

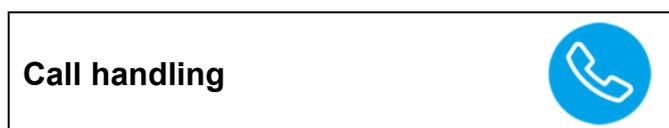
Case 02 Issue 39 – Child sexual abuse		LEARNING THE LESSONS
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Girl found in hotel room with two older men

Response of a call handler to a report of a potentially vulnerable girl in a hotel room with two older men, raising issues about:

- *Asking probing questions to assess vulnerability*
- *Demonstrating professional curiosity*
- *Performing system checks*

This case is relevant to the following areas:



Overview of incident

At close to midnight one evening a staff member at a local hotel, Mr A, called police via 999 to report a girl aged 16 staying in one of the hotel rooms with two older men. He said he was unaware of the girl's age but thought she was a teenager. He also said he was trying to get her home and she had no money. In his later complaint to the force, Mr A said he had become aware of the girl after receiving an anonymous call saying two men were trying to groom her.

The call was taken by CRO B. According to the transcript of the call seen by the IOPC, CRO B responded by saying "Okay, can I just stop you there please. Why is this an emergency? What's the emergency?" Mr A said the girl seemed vulnerable and she was in a room with two men. CRO B confirmed Mr A did not know how long the girl had been in the room before stating "Right this isn't really an emergency Sir, if she's been in the room and you are now just trying to get her home that is not really an emergency. I will take the call on this occasion but you shouldn't ring 999..." Mr A asked CRO B what he should have done instead of calling 999. CRO B said he should have called 101 because 999 "is for if there is a crime in progress or someone in immediate danger."

Under interview by the IOPC, CRO B stated she conducted a person check using force systems for the girl but this yielded only negative results. The incident log did not show a systems search for the girl was carried out by CRO B.

CRO B asked if Mr A knew the girl's name. Mr A questioned the girl who confirmed her name and date of birth. She was 16 years old. Mr A also relayed to CRO B the girl had recently been

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in full time social care. Around this time, an unknown man was captured on the call recording audibly offering to drive the girl home. CRO B heard this and told Mr A not to let the man take her home. CRO B also took the address of the hotel before asking to speak to the girl.

CRO B asked the girl what she was doing at the hotel. She replied she came because she knew the men she was with. She confirmed she had moved out of care that week. CRO B confirmed the girl just needed a lift home before stating “Right well that is not a police matter. You need to sort that out with somebody. You went there willingly with people you know... if you can’t get home, unfortunately we are not a taxi service so you either need to phone a family member, a friend or a taxi yourself...” CRO B spoke to the girl for approximately 50 seconds. CRO B was asked by the IOPC what led her to assume the girl was in the hotel room willingly. She said the girl said she was with some men she knew at a hotel and had been due to be joined by other friends. She said as far as she was concerned, meeting at a hotel meant she was willing to be in the hotel room. She was asked to clarify how she could be sure the girl had not been coerced into the room. She replied “I can’t.

Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse – key messages from research on looked-after children and child sexual abuse (2019)

“Care leavers

Children in care may come to associate care with control and be unable to make or initiate independent decisions or exercise protective life skills. They may be attracted by what become controlling and exploitative relationships because of this. Young disabled people who have been in protective accommodation are at risk of exploitation when they move into supported or independent living. Support from the vulnerable adults service is recommended.

The instability of frequent moves in care and the risks of sexual exploitation in the community may lead some care leavers into sexual exploitation; they require intensive emotional support both before and after leaving care. Attention needs to be paid to the protective factors that develop resilience – such as education, future orientation and relationships with positive peers – before a young person leaves care, although effective targeting of perpetrators is also essential.”

Find out more: <http://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/looked-after-children/>

CRO B was asked in interview with the IOPC about the conversation she had with the girl. CRO B stated she decided the girl was not overly vulnerable because, although she had been in care, she had been allowed to move into independent accommodation by social services. CRO B was asked why she did not ask more probing questions rather than making assumptions about the girl’s vulnerability. She said she did not believe she needed to ask more questions as Mr A said the girl wanted to get home. She said “The implication was that she’d gone to the hotel with older men and so the implication was potentially for sexual intercourse I presume. However, she’s 16 so she’s legally allowed to do that if she chooses to...” CRO B was also asked if, knowing the girl had been out of care for a week, whether she felt it necessary to gather more information on where she was living. She replied “no”.

CRO B told the IOPC she genuinely thought she had asked the girl whether she had been harmed. She was shocked to find upon listening back to the recording she had not asked this.

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The force incident and grading policy indicated CROs use THRIVE to risk assess and grade calls. The evidence did not support CRO B documented a THRIVE risk assessment during the call.

Following Mr A's later complaint about the handling of the call, it was established the girl was known to social services and the force for child sexual exploitation concerns and she had a designated specialist social worker. Subsequently, specially trained officers were deployed to interview the girl to achieve best evidence. During the interview, she disclosed the names of the two men she had been with and during her time in the hotel room she had been the victim of attempted rape. Both men were located and arrested shortly after.

Find out more about 'achieving best evidence':

https://www.cps.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/legal_guidance/best_evidence_in_criminal_proceedings.pdf

Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation.

Action taken by this police force

1. The force now has a dedicated lead for vulnerability.
2. The force has developed its policing plan with five strategic priorities. Early intervention is one of the key priorities of the plan, with delivery plans formulated for key areas including the identification of vulnerability and early support to those who are vulnerable.
3. The force has developed a multi-agency child exploitation strategy with governance provided by the Safeguarding Children's Board.
4. An early intervention and prevention unit was launched, with a dedicated problem solving co-ordinator appointed to drive prevention activity around child exploitation.
5. The force commissioned a College of Policing peer review to consider how well it recognises and responds to vulnerability. Recommendations from the review were built into delivery plans.
6. The force launched a vulnerability communications campaign, reflecting the policing plan's ambition for all staff to 'understand and recognise vulnerability'.
7. The College of Policing vulnerability training programme has been delivered across the force.

Outcomes for officers and staff

CRO B

1. CRO B was referred to the force for gross misconduct. Following representations made by the appropriate authority, she was found to have a case to answer for misconduct. This was in over the allegations she may have breached a number of the force's Standards of Professional Behaviour, and subsequently the terms of her employment contract. They were noted to have included, but not been limited to, honesty and integrity, authority respect and courtesy, work and responsibility and discreditable conduct. She received a written warning.

Force commentary

While this is a serious failing by CRO B, compounded by the inaccurate recording of the matter and an unconvincing account of her actions, I have carefully considered the elements of this incident as a 'snap shot' in time dealing specifically with the actions of CRO B while in conversation with the girl, Mr A and her recording of the incident. CRO B was neglectful, intolerant and treated both individuals appallingly, which rightfully led to a complaint being raised by Mr A. As an individual and as an appropriate authority, I am horrified a serious offence has been alleged to have been committed against the girl and the relevant support, safeguarding and investigative opportunities were not explored there and then.

The failing was due to assumptions made by CRO B and a failure to follow procedure and training, as opposed to a direct disregard to report an alleged offence. I view this as a breach of the relevant standards and assess this as misconduct. My threshold for reaching this assessment is that the actions, if proven, represent themselves within the threshold of bad behaviour / deliberate bad behaviour / laziness.

A predominant aspect of this investigation has been the application or non-application of the THRIVE professional discretionary framework by a force call taker. I take note that in accordance with the force incident grading policy, staff members are not obligated to record their rationale for, or the results of, the THRIVE assessment, despite the requirement to conduct the assessment being set out in detail within the policy. The appropriate authority 'points for consideration' will be raised with the head of contact services with regard to incident grading policy and a transparent, proportionate and accountable process for the application and documentation of the THRIVE framework.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. What training or advice has your force given to help call handlers identify cases where a young person might be at risk of child sexual exploitation or grooming?
2. What steps has your force taken to make sure adequate systems checks are carried out on potentially vulnerable victims?
3. What action has your force taken to help develop professional curiosity amongst officers and staff working within your force?

Questions for police officers and police staff

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4. What other questions would you have asked the girl to find out if she was vulnerable?
5. How do you demonstrate a professional curiosity when reports of potentially vulnerable individuals in potentially dangerous circumstances are received?
6. Are you aware of schemes such as Operation Makesafe and Operation Nightwatch in your area that train the night time economy in spotting the signs of exploitation?
7. Would you have recognised the presence of a 16 year old girl with two adult men as sufficient indication of vulnerability to justify attending and carrying out a welfare check?
8. Would you have made any other enquiries to determine whether the hotel was being used regularly for child sexual exploitation?