

**Supplement to the agenda for**

# **Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee**

**Tuesday 27 May 2025**

**2.00 pm**

**Conference Room 1 - Herefordshire Council, Plough Lane  
Offices, Hereford, HR4 0LE**

**7. CHILD EXPLOITATION**

**Pages**

**3 - 20**





# **Title: The Safeguarding Children Partnership Response to Exploitation**

**Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee**

**Meeting date: 27 May 2025**

**Cabinet member: Cabinet Member Children and Young People**

**Report by: Ross Jones (Chief Inspector West Mercia Police) and Christine Wellington (Head of Service Safeguarding and Family Support)**

## **Classification**

Open

## **Decision type**

This is not an executive decision

## **Wards affected**

(All Wards);

## **Purpose**

- . The committee would like to cover the following aspects of the work to tackle exploitation:
- To understand different ways children are at risk of exploitation and the factors that contribute to that risk, to include:
    - Criminal exploitation
    - Sexual exploitation
    - The risks faced by unaccompanied asylum seekers
  - Scrutinise how the different agencies work together to tackle all forms of exploitation, to include:
    - Use of intelligence
    - Online safety training in schools and the wider community
    - Safeguarding children as they transition into being supported by adult social care.
  - Appraise the multi-agency response to children who go missing.
  - Understand the work underway to refresh the partnership's exploitation strategy
  - Scrutinise the role of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership Subgroup in tackling exploitation.
  - Appraise any improvement work to be undertaken following the Ofsted targeted inspection.

## **Recommendation(s) that**

- a) **Scrutiny receive and note the response to exploitation.**
- b) **The committee make any recommendations, or suggested actions, in connection to the report.**

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Further information on the subject of this report is available from  
Caroline Marshall, Julie Mephem, Tel: 01432 260249,, email: caroline.marshall3@herefordshire.gov.uk, I

## Alternative options

1. The Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee could choose not to review information contained in this report; this is not recommended as tackling child exploitation is one of the council's priorities.

## Key considerations

2. Exploitation for children, young people and adults involves being groomed, forced or coerced into doing something for someone else's gain. It is a complex and hidden issue. There are various types of exploitation including CSE (Child Sexual Exploitation) where children and young people (C&YP) can be groomed into sexual abuse for money, power or status.
3. Child Criminal exploitation (County lines) is where C&YP are targeted by gangs to sell drugs. This can be within or outside County boundaries. The C&YP can face violence and intimidation as well as debt bondage where they are arranged to be robbed to be in the 'gang's debt'. Human trafficking is modern day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud or coercion to obtain forced labour, and sexual exploitation. Our unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) or more appropriately called separated children or children seeking sanctuary, are particularly vulnerable to this. Children who arrive in the UK face a heightened risk of exploitation due to their unique characteristics and vulnerabilities. Their key risks are exploitation by traffickers before, during and after arrival to the UK, language barriers, lack of understanding of their rights, insecure immigration status and fear of authority. They also have trauma linked to conflict, persecution and displacement. These risks are known and on being accommodated our Safe Team will undertake a risk assessment to understand their key initial vulnerabilities and associated risks.
4. Exploitation can happen anywhere. It takes place in urban and rural areas and affects people of all ages, genders and ethnicities. The responsibility of recognising and addressing exploitation is "everyone's business" with recent government campaigns and legislation. The Government's proposed Crime and Policing Bill will make two new criminal offences of cuckooing (taking over a person's home to use it for illicit activity) and using a child to commit a criminal activity. There is also a statutory duty for individuals working with children to report child sexual abuse when they become aware of it.
5. For a full explanation of all forms of exploitation please see [Get Safe - Contextual Safeguarding - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#), which sets out the Safeguarding response and the [Exploitation Tools and Pathways - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#), which gives clear guidance and tools to support work for practitioners. It also gives guides on Get Safe – our approach and specialist team that works alongside practitioners and parents to support children.
6. Responsibility for coordinating the response to exploitation is held within the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership's Child Exploitation Subgroup, which includes representatives from all Statutory Partners including Children's Services, Police, Health, Education, this has been from the Strategic Schools Team within HCC, but a rep has recently been identified, Youth Offending Service, Early Help, Community and voluntary services. This group reports to the Safeguarding Partnership Board on its activity and outcomes on a quarterly basis.

