

Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee
16th April 2024

Agenda Item No.

Children at Risk of Exploitation

Ward(s): All

Portfolios: Cllr Stacie Elson - Children's Portfolio Holder

Executive Summary:

The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update in respect of Walsall's arrangements and work completed to support Children and Young People that may be at risk of exploitation over the last 12 months. The issue of Child Exploitation remains a core and significant component of activity and leadership focus of Walsall Council, the Local Safeguarding Partnership and Community Safety Partnership.

Child Exploitation (CE) is a term with a broad definition. It includes Child Sexual Exploitation, Child Criminal Exploitation, County Lines, Modern Slavery and Trafficking. Local Authorities have overarching responsibility for safeguarding all children in their area. Their statutory functions under the 1989 and 2004 Children Act(s) include specific duties in relation to children in need and children suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm (under sections 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989).

Local agencies, including police and health services, also have a duty under section 11 of the Children Act 2004 to ensure they consider the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people when carrying out their functions.

Reason for scrutiny:

This is an annual updating report outlining previous and current partnership activity relating to tackling Child Exploitation here in Walsall. This report aims to provide assurances and updates of the work that has taken place across the partnership since last presented to this committee in April 2023.

Recommendations:

To note and support the current plans in regard to the work being undertaken here in Walsall to safeguarding children at risk of exploitation.

Background papers:

Child exploitation is a continued concern across the country and both government and local authorities have seen the impact that exploitation has had on its children. Through research there have been lessons learnt and so local authorities now have a better understanding of how all forms of exploitation links to other behaviours which put children at risk of exploitative harm.

Previous reports in regard to Walsall's arrangements to safeguard our children exploitation have been presented to this committee annually and in line with safeguarding partnership processes.

There have been a number of regional and national reports published since Alexis Jay's Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham was published in August 2014. Since that time, the focus of what constitutes Child Exploitation has shifted and professionals working in this arena are now more educated as to its impact and how partners should work together in an attempt to reduce any risk within their communities.

In addition, Professor Alexis Jay has recently published (October 2022) her final report from the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. This outlines a number of key findings from a range of reports in regard to extra familial and intra familial sexual harm over the last 7 years. The most recent report specifically looking at Child Sexual Exploitation was published in February 2022 and outlined the findings of exploitation by organised networks. This review focussed on 6 case study areas and undertook a detailed analysis of information held by agencies to better understand the experiences and responses to children who were currently being, or had been, sexually exploited by organised networks.

The Government provided a response to the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Sexual Abuse in May 2023, accepting the need to act on all but one of the inquiry's recommendations, committing to an extensive programme of work across the recommendations which they felt would deliver real change for the future. The response went on to outline what actions were proposed by the Government across each of the recommendations, with reference to the voice of victims and survivors remaining at the heart of all of their work.

As with all regional and national research findings, we cross reference all key recommendations with the work of Walsall Safeguarding Partnership as an assurance and potential learning opportunity.

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. 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.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

One of our corporate priorities is that children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well. We also aim to provide people to have increased independence, improved health, and can positively contribute to their communities. In Walsall, we strive to ensure that communities are prospering and

resilient and that our children are living in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion.

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, whatever their needs, are safe and supported.

Environmental impact:

Not applicable for this report

Performance management

Protection from abuse is a fundamental right for all children and exploitation is a form of child abuse. Our vision continues to ensure that children, young people and their families whose lives are affected by exploitation will receive a high level of support, protection, and that offenders are held accountable for their actions, and brought to justice.

We continue to collate and track information in regard to exploitation through our exploitation hub and via the use of performance data. This information is also shared regionally with the local Violence Reduction Partnership as part of the regional data set that is accessible to all partners across the region.

Reducing inequalities:

Our Walsall All Age Exploitation Strategy sets out the vision that Walsall Council has 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 provides specific support for those children and young people who are at risk of significant harm, including those with protected characteristics of gender, disability, race and religion.

In line with our corporate priorities, Walsall sets out the response to secure improvements in the equality of services in order to have a positive impact on our most vulnerable children and young people. Local Authorities, Police and Health Services as key local partners must provide a robust safeguarding approach to ensure they have arrangements in place to provide adequate protection for children at risk of exploitation. The work we continue to do in regard to exploitation continues to be overseen and scrutinised by the key functions of the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership business unit.

Consultation:

In order to make sure that all children and young people's voices are heard, we must make sure that appropriate and accessible participation opportunities are available.

This includes ensuring that children and young people have the skills and support they need to take part in a way that works for them and their families. This is outlined within Walsall's Participation Strategy.

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Introduction

The interpersonal harms that young people face beyond their families is now well known and categorised. From peer-on-peer abuse within schools and communities to an increase in domestic abuse amongst young people in intimate relationships and the exploitation of children for sexual and criminal purposes - these harms pose a significant and long-lasting risk to young people's welfare.

The exploitation of children can take a number of different forms and perpetrators may subject children and young people to multiple forms of abuse at the same time, such as criminal exploitation (including county lines) and sexual exploitation. The child exploitation landscape is a complex one with ever-shifting characteristics and challenges for local partnerships. Like most areas nationally, we have seen a significant overlap between children that are potentially being exploited with those that are also involved in, or exposed to, serious youth violence. Youth Violence is a term often used to describe the threat, physical injury and harm caused to children and young people from violence outside of the home.

As offending behaviours and the methods of exploitation of young people changes, so does the understanding of what constitutes Youth Violence. In the past five years, there has been a significant change in the nature and extent of those affected, as well as professional understanding of the issues and of what works to reduce its harm. Our focus on contextual harm and how we safeguard against this alongside our work in relation to exploitation will be further explored within coming months to consider a wider adolescent safeguarding offer in Walsall and may change the way in which we focus our resources and devise new pathways that may be required to better support our young people at risk or have complex needs.

Every year, thousands of children in the UK are exploited. Some have been groomed into county lines drug trafficking, others face sexual abuse from within their own community. Although the forms of exploitation may often change, the methods these adults use to target and exploit children largely stay the same. This includes supplying them with alcohol and/or drugs, befriending them and providing them with money/gifts. This is known as 'grooming' and it is used for both criminal and sexual exploitation. For some time now, the term 'Contextual Safeguarding' has been used to describe an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form within their communities, schools and online can feature violence and abuse and we here in Walsall are no different from other areas that are trying to adapt our work to ensure that our approaches remain current and in line with the needs of our community.

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. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. This is often seen when the young person being exploited believe that they are in a relationship with the perpetrator. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact as this can also occur through the use of technology. Over recent years there has

been an increase in peer-on-peer abuse with the use of social media platforms aiding in the overall exploitation of one young person to another.

Child criminal exploitation is not defined in law, though the government's Serious Violence Strategy defines it as occurring 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. It is in this context that we are seeing a larger number of young people potentially being exploited as part of the increase of serious youth violence across the region.

The vast majority of children and young people grow up safely in Walsall. However, a minority of children and young people face significant risks from exploitation and/or serious youth violence. Much progress has been made in Walsall in recent years in recognising and responding to the needs of our young people but there is a growing need to tackle violence and exploitation holistically, with consistent, evidence-based interventions which avoid fragmented, crisis-driven responses. The governance arrangements reflect the importance of a joined up approach between community safety and child safeguarding agencies and as such the partnership arrangements in place are robustly scrutinised here in Walsall.

The exploitation of children cannot be addressed by a single agency working alone. Effective collaboration between partners is essential to the protection of children and ultimately in stopping offenders. There is a wide range of behaviours and scenarios that may not initially appear related to child sexual or criminal exploitation, but pieced together and put into context, form a bigger picture. This is why we hold daily triage conversations within our hub to ensure that those pieces of the jigsaw are put together to inform us of what actions may be required to safeguard those at risk and disrupt any potential exploitation from happening in the future. Any themes/patterns that emerge are routinely discussed in our monthly Exploitation Panel and the work of this is then overseen by the Exploitation Sub Group and the wider safeguarding partnership.

Local Response – what we do here in Walsall

Exploitation Strategy

Since 2019, Walsall Safeguarding Partnership and the Safer Walsall Partnership, have had an All Age Exploitation approach as part of our All Age Strategy to tackling Exploitation. The governance of this approach continues to be managed through the Exploitation Sub Group and operationally through the Exploitation Panel with operational oversight taking place through the joint adults and children's delivery group. All of these are multi agency meetings with members from Childrens and Adults Social Care, Education, Community Safety and Enforcement, Youth Justice Service, West Midlands Police, Health, Black Country Healthcare Foundation Trust and voluntary organisations such as Street Teams.

The Safeguarding Partnership Business Unit, supported in undertaking a review of all-age exploitation between February 2023 and May 2023, in consultation with partners.

An updated strategic needs assessment was agreed and commissioned, which commenced in December 2023 by Professor Helen Lowey and this will take a public health approach. The strategic needs assessment is proposed to be completed by May 2024. This will lead to a revised exploitation strategy that is evidenced based through the strategic needs assessment and development of an updated strategic delivery plan that will reshape our focus and strategic objectives over the coming 3 years to tackling exploitation in Walsall and continue to improve outcomes for our children and young people.

Regionally, as one of the seven metropolitan Local Authorities across the West Midlands, we continue to be represented at various forums that feeds into the Regional Strategic Exploitation Framework. The West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership continue to work jointly across the region to provide an overview of exploitation and abuse from across the West Midlands. This is part of the overall public health approach across the region of which our strategy feeds into. In addition, we feed into a regional dataset that is used to cross reference themes/patterns in relation to children missing or at risk of exploitation from across the region. This information is then used to determine what support/resources may be needed in particular areas and how as a collective partnership we can tackle some of the issues from a regional perspective.

Operational response

In Walsall we continue to operate a 'Exploitation Hub' which is a multi-agency approach to identifying, screening, and sharing of intelligence around those at risk of exploitation and ensure that children and young people receive the right help and support at the earliest opportunity and are protected from harm. The hub performance data continues to be shared at the monthly all age exploitation delivery group and monthly exploitation panel, where any emerging themes or trends identified through the hub are reviewed with all partner agencies. We are continuing to strengthen our exploitation panel by enhancing the partnership data and assurance activity that is shared. This supports us as a partnership in understanding the current exploitation landscape in Walsall, demographics of victims and survivors, additional vulnerabilities they may experience, locations that exploitation is taking place and perpetrators of concern. This enables us to take a tactical approach in responding to and disrupting exploitation in Walsall, focusing on the 4 P approach of Prepare, Prevent, Protect and Pursue, ensuring the voice and lived experience of children and young people is at the heart of our intervention to ensures best outcomes.

Walsall's All-Age Exploitation Pathway has been in place since September 2020 and this is well embedded. Exploitation remains a priority area for the Safeguarding Partnership and the pathway was reviewed in May 2023 through consultation with partners to ensure our approach to tackling exploitation in the borough remained effective and to support in identifying key areas of focus and development over the coming year. The hub continues to raise awareness of exploitation and our local pathway across the wider partnership through the exploitation delivery group promoting regular training offers from the Exploitation team, the Safeguarding Partnership and West Midlands Police Violence Reduction Unit, in addition to attending quarterly Education DSL workshops and Early help locality Time to Talk sessions.

The pathway works alongside our MASH and daily partnership exploitation triage discussions promotes effective sharing of information between agencies to ensure children and young people who are exploited or vulnerable to exploitation, receive the right help and support at the earliest opportunity. These discussions continue to include our Vulnerable learners hub, Street Teams, Youth Justice Service, Local Policing Unit Exploitation Police, Locate police, Adult Social Care, and a member of our exploitation team.

In November 2022, Walsall Safeguarding Partnership was subject to a Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to identification of initial need and risk in Walsall. This inspection took place from 7 to 11 November 2022 and was carried out by inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS).

In their letter to the Safeguarding Partnership on the 6th January 2023, they highlighted that, *'risks to children from sexual or criminal exploitation are recognised well at the front door. The daily Exploitation Triage meeting is a well-attended multi-agency meeting that explores effectively the risks faced by children when they are reported as missing. Information is shared effectively in order to help professionals' understanding of risks and actions, which helps inform decision-making. The chair of the Exploitation Triage meeting rotates between its core members, which is inclusive and indicative of confidence in the commitment and capability of the participants in the meeting. This ensures that responses to child protection are a shared responsibility across all partners' (JTAI inspection report, January 2023).*

We continue to develop our multi-agency exploitation triage and will soon be having a mental health practitioner join us from the Black Country Healthcare Foundation Trust which will provide valuable information sharing and support decision making, with their professional knowledge and insight to supporting our children who present with diagnosed and undiagnosed need and increased vulnerability relating to their mental health. In addition, conversations have commenced to look to secure a representative from the Probation service within triage.

Exploitation and Missing Team

Our Exploitation Team continues to be led by our Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer, Katie Storer-Young. This is currently a non-case holding team that offers consultation and support in regards to all types of child exploitation including sexual, criminal and children at risk of being trafficked. The Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer has good partnership relationships both locally through the Safeguarding Partnership and regionally, through the regional exploitation forums, keeping up to date with the changing landscape around exploitation, regional themes and trends and information sharing between partners and regional colleagues, which supports in effectively tackling exploitation locally.

The team consists of the following staff:

- 1 x Principle Exploitation Reduction Officer (full time)
- 2 x Exploitation and Missing Coordinators (full time)

- 2 x RHI Missing officers (full time)
- 1 x Specialist Harmful Sexual Behaviour Practitioner (full time)
- 1 x Youth worker (full time seconded)

The Exploitation Team key responsibilities include:

- Is responsible for monitoring and reporting on all aspects of performance around exploitation and children who go missing across all Children's Services and reporting this data to senior managers.
- Holds daily exploitation triage in consultation with external agencies as part of all age exploitation strategy.
- Offers 1:1 support sessions for practitioners and managers to complete exploitation assessments and use of toolkits and to consider/reflect upon potential support and disruption for individual children.
- Will attend and provide information for strategy meetings in regard to high risk children.
- Will attend planning or decision-making meetings where there are indicators of any child being exploited, or going missing.
- Works with all statutory and community partners to prompt and assist joined up working in respect of safeguarding and disruption in Walsall
- Has links to neighbouring authorities and regional forums where Local Authority/external agencies responses to vulnerable children.
- Delivers training and awareness building workshops across children's services and the wider partnership.
- Youth worker provides some direct work with young people who are being exploited or vulnerable to exploitation, this includes activities that support and encourage the young person to voice their wishes and feelings through music, outreach and community based work.
- Collaborates with west midlands VRP and provides support into intensification weeks.

Access to police support via the Exploitation Hub consists of the following officers:

- X1 F/T Sergeant
- X3 F/T PC's and x1 Part time PC
- X1 CSE co-ordinator – part time shared with Wolverhampton
- X1 LOCATE Missing PC – full time
- X1 Vulnerable persons' officer full time (Police staff post)
- X1 Violence co-ordinator full time

Exploitation Hub Triage Data

The following is a breakdown of the referrals of children and adults that have come through exploitation triage between 1st April 2023 and 15th March 2024.

The Exploitation Hub received **416** exploitation assessments during this period. **95** assessments were returned to the referrer as no exploitation had been identified within the assessment. The remaining **321** assessments identified a concern of exploitation and proceeded to partnership screening and discussion within the Exploitation Daily Triage.

Of the **321** exploitation assessments received, this related to **258** individuals that were discussed in the Exploitation Daily Triage. A new exploitation assessment is submitted to the Exploitation Hub for individuals where there is in any change in risk level or any additional information is identified that requires further partnership discussion and decision making.

Of the **258** discussions, **204** of them were for children and **54** for adults over the age of 18.

The exploitation assessment received within the hub for the **258** individual children and adults were screened and discussed within the multi-agency Exploitation Triage and a level of risk agreed, a breakdown of the triage outcomes is shared below:

Assessments where the victim was deemed vulnerable to exploitation: 92.	Assessments where the victim was deemed to have been targeted for potential exploitation: 99.	Assessments where it was clear the victim had been exploited resulting in harm: 67.
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Exploitation Assessments received into the Exploitation Hub, identify different types of exploitation that the individual is experiencing or is vulnerable to. Of the **258** individuals that we received Exploitation Assessments for in this period, the type of exploitation identified is as follows:

Criminal Exploitation	131
Sexual Exploitation	69
Sexual and Criminal Exploitation	25
Youth Violence and Criminal Exploitation	3
Modern Day Slavery	13
Invaded Home (Cuckooing)	3
Online Grooming	12
Financial Exploitation	2

The data shows that the highest type of exploitation identified in Walsall, relates to Criminal Exploitation, with Sexual Exploitation being the second highest referral reason, and for a smaller proportion of individuals there was indication of both criminal and sexual exploitation.

