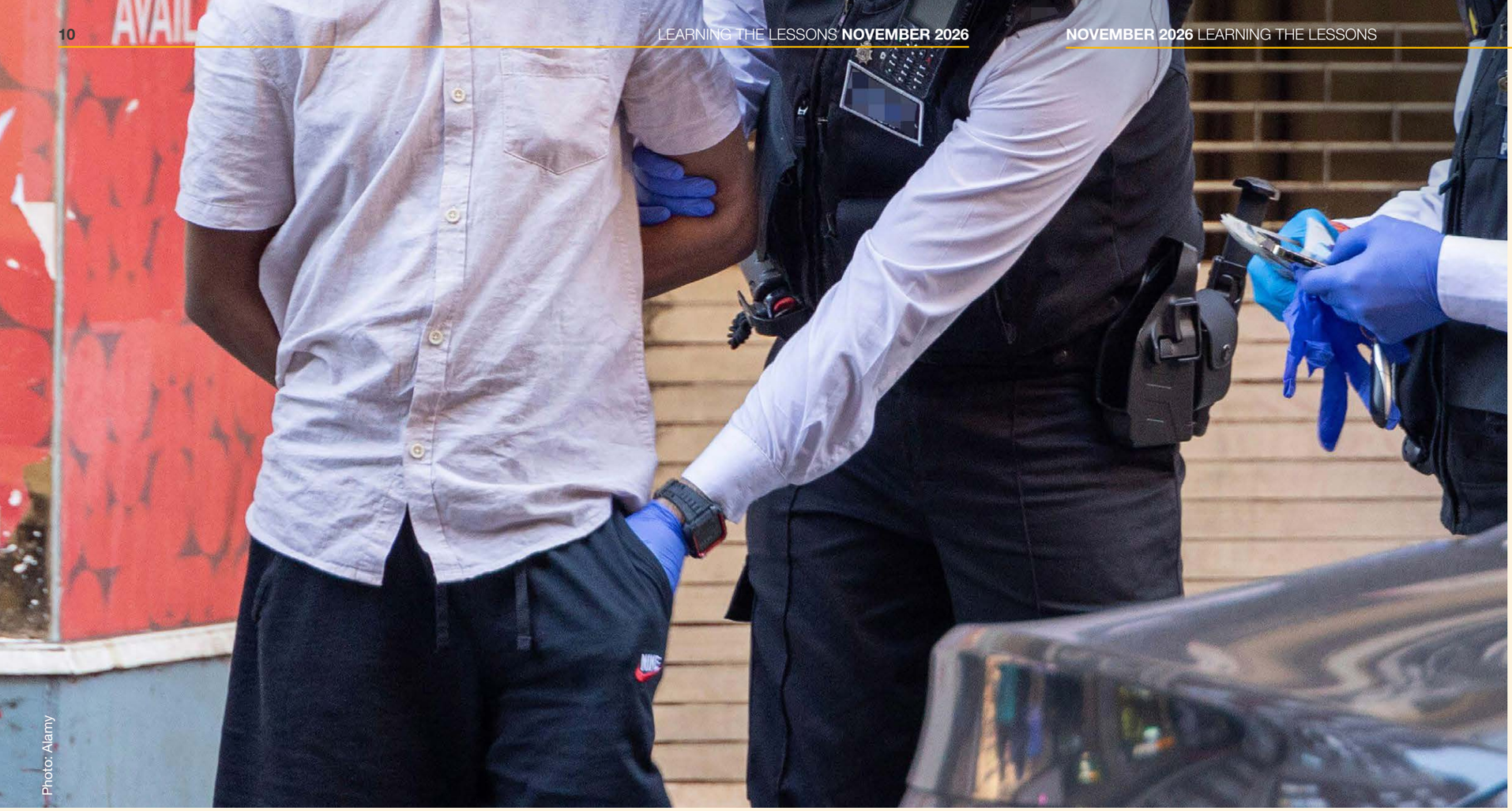


Photo: Alamy

PC A asked Child E his surname, but he refused to give it. PC A insisted he needed Child E's personal details for safeguarding purposes. PC A pulled up Child E's hoody to identify his school blazer and told the boy he would ask the school. PACE Code A states there is no requirement to give such details.

Visibly upset, Child E repeatedly asked officers to remove his handcuffs. PC A responded, "I don't need to at the moment, I need to talk to you."

Child E asked to call his mother. PC A said he didn't need to as he was "not being detained", despite Child E remaining in handcuffs.

The IOPC investigation found it was unclear why Child E remained in handcuffs after the search concluded, with no stolen items or a knife found.

College of Policing APP guidance on using handcuffs during stop and search states: "whenever handcuffs are used, officers must only use them for as long as their use remains lawful, necessary and proportionate."

A teacher who was present spoke to Child E, asking whether he was okay and if he wanted to call his mother. Child E said yes. The teacher called Child E's mother, informing her of the stop and search. The mother later told the IOPC she was anxious about hearing this, as her son had asthma and learning difficulties.

> **"Officers need to take time to help children understand what's happening and always adopt a child-centred approach"**

Child E's handcuffs were removed. However, officers told him that he was not free to go, as PC F was attempting to establish whether he was linked to the robbery.

It was later confirmed that Child E was not a suspect and he was released. ■

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- How does your force equip officers and staff to adapt their communication to a child's age and level of understanding?
- How does your force ensure that officers and staff understand and follow College of Policing APP guidance on communicating effectively before, during and after a stop and search?
- How do you reinforce with officers and staff that when carrying out a search there is no obligation for a person to provide their personal details?
- What steps does your force take to prevent officers becoming desensitised during their work, so they can respond empathetically to a child in distress?
- How does your force's training ensure officers recognise when behaviour perceived as aggression or resistance may instead reflect trauma, fear or developmental age?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- How do you guard against assumptions about maturity, culpability or threat when interacting with children, particularly Black and other ethnic minority children?
- Do you understand what adultification is, and the impact it can have on children?
- Do you reflect on the language you use when communicating with a child, particularly phrases that could adultify them?
- How would you have approached this stop and search differently to actively listen to the child and ensure a child-centred approach was taken?

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

The IOPC investigation found PC A and A/PS D had a case to answer for gross misconduct.

At a misconduct hearing, PC A and A/PS D were found to have failed to communicate appropriately with Child E based on his age and failed to adopt a child-centred approach. The hearing also found that Child E's handcuffs should have been removed earlier.

PC A was found to have breached PACE Codes A and D in respect of telling Child E he had to provide personal details.

A/PS D was found to have shown a lack of respect when speaking to Child E, his mother and members of the public.

PC A resigned from the police service before the misconduct hearing. A/PS D received a final written warning.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

Officers should recognise how traumatic stop and search encounters can be for children. Officers need to take time to help children understand what's happening and always adopt a child-centred approach.

Officers should recognise that resistance may stem from a vulnerability, which can include learning difficulties, and they need to show more understanding and care. Allowing a child to contact a parent or carer should be treated as a priority.

Safeguarding children during stop and search encounters

Chief Inspector Andy Thornton outlines how West Yorkshire Police developed a more consistent approach to safeguarding children, improving early intervention opportunities and outcomes.



Photo: Alamy

What was the problem?

In early 2025, prompted by the Children's Commissioner's report, Strip Searching of Children in England and Wales, an internal audit was commissioned to review safeguarding arrangements following stop and search encounters involving children.

At the time, officers were already required to submit a public protection notice (PPN), which records safeguarding concerns and is shared with partner agencies, when a child under ten years old had been searched or a child had been subject to a strip search. For all other encounters, officers applied a risk-based approach to determine whether a PPN or other safeguarding action was necessary.

The audit identified inconsistencies in how safeguarding concerns were recognised and managed. It found that differing approaches were being taken, which created a risk that opportunities to identify and support vulnerable children could be missed.

The ambition was to develop a consistent, child-centred process that maximised the opportunities to safeguard children while also supporting officers to identify vulnerabilities more effectively.

Considerations

The first step focused on identifying an effective and proportionate approach to improve safeguarding outcomes. One option was to mandate the submission of a PPN after every stop and search encounter. While this would provide consistency, it also risked:

- diluting the value of PPNs through unnecessary submissions
- increasing demand on partner agencies
- adding bureaucracy for frontline officers
- discouraging the appropriate use of stop and search powers

Following consultation with local policing teams, safeguarding leads and district leadership teams, the preferred option involved using Early Action (EA) teams to lead a bespoke triage process for all child stop and searches. EA teams are embedded in each policing district and specialise in identifying and supporting young people at risk of exploitation, harmful associations and emerging vulnerability.

The process

A review process was introduced, where stop and search data is shared with EA teams to triage. They review every encounter with a child, with the frequency of reviews being tailored to local demand. Each case is assessed using a contextual risk assessment that considers available intelligence, previous police contact, the circumstances of the stop and search and the outcome of the encounter.

EA teams determine the appropriate intervention, which may include:

- notifying and engaging with parents or guardians
- providing support to parents or guardians through EA teams or partner agencies
- delivering tailored interventions for children and families
- submitting a PPN and referring to social care when safeguarding thresholds are met

A key element of the process is officer learning. Where EA teams identify that a PPN should have been submitted, the searching officer and their supervisor are informed and provided with feedback to improve future safeguarding decision making.

An action-tracking system also monitors interventions, compliance and outcomes.

The initiative was piloted over four months in two policing districts selected according to demand and staffing capacity. This phased approach enabled the force to assess effectiveness, compare operating models and identify learning before wider implementation.

Following this successful pilot, the process was rolled out across West Yorkshire in September 2025, without additional funding, by integrating the work into existing EA team responsibilities.

Positive impacts

Since the force-wide implementation in September 2025, officers have conducted more than 2,000 stop and search encounters involving children. Approximately 70% of those have been reviewed by EA officers.

Of the stop and search encounters reviewed, 66% were assessed as requiring a PPN. In almost half of these cases (49%), officers had identified the need for a PPN at the time of the encounter and submitted it before an EA team review.

Recent performance has shown that the process has continued to improve. For example, 95% of stop and search encounters have been reviewed during the most recent four-month period. There has also been a 14% increase in officers identifying the need for a PPN, indicating that feedback and learning are helping officers identify safeguarding concerns earlier. Alongside increased PPN submissions, EA teams have delivered numerous tailored interventions for children and families, providing support and addressing vulnerabilities at an earlier stage.

Advice for other forces

The success of the initiative was supported by using established EA teams and incorporating the process into existing safeguarding structures.

Key lessons include:

- **Collaboration is essential** – engaging practitioners and strategic stakeholders helped develop a robust and credible process.
- **Clear governance is vital** – a single governance structure provided accountability and performance oversight.
- **Technology improves compliance** – a semi-automated performance platform enabled effective monitoring and evaluation.
- **Learning should be embedded** – providing feedback to officers improved safeguarding awareness and decision making.
- **It's not a one-off** – ongoing reviews and frontline feedback have helped refine the process and support long-term change.

By combining consistent risk assessment, early intervention and continuous learning, West Yorkshire Police has strengthened its approach to safeguarding children. It has also ensured that stop and search encounters are viewed not only as an enforcement tool, but also as an opportunity to protect vulnerable children. ■

Chief Inspector Andy Thornton is local policing operations lead for West Yorkshire Police.



CASE STUDY 2

Officers' failure to act on a crime reported by a child

This case was independently investigated by the IOPC.

Police were called to a fight between an intoxicated man and woman.

When officers arrived, they were told that the man had left the location. Officers subsequently arrested the woman.

The officers walked the woman to a police van. While searching her, Child A approached them. Body-worn video showed an officer telling Child A that they were busy dealing with the woman. The IOPC investigation noted that this was a reasonable response, as officers were focused on placing the woman in the police van.

Child A approached PC B and explained that he and his friend, Child C, a 14-year-old girl, had walked the same man involved in the earlier incident to a hotel. He stated that Child C had remained with the man and had told him she was 16 years old. Child A was concerned about her staying with the man.

In interview, PC B explained that, because he was wearing an earpiece, he had only heard parts of the conversation and missed Child C's age. The IOPC investigation noted that PC B did not explore in greater detail what Child A was reporting. PC B said that officers were dealing with the woman and advised Child A to ring 999.

Child A told PC B that he had already contacted Child C's carers. PC B replied that if they had been informed of her whereabouts they might report her missing. PC B then left the scene. In interview, he said he had advised Child A to report his concerns.

The IOPC investigation highlighted that PC B did not recognise Child C's potential vulnerabilities. Although he had not heard her age, he was aware that she was a care-experienced child and would therefore be considered particularly vulnerable, especially as she was reported to be in a hotel with an adult man.

> **"During interview, PC B was asked whether he did not take the report seriously because of Child A's age"**

College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice on Major investigation and public protection: Responding to child sexual exploitation

Any young person regardless of their age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality can be at risk of being sexually exploited. However, there are a number of factors that can increase a young person's vulnerability.

These include children or young people who live in care, foster care, […]

More information
www.college.police.uk/app/major-investigation-and-public-protection/responding-child-sexual-exploitation/responding-child-sexual-exploitation

PC B said he felt "rushed" because the other officers were keen to transport the woman to custody. He also believed that he had provided the best advice available based on the information he had received at the time.

PC B further explained that he had not fully understood what Child A was reporting and therefore did not pass on the information. He explained that had he heard the full conversation he would have requested assistance from other officers.

During interview, PC B was asked whether he did not take the report seriously because of Child A's age. PC B said that he took every complaint seriously. He reiterated that he had provided the best advice he could at the time and that Child A's age had not influenced his response. The IOPC investigation concluded that PC B had not treated Child A differently because of any conscious or unconscious views relating to his age.

