

**Children at Risk of Exploitation – including children at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation**

**Ward(s) All**

**Portfolios: Cllr Wilson, Children's Services**

**Executive Summary:**

This report provides an overview of the issues relating to child exploitation including child sexual exploitation (CSE) and criminal exploitation; including children involved in the supply of drugs "county lines". It also makes reference to the national and regional responses to these issues which are priorities for the Council and the wider partnership and the response to these issues in Walsall, led by the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership (formerly the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board).

**Reason for Scrutiny:**

This report was requested by the Chair of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to provide an update on current partnership activity relating to Child Exploitation, to enable Members of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Panel to fulfil their key responsibility and duties in holding the Council and its Partners to account for its work in preventing and protecting children and young people from harm through child exploitation in Walsall. This report builds on previous reports on Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Exploitation (CE) presented to Scrutiny in October 2014, April 2015, November 2016, January 2017, January 2018, September 2018, September 2019 and January 2020.

**Recommendations:**

**That:**

1. Scrutiny notes and supports the contents of the report and the current activity to protect Walsall children and young people from the risk of exploitation, to pursue perpetrators and to disrupt their activities, including through prosecution.
2. Scrutiny challenges the partnership on the outcomes for children and young people in Walsall in relation to preventing and protecting against child exploitation.

**Background papers:**

The following reports provide an overview into the issues of child exploitation nationally and regionally:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, 2018
- 'If only someone had listened': the Office of the Children's Commissioner inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups report, November 2013
- The Jay Report: Independent Enquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham August 2014
- The Sexual Exploitation of Children: It Couldn't Happen Here, Could It? A thematic report by Ofsted, November 2014
- The Louise Casey Report of an Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, February 2015
- Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation across the West Midlands Assessment, 18 March 2015
- Tackling Child Exploitation Her Majesty's Government March 2015
- Time to Listen – a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children September 2016
- Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance, Home Office 2017
- National Crime Agency Intelligence Assessments, NCA 2017

#### **Resource and legal considerations:**

Responding to children at risk of significant harm is a statutory duty placed on local authority Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services, Strategic Partnership Chairs and senior managers within organisations who commission and provide services for children and families, including social workers and professionals from health services, adult services, the police, Academy Trusts, education and the voluntary and community sector who have contact with children and families.

The resources required to respond to this statutory requirement come from within the existing resources across the partnership of organisations working in Walsall to protect vulnerable children and those at risk of harm.

#### **Citizen impact:**

The effective delivery of high quality services to protect children and young people from significant harm, including the risk of child exploitation has a direct impact on the welfare and well-being of children and young people in Walsall. It directly links to the corporate priority to Improve Health and Wellbeing and the Children's Services objective that all children in Walsall are safe and supported.

#### **Environmental impact:**

There is no environmental impact

#### **Performance management:**

The Walsall Safeguarding Partnership monitors the performance of the partnership in successfully supporting children and young people at risk of exploitation, prosecuting offenders and the promotion of disruption activity.

**Equality Implications:**

The co-ordinated provision of services designed to address the protection of children and the disruption and prosecution of activities by adults provides specific support for those children and young people who are at risk of significant harm. This includes those protected characteristics of gender, disability, race and religion.

**Consultation:**

There is consultation and feedback with partners through the Safeguarding Partnership and the Criminal Exploitation sub group (CMET). Young people are consulted and their opinions and views are obtained through the Return Home Interview process and Children in Care Council.

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## 1. Introduction

1.1 The two main forms of child exploitation are sexual and criminal exploitation, which may both occur at the same time for the same child. This report provides an overview of the issues involved, the partnership response and suggests areas where the committee may like to seek further information in understanding the issues and the response to child exploitation.

1.2 Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is when people use the power they have over young people to sexually abuse them. In February 2017 the Department for Education issued a new definition of CSE:

*“Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual.” (Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners Department for Education February 2017).* Walsall Safeguarding Partnership has adopted this definition of sexual exploitation of children and young people under the age of 18years.

1.3 Children in exploitative situations and relationships are groomed; they may receive gifts, money or affection as a result of performing sexual activities or others performing sexual activities on them. Children or young people may be tricked into believing they're in a loving, consensual relationship. They might be invited to parties and given drugs and alcohol. They may also be groomed and exploited online. Some children and young people are trafficked into or within the UK for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation can also happen to young people in gangs.