Although this report is in regard to safeguarding our children at risk of exploitation, as we operate an 'all-age exploitation hub', it is worth noting that referrals for adults who are being exploited in Walsall, continues to increase. Within this increase, there are two key themes that have emerged – those of adults being groomed and exploited by local drug dealers who take over their home and sell drugs from the property (previously referred to as 'cuckooing') and those adults who are victims of Modern Slavery. Further work is taking place around these two trends within the exploitation

delivery group and we are currently in the process of developing a robust multi-agency modern slavery pathway.

The referrals leading to assessment came from a number of sources, as listed below:

NHS/Health	5
Adult's Social Care	14
The Beacon	6
Community Safety Protection Team	1
Children's Social Care	110
Early Help	35
Education (Schools and Colleges)	37
Housing	11
Police	14
Probation	1
Street Teams	16
Youth Justice Service	8

Ongoing training and development is offered across the partnership in relation to exploitation to support partners in identifying and responding to need at the earliest opportunity, and increasing awareness and understanding of the referral pathways when exploitation is identified.

Community work

Over the last 12 months, a significant amount of community work has been undertaken by the Missing Children and Exploitation Team. This work has continued to develop on previous successes working directly with children and families and growing multi-agency knowledge and understanding around the issues of contextual safeguarding.

Over the last twelve months, a youth worker within the exploitation hub has led on work within the Mossley area, working with a proactive group of residents around the issue of gangs and exploitation. The group has grown to become self sufficient and has set up as a Community Interest Company, applying for local funding to support children and families and to deliver youth work type of interventions to support young people.

The Exploitation Hub has also extended its work within schools offering support to parents in parent and carer workshops raising awareness of exploitation, signs to look out for and what to do if they have any worries their child may be vulnerable or at risk of exploitation. In addition, this work has included awareness building around missing young people and what to do to prevent missing episodes and how to respond if their child goes missing.

The team continues to support children with positive engagement, and over the last 12 months, one the exploitation hub youth workers has been working with Bay 10 Studios to support young boys and men around the issue of criminal exploitation, young people have written, produced and performed new material reflecting on their

experiences within their local areas. There has been a focus on reflective work, particularly around mental health and how this is impacted by grooming and control by adults around them.

The team has also continued to offer detached outreach work in partnership with Street Teams, Youth Connect and EYES, targeting locations that have been high risk for children, including transport hubs, high footfall spaces and shopping centres. This work has supported additional work to grow within the community safety teams within the council.

Internally the team have grown relationships with council colleagues from the community safety protection teams to highlight areas of concern within the Town Centre and outer borough areas. Targeted pieces of work have taken place to secure buildings and locations where children have been known to be targeted by groomers. This work continues to grow and has been supported by local parents and community protection officers.

Along with this community driven work, training has been offered to taxi drivers who have applied for licences within the council. Licencing officers have supported this work and work is ongoing to develop this further.

Training has been offered to DSL leads throughout the borough to support their understanding of what is happening within the local area and to support the identification of children within educational settings. This has shown dividend with a higher number of educational referrals into the hub over the last twelve months. This work will continue through into the next year.

Working with parents

In addition to our continued community work, working in partnership with parents and carers remains a priority and we continue to increase our offer of support. There is a joint work offer with social workers to support the whole family approach where exploitation has been identified. Families are experts into their own lives and know their children better than any professional, therefore their support and ability to engage in the safety planning is crucial to the success of any intervention. Our work with parents is based on the relational based practice model shared by the Iveson Trust (formally PACE).

The exploitation team will also support parents reporting concerns to police, understanding and identifying potential risk and reporting children as missing when necessary. Our support may also include linking with other partner agencies such as housing as some of our parents have needed to be provided with alternative accommodation when risks to children and their families have become high. For parents, having a child groomed for exploitation can be incredibly traumatic and the team look at what additional support they may need that can ensure they are supported in keeping their children safe within their own community.

Parents are regularly consulted with as part of the work of the Exploitation Pilot Social Care Team and positive feedback has continued to be received over the last 12 months, with parents sharing they felt listened to, involved and supported during the

assessment, safety planning and intervention, and felt there had been positive outcomes for their children.

Cross border work

It is recognised that the exploitation of children does not stop at Walsall's geographical boundaries. Many of the most vulnerable children in the borough are those children who are in care and some high-risk children may have been moved into homes in the Walsall area from other local authority areas. As part of our MASH arrangements at the front door, we have a well-established cross boarder social care network to ensure that safeguarding information is shared and updated when children from other local areas go missing. The Exploitation team work with LOCATE police colleagues to understand the risk in terms of exploitation for these children and young people and we recognise that children in care are potentially more vulnerable to exploitation given their lived experiences. The team have positive working relationships with local authority exploitation hubs across the region and work in partnership when considering risk of exploitation, disruption activity and safety planning for children and young people who move cross border, with a number of positive examples of collaborative cross boarder safeguarding work being seen. In addition, the team work with regional colleagues and colleagues from the regional VRP team to share information, learning and consider best practice. Some of this work informed our work during county lines week and national exploitation day and supports our forward planning. We recognise that children do not see physical boundaries to areas in the same way that professionals do and so information sharing to other teams is significantly important to the work we do.

Children missing from home/care

The team continues to have direct contact with children who have been missing and all children are offered and/or are visited after a missing episode, usually within 72 hours of the episode. The missing worker completes return home conversations with the children and young people looking at the reasons why they were missing, provides a chance for them to talk about what happened whilst they were away and how they may be feeling now that they have returned. Whilst all children are offered this opportunity immediately once they return, not all may wish to receive it but the option to do so at a later date is available should they choose to do so.

We know that when children are missing from their homes, the risk to their health and wellbeing is extremely high and the need to locate them and ensure their safety is our main function. The team have two full time dedicated missing children's workers, offering direct face to face one to one discussions when a child goes missing. This work continues to develop, and we offer additional sessions when a vulnerable child will potentially go missing again. This isn't a statutory obligation, but an addition so that workers are able to support children when they are at their most vulnerable. This work also allows workers to make any additional referrals that may be needed for that child or family as a way of disrupting the pattern of missing episodes. This element of our work is new and is an extension of our focus on prevention.

Walsall Children's Social Care, along with the other 6 Local Authorities in the region, are working in partnership with West Midlands Police to adopt the Philomena Protocol,

which is designed to provide the Police with accurate and up to date information about a child who has gone missing from care homes and other local authority accommodation and puts emphasis on carer's (residential care home staff, supported accommodation staff and foster carer's) working alongside allocated workers in children's services to identify where a child or young person in their care is likely to go missing. The protocol has been seen to work effectively across other local authority areas in the country and West Midlands police were keen to adopt this locally.

The aim of the Philomena protocol is to:

- To safeguard each child in care or resident in supported accommodation
- To manage risk appropriately in accordance with the needs of the child
- To reduce missing episodes for children
- To minimise unnecessary involvement of police
- To manage demand and support a more effective service overall
- To develop understanding of the joint responsibility held by care givers and local police
- To ensure that our joint response is sustainable and that emerging best practice is identified and appropriately developed

A profile pack will be completed by the care provider when a new child is placed with them. The information will support the care provider, should the child go missing, in making efforts to locate them, by understanding their networks and relationships. In addition, it supports them in identifying any possible risk that would require police support in locating them, and in supporting preventative work and reduction in further missing episodes. It will also support in reducing the number of missing notifications for children who have not returned for planned curfew time but their whereabouts have been known and there are no identified safeguarding concerns, allowing police more capacity to focus on the missing episodes of children and young people where we have concerns about their safety and wellbeing whilst missing. For those children who are missing, the profile pack information will support with trying to locate them safely and timely, with any potential risk to the young person whilst missing being evident within the profile pack.

Walsall Exploitation Pilot Team

It was previously shared in Overview and Scrutiny Committee in April 2023, that we had strengthened our response to children at risk of exploitation with the launch of the Exploitation Pilot Team in October 2022. This was a 12 month programme that focussed on delivering bespoke packages of support to individual children that are being identified and selected through exploitation triage. The team consists of a consultant social worker and 2 social workers, a youth worker and links in with key partners such as health, police, education and the youth justice service. The team has case holding responsibility for up to 20 young people deemed as medium risk of exploitation and sits alongside the wider work that continues within our Exploitation service.