Eight hours later, Child C's carers reported her missing. A different group of officers attended the hotel Child A had reported to PC B, found Child C with the man, and arrested him on suspicion of child abduction and rape. ■



Photo: Alamy

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- Has your force embedded the 2024 National Police Chiefs' Council strategy on policing children and young people into local policies and practice?
- How does your force ensure that officers understand the specific vulnerabilities and safeguarding needs of care-experienced children?
- Does your force's training explicitly emphasise that safeguarding considerations should underpin all interactions involving children?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure safeguarding information shared with an officer is recorded, assessed and disseminated so that appropriate action can be taken?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- When a child is known to be care-experienced, how does this influence your assessment of risk and vulnerability?
- How do you ensure that relevant safeguarding concerns are recorded, escalated and shared with appropriate agencies?
- How do you balance competing priorities at the scene while still responding appropriately to potential safeguarding risks?
- What prompts you to pause and reassess risk when a child discloses concerns about the safety of another child, such as being with an adult in a hotel?
- How confident do you feel in recognising indicators of child sexual exploitation, and what support is available to you if you need reassurance or advice?
- What steps do you take to ensure you fully hear and understand information given to you when your earpiece is preventing this (for example, adjusting your earpiece or temporarily lowering the volume)?

ACTION TAKEN BY THIS POLICE FORCE

- The force reiterated to frontline officers that all safeguarding information, particularly where children are concerned, must be treated as a priority despite competing operational demands.
- Emphasis has been placed on recording and disseminating information at the earliest opportunity, ensuring no safeguarding intelligence is lost during dynamic incidents.
- The incident has informed local learning on maintaining situational awareness and actively listening when concerns are raised, particularly where distractions (such as radio traffic, earpieces or prisoner handling) are present.
- The force has reinforced training and briefings on recognising child vulnerability and indicators of exploitation, including the heightened risk faced by care-experienced children.

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

PC B was referred to the Reflective Practice Review Process. The session focused on the expectations when a member of the public reports a crime. Attention was given to safeguarding vulnerable people, ensuring that officers fully hear and understand information being provided, and recognising the responsibility to appropriately record and escalate concerns disclosed by members of the public.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Listening to the voices of children and young people

The Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, answers the Youth Panel's questions on how policing can better work with and protect young people.

How can policing move beyond listening to young people occasionally and make youth voice a normal part of how decisions are made?

During my time as Children's Commissioner I have heard from hundreds of thousands of children, and one issue they continue to raise is keeping safe in their local community. Thankfully, most young people feel safe, but children experience their communities differently from adults: they know where they feel safe and which areas make them feel vulnerable. The police should recognise this and engage with children who can share valuable insights about how to keep them safe.

Instead of asking children for feedback after something has happened, the police need to involve children earlier, whether through co-producing policies and guidance or creating structures for young people to regularly engage with the police.

I want every police force to give young people from different backgrounds the opportunity to shape local policing priorities, policies and outcomes. Forces should explain how these views shaped decisions, helping young people feel heard.

If you could ask every chief constable to co-produce one area of policing with young people over the next year, what would you choose and why?

Chief constables should work with young people to design best practice guides on how officers should interact with children in everyday encounters. This would cover neighbourhood policing, stop and search, safeguarding conversations and school engagements, because even small interactions can shape how children view policing.

Young people are best placed to share child-friendly language that should be used to explain police powers and what a respectful encounter looks like, helping build better relationships between children and the police.

Your Big Ambition calls for a stronger public health approach to preventing serious violence. What role should the police play in prevention, rather than simply responding after violence has happened?

Preventing serious violence cannot be the job of the police alone, but they have an important role to play alongside schools, health services, children's social care and youth organisations.

Working in partnership with other agencies is crucial in addressing this. I want to see all the services working together to identify risks to children early, share information quickly and support children before they reach crisis point. Officers need to know their communities and work closely with local partners to identify vulnerable children and connect them with support before violence occurs.

You've highlighted the impact that stop and search, particularly strip search, can have on children's trust in policing. What changes do you think are most urgently needed?

Since the shocking case of Child Q, I have used my powers as Children's Commissioner to examine the data around strip searching. While it can be an important power to keep people safe when used lawfully and proportionately, the data shows too many children have been subject to a strip search, which can have a lasting impact on them. Data continues to highlight that Black children are consistently more likely to be strip searched, and this must be urgently addressed.

I have always argued that strip searches involving children should be rare and only take place when there is a risk to a child or officer, with strong safety measures, clear guidelines and reporting in place. If a search does take place, children should understand what is happening and why, and there should be an appropriate adult present.

I want to see fewer strip searches conducted on children, with the practice only used as a last resort. The Home Office should support this by piloting new technology, including the use of X-ray body scanners, to reduce the need for invasive searches.

How can police officers better recognise when a child may be a victim of trauma or exploitation, rather than seeing only their behaviour?

It can be difficult for children to explain traumatic events or tell someone that they have been exploited, which is why it's important that officers are trained to understand children's behaviour rather than interpreting it in isolation. Children may appear angry or withdrawn, but could be responding to trauma or experiencing exploitation.

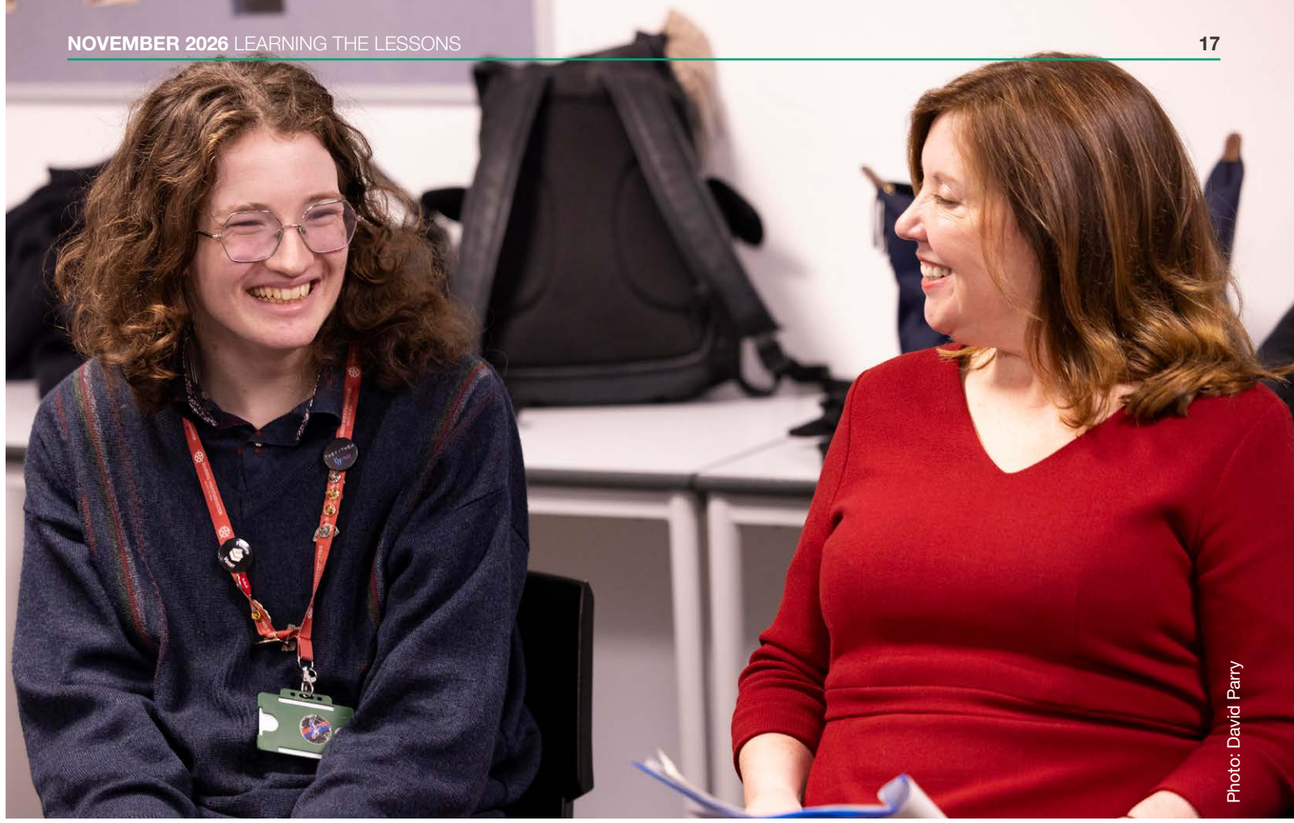


Photo: David Parry

Everyone working with children should be curious about their lives and work closely with other services to share information and identify the appropriate safeguarding responses. Simply asking why a child is behaving in a certain way can reveal risks that might not be immediately obvious. Listening carefully and recognising children as potential victims will lead to better outcomes.

What online threat to children worries you most over the next five years, and what should policing be doing now to prepare for it?

The online world is always changing, which can bring benefits to young people's lives but also several risks. Policing must continue to develop expertise to investigate emerging offences, secure digital evidence and work to remove harmful content quickly. Technology companies should be required to test AI tools prior to release to ensure they cannot be misused to harm children.

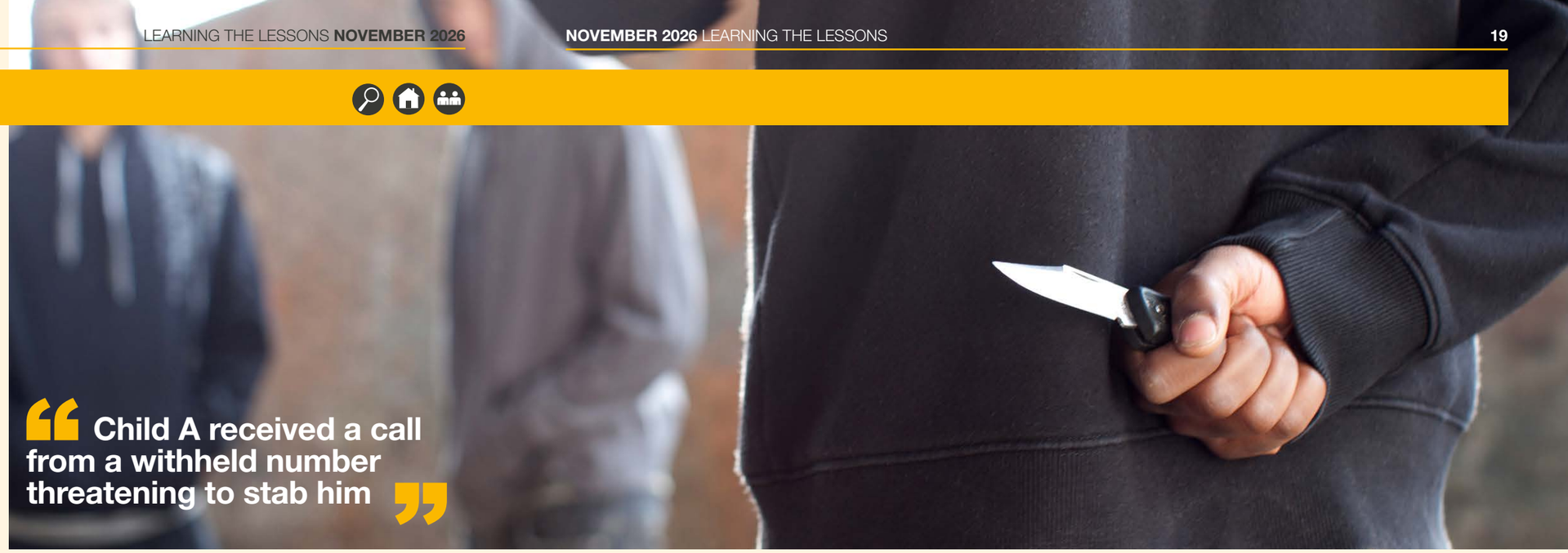
Children also need information about what to do if they are targeted, with effective tools to report abuse and clear routes to have content removed. Technology can transform our lives, but we have to ensure that children are kept safe. ■



Dame Rachel de Souza is the Children's Commissioner for England.

CASE STUDY 3

Managing the risks of exploitation and violence against a child



> Child A received a call from a withheld number threatening to stab him

This case was locally investigated by the force and reviewed by the IOPC.

Police received a 999 call from the mother of Child A, a 16-year-old Black child, reporting that he had assaulted her.

The mother asked police for additional support at home. She wanted social worker support to be reinstated after it had been withdrawn due to Child A's improved behaviour. Police made a referral to the local authority and signposted victim support services. The police investigation noted that the local authority had provided Child A with a mentor and his mother was due to start a parenting course.

A month later, police responded to a report that Child A had been involved in a fight. He was identified as the victim of an assault. PC B spoke with Child A. Child A said that he did not wish to support a police investigation. PC B encouraged him to reconsider.

PC B referred the assault case to a specialist team and highlighted the need for early engagement. The referral noted Child A had special educational needs which could lead to him becoming frustrated. The specialist team referred the assault to the local authority.

PC B also raised concerns with the Anti-Social Behaviour Coordinator about potential organised crime group (OCG) links to the incident. He sought to have the suspect dealt with via Youth Justice Services.

A few weeks later, police received a call from Child A. He reported that he had been chased by two people and that one of them had pulled a knife on him. Child A supported the investigation and provided a statement. The suspect was arrested and charged.

Both Child A and his mother expressed concerns about their safety following the arrest. The suspect was identified as a member of a local OCG. Information indicated that Child A had contact with individuals associated with another local OCG. However, police intelligence could not confirm whether Child A was an OCG member.

Child A reported receiving threatening messages on social media.

In response, police implemented several measures. These included adding a warning marker to the family home address, making safeguarding referrals to the local authority and other support services, and arranging for the installation of an anti-arson letter plate, anti-kick bars and window sensors at the property.

Five months later, Child A received a call from a withheld number threatening to stab him. He reported the incident to his college, which contacted the police. The police investigation recorded that Child A did not want police action taken. The incident was documented to support safeguarding measures at the college.

Fourteen months later, police received a 999 call that somebody had been stabbed. Police attended and found that Child A had been stabbed several times. He said that he had been "jumped" but did not want to make a formal complaint. He was taken to hospital and discharged.

Police subsequently arrested Child A in connection with the same incident, after allegations were made that he had stabbed another person. Due to a lack of evidence, it was difficult to assess the allegations and counter allegations. The police decided to treat all parties involved as suspects. Initially, Child A was released on police bail before being released under investigation.

