

Overview and Scrutiny Committee

28 January 2019

Agenda Item No.

6.

Young People- knife crime and criminal exploitation

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Cllr T Wilson – Portfolio Holder for Children’s Services Social Care

Executive Summary:

This report provides an introductory overview of the issue of knife crime and criminal exploitation for young people. It also outlines Walsall Children’s Services response to the problem in partnership with Walsall Police and other partners.

Reason for scrutiny:

The report was requested by the Chair of Children’s Services Scrutiny Committee to provide an update for the members of Scrutiny Panel. Research undertaken by the Youth of Walsall has indicated that knife crime is a significant concern for Walsall children and we are aware that criminal exploitation and links to gangs is an emerging issue. Therefore, this report aims to provide an update for panel members to enable them to fulfil their duties and responsibilities in holding the council and its partners to account.

Recommendations:

That:

- 1. Scrutiny notes and supports the contents of the report and the current activity to protect Walsall children from the dangers of knife crime and criminal exploitation.*

Resource and legal considerations:

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

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

Strategic priority 2018-2021

- Children have the best start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.

Citizen impact:

The work in Walsall to address knife crime and criminal exploitation has a direct impact upon the welfare and wellbeing of young people and their families.

Environmental impact:

None noted.

Performance management:

The performance of the partnership in successfully reducing knife crime and criminal exploitation in Walsall is monitored by the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB), and relevant WSCB sub-committees, Children's Services Performance Management Board and Walsall Youth Justice Service Performance and Partnership Board.

Reducing inequalities:

The provision of services to reduce knife crime and the criminal exploitation of young people aims to support those at risk of harm and who need safeguarding. This includes young people from protected characteristics of gender, disability, race and religion.

Consultation:

This report has been prepared collaboratively between Walsall Children's Social Care, Walsall Youth Justice Service and Walsall Police.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Child Criminal Exploitation has been defined within the Home Office Serious Violence Crime Strategy (2018) where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

1.2 The Modern Day Slavery Act 2015 places a duty on local authorities, including services that are commissioned to give due regard to support people who are drawn into modern slavery in which people are exploited for criminal gain. Practitioners need to be mindful that children who are criminally exploited should be seen as victims and not treated as criminals. They should also be treated through the lens of modern slavery and child safeguarding legislation and practice.

1.3 Criminal exploitation of children is broader than just county lines, and includes for instance children forced to work on cannabis farms or to commit theft. County lines is a major, cross-cutting national issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons; and the response to tackle it involves the police, the National Crime Agency, a wide range of Government departments, local government agencies and VCS (voluntary and community sector) organisations. The UK Government defines county lines as:

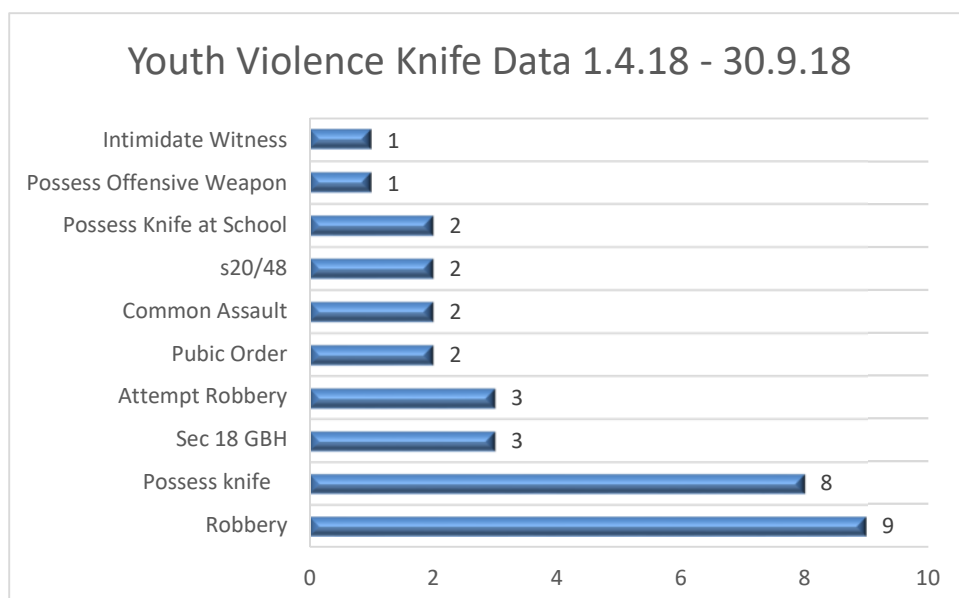
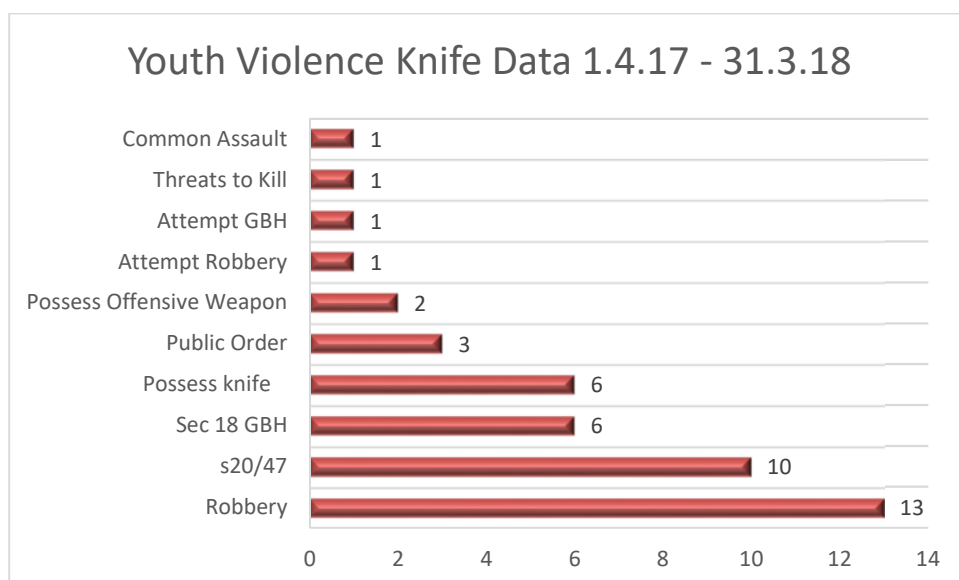
1.4 County lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

1.5 The reasons why young people carry knives are complex, varied and not necessarily linked to criminal exploitation and/or gangs. Although certainly the possession of a knife is a common factor for those young people involved in county lines criminal exploitation and the supply of drugs.

2. Local issue.

2.1 There is an emerging issue of knife crime amongst young people in Walsall and according to police crime data recorded violent crime has been increasing across the borough. Knife crime in itself represents a small percentage of all crime, although in recent times there have been 4 murders in the borough that have involved a knife or a bladed weapon. These tragic events understandably attracted public attention and there is a perception that knife crime is a critical issue. Certainly, research undertaken by the Youth of Walsall highlighted that knives and gangs are a significant issues of concern for our young people.

2.2 The following information pertaining to violent crime has been provided by Walsall NPU.



2.3 The two charts above look at youth violent crime where a knife was present. The first chart is the full year 2017/18 and the second chart relates to April – Sept 2018. There have been 33 Youth Knife related offences from April – Sept 2018 compared to 44 for the full previous year. Knife crime is an important issue to address in Walsall.

2.4 In 2018 Walsall Youth Justice Service (YJS) consulted with 20 young people who were receiving intervention from the YJS about the reasons that young people carry knives.

2.5 They identified the main reason to carry a knife was to feel *‘safer’*, however conversely this was closely followed with *‘to scare others’*. One young person said that they carry a knife because they have been specifically threatened by others and 3 young people talked about the threat from *‘gangs’*. Some areas in Walsall were identified by our young people where *‘knife crime is increasing rapidly’* and had *‘issues with gangs as they cross the border from Wolverhampton’*. The following quote is from one of our young people:

2.6 *“Even if we did put our knives away..., there’s still hundreds of people that you and the Police don’t know about who are still going to carry knives. Who is going to protect us from them?”*

2.7 Ultimately, the real number of young people carrying knives and the full scale of the issue can never be known as not all knife crime is detected or reported. It is clear that perceptions or misperceptions play a significant role to play in convincing young people to leave the house with a knife in their possession and also whether they ultimately use them.

2.8 Following extensive cross-agency discussion between Children’s Social Care, West Midlands Police and Walsall Youth Justice Service to map tangible evidence of criminal exploitation, we now have an agreed number of Walsall young people who we are aware of that are assessed as ‘high risk’ of being criminal exploited. This number is currently assessed as 8, but is of course changeable. It is concerning, but perhaps not surprising, that all 8 find themselves in the youth justice system as young people who have been charged or convicted of offending behaviour. We are aware of approximately 50 other young people who are presenting a ‘low’ to ‘medium’ risk of being criminally exploited.

2.9 We know that from working closely with Walsall Police that some Walsall young people are exploited and influenced by established urban street gangs that operate on the borders of the borough, within Birmingham, Sandwell and Wolverhampton. We are aware that some young people living in Walsall have some associations within these urban street gangs and at times there is ‘gang’ activity within the borough. Information from Walsall Police indicates that this occurs due to a lack of an established youth urban street gang in Walsall and therefore violence can migrate across. There is an acknowledged gap in the partnerships’ intelligence around groups of young people within areas of Walsall where violence and knife crime is occurring and as a partnership we are working hard to co-ordinate and share information.

3. Local Governance:

3.1 Governance for activity to safeguard young people from criminal exploitation and the dangers of knife crime sit underneath several partnership boards:

- Walsall Safeguarding Children’s Board (WSCB) and the WSBC sub-committee Child Missing, Exploitation and Trafficking (CMET).
- Safer Walsall Partnership- Community Safety Board
- Walsall Youth Justice Performance and Partnership Board

3.2 Accountable to the CMET sub-committee, a multi-agency Exploitation Delivery Group was developed with membership including Children’s Social Care, West Midlands Police, Youth Justice Services, Education, Licensing, Legal Services, voluntary organisations, and partners from health. The purpose of the Delivery Group is to operationalise, support, develop, monitor and evaluate the impact of the Child Exploitation Strategy and in doing so improve the multi-agency response to safeguard and protect children who are at risk of or who are being exploited.

3.3 Reducing violence is a strategic priority of the Community Safety Partnership and reducing knife crime is a strategic priority for the Youth Justice Service for 2018/19. Knife crime and exploitation are pertinent issues that are also now monitored by the WSCB. Data and analysis pertaining to knife crime is presented to all three of these partnership boards for regular monitoring, oversight and strategic direction.

4. Local response.

4.1 Although there are links between the possession and use of knives with criminal exploitation and gangs, there are many other reasons why young people carry and use knives and therefore the response to reduce this type of dangerous behaviour should not focus on exploitation and gangs alone. The response to local increases in knife crime therefore needs to be as varied as the reasons why young people carry them.

4.2 Walsall's Community Safety Partnership have been successful in applying for an **Early Intervention Fund** through the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner. The aim of the early intervention Fund is to target our resources and work with a group of approximately 100 young people who have been identified by various partner agencies as at risk of violence, carrying and using knives, criminal exploitation, and links to gangs, drug misuse and reoffending. It was also give us the additional capacity to work with siblings and family members of young people involved in violence and the criminal justice system. As this funding is temporary it is important that we are able to demonstrate the impact of this work in 2019/20.

4.3 Response to the emerging issue of Criminal Exploitation:

"Protecting children from criminal exploitation, human trafficking and modern slavery: an addendum" was published in November 2018 and detailed findings from Joint targeted Area Inspections carried out in the spring of last year. In summary the report found that:

- lessons must be learned from past sexual exploitation cases
- all children, not just the most vulnerable, are at risk of criminal exploitation
- agencies should not underestimate the risk of criminal exploitation in their areas
- children should be seen as victims, not perpetrators
- awareness-raising is crucial in preventing criminal exploitation

4.4 The report calls on agencies to get the basics right, making sure that there are clear systems in place at the 'front door' of services that first come into contact with children is essential, so that children at risk are identified and receive a prompt and appropriate response. This response needs to be varied and focussed on family.

4.5 The report also calls for a whole system approach to address the perpetrators, to protect and support victims, as well as preventing exploitation by raising awareness in the community and disrupting criminal activity.

4.6 Through the governance of the WSCB sub-committee, CMET, and the Exploitation Delivery Group, Walsall have developed an **Exploitation Strategy** which builds upon the significant progress made with Child Sexual Exploitation to include Criminal Exploitation.

4.7 Again, through the governance of CMET and the Exploitation Delivery Group, the Walsall partnership have made the decision to pilot the use of a **regional screening tool** for practitioners that assesses for both Child Sexual Exploitation and Criminal Exploitation. The screening tool is now regularly used to support safeguarding referrals and is also a pre-requisite for oversight at the Multi-agency Risk and Vulnerability Panel.

4.8 As a result of the work of the Exploitation Delivery Group, a task and finish group has been established to develop and implement an awareness raising campaign that will; consider different forms of exploitation, raise awareness of exploitation in Walsall to

support communities in understanding the issue and to also ensure the public are aware of how to raise concerns with the authorities.

4.9 The delivery group are looking at **awareness raising campaigns** as a rolling programme that will include Criminal Exploitation (incorporating gang and knife crime). It is proposed that the partnership all take responsibility for raising awareness in their specific service areas around the proposed themes which will ensure a wide reach in terms of getting messages out. This campaign will align with the Walsall Safeguarding Children Board (WSCB) campaign. This will be delivered in a way that reaches vulnerable community groups and children and will promote activities designed to raise awareness. The group is also meeting in January to look at the current services in place from partnership agencies and voluntary bodies to reduce criminal exploitation in Walsall and to then consider how any deficit in support can be addressed.

4.10 Walsall Children's Services, in partnership with West Midlands Police, CAMHs, the Beacon Substance Misuse Service and other partners have joined together to establish a **Multi-agency Risk and Vulnerability Panel (MRVP)** to ensure robust partnership plans are in place for young people assessed as high risk of being criminally exploited and involved with gangs. The panel has joined together with the Youth Justice Service's high risk panel to ensure improved alignment and information sharing. Social Workers, Youth Justice Officers and Police Officers are working closely together to ensure plans and intervention are joined up for these young people and that these plans include disrupting and catching the perpetrators of exploitation.

4.11 Through MRVP, the Youth Justice Service (YJS) are able to offer support to the siblings and families of young people at risk of criminal exploitation or involved with gangs through the **YJS Crime Prevention Service**. We know that there is an increased risk to the family members surrounding these young people and therefore it is important to provide a preventative service to safeguard them.

4.12 Walsall Children's Services have placed a requisite on all practitioners and managers to undertake regionally designed **human trafficking training**. The level of training required depends upon the nature of the work undertaken, but provided an overview for frontline 'first responders' required to complete exploitation referrals to the National Referral Mechanism.

4.13 Response to the increase in knife crime:

As already stated, the response to the increase in knife crime also need to be varied in its approach and some of the focus of interventions needs to be different to the response to criminal exploitation. We know that the reasons for carrying knives are not necessarily related to criminal exploitation or 'county lines'. Some elements of our Walsall response to knife crime is detailed below.

4.14 Walsall YJS in partnership with Walsall Police work closely with the charity **'Street Doctors'**, which provides an education programme to empower young people at risk of carrying knives to learn, share and teach emergency lifesaving skills regarding unconsciousness and bleeding. Young people are provided with first aid accreditation, career guidance and mentoring and a keen awareness of the dangers of knife crime.

4.15 The **'Precious Lives' workshop** looks at recent youth murders and how everyday young people make choices which have life-changing consequences for so many. It is focused around knife crime but has been adapted to a wide range of audiences covering

varied topics from drugs and anti-social behaviour to being more motivated to achieve. Young people who have received convictions for knife related offences or who are at risk of carrying a knife are supported to attend the programme.

4.16 **'Real Knives, Real Lives'** is a knife awareness campaign being run by the Youth of Walsall (YOW) with support from their Youth Workers, the Youth Justice Service, the Police, Walsall Council and other partners. The project is being funded by the Active Citizens Fund, from the Office of the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner. The campaign aims to educate young people at risk of committing knife crime about the potential impact of their actions, not only on victims and perpetrators, but also their families and relevant organisations that are involved in the aftermath of a knife incident.

4.17 Throughout September 2018, workshops have given young people at risk of knife crime a space to explore youth violence from different perspectives and help them to consider and recognise their own talents and skills. We needed this part of the campaign to have the greatest impact on the young people that experience these issues on a weekly basis and therefore the Youth Justice Service were critical in supporting their young people to participate. Further workshops, incorporating the arts, are being planned in some schools across the borough.

4.18 Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) was launched in 4 **schools** in the summer of 2018. It is a peer mentoring programme that gives young people the chance to explore and challenge the attitudes, beliefs and cultural norms that underpin gender-based violence, bullying and other forms of violence. It addresses a range of behaviours including name-calling, sexting, controlling behaviour and harassment, and uses a 'by-stander' approach where individuals are not looked on as potential victims or perpetrators but as empowered and active bystanders with the ability to support and challenge their peers in a safe way.

4.19 MVP is being driven by Walsall's Early Help Service and is currently working with schools across the borough to roll out the programme. This is a partnership project with West Midlands Police

4.20 A significant piece of research has been undertaken across the West Midlands Combined Authority area into the extent of the **childhood adversity** of young people within the Youth Justice System and the impact this had had on their propensity to commit offences. The research examines the life stories of these young people from birth and details the traumatic experiences they have suffered, including abuse, loss, a range of trauma and attachment issues. Through Walsall's Community Safety Partnership, Walsall YJS applied for Police and Crime Commissioner funding to train all staff within the Service and increase Walsall's research sample. The findings from the research are being presented to the YJS Performance and Partnership board in January and it is hoped that this information will enable the YJS and the wider partnership to better target its resources to address the issue of knife crime and serious violence.

4.21 The **YJS Crime Prevention Service** is successful in working with young people who are at risk of committing violent offences, including carrying knives and also those young people who have received a Police disposal, such as a Community Resolution. The numbers of Walsall young people entering the youth justice system as a first time entrant remains low due to work that the Crime Prevention Workers complete. Work to address knife crime within **schools** is important and YJS Crime Prevention Workers deliver 1 to 1 interventions with students and wider inputs to classes and year groups.

There is also significant activity by Early Help and Walsall Police within schools to provide universal knife crime awareness raising interventions.

4.22 The Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chief Constable asked every school and college in the West Midlands to have a conversation with students about knife crime before the summer holidays in 2018. The 'big conversation' occurred across the region to create some momentum to help stop the problem of knife crime. There was a lot of activity in 2018 to attempt to co-ordinate the partnerships approach to working together with schools to avoid duplication. There is a **Schools Partnership Police Officer** who works closely with Walsall schools to deliver a universal awareness raising.

5. Conclusion:

5.1 Similar to the issue of child sexual exploitation, there is no quick fix to the emerging issues of knife crime and criminal exploitation. It is imperative that we continue to learn more about county lines and improve our knowledge of how Walsall young people are drawn into a life of exploitation. It is, however, clear that no one single agency is able to tackle these issues alone and a robust partnership approach, that focusses on the strength of relationships and family, is required to make a positive difference.