As this was a pilot project, we did not make any changes to the current Safeguarding Partnership Exploitation Pathway. However, the pilot is being used to test whether a case-holding model is the way forward for us in Walsall and whether we should ultimately move towards a permanent multi-agency co located team in the future. In

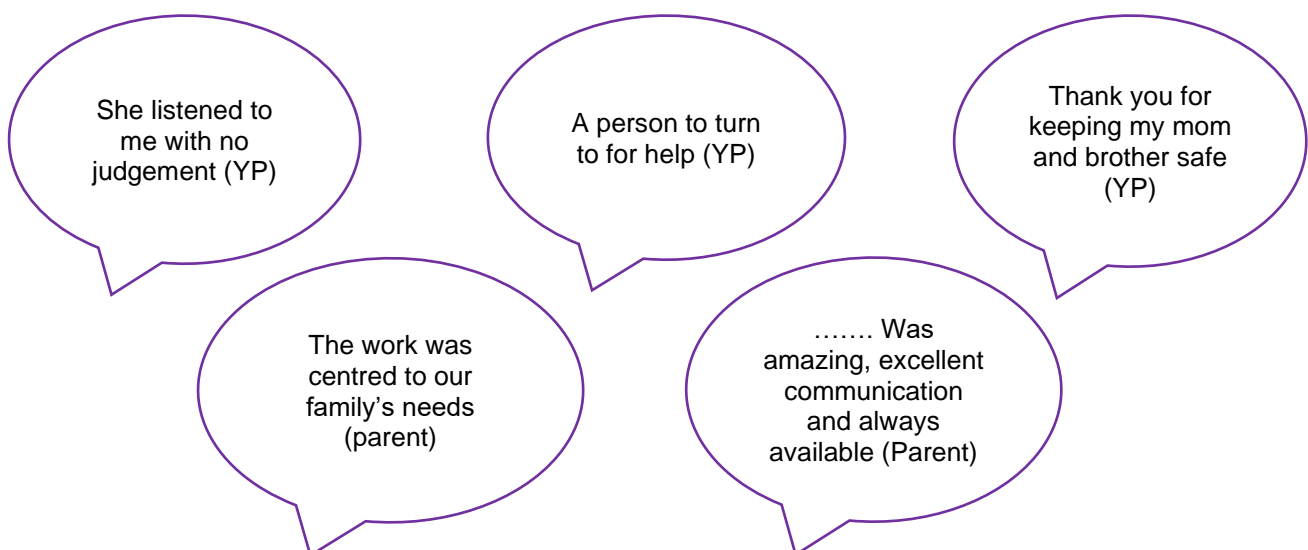
order to do this, management information and performance indicators are being collected throughout the term of the pilot in line with the KPI framework and evaluation that has been specifically devised. All children from the pilot are being individually audited as well as 20 comparable children from the wider service that are being supported via the usual route.

The Key Performance Indicators for the pilot are to:

- Reduce the number of missing episodes (if applicable)
- Providing greater learning experiences either in educational or training settings.
- Reduce level of criminality
- Reduce Exploitation Indicators
- Increase Young People's participation and engagement.

The social workers within the exploitation pilot team have a good understanding of the exploitation landscape in Walsall, being so closely connected with the Exploitation Hub and through having regular presence within daily triage. This ensures they hold up to date knowledge and understanding of exploitation concerns within the area, locations of concern and perpetrators of exploitation that are linked more frequently. This enables them to identify links or additional worries during their direct work with young people and make wider connections when information is shared, that supports their understanding of the individual need or risk to the young person, in addition to increased understanding of the wider exploitation profile in the area, enabling more targeted support and intervention.

The relationships being forged between the young people and their parents/carers within the team is having a positive impact on participation and improved outcomes. The reduced caseload in the team allows the workers within the team to build positive relationships with the young people in order to better understand their circumstances, build the trust and identify the support that they and their family need. Each young person and their family are asked to provide feedback on the support provided which will support in the overall evaluation on the impact of the pilot project. Some examples received to date are as follows:



The pilot has also received positive feedback from practitioners that are working with the children and young people. The pilot adopts some of the principles of the family safeguarding model, utilising motivational interviewing and a strengths-based approach to engaging with children, young people and their families. The use of group supervision has been positive in bringing key practitioners who are supporting the young person together and reflecting on the intervention that is being offered to reduce the risk of exploitation and the impact of this. Practitioners are asked for feedback during the intervention to support the evaluation, some examples of which are:

_____ went above and beyond to build a rapport with the young person and their mother, and to swiftly address and resolve any welfare concerns in relation to the young

I would like to thank _____ for her support in managing our young person who was at high risk of custody be reduced from very high risk to medium in a 6 month time frame. _____'s support and education has enabled this young person to relay his learning and understanding to other young people in school to safeguard them from exploitation. _____ has been extremely reliable and efficient in her work and our young person and family are thankful for this. Our young person has had many social workers throughout their life and I feel _____'s approach through an exploitation route has been able to address and reduce safety and wellbeing concerns. (YJS Practitioner)

A really positive impact – I would say both the young person and their mother felt supported and empowered to participate in the assessment process. This may also have helped to reduce the family's negative view of professionals and make any future interventions easier (YJS practitioner).

Overall, the audit findings to date have been positive and there is indication of positive impact for young people supported through the pilot. There appears to be a greater understanding around the contextual safeguarding concerns of the young people supported through the pilot, and a range of direct work tools used to support safety planning and safety mapping. Engagement from young people and their families within the exploitation pilot team overall is positive and the young person's participation within their child in need planning is positive. Intervention in terms of exploitation is more clearly identified within the young person's social care records for young people open within the pilot. Of the audits completed to date, it is positive that for most young people open within the pilot there has been a decrease in vulnerability or risk, which has included a reduction in criminal activity, reduction in missing episodes, improved school attendance and positive participation in the assessment, plans and intervention. The initial review has seen some very positive outcomes for young people and subsequently it was agreed that the pilot would extend until the summer of 2024 to allow for wider consideration as to what the exploitation offer should look like moving forward, the resource required to be able to increase capacity to work with more young people and considerations to expanding the offer to wider adolescent safeguarding such as serious youth violence and adolescents with complex needs.

Walsall CARE Project

Walsall Council was one of 7 Local Authorities nationally that were successful in securing 1 year funding from DfE for the 'Better Integrated Care Fund' (short breaks innovation funding) for delivery of projects between April 2022 and April 2023. This funding enabled us to deliver the Walsall CARE (community activities reducing exploitation) project, an innovative short-break model specifically for 60 young people aged 11 plus, in academic school year 6 and above who have additional needs, either diagnosed or undiagnosed and who due to their vulnerabilities are at risk of and/or showing early warning signs of low-level exploitation. The objective of the model was to provide positive activities and diversionary support to each young person involved in the project so that they achieve better outcomes and have greater aspirations.

The CARE project sought to deliver a bespoke locally delivered programme of positive activities including sports, arts, cooking/life skills, ICT and other diversionary activities designed to develop positive health, wellbeing, and resilience delivered by the voluntary and community services. Following a procurement exercise 2 local community providers were secured to deliver the pilot programme. This was Street Teams and The Inspire Group.

The CARE project operates in each of the 4 locality areas of Walsall and is shaped around the needs of each area. The programme albeit initially set to support 60 CYP, supported with approval from the DfE 69 Children/young people within the first year of 2022/23 and funding was secured to continue for a further year 2023/24, although at a reduced capacity of 40 children and young people. The service providers deliver weekly activities after school and at the weekend. These programmes engage individual young people in a bespoke programme of activities and mentoring.

Each Young person has access to:

- 1 x after-school club pw (term-time only)
- 1x weekend activity pw (term-time only)
- 121 mentor/trusted adult (throughout the programme)
- HAF programme

The combination of diversionary activities and 1:2:1 mentors provides targeted, bespoke interventions for each child as part of our SEND Local Offer, reducing isolation and increasing understanding of the dangers of exploitation. Referrals are received from schools, GPs, other health professionals, Early Help locality teams, Police and other professionals who may be working with young people, meeting the criteria who have SEND and are at risk of exploitation.

The CARE programme is an evaluated programme with key KPI's and tools used to monitor performance and impact. The end of year report published in September 2023 identified the following impact during year 1 of the programme:

- Exploitation Impact

Impact Missing/risk of exploitation – at the start of the programme 31 young people had been reported as having 'missing episodes', of these 31 young people during their time on the programme:

- 15 young people had no further reported missing episodes.
- 3 reduced their missing episodes significantly (one young person had been reported missing on 16 separate occasions in a 12-month period prior to joining the programme, these reduced by 70%).
- 13 young people continued to have reported missing episodes and their support plans structured around the risks associated, 2 of these young people were stepped up to children's social care with one being supported at CIN and one young person being looked after

- Crime

Prior to joining the programme:

- 15 young people were known to youth justice services.
- 12 of whom were in receipt of youth justice support at the point of CARE intervention, all 12 young people have had no further involvement with youth justice service or escalation within the youth justice system whilst attending CARE programme.
- However, 3 additional young people received youth justice intervention whilst attending CARE.