Four months later, the college contacted police to report that Child A had allegedly chased student C with a knife. A risk assessment identified the need for further safeguarding measures to reduce the risk of Child A becoming a victim of, or committing, further offences. An intelligence report noted that Child A and student C were "likely" to cause harm to one another.

A month later, police responded to a reported stabbing. Child A, now 18, had been stabbed while walking along the road and sadly died from his injuries. The suspect was arrested and later convicted of manslaughter.

The police investigation concluded that matters regarding Child A had been appropriately recorded and responded to and that, where risks were identified, relevant referrals were made to specialist services and support agencies. ■

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- What steps does your force take to safeguard children at risk of exploitation who associate with known OCG members but are not themselves part of an OCG?
- How are officers trained to seek and consider information from safeguarding partners, including schools and social services, when exploitation concerns arise?
- How does your force review safeguarding concerns involving a child to identify any patterns of risk or escalation over time?
- How does your force work with partner agencies to identify, assess and support children at risk of exploitation or serious youth violence? Has your force promoted the Every Voice Matters training?
- What processes does your force have in place to manage the transition from child to adult safeguarding services, ensuring that those who have turned 18 continue to receive appropriate support?
- What guidance or support is available to officers to help them manage ongoing risk to a child who is exposed to OCG related threats, but is reluctant to engage with the police?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- What would you do to actively encourage a child to report their concerns to the police and support an investigation?
- How do you take account of the possibility that a child may not recognise or identify themselves as a victim of exploitation?

ACTION TAKEN BY THIS POLICE FORCE

- No action was taken as it was found policy and procedure had been followed.

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

There was no indication that anyone serving with the police had committed a criminal offence or behaved in a way that would justify disciplinary proceedings.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

This case highlights potential missed opportunities for partner agencies to intervene earlier and provide sustained support to Child A. It also raises questions about whether there was sufficient oversight and coordination of safeguarding measures between agencies as his needs evolved and he transitioned from childhood into adulthood.



Operation Divan: Preventing knife crime among children

Police Sergeant Heidi Lewis introduces North Yorkshire Police's early intervention programme which seeks to educate and support those who are at risk of carrying weapons

Operation Divan is a North Yorkshire Police programme that aims to prevent knife crime among children. The programme focuses on reducing knife crime by helping children understand the risks and consequences of carrying weapons. It also involves working with partner organisations to support those who may be at risk at the earliest opportunity.

At the centre of Operation Divan is a child-focused approach. This means seeing the child first, rather than just the offence, and creating opportunities to guide, support and protect them.

A preventative and partnership approach

A key strength of Operation Divan is its focus on early intervention. Rather than waiting for serious incidents to happen, it proactively identifies children who may be at risk of carrying or using knives or becoming involved in weapon-related violence. A broad range of information sources are reviewed daily by an intelligence unit and vulnerability assessment teams to identify eligible children. This includes police intelligence, stop and search data, and information shared by schools, social care, early help workers, youth justice services and other partner agencies.

Once identified, a child is offered a voluntary intervention, usually within 72 hours. This involves a one-to-one session with a School Liaison Officer who has received NHS-led trauma-informed training, or another professional, sometimes with parents or carers involved. During these sessions, children are supported to understand the legal and physical risks of carrying weapons. The discussion also looks at the reasons behind their behaviour, such as peer pressure, trauma, exploitation and social influences. After the meeting, the details of the intervention are recorded, including the level of engagement and understanding from the child and whether further support is required.

Crucially, Operation Divan is not just a police-led initiative. It follows a public health approach, recognising that these issues are complex and cannot be solved by policing alone. Strong partnerships with education, youth justice, children's services and voluntary organisations allow for a wider range of support. This includes education in schools, as well as longer-term mentoring and diversion programmes. Examples of some of the programmes Operation Divan works in partnership with include **Change Direction**, **Stepping Up Project** and **St Giles Yorkshire**.

These programmes help children build confidence, develop positive relationships and take part in constructive activities. Collaboration with education providers brings knife crime awareness into classrooms through age-appropriate resources in primary, secondary and alternative provisions.

How the programme has developed

Since it was introduced, Operation Divan has continued to develop; what started as a simple intervention has become a broader and more flexible programme.

The team has introduced new ways to engage with children, recognising that traditional methods are not always effective. An example of one of these initiatives is **'No More Knife Crime'**. This combines printed comic strips, digital animations and primary and secondary school workshops. The storylines highlight the close links between weapon carrying and child criminal exploitation and are designed to warn children about the interconnected dangers of grooming, county lines drug dealing and weapon possession.

More recently, virtual reality has also been introduced through the 'Virtually There' initiative. This uses a 360-degree film to show the impact of violence from different perspectives, including the victim, perpetrator, their families, emergency services and police—witnessing the ripple effect of a single violent act. This approach helps children better understand the wider effects of their actions.

Positive impact

An independent study carried out by the University of Birmingham in 2025 found the programme had positive impact on reducing knife crime among children. It showed that the children who took part were 59% less likely to commit knife-related offences compared to a similar group who did not take part.

The study also found that those who received the intervention stayed offence-free for longer. This provides strong evidence that the programme is effective in both preventing crime and supporting long-term behaviour change.

York and North Yorkshire Youth Commission reflections

"Overall, the youth commission shared positive sentiments about the programme. We felt that tailored one-to-one sessions create a more welcoming environment for vulnerable young people, helping them to open up without the pressure of maintaining a tough appearance in front of their peers.

"Whilst questions about how generational police mistrust can be addressed were raised, the youth commission commended the steps taken to strip back the potentially intimidating atmosphere by staging interventions in a familiar environment, using the police station as a last resort. Despite this, more could be done to support people who age out of the scheme."

Hattie, York and North Yorkshire Commission member

Key learning for other forces

Operation Divan highlights several important lessons:

- Identifying risk early and acting before behaviour escalates is key to its effectiveness.
- Use intelligence to target support where it is most needed—it's too late once an offence has occurred!
- Working closely with other agencies is imperative, as policing alone cannot address these issues.
- Interventions should be child-centred and informed by an understanding of trauma—building trust through supportive and non-judgemental engagement increases the chances of positive outcomes.
- Having a central team responsible for delivery helps ensure that the right support is provided at the right time.

Operation Divan shows how policing can take a proactive and child-focused role in preventing serious violence among children. By combining early intervention, strong partnerships, modern engagement methods and evidence-based practice, we can make a lasting difference. ■

Heidi Lewis is a School Liaison Sergeant at North Yorkshire Police and the force lead for Operation Divan.

Building trust with children and young people: The YourPolice.UK approach

Alex Finn introduces the YourPolice.UK Instagram channel, created to help police meaningfully engage with children and young people.

With information reaching people at scale through social media and algorithms, trust in institutions is declining. Children and young people (CYP) face vast amounts of unverified and often divisive content, so policing must respond with clear information, support safer choices and ensure CYP know where to turn for help.

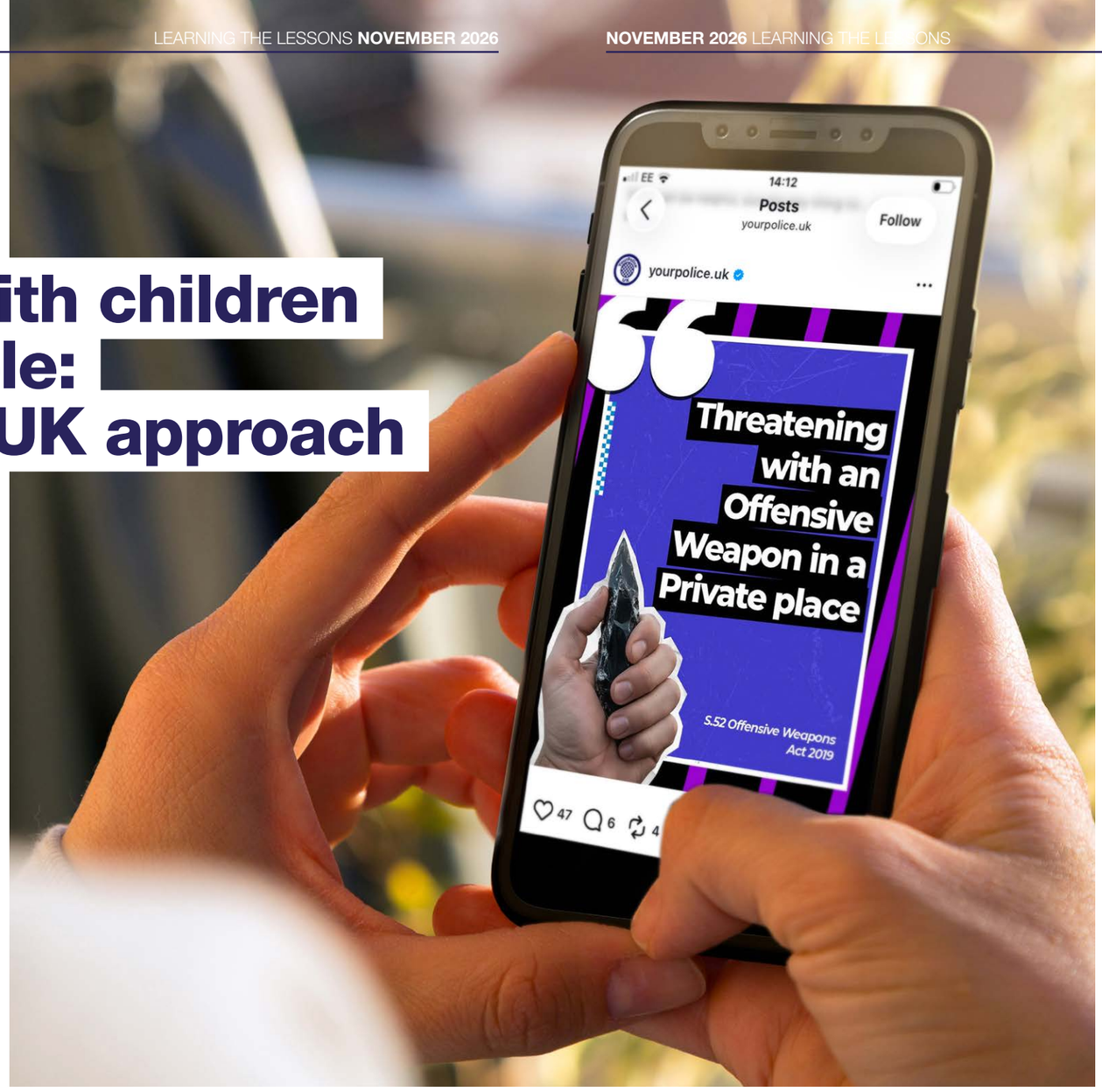
The YourPolice.UK Instagram channel was created by the National Police Chiefs' Council to engage with CYP online, where they already spend their time. Its aim is to build trust and confidence in policing through open, consistent communication and a safe space for meaningful engagement.

Engaging with children and young people

YourPolice.UK delivers concise, accessible content tailored to young audiences. Topics covered include online and real-world safety, how policing works and how to report crime. Content is kept simple, visually engaging and responsive to emerging issues.

A key part of the channel is two-way communication. CYP can ask questions, respond to polls, take part in discussions and seek support. This allows policing not only to inform CYP, but also to listen to them and respond with empathy. In a digital world where harmful online spaces are becoming a growing concern, the channel offers a trusted alternative.

Safety remains central to the channel, and clear moderation principles help ensure discussions are respectful and that safeguarding concerns are identified and managed appropriately. The aim is not to imitate CYP's language or culture, but to communicate in an authentic way.



The channel reaches around **400,000 CYP monthly** and achieves high engagement, including through direct messages. Hundreds of CYP have used the channel to report crime, with reports passed directly to policing via the Metropolitan Police Service Contact Centre's Digital Desk. Thousands more have asked questions or sought advice. The content library contains over 1,000 resources covering more than 47 themes, including online harms, personal safety, violence against women and girls, antisocial behaviour and e-mobility. These resources are all free for anyone to use.

This level of engagement shows that CYP want opportunities to discuss policing and safety when those conversations are delivered in a way that feels genuine.

Youth engagement in the digital neighbourhood

Neighbourhood policing relies on visibility, accessibility and trust. YourPolice.UK extends these principles into the online world, creating a safe space for CYP in their 'digital neighbourhood' which, for many, is their primary communication space. Being present there allows policing to remain visible and accessible in ways that reflect modern life.

The channel often acts as a first point of contact. It helps CYP find information, connect with support services and understand risks before harm occurs. It also provides support outside normal working hours, complementing the work of neighbourhood and school-based officers.

A youth-led approach

A defining feature of YourPolice.UK is that it is youth-led. Content is shaped with support from a national Youth Advisory Group (YAG), youth organisations and school workshops. Young people help identify priority topics, test content before publication and provide feedback on tone and language.

This collaboration helps ensure the channel reflects the experiences and interests of CYP. It also strengthens credibility; young audiences are more likely to engage when they feel their voices have been heard and their views are reflected.

The YAG has also worked with the IOPC Youth Panel, collaborating with them to discuss Recommendation 3 from their Manifesto for Change: "All officers should receive training in trauma-informed approaches, neurodiversity and mental health". This partnership has helped improve understanding on how messages are received. It also ensures that content aligns with the expectations and lived experiences of CYP, particularly in areas where trust may be fragile.

A national platform delivering locally

YourPolice.UK is a national resource, but its success is strengthened by local partnerships. Forces can use the programme's free resources, including out-of-hours support, the content library, promotional materials for local engagement, national insight data and access to consultation through a YAG.

Offering this as a national capability means forces don't need to duplicate effort. Instead, they can leverage consistent national messaging, alongside local knowledge and relationships, to build stronger relationships within communities.

Trust is built through everyday interactions, including those that take place online. By creating a safe, youth-led space for conversation, information and support, the programme is helping policing engage with CYP in ways that are truly meaningful. ■

To find out more, visit the **YourPolice.UK Instagram channel** or email the team at **YourPoliceUK.Team@met.police.uk**

Alex Finn is the National Lead for the Digital Youth Engagement Programme which runs the YourPolice.UK Instagram channel.

CASE STUDY 4

Poor language and behaviour displayed by police cadet leaders towards children

This case was locally investigated by the force and reviewed by the IOPC.

