

Institute of Technology



## *Document Summary*

# **The Bichard Inquiry Report**

*HMSO, June 2004*

# The Bichard Inquiry Report

On 17th December 2003, Ian Huntley was convicted of the murders of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells. It emerged that Huntley had been known to the authorities over a period of years, coming into contact with the police and/or social services in relation to 11 separate incidents involving allegations of criminal offences, between 1995 and 1999. Nine of these were sexual offences. This was not discovered in the vetting check carried out by Cambridgeshire Constabulary when he was appointed caretaker of Soham Village College late in 2001.

This inquiry looks at the child protection procedures in Humberside Police and Cambridgeshire Constabulary, with a focus on the effectiveness of record keeping, vetting practices and information sharing with other agencies. It aims to discover what happened, why it happened and what lessons can be learned.

## Humberside Police

Huntley repeatedly came to the attention of Humberside Police and Social Services, with numerous allegations of rape, sexual assault and underage sexual intercourse, but they failed to share information effectively with other agencies and each case was looked at in isolation. The failures in the way in which Humberside Police managed their intelligence systems led to information being lost without appropriate review, or not recorded at all. The poor quality of information available prevented Huntley's behaviour pattern from being identified soon enough.

The problems in Humberside were, in the words of the Chief Constable, 'systemic and corporate'. There was a failure to identify the problems over a period of several years, because of a lack of effective management audits and inspections to ensure that systems were working.

## Huntley's recruitment

The post of residential site officer or caretaker at Soham Village College was advertised after the previous post-holder had been dismissed for having an inappropriate relationship with a pupil. Huntley applied under the name Ian Nixon and performed well at interview, including satisfactorily answering questions on child protection. The interview could have been more focused and should have taken into account the 1992 report by the Committee of Inquiry entitled *Choosing with Care*.

There were errors in the recruitment procedures used by Soham Village College. One of these was accepting open references, rather than obtaining references directly from referees, as was normal practice for the school. Huntley's employment history was not adequately checked, despite the fact that there were gaps in it and employment dates were listed by year, rather than by month or specific date. He was also allowed to start work before the necessary checks were completed, even though the post was being covered temporarily and there was no evidence in his employment history of having worked with children before. However, even if these errors had not been made, it is probable that the outcome would have been the same.

A director of Education Personnel Management Limited, the personnel service provider used by Soham Village College, would have signed the police check form that Huntley provided to confirm the details in it, but they did not actually check all of the particulars, relying on the individual's honesty. The Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) needs to offer further advice on the responsibilities of registered bodies for the checking of information provided by applicants for disclosure.

## The vetting check

Serious errors were made in the handling of Huntley's vetting check, as a result of problems in the Cambridgeshire Constabulary's local CRB. The CRB was suffering from a general staff shortage, a shortage of fully-trained staff, large volumes of work and staff absence. Consequent errors included entering Huntley's date of birth incorrectly, checking the Police National Computer (PNC) only against the alias 'Ian Nixon' and failing to send a fax to Humberside Police requesting a check of their records. A subsequent review has shown that it is unlikely that such errors were widespread.

If a fax had been sent to Humberside Police, it is unlikely that any significant details would have been found, since the systems which had records of the allegations of sexual offences would not have been searched. If a fax had been sent to Lincolnshire, it might have uncovered the only intelligence report on Huntley, but this did not happen, either because of an omission on the form or an error by the CRB. Errors in Cambridgeshire Constabulary were serious, but they were neither systemic nor corporate, and their extent was not as great as failings in Humberside Police.

## The national context

Although national IT intelligence systems were part of the National Strategy for Police Information Systems in 1994, they have since been formally abandoned and there are still no firm plans for such a system in England and Wales. It has only very recently become a priority for forces (and the CRB) to identify whether intelligence is held on an individual by another police force. The PLX system to enable this should be available to all forces by the end of 2005.

The PNC is currently the most important system, holding information on recordable convictions as well as aliases and distinguishing features. There are serious delays across police forces in entering information into the PNC, which indicate a failure to recognise the importance of intelligence gathering to effective policing. The Home Office intends to introduce a code of practice to support improvements in the PNC. The Police Performance Assessment Framework and the Performance Baseline Assessments will examine the quality and timeliness of PNC data entry. The responsibility for entering court records onto the PNC will transfer from the police to the Court Service by 2006.

A national code of practice covering record creation and management would address the confusion and lack of clarity concerning these issues, which caused such problems in Huntley's case.

## Recommendations for action

- A national information technology system for police intelligence in England and Wales.
- The PLX system, which flags that intelligence is held about someone by particular forces, should be introduced in England and Wales by 2005.
- Police IT procurement should be reviewed to ensure that national solutions are developed to national problems.
- The Government should invest in the medium- and long-term future of the Police National Computer:
  - a new Code of Practice dealing with the quality and timeliness of PNC data input should be made under the Police Reform Act 2002
  - PNC input should also be regularly inspected by the Police Performance Assessment Framework and the Performance Baseline Assessments
  - inputting court results will be transferred from the police to the Court Service.

- A new Code of Practice should be produced which clearly sets out the principles of good information management with regard to policing purposes, the law and the rights of the individual, along with the standards to be met.
- In handling allegations of sexual offences against children:
  - the Government should reaffirm the guidance *Working Together to Safeguard Children* so that police are notified as soon as possible of offences or suspected offences against children
  - national guidance should be produced to inform the decision as to whether or not to notify the police
  - the Integrated Children’s System should record cases where a decision is taken not to refer to the police
  - the Commission for Social Care Inspection should check whether decisions not to inform the police have been properly taken.
- With regard to training those conducting interviews to reflect the importance of safeguarding children:
  - from a date to be agreed, interview panels should have at least one properly trained member
  - inspection bodies should review schools’ recruitment arrangements.
- There should be a registration scheme for those who wish to work with children (possibly supported by a card or licence) with information available continuously to employers:
  - employers could decide whether a post requires the holder to register
  - a central body would have the discretion to ignore conviction information judged to be irrelevant
  - individuals would have the right to appeal against a refusal to place them on the register, before information is made available to a third party.
- Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, the Association of Chief Police Officers and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) should develop standards for carrying out police vetting checks, covering the databases to be searched, the robustness of procedures, guidance, training, supervision and audit.
- There should be an enhanced disclosure regime for all posts working with children.
- Checking processes should be clarified and improved through:
  - better ways of verifying identity
  - guidance to ensure forms are adequately checked
  - access to additional databases (eg customs and excise, National Crime Squad) for the CRB.