1.4 Young people often trust their abuser and do not understand or recognise that they are being abused. They may depend on their abuser or be too scared to tell anyone what is happening. It can involve violent, humiliating and degrading sexual assaults. In some cases, young people are persuaded or forced into exchanging sexual activity for money, drugs, gifts, affection or status. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact and can happen online. Sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and trafficking is complex. However, the responsibility for the exploitation of children lies with the perpetrator.

1.5 The most common form of child criminal exploitation is “county lines”. The National Crime Agency defines county lines as:

*“a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs. These dealers will use dedicated mobile phone*

*lines, known as 'deal lines' to take orders from drug users. Heroin, cocaine and crack cocaine are the most common drugs being supplied and ordered. In most instances, the users or customers will live in a different area to where the dealers and networks are based, so drug runners are needed to transport the drugs and collect payment".*

This is facilitated by a group who may not necessarily be affiliated as a gang, but who have developed networks across geographical boundaries to access and exploit existing drugs markets in these areas.

- 1.6 Criminal exploitation is child abuse where children and young people are manipulated and coerced into committing crimes.
- 1.7 Child exploitation is most often identified when young people go missing from home or care either regularly or for significant periods of time. It may also be detected when a child's behaviour changes or if they acquire new possessions or money without an obvious explanation.

## **2. Know**

### **The Local Response**

#### **Governance**

- 2.1 Following on from the development work commenced by the Partnership in November 2019, the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership has now moved to an All Age approach to Exploitation with the Exploitation Sub-Group, jointly chaired by West Midlands Police and Adult Social Care expected to commence under new arrangements in April 2021.
- 2.2 The membership of this multi-agency group includes Children's Social Care, Adult Social Care, Education, Licensing, Youth Offending Services, West Midlands Police, voluntary organisations, and partners from health.
- 2.3 Over the last 12 months, the partnership have worked together to develop an All Age Exploitation Pathway and All Age Exploitation Assessment which was launched in September 2020. An All Age Exploitation Strategy is being led by the Community Safety Partnership with the intention of providing a strategic overview of the wider partnership response to exploitation. The multi-agency partnership will ensure that safeguarding responses and procedures are put into place to safeguard, protect and prevent young people from exploitation. The strategy will be reviewed by the Exploitation Sub Group and the Safeguarding Partnership.

## **3. Operational Practice**

- 3.1 The 2017 Ofsted inspection report recommended that Children Services: *"Improve the response to all children at risk of child sexual exploitation, making*

*sure that all assessments, safety plans and interventions are of a consistently good quality”.*

- 3.2 The Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer (PERO) role is now well established, with a key focus on strengthening partnership responses to missing and exploited children, young people and vulnerable adults in Walsall. The development of the exploitation delivery groups has been key in bringing partners together and strengthening multi-agency relationships, to enable a clear and robust exploitation pathway to be developed and agreed across the partnership.
- 3.3 The delivery group continues to focus on key areas such as improving knowledge and practice across the partnership, strengthening and developing effective systems and process and working towards a multi-agency co-located exploitation hub, developing a partnership training programme as well as delivery of awareness raising sessions within the community and strengthening the collation of data and data reports.
- 3.4 The importance of an integrated approach to exploitation through multiagency working is well recognised. A multi-agency Daily Missing and Exploitation Triage has been developed which brings together a range of practitioners who work in partnership to provide a clear, consistent and coordinated response to preventing, identifying and responding to children, young people and adults at risk of exploitation, trafficking and missing in Walsall.
- 3.5 The daily triage initially commenced in January 2021 with a focus on missing children and was facilitated by a LOCATE officer from West Midlands Police and the Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer (PERO) for Children’s Social Care. In line with the development of the all age exploitation assessment and all age exploitation pathway that launched in September 2020, the daily triage became a multi-agency triage for missing and exploited children, young people and vulnerable adults and although has taken some time to become established, it now includes police from all sectors of West Midlands Police Force (Force CID, Neighbourhood Police Unit, LOCATE, PPU), Children’s Social Care (exploitation team), Youth Justice Service, Turning Point, Adult Social Care and Street Teams. Triage will shortly be strengthened by attendance from an education. It is intended that health colleagues will join daily triage by May 2021.
- 3.6 All missing children notifications from police and all exploitation assessments for children, young people and adults, are discussed at the daily triage within 24 hours of receiving them in the Exploitation Team. This ensures a coordinated and timely response to information received and allows for appropriate intervention and support to be identified and implemented at the earliest opportunity.
- 3.7 The key objectives of the daily missing and exploitation triage are:

- To provide a coordinated multi-agency response to missing and exploitation concerns for children, young people and vulnerable adults.
- To share information about children and young people who are currently missing and discuss and agree actions, interventions and lines of enquiry required to locate them. Agree to the requirement of a strategy meeting for children and young people missing over 72 hours.
- To share information and intelligence in relation to children and young people who have returned from a missing episode and consider the number and frequency of missing episodes (multiple missing episodes within 3 months or less). To discuss at triage within 24 hours of a found notification being received and agree any required actions, i.e RHI to be offered, use of appropriate police notices, missing intervention meeting to be convened.
- To reduce risk of exploitation and missing episodes within the community through early identification and intervention i.e. low risk exploitation concerns, signposting to community and voluntary provisions for preventative intervention.
- Review and discuss updated exploitation assessments for open children, young people and adults which are completed and submitted following a change in circumstances or new concern arising and collectively agree level of risk/harm in collaboration with the allocated worker.
- To share information and intelligence to support appropriate decision making and identification of risk level in relation to children, young people and adults who are being exploitation or are at risk of exploitation.
- To ensure information or actions are appropriately disseminated within own agency/department/team and with partners as relevant. To include inputting of appropriate exploitation and/or missing flags/markers on individual agency ICT systems.
- All practitioners have a key role to play in identifying and supporting victims by sharing information and intelligence, tackling exploitation and targeting disruption.
- Multi-agency sharing of information in relation to exploitation perpetrators that present a threat, risk or harm to children, young people and vulnerable adults, for a range of disruption opportunities to be considered.
- Identification of emerging themes, which are to be shared with exploitation panel on a monthly basis.

3.8 The supervisors/managers of the partners within daily triage meet on a weekly basis to discuss any emerging themes or commonalities identified in relation to exploitation victims, perpetrators and locations of concern and any identified connections, any barriers or resource concerns in relation to disruption and any intervention/actions required to address the identified need. These discussions form part of the agenda/updates for the monthly exploitation panel.

3.9 The Exploitation Panel meets on a monthly basis and reports to the Exploitation Sub Group of the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership. The panel is co-chaired by a Children's Social Care Head of Service and Super-intendant Neighbourhood Policing Unit (NPU) and it replaces the previous Children's Missing Operations Group and Multi Agency Risk and Vulnerability panel meetings. The exploitation panel is a multi-agency panel where information, Intel and disruptive actions with regard to perpetrators of exploitation are shared, key locations used to exploit children, young people and adults are understood and disruption responses agreed, trends, networks and connections between victims, perpetrators and locations is understood and multi-agency actions are agreed to disrupt and manage key locations and perpetrators.

3.10 At the last meeting in February a new approach to managing threat, harm and risk was discussed. As a result, an overarching risk register is being developed to provide a framework for on-going self-assessment and continuous improvement. This will ensure that actions and learning from exploitation cases is implemented quickly and progress is monitored more effectively.

## **4 Respond**

### **The challenge in Walsall**

#### **4.7 Sexual Exploitation**

As at 31 December 2020, 42 children were assessed as being at risk of sexual exploitation. Of these:

- 5 children are assessed as being at serious risk (high). This is a reduction of 3 children on the previous year
- 8 children are assessed as being at significant risk (Medium). This is a reduction of 1 child on the previous year
- 29 children are assessed as being at risk (low). This is a reduction of 32 children on the previous year

4.8 Comparatively, the data shows a significant decrease in terms of lower levels of CSE concern. This is mostly due to regular auditing and review of those children open to support services. Auditing of low risk children and young people takes place every three months to ensure the right support is being offered to the right children, at the right time for the right amount of time. Where CSE concern is not evident or risks have not been highlighted during this period (i.e. missing episodes), the low risk marker is removed.

4.9 Children in Walsall have previously been identified as low risk of sexual exploitation if vulnerability features exist, even if there were no links to grooming or sexual harm, for example, if a child is known to smoke cannabis or have friendship links with other known children, risk levels could be considered as low risk using the previous CSE screening tool which did not give room for



practitioners professional opinion linked to each area. The new Exploitation Assessment looks at vulnerabilities more specifically linked to exploitation and that are evidenced based, which is likely to lead to lower number of children and young people being identified as vulnerable or at low risk of exploitation, however a more accurate number.

4.10 All exploitation assessments are reviewed and discussed within the missing and exploitation daily triage within 24 hours of receiving them and these includes children, young people and vulnerable adults, some of which are known to social care and have an existing plan and allocated worker and some are new children, young people and adults that are not previously known or not currently open to Social Care or Early Help.

4.11 The multi-agency triage of exploitation assessments enables the timely sharing of information and intelligence from partner agencies to support appropriate decision making and identification of risk level in relation to children, young people and adults who are being exploited or are at risk of exploitation. It supports early identification and intervention for children, young people where there are low risk exploitation concerns by signposting to community and voluntary provisions for preventative intervention and it benefits from multi-agency agreed actions and interventions required to reduce harm in relation to children, young people and adults identified as being exploited or are at risk of exploitation. All practitioners have a key role to play in identifying and supporting victims by sharing information and intelligence, tackling exploitation and targeting disruption.

## **5 Criminal Exploitation**

5.7 As at 31 December 2020, 56 children were identified as being at risk of or being criminally exploited in Walsall. Of these:

- 5 children are assessed as being at serious risk (high). This is a reduction of 3 on the previous year
- 11 are assessed as being at significant risk (medium). This is a reduction of 9 children on the previous year
- 40 are assessed as being at risk (low). This is an increase of 2 children on the previous year

5.2 The number of children and young people identified as being at risk of or being criminally exploited in Walsall is currently higher than the number of children and young people at risk of or being sexually exploited. Criminally exploited children and young people are sometimes mistaken or 'labelled' as perpetrators when they are victims who are groomed and exploited to commit crimes on behalf of their groomer/perpetrator.

5.3 There are no longer separate panels/meetings for children and young people being criminally exploited. The discussion; decision-making; risk assessment

and identification of appropriate intervention to support, safeguard and disrupt criminal exploitation is via the daily missing and exploitation triage. The child or young person's existing plans and reviews discuss disruption activity in the same way that sexual exploitation is managed. The benefits of having one forum for these initial discussions and decision making is that connections and themes can be identified as there can often be associations or links between young people who are criminally exploited and young people who are sexually exploited. This allows for more holistic planning and decision-making and we would expect to see more disruption moving forward. The presence of the youth justice service within the daily missing and exploitation triage is extremely valuable.

- 5.4 It is worrying that a number of victims of criminal exploitation continue to be criminalised for crime committed on behalf of their groomer, whilst a number of them have a positive NRM in place. Further awareness and understanding is required of criminal exploitation across the partnership and wider community. The partnership have utilised the current county lines and criminal exploitation intensification week to share webinars, resources and links to Barnardos and St Giles, to increase aware of criminal exploitation and understanding of NRM's. This remains a key focus of development moving forward.
- 5.5 Recent data collation in relation to children and young people who are exploited or at risk of exploitation indicates a high number of these children and young people are missing from education, are subject to managed moves or there is a risk of exclusion. We have secured a recent offer from the virtual school to partake in daily missing and exploitation triage which will enable access to educational information and timely identification of any additional vulnerabilities that need to be considered when reviewing risk levels and appropriate intervention.
- 5.6 Preliminary discussions have taken place with the Education Delivery Manager in the West Midlands Violence Reduction Unit. The VRU is currently working with two educational establishments in Walsall (Blue Coat School and Walsall College).

#### **The role of the Education Team within the Violence Reduction Unit:**

- Working in schools to deliver trauma – informed training, which promotes resilience and reduces risks to vulnerable children and young people who experience violence in their lives.
- Supporting the training and development of education staff to promote a whole school approach to children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing, with a focus on behaviour as a communication.
- Helping schools adopt tried and tested methods to prevent young people being drawn into activities that may lead to violence.
- Linking the support offered by schools, partners and communities to ensure all children get the support and opportunity they need to fulfil their potential and stay in mainstream education.

- a) Bringing together experts within education so they can share, develop and influence educational approaches that support social, emotional and mental health of young people at risk or affected by violence.

We are in discussion to consolidate and further develop collaboration between education, the VRU and the wider partnership to ensure we can mitigate against the risk of school exclusions. Research has clearly and repeatedly shown that when children fall through the gaps in a system, such as attending an alternative education provision, then they become more vulnerable.

- 5.7 In addition, a high proportion of victims of exploitation have a diagnosis or display traits of ADHD or Autism, which in turn can increase their vulnerability. There is an identified need for health input in triage; however, lack of resource is restricting this currently. A proposed timeframe provided by health colleague's state is that they will be able to join triage from May 2021. Walsall Health Trust are committed to working in partnership in the provision of a response to exploited children. The Trust have recognised in their training that exploited children often become exploited adults as is reflected in the daily triage meetings. In September 2020 the Trust safeguarding team took part in a multi-agency audit on the transitions exploitation protocol; learning from this audit has been shared with WHT staff in daily communications briefings, training events and also with all members of the Trust's internal Safeguarding Committee who are expected to circulate to their teams. .
- 5.8 Two of the WHT Safeguarding Children Team staff have attended a University of Bedfordshire course entitled "Understanding Child Sexual Exploitation, Associated Forms of Harm and Contextual Safeguarding". This has proved useful in informing their day-to-day work in the Trust; they will also be utilising their new knowledge to deliver level 3 exploitation training, which could also be shared as a multi-agency training event.
- 5.9 The Trust are currently working with our informatics and performance teams to develop coding that will capture those patients who attend our emergency department (ED) and in whom indicators of exploitation may have been recognised.

## **6.The Clinical Commissioning Group**

- 6.1 Walsall CCG recognise that Safeguarding has remained business critical during the COVID-19 Lockdown. Walsall CCG acknowledge and support the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership priority of responding to the Exploitation of Children, Young People and Adults. Walsall CCG fully support and engage with the development of the all age Exploitation Strategy.

The Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Adults along with a Police representative co-chair the Strategic Exploitation meeting.

- 6.2 Walsall CCG has set up the Health Exploitation Group. The purpose of the Health Exploitation Group is to provide a structure in facilitating and embedding learning within the member health organisations to support systems in preventing abuse of children and adults at risk of exploitation. The group employ joint working to consider the impacts on all critical areas of business in protecting and recognising children and adults from exploitation and organised criminality. These arrangements seek to ensure each health partner/organisation will safeguard their stakeholders and promote the welfare of children and young people, vulnerable adults and protect the public in Walsall.
- 6.3 The Designated Nurse for Looked after Children is an active member of the NHSE/I Regional Tackling Serious Violence Forum. In addition, the Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Adults is an active member of the West Midlands Anti-Slavery Network. Information from these strategic meetings are then feed in at a local level.
- 6.4 The CCG has assisted with the co-ordination of the health response at a strategic and an operational level, ensuring there is correct representation at appropriate meetings from CCG and Provider Organisations including the planned health response to the Exploitation Hub.

The CCG has been a key agency in the delivery of the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Work that Walsall has been fortunate to undertake following a successful bid submitted by the previous Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Children.

## **7. Missing Children**

- 7.1 In December 2020, 71 notifications of missing were received in respect of 51 children. Of these notification, 35 Return home interviews were completed (49%). Of the 36 not completed:
- 23 were declined (return interviews were offered, by either telephone or face-to-face visit). It has been noted that more return home interviews have been declined during the third COVID lockdown, some schools have not been accepting visitors and parents have not wanted missing officers visiting their home during lockdown or over the festive period.
  - 12 appointments were made but the child went missing again within 72 hours and the RHI therefore was not completed.
  - 1 young person remained missing at the end of December therefore RHI would count in January figures.
- 7.2 Missing data continues to be scrutinised on a monthly basis. There have been fluctuations in missing children through the ongoing periods of national/local lockdown. There have been fewer children missing during these periods, although this could be due to none reporting to police at this time.
- The social care missing officers continue to offer RHI's for all young people who have been missing and complete interviews with young people in a

timely way. More creative ways of completing RHI's has been offered during the period of local and national lockdown, offering virtual visits through teams, WhatsApp calls, face to face meetings outdoors in open spaces and virtual meeting through schools. The number of return home interviews that aren't completed due to children and young people going missing again within 72 hours, remains higher than is liked and further work is required to understand this cohort of children and young people, the frequency of missing episodes and time missing and ensure that missing trigger plans are in place and missing intervention meetings are held where required to try and reduce frequency of episodes. This will continue to be monitored through regular audits.

