

**Case 9 | Issue 40 – Abuse of Position for Sexual Purpose (APSP)**

Published May 2022

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## Unofficial cadet scheme

*Contact with a young girl, raising issues about:*

- *Operation of unofficial cadet schemes*
- *Use of personal social media*
- *Communication with young people*

This case is relevant to the following areas:

**Professional standards**

PSD

## Overview of incident

Child A, a 12/13 year old girl, had been part of an unofficial cadet scheme while she was at primary school.

PCSO B and PCSO C were involved in setting up the scheme. Child A had known PCSO B for a number of years as he worked at the school.

Child A regularly saw PCSO B on her walk home from secondary school. She often saw him watching over the park with other PCSOs from their police vehicle. She would chat to him when she walked past with her friend - often two or three times a week.

Child A had Instagram and Snapchat accounts. PCSO B added her on Instagram and started to send her messages to ask if she was OK. Child A thought PCSO B's behaviour was strange and would often provide blunt replies to try and end the conversation.

Child A said that when PCSO B first added her on Instagram he would unfriend her and then follow her again. Child A said PCSO B deleted most of his messages. He told her she should do the same. On a number of occasions he also said "I hope nobody else knows we chat". She said no and he told her not to tell anyone he had messaged her.

One of Child A's friends recalled that Child A said PCSO B was always parked around the corner from her house. She said she was worried about walking home from school because of the messages he had sent to her.

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PCSO B went on to send Child A a number of inappropriate messages across multiple platforms, including Instagram and Snapchat. The content of the messages included complimenting the girl's appearance and telling her that he liked her.

Child A told her parents about PCSO B and they reported the matter to the force. Investigators analysed PCSO B's interactions with other individuals on Snapchat and found similar content to that included in the messages sent to Child A.

PCSO B's personal mobile phone contained a number of social media and messaging applications, including WhatsApp, Facebook, Line, Anygram and Snapchat. The download showed a volume of contact with various users, however it was not possible to establish their identities or ages.

A number of explicit photographs and videos were found in a WhatsApp sent folder but it was not possible to determine who the images had been sent to.

The scheme run by PCSO B and PCSO C is an unofficial cadet scheme. This is separate to the national volunteer police cadet scheme within the force.

Concerns had been expressed by senior leaders that the scheme would not have the same practices around safeguarding training, vetting or risk assessment found in the official scheme. Senior leaders allowed the unofficial scheme to operate on the understanding no field trips would be arranged by the force, a teacher must always be present, and the term cadet should not be used.

Senior leaders also contacted PCSO B and PCSO C to see whether any additional training or support was needed. The PCSOs were given time to complete an online Child Protection in Education course and DBS checks were conducted in relation to the PCSOs.

### Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

### Findings and recommendations

#### *Local recommendations*

##### **Local recommendation 1**

1. The IOPC recommended the force update their policies on the use of personal social media. This should enforce to officers and staff that using personal social media to contact members of the public met through their work or duties was not acceptable. This message should be explicit and unambiguous to all officers and staff, and may require dedicated inputs or line manager discussions to ensure understanding.
2. This followed an IOPC investigation into a complaint made about a staff member's social media contact with a child met through policing duties. The force's social media policies and guidance lacked explicit instructions to officers and staff that personal social media should not be used to contact members of the public met through their work.

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### Local recommendation 2

3. The IOPC recommended that the force make sure that officers and staff working with children in any capacity are aware of the appropriate communications channels and that contact with a child via social media is never appropriate.
4. This followed an IOPC investigation into a complaint made about a staff member's social media contact with a child met through policing duties. The investigation found that work to improve in this area has been implemented as a result of another investigation which related to the Volunteer Police Cadet (VPC) scheme. The force should confirm this message is also being received outside of the official VPC scheme.