- School attendance impact

Part of the impact measures school attendance has been tracked for all 69 young people during their time on the programme:

- 61 of the young people were in mainstream education at the time of joining CARE, all remained in school, non-had any fixed term or permanent exclusions.
- 2 young people were in post 16 education and remained in education with no concerns.
- 3 young people were attending the PRU at the start of the programme, at the end of the programme 1 had returned to mainstream education and the other 2 had applied to attend post 16 education.
- 3 young people were missing education (CME) at the start of the programme, as part of the support provided 2 young people now attend alternative education that meet their needs, both are on reduced timetables as part of their transition back into education and to build on their confidence.
- 1 young person remains CME and is receiving additional mental health support as part of the plan to return to a form of education.

It was also noted that of the 69 YP on the programme:

- 40 young people improved their school attendance & educational outcomes from point of referral to point of closure.
- 19 young peoples had a significant increase in school attendance from point of referral to the last academic term, from a dip sample audit it is felt that the increase in attendance has been due to several interventions including increased SEN support, access to alternative education as part of the school week and a positive school placement move.

Of the 29 young people who did not see a significant school attendance increase, again a dip sample audit has been completed the finding of which show the circumstances contributing to low attendance includes:

- Attending school daily however numerous late attendances recorded.
- Reduced timetable or home schooled from mainstream education between 1 – 3 hours per day whilst awaiting named education provider.
- Non school attendance between managed moves / arrangements for alternative education.

- Wellbeing Impact

All young people accessing the CARE project were supported to complete the 'My Mind Outcome Stars', which is strength based, person centred evidenced based tool that measures and supports change around 7 areas of qualitative data:

- Feelings and emotions
- Healthy lifestyles
- Where you live
- Friends and relationship's
- School training and work
- How you use your time
- Self esteem

Through the tracking facility available we are able to evidence the positive well-being impact the programme has had on the young people with a total of 171 Outcome Stars being completed/reviewed with 95% of the young people:

- 85% of young people reported improved feelings and emotions.
- 75% of young people felt they had a healthier lifestyle.
- 87% of young people have improved feelings about where they lived, this was significant improvement compared to a check in point February 2023 when where you live had the lowest overall scoring with 22% reducing scores. At this point work was being completed with the young people to increase the awareness of exploitation and the associated risks, Street Teams delivered awareness sessions to all young people on the project around, criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation & county Lines. The work clearly had an impact on feelings of the area young people lived, work continued around safe relationships, how to stay safe etc that clearly made young people feel safer.
- 76% of young people attending CARE reported having improved friendships and relationships. • 42% said feelings towards school and education had improved.
- 76% of young people attending CARE reported they had improved how they use their time.
- 68% of young people reported improvements in their self-esteem.

As part of the support plan and engagement it was recognised that 21 young people required more intensive mental health support all have been referred to CAMHS and now receiving the right support associated to emotional wellbeing.

The findings of year two of the project will be available after the end of March with the annual evaluation taking place in April/May. Currently we have a total of 55 young people accessing CARE support, 24 young people continued to access CARE provision following from year 1 delivery, with West locality having the highest demand with 27 young people engaged in the programme followed by North locality with 13 young people.

So far for 2023/24, we have delivered

- 326 mentoring support sessions
- 151 youth club attendances

Practice Improvement and Quality Assurance

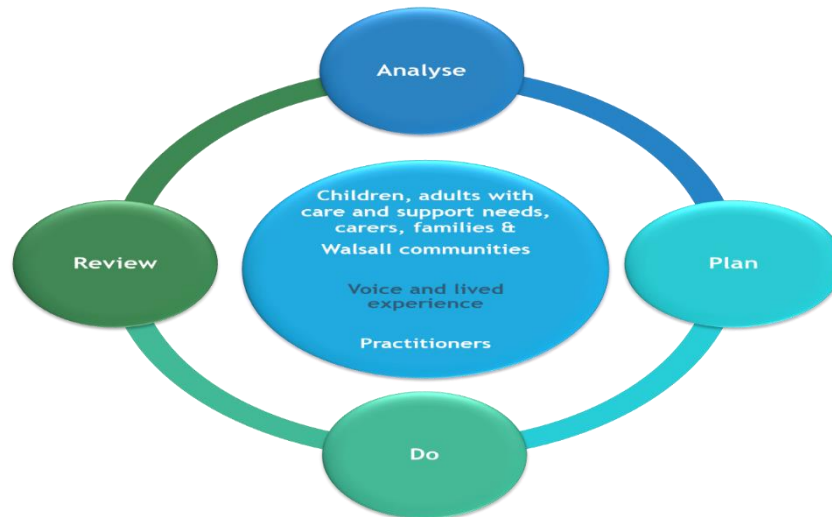
Walsall Safeguarding Partnership introduced the Performance and Quality Assurance Framework in August 2023, which consists of a structured programme of activity, assessment and reporting into the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements and practice. WSP's Performance and Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) is used by all the subgroups in the partnership, including All-Age Exploitation sub group, to provide a consistent, systematic, evidence-based and intelligence informed approach to our work. It is also used as a leadership tool to deliver our responsibilities as strategic managers across the partnership.

All subgroups will use the Performance and Quality Assurance Framework and regularly feed key intelligence and evidence into the Performance and Quality Assurance Subgroups (Children and Adults). This ensures connectivity between the subgroups as this becomes a subset of the quarterly performance dataset/dashboard and assurance activity of the PQA Subgroups which is the central repository of information relating to the effectiveness of our safeguarding arrangements. Key information is triangulated from a range of different sources and subgroups rather than relying on a single means of assessment or source.

The Performance and Quality Assurance Cycle:

Effective performance management and quality assurance is based on a continual process that structures all of the work throughout WSP.

The WSP Performance and Quality Assurance Cycle underpins the framework, includes four key stages of activity (analyse, plan, do and review) with the voices and lived experience of our 4th partners and practitioners at the centre of the process and each stage. Each stage of the cycle and the activities required by partners within subgroups are outlined next.



The Performance and Quality Assurance Cycle

The WSP Performance and Quality Assurance Framework, threads through all of meetings and panels relating to exploitation. The Framework will balance three types of data from a range of sources:

- Quantitative information – This will help to inform **What we do**. It answers the questions: ‘How much/how many?’
- Qualitative information – This will tell us more about **How well we do it**. It is concerned with the functioning of the organisation, the quality of what was done. Are partners working well to respond to safeguarding concerns?
- Outcome information – This tells us **What difference we have made** (through our services, strategies, and interventions) to the lives of children and adults with care and support needs - ‘Is anyone better off.’ Do safeguarding arrangements improve outcomes? Do people feel safer?

As part of the implementation, the WSP performance and quality assurance framework is being used by exploitation subgroup chairs and subgroup members as a leadership tool to provide consistent evidence based and intelligence informed approach to the work undertaken. This is linked to the programme of activity in the performance and quality assurance cycle of analysis, planning, doing and reviewing. Most importantly that the voice and lived experience of children, adults with care and support needs, carers, families and the views of practitioners is central to every stage of activity.

Children’s Social Care Exploitation Month

During January 2024, Children’s Social Care focused our practice improvement and quality assurance activity on Exploitation. This included a range of activities to support professional development and assurance across the service, this included:

- Our monthly child journey audits were themed focusing on children and young people where exploitation was an identified need.

- Our weekly briefs to social care practitioners contained a section focusing on exploitation with different themes each week, this includes child trafficking, National referral mechanism (NRMs), missing children and the proposed launch of the Philomena protocol, FIB partnership information sharing forms, language that cares, in addition to sharing useful links to resources, training opportunities, practice guidance and reflective case studies.
- We developed a voice over presentation on contextual safeguarding assessments and safety planning to be delivered to social care practitioners within their team meetings.
- We shared practitioner guidance around the National Referral Mechanism(NRM) and sourced the facilitation of training to practitioners through Barnados.
- We offered consultation with practitioners to understand what is working well and identify areas of development.
- A number of podcasts and webinars were shared to support practice development.