7. The Child Exploitation Strategy 2022-2025 is available on the safeguarding partnership website and can be accessed via this link – [Child Exploitation Strategy 2022-2025](#). The Strategy sets out a common vision and principles for preventing and responding to child exploitation in Herefordshire, and how we will set out to achieve this. The Strategy is due for review this year and this work is underway within the subgroup.
8. The effectiveness of Herefordshire's multi-agency response to child exploitation continues to evolve in line with national safeguarding priorities. The nature of risk to children outside the home is dynamic. Methods used to recruit, groom and exploit children are becoming increasingly sophisticated, often adapting responses to disruption efforts by agencies. This includes the use of encrypted messaging, gaming platforms and live streaming.
9. Agencies are working in collaboration to identify, disrupt and prevent all forms of exploitation. This is supported by expert professionals within the police, Safe Team, safeguarding leads and through the Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meetings. MACE 1 meetings, chaired by the Safe Team, includes the child, their parents, and professionals to support an individual response. MACE 2, chaired by West Mercia Police, co-ordinates the sharing of intelligence from several agencies including police, schools, health, social care and youth justice. This supports real time learning, with the use of mapping tools, hotspot and risk assessments, which enables identification of emerging risks, key individuals of concern and contextual safeguarding environments.
10. Ofsted in October 24 noted that *'Multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings provide a structured, embedded approach to multi-disciplinary analysis and evaluation. A collaborative approach to risk management leads to reliable decisions about next steps.* This disruption activity and co working has been built upon with the communication and information sharing protocol between West Mercia Police Online Child Exploitation Team (OCSET) Intelligence team and Herefordshire Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) going live. The protocol provides the basis for information sharing and collaboration in the investigation and prevention of child sexual exploitation by adult perpetrators and/or facilitators of this form of harm and abuse.
11. The Safe Team are a dedicated resource for exploitation and missing children across our services. They are also part of a cross-border network with neighbouring, regional and national counterparts. Ofsted noted that *"A range of early help services support children at risk of exploitation. The specialist Get Safe team works alongside early help workers, which ensures a well-coordinated approach to intervention. Clear parameters are set for the required work, which enables a coordinated approach about how best to support the child. The Get Safe team is based in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) which receives referrals to children's services. Effective systems are in place to ensure prompt screening and allocation of new referrals relating to children at risk of harm outside of their family to the Get Safe team".* In the last quarter they completed 73 risk assessments on children. Ofsted noted these assessments were *"clear and comprehensive"*. The information from these informs the larger intelligence data set in real time. In evaluation 23% were assessed as "exploitation was not a concern," 48% were identified at "emerging" therefore at the early stages and so were worked with at the earliest point, 21% as "moderate" and 8% as "significant." This evidenced that children were being referred and supported at the earliest stages. Criminal exploitation was the largest risk factor at 60%, with sexual exploitation at 23%. 16% of children were at risk of both Criminal and Sexual Exploitation, and 1% at risk of Radicalisation.

12. This team are also responsible for the response to children who are reported as missing. The local response is coordinated through the West Mercia Missing Children Protocol. Return home interviews (RHIs) are a key source of intelligence helping professionals to understand the push/pull factors and exploitation links for children and young people in Herefordshire. Information from RHIs is used for disruption and hotspot mapping and is shared with our partners in Health, Police and Education which informs post-return safety planning. The appropriate school is also notified of the specific episode. Ofsted noted that when completed that these were done in a *“timely way that made children feel comfortable”* but that the take up rate was lower than expected and *“some lacked professional curiosity”*. This was already a focus within the team and improvements have been seen. In Q4 there were 30 missing episodes from 27 C&YP, 25 of these children accepted a RHI which saw an increase in take up of 80%. This was a significant increase from the previous quarter of 63%. Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Conference Chairs are notified of missing episodes, ensuring oversight and review within statutory planning and safeguarding processes. The team also tracks C&YP placed in our area, who go missing from other Local Authorities, to ensure they gain an RHI from their Home Local Authority. The team offer to chair a MACE or attend a risk meeting to ensure learning and a coordinated response. Current work is a deep dive into understanding the specific push pull factors of missing episodes for Herefordshire children. Multi Agency Intelligence data is shared to identify patterns, hotspots and networks, associated with exploitation. Herefordshire’s CSE profile dated 2020-2023, showed the prevalence of this crime is low in Herefordshire (see briefing note). Although low compared to National statistics, criminal exploitation remains the most prevalent form of harm experienced by children and young people in Herefordshire. Across the West Mercia footprint 30 offences occurred over the three year period which met the published definition of CSE, these were split equally with online and offline. 42% of victims had multiple vulnerabilities, 12 of which had markers for drugs, alcohol and mental health. 90% were female, with the majority aged between 13 and 16 and 83% were classified as white European. The profile highlighted social media as the most used method for perpetrators to contact children and young people. A recent profile has just been completed and is due for cascade in June.
13. Prevention and awareness regarding online safety is promoted through schools and through community partnerships. In the last academic year, education colleagues have undertaken the following to ensure C&YP and their parents/carers are educated to these risks.
- Updated the model of our Safeguarding Policy and cascaded to all schools
  - Delivered training and notes to DSL’s (designated safeguarding leads) and Education Directorate staff on the inclusion of exploitation in a more prominent way in the updated Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE 2024) advising that the avenues for exploitation through grooming are very much interlinked with the digital world
  - Herefordshire Council provided three DSL events across the academic year, with a key focus on exploitation. Sharing messages through the ‘Spotlight’ publication to all education settings on key issues and possible training that would support the CE agenda and how to help build resilience in individuals
  - Training delivered on the challenges that AI technology is bringing to the exploitation world through the creation of deep fake images of people and other manufactured posts to entrap unsuspecting people.
  - The Education MASH team support schools and the Get Safe assessment completion process alongside their requests for MASH statutory checks
  - Herefordshire Council annual Safeguarding Audit questions schools to declare their compliance with monitoring and filtering software, as well as their teaching through the curriculum, about online dangers.
  - Education representatives are at the weekly Get Safe, MACE meetings and subgroups.

- In the last quarter the SAFE team attended the Schools Day at Skylon Park and Hereford 6<sup>th</sup> Form as well as the Co-operative parenting event at the Town Hall, to advise parents, children and young people about exploitation.
- The Safe Team undertook group work in both primary and secondary settings which enabled collaboration to gain feedback on how to develop and improve the service. As a result of this group work, young people have actively contributed to the evolving creation of posters, leaflets and other literature designed to explain and promote the Get Safe service.

14. Disruption is multi-faceted with targeted intervention using techniques to disband groups, adding streetlights where criminal activity is suspected, and targeted campaigns at train stations or transport spots. There is also the use of CAWNS (Child Abduction Warning Notices) which is a preventative tool used by police to disrupt contact between a vulnerable child and an adult who may pose a risk to them. This can be a precursor to legal action if the individual breaches this order.

15. Health services have put in place an alert system for those children at risk of exploitation. Health visitors, school nurses, district nurses and GP's access this through their Electronic Medical Information System, EMIS. Where a booking for an appointment, medication review is made, the alert can be seen on the relevant child's records. The hospital and community services can access the alert through their MAXIMs system, which is for when a child is presented at A&E, on the children's ward and also for any dental treatment.

16. Partners work together through the MACE meetings, to offer individual support plans and a multi-agency response for the child and family. They have a clear multi agency purpose and remit to:

- Share the Get Safe Risk Assessment information or new incidents across the key partners. Ensure the child is building/ has a trusted relationship to support communication,
- Identify concerns and agree multi agency flags for a young person to be added on key partner databases to inform sensitive and coordinated responses.
- To identify the response pathway for the young person based on the Get Safe Risk Assessment/incidents and known information.
- The police to identify / advise of any criminal activity and response
- To identify complex safeguarding where there are multiple children to coordinate disruption operations.
- Support the Intelligence Exploitation Profile to understand what we know about locations, perpetrators, demand and need.
- Share this profile with strategic and operational groups to inform strategy, policy and influence multi-agency practice.

17. Ofsted in their review of our response to extra familial risk noted that "*Children at risk of extra-familial harm in Herefordshire benefit from a committed specialist team which reduces risks for many of these very vulnerable children. These risks include child exploitation, going missing from home or care and the risks associated with gangs, radicalisation, trafficking and modern slavery. The Get Safe team works effectively and reduces risks for many children who are vulnerable to or at risk of exploitation and other forms of extra-familial harm*". Ofsted also noted the response from partners had improved. They advised, "*Most children*



*vulnerable to exploitation risks who come to the attention of children's services are promptly identified. For these vulnerable children, collaboration and timely information-sharing between partners has improved, which is helping to protect vulnerable children through targeted interventions and/or disruption activity".* They also recognised that the early help service supports children at risk of exploitation and there is a coordinated response to the child.