Following a **volunteer police cadet** (VPC) session, the parents of Cadet A, a 16-year-old girl, made a complaint to police about the language and behaviour of cadet leaders **Special Constables** (SCs) B and C. Cadet A described events across two VPC sessions.

She said that during the first session a cadet used a derogatory term towards another cadet. Cadet A said SC B took no action in response (SC C was absent). The police investigation noted the incident was not recorded, meaning no safeguarding measures were considered or put in place.

At the start of the second session the following week, SC C addressed the cadets about behaviour during the previous session. Cadet A said that SC C raised his voice and swore while speaking to the group, which made her feel scared.

During the second session, Cadet A contacted her parents to explain what was happening. They suggested she record the session. A 12-minute recording captured SCs B and C repeatedly swearing at the cadets. Cadet A said that swearing had become commonplace since SCs B and C took over as cadet leaders and described the behaviour as disrespectful. She said she had become "blind" to hearing this language during sessions.

The police investigation spoke with two police volunteers who were present at both sessions. They said some cadets had behaved poorly during the first session, and SC B spoke to them several times. They said this was why SCs B and C addressed the group at the start of the second session, to reinforce the standards expected of cadets.

SC C said that when he became aware of the cadets' behaviour during the first session, he was disappointed and allowed his frustration to show while speaking to them. He later reflected on his behaviour and accepted it was unprofessional. SC C also explained that work on a Code of Conduct for cadets had been paused due to staff turnover, but he had explained the standards expected of the cadets.



Photo: Alamy

Two police officers, PCs D and E, and the two police volunteers were also present during the second session. Cadet A said that none challenged the behaviour of SCs B and C.

PCs D and E both felt the behaviour of SCs B and C was unacceptable. They accepted they should have intervened and challenged what they witnessed but said they lacked the confidence and knowledge to do so at the time. Having reflected on the incident, both officers said that if faced with a similar situation in future, they would challenge the behaviour and report their concerns.

Following the session, SC C reported his own behaviour to the force's VPC manager and confirmed that he had sworn at the cadets.

During the police investigation, both cadet leaders raised concerns about the training and support they had received for the role. SC C said his training had consisted of safeguarding training delivered through an e-learning package and two two-hour webinars. He also said he had received no training on delivering educational content to cadets. SC B similarly highlighted a lack of training, particularly in relation to supporting children with additional or special educational needs.

SC B said a family member was unwell at the time and that he had not been fully focused during the second session. He accepted that his behaviour was inappropriate and unacceptable. The IOPC review noted that his personal circumstances appeared to have influenced his judgement but did not excuse the language he used.

The police investigation concluded that the behaviour of SCs B and C fell below the standards expected of them, and both were removed from their roles as cadet leaders. ■

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- Does your force have clear expectations of cadets and cadet leaders?
- What qualities and values do your force look for when recruiting cadet leaders?
- What training does your force provide to cadet leaders? Does it cover safeguarding, behaviour management and supporting children with additional needs?
- What guidance or resources does your force provide to help cadet leaders support children with additional or special educational needs?
- Do you clearly publicise how cadets or cadet leaders can raise concerns?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- How would you respond to the cadet leaders' behaviour?
- How confident are you in challenging unprofessional behaviour by colleagues, particularly when children are present? What support, guidance or training would help to improve your confidence?

ACTION TAKEN BY THIS POLICE FORCE

- The force identified the need for greater structure in VPC sessions, to create an environment where cadets are less likely to become disruptive and cadet leaders are better able to manage behaviour and expectations. The force also sought to develop cadet leader training, strengthening cadet leaders' understanding of vulnerabilities and safeguarding practices to help them better support cadets.

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

SCs B and C had a case to answer for misconduct and faced disciplinary proceedings for breaching the Standards of Professional Behaviour for authority, respect and courtesy, and discreditable conduct.

SC B resigned from the police but would have faced a misconduct meeting had he still been serving.

SC C attended a misconduct meeting and received a written warning for 18 months.

PCs D and E were both referred to the Reflective Practice Review Process to help them understand when to challenge or report a colleague's behaviour.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

This case highlights how inappropriate language had become normalised within the cadet environment because it was not challenged by the adults present. This affected young people's ability to feel safe, respected and confident in raising concerns. It's important cadet leaders receive comprehensive training on working with children and young people.

IOPC YOUTH PANEL

Youth Panel 2030 Manifesto for Change

IOPC Youth Panel members **Ashaz**, **Deniss**, **Harriet**, **Katie**, **Morgan**, **Poppy**, **Ruksar** and **Teagan** introduce the Panel's manifesto for change and discuss two key recommendations for policing.

The 2030 Manifesto for Change developed out of the IOPC Youth Panel's desire to improve young people's experiences of policing and the police complaints system.

Between 2022 and 2025, the Panel conducted three annual youth-led national policing surveys of young people aged 13–25 in England and Wales, comprising nearly 6,700 voices. The surveys generated a series of youth-led solutions for both the IOPC and police to implement to improve young people's trust and confidence in the system.

Consultation with young people demonstrated that these solutions were not enough, because the system required greater change. So, we, as a Youth Panel, began to aspire for more; for the system to change meaningfully and not just adopt 'quick fixes'.

We therefore published our 2030 Manifesto for Change, which sets out ten key recommendations for police forces and the police complaints system to improve young people's experiences of, and their confidence in, policing. It reflects years of our national findings and research, extensive future-focused discussions and consultation with organisations from all sectors involved in policing and the police complaints system. The recommendations are designed to drive systems change in the areas that will have the most tangible improvements for young and vulnerable people.

> **"We began to aspire for more; for the system to change meaningfully and not just adopt 'quick fixes'"**

The Manifesto outlines our desire for changes such as increasing community engagement, mandatory trauma-informed training and greater use of body-worn video. It also calls for reform to improve accessibility of online complaints, the use of Complainant Impact Statements and the development of an advocacy service to support those engaging with the complaints system. The aim is to make the system increasingly responsive, inclusive and transparent.

Spotlight on recommendations 1 and 3

Recommendation 1:

Have you ever been talked at, not talked to? How did it make you feel?

This is the unfortunate reality experienced by many young people across the UK. Initiatives are made without us yet hinge upon our wholehearted participation to succeed. To break this cycle, we propose more proactive engagement from police services, led by co-production with young people. Rather than only engaging with young people when problems arise, police should build positive, ongoing relationships and involve young people in shaping local policing.

A more proactive approach is important because trust and confidence in policing are built through regular, positive interactions. Evidence from the Panel's 2025 youth-led national policing survey found that around 55% of young people felt their voices were not being heard by their local police force.

This recommendation includes calling for the establishment of a representative youth commission, scrutiny panel or advisory group in every police force. This should seek to increase age-appropriate volunteering opportunities, deliver youth-led





> **A starting point for this recommendation is to understand what good and proactive community engagement looks like from a young person's perspective**

police training and co-produce community events with young people and community leaders. Dedicated neighbourhood officers should focus on prevention, safeguarding and relationship-building wherever possible.

Implementing this recommendation will require the input of police forces, local councils, schools, youth services, community organisations and, most importantly, young people themselves. Co-design should not be performative but underpinned by equity and the inclusion of young people at every stage of decision making. A starting point for this recommendation is to understand what good and proactive community engagement looks like from a young person's perspective, something that will ensure young people's perspectives are included in decisions from the very beginning.

Recommendation 3:
It is estimated that around one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 may have a probable mental disorder (NHS, 2023). There is a growing demand for mental health services, such as children and adolescent mental health services, and long waiting lists inevitably lead to more young people going into mental health crisis. Increasingly, police services are responding to more mental health-related calls where there is a risk to life and police intervention is needed to keep a young person safe.

We are calling for mandatory, interactive training for all police officers on trauma-informed practice, neurodiversity and mental health. The training must reinforce that compassion and enforcement are not opposing values, but complementary tools for protecting vulnerable people and reducing long-term harm. The training should be co-produced and delivered alongside people with lived experience, emphasising de-escalation and person-centred policing.

This recommendation is needed because, without appropriate knowledge, officers may unintentionally escalate situations or re-traumatise individuals, reducing trust. We also know there is often a postcode lottery in service provision, with some forces better equipped to respond to mental health-related incidents than others.

The College of Policing and individual police forces should work with external expert agencies and young people with diverse lived experience to co-produce this training and ensure the best possible outcomes. Training should include scenario-based learning, youth-led workshops and practical de-escalation techniques to help officers better understand trauma, neurodiversity and mental health.

By improving officers' understanding of trauma, neurodiversity and mental health, policing can make interactions safer, more compassionate and more effective, ensuring every encounter with vulnerable young people promotes dignity, safety and long-term wellbeing.

You can find out more about the Youth Panel's 2030 Manifesto for Change at: www.policeconduct.gov.uk/publications/iopc-youth-panel-manifesto

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Ashaz, **Deniss**, **Harriet**, **Katie**, **Morgan**, **Poppy**, **Ruksar** and **Teagan** are members of the IOPC's Youth Panel.

Supporting children and young people: practical guidance

Clare Howe, in collaboration with the IOPC's Youth Panel, discusses approaches for engaging with children and young people who may be in crisis or distress.



As a mental health nurse who has worked alongside you in control rooms and street triage, I want to acknowledge the professionalism and care you bring to these moments. What follows reflects and strengthens the approaches many of you are already using with children and young people.

Stay curious

- A young person's story isn't always obvious, and appearance or behaviour can mask very different experiences. Thoughtful questioning ensures young people are guided to the support that's right for them.
- Behaviour can mislead, so keeping an open mind prevents misunderstanding. Distress might be an injury, neurodivergence or a communication barrier. 'Anger' may be confusion after a seizure and 'non-compliance' may be someone struggling to hear or process what is being said.
- A diagnosis does not tell you how a young person usually presents. ADHD, autism or anxiety look different in every child. A chatty child may suddenly become mute — that change matters. Speak to whoever knows them best to get a reliable baseline and respond to what's in front of you.

Avoiding labels and assumptions

- Document what you directly see and hear so that what you share is factual. For example, "child appears confused — not responding to name and age" or "child says God is punishing them." Phrases like "child clearly has mental health issues" sound like opinion and should be avoided. If someone shares a view, record it as "X states they believe…" Clear attribution prevents opinions becoming long-term labels.
- Avoid using the term "attention seeking" — it can sound dismissive and misses the distress underneath. Describing what you see and hear is clearer and helps the young person feel taken seriously.

Responding in the moment

- When something urgent is happening — like an overdose or the presence of a weapon — that's the part that needs attention first. Once that has been addressed you can focus on what is going on for the young person and how best to support them.
- Confidentiality means sharing only what's necessary, factual and proportionate to keep a young person safe. A neighbour does not need a child's diagnosis, but they might need to reach a parent. If withholding information creates risk or blocks the right care, it must be shared. Only offer what's needed for safety and support.
- First impressions shape how a young person experiences policing long after the moment. A calm, fair approach helps them feel seen and heard, builds trust and supports safer engagement for everyone.

You don't need all the answers and you're not expected to diagnose. Good policing is noticing when something is not right, describing clearly what you have seen and heard, and giving the next professional what they need to help. It's about being observant, steady and supportive. ■



Clare Howe is a registered mental health nurse and independent specialist consultant.

CASE STUDY 5



Police response to a concern for welfare involving a neurodivergent girl

A complaint was handled otherwise than by investigation by the force. Following this, the complainant exercised their right of review to the IOPC.

The police received a report that Child A, a 17-year-old girl, had expressed suicidal thoughts and locked herself in her room at her supported accommodation. Support workers had tried opening the door, but Child A had barricaded it using her bed.

PCs B and C arrived at the scene.

Support workers showed the officers concerning text messages sent by Child A, including messages saying she was self-harming. The support worker also explained that Child A had a history of self-harm and had previously hidden sharp objects.

PCs D, E and F arrived and joined PCs B and C outside Child A's room.

PC D knocked on Child A's door, asking her to open it several times. Child A told PC D to go away. PC D explained they needed to check that she was safe. He then advised Child A that if she did not let officers in they would have to force the door open.

Under section 17 of the *Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984*, police have the power to enter and search premises in order to save life and limb.

Body-worn video (BWV) showed officers engaging with Child A for over six minutes, asking her eight times to open the door.

PC C asked for a key to Child A's room, which was provided. PC D was able to open the door but could not enter because it remained barricaded.

As PC D opened the door, Child A told officers they could not come in because she was not wearing any clothes. PC C twice told her to get dressed but she did not do so. Officers asked Child A to open the door otherwise they would force entry because they were concerned for her safety.

PC D removed the door from its hinges and PCs B and E, both male, entered the room first. They were followed by PCs C and F, who were both female.

> **"PC D removed the door from its hinges and PCs B and E, both male officers, entered the room first"**

BWV showed Child A lying face down on the bed. It was unclear whether she was dressed as she was covered by a blanket with only her head visible. She was crying and shouting.

PCs B and E attempted to bring Child A's arms behind her back to apply handcuffs, but she resisted. PC B took hold of her right arm, but her left arm remained underneath the blanket.

During this time, PC C drew her incapacitant spray but then put it away to assist her colleagues. PC C said she drew her spray to protect herself and her colleagues because they did not know whether any weapons were concealed beneath the blanket.

Child A continued to be distressed, struggled against the officers and refused to give her left arm so handcuffs could be applied. PC C drew her incapacitant spray again and told Child A that if she did not calm down and give officers her left arm, she would deploy the spray. In her account, PC C explained that due to Child A's behaviour she used this tactic to safely detain her so officers could check for any weapons or injuries.

Officers then managed to apply handcuffs. Child A told officers that she was autistic and had ADHD and there were too many people in the room. PC E asked whether she would like the male officers to leave the room, which they then did.

PCs C and F then explained to Child A that they needed to check underneath the blanket for sharp objects that could be used to self-harm. BWV showed officers ensuring that the blanket covered Child A throughout this process.

The handcuffs were removed after one and a half minutes once Child A had calmed down.

An ambulance arrived and the remaining officers left the room, leaving Child A in the care of paramedics.