### *National recommendations*

#### National recommendation 1

5. The IOPC recommended that the Police Staff Council strengthen the Standards of Professional Behaviour (September 2008) in respect of 'Authority, Respect and Courtesy'. They should make it explicit to police staff they should not establish or pursue an improper sexual or emotional relationship with a person they come into contact with in the course of their work, who may be vulnerable to an abuse of trust or power.
6. This followed an IOPC investigation into a complaint made about a police staff member's social media contact with a child met through policing duties. The investigation found the Standards of Professional Behaviour for police staff did not provide clear expectations in relation to abuse of position for sexual purposes

## Response to the recommendations

### *Local recommendations*

#### Local recommendation 1

1. The force has revised its policy governing use of social media.
2. The policy emphasises that individuals should never contact a victim or witness through their own social media accounts. This includes personal-professional and personal-individual accounts. The policy states that doing so crosses the boundary between work and personal life and could give false or misleading messages to that person. It goes on to highlight that officers accused of serious corruption within the police in cases of abuse of position for sexual purpose often started their campaigns to target vulnerable persons by contacting them in this way.
3. Student officers now receive an input on use of social media on day three of their training. Similar inputs are also provided to newly promoted sergeants who are asked to cascade information to their teams through briefings and one to one discussions.

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4. The Deputy Chief Constable (DCC) tasked the Head of Corporate Communications to produce a full communications plan around learning within the organisation. This will include how key messages are communicated to staff.

### Local recommendation 2

5. The following guidelines apply to all VPC social media accounts and must be adhered to:
  - Only official force VPC social media accounts and the Marshall platform should be used for any business relating to the VPC.
  - all VPC social media accounts must be approved by the central VPC team and only approved individuals can use these accounts. Details of all those who have access will be stored centrally.
  - Staff/volunteers should not make friend requests to young people - they can only accept them. Staff are responsible for ensuring member social media accounts are genuine before accepting requests.
  - Staff/volunteers should not 'friend', 'connect', or 'follow' their own personal account or that of friends/family/personal associates.
  - Communication with cadets should take place in open forums such as the main Facebook/Instagram page, groups or group messages. Another member of staff must always be made aware of and check when the group message function is used.
  - Communication with cadets through social media must always be for a specific purpose, such as planning an event or sharing information. We should avoid excessively social chat and conversation and be mindful of the time at which they are communicating.
  - The private or direct messaging function in a one to one setting must not be used. If a cadet tries to make contact using the private or direct messaging function it should be responded to in an open forum or by another means of communication.
6. Staff and volunteers involved in the VPC should not have any contact with cadets through personal social media accounts or any other form of personal, electronic communication, such as email. If a young person attempts to make contact with staff or volunteers online, this should be reported to a supervisor and the central VPC team and logged on the VPC risk register. The same procedure applies if any adult involved in the VPC has a legitimate reason to have online contact with a cadet.
7. The force's Safeguarding Adults and Young People Lead has devised a new safeguarding policy as part of his role which will be disseminated in similar ways to the Social Media Policy. This will ensure the message is also received outside of the official VPC scheme. This information will also be included in the VPC newsletter. They are also establishing networks and contacts with school based officers and will ensure the information is cascaded as part of his wider work on safeguarding. He is also working on a safeguarding policy for apprentices which will include similar guidance and dissemination strategies.

### ***National recommendations***

#### **National recommendation 1**

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8. The Police Staff Council did not accept the recommendation. They said there was insufficient evidence the case against the individual in this case was hampered by the lack of an explicit injunction to refrain from abuse of position for sexual gain in the Standards of Professional Behaviour. The Police Staff Council said they believed existing Standards would have been applicable in this case, in particular Honesty and Integrity, Authority, Respect and Courtesy and Discreditable Conduct. In particular they made reference to the following injunction under the "Authority, Respect and Courtesy" Standard: "Police staff do not abuse their powers or authority and respect the rights of all individuals." They also made reference to The College of Policing Code of Ethics which set out that officers and staff shall "... not establish or pursue an improper sexual or emotional relationship with a person with whom you come into contact in the course of your work who may be vulnerable to an abuse of trust or power."

### Outcomes for officers and staff

#### PCSO B

1. PCSO B was found to have a case to answer for gross misconduct in relation to the allegations he engaged in inappropriate contact with a 12/13 year old child via social media.
2. A gross misconduct hearing took place and PCSO B was dismissed without notice.
3. There was a criminal investigation where offences of Misconduct in Public Office and Sexual Communication With a Child were considered. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) determined there was insufficient evidence to charge PCSO B.

### Questions to consider

#### Questions for policy makers and managers

1. Does your force give officers clear guidance on use of personal social media and the importance of not using this to contact members of the public?
2. What steps has your force taken to ensure any schemes involving young people have proper procedures in place around vetting, risk assessments and safeguarding?