

<b>Case 2   Issue 37 – Young people</b>		<b>LEARNING THE LESSONS</b>
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## Safeguarding the welfare of three females

*Police response to a vehicle fire, including their actions in relation to three young women once the fire was extinguished, raising issues about:*

- *Duty to protect children and young people*
- *Identifying vulnerability*
- *Assessing risk to children or young people*

This case is relevant if you work in:

<b>Call handling</b>		<b>Public protection</b>	
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## Overview of incident

On 21 August 2015, Ms A, Ms B and Ms C arranged to spend the night at one of their parents' houses. At the time of the incident, Ms A was 14-years-old; Ms B was 16-years-old and Ms C was 15-years-old – all three young women lived in Town A.

At the same time, Ms B was in contact with Mr D, a 17-year-old man. They arranged for the three young women to meet Mr D in the car park of a local supermarket. When the three young women arrived, they met Mr D and another man, Mr E. Mr E was 22-years-old. The group got into Mr E's vehicle and drove away.

The vehicle caught fire while the group were driving along a dual carriageway. Mr E pulled into a lay-by or service area near to a petrol station. The five occupants got out of the vehicle. They sat on a grass verge near the side of the road.

At 9.37pm, the police received a call reporting the vehicle fire. Police resources were sent to the scene. The first police officer to arrive was Police Sergeant F. He had been travelling along the dual carriageway in a marked police people carrier to pick up a colleague when he saw the vehicle fire. PS F brought the traffic behind him to a halt and parked his vehicle before the burning vehicle. The scene was also attended by the ambulance and fire services.

The police incident log shows three other police units were also allocated to this incident; each of the three units took positions at road junctions away from the fire to try to control traffic. The incident log indicated no other officers joined PS F at the burning vehicle until the fire had been extinguished.

## OFFICIAL

Ms A, Ms B and Ms C said that after they sat on the grass verge, Mr E spoke with a police officer. The accounts of the three young women noted the officer asked Mr E for the registration number of the vehicle that had caught fire. During his interview with the police, Mr E stated he spoke to a police officer and gave the officer details about what had happened. He also gave the officer his name, address, and the details of the vehicle that had caught fire.

In interview, Mr E said he told the officer the young women were his friends. Mr E noted he asked the officer whether the police would take the occupants of the vehicle that was on fire. He said he was told by the officer the group would all need to be taken back to one place.

A paramedic who went to the incident said after he arrived he treated one of the young women (Ms B) who was believed to be suffering from an asthma/panic attack. Paramedic G explained he asked Ms B for some details, including her age. He recalled Ms B said she was 16-years-old. Paramedic G stated the occupants of the vehicle were sitting on a grass verge, and he saw a police officer go between a police vehicle and the grass verge a number of times.

Airwave transmissions in relation to this incident detail PS F giving details of the vehicle that had caught fire to the force control room. However, PS F did not provide any details of the occupants of the vehicle. While checks were made on the vehicle that was on fire, no checks were recorded for any of the occupants of the vehicle.

In his interview with the IOPC, PS F said when he arrived he could see a group of people on a grass verge. PS F stated he remained near to his vehicle for his own safety and did not approach the group, who were on the other side of the burning vehicle to where he was positioned. He confirmed he did not pass the burning vehicle to speak with the occupants of the burning vehicle.

PS F stated he relayed the details of the vehicle that was on fire to the control room, although he could not recall how he obtained these details. He thought it was possible a fire fighter had given these details to him. However, PS F could not specifically remember seeing any fire fighters speaking to the occupants of the vehicle.

Shortly afterwards, the fire was extinguished and the police re-opened the dual carriageway. One of the police units involved in closing the road made their way to the scene of the fire. This unit was crewed by Police Constable H and Police Constable I, who were on-duty as road traffic patrol.

Upon PC H's and PC I's arrival at the scene, PC I explained he spoke to PS F about what he and PC H could do to help. He recalled PS F replied everything was in hand. PC H said she waited by her police vehicle and did not speak to PS F. PC H and PC I both noted they had no contact with the occupants of the vehicle. A short time later, PC H and PC I left the scene.

In his interview with the IOPC, PS F said PC H and PC I arrived at the scene once the vehicle had been extinguished. He noted the officers spoke with the occupants of the burnt vehicle, but he was not close enough to hear what was discussed. PS F stated he believed that PC H and PC I had taken over management of this incident.

Ms A stated a police officer approached the occupants of the burnt vehicle while they were still sitting on the grass verge. She recalled the officer addressing Mr E and asking whether they were ready to go. At this point Ms A did not recall any conversation about where they were being taken.

## OFFICIAL

After the police officer asked them if they were ready to go, Ms A asked Mr E whether they could be taken back to Town A. According to Ms A, Mr E replied the officer had told him the officer would only go to Town B, not Town A, because the officer was from Town B. Ms B also confirmed this in her account.

Ms C stated while the group were sat on the grass verge, a police officer approached them and asked where they were going. She recalled Mr E told the officer that the officer should take the group back to Mr E's home (in Town B), and that Mr E would arrange a lift home for the other members of the group the following morning.

In their accounts, both Ms A and Ms C stated the officer did not ask them or Ms B for their details, including their names or ages.

The five occupants of the burnt out vehicle then got into the police vehicle, and the officer drove them to Town B. Ms C stated she and Ms A cried during the journey. She also said Ms B was panicking, but Mr D and Mr E did not seem bothered by the incident. Ms A noted she had been upset, but could not recall crying.

During his interview with the IOPC, PS F stated either PC H, PC I or the fire fighters had asked if he could recover the occupants of the burnt vehicle from the roadside. He believed PC H or PC I told him to take them to Town B where the occupants had arranged to be picked up. PS F noted the occupants asked if he could drop them at a garage near the centre of Town B – he denied he was ever asked to take any of the occupants to Town A.

PS F recalled that during the journey the occupants of the burnt vehicle were all in good spirits, but he had not had any conversation with any of them. He believed all of the occupants were in their 20s, but acknowledged this was based on how they looked as opposed to being told their ages. PS F confirmed he was not aware of any details of the occupants, including their names or ages.

At 10.44pm, the incident log was updated stating PS F had dropped the occupants of the burnt vehicle at home in Town B.

Subsequently, Ms A and Ms B made a complaint to the police that during that night, while they were at Mr E's address, they were sexually assaulted. This was investigated by the police who referred this matter to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). The CPS decided no further action would be taken in relation to the allegations made by Ms A and Ms B.

In his interview with the IOPC, PS F stated he had not failed to safeguard the three young women because he was not managing the incident, and, as such, it was not his responsibility.

### Type of investigation

IOPC independent investigation

### Outcomes for officers and staff

**PS F**

## OFFICIAL

1. PS F was found to have a case to answer for misconduct. This was for his failure to make sufficient enquiries to enable him to establish the age or identity of the three young women, and his failure to properly assess the risks of taking the young women to Town B rather than their own homes (in Town A).
2. Prior to PS F attending a misconduct meeting concerning this incident, he was dismissed without notice following a special case hearing on another, unrelated matter. Therefore, no further action was taken by the force in respect of PS F's actions in this case.

### Questions to consider

#### Questions for policy makers and managers

1. How does your force make sure all officers and staff are aware of their responsibilities to safeguard vulnerable people?
2. What training does your force give to officers and staff about identifying vulnerability, particularly in relation to children and young people?
3. What guidance does your force provide to officers and staff about the actions they should consider if they identify any risks to a child or young person?

#### Questions for police officers and police staff

4. What questions would you have asked to identify the circumstances of this incident, in particular the details of the occupants of the vehicle?
5. What would your assessment have been in relation to the risks to the three young women's welfare?
6. What actions would you have taken to manage any risks to the three young women's welfare?
7. Would you have considered contacting the parents or guardians of any of the occupants of the vehicle who were under 18-years-old?
8. As the officer first on the scene, would you have taken any additional action(s) to engage with the three young women in the vehicle to identify potential welfare or safeguarding concerns?
9. As the officer first on the scene, would you have asked the occupants of the vehicle if they needed help to make contact with anyone to inform them of the situation?
10. If you were a member of the traffic unit who arrived on the scene after the road block(s) were lifted, would you have had any contact with the occupants of the vehicle?
11. Would you have considered separating the young women and speaking to them separately?