Child A's mother subsequently made a complaint about the police's response to this incident, including the force used against Child A.

No use of force forms were submitted by the officers concerning this incident. ■

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- How are officers trained to recognise where behaviour perceived as aggression or non-compliance may instead reflect neurodivergence or sensory overload?
- How does your force incorporate trauma-informed practice when responding to incidents involving children?
- How does your force ensure that training and guidance takes account of the experiences of girls, including neurodivergent girls?
- How does your force promote understanding of the experiences and vulnerabilities of children and young people living in supported accommodation?
- What steps do you take to monitor submission of use of force forms and support officers to complete them consistently?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- How do you seek and consider information from parents, carers or other professionals to understand the needs and vulnerabilities of a child?
- What steps do you take to adapt your communication to reduce distress and build trust when interacting with girls?
- If female officers are present, would you consider asking them to take the lead communicating with and managing an incident involving a vulnerable girl?

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

The IOPC's review was not upheld. It recommended that PCs B, C and E complete learning by reflection on the requirement to complete use of force forms.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

It is important to recognise when a child or young person's behaviour may reflect trauma, fear or self-protection rather than deliberate non-compliance. If possible, female officers should be deployed first in situations involving vulnerable girls to help minimise distress.

Officers should seek to de-escalate and explain what is happening, especially in situations involving neurodivergent children. Force should only be used when necessary, reasonable and proportionate.

Centre for Justice Innovation

Child-centred policing in practice



Carmen Robin-D'Cruz discusses a practical toolkit that can support child-centred approaches in everyday policing.

The Centre for Justice Innovation is a charity that works to build a justice system everyone believes is fair and effective. We provide hands-on support to help practitioners develop innovative and effective practice; conduct research into how things could work better; promote evidence-based policy reforms; and share lessons across the UK and beyond. We have worked on issues around the policing of children for more than a decade, and since 2025 we have explored wider issues around child-centred policing.

Introducing the toolkit

As defined by the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), child-centred policing has two key features:

- It is seen as legitimate as it is lawful, effective and fairly applied in line with the NPCC's values, the Code of Ethics and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- It reduces trauma for children and young people when all practice and contact is culturally competent, empowering, collaborative, provides choice, is trustworthy and brings safety.

We developed our child-centred policing toolkit to help translate national strategies into a practical resource. The toolkit brings together evidence, guidance and tools to support working with children and young people. It helps frontline practitioners better understand children's needs, reduce harm and deliver responses that put the child's voice and best interests at the centre of decision making.

The toolkit supports the three child-centred policing pillars—Your Trust, Your Voice and Your Future—as set out in the NPCC's **Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy 2024–2027** and **Children and Young Persons Policing Charter 2025**. Although the toolkit is focused on policing, the content is still relevant to other agencies, including youth justice services, children's social care, education and health.

At present, the toolkit covers four areas: adultification, diversion, effective communication and police protection. Content will be added regularly, with sections on deferred prosecution, child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation due to be published. Each section contains a concise research summary, with links for those who want to delve deeper, as well as templates, video resources, examples of good practice and top tips informed by frontline officers.

The following section explores effective communication, to give a sense of how the toolkit helps translate strategy into practice.

Effective communication with children

Due to their young age and immaturity, children may lack the communication skills needed for meaningful participation in the justice system. Children are often expected to navigate difficult and complex verbal interactions, understand unfamiliar processes and explain themselves under pressure. This can be particularly challenging for children with speech, language and communication needs, which the research summary shows are very common among those in the youth justice system. Effective communication helps build trust and works to ensure children understand what is happening and are meaningfully involved in the decisions affecting them.

We offer top tips for achieving child-centred communication, including:

- using simple language and speaking more slowly
- giving children more time to process information and asking them to repeat back what they have understood
- using visual aids where helpful and making sure written information uses developmentally friendly language
- thinking about whether custody or the police station environment is affecting the child's ability to engage
- engaging with education, health, children's social care and youth justice services at the earliest opportunity
- making sure appropriate adults are supported to help with communication

The Effective Communication section of the toolkit links to research from the Centre and others, the NPCC and College of Policing resources, and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists training and video resources on speech, language and communication needs. It also includes good practice examples, such as:

The 'No Comment' pathway: This provides another opportunity for diversion for children who give no comment or who struggle during interview, so they can receive appropriate support and intervention.

Communication passports: These documents explain how a child communicates, what they need to effectively express themselves and how they can be supported.

Talking mats: Physical or digital mats support people with communication difficulties to express their feelings and views.

Communication friendly environments checklist: This can be used to reflect on how your environment supports communication.

Alongside the toolkit, the Centre for Justice Innovation is funded to provide free support to police forces to develop their child-centred policing frameworks. The support is tailored to each force and can run for up to a year. It can include, for example, reviewing current processes, helping forces understand where practice is working well and where there are gaps, providing multi-agency training and reviewing protocols or guidance.

We are keen to hear feedback on the toolkit from forces and partners, including what topics should be added and examples of local practice others could learn from. ■

You can explore the child-centred policing toolkit at: **https://justiceinnovation.org/areas-of-focus/child-centred-policing/toolkit**



Carmen Robin-D'Cruz is a Senior Research Officer at the Centre for Justice Innovation.

CASE STUDY 6

Use of force decision making during an incident involving a child



This case was locally investigated by the force and reviewed by the IOPC.

Police received a report that a group of children were throwing bricks from a road bridge onto vehicles below. PC A and Special Constable (SC) B were deployed.

As PC A walked along the bridge, he could hear noises coming from a roadside embankment. The officers approached and saw three children, dressed in black and wearing balaclavas, running across an A road in front of oncoming traffic.

As officers reached the embankment, the children ran off and both officers gave chase. PC A caught up with Child C, a 14-year-old boy, who was described as around 6ft tall. At this stage, Child C's age was unknown to the officers.

Child C turned towards PC A with his arms extended, which PC A believed was a "hostile" act towards him and SC B.

> **"The IOPC review noted that PC A did not record on his use of force form that he unholstered his Taser"**

To gain control of Child C, PC A considered several tactics, including a pre-emptive strike, incapacitant spray and a baton. He assessed these options as unsuitable as they would have required close contact with Child C, which PC A considered unsafe. He also believed using a baton could have caused serious injury. PC A concluded that using his Taser was the safest option to reduce the risk of injury. The IOPC review noted that while PC A considered Taser to be the least harmful option, he did not consider the potential psychological impact of Taser use.

PC A unholstered his Taser and instructed Child C to lay down on the floor. Child C immediately complied. PC A re-holstered his Taser, approached Child C and handcuffed him to the rear. Child C was arrested for causing a danger to road users.

The police investigation identified a discrepancy between the officers' accounts. PC A stated that he did not aim or point the Taser directly at Child C. However, SC B said that PC A aimed his Taser towards Child C, but it was not activated.

The IOPC review noted that PC A did not record on his use of force form that he unholstered his Taser. The review also found PC A did not give a warning before drawing his Taser.

College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice on Armed Policing: Conducted energy devices (CED (Taser))

The use of a CED ranges from the physical presence of a drawn CED through to discharge.

The term 'use' includes drawing the device in circumstances where any person could reasonably perceive the action as a use of force.

More information
www.college.police.uk/app/armed-policing/conducted-energy-devices-taser

The police investigation noted that neither officer activated their body-worn video (BWV) before Child C was handcuffed. Both officers did so following the arrest.

PC A stated that when applying handcuffs, Child C offered some resistance and that he used a minor amount of force to place Child C's hands behind his back.

The police investigation identified a second discrepancy between the officers' accounts. PC A said that he did not apply pressure to Child C's back, while SC B said that PC A placed his knee on Child C's back to assist with handcuffing. This was not captured on BWV. The IOPC review noted that the force used during handcuffing was minimal and proportionate, but highlighted the distress caused to Child C by the handcuffing process.

After handcuffing Child C, the officers helped him to his feet, checked the handcuffs for tightness and walked him to a nearby police van.

The police investigation concluded that PC A's use of force sought to maximise safety and minimise the risk of harm to Child C. The IOPC review concluded that PC A did not recognise that unholstering his Taser constituted a use of force, had failed to record this use of force and had not activated his BWV.

Child C was taken to custody and later released.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- How are officers trained to recognise where behaviour perceived as aggression, resistance or non-compliance may instead reflect trauma, fear, emotional dysregulation or developmental immaturity?
- How does Taser training and guidance support officers to use clear, calm and age-appropriate communication with children during dynamic incidents?
- Does training reinforce the importance of giving a warning before deploying Taser, using language that is clear and appropriate for children?
- How does training support officers in recognising and assessing the potential psychological impact of Taser use on children?
- How has your force satisfied itself that Taser officers are aware of, and complying with, the requirement under National Police Chiefs' Council Circular 03LL/2025 to activate BWV when deploying a Taser?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- How do you guard against assumptions about maturity, culpability or threat level when interacting with children?
- What factors should you consider before drawing a Taser during an incident involving a child?
- Are you aware that, when using a Taser, the term 'use' includes the physical presence of a drawn Taser through to discharge, and is this reflected in your force's Taser use policy?

ACTION TAKEN BY THIS POLICE FORCE

- Following the incident, the force removed PC A's Taser authority and required him to complete refresher training before it was reinstated.

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

PC A was referred to the Reflective Practice Review Process. As part of this, PC A was asked to reflect on their decision making when using force involving children, review the force's BWV policy and to consider additional de-escalation techniques and appropriate communication when dealing with children.

IOPC YOUTH PANEL

From recommendation to reality: The 2030 manifesto in action

Youth Panel members **Ashaz** and **Harriet** reflect on a youth-led roundtable that helped drive changes in how young people are treated in police custody.

"If you don't know your rights, you don't have any!"

Recommendation 2 of the Youth Panel's 2030 Manifesto for Change calls for the right to complain to be included in the majority of police interactions. This is integral to improving trust and confidence in policing and the police complaints system, because it will empower young people to have a voice about issues that matter to them. Young people's voices are often missing as they don't know about their rights or that they have the option to complain. Our 2025 youth-led national policing survey of 1,594 young people aged 13–25 found that 60% would not know how to make a complaint about the police if they needed to, while only 20% had heard of the IOPC.

To turn this recommendation into reality, the Panel designed and delivered a national roundtable, bringing together senior policing leaders, academics and representatives from third sector and civil society organisations to explore how the right to complain could become more embedded in policing interactions. The event was youth-led at every stage. We set the agenda, issued invitations and facilitated breakout discussions, creating a space where stakeholders could respond directly to our recommendation and work with us to develop practical solutions.

We proposed different ways of implementing this recommendation and had valuable conversations about how they could be realistically embedded in each police force. For example:

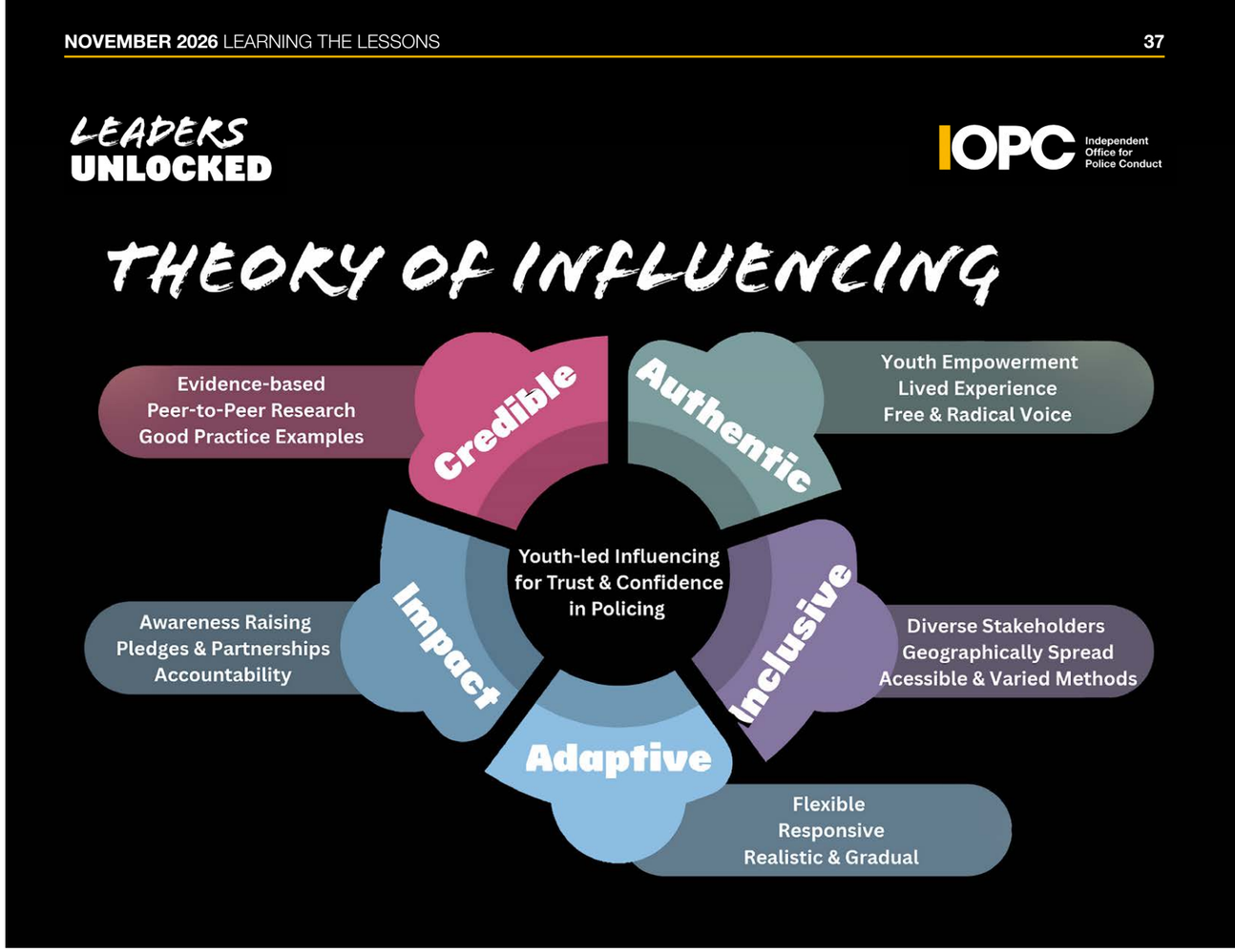
- Communicating the right to provide feedback, including complaints, during the custody booking in and out processes if a young person is arrested and brought into police custody.
- Ensuring stop and search cards or receipts, which clearly explain a young person's rights and ability to complain, are routinely issued after every search.

