

Operation Ector: Executive summary

The investigation

In 2018, Greater Manchester Police (GMP) began an investigation, managed by the Independent Office for Police Conduct (IOPC) into the interaction between a serving police constable and a group of children and young adults involved in GMP's cadet scheme.

In October 2018, a cadet raised concerns with GMP about the officer's contact with them. It was alleged the contact was inappropriate and that the officer had abused his position for a sexual purpose. GMP arrested the officer, on suspicion of police corruption, on 21 October 2018, and suspended him the same day.

On 22 October, GMP made a recordable conduct referral to the IOPC. While we initially determined the matter should be independently investigated, we re-determined this as a managed investigation on 1 November 2018. A managed investigation is carried out using police resources, under the direction and control of the IOPC. This decision was made due to additional information suggesting there may be a number of other potential victims. We felt a managed investigation would better allow GMP to provide the necessary safeguarding for those individuals, while still ensuring an appropriate level of independent oversight.

The investigation was carried out by GMP's Major Incident Team, supported by its Professional Standards Branch, under our direction.

We set the terms of reference for the investigation, which were: to look at the level and nature of the officer's contact with the original complainant, as well as the wider cadet group; and to identify and address any safeguarding issues. Investigators also considered a number of other allegations separate from the allegations of abuse of position for a sexual purpose.

As a result of further disclosures, the officer was arrested for a second time on 16 November 2018, on suspicion of sexual assault. In the same month, he was served with a notice outlining that his conduct was under investigation at the level of gross misconduct. He was further arrested on 13 March 2019 on suspicion of misconduct in public office and additional sexual assaults, along with a number of other alleged offences. He was served with two further misconduct notices in May and August 2019.

GMP investigators interviewed the officer under criminal caution each time he was arrested, and again on 27 August 2019. During the investigation, investigators obtained a large number of witness statements. There were 21 people spoken to as part of the investigation, most of whom had been cadets, who made allegations of inappropriate conduct or sexual assault against the officer.

Findings

GMP investigators found the officer had been working with GMP's cadet scheme since 2013. He was respected and trusted by the cadets he worked with and many believed he could help assist their own careers with the police. The officer was found to have significant control over the cadet scheme, including recruitment of cadet leaders, as well as a high degree of influence over the recruitment of police apprentices. During his time in charge, the cadet scheme in the area grew rapidly and investigators found he was supervising a high number of young people as his primary police duty with minimal supervision.

Evidence obtained during the investigation showed the officer had engaged in sexualised conduct towards some of these young people over a period of several years. This included: sexual touching, kissing, and sending inappropriate messages. These messages included sexualised comments; sending or offering to send an image of his penis; and requesting indecent images.

GMP investigators identified a pattern of behaviour by the officer towards young people in his care. Witnesses also reported being afraid to raise their concerns about the officer's behaviour due to his perceived status with senior leaders, which caused them to fear they would not be believed. Some told investigators they wanted to work for GMP in future and were concerned speaking up would affect their career opportunities.

The investigation concluded in August 2019, when we reviewed and signed off the investigator's report.

Criminal and disciplinary proceedings

On conclusion of the investigation, the IOPC decision maker determined the case should be referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, and a file of evidence was referred in October 2019. It was also agreed with GMP that the officer had a case to answer for gross misconduct. The officer was charged with misconduct in public office and sexual assault. He made his first court appearance in August 2021.

In 2022, GMP arranged a special case hearing, in relation to an allegation of sexual activity on police premises. The case against the officer was found proven at the level of gross misconduct and he was dismissed without notice at the hearing on 29 April 2022. He was also barred from working in policing in future.

Following a trial at Liverpool Crown Court, which concluded in April 2023, he was found guilty of 15 counts of misconduct in public office and five counts of sexual assault. The offences took place between 2015 and 2018, and related to the officer's interaction with nine individuals.

In June 2023, the officer appeared at Liverpool Crown Court, where he was sentenced to five years in prison.

Organisational learning

National learning

Shortly after the investigation got under way, prompted by this case and some other matters we had been made aware of around that time, we wrote to the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) in December 2018 calling for all forces to review safeguarding arrangements for their cadet schemes.

At that time, the NPCC confirmed a new national safeguarding framework was being developed.