18. Since this visit the Partnership hosted a Risks Outside the Home Conference on the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 2025. It was attended by over 150 delegates and featured contributions from a diverse range of professionals across multiple disciplines and backgrounds and our specialist Safe Team. The event included powerful presentations from survivors, which included 2 of our young people who shared their firsthand experiences and insight. One of these was a separated young person (UASC), who is supporting our response to this group. Feedback and evaluation from attendees were positive with professionals highlighting how impactful and informative the conference was.
19. For Separated Children, as their risks are heightened due to their journey to the UK, at notification from the National Transfer Scheme the Safe Team are informed. They evaluate the information and due to their expertise on different groups they are able to support the worker and/ or the child. Key information is translated into different languages to ensure the C&YP get clear information that they are safe and are aware of their rights. There are specific groups where we can bring the young people together to share their experiences. Many of these children present as older young people and the Exploitation Pathways for Care Leavers and those young people up to the age of 25 has been put into place to prevent young people falling through the gap of different thresholds between Children's and Adults Services. Although already available ([Exploitation Tools and Pathways - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#)) ongoing work is being undertaken to identify wider and coordinated support for this age group. We are not seeing a high level of missing episodes for the separated cohort of young people with none reported in Quarter 4.
20. Ofsted noted that *"At the initial MACE meeting, which decides whether the Get Safe team will become involved, the opportunity is missed to involve children and their family at the earliest opportunity. It is not sufficiently clear why they are not invited or asked for their consent. Children and their families are encouraged to attend subsequent MACE meetings, which increases their understanding and ownership of planned intervention."* Children and their families are now advised and invited from the earliest point and this forms part of the practice standards. An audit completed this quarter on parent and child / young person inclusion and participation in their initial MACE meetings found that in all 15 parents and children were invited to the meetings. Of these, 14 were attended by parents and/or carers. Young People advised they did not want to attend but, in all meetings, it was evidenced that they had shared their views through people known and trusted by them. Further work is being undertaken to support young people to see this meeting as their meeting. This is being explored through young people who have been through the service to feedback.
21. Ofsted noted that *".... a small number of children with very complex needs, many of whom the local authority has been involved with for a long time, experience delays in effective intervention, particularly when they cannot safely be cared for at home and there is continued difficulty in sustaining the right placement and keeping them safe."* This small number of children have suffered multiple adverse childhood experiences and need stability to support repair. However, due to their trauma they can exhibit challenging behaviour causing placement breakdowns, particularly when placed at distance. To address this capital



funding was agreed to set up residential homes in Herefordshire. By the children being within our boundaries it supports a clearer response as we are working with our own partners to gain the support needed. Our first home is ready and awaiting an Ofsted review. The Service Director for Corporate Parenting has led a review of each of these “historical cases” (20 identified) The reviews focused on obtaining assurance that these children and young people, who were accommodated prior to the time of the restorative practice approach being in place, are currently on the right care plan and are benefitting from a strength based restorative approach. Where there are risks of exploitation, prior to a young person being placed, an exploitation risk assessment of the area is requested from the placement and the Safe team are informed to improve planning. A member of the Safe team attends the young person’s Child Looked After review to support the planning and intervention. Safe Team workers continue to visit residential placements in Herefordshire (even where no Herefordshire Council children are placed) to deliver training and resources to both staff and young people in placement.

22. We have strengthened the closure decisions where children are not subject to MACE to ensure that the closures clearly note the actions and interventions to be done by the community ‘team around a child’ to ensure the progress seen to enable closure is sustained. All closures were reviewed by the service manager throughout Quarter 4 to support better evidencing of the ongoing support. This also addressed the comment that *“Children’s risk management plans vary in quality. Some are formulaic and not tailored sufficiently to the child’s circumstances. Staff are able to talk about how they tailor these plans in practice, but this stronger practice is not sufficiently reflected in these documents.”* Manager oversight, as well as IRO or CP Chair focus on the plans is ensuring that they accurately reflect the work being undertaken
23. The Child Exploitation and Missing Subgroup of the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSCP), which meets bi-monthly, are continuing to build on the work undertaken. This includes ongoing training for professionals. They have visited other Local Authorities including Birmingham and Worcester to see how exploitation is addressed, how data is handled and how they complete and use risk assessments. This is being fed into an updated action plan alongside the current Child Exploitation Strategy (see [Child Exploitation Strategy 2022-25](#)). The HSCP also maintain policies and guidance for professionals to address exploitation (see [Exploitation Tools and Pathways - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#)) and an online information hub for children and young people ([Hub: Exploitation and Crime - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#)). They are also focusing on children missing in education or those leaving the school during the day to gain a different response, alongside the police drive for Right Help Right Person framework. The subgroup is to give an update to the Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership on this work in July.