The learning from our exploitation focused month will be shared within the exploitation delivery group, exploitation panel and exploitation sub group to support with our continued practice development and assurance.

Governance

Walsall's All Age Exploitation Reduction Strategy is governed by the Safer Walsall Partnership overlapping with the Safeguarding Partnership, for which all-age exploitation remains a priority area. The All-Age Exploitation Subgroup continues to be chaired by the Head of Community Safety and Enforcement, Walsall Council and Superintendent, Local Policing, West Midlands Police Chair and is held bi monthly. The Chairs will provide a written report quarterly to both the SLG and Executive Group on the work of the All-Age Subgroup and as part of this reporting by exception escalate issues to these groups. The All-Age Chairs will also receive updates, feedback, and guidance from the Executive Group /SLG to direct and steer the work of the subgroup.

The purpose of the All-Age Exploitation sub-group is to oversee the strategy, prepare and develop the strategic delivery plan, ascertain that there are sufficient resources and policy direction to enable operational lead officers to undertake work to prevent exploitation, protect victims and survivors whilst pursuing offenders using deterrents and disruption. Utilising the Safeguarding Partnership Performance and Quality Assurance Framework, the All-Age Exploitation Sub Group is able to assure itself of the quality and impact of services and intervention and enable continuous improvement. The Exploitation Sub Group provides governance to the panel and delivery groups to enable the objectives of the strategy to be met through the delivery plan and effectiveness to be measured through a range of quality assurance activities.

Exploitation Panel continues to be held monthly to ensure that there is a partnership understanding of risk, threat and harm and to provide a multi-agency coordinated response to safeguard and protect vulnerable children and young people. Themes from exploitation triage, exploitation work and any relevant areas of concerns form the basis of the agreed agenda items and a greater focus on partnership updates has

been included within recent panels which includes strengthening of partnership sharing of data, intel and business insights and partnership assurance activity. There is a focus on ensuring the voice and lived experience of children and young people is captured and is at the heart of all of our work around exploitation. The exploitation panel is also a forum whereby national publications are shared and discussed providing partners with the opportunity to reflect on how any recommendations that may arise from these, can be considered within their respective agencies.

Key focus points of the panel continues to be:

- Raise awareness of exploitation across the partnership
- Discuss the need for expert consultation and analysis.
- Help identify contextual risks and “map” known intelligence.
- Gather and share intelligence from within and out of the area.
- Collate data to create a local understanding of need.
- Increase understanding of geographical “hotspots” and local themes
- Ensure partnership disruption of exploitation is purposeful and reduces the risk of exploitation and improved outcomes for children, young people and adults with care and support needs.
- Keep up to date with current practice research and themes and to share findings as they relate to us here in Walsall.

Investment from across the partnership is critical to fully tackle all facets of exploitation and here in Walsall we are having some real success in our responses to those at risk. As a partnership we work well to identify risk and intervene as appropriate but our systems rely heavily on the investment from partner agencies with clear assessment frameworks, referral pathways and sharing of resources in order to offer both support and intervention alongside the need to pursue prosecutions.

Partnership Updates

Police

This past year has been marked by our strides in our ongoing commitment to combat exploitation and organised crime, reflecting both our tactical adaptability and strategic foresight. The enhanced leadership structure, notably with the appointment of a Superintendent as co-chair of the All-Age Exploitation initiative in April 2024, has fortified our approach, aligning efforts across sectors for a unified response to these pervasive challenges.

The establishment of the Serious Organised Exploitation Team underlines our proactive stance against exploitation, employing a mix of innovative and traditional enforcement tactics to disrupt criminal networks. The success of targeted operations, particularly the County Lines intensification weeks and Operation Advance, underscores our effectiveness in safeguarding vulnerable populations and engaging the community in our prevention efforts.

Our public awareness campaigns, including the impactful #lookcloser initiative and a Crimestoppers collaboration, have been pivotal in educating the community on the signs of exploitation and the critical importance of reporting. These campaigns have

significantly bolstered our outreach, particularly in educational settings, fostering a protective environment for our youth.

The detailed enforcement actions undertaken during a specified County Lines Intensification Week (CLIW) for the Walsall LPA exemplify our commitment to operational excellence and accountability. With significant arrests made for a range of serious offences, the execution of search warrants yielding substantial seizures of drugs, cash, and weapons, and the recovery of a viable firearms, our resolve in dismantling criminal operations is clear.

Furthermore, our approach to tackling exploitation extends beyond traditional law enforcement, as evidenced by our recent operations against suspected brothel activities in collaboration with Black Country Women's Aid. This operation exemplifies our victim-centred approach, prioritising safeguarding over enforcement actions that might compromise the welfare of those we aim to protect.

As we move forward, our focus remains on refining our operational tactics and enhancing the quality of referrals through continuous education on exploitation. The ongoing participation in Trauma-Informed Practice and efforts to improve the standards of exploitation referrals are critical to our strategy.

The collective achievements of the past year not only demonstrate a high level of dedication and professionalism but also highlight the substantial impact of our work on enhancing community safety and well-being. Looking ahead, we are motivated by our accomplishments and remain dedicated to further innovating and strengthening our collective response to all-age exploitation and organised crime.

This update integrates the latest operational data and strategic developments into a coherent narrative, offering a comprehensive overview of our multifaceted approach to tackling these complex issues.

West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership continues to lead work across the region, encouraging and facilitating a system wide public health approach to preventing violence.

The VRP brings together a number of specialists to directly deliver and commission interventions and help different systems to work together more effectively to prevent violence. The work of the VRP focuses on a number of thematic areas including criminal justice; exploitation; health; education; sport; community engagement and trauma informed practice. The aim is to embed a whole systems approach that focuses on early identification and effective response to all forms of exploitation.

The VRP delivery team aims to:

- Deliver primary prevention, whole population approaches to violence prevention and reduction, including training, intervention, capacity building and awareness raising.

- Fund targeted work in areas we know are impacted more by violence (secondary prevention).
- Respond effectively as a partnership to incidents when they occur to limit the onward transmission of violence and address the trauma that serious incidents cause to individuals and communities (tertiary prevention).



WM VRP Exploitation Team Highlights:

- The VRP & Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) co-ordinate four regional boards leading on our regional responses to exploitation and missing; modern slavery and human trafficking; sexual assault & abuse; and domestic abuse. All four partnership boards are seeking to take a public health approach and are in the process of adopting public health frameworks.
- Supported the development and implementation of the Philomena Protocol.
- The regional [Exploitation and Missing Dashboard \(arcgis.com\)](https://arcgis.com) continues to develop, bringing together a variety of information to inform our understanding of the risk, threat and harm of exploitation across the region
- A competency, training and development framework has been produced to support organisations and professionals to understand the different levels of knowledge and experience required to effectively identify and respond to exploitation and abuse.
- A best practice guide has been launched to support professionals working with young people who are recognised by the National Referral Mechanism and are transitioning into adulthood.
- Delivery of training webinars to support continued professional development across the region which includes an Introduction to exploitation.
- Commissioning of a range of interventions to support young people at risk of exploitation and abuse, including Navigators in A&E and Custody, and primary prevention programmes in schools, including REAL County Lines and Exploitation products.
- Working towards a regional approach to risk analysis and identification of exploitation.
- VRP & OPCC hosted the first regional Anti-Slavery Conference – attended by statutory partners from across the region influencing approaches to tackling and developing modern slavery and human trafficking pathways. This was supported by a training schedule with up to 400 people attending different webinars.
- County lines awareness weeks October 2023 and March 2024: offered regional training schedule to professionals, parents, carers and grandparents. Sessions delivered to approximately 4000 individuals.

Overview of WM VRP in Walsall:

VRP funding has been used in Walsall to fund the Mossley Big Local Project to deliver bleed kit training to local residents; Vision for All to deliver outreach work in the Blakenhall area; and Walsall Children's Services to deliver the Draw & Talking Training which will be delivered to a range of professionals in youth justice, early help, pupil referral units and schools with high exclusion rates to better equip them to support children and young people at risk of knife crime and/or gangs.

VRP have delivered Virtual Reality Knives training to Police School Intervention and Prevention Officers (SIPOs) and PCSOs who have been delivering this training into schools as part of primary prevention in the borough. VRP continue to deliver these programmes to schools in Walsall including Ormiston Academy, Walsall Academy, Joseph Leckie Academy, Blue Coat whilst seeking to introduce it into new schools including Abu Baker school, Aldridge school and Shireoak. 71 young people received in-person intervention training (30 Round Midnight Gangs, 15 Round Midnight Knives & 26 REAL County Lines); and 29 professionals received in-person training (2 MVP, 1 REAL County Lines, 14 Round Midnight Gangs & 12 Round Midnight Knives) including PCSOs and SIPOs.

The Walsall stakeholder meeting continues to take place on a monthly basis bringing together individuals and organisations to focus on preventing and reducing violence, sharing and maximising resources where possible. There are 200 members of the network who receive regular information from VRP.

The Knife Angel came to Walsall in December 2023, where VRP delivered the virtual reality knives programme at the hub based in the bus station with the support of PCSO's.

Meetings with the OPCC and VRP have also taken place in regards to retail crime to reduce violence against staff at the Co-Op, Pets at Home and Dunelm and the VRP are in talks to arrange trauma training for public facing staff.

The Walsall local violence reduction partnership has produced a strategic needs assessment and a local delivery plan in response to the requirements of the Serious Violence Duty. WM VRP have produced a regional response strategy, by drawing together the common themes and priorities emerging from the strategic needs assessments developed for each of the seven areas within the region.

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Strategy was co-produced with communities, young people and partners and signed off by the VRP Strategic Board in January 2024. The 5 strategic objectives in the strategy include:

1.Prevention across the life-course

2.Development of a sustainable, community and youth led approach to violence reduction

3. Building closer regional partnerships that support innovation
4. Development of a West Midlands wide movement that aims for a violence free region
5. Upscale delivery of evidence-based programs in schools

The VRP Delivery Plan for 2024/2025 is focused on these priorities. To support accessibility of the strategy the VRP Youth Assembly have produced a young person's strategy, and developed a counter-narrative which will form the foundations of a regional **campaign** which will be launched in May 2025. The campaign aims to embed a positive counter-narrative to youth violence across the region which can build a movement of young people who want to stand against violence, and will be promoted across Walsall.

Step Together continues to be delivered in Alumwell via EYES and the funding for this route has been extended until the end of the financial year (March 2023). The Joseph Leckie route also continues to be delivered by Birmingham City Football Club and will be transferred to Birmingham City Innovate during quarter 4.

Health – ICB

The Designated Nurses across the ICB Black Country Footprint take responsibility for a portfolio of work which is overseen by the ICB Safeguarding Steering Group. These portfolios include cross cutting safeguarding issues where standardisation of approach and monitoring is desirable and necessary and so that duplication of effort can be avoided. As part of this, Exploitation is a key workstream across the Black Country (B/C) footprint and has been a key priority since 2022 and remains. A key focus has been to review the health support for Exploitation Hubs within each local place, strengthening partnerships and response to children at risk which are discussed at exploitations hubs/health forums by identifying gaps and seeking a solution. A systemwide Exploitation Options Proposal was developed for operational specialist nurse support to work across the B/C footprint supporting the Exploitation Agenda. The proposal and funding were approved by the ICB and BCHFT have recruited to the post, and the Nurse is due to commence in April 2024. The role will enhance sharing of health information into the hub discussions and ensure lead health professionals are updated.

In the interim, to support Exploitation at Walsall Place the ICB produced a flow chart and have had agreement from the 0-19 Team and CIC Team in Walsall that they would receive notifications of Children who had been discussed at Exploitation Triage, this aids information sharing and supports decision making and managing risk. In addition WHT and BCHFT also attend the Delivery Groups and Exploitation Panels at place and the ICB continue to have oversight via the Strategic Exploitation Group.

In addition, an ICB System wide Exploitation event was held in February 2024 with NHSE Safeguarding Lead Kenny Gibson opening the event. The event included an overview of Exploitation in the Black Country from the VRP and Research in Practice

updating on the latest learning to improve multiagency working in Exploitation. The event was attended by over 70 health professionals and anecdotal feedback has been extremely positive.

The Designated Nurse for Safeguarding Adults is an active member of the Partnership Strategic Exploitation meeting and continues to chair the highly regarded All Age Exploitation Health group.

The Health Exploitation Group in Walsall continues 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. The group is regularly attended and supported by the Principal Exploitation Reduction Officer from Walsall LA. This reinforces partnership working and has improved communication pathways. The group organised a face-to-face event in May 2023 and the session was attended by the health Exploitation Champions, with a focus on improving referral rates to the hub and raising awareness of exploitation across the health economy. There is a further event planned for later this year.

As a commissioning organisation the ICB continues to monitor our health providers Safeguarding Training (including Exploitation) compliance via system wide Safeguarding Dashboards and also assurance visits and including Exploitation as part of Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOE). This gives assurance that all staff have the appropriate level of training to respond to Safeguarding Risks. The Safeguarding Team ensure all communication and training opportunities relating to Exploitation is disseminated accordingly across the health economy in Walsall. In addition, GPs receive bespoke training around Exploitation.

Health – Black Country Healthcare Foundation Trust

The Lead Nurse for exploitation is now embedded in all 4 geographical areas in the Black Country. The post is shared between a 4 day practitioner and a 2 day practitioner, ensuring there is a suitable time for both practitioners to meet and discuss the exploitation agenda. A third exploitation nurse will be commencing imminently to provide input into all 4 exploitation hubs. In Walsall, this will include attendance at some of the daily meetings where all age exploitation cases are discussed. The nurses attend numerous exploitation meeting across the area including Channel, Contest, Prevent, CSA strategy. BCHFT are hosting a nurse for 12 months who will contribute to information sharing and risk assessing those at risk of exploitation. This nurse will provide relevant Health information from Mental Health services, GP, acute setting/ Urgent care centres, School Nurse and sexual Health services. This will be an important achievement in exploitation and highlight the importance of health information in these forums.

The 2 day practitioner focuses on the PREVENT aspect of exploitation whilst providing links to useful resources and events. Currently all exploitation assessments are progressed via the Exploitation Triage. The Health practitioner will be keen to share good practice from other exploitation hubs in the local area and formulate the optimum strategy for Walsall. The Nurses currently have oversight of all 4 geographical hubs and has shared good practice with each individual hub, some of which has been adopted in their own hub triage. In order to improve the outcomes of those at risk of exploitation, the leads will progress any suggestions with partner agencies once the 3rd nurse joins the team.

Youth Justice Service

Via our exploitation triage-based discussion, for those children that are identified as being exposed to exploitative based influences, a timely and specific multi-agency intervention-based approach is consistently being adopted. Furthermore, a collective and timely effort is made to ensure a more specific exploitation screening process is undertaken and, where appropriate, prompt referrals are made into the National Referral Mechanism (NRM). What is delivered intervention-wise is holistic and draws on what is available, as a collective, from across Children's Services. The goal is that this further develops, reinforces and/or enhances what is being delivered in response to the needs of the child and their family/carer in the event that they are already open to Walsall Children's Social Care or Early Help service. For those children who are not known, and meet the eligibility criteria specified, there is a consent-based preventative referral route open via the Turnaround Project.

Our intervention as a Youth Justice Service focuses on behavioural, welfare and criminogenic/exploitative based need and our plans are unique and individualised to the child concerned. Considerable effort is made in capturing the voice of the child as part of our initial (and ongoing) assessment process. What is provided support wise is tailored to individual risk and need and may incorporate elements of education/employment based support, lived experience exploitation based mentoring (St.Giles), Disproportionality based mentoring and engagement in positive based activity with the music studio, digital media, football and mixed martial arts being four of the current options we have open to us. These options are open to every child that we work with, not just those that have been referred through the exploitation based triage process. We are currently in the process of developing further our intervention and support based portfolio with an exciting link being fostered with our colleagues at Walsall Art Gallery around the provision of an art based therapy option.

Community Safety and Enforcement

Community Safety and Enforcement are responsible for a several functions which protect the public and in particular children from harm; the service consist of the following teams Community Safety, Community Protection, Environmental Health, Licensing and Trading Standards.

The Head of Community Safety and Enforcement co-chairs the All Age exploitation Sub Group with the local policing Superintendent and this has lead to much closer alignment of Childrens Services strategic and operational child exploitation work during 2023/4.

There are certain key elements of the services work which contribute to the exploitation agenda and key pieces of work undertaken during 2023/4 are listed below:

Licensing - The council renewed its Gambling Statement of Principles during the year ensuring it is fit for purpose and sets out how the council will meet the licensing objectives which are

- to prevent gambling from being a source of crime or disorder, being associated with crime or disorder or being used to support crime
- to make sure gambling is conducted in a fair and open way
- to protect children and other vulnerable persons from being harmed or exploited by gambling

In accordance with the powers under s157(h) of the Gambling Act and having regard to the Gambling Commission's Guidance to Licensing Authorities, the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership was designated as the competent body to advise Walsall Council about the protection of children from harm.