The roundtable demonstrated a shared commitment to ensuring that young people's experiences directly influence future policing policy and practice. Attendees recognised the importance of genuine co-production rather than consultation alone and supported greater involvement of young people with lived experience in police training, organisational learning and future policy development.

One of the most significant commitments came from the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC), which pledged to strengthen how children and young people are informed of their rights while in police custody. Since the roundtable, this commitment has been delivered through new national guidance, issued to police forces across England and Wales, which sets the expectation that children and young people in custody should routinely be informed of their right to provide feedback, including complaints throughout their custody journey.

The Independent Custody Visiting Association committed to supporting implementation by monitoring how the new guidance is being put into practice. This will help strengthen oversight for delivering the changes we called for.

Our involvement did not end when the roundtable finished. Following the publication of the new guidance, Youth Panel members met with Chief Constable Ivan Balhatchet, NPCC Lead for Custody at Northamptonshire Police Custody Suite, to discuss how the recommendation was being implemented in practice.



"My personal experience of the Roundtable event was very positive. It made me feel very empowered that our work is actually making real life change happen. Hearing that the NPCC had listened to our recommendation was brilliant; this is real systematic change that has been done by the youth panel.

"I believe this is just the start and look forward to seeing how our work influences changeacross England and Wales for other young people like me."

Harriet, Youth Panel member

"It provided a unique insight into the thoughts and findings from young people. I have similar conversations about the same topics with partners, but never before had this perspective in a conversation."

Detective Inspector Simon Barnes, Staff Officer to the NPCC Custody Portfolio Lead

The College of Policing also pledged to facilitate Youth Panel consultation on stop and search Authorised Professional Practice guidance and the NPCC pledged to welcome the Panel into the National Trust and Confidence Symposium. Both commitments have now been actioned.

This model of youth-led systems change links directly to our Youth Panel Theory of Influencing. Our work is credible because it is grounded in youth-led evidence and real experiences, generated through peer-to-peer research, which allows young people to speak openly and honestly. It is authentic because we always put young people's voices and lived experiences at the forefront of our work. The roundtable also showed how inclusive our approach is by bringing together people from different policing and non-policing organisations, each able to consider Recommendation 2 from their own perspective. Most importantly, it demonstrates impact by creating real-life change through partnership, commitments and national action. ■

Ashaz and **Harriet** are members of the IOPC's Youth Panel.

CASE STUDY 7

Strip search and use of force and spit guard on an autistic child

A complaint was locally investigated by the force. Following the outcome of the force's investigation, the complainant exercised their right of review to the IOPC.

A 14-year-old boy (Child A) was arrested by student officer, PC B, on suspicion of the supply of Class A drugs.

He was transported to custody, where a risk assessment was completed which identified that he may have ADHD and autism. His mother later confirmed that he had autism.

Due to the circumstances of the arrest, PC B requested a strip search for Child A.

Child A had an intelligence marker noting that he had previously been arrested for a similar offence and strip searched. The previous search found that he had concealed drugs in his underwear.

While authorisation for the search was sought, Child A was handcuffed. His care plan placed him on **level 4 close proximity observations** by PC B and another student officer, PC C.

Child A's appropriate adult (AA), his mother, arrived. The strip search was conducted by PCs B and C, with the AA present as a witness.

During the search, drugs were found in Child A's underwear and removed.

Child A's care plan was then adjusted to level 1, general observations. The rationale provided by custody staff was that the search had been completed.

A few minutes later, Child A went to a toilet in a vacant cell, escorted by PC C, who stood a short distance away, intermittently looking towards Child A in the toilet.

Thirty minutes later, Child A was brought to the charge room where he had a seizure. First aid was provided by PC B and a health care practitioner until an ambulance arrived.

Custody officers later reviewed CCTV footage of the cell to establish what caused the seizure. Footage showed Child A rummaging in his underwear, then holding a white substance, which he ingested.

Child A was transported to hospital, treated for a drug overdose and kept overnight.

Two officers, PCs D and E were deployed to the hospital to provide constant watch of Child A, as he remained in police custody.

In the early hours of the morning, Child A asked PCs D and E if he could go outside for fresh air. His request was denied by nursing staff, and he became agitated and upset. Child A's mother was present and attempted to calm him down.

> **Child A had an intelligence marker noting that he had previously been arrested for a similar offence and strip searched. The previous search found that he had concealed drugs in his underwear**

College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice on Conflict Management Skills: Practical advice from the front line – mental health and capacity, and neurodiversity

- Approach the person calmly with an open, non-threatening stance.
- Don't get too close to the person. Give them plenty of space.
- Use a low, consistent voice. Do not shout or use threatening language.

More information
www.college.police.uk/guidance/conflict-management/conflict-management-skills

Child A swore and shouted at PCs D and E, telling them to take him back to custody. PC D told Child A to "shut up". Neither officer had their body-worn video (BWV) activated during this interaction.

The two officers' statements described Child A becoming increasingly loud and irate, walking towards the officers, who blocked the door. PC D stated Child A made threats to assault him.

The officers stated that Child A began spitting at PC D. PC D pushed him back and restrained him on the hospital bed. While being restrained, Child A punched and kicked out at PC D. PC E assisted with the restraint and the officers handcuffed Child A's arms



separately to the bed, while he lay on his back.

Both officers described the force used on Child A as reasonable and necessary to control the situation and prevent him harming the officers, hospital staff and his mother.

Child A continued to spit and kick at PC D. At this point, both officers activated their BWVs. PC D applied a spit guard over Child A's head and restrained his legs.

BWV footage showed Child A resisting the officers despite being handcuffed to the bed. Child A removed the spit guard several times and continued to spit at and threaten PC D. PC D reapplied the spit guard each time.

On two occasions, BWV footage showed PC D gripping Child A's neck with one hand while using the other to resecure the spit guard. The IOPC review found the force used to resecure the spit guard on these occasions was not reasonable and proportionate.

Both officers held Child A's arms and the handcuffs to prevent him from removing the spit guard. A hospital security guard arrived and helped restrain Child A.

PC D arrested Child A for assault of an emergency worker. He was later transported back to custody.

Following the incident, Child A's mother made a complaint that the strip search of an exploited, autistic child was not carried out thoroughly. The IOPC review found that the force's complaint investigation did not fully address these concerns. ■

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- What training or guidance do you provide to custody staff to safeguard children at risk of exploitation and found to be handling drugs?
- How are officers trained to recognise indicators of exploitation, coercion and grooming in children?
- How does your training ensure that strip searches of children are carried out thoroughly, while still maintaining the child's dignity and recognising their vulnerability?
- Does your training include guidance on effectively interacting with neurodivergent children? Including adjusting actions accordingly to help calm the child if they become distressed?
- What guidance does your force provide on applying spit guards to children?
- Does your force's guidance and training clearly emphasise that there is no safe way to use force around the neck?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- How would you approach the risk management of a vulnerable child in custody who is at risk of exploitation and has previous drug warning markers?
- Do you always promptly make referrals when a risk assessment highlights safeguarding concerns for a child in custody?
- Would you be confident carrying out a strip search on a child in a thorough yet sensitive way?
- How could you de-escalate a similar incident and reassure a child who is visibly distressed?

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

The IOPC review recommended that a re-investigation be conducted by the force to explore concerns about the thoroughness of the strip search.

It was recommended that PC D should engage in the Reflective Practice Review Process (RPRP) to discuss the importance of using the minimum level of force required. Following this recommendation, the force confirmed that PC D had already undergone reflection concerning this incident.

Following this incident, PCs B and C underwent development plans under the Individual Development Procedure for student officers.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

This case highlights the importance of thorough searches and clear communication. There were missed opportunities to monitor Child A following the search.

Officers should receive training on communicating with neurodivergent children and young people when carrying out strip searches. Guidance on how to de-escalate situations and using spit guards appropriately should be regularly reinforced.



TACKLING ORGANISED EXPLOITATION PROGRAMME

Practical tools and resources for organised exploitation investigations

Detective Inspector Matthew Griffiths highlights the support available for frontline policing when dealing with cases involving child exploitation.

The Tackling Organised Exploitation (TOEX) Programme is a national and regional policing capability focused on identifying, understanding and disrupting organised exploitation, while supporting the safeguarding of vulnerable people. TOEX teams are based in each Regional Organised Crime Unit across England and Wales, and bring together analysts, intelligence officers and researchers with specialist expertise in exploitation.

The teams support officers and staff by turning complex information into actionable intelligence. This can include carrying out open-source research, analysing communications data and identifying criminal networks linked to exploitation.

Support available to frontline officers

Alongside direct operational support, TOEX has developed a range of self-service tools that are available across policing to every officer and staff member. They help officers make better use of information already held within policing systems, enabling them to identify risks, develop lines of enquiry and safeguard victims more quickly. For example, the tools can:

- identify links between people, locations and events
- develop intelligence around suspected exploitation networks
- highlight patterns that may otherwise be missed
- support safeguarding decisions and investigations

Automating tasks through the use of these tools can reduce the many hours previously spent on manual data analysis, freeing investigators to focus their time where it matters most—protecting vulnerable people and pursuing offenders.

These tools are provided **free to forces** and delivered via a secure, UK-hosted cloud platform, the TOEX Capabilities Environment (CE). There is no need for additional software or force-level IT changes. TOEX provides written and visual training material to ensure users know how to access and use the environment, and a service desk provision is in place to provide wrap-around support. If you'd like access to the CE and associated tools, please contact the **TOEX Technical Team**.

Supporting better outcomes

One example of TOEX's work is **Operation Silphium**, a project developed in partnership with the TOEX Tarian team and South Wales Police to improve the safeguarding of vulnerable missing children.

The initiative uses information gathered during missing person investigations to identify previously unknown contacts, concerning associations and indicators of exploitation. By bringing together intelligence from multiple sources, the project has helped identify risks that may otherwise have remained hidden and has supported safeguarding interventions to protect vulnerable children.

Following positive operational outcomes, this approach is now being explored more widely across the TOEX network.

How to access support

If you are dealing with a case involving organised exploitation or would benefit from specialist analytical support, you can contact your local TOEX team.

Early engagement can help identify opportunities, develop intelligence and strengthen safeguarding activity, ensuring vulnerable children receive the protection and support they need as quickly as possible. ■

More information can be found in our **Offer of Support booklet** or by accessing the TOEX website: **www.toexprogramme.co.uk**

Detective Inspector Matthew Griffiths leads the TOEX Tarian team.

CASE STUDY 8

Missed opportunities to safeguard a child

This case was independently investigated by the IOPC.

A mother reported to police that her 15-year-old daughter, Child A, had received threats from her ex-boyfriend.

Police recorded the report and arranged for an appointment with an officer later that day. PC B, a response officer, was assigned as the investigating officer.

The mother showed PC B the messages Child A had received. Although they had never met in person, she believed the ex-boyfriend was the same age as Child A. The IOPC investigation noted he was 23.

PC B asked the mother to provide any evidence she had. The mother provided the ex-boyfriend's address and phone number. PC B searched police systems but was unable to confirm the ex-boyfriend's identity or location, as he had provided Child A with false details. PC B submitted a protection notice due to the risks posed to Child A, which was approved on the same day, and said she sought advice from a domestic abuse investigator. The IOPC investigation noted she did not record this discussion or any subsequent actions.

PC B expected the case to be allocated to a specialist team, but this did not happen because no suspect had been identified. The IOPC investigation noted PC B's initial actions were appropriate for a response officer, although the case may have benefited from investigation by a specialist team.

PC B met with the mother again and explained that the ex-boyfriend could not be traced because he had provided false information. The mother supplied additional phone numbers and social media profiles, which PC B intended to use to identify him. However, she lacked the training to do so, and no trained officer was available to assist.

PC B considered arranging a video recorded interview (VRI) with Child A, but was not trained to conduct VRIs. She explained that there was no formal process for requesting a trained officer and that support typically relied on asking colleagues. As a result, no VRI was carried out.

PC B said she provided safeguarding advice, including locking doors and ensuring Child A's phone remained charged should she need to contact police. However, the mother did not recall receiving safeguarding advice. The IOPC investigation also noted that PC B had not recorded this conversation on police systems.

The ex-boyfriend sent further messages to Child A and attempted to share intimate images of her online. The mother reported this to police. PC B was not on duty, so another officer took the information and said it would be passed to PC B. Screenshots were provided and uploaded to police systems.

A few days later, the mother reported further contact from the ex-boyfriend, including images of knives and voice messages threatening to rape and harm Child A on her way to school.

Call handler C completed a Threat, Harm, Risk, Investigation, Vulnerability and Engagement (THRIVE) assessment and graded the incident as low. She arranged for an officer to visit the family. Call handler C also provided safeguarding advice, including keeping doors locked and accompanying Child A to school.