Organisational learning identified for GMP

The GMP investigation team identified a significant amount of organisational learning based on their findings. They identified vulnerabilities in relation to GMP practices regarding young people involved in the cadet scheme and apprentice programme.

A plan to address immediate and mid-term issues arising from Operation Ector was prepared in November 2018. A review of GMP cadet schemes was undertaken that month, which resulted in some units being paused or merged with other areas. In March 2019, further actions were identified by GMP after it was agreed to look at ways to implement the learning in other areas where employees were interacting with young people.

A report outlining all 41 recommendations, and the actions proposed or already taken to address them, was produced in July 2020. This was reviewed and approved by the IOPC decision maker. At this time, the majority (25) of the recommendations had been implemented, while five were assessed by GMP and found to require no further action. Three of the recommendations required long-term action which was ongoing, and work was in progress towards implementing the other eight.

Learning identified during the investigation covered a range of areas, predominantly: training and recruitment; oversight; and the way information about the cadet scheme was recorded and communicated. A number of recommendations related to the GMP-wide review of the cadet scheme, while others addressed the way concerns about conduct were dealt with. Three of the recommendations related to issues within GMP's apprentice programme.

Actions taken

Training and recruitment

A number of issues were identified during the course of the investigation relating to recruitment and the training provided to cadet leaders. Inconsistencies were found between units as well as in vetting process for internal and external recruits. There was a lack of clarity among cadet leaders regarding what was expected of them.

Among the steps taken by GMP were:

- improvements to the training and guidance given to cadet leaders, with training to be provided to new recruits prior to starting
- a standardized vetting process for cadet leaders, with regular reviews carried out using the police national database
- a central team appointed to oversee cadet recruitment
- an induction package created to provide the new intakes with key information

Oversight

During Operation Ector, it became clear the officer was operating with minimal supervision from senior colleagues. Subsequently, it was identified that there was a lack of oversight of new units within Greater Manchester; a lack of consistency in the way the different units operated; and a lack of supervision to monitor the workload and welfare of employees who volunteered within the cadet scheme.

Recommendations to address these issues included:

- restructuring units as part of the organisational review of GMP's cadet scheme
- appointing superintendents to take responsibility for local units
- having a central team oversee activities, including approving lesson plans, and social and fundraising events
- appointing a dedicated lead for young people from within GMP's senior leadership team
- requiring internal cadet leaders to inform their line manager, as well as regular reviews of their hours volunteered

Communication and information management

As well as concerns over methods of communication used within cadet units, GMP also identified a lack of consistency in the way information about cadets was recorded. Actions were also proposed to address examples of GMP employees inappropriately communicating with young people, whether by the method of communication or the content of messages shared.

This included:

- circulating key messages to cadet leaders regarding the use of appropriate channels, including advice not to have cadets as friends on social media and instruction to cease social media and WhatsApp contact immediately
- ensuring all units use a dedicated central system for storing information
- improvements to this system aimed at strengthening safeguarding measures
- information and support provided to officers and staff around interaction with young people

Review of cadet scheme

Several recommendations made as a result of the investigation related to GMP's review of its cadet scheme. They included:

- reviewing staffing to ensure appropriate support in all areas
- approving new criteria as part of the risk assessment when determining how units should be allowed to operate in future
- having a senior leader review full unit assessments

As part of the review that was carried out, the cadet scheme was restructured and four units were decommissioned due to a lack of engagement and low leader numbers.

Other recommendations

Concerns were also raised about an inconsistent approach to discipline within the cadet scheme, as well as a lack of knowledge among young people about raising issues regarding colleagues. When considering GMP's apprentice programme, issues identified included the number of hours worked, a lack of support and apprentices not being fairly allocated to departments.

Recommendations made in these areas included:

- providing clear guidance and processes for dealing with breaches of the Code of Ethics, and ensuring matters are recorded centrally by GMP's Professional Standards Branch
- creating a single point of contact for young people to raise concerns (on review, this was deemed unnecessary as the issue had been adequately addressed through other actions)
- providing training for those supervising young people at GMP, ensuring there was awareness of hours people should be working as well as support available
- implementing a monthly review of tasks and hours worked for apprentices
- ensuring a fair and clear allocation process for apprentices