

27 January 2020

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 (primarily 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:

The report was requested by the Chair of Children's Services Scrutiny Committee to provide an update for Members of the Children's Services and Education Scrutiny Panel to enable them 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 CSE presented to Scrutiny in October 2014, April 2015, November 2016, January 2017, January 2018, September 2018 and 24 September 2019.

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

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 multi-agency response and suggest 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 (formerly WSCB) 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 don't understand or recognise that they are being abused. They may depend on their abuser or be too scared to tell anyone what's happening. It can involve violent, humiliating and degrading sexual assaults, including oral and anal rape. In some cases, young people are persuaded or forced into exchanging sexual activity for money, drugs, gifts, affection or status. Child sexual exploitation doesn't 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 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 Regional Response

- 2.1 A regional CSE co-ordinator was originally appointed in August 2015 together with an Implementation Officer later that year. Both posts formed part of a Preventing Violence against Vulnerable People (PVVP) programme. The regional meetings were refreshed in 2018 with a focus on exploitation in response to the increased awareness of risks to children being exploited for criminal reasons by gangs, in particular the risk of involvement in ‘county lines’, and the recognised relationship in some cases between risk of child sexual exploitation and gang association.
- 2.2 Collation and analysis of the identification of vulnerability to CSE and classification of that risk across the region is currently unavailable; however, this does not impact on practice or activity undertaken in Walsall to safeguard individual children and we continue to collate local data in relation to exploitation in Walsall which is referenced later in this report.
- 2.3 The National Crime Agency hold “intensification weeks” that focus on the disruption of county lines and criminal exploitation – the schedule for these is set nationally. Following recent discussions between the police and children’s social care services, we are planning to participate in the next planned “intensification week, scheduled in the autumn.

The Local Response

2.4 Governance

- 2.4.1 The Child Exploitation and Missing Trafficking Committee (CMET) sub group of the Walsall Children’s Safeguarding Board has a multi-agency delivery group, the membership of which includes Children’s Social Care, Education, Licensing, Youth Services, West Midlands, Police, 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 are being exploited.

2.4.2 The delivery group is focussed on specific areas of the CMET strategy and agrees how these will be progressed and implemented. The key priorities of the group are:

- To be clear on the scope of the problem in Walsall
- Raise awareness of exploitation within partners agencies and communities
- Monitor, review and co-ordinate provision and practice against the delivery plan
- Promote multiagency and collaborative working practices
- Promote cross boundary information and intelligence sharing
- To ensure that all decisions are made considering the voice of the child.

2.4.3 Key actions include:

- a) To put into effect the actions of the delivery plan
- b) Problem solve and troubleshoot any operational issues
- c) Develop, monitor and review multiagency practice in relation to CMET across the Borough
- d) Report back to the CMET Sub Group any issues and areas of concern
- e) Target work through Task and Finish groups as necessary

2.5 Operational Practice

2.5.1 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”*.

2.5.2 A specialist Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer (PERO) was appointed who has undertaken a range of activities to improve the response to all children at risk of sexual exploitation which has included:

- Development of the partnership response through a delivery group (as above);
- Improving the collation of data and data reports
- Improving knowledge and practice;
- Auditing and benchmarking the work at Walsall (see below);
- Development of a gang / criminal exploitation pathway;
- Challenged victim blaming language;
- Piloting a new CSE assessment tool;
- Reviewing process, pathways and procedures for social workers and other agencies;
- Reviewing the training delivered to taxi drivers in Walsall and working with colleagues to consider how this can be enhanced to take into account the emergence of criminal exploitation;

- Delivering awareness raising sessions and developing an awareness raising campaign for Walsall;
- Developing a transition policy between children's services and adults services
- Working and supporting regional colleagues to start to develop new processes and ensure a consistent response exploitation across the region.

This PERO continues to work on enabling the further development of the Partnership's response to tackling all forms of child exploitation.