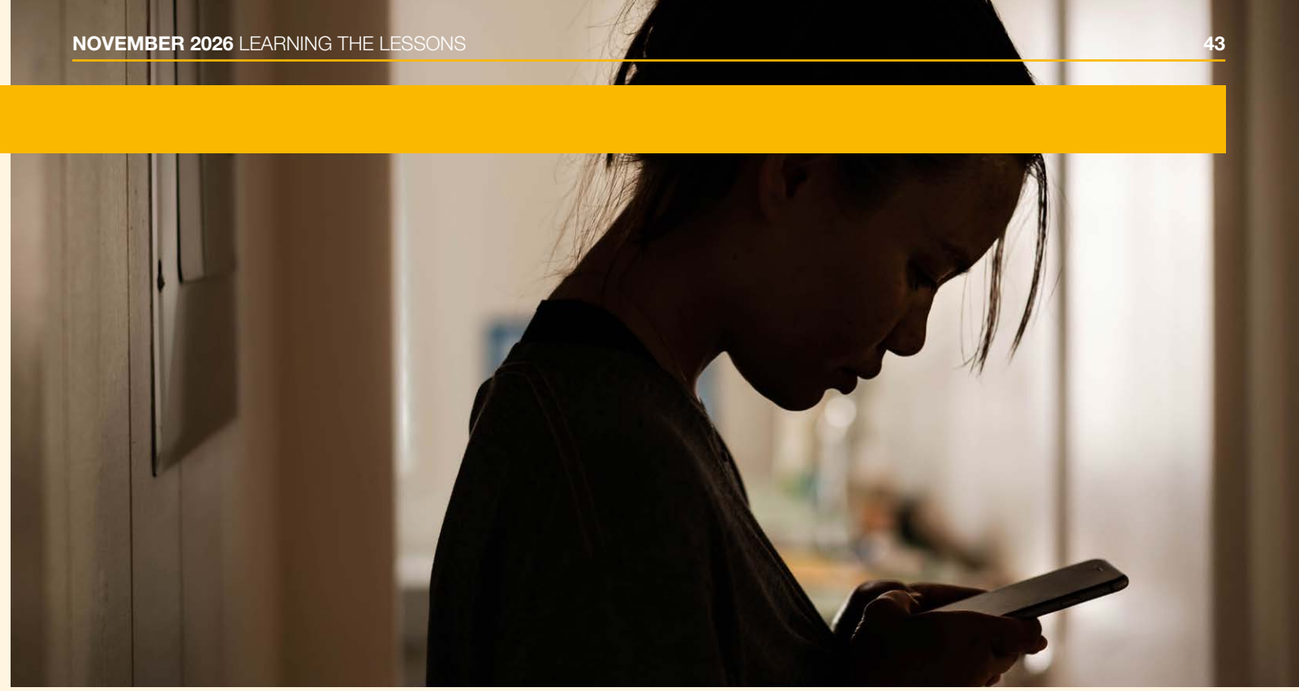
> **"The IOPC investigation noted the THRIVE assessment did not accurately reflect the level of risk"**

The IOPC investigation noted the THRIVE assessment did not accurately reflect the level of risk, as the ex-boyfriend's behaviour had escalated. It also found that some key information had not been recorded on the incident log.

PC B was on rest days. PC D visited the mother, asked her for any new messages and submitted a protection notice. PC D noted the report demonstrated escalating behaviour. In his statement to the IOPC, he said that the incident involved considerably more information than had been recorded on police systems.

PC D provided an update on the investigation and explained why the ex-boyfriend had not been arrested. The mother expressed concern that Child A might be attacked on her way to school.

A few days later, Child A was stabbed while walking home from school. The ex-boyfriend was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder. Child A survived the attack. ■



KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- How does your force ensure officers and staff recognise indicators of violence against women and girls when assessing risk and safeguarding needs?
- What processes are in place to trigger a formal review when repeat reports or escalating threats are received?
- Does your force have a process for requesting trained officers to conduct VRIs to support investigations?
- What training and support do officers receive to search police systems using digital information, such as phone numbers and social media accounts?
- What processes are in place to share safeguarding information with schools and partner organisations where this may assist in protecting a child?

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- How do you ensure safeguarding advice and decisions are clearly recorded? Do you understand why this is important for victim safety?
- What processes are available for raising concerns when you do not have the training or experience to conduct a complex investigation?

ACTION TAKEN BY THIS POLICE FORCE

- The force has published a new crime allocation policy setting out how crimes are assigned. Allocation is based on seriousness, harm and complexity rather than whether a suspect has been identified. Certain offences, including stalking and harassment, are assessed for risk of harm and, if high, are subject to additional inspector review after 16 days.
- All VRIs are now conducted by trained detectives.

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

PCs B and D and call handler C had no case to answer for gross misconduct and did not face disciplinary action.

PC B was referred to the Reflective Practice Review Process and was asked to reflect on recording of communications and investigative actions.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

This case highlights the importance of hearing directly from children and recognising concerns at the earliest opportunity. To ensure appropriate safeguarding is put in place, risk assessments should be reviewed in light of previous and new information, which is appropriately shared with school and partner agencies. Officers should have access to specialist support to progress investigations.

Operation Luka: Improving the response to the exploitation of children and young people



Detective Inspector Chris Chadderton talks about a multi-agency initiative addressing child sexual and criminal exploitation.

Operation Luka was launched in January 2024 in response to concerns around child exploitation in Manchester city centre, particularly Piccadilly Gardens. A review of intelligence, crime data and information from partner agencies identified several high-risk areas, with a **Management of Risk in Law Enforcement** (MoRiLE) assessment scoring the threat at 696—the second highest risk across Greater Manchester Police (GMP)—highlighting the need for a coordinated partnership response.

Establishing Operation Luka

A scanning phase was conducted jointly by the complex safeguarding and city centre neighbourhood teams and Children's Services to assess the scale of child exploitation risk in Manchester city centre. A comprehensive 4P plan was then developed, covering the following key elements:

Prepare:

- Delivering awareness training to hotels, businesses, taxi operators and Transport for Greater Manchester, empowering them to recognise indicators of exploitation.
- Holding a dedicated engagement event supported by ongoing visits from officers and social workers. This strengthened partnerships and improved the identification and reporting of concerns.

Prevent:

- Reviewing child abduction notices related to exploitation in Piccadilly Gardens to ensure every opportunity to safeguard a child was considered.
- Working with the community safety partnership to target known offending areas in Piccadilly Gardens, including improving CCTV coverage and removing visual obstructions.

Pursue:

- Holding multi-agency deployments, bringing together specialist police officers and social workers to target those seeking to exploit children, while also identifying and intervening early to safeguard children at risk.
- Timing deployments to coincide with periods of increased risk, including school holidays, weekends and summer evenings, ensuring resources were focused on targeting offenders when vulnerable children were most likely to be present in the city centre.

Protect:

- Developing a more intelligence-led and offender-focused approach. Operation Luka provided a framework for GMP and partner agencies to share information, develop intelligence and coordinate activity against those posing the greatest risk. This helped maximise opportunities to disrupt offending behaviour while safeguarding vulnerable children.

Operation Luka has dedicated thematic leads appointed across safeguarding, crime, intelligence, community engagement, neighbourhood policing and media. This structure facilitates monthly safeguarding meetings where vulnerable children and perpetrators are reviewed in detail. Each child and offender is allocated a lead responsible officer, ensuring accountability for safeguarding interventions, ongoing risk management and the disruption of individuals believed to pose a risk to children in the city centre.

Overall impact

Operation Luka's impact now extends across Greater Manchester and beyond, with children from other local authorities and the wider region being referred to the operation and neighbouring districts joining deployments. This has strengthened cross-boundary safeguarding, improved information sharing and ensured vulnerable children receive support regardless of where they live.

An example of the benefits of Operation Luka involved a high-risk girl where services had experienced difficulties trying to meet and engage with her. By meeting the girl during a deployment in her own environment, officers and a social worker were able to build trust, leading to the disclosure of serious sexual offences. With analytical support from the northwest regional organised crime unit and tackling online exploitation team, a suspect was subsequently identified.

Information shared through monthly safeguarding meetings identified a further victim, strengthening the investigation and leading to the suspect being charged with two rape offences.

Recent outcomes from Operation Luka include arrests and charges for offences including rape, drug supply, robbery, modern slavery and child abduction, alongside prison sentences and city centre bans. Where prosecution is not possible, civil orders and partnership working has helped manage the risk of known individuals.

As of April 2026, 434 disruptions have been conducted, representing the highest volume recorded for any GMP safeguarding operation to date. Data from our Agency and Partner Management Information System also identified 227 individual children linked to this operation. Notably, this is the first instance where this system has been used to capture vulnerability associated specifically with a geographic location.

These combined efforts have delivered tangible results. Following more than two years of focused partnership activity, in March 2026 a MoRiLE reassessment reduced the risk score from 696 to 300.

Operation Luka has been identified as good practice within the child protection inspection by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and has been added to the College of Policing Practice Bank as an example of national best practice.

Learning

A key learning point has been the importance of maintaining a strong intelligence collection plan, regularly reinforced with frontline teams to maximise intelligence gathering. Ongoing partner engagement remains essential, as valuable information is often held across agencies, even when referrals reduce and exploitation risks appear less prevalent.

Central to Operation Luka is co-location and direct information sharing between GMP and partners from Manchester City Council. This learning has been incorporated into GMP's practice following critical reports on the force's previous response to child exploitation.

A key challenge during deployments has been the 'uniform barrier', with young people often labelling areas as 'hot' when police are present, making engagement more difficult. We focus on being approachable, listening and showing we are there to help to overcome this. By doing so, we can help build trust and prevent the exploitation of children and young people. ■

Detective Inspector Chris Chadderton is the City of Manchester's Complex Safeguarding Lead for Greater Manchester Police.

CASE STUDY 9

Arrest of 14-year-old Black boy mistaken for an older man

This case was independently investigated by the IOPC.

An annual event was subject to a police operation. As part of this, police officers and staff were given intelligence on people who had conditions not to be in the area.

While checking live CCTV footage, PCSO A made a radio transmission stating they had seen a man who was in breach of his Criminal Behaviour Order (CBO) not to be in the area.

The person with a CBO was a 30-year-old Black man. However, PCSO A incorrectly identified Child B, a 14-year-old Black boy. PCSO A did not check Police National Computer (PNC) records or the police operation briefing before making the radio transmission.

PCSO C and PC D were patrolling the area. PCSO A gave a description over the radio to PC D of Child B's clothing.

PCSO A did not provide any information about the age of the person with the CBO.

PCSO C and PC D identified Child B riding a bike. Body-worn video (BWV) showed PC D approaching Child B and taking hold of his arm, pulling him off his bike. PC D made no verbal command for Child B to stop and did not follow **the five-step appeal**.

During the IOPC investigation, PC D stated it was not practical to stop Child B by using verbal commands or access other intelligence, believing that Child B would cycle past and escape.

PCs E and F arrived to assist PCSO C and PC D.

PC D incorrectly assumed the grounds of arrest and told Child B, "We're arresting you. Alright? We're arresting you, cos' you're wanted on recall to prison." Child B replied, "But I'm 14."

After arresting Child B, PC D asked PCSO A via radio for the grounds for arrest. PCSO A responded that it was for a breach of a CBO.

PC D and PC E took hold of Child B. PC F applied handcuffs to Child B's right wrist while he was restrained.

PC D later stated they believed the Intelligence Officers and the Silver Commander for the event heard PCSO A's radio transmission and PC D's later radio communications. As no intervention took place, PC D believed this indicated approval of the arrest and use of force.

PC D told Child B, "Let's walk this way" and moved him towards a police van. Child B stopped walking and BWV showed him crying out, as if in pain. Child B later told the IOPC that he stopped walking because he did not know where he was going after getting into the van.

PC D further restrained Child B using an arm lock.

Child B provided officers with his name, address, age and school and said he had never been arrested before. Video footage also showed members of the public telling officers that Child B was 14.

Following increasing concern from members of the public about Child B being misidentified, PC D contacted PCSO A several times via radio to question whether the identification was correct. PCSO A confirmed it was.

PC D asked PCSO A if an officer who knew the man with the CBO could attend to identify whether they had arrested the right person.

PC D also requested that a photograph of the man with the CBO be sent to an officer at the scene. PCSO C received a photograph, and officers compared it with Child B.

In their statement to the IOPC, PCSO C said, "When [the] picture [of the man with the CBO] was sent to me it was pretty obvious it wasn't him [Child B], the person in the picture was 30. I suppose from a distance it was difficult to tell the age."

After reviewing the photograph, PC D de-arrested Child B and released him. ■

KEY QUESTIONS FOR MANAGERS, POLICY MAKERS AND TRAINERS

- **Does your force provide training or guidance for officers and staff on the use of CCTV and police cameras?**
- **How do you ensure that descriptions of suspects are communicated clearly to officers and staff to help avoid misidentification?**
- **How does your force monitor and review disproportionality in the use of force against children by age, ethnicity and gender?**
- **Does your force provide training on adultification and how to mitigate racial bias when interacting with Black children?**



> Video footage also showed members of the public telling officers that Child B was 14

KEY QUESTIONS FOR POLICE OFFICERS AND STAFF

- Do you always follow the five-step appeal to communicate clearly with an identified suspect? If the suspect is a child, how could you adapt your communication in a child-centred way?
- How would you approach this situation differently to verify the identification of the suspect earlier?
- Have you ever thought a child was older than they were? What factors influenced that assumption?
- How could assumptions about age affect your decision making and your communication with a child?

ACTION TAKEN BY THIS POLICE FORCE

- The force produced a briefing and identification procedure for officers and staff deployed in CCTV suites. This will be embedded in all relevant operational orders.
- The operational order for the annual event has been updated to require two positive CCTV identifications before action is taken.
- A new process was implemented requiring officers to submit a form confirming they have attended and understood operational briefings.
- Feedback was provided to all Public Order Public Safety Commanders to ensure they clearly communicate tactical arrest plans to staff in briefings.
- A diversity, equality and inclusion plan is being developed by the force. This will detail all training and CPD, including race as a priority area.
- The force is looking to establish a learning panel that will meet quarterly to review misconduct investigations and assess decision making. One of its focus areas will be race and disproportionality.



Photo: Alamy

OUTCOMES FOR THE OFFICERS AND STAFF INVOLVED

PC D did not have a case to answer for misconduct and did not face disciplinary proceedings.

The IOPC investigation found that PCSO A had a case to answer for misconduct. The misconduct meeting found the allegation of race and age discrimination not proven.

The allegation of misidentification was proven. PCSO A was found to have failed in their duties and responsibilities when communicating with officers, stating that they had identified the man with the CBO when they had not.