The service also conducted public consultation with regard to a new Convictions Policy and Fit and Proper Person Policy in terms of its responsibilities when issuing licences to the Taxi and Private Hire Trade. The new Policies were adopted in February 2024 and reflected more accurately statutory guidance set out by the Department for Transport relating to the safeguarding of children and vulnerable adults. A recent complaint investigated by the Police, Street Teams and Walsall Council Community Protection resulted in the revocation of a private hire vehicle drivers licence on the grounds of alleged inappropriate sexual messages being sent to a vulnerable young person by a licensed driver. This shows positive partnership working and robust implementation of the council's powers against those who may seek to do harm.

Trading Standards are responsible for the enforcement of law relating to age restricted products such as tobacco, alcohol, vapes and knives. The service receives complaints and intelligence with regard to businesses breaching these rules from the public and partner agencies, they conduct educational visits to the premises and then organise for children acting on behalf of the authority to attempt to purchase age restricted products under the close supervision of trained officers. The sale of such products to children can cause physical harm, lead to drunken behaviour that can cause ASB or lead to the exploitation of children by unscrupulous persons including organised criminal gangs. During 203/4 Trading standards seized 320,000 illicit cigarettes, 126kg of illicit hand rolling tobacco and 10,500 illegal vapes from 71 premises across the Borough. Staff also liaised with Police colleagues on visits to premises to ensure knife sales were being properly supervised at stores in Walsall with reasonable levels of compliance.

Environmental Health working alongside Trading Standards carried out visits to sun bed premises across Walsall to ensure that they were trading safely but also preventing young persons from accessing the services. Some complaints indicated that children as young as 12 were accessing sun bed premises and whilst the risk to their health is of importance some premises can be run by or of interest to persons willing to exploit children.

Community Safety have following a restructure started to pull together partners under the Safer Walsall Partnership banner to tackle serious issue in local areas. The locality tasking model which now exists in both the north and south of the Borough and brings partners together to develop positive activity to tackle a variety of issues affecting communities. This has been particularly helpful as a partnership vehicle to introduce diversionary activity in the Bloxwich area following a spate of serious asb and youth violence.

Community Protection are the team that takes enforcement action against a variety of anti-social behaviours in Walsall they work closely with partners such as the police, fire service and social landlords to ensure the public are protected from harm they are therefore key partners on the locality tasking work and alongside community safety have carried out a number of interventions during the year which help to protect vulnerable persons from harm and exploitation.

- Development of off-road vehicle operations with police fixed wing aircraft and drones leading to the seizure of over 40 uninsured and nuisance vehicles.
- Proactive work with night-time economy venues including pubwatch, bleed kits, knife detection equipment, drugs, and stop and search policies. Liaison with partner agencies and traders with regard to requests to hold under 16 discos in the town centre at licensed venues.
- Continued support for the Black Country Car Cruising injunction leading to a number of interim injunctions being awarded by the High Court while the Supreme Court consider an appeal based on injunctions on unknown persons.
- Enforcement action taken on 127 occasions in relation to void buildings where concerns had been raised of people including children gaining access to 'hang out' cause vandalism, drink, smoke and take part in sexual activity. In general, the commercial premises such as void pubs were of most concern and in one case led to the complete enclosure of a derelict pub with six-foot fencing to prevent regular trespass by local youths.

Street Teams

The priorities we are addressing:

- **Prevention of exploitation of children/young people and young adults:** there has been an increase in child exploitation across the country with our own referrals rising by 12% over the past 12 months. Referrals to our boy's project have increased by 87% over the past 5 years due to the rise in criminal exploitation (CCE) in Walsall. This has become a real problem locally, particularly County Lines drug rings due to our central location in the country and easy access to motorway systems. There has also been a dramatic rise in youth violence/knife crime, which in our experience is often associated with drug use. The use of serious category drugs such as Cocaine and MDMA has also become 'normalised' and we are now seeing an increase in mental health issues in our service users.
- **Reducing the likelihood of children/young people with increased vulnerabilities from being targeted by perpetrators:** Annually, around ¾ of our service users live in areas that fall within the 10% most deprived places to live in England. Their families struggle with poverty/low income, are lone parents, have a

partner in prison, are unemployed, in debt, live in rented/social housing or have experienced domestic abuse. These factors can increase a child's vulnerability to being targeted by abusers and are known as 'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACE's).

- **Supporting local communities** to build their own prevention strategies to reduce the risks of exploitation of children, young people and adults living with them.
- **Improving recognition of exploitation** by raising awareness amongst professionals and frontline workers to increase early intervention.
- **Ensuring that vulnerable young people transition safely into adulthood**, whilst limiting pressure on their mental/physical health which could increase their risk of exploitation
- **Ensuring that local and regional policies and practices effectively recognise and support victims of all forms of exploitation including early intervention:**

Our Purpose

- To prevent all forms of child exploitation and to support victims and those at risk of exploitation to rebuild their lives.
- Help relieve the distress of children/young people who are victims of exploitation by helping them to improve their mental/physical health and develop their self-esteem
- Enable vulnerable young adults transitioning from children to adult services/no services, to stabilise their lives at a critical point of change, increasing resilience and awareness to vulnerability factors like exploitation.
- Educate children/young people how to recognise grooming techniques/exploitation to help them to improve their understanding and awareness of potential risks
- Support families whose child/children have been exploited/are at risk of exploitation, to help them recognise grooming/exploitation and how to improve protective factors within their family unit to help reduce the risks of abuse
- Train professionals, parents, and the wider community to understand the impact of exploitation and to recognise potential victims at the earliest opportunity
- Educate professionals, parents, and the wider community to understand the impact of exploitation and to increase awareness and improve early identification of abuse
- Re-enforce community resilience to exploitation and enable them to develop a sustainable response to child exploitation at a local level
- To be the Voice of the Victim.

Over the past 12 months Street Teams has provided:

- 1:1 face-to-face support for 147 vulnerable and abused children/young people to help them to understand how they have been exploited and gain the confidence and skills to remove themselves from harm
- Support for 40 families whose child/children have been groomed/exploited/or are at risk of exploitation, plus 41 siblings, to help to reduce the potential for further abuse
- Help for 26 vulnerable young people transitioning from children's services to adult services/no services to reduce any risks of destabilisation, which could heighten their risk of abuse

- Education and prevention workshops to 8,555 schoolchildren to help them to understand grooming and exploitation techniques and the risks of carrying weapons
- Outreach work in targeted communities that face additional challenges (e.g. deprivation/unemployment/community tensions), resulting in 13 children/young people being referred for early intervention
- Training for 622 professionals, parents, and volunteers to help them to recognise abuse and appropriately intervene, as part of our early intervention approach.
- Contributed to all partnership activities, including County Lines Intensification weeks.
- Triage attendance daily and chairing role once a week.
- Sharing of all intelligence/information with police.
- Attended all relevant meetings across the partnership.

Next steps

Over the next 12 months we will continue to evaluate and develop our work collectively across the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership. We will conclude and report on the impact of the CARE project and the further learning from the Exploitation Pilot team, to review and consider what a wider adolescent safeguarding offer, inclusive of exploitation, may look like moving forward. We will continue to be involved in joint regional initiatives such as County Lines Intensification weeks and Walsall will continue to play an integral role in the development of our regional work with the support of the Violence Reduction Partnership.

We will continue to provide good quality training and development opportunities across the partnership in relation to Child Exploitation and will use forums such as the Exploitation delivery group and Exploitation Panel to ensure that good practice and areas of further development are identified and responded to. The partnership response in regard to exploitation in Walsall is strong, but there is always more to be done. Collectively, and with the continuation of good multi agency working, I am confident that the good work identified within this report can continue to move forward for the benefit of our children in Walsall.

We will continue to understand and be responsive to emerging exploitation themes and trends whilst using data insights, evidence and learning, to strengthen predictive and responsive capabilities whilst also focusing on prevention as a form of protection. We will utilise the findings of the strategic needs assessment to support development of a revised exploitation strategy and delivery plan to continue to drive practice improvements across the partnership and achieve strategic aims, to ensure positive outcomes for our children and young people in Walsall.

Report prepared by

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