2.5.3 The importance of an integrated approach to sexual exploitation through multiagency working is well recognised. Supporting sexually exploited children and disrupting perpetrators is a complex process and requires a response from a range of stakeholders. Multi-agency responses are supported through (MultiAgency Sexual Exploitation Panel (MASE) and Child Sexual Exploitation and Missing Operations Group (CMOG) in Walsall and we continue to develop and strengthen our responses through strategic meetings and joint training. Intelligence is shared to inform disruption and prosecution of perpetrators by Police.

2.5.4 Children missing from home or care is often an indicator of exploitation or increasing risk of exploitation. The process for undertaking return home interviews was reviewed in 2018 and the service brought in house in the autumn of 2018 to improve the timeliness and frequency of return home interviews as well as an improving liaison between those undertaking the interviews and follow up offers of support and intervention along a continuum from early help through to the allocated social worker. The capacity, role and processes of the service has been reviewed again by the new head of service with the intention of introducing further changes in the light of the change in the categorisation of missing children (see 4.2.3, below).

3.2.5 The CMOG meets on a monthly basis and reports to the strategic Child Exploitation and Missing Committee (CMET) of the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership (role of CMET is currently under review). Since May 2018, CMOG has had two panels, one of which considers children who are sexual exploited and the other those that are missing or criminally exploited – some children may be considered in both panels. These panels ensure that these children have a lead professional supporting them and an effective safeguarding plan in place. This ensures that all cases are considered by a single multi-agency group who are then able to identify any links between individual cases and ensure that all agencies are supporting victims and ensure that intelligence relating to patterns of abuse and risk are identified and action taken where necessary. This includes the sharing of intelligence relating to:

- Victims
- Perpetrators
- Locations

3. Respond

The challenge in Walsall

3.1 Sexual Exploitation

3.1.1 As at 31 December 2019 78 children were assessed as being at risk of sexual exploitation. Of these:

- 8 children are assessed as being at serious risk (high). This is a reduction of 2 children on the September figure
- 9 children are assessed as being at significant risk (Medium). This is a reduction of 5 children on the September figure
- 61 children are assessed as being at risk (low). This is a reduction of 21 children on the September figure

3.1.2 Assessing the level of risk enables professionals to work with the child and their family to address their educational, health, psychological and social care needs. It also enables West Midlands Police to tackle the perpetrators who seek to exploit our children.

3.1.3 Children who are assessed as being at serious or significant levels of risk are children who are being exploited and these children will be considered at a multi-agency sexual exploitation meeting (MASE). This meeting discusses how best to protect the child, sharing information and intelligence and is designed to identify specific actions relating to the exploitation this child is experiencing. These meetings are attended by the police, child, parents or carer, social worker, school or college, health and any other professional who can share information and offer support.

3.1.4 A clear plan of action (safety and disruption plan) is put in place to protect the child and this becomes the responsibility of a named professional to ensure the actions are delivered and the intended impact is achieved. The impact of exploitation on children has far reaching affect exploited young people are at increased risk of rape, sexual assault, physical violence, sexually transmitted infections, trafficking and pressure to use drugs and alcohol. CSE can impact on every aspect of a child/young person's life, such as:

- Physical and mental health
- Education and training
- Family relationships
- Friends and social relationships

This impact can go far beyond childhood into adulthood and affect their relationships with their own children in the future. As part of our ongoing work the MASE process and subsequent safety planning are under review to ensure that we have best practice in place throughout our processes.

3.2 Missing Children

3.2.1 The service provided for missing children was moved “in-house” in the autumn of 2018. It is currently the subject of an internal review to reconsider its processes.

3.2.2 During the spring of 2019, West Midlands Police adopted the Police College Guidance in respect of dealing with reports of missing persons. This resulted in a change from previous practice where some children were classified as absent rather than missing to a position where all children whose whereabouts is unknown will be considered as missing. It was expected that this would result in a significant increase in reports of missing children; insufficient data is available to comment on this as yet. However, Walsall Children’s Services, in common with other Children’s Services across the West Midlands, are experiencing some significant delays in receiving some of the notifications from West Midlands Police that children have gone missing or that they have been found and this impacts on the timeliness of the completion of the return home interviews.