- Our highest risk young people who go missing are our children in care – this is a national/regional issue and one in which a lot of work is currently being focused around. A partnership meeting was held with Police (Locate) Children's Social care and commissioning to review the draft 'Best Practice Guidance for Children missing from Care' formulated by the NPCC. It was agreed that the draft guidance would be used to advise supported accommodation providers and care home providers to explore the use of missing trigger plans and ensure that children and young people are appropriately reported missing. The Police are now leading on work to develop a care provider's forum, with multi agency training and workshops to implement the latest guidance making sure that everyone is clear on roles and responsibilities. Next steps will look at involving looked after children and young people in writing a young person's charter that will sit alongside guidance for professionals.
- There have been concerns during 2020 that police notifications of missing episodes were often delayed, sometimes by several days and this would impact significantly on the timeliness and uptake of 'return home interviews'. Whilst this has improved and the timeliness of receiving notifications is much more appropriate, there are concerns that at times, notifications are not being received from police in a small number of situations and children's social care are notified of a missing episode by the care provider for the child in care. This is something that police are continuing to look into to understand why the compact notification is not sent through and it appears to link to situations where the young person has not returned at the time they have indicated and notification to police of the young person being missing is sometimes sent prematurely and they return before the compact is actioned. Whilst this is concerning and needs to be addressed, it is reassuring that the use of the multi-agency missing and exploitation triage daily assists in identifying such situations quickly, escalating and resolving these, whilst ensuring that the child or young person's needs continue to be appropriately met in a timely way and that RHI's are offered.
- The daily triage supports in identifying preventative work around missing, focusing on those children where exploitation is a potential feature. There

is also a particular focus on those children who are first time missing and what work can be done to prevent future missing episodes.

## **8. Trafficking**

8.1 Information relating to children who are accepted as having been trafficked are obtained from the National Crime Agency. This includes foreign nationals trafficked into the country as well as Walsall children who are trafficked internally within the UK. Social Care can only currently report on the number of National Referral Mechanism's submitted by social care that return positive, as there is no central collation of data currently available. Police are sharing monthly figures and local police recognise that a positive NRM places a responsibility on FCID to investigate the exploitation concern for the child or young person, and the exploitation police Sgt is keen to promote awareness of NRM's and encourage submission across the partnership.

8.2 Further work is being undertaken by the Exploitation Delivery Group is being undertaken to increase understanding and awareness of NRM's. NRM (National Referral Mechanism) usage has increased in Walsall during 2021. More victims are being referred through the All Age Exploitation Pathway and are being recognised as victims of trafficking, as well as victims of exploitation. The NRM is a form of legislation that actively highlights a victim of trafficking for exploitation purposes. The rising number of the NRM notices is due to ongoing training for First Responders (Police, Social Workers and Barnardos) to identify those victims that are trafficked in a timely way and Police colleagues who are starting to use the NRM to escalate crimes that need to be investigated further.

Trafficking notices and NRM use remain a priority for 2021-2022 and further work with Police colleagues and the Trafficking Service provided by Barnardos is planned. More recently, there have been cannabis farm raids within the local area that have uncovered children who have been trafficked here internationally to grow and distribute drugs. This is the type of exploitative crime that as awareness is raised, so too will referral rates.

## **9. Impact of COVID 19**

9.1 COVID-19 restrictions hamper the ability of frontline agencies to risk-assess child exploitation, and exacerbate the potential for young people to be exploited and harm to remain hidden. Ongoing concerns include:

- Safeguarding capacity - reduced contact with young people due to lack of resources; doorstep/telephone communication replacing face-to-face interaction; and victims of exploitation falling through the net due to school closures.

- Evolving County Lines supply methods - increased levels of cuckooing with young people remaining in trap houses for longer; greater use of local children involved in transporting drugs; perpetrators claiming to have COVID19 in order to avoid being stopped, questioned and arrested; and use of supermarket car parks to co-locate with customer shopping routines.
- Heightened risk of exploitation due to greater social media and internet use; feelings of isolation, and greater substance misuse among children residing away from family members.

9.2 The pandemic has created challenges for child protection services. Lockdown has meant many organisations have not undertaken for face to-face safeguarding and risk assessment, fuelling concerns over online harms and grooming while young people were confined to their homes. School closures further exacerbates risks to vulnerable young people. However, Children's services frontline staff continue to undertake direct face-to-face visiting and intervention to children and young people who require safeguarding owing to exploitation concerns.

9.3 There has been a reduction in missing notifications during the most recent lockdown. This trend was seen during the first lockdown with numbers increasing as restrictions lifted. There has also been reduction in the uptake of return home interviews though Walsall's performance is higher than regional neighbours.

9.4 On a positive note, some real traction has been made in relation to the development and implementation of the all age exploitation pathway, all age exploitation assessment and the missing and exploitation triage, during the COVID pandemic, despite predominately-remote working for many partners currently.

9.5 Children and young people who are open to children's social care due to medium or high-risk exploitation concerns have continued to be seen regularly and in line with the COVID practice guidance. RAG rating is in place to ensure that visits are planned in accordance with level of need, frequency required and whether this should continue to be face-to-face visits.

## 10. **Next Steps**

10 The exploitation of children is complex for which there is no quick fix solution. As a partnership we know that we must tackle those that perpetrate abuse and seek to do this through disruption and prosecution of perpetrators, which we hope will deter others.

10.1 Following the development work which commenced in November 2019 the Partnership has developed and implemented the following actions:

- Agreed an all age pathway to tackle the identification of exploitation
- Implemented an all age Exploitation Assessment

- Daily Missing and Exploitation Triage has been developed which provide the granular detail about what is happening on the ground (including the hotspots of activity and perpetrators) and; identify the gaps (who **isn't** being reached; where referrals **aren't** coming from) which can inform strategic planning and decision-making.
- Coordinate information in order to develop safety planning with young people.
- Weekly meetings to discuss themes, connections etc.
- Exploitation Panel has been implemented. This has supported in the development of local strategic partnerships and improved information sharing.
- Children and adult exploitation delivery groups.
- The development of process and practice to complex investigations.
- Development of multi-agency partnership training and awareness raising.
- All age Exploitation Strategy is being developed.
- Greater links with the wider partnership, which has enabled more creative disruption activity.

## **11 Development of the Exploitation Hub:**

- 11.1 As a Partnership we have also agreed to move forward with creating an Exploitation Hub to make best use of the existing specialist capacity within West Midlands Police and Children's Services in respect of CSE and CE. Work is ongoing to reach agreement in respect of the remit of this unit and the staffing resources that will be required. The hub will build on strategic partnerships locally improving information sharing so that offender and victim profiles are more complete and feed into effective disruption and early intervention techniques.
- 11.2 It is hoped that the Hub will serve to build on the progress of Exploitation Triage and provide an integrated response to Complex Safeguarding concerns, sharing information efficiently and in a timely manner and within agreed protocols to protect and safeguard our children, young people and vulnerable adults. The aim is that key partners will be joined by a variety of multi-agency partners to ensure a targeted response across need and risk for vulnerable people so they can be supported to mitigate against the harm of exploitation.
- 11.2 Through the Delivery Group, we will direct our efforts into working hard to ensure that all communities, families in Walsall are aware of what exploitation is and how to report concerns. Through a joined up partnership awareness raising campaign in Walsall we will improve early identification and our responses to children at risk before risk escalates.
- 11.3 We know that for some children who suffer exploitation in childhood this does not end just because they reach the age of 18. We know that those that suffer abuse as a child can continue to be exploited as an adult and can go on to endure chronic mental health issues throughout their lives. We continue to work closely with colleagues in Adult Services in Walsall, as well as Street Teams to ensure support is available to vulnerable adults post 18 years of age.



- 11.4 As a partnership, we will continue to work with all professionals to develop a model for children to build positive trusted relationships with a professional of their choice, knowing that this encourages them to have the confidence to recognise and / or disclose their experiences.
- 11.5 We will undertake a review of the Missing service to ensure that it has sufficient capacity and the right processes to be able to offer RHIs to the appropriate children
- 11.6 As a partnership, we will continue to work to better understand and to develop our response to all forms of criminal exploitation. Both local and national reviews have identified the need to ensure that children who are being exploited are in school. There is focussed work being undertaken in this respect that is looking at the local offer across the wider partnership.

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