

**Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee**  
**18<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

**Agenda Item No. 6**

**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.

**Recommendations:**

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 2022. It invites this committee to note and endorse 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 Enquiry 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 Enquiry 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. 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.

**Contact Officers**

Zoe Morgan - Head of Service, Help and Protection

☐. 07775 541850

[zoe.morgan@walsall.gov.uk](mailto:zoe.morgan@walsall.gov.uk)

## 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 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.

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 has 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 individual operational oversight taking place through the separate adults and children's delivery groups. All of these are multi agency meetings with members from Childrens and Adults Social Care, Education, Licencing, Youth Offending, West Midlands Police, Health and voluntary organisations.

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 revised strategy will feed 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 'hub' which is a virtual multi-agency approach to identifying, screening, and sharing of intelligence around those at risk of exploitation. The hub performance data continues to be shared at Exploitation Operational Delivery Groups. This is where exploitation triage leads meet on a weekly basis to review any themes or issues emerging from the hub, which are then raised at our monthly Exploitation Panel and shared with all agencies. The hub seeks to clarify intelligence around current CSE/CE risk, victims, perpetrators and locations as well as learning from historical investigations.

Walsall's Exploitation Pathway and Assessment has been in place since September 2020. Through regular promotion by multi-agency updates, school briefings and webinars, we continue to promote the process, so that they are now regularly used by professionals making referrals for both vulnerable adults and children. The pathway works alongside our MASH and promotes effective sharing of information between agencies. These discussions continue to include our Virtual School, Street Teams, Youth Justice Service, NPU police, Locate police, Adult Social Care and a member of our exploitation team.

### 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. Katie Storer-Young is well known both regionally and within the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership in regards to tackling exploitation here in Walsall. She shares information and data in regards to the hub in a variety of forums across a number of agencies and acts as a guide to practitioners across the safeguarding partnership.

The team consist 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 Practitioner (full time)

Team key activities:

- 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.
- Collaborates with west midlands VRP and provides support into intensification weeks.

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

- 1 x Full time Sgt – Exploitation
- 1 x Full time PC – Exploitation
- 1 x Part Time PC – Exploitation
- 1 x CSE Coordinator, full time
- 1 x LOCATE Missing PC, full time

### Triage 'hub' Data

The following is a breakdown of the referrals of children and adults that have come through exploitation triage between 1<sup>st</sup> October 2022 and 28<sup>th</sup> February 2023.

Total number of referrals is 181 and the breakdown of risk is as follows:

Level of risk	CE (Criminal Exploitation)	CE and Violence	CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation)	CE and CSE	Youth Violence	Adults	Other
Returned not discussed	6	1	2	2	2	4	12
No risk	9	0	5	1	3	2	0
Low Risk	29	0	22	3	3	7	0
Med Risk	20	1	14	5	0	7	0
High Risk	3	0	10	2	0	6	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>12</b>

In regards to referrers, the following breakdown applied:

CSC	Education	Street Teams	Police	YJS	Health	Early Help	Other
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74	34	11	14	3	9	16	20

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 the referrals for adults being exploited in Walsall continues to increase. Within this increase, there are two key themes that have emerged within the last six months – 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. Due to ongoing training and support for the multi-agency partnership supporting vulnerable adults in Walsall, we expect the number of referrals to increase over the next year. As such, Adult Social Care are in daily attendance to triage discussions where these key themes are discussed and reviewed and a delivery group focussing on the support for adults is in place and will feed separately back into the safeguarding partnership as part of our practice and quality assurance arrangements.

### 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 six months, our exploitation team have been supporting work in Bloxwich, Blakenhall and the Town Centre providing targeted youth work and support to children on the edges of being exploited by local gangs and groups. This work started prior to current potential gang related tensions and was in direct response to referrals made by social workers and their concern that potential street gangs were operating in the local area that were grooming children for car crime and drug sales. This work has enabled us to gather the views of local children, schools and parents on their feelings of safety. We have partnered with organisations such as Youth Connect, Street Teams and EYES (Engaging Youth Empowerment Services). This work continues and will play a key role in our future operational responses to local concerns whilst considering the views of the young people we are aiming to protect.

The team are also actively involved with and facilitate some of the actions as part of County Lines Intensification Weeks. These national campaigns happen each quarter across the West Midlands region and is an opportunity for police and partners to pull together partnership plans to consider any potential county lines running through Walsall and their impact on children in the borough.

Our last week of activity ran in February and was another well-planned and supported week with youth work activity, partnership walk around with Street Teams and detached work in schools, towns and transport hubs. The work from the Exploitation Team involved running workshops for practitioners on understanding drill music, engaging with families on public transport and workshops for social care to give a roader understanding of the issue in Walsall. These weeks are coordinated by the Violence Reduction Partnership who commented that the Walsall partnership plan was one of the best in the region.



### Working with parents

In addition to our continued community work, we have continued to increase our offer of supporting parents through the ongoing work of the team and have linked in with parents that are interested in supporting other families whose children have been exploited. 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.

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.

### 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 border social care network to ensure that safeguarding information is shared and updated when children from other local areas go missing. Our Exploitation team are also part of several regional relationships with other Exploitation Hubs across the seven local authorities in the West Midlands region. We meet bi-monthly to discuss best practice and share learning across the regional safeguarding partnerships.

### 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 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 added extra 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 Exploitation Pilot

As recognised within recent inspections, we have a shared understanding of thresholds for exploited and missing children, enhanced by the daily multi-agency triage meeting in the MASH. We have also strengthened our response to children at risk of exploitation with the launch of our Exploitation Pilot. Commencing in October 2022, this is a 12-month programme that is focussing on delivering bespoke packages of support to individual children that are being identified and selected through exploitation triage. The team consists of social workers, youth workers and links in with key partners such as health, police, education and the youth justice team. This team has case holding responsibility for up to 20 young people deemed as medium risk of exploitation and will sit alongside the wider work that continues within our Exploitation service.

As this is a pilot project, we have not made any changes to the current Safeguarding Partnership Exploitation Pathway. However, this pilot is being used to test whether a case-holding model is the way forward for us here 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 feedback thus far has been positive and some of the obvious benefits are being identified. This includes a better engagement from families and the young people themselves with some that are involved having previously refused support by Early Help or the wider safeguarding teams. This seems to suggest that the message to families involved with the pilot has been well received as they feel more able to engage with the preventative work that the team are set up to provide rather than the more traditional routes of offering support.

Equally, the relationships being forged between the young people and the team is having a positive impact on the feedback that we receive from the young people themselves. This is due to the lower caseloads allowing 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 be included in the overall evaluation on the impact of the pilot project. A final evaluation report of the pilot will be completed and shared across the partnership in September 2023.

### 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, is supporting with approval from the DfE 69 Children/young people and will continue for another year. 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. As such, the following indicators have so far been identified:

Improved education outcomes: we are waiting on data around the current education attendance data, however from what we have available for the academic year 2021/22, compared with the current academic year;

- 1YP attendance remains the same
- 17 C/YP have had an increase of school attendance
- 16 C/YP have had a slight decrease \* however this is compared to a whole academic year 2021/22
- 35 C/YP data is not available currently for 2022/23

- 29 CYP data is not available currently for 2021/22 to allow for comparison

Improved emotional outcomes All young people accessing CARE programme are supported to complete My Mind outcome stars, evidence from outcome stars is positive, showing that the majority have seen a positive impact as follows:

- 85% of young people had improved or sustained positive scores on feelings and emotions
- 78% of young people had improved or sustained positive outcome scores for healthy lifestyles
- 82% of young people had improved or sustained positive outcomes for how they used their time
- 74% of young people had improved or sustained positive outcomes for self esteem

On the 17<sup>th</sup> March we held an awards event at the Bescot stadium to celebrate the achievements of the children and young people involved in this project. The children enjoyed the celebrations and for the professionals in attendance, it was a delight to see the positive impact that this project has made.

### Practice Improvement and Quality Assurance

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 6<sup>th</sup> January 2023, they highlighted the following points:

*Strong and stable leadership across the partnership has successfully embedded the 'Right Help, Right Time: A Multi-Agency Guidance Continuum of Need'. This ensures that children receive a timely and proportionate response when needs and risks are identified in the front door. Professionals in all agencies working in early help and in the MASH understand this guidance and apply it effectively.*

*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.*

Prior to this JTAI Inspection, as part of our quality assurance work across the partnership, we conducted a 'mock' JTAI in regards to Exploitation. This was supported by the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership Business Unit and was conducted within the timeframes that would be expected when an inspection is undertaken. This audit was undertaken to provide an insight into the effectiveness of multi-agency practice where a child or young person had experienced or is at risk of exploitation.

The following agencies were asked to take part in this audit. The agencies who participated was smaller than usual due to the specific theme considered:

- Youth Justice
- Early Help
- Children's Social Care, including Local Authority Missing and Exploitation Reduction Team
- Black Country Healthcare Foundation Trust (BCHFT) - CAMHS
- Walsall Healthcare Trust – School Nurses
- Integrated Care Board - GPs
- Street Teams
- Police PPU / Force CID
- Schools

The scope of this audit was focussed on children and/ or young people that had been assessed as being at risk of exploitation using the exploitation toolkit, and who are open to Children's Social Care. The children audited were randomly selected with each audit undertaken with reference to the JTAI Inspection guidance but with individual agencies using their own audit templates. Specific questions linked to the inspection criteria were identified, and key questions included:

- Have agencies worked together to identify children at risk or who are exploited, intervened to reduce risk and monitor effectively the impact of interventions so that risk is reduced?
- Are assessments timely and include contributions from all agencies?
- Do the assessments consider contextual risks and protective factors, risks and strengths within the family, and risks online?
- Are assessments and plans dynamic and change in the light of emerging issues and risks?
- Are the key participants in attendance in multi-agency meetings?
- Is there effective information sharing, planning, decision-making and monitoring?
- Do actions happen within agreed timescales and the help and protection provided reduce risk and meet need?
- Is the experience of the child well understood and their views are clearly recorded and central to an effective multi-agency response?
- Were Children and their families offered a sufficient range of effective services that are well coordinated, including therapeutic help?
- Have agencies worked together to ensure that they are appropriately persistent in their efforts to engage with children and their families?
- Do partners understand the impact of exploitation on children's health and well-being?
- Are partners avoiding victim-blaming language and approaches in their practice?
- Do agencies avoid the unnecessary criminalisation of children?

- Do children at risk of exploitation who are missing receive a well-coordinated multi-agency response to prevent and reduce risk?
- Do agencies work together to support children to remain in education?

The areas of good practice identified included positive examples of skilled professional work to engage with children, young people and families who were at points of crisis and had experienced trauma and adversity. It also identified that Individual agencies were generally engaging well with children and families with some good examples of individual working and that exploitation was recognised and for the most part the relevant assessments and tools were completed.

Areas for development included better information sharing across agencies and some confusion as to when things should be reported. This led to agencies working with the children not always having the full picture either in relation to the child's history or current interventions that are being offered. Where individual agency remedial actions had been identified by auditors in relation to specific cases, agencies were asked to ensure these were taken forward. The overall findings from the piece of work will now be used as part of our continued development of the exploitation hub and will inform future service delivery from across the partnership.

### Governance

Walsall's All Age Exploitation Reduction Strategy is governed by the Safeguarding Partnership. The Exploitation Subgroup continues to be held bi monthly and continues to be jointly chaired by Police and the Local Authority. Information is also provided in regard to the partnership work around exploitation through Operations and Scrutiny Group and Performance and Quality Assurance meetings.

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. It 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
- Keep up to date with current practice research and themes and to share findings as they relate to us here in Walsall.

A review of the core functions of the hub is being undertaken which focusses on issues such as capacity and resources. Changes in the number of referrals and the

complexities of some of the issues that are referred means that the current pathway and framework needs to ensure we are able to continue to meet demand. This is a joint piece of work with the engagement of all partners. Currently an analysis of the impact on serious violence in Walsall is being undertaken by Professor Helen Lowey. She is an independent researcher and consultant in public health. Again, the findings and recommendations from this analysis will inform our work in regard to exploitation and how we incorporate the contextual element of violence that is becoming increasingly risky for some of the children we work with.

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**

Police participation, work and personnel in the hub has continued to progress and evolve over the last 12 months, with a new Partnerships Inspector and more recently new Sergeant overseeing it on a daily basis and handling the referrals coming through. Alongside the volume of cases through triage we have also worked hard to deliver joint working within the hub, in particular through the four County Lines Intensification Weeks run throughout the year – where we included the wider police partnership team and Neighbourhood Teams in joint patrols on key transport routes to deliver a joined up contextual safeguarding approach.

We were also very pleased with the recent Schools Open Day at Bloxwich Police Station which included not only police department inputs to 150 young people but also a County Lines input and a violence and exploitation input from the Exploitation hub and Street Teams. We will continue to plan and deliver such joint operational activities over the next 12 months.

The link previously articulated around exploitation, violence and acquisitive crime has become ever more apparent. Over the last 12 months from April 2022 to March 2023 compared to the same timeframe 2021/ 2022, both Serious youth violence and knife related youth violence has reduced according to police crime statistics, however there has been several significant serious crimes involving a targeted group of young people, many of whom had an exploitation footprint previously that has caused significant community impact.

In response to these crime trends linked to exploitation and violence, Walsall Police have created a new Impact Area on the borders of Bloxwich and Blakenall with additional Neighbourhood team resources. Additionally, the Exploitation team are working alongside the pro-active team and partners around mapping two new Urban Street Gangs from Blakenall and Bloxwich which has been driving some of the recent acquisitive vehicle crime and violent crimes. This work will continue to address the location and individuals. We are also looking to further invest into the partnerships

team by increasing our resource to support the suppression of violence and delivering our serious violence duty. This will involve working closely with the Violence Coordinator where we have secured their position through the Safer Walsall Partnership for the next twelve months.

Finally also over the previous 12 months there have been a number of cases dealt with by the Exploitation hub where we have worked with Walsall Drug and Alcohol Services and local housing provider to safeguard vulnerable drug users from having their addresses taken over by drug dealers and users, and more recently with the Gang masters and Labour Abuse Authority to intervene in a case of modern slavery with a group of Czech nationals being exploited in the borough, and the employer to take steps to prevent further incidents.

In terms of educating our officers and staff locally around the work of the Exploitation hub, we have participated in the roll out of Trauma Informed Practice and have also presented to other police teams around the role and existence of the exploitation hub and to drive up standards of completion of the Exploitation referrals by explaining what is required and what then happens to their referrals. This work educating police and partners around the content and quality of the detail of information will continue to progress over the next 12 months in order to improve the quality of referrals and information received.

### **Violence Reduction Partnership**

The West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership continues to work across the region and have a number of projects in place across the west midlands.

The VRP delivery model 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).





## Highlights 22/23

- Established a comprehensive prevention programme for schools, which can meet the individual needs of different schools and localities. Offered support to schools to develop consistent, long-term approaches to prevention that move away from reactive models but promote planning across the academic year. There has been a strong partnership with schools and West Midlands Police in delivering this programme. Despite only being in its third month of delivery, this programme is already reaching almost 2,000 young people and frontline professionals per quarter
- Commissioned local projects that provide a range of support, activity, intervention and training to approximately 4,000 individuals each quarter (i.e. over each 3-month period) who are at risk of engaging in or being exposed to violence. The majority of that activity reaches young people aged under 25, and frontline professionals who work with children and young people.
- Developed a robust response model, contributing to partnership responses to around 60 incidents of serious violence across the region every 3 months. VRP have arranged for the deployment of youth work teams, offered support to affected schools and coordinated the delivery of psychosocial and therapeutic interventions (amongst other activity) in the aftermath of serious violence to ensure further violence is prevented.
- Continued to build on the engagement with parent and carers through forums and awareness raising sessions. Developed a number of community pilots, aimed at increasing the role communities across the region play in violence prevention and most importantly giving communities the ability to make decisions about where they live.

## Health – ICB

In April 2021, 4 legacy CCGs merged to become one, requiring a significant Management of Change Process to support staff through the transition. For safeguarding, 4 separate Designated Professional Teams were brought together with the requirement to align processes, policies and procedures whilst maintaining their presence within key partnerships in place. At this point there were already plans in place for the CCG to become an ICB in April of 2022 (although this was later deferred until July 2022).

The Designated Nurses across the system 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 a key priority for 22/23 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 has been developed for operational specialist nurse support to work across the B/C footprint supporting the Exploitation Agenda. At this stage it's not known if this proposal will be approved and commissioned by the ICB, however the paper and costings has been shared with ICB Associate Director for Safeguarding and Partnerships to progress through the

appropriate ICB governance process. Along with our system response to Exploitation, we also continue to maintain our place-based response in Walsall. The Designated Nurse for Looked After Children 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.

In 2022 via the Senior Principal for Health Equity at the ICB, the violence reduction fund we had was allocated to a scheme supporting prevention of childhood exploitation in Walsall via Walsall Street Teams. Walsall Street Teams operates 'Keep Safe', a multi-faceted prevention programme involving community outreach work, workshops and alternative learning schemes, education and training programmes with schools, education and health professionals, and specialist work with gangs, boys, and other young people deemed at high risk. Funding directly supported an expansion of programme delivery to address unmet needs. This was a one-year fund that finished in September 2022.

Following on from this opportunity to access potential Health Equity funding, the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children recently submitted a bid via the ICB Health Equity Team for National NHS Prevention monies to fund a Nurse to support Exploitation in Walsall. Unfortunately, this bid was not successful. NHS England commenced its 'New NHS England' change programme which has meant that all National programmes of work have had to revisit and re-profile budgets and work for this year. The team are developing other options around ICB health inequalities funding so something that will be considered moving forward.

As a commissioning organisation the ICB continues to monitor our health providers Safeguarding Training (including Exploitation) compliance via system wide Safeguarding Dashboards. 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 and the next session is being held on 28th March 2023.

#### **Health – BCHFT**

The Lead Nurses for Exploitation (One whole time equivalent – job share) are starting to develop relationships with partners across all four boroughs and have now met with all four ICBs. They are attending meetings in regards to PREVENT, CONTEST,

Modern Day Slavery, Domestic Abuse as well as both Adult and Childrens Exploitation Boards and ICB Health Exploitation meetings. They are currently supporting information requests from Hubs in Wolverhampton and Dudley, whereas in Sandwell and Walsall these requests go through MASH. They are currently looking at developing data sets to help inform their developing role and are also looking at how best to get the messages across to their teams in regards to exploitation - recognising signs and how to support/refer etc. They will also be looking at the possibility of developing exploitation champions across the teams so that they can share new developments, information and learning. It is still a very new role and will be developing over the next 6-12 months.

## **Street Teams**

Street Teams is a local organisation specialising in the prevention of child grooming/exploitation and helping those who have been abused to rebuild their lives. Their work includes direct support for parents, siblings, young people in transition to adulthood and also adult survivors of child exploitation. Exploitation has changed over the years and referrals to their service now cover child sexual and criminal exploitation (CCE), including County Lines, gangs, and knife crime.

Street Teams continue to be a key partner in our work with young people at risk of exploitation. They run a multi-faceted prevention programme involving outreach work directly with young people as well as offering education and training programmes with schools and health agencies. Their overall aim is to prevent child exploitation and support victims and those at risk of abuse, whilst educating the wider public about how to identify grooming and exploitation and appropriately respond. They deliver several successful services for Walsall and these include:

- Project X – working frontline with identified young people from the exploitation triage process.
- Kaleidoscope – Working directly with families who have children who have been exploited or vulnerable to exploitation.
- The Hope Project – working with survivors of exploitation.
- Bridging the Gap – supporting young people who are exploited but that are reaching the age of adulthood (17-25)
- Community Futures – engaging communities in the fight against exploitation
- CARE project – supporting identified young people with additional educational needs at risk of exploitation
- Enlighten – Educating young people and professionals on exploitation and connected modern day issues.

They continue to offer support to a number of our young people here in Walsall and have been delivery partners in the aforementioned CARE project. Street Teams continue to be an active member at Walsall Exploitation Panel and continue to work alongside Walsall Childrens Services Exploitation Team.

## **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 both the CARE project and the Exploitation Pilot team as well as complete a review of and outline the future development of our exploitation hub. 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 Panel to ensure that good practice and areas of further development are identified and responded to. The partnership response in regard to exploitation here 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 here in Walsall.

Report prepared by:

Zoe Morgan

**Head of Service, Help, Protection and Support, Walsall Childrens Social Care**