3.2.3 This change was welcomed as it was recognised that on occasion vulnerable children were being classed as absent even when there were indicators of exploitation and the opportunity for early engagement was lost without this trigger for intervention.

3.2.4 In September 2019 98 Missing notifications were received in respect of 62 Walsall children. Of these, 49 children received a return home interview of which 22 (45%) were completed within the required 72hrs and the remainder were completed outside that timeframe. Those completed outside the 72hr timeframe were due to the following reasons:

- 8 delays in notification from West Midlands Police.
- 12 child/parent earliest convenience.
- 7 non-engagement within the timescale

11 return interviews were not offered because:

- 8 of the children were missing again within 72 hours.
- 3 of the children were triaged with police and deemed missing no apparent risk and therefore an interview was not required.

33 return interviews were declined by children/families.

3.2.5 In October 2019 79 notifications were received in respect of 56 Walsall Children and 50 return home interviews were completed. 24 of these were in the 72hr timescale (48%) and 27 were out of timescale. This was due to:

- 12 delays in notification from West Midlands Police.
- 13 child/parent earliest convenience.
- 1 child was missing again within 72 hours

21 return interviews were declined by children and their families.

3.2.6 In November 2019 the Missing Return Home officers established a daily triage process with officers from WMP Locate Team and MASH to support a joined up

approach to information sharing and decision making in respect of the children who have been reported to WMP as missing from home or care. This has improved working once the notifications have been received.

In November 106 notifications were received in respect of Walsall children and 50 return home interviews were completed. Of these, 42 were in timescales (84%) and 8 were out of timescale. This was due to:

- 4 delays in notification from West Midlands Police
- 4 child/parent earliest convenience

Of the 56 not completed,

- 24 return interviews were declined by children or their families
- 24 of the children were missing again within 72 hours
- the whereabouts of 1 child was unknown although he had not been reported missing again
- 1 child was in Police custody
- 1 child was triaged with the police and deemed not to require a return home interview

These delays and their impact on the offer of an intervention for children have been raised with West Midlands Police who advise that the reasons for these delays are due to the time available to staff to upload the notifications onto the system.

3.3 **Trafficking**

3.3.1 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. Updated information has been requested but is not currently available.

3.4 **Criminal Exploitation**

3.4.1 The collation of children at risk of or being criminally exploited is a relatively new development and includes all forms of exploitation including county lines.

3.4.2 As at 31 December 2019 66 children were identified as being at risk of or being criminally exploited in Walsall. Of these:

- 8 are assessed as being at serious risk (high). This is an increase of 1 on the September figures
- 20 are assessed as being at significant risk (medium). This is an increase of 9 children on the September figures
- 38 are assessed as being at risk (low). This is an increase of 6 children on the September figures

As with children at risk of sexual exploitation, a clear plan of action (safety and disruption plan) is put in place to protect the child and this becomes the responsibility of a named professional to ensure the actions are delivered and the intended impact is achieved.

4 **Next Steps**

- 4.1 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.
- 4.2 Our ongoing focus is on developing a strong partnership response to all forms of child exploitation; we know that this is most effective in tackling exploitation. To this end, the Partnership met in November 2019 and agreed a series of short term, 6month priorities. These include:
- Developing and implementing a single child exploitation strategy
 - Reviewing best practice in respect of existing risk assessment tool and implementing the reviewed tool
 - Ensuring how the data currently captured and held can be best used to understand the exploitation of Walsall children
 - Ensuring that the existing Transition protocol between Children's Services and Adult Social Care is fit for purpose and fully implemented
- 4.3 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 WMP 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
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 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 are working closely with colleagues in Adult Services in Walsall, as well as Street Teams to develop a transition pathway and support post 18.
- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 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

- 4.8 As a partnership, we will continue to work to better understand and to develop our response to all forms of criminal exploitation.

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