

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

16 April 2024, 6:00pm

In Conference Room 2 at the Council House, Walsall

Committee Members present:

Councillor Hicken (Chair)
Councillor Jukes (Vice Chair)
Councillor Harrison
Councillor Latham
Councillor Nasreen
Councillor Garcha
Councillor Whitehouse
Councillor Nasreen
Councillor C. Statham
Councillor W. Rasab

Portfolio Holder

Councillor S. Elson

Officers present:

R. Homer	Director (Children's Social Care).
I. Vanderheeren	Director (Early Help)
R. Phillips	Head of Early Help, Family Support and Youth Justice
Katie Storer-Young	Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer
D. Elrington	Head of Community Safety and Enforcement
R. Warren	Head of Service, MASH, Exploitation and Turning Point
L. Wright	Head of Service (Support and Protection)
Antony Schaffarczyk	Head of Service (Family Safeguarding)
N. Gough	Democratic Services Officer

Partners

Chief Superintendent Dolby	West Midlands Police
A. Jones	Designated Nurse Adult Safeguarding (Black Country ICB)
D. Benson	Independent Scrutineer of the Safeguarding Partnership
H. Matthews	Head of Service Street Teams
R. Rackstraw	Operation Manager, Street Teams
Z. Chowdhury	Violence Reduction Partnership

60 **Apologies**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Nawaz.

61 **Substitutions**

There were no substitutions.

62 **Declarations of interest and party whip**

No declarations of interest or party whip were received.

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

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

64 **Minutes**

The minutes of the previous meeting were deferred.

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 11 March 2024 be deferred.

65 **Children at risk of exploitation**

The Head of Service introduced the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report provided the Committee with an update in respect of Walsall's arrangements and work to support Children and Young People that may be at risk of exploitation over the last 12 months. Child exploitation was described, which included child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation, county lines, modern slavery, and trafficking.

Members were provided with information on the 'All-Age Exploitation Strategy' which set out the vision to ensure the co-ordinated provision of services designed to address the protection of children and the disruption and prosecution of activities by adults. It was proposed to complete a strategic needs assessment by May 2024, which would lead to a revised exploitation strategy alongside an updated strategic delivery plan that would reshape focus and strategic objectives.

The operation of the 'Exploitation Hub' was explained, as a multi-agency approach to identifying, screening, and sharing of intelligence around those at risk of exploitation. Performance data from the hub was used to identify trends and emerging themes.

Members were informed that the 'Exploitation Pilot Team' was a 12-month programme, launched in October 2022, that focussed on delivering bespoke packages of support to individual children that were identified and selected through exploitation triage. The Exploitation Pilot Team had been audited, and the findings were positive with a decrease in vulnerability or risk for most young people. This had resulted in the extension of the pilot, until summer 2024.

The Head of Service described the Walsall CARE (community activities reducing exploitation) project, which was established following the receipt of DfE funding. The objective was to provide positive activities and diversionary support to each young person involved in the project. The outcomes of this project were presented, which were extensive.

Partners proceeded to present an update on the work within their organisation to tackle child exploitation.

The Chief Superintendent provided the West Midlands Police update, explaining that there was a dedicated exploitation team which was proactive in making arrests. The team was careful not to enforce against victims. There was an ambition to grow this team and create more posts. It was stressed that partnership work in Walsall, in this area, had increased in effectiveness.

The representative from the Violence Reduction Unit described the role of the unit as to prevent violence, particularly in those under the age of 25. Members were informed that key priorities included a crime prevention offer.

The Designated Nurse - Adult Safeguarding stated that exploitation was a key priority for Walsall ICB. A post had been created to support exploitation hubs from a health perspective. Most recently an exploitation event had been held, and this would be repeated in 6 months.

The Head of Early Help, Family Support and Youth Justice stated that the team provided positive activities to prevent young people from being exploited in Walsall, which was important when working with a vulnerable group of young people.

The Head of Community Safety and Enforcement stated that he co-chaired the 'all age' exploitation subgroup, and policies had been updated to include children. All strands of the service were involved in work relating to exploitation, this included trading standards, environmental health, community safety and community protection.

The Head of Service - Street Teams described the work of the service, stating that it worked closely with the exploitation team. Work included services for abused children, provision of a family worker, education of young people and families and training within schools.

There then ensued a series of questions from Members to Officers and Partners. In response to these questions the Chief Superintendent informed the Committee that in order to tackle adult perpetrators of exploitation more intelligence needed to be gathered alongside partnership working. Members were informed that tackling county lines operations in Walsall was successful due to successful partnership working at Black Country level. Officers stated that it was not always the case that young people were known to social services. Members were informed that a whole family approach was taken, although there was very often a safeguarding element in the household.

Chief Superintendent stated that there was a risk that victims could become offenders, which was evidenced by a disproportionality in victimology.

The Independent Chair of the Safeguarding Partnership responded to challenge to state that there was always more work to do however he was assured that there was an effective response in Walsall. He further explained his depth of experience in the area.

Partners agreed that awareness raising was a key area of concern to ensure that those at risk of exploitation were identified. It was clarified that historical allegations were investigated fully, and serious case reviews highlighted lessons learned.

The Director (Early Help) responded to state that partnership training was reviewed on an ongoing basis, and this was considered by the practice development group.

The transition to an adult from a child was considered, and the loss of safeguards (from the law and systems) when a child turned 18 years old. The adverse outcomes for young people were described. The role of the Probation Service in this capacity was described and the link that this service had with the Early Help Team.

Further to challenge, Officers stated that it was reassuring that referrals were received. It was important that exploitation was identified, however there was a focus on preventative work. It was stressed that the data relating to Walsall was not concerning. In response to a question around the number of projects offered, Officers explained that evaluation was ongoing however outcomes were positive at this early stage.

Members questioned the outcome of the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI), Officers responded to state that a set of recommendations relating to access to systems, and quality of referrals from the Police to MASH. Work was underway to make progress on these actions. It was stressed that good practice was also recognised by the inspection.

Officers confirmed that work was done with taxi drivers and hotels to ensure that they could identify exploitation. The Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer confirmed that new taxi drivers received exploitation training, and where there were know issues with hotels the team made contact to provide training. She further provided detail on the complexity of exploitation post-covid - the drug market had adapted to the pandemic to exploit vulnerable adults and children in their own homes.

Officers and Partners described work that was done with the BAME communities to increase awareness and ensure concerns were referred. The process for reporting concerns in relation to exploitation were described.

Resolved that:

- 1. The Children at risk of exploitation report was noted.**
- 2. It was recommended that this item be reconsidered in the new municipal year.**
- 3. That a letter be sent, on behalf of the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee, to the Police and Crime Commissioner expressing concern around the arrangements in relation to funding for exploitation hubs.**

66 **Child Sexual Abuse within the Family Environment**

The Director (Children's Social Care) introduced the report and highlighted the salient points (annexed). The report outlined the partnership activity relating to child sexual abuse within the family environment in Walsall.

The context to child sexual abuse was provided, this included its inclusion as a strategic priority in Walsall, and that a child sexual abuse subgroup had been formed in September 2023 with the specific aim of ensuring that there was a shared understanding of the impact of child sexual abuse and how long lasting impact could be prevented. A strategic needs assessment focusing on child sexual abuse was planned by the end of summer 2024 and would support a revised child sexual abuse strategy.

The Head of Service (Family Safeguarding) explained that the approach to this issue was a partnership one, using the 'Four P' approach which was to plan, prepare, prevent and prosecute.

In response to questions, Officers clarified that there had been 21 convictions. The Director stated that locally and nationally child sexual abuse had been underrepresented. Further challenge was provided in relation to how referrals were encouraged. The methods for identification were provided and how professionals were encouraged to link in together and the criteria for assessment. In response to queries around data collection and the ability to link information and track issues back, the Committee was informed that the Partnership complied with data protection laws and confirmed that the key thing was to ensure child sexual abuse was identified.

Resolved

1. That the Child Sexual Abuse within the Family Environment report was noted.
2. That a report on Child Sexual Abuse within the Family Environment be reconsidered at a future meeting.

67 **Recommendation Tracker**

The Committee received the tracker of recommendations from previous meetings, including progress made and outstanding items.

[Annexed]

Resolved:

That the recommendation tracker be noted.

68 **Areas of Focus**

Resolved that:

The Areas of Focus be noted.

69 **Date of next meeting**

The next meeting would be confirmed at Annual Council.

There being no further business this meeting was terminated at 8.55 pm.

Signed:

Date: