

Children’s, Families and Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Monday 9 March 2026, 6:00pm

In Conference Room 2 at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor N. Latham (Chair)
Councillor T. Jukes
Councillor E. Morgan
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor L. Rattigan

Co-opted Members

W. Duffus, Secondary Teacher representative.
D. Smith, Diocese of Lichfield.

Portfolio Holder

Councillor M. Bird - Leader
Councillor M. Statham – Children, Families &
Lifelong Learning

Officers present (Walsall Council):

C. Male	Executive Director (Children’s Services)
R. Homer	Director (Children’s Social Work)
S. Kelly	Director (Access and Inclusion)
I. Vanderheeren	Director (Early Help)
R. Phillips	Head of Children’s Early Intervention and Adolescent Support
L. Wright	Head of Service, Support and Protection
R. Warren	Group Manager MASH, Exploitation and Turning Point
D. Elrington	Head of Community Safety and Enforcement
S. Jones	Head of Safeguarding Partnership

Partners

J. Brown	CEO, Street Teams
Z. Chowdhury	Violence Reduction Unit
Inspector D. Fox	West Midlands Police
A. Jones	Designated Nurse Adult Safeguarding, Black Country ICB

57 **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Councillors C. Towe, Councillor S. Ditta, and S. Guy for the duration of the meeting.

58 **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions for the duration of the meeting.

59 **Minutes**

The meetings of the meeting held on 27 January 2026 were considered by the Committee.

Resolved

That the minutes held on 27 January 2026 were agreed as a true and accurate record.

60 **Declarations of interest and party whip**

There were no declarations of interest or party whip.

61 **Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985 (as amended)**

There were no agenda items requiring the exclusion of the public.

It was agreed that items 8 and 9 would be received prior to item 6.

62 **Children at Risk of Exploitation**

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Group Manager highlighted the salient points (annexed). The Committee was informed that the term 'child exploitation included child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, county lines, modern slavery and trafficking. The Committee was informed that perpetrators may subject children and young people to multiple forms of abuse at the same time. The Walsall 'All-Age' approach to tackling exploitation for children, young people and adults had been in place since 2019 and was supported by a reduction strategy. Exploitation had remained a focus of the partnerships work.

Members considered the triage data 2025/2026 and noted that 307 child screening tools were received via the exploitation hub. Of these, 18 screening tools identified no evidence of exploitation or vulnerability to exploitation, and 7 were out of borough children. The remaining 282 exploitation screening tools for children were screened and discussed within the multi-agency exploitation triage and a level of exploitation was agreed. The impact of the 'Aspiring Futures' programme was considered, with 39 young people who were considered to be at high risk of exploitation supported since the model launched in May 2025.

The locality youth offer in Walsall was described by the Head of Children's Early Intervention and Adolescent Support, this alongside 'safe spaces' and 'Our Place' in Walsall town centre aimed to reduce the exploitation of young people. This was in response to children and young people reporting that they did not feel safe when travelling through the town centre.

Members were advised that the youth justice service worked with a small cohort of children at high risk of exploitation, often with more complex needs. A lived experience mentor worked with young people in this cohort.

Representatives from Street Teams, West Midlands Police, the Violence reduction Unit, Community Safety and the Integrated Care Board described their organisations contribution to tackling and responding to child exploitation in the Borough. It was noted that partnership working had strengthened and the representatives each provided a unique type of support to assist in the reduction of exploitation.

There then ensued a period of questioning, in response to challenge Officers confirmed that where young people moved out of the area, the local authority was notified that they had previously been identified as at risk of exploitation. In response to questions around timeliness of escalation, Members were assured that concerns were raised immediately.

Officers explained how parents and careers were supported to understand exploitation and assisted if they were struggling stating that Parents were seen as an additional Partner. Across the pathway parents received support from Street Teams and workshops were held for parents and in schools. It was noted that exploitation could happen anywhere at any time, and equally online.

Challenge was provided in relation to the training offered to hotels, Officers stressed that hotels were not licensed however lots of work had been done to raise awareness and encourage reporting. Members queried how online safety was promoted, Officers explained that parents were educated through workshops to understand the risks. The Head of Safeguarding stated that education was key, and that an 'all-age education' subgroup considered new and emerging online risks and had developed a strategic plan. The Chief Officer (Street Teams) informed the Committee that there was a focus on online harm for children in year 6 to prepare children for the increased exposure.

It was questioned how awareness could be raised with parents, and it was suggested that it was the responsibility of the partnership to collaborate and offer education sessions. The Violence Reduction Unit offered webinars for parents to make the offer readily available and take a preventative approach.

Resolved

That the Children at Risk of Exploitation report be noted.

63 Child Neglect Strategy

The Portfolio Holder introduced the report, and the Director (Early Help) presented the salient points (annexed). The Committee was informed that the report provided assurance in relation to the Ofsted ILAC 2025 recommendation that the effectiveness of practice with every child who was experiencing harm from neglect needed improving. The Child Neglect Strategy 2025 – 2030 updated the previous

2021 – 2025 approach. A key shift was the removal of the word 'persistent' from the definition of neglect, reinforcing that any level of neglect was harmful and that early action should be taken. The strategy was informed by an updated local needs assessment which identified several key areas of concern. The strategy set out three outcome-focused priorities:

1. Maximise opportunities for preventative support.
2. Improve identification, assessment and practice.
3. Strategic leadership and system accountability.

To further strengthen practice a multi-agency neglect pathway had been developed and launched, and a 'Early signs of neglect tool' had been developed and would be embedded within partnership guidance. Auditing had shown that practice was improving, however further consistency was needed. Techniques used to address practice variability were described, alongside prioritisation of neglect by the partnership.

Officers were challenged in relation to the involvement of the voluntary and community sector, and Members were assured that a representative sat on the Neglect subgroup, and there had been significant training for 'Holiday Activity Food' (HAF) providers. Further work with the faith sector was planned, however it was acknowledged that this was a vast sector.

It was queried how clearly the strategy defined neglect; it was stated that this was at a high level to encourage preventative work to identify it. Further queries related to how early help to prevent neglect could be evidenced. The Director suggested that this could be identified in the referrals received. It was stressed that work carried out through the partnership had assisted and resulted in more referrals.

Further discussion was held around the lived experience of children, which was captured through practitioners and the threshold of neglect.

The Director provided detail on 'where the silence is', which was an exercise mapping children that had not previously been seen by professionals. Work was being done to break down barriers, and Members were advised that further detail would be provided through the Best Strat Plan at a future meeting.

Resolved

- 1. That Members note the progress made by the Safeguarding Partnership in responding to the Ofsted ILAC 2025 recommendation on neglect.**
- 2. That Members are assured that robust partnership governance, oversight and practice improvement activity are in place to reduce the risk of children experiencing neglect for prolonged periods.**
- 3. That Members support the continued focus on prevention, early help and sustained multi-agency practice improvement in relation to child neglect.**

64 **Recommendation Tracker**

The recommendation tracker was noted.

65 **Areas of focus – 2025/26**

The areas of focus were considered by the Committee.

Resolved

That the areas of focus was noted.

66 **Forward Plans**

The forward plans were considered by the Committee.

Resolved

That the forward plans were noted.

67 **Date of next meeting**

The date of the next meeting was noted as 7 April 2026.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 8.22 p.m.

Signed:

Date: