



KEY FACTS

AN INSPECTION OF CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND

FEBRUARY 2026



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WHAT IS CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION?

Child criminal exploitation is child abuse. It happens when children are used to engage in criminal activity or commit any type of crime. It can take many forms but ultimately results in children being harmed with long term consequences for their health, wellbeing and futures.

Children are being exploited in our community to steal, transport drugs, get involved in public disorder and other crimes. Children can be used by paramilitaries and organised crime groups and their parents to commit crimes.

WHAT IS BEING DONE TO TACKLE CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION?

Child criminal exploitation cannot be tackled by the criminal justice system alone. It requires a joined-up approach from Government Departments and service delivery organisations. The Departments of Education, Health and Justice are working together to:

- increase awareness of child criminal exploitation and build the capacity and capability of professionals to tackle it;
- prevent harm and abuse from happening to children;
- protect and intervene when children are abused and exploited; and
- pursue those who harm and exploit children.

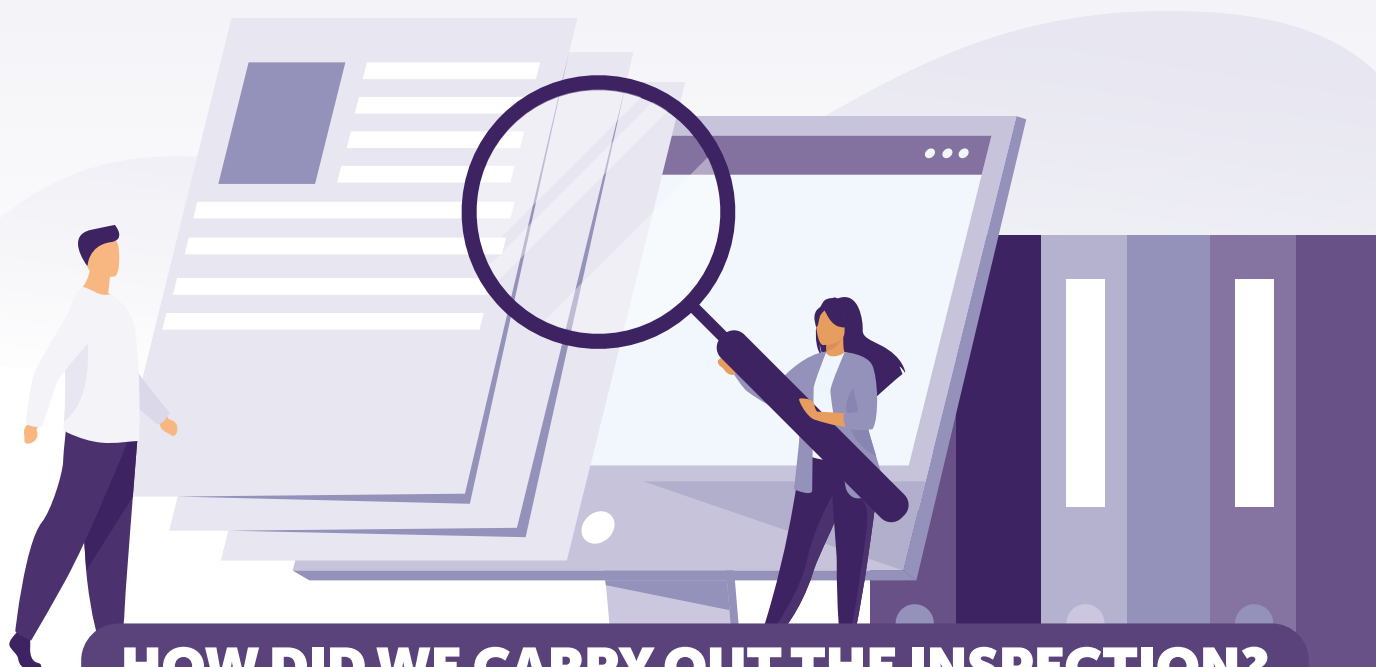
The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) has recognised child criminal exploitation as a priority in the current Policing Plan for the first time.



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WHAT DID THE INSPECTION LOOK AT?

- We looked at how the criminal justice system recognised, assessed and responded to child criminal exploitation.
- We focused on the role of the PSNI given how important their role is in determining a child's pathway through the criminal justice system.
- The work of other organisations including the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland (PPS) and the Youth Justice Agency was also considered.



