

Family contact officer (FCO) – supporting family members of suspects under investigation for online child abuse offences

The family contact officer (FCO) is the single point of contact for supporting family members of suspects under investigation for online child abuse offences.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Organisational
Topic	Child abuse Rape and serious sexual offences Wellbeing
Organisation	Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2023–25 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary
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Region	South East

Key details

Partners	Police Government department Health services Private sector
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	September 2023
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Families Offenders

Aim

The aim of the FCO role is to support the officer in charge (OIC) by informing and supporting family members of suspects under investigation for online child abuse offences.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes are to:

- improve the support provided to families by focusing on child safeguarding
- enhance suspect management by engaging with family members
- increase the efficiency of investigations
- improve the quality of the investigation

Description

The FCO role was designed to support OICs, who are often tasked with communicating with suspects' family members, diverting their capacity away from investigative tasks. The role is

undertaken by a police constable who is part of Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary's Internet Child Abuse Investigation Team (ICAT). The force initially introduced the role as a six-month fixed term contract, which has now been extended to 12 months.

The FCO often accompanies the investigators during the arrest or warrant of the suspect. At this stage, the FCO will establish contact with the families of the suspect. If the FCO is not present during the arrest or warrant, the ICAT investigators can refer the family to be contacted.

The responsibilities of the FCO include:

- explaining investigation processes and outcomes
- conducting child visits and recording the child's voice in cases involving risk of harm
- conducting bail reviews and enhanced risk assessments
- supporting child victims through video recorded achieving best evidence (ABE) Interviews
- liaising with social workers and attending child protection conferences
- accompanying family members to criminal trials
- a consistent service is provided to suspects' family members

The FCO will engage and brief the family about the charity Hope After Harm, which provides support to victim-survivors, families and young people. The family can then decide on whether to accept/request a referral to receive support from Hope After Harm.

The charity offers:

- emotional support – through a counselling service
- practical advice – guidance on navigating legal processes, social services and understanding your rights
- confidential help – assistance with dealing with relationships, friendships and navigating the criminal justice system
- signposting – help with finding and accessing local support such as housing, benefits or counselling
- understanding and compassion – understanding the unique challenges faced by families and friends during police investigations

Funding and resources

Hampshire Office of Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) has partnered with Hope After Harm, to ensure the role provides tailored support for family members of suspects under investigation for online child abuse offences. The force has obtained £30,000 of funding for the FCO to manage 100 referrals to Hope After Harm per year linked to online child image offending. All activities are recorded monthly and are overseen by the OIC.

Overall impact

During October 2024 to September 2025, the FCO role has been involved in over 100 ICAT investigations, including:

- 42 ongoing support cases
- 17 victim visits – eight cases of contact offending and 12 child medical procedures
- five cases accompanying family members to criminal trials
- two ABE interviews

While the time-saving benefits for OICs are hard to quantify, the FCO role has received positive feedback from the ICAT team and suspects' family members.

Learning

- The workload for the FCO role continues to increase; having one role meant that there were gaps in support due to leave or illness. This has been rectified by expanding the role to two positions.
- Some officers are more likely to utilise the FCO's services, while others may need reminders to offer support during arrests.
- For investigations involving child victims of contact and online offending, OICs have become increasingly reliant on the FCO's skills to handle sensitive family engagement. The FCO's resilience and training have been crucial in managing the emotional impact of disclosures and providing ongoing support.
- Initially, the FCO role excluded the Isle of Wight, but it was later expanded to ensure consistency across the geographical area.

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