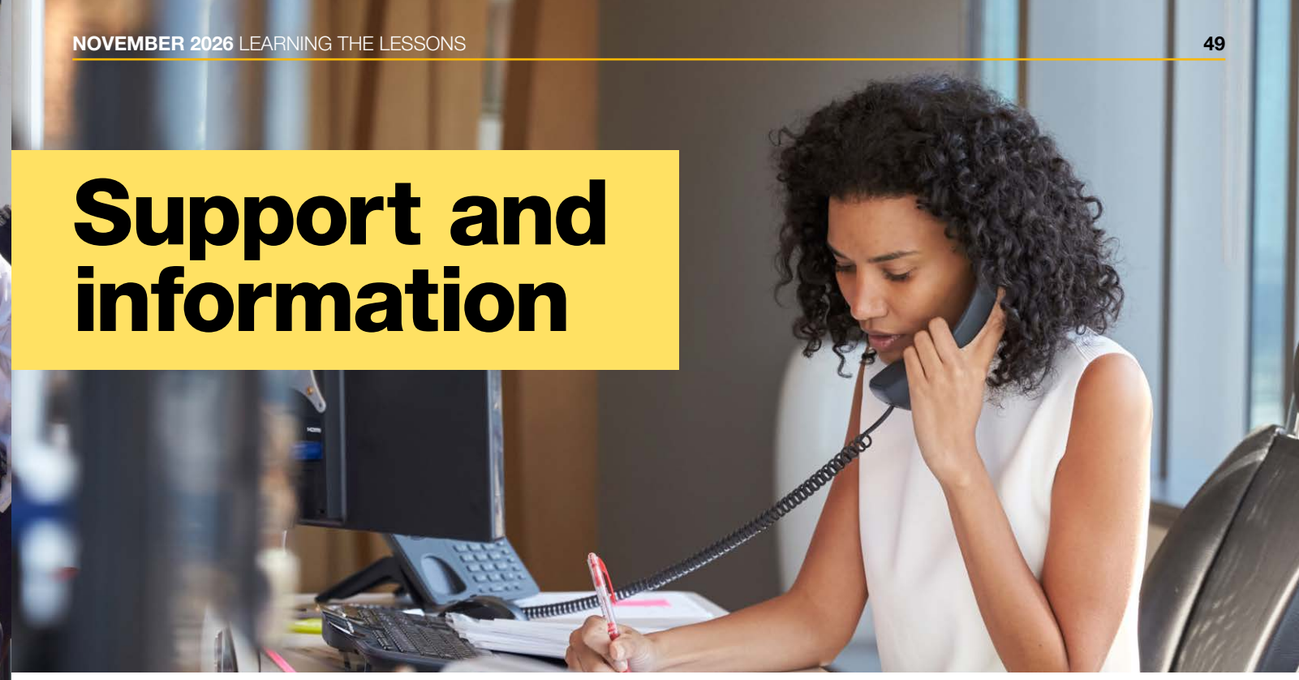
PCSO A was referred to the Reflective Practice Review Process to consider what could have been done differently.

The force also spoke to Child B and his mother about the outcome of this case and formally apologised.

YOUTH PANEL REFLECTIONS

Officers should not disregard what a child or young person is telling them and avoid making assumptions.

Officers and staff can prevent situations like this by studying the resources available to them and clearly communicating. To verify who a person is, a photo should be shared, or requested, at the earliest opportunity.



Support and information

Children and young people

Childline
www.childline.org.uk
Childline is here to help anyone under 19 in the UK with any issues they're going through. Childline is free, confidential and available at any time, day or night. You can talk to Childline by phone, email or through 1-2-1 counsellor chat.
Tel: 0800 1111

Young Minds
www.youngminds.org.uk
Young Minds supports children and young people, their families and professionals by providing guidance and advice. It offers emotional signposting and support through its parents helpline or webchat service.
Tel: 0808 802 5544

Mental health

Oscar Kilo
www.oscarkilo.org.uk
Oscar Kilo is the National Police Wellbeing Service, providing support and guidance for police forces across England and Wales to improve and build organisational wellbeing. It provides resources and support developed specifically for policing, by policing, and is designed to meet the unique needs of officers and staff, their families and those who leave the service.

Samaritans
www.samaritans.org
When life is difficult, Samaritans are here to listen – day or night, 365 days a year. You can call them for free or visit thei website for more ways to speak to a Samaritan.
Tel: 116 123

Shout
www.giveusashout.org
Shout is the UK's first and only, free, confidential, 24/7 text messaging support service for anyone who is struggling to cope. Text: 'SHOUT' to 85258

Violence against women and girls

Rape Crisis
www.rapecrisis.org.uk
Rape Crisis England & Wales is the feminist charity working to end child sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment and all other forms of sexual violence.
Tel: 0808 500 2222

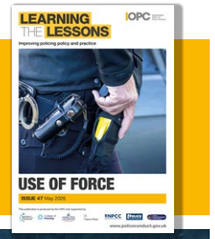
Suzy Lamplugh Trust
www.suzylamplugh.org
The Suzy Lamplugh Trust is the UK's pioneering personal safety charity and leading stalking authority.
Tel: 0808 802 0300

The Survivors Trust
www.thesurvivorstrust.org
The Survivors Trust is a national membership organisation whose 126 member agencies provide a range of specialist services to survivors across the UK and Ireland. These include specialist counselling, ISVA services, helplines, support and advocacy services for women, men, non-binary people and children.
Tel: 0808 801 0818 or visit the following webpage to find local services: thesurvivorstrust.org/support-in-your-area/

Substance misuse

With You
www.wearewithyou.org.uk
With You is a charity providing free, confidential support to adults and young people facing challenges with drugs, alcohol and mental health.

YOUR FEEDBACK ON
ISSUE 47: Use of force
(May 2026)





Thinking about the content of issue 47

96% said the magazine was relevant to their work

96% said the case summaries were clear and easy to understand

100% said the mix of cases and articles felt about right

100% said the key questions helped them identify learning in the cases

100% said the case studies were relevant and explored the key issues

Thinking about the impact of issue 47

89% said they intend to share issue 47 with their colleagues to share the learning it contains

81% said the magazine was a useful tool to help drive change in police policy and practice

88% said it had increased their understanding of issues that are relevant to use of force

100% said the magazine provided useful knowledge to supplement information received from training, briefings or practical experience

70% said reading issue 47 helped them to identify areas where they could benefit from additional training or development

Based on 27 responses to the survey.

YOUR FEEDBACK NEEDED

What do you think about the latest issue?

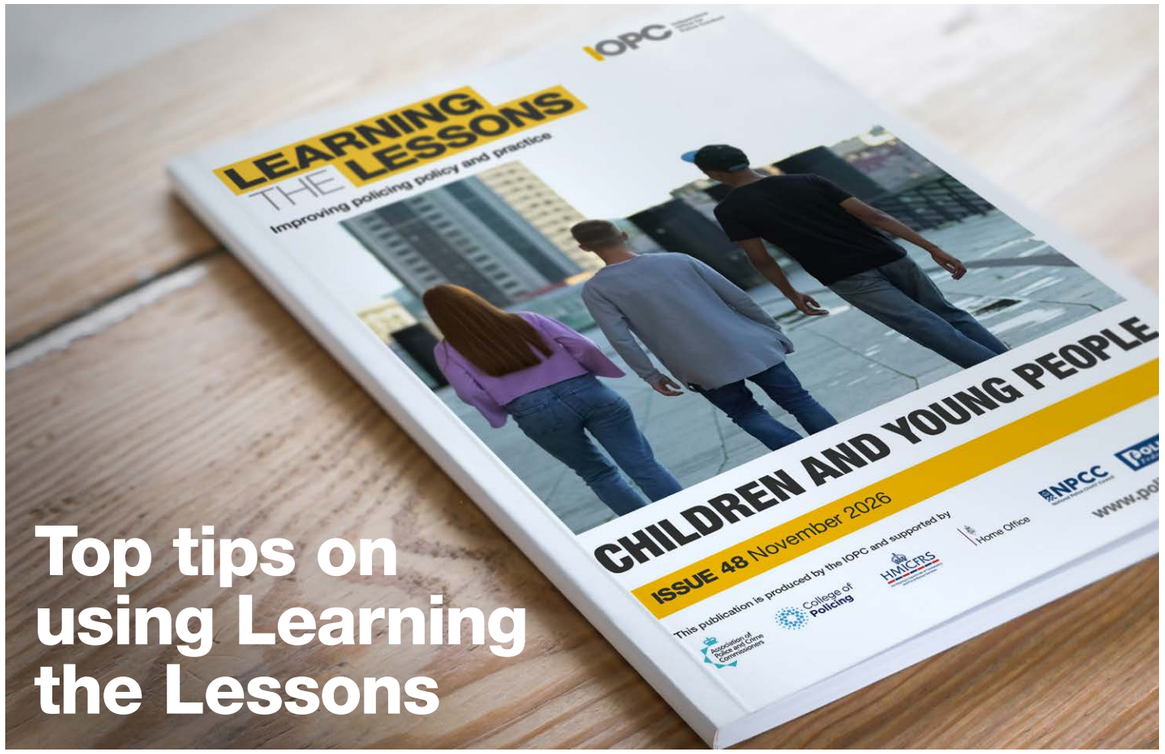
How useful did you find it?

What topics would you like to see covered in future issues?

Please complete our three-minute feedback survey:
www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/LearningTheLessons48ChildrenandYoungPeople

The survey is open until **6 January 2027**.

The magazine is available to everyone.
Email **learning@policeconduct.gov.uk** to be notified when we publish a new issue.



Top tips on using Learning the Lessons

In response to previous issues of Learning the Lessons, readers gave us important insights into how they shared the magazine with others and how they put the learning to use. We have turned some of those insights into top tips. Which could you put into action?

Managers or supervisors

- Consider different ways to talk about and share the magazine with your team.
- Encourage your teams to join our mailing list by emailing **learning@policeconduct.gov.uk**
- Use the case studies or key questions as discussion points with your team to identify opportunities to reflect on existing practices.
- Consider the different meetings, boards and events you attend. Would it be useful to highlight key insights from the magazine at any of them?

Frontline officers and staff

- Join our mailing list and encourage your colleagues to do the same by emailing **learning@policeconduct.gov.uk**
- Consider sharing any case studies or articles you found particularly interesting with colleagues who may be interested in finding out more.
- Fill out our feedback survey (QR code on previous page) so we can make sure Learning the Lessons continues to work for you.

Communication teams

- Share the latest magazine on your intranet, organisational learning portal or other platforms regularly accessed by officers and staff.
- Consider featuring our poster, which features a handy QR code to download the magazine onto phones and devices, on notice boards in key places: **www.policeconduct.gov.uk/our-work/learning/learning-the-lessons**.
- Help us to share the magazine on your social media accounts to help reach new audiences.

Policy leads

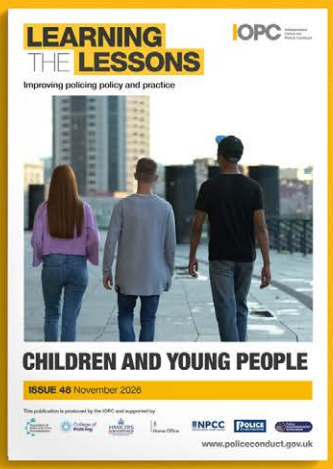
- Think about opportunities to review and sense check existing policies in line with the learning in the magazine.
- Help to make sure the magazine has reached the right thematic leads in your force, who will be most interested in the learning it contains and can help influence changes to policy and practice.

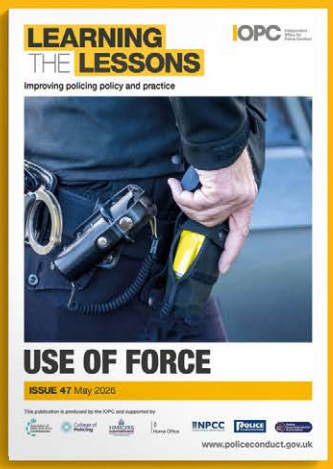
Learning and development teams

- Consider if any of the case studies included in this magazine would be useful to embed into existing training packages to bring important topics to life.
- If you have a training event coming up, ask us for a small pack of free hard copies of the magazine to hand out by emailing **learning@policeconduct.gov.uk**

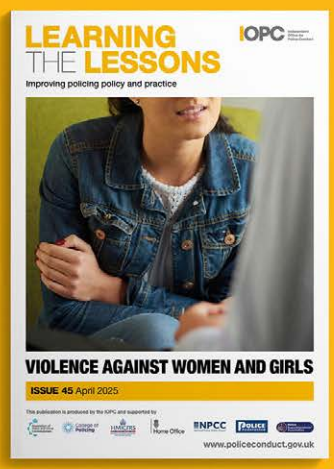
Interested in receiving new issues of Learning the Lessons?

The magazine is available to everyone.
Email **learning@policeconduct.gov.uk**
to be notified when we publish a new issue.

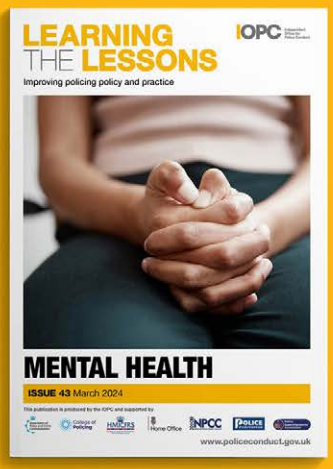


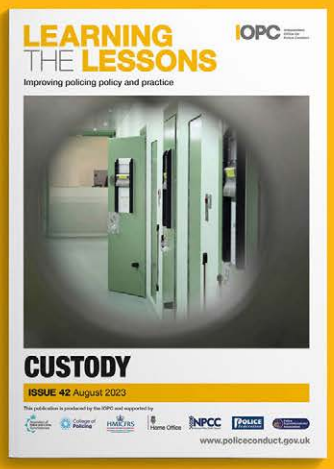














Want to get involved in the development of Learning the Lessons?

We have created a virtual panel, bringing together stakeholders from policing, academia, and community and voluntary sectors, to shape the development of future issues of the magazine. We invite panel members to review and provide feedback on drafts before publication.

Email **learning@policeconduct.gov.uk**
if you are interested in joining the panel.