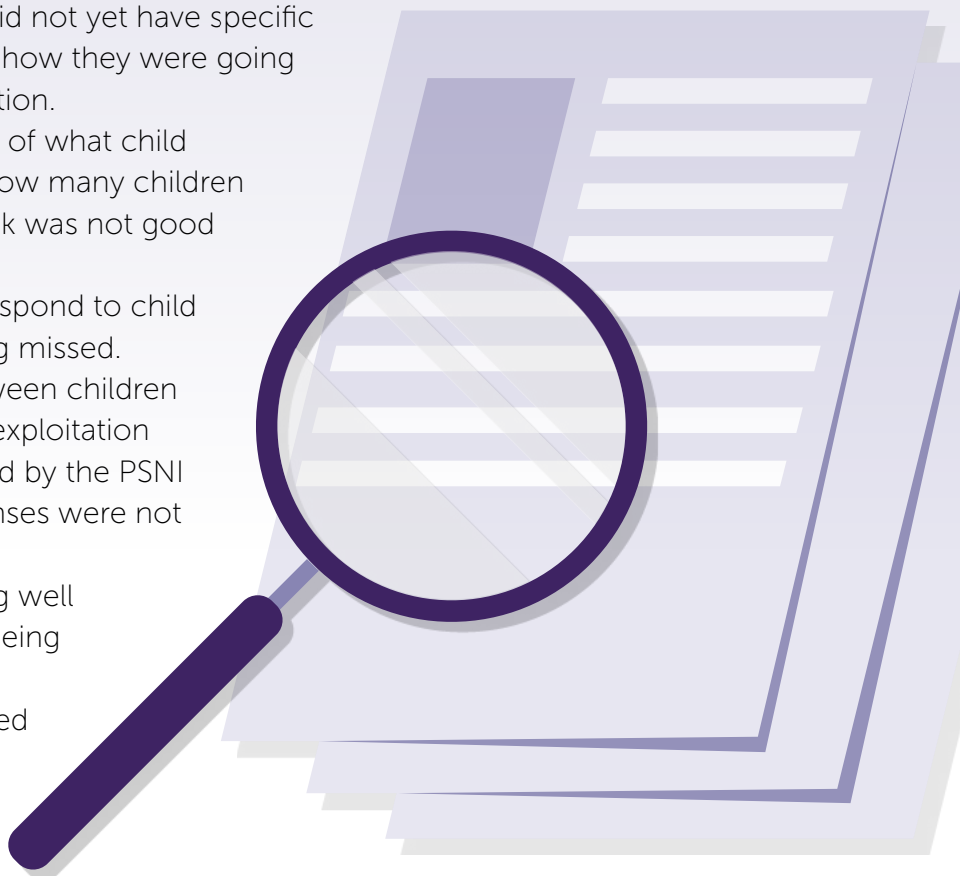
HOW DID WE CARRY OUT THE INSPECTION?

- Inspectors asked the Department of Justice (DoJ) and criminal justice organisations to tell us how well they were tackling child criminal exploitation and provide us with supporting information.
- We spoke to a range of people including representatives of the community and voluntary sector to learn about how children experienced child criminal exploitation and to staff and leaders working in the DoJ, other Departments and criminal justice organisations.
- We partnered with Inspectors from His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services and looked at 34 PSNI case files to see how well child criminal exploitation was being identified and responded to. Inspectors also looked at 12 PPS prosecution files.
- We escalated concerns about how the PSNI were responding to missing children reports and asked the PSNI Chief Constable to take immediate action to improve current practice and safeguard children.

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WHAT DID INSPECTORS FIND?

- Criminal justice organisations did not yet have specific policies and procedures saying how they were going to tackle child criminal exploitation.
- Criminal justice staff awareness of what child criminal exploitation was and how many children had been harmed or were at risk was not good enough.
- Opportunities to identify and respond to child criminal exploitation were being missed.
- Understanding of the links between children who are reported missing and exploitation were not sufficiently understood by the PSNI and the PPS and current responses were not child-centred.
- The police were not responding well enough to reports of children being missing from their home.
- Children who had been exploited were not well supported and safeguarded.



WHAT NEEDS TO IMPROVE?

**Inspectors made four recommendations for improvement.
We did not replicate work the Departments were already progressing.**

At a Strategic (leadership) level:

- The DoJ and the criminal justice organisations should come together and decide how they would tackle child criminal exploitation across the criminal justice system and monitor how well they were doing.
- The PSNI had not yet worked out how it was going to make sure it was organised to tackle child criminal exploitation effectively.

At an Operational (on the ground) level:

- The PSNI needed to improve how it responded when they were told that children were missing from their homes.
- We would like to see the work the DoJ and other Departments started in 2021 to be fully delivered.



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WHAT NEXT?

- We want to see the DoJ and criminal justice organisations work well together to implement the Inspection recommendations and make a more informed contribution to cross-Government strategies and Programme for Government priorities about how well child criminal exploitation was being tackled in Northern Ireland.
- We expect them to adopt the learning from our **2025 Child Sexual Exploitation Follow-Up Review Report** to help their approach.
- We plan to monitor how well they are doing in a future inspection programme.

If you would like to know anything more about us or this inspection please get in touch with:

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