## Community impact

24. The Council Plan 2024-2028 includes the ambition to support children and young people to thrive, be safe, and for families to be supported. We believe that children and young people are best supported in their family networks and within highly effective schools and flourishing communities. Our children are the future.
25. Effective scrutiny enables the committee to reflect community concern. Overview and scrutiny is a key part of the council's governance arrangements and provides accountability and assurance, as well as a vehicle for elected councillors to contribute to policy development and review. Scrutiny committees have the overall aim of driving improvement to services to the local community.

26. As well as scrutinising the council's own services, scrutiny committees have the power to look into the provision of local services and issues which affect the economic, social or environmental wellbeing of the county.

### **Environmental Impact**

27. This report contains no direct environmental impacts. However any recommendations made by the committee, if agreed by the appropriate decision-making body, may have direct impacts. Reports arising from or supporting this work will outline their potential environmental impact.

### **Equality duty**

28. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. This report contains no direct equality impacts. However, any recommendations made by the committee, if agreed by the appropriate decision-making body, may have direct impacts. Reports arising from or supporting this work will outline the any associated equality impacts for committee consideration.

29. That children and young people receive the services that they need equitably across Herefordshire.

### **Resource implications**

30. There are no resource implications as a result of this report, which is for information only.

### **Consultees**

This is overseen by the Exploitation Subgroup which includes all statutory partners, Youth Offending Service, community and the voluntary sector

### **Appendices**

Appendix 1 - [Ofsted Monitoring Visit on Exploitation published December 24](#)

Appendix 2 - Briefing Note Report from West Mercia Police

4 December 2024

Tina Russell  
Interim Corporate Director of Children's Services  
Herefordshire County Council  
Plough Lane Offices  
Hereford  
HR4 0LE

Dear Tina

### **Monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services**

This letter summarises the findings of the monitoring visit to Herefordshire children's services on 22 and 23 October 2024. This was the fifth monitoring visit since the local authority was judged inadequate in July 2022. His Majesty's Inspectors for this visit were Alison Smale and Ceri Evans.

### **Areas covered by the visit**

Inspectors reviewed the progress made in the following areas of concern identified at the last inspection:

- The protection of vulnerable children from extra-familial risk.

This visit was carried out in line with the inspection of local authority children's services (ILACS) framework.

### **Headline findings**

Since the last monitoring visit in February 2024, a new interim director of children's services (DCS) has been appointed, who has brought renewed focus to areas of the service which need to improve. A refreshed improvement plan is being implemented and there are some early signs of improvement.

Children at risk of extra-familial harm in Herefordshire benefit from a committed specialist team which reduces risks for many of these very vulnerable children. These risks include child exploitation, going missing from home or care and the risks associated with gangs, radicalisation, trafficking and modern slavery. The Get Safe team works effectively and reduces risks for many children who are vulnerable to or at risk of exploitation and other forms of extra-familial harm. Most work is timely and well structured. The team forms lasting and trusting relationships with children, some of whom maintain contact after they are closed to the team. The quality of these relationships serves as a positive foundation, and risks reduce for many

children. Interpreters are appropriately used with children and families, which helps facilitate discussion in visits and direct work where English is not the first language.

Most children vulnerable to exploitation risks who come to the attention of children's services are promptly identified. For these vulnerable children, collaboration and timely information-sharing between partners has improved, which is helping to protect vulnerable children through targeted interventions and/or disruption activity. However, a small number of children with very complex needs, many of whom the local authority has been involved with for a long time, experience delays in effective intervention, particularly when they cannot safely be cared for at home and there is continued difficulty in sustaining the right placement and keeping them safe.

### **Findings and evaluation of progress**

A range of early help services support children at risk of exploitation. The specialist Get Safe team works alongside early help workers, which ensures a well-coordinated approach to intervention. Clear parameters are set for the required work, which enables a coordinated approach about how best to support the child.

The Get Safe team is based in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) which receives referrals to children's services. Effective systems are in place to ensure prompt screening and allocation of new referrals relating to children at risk of harm outside of their family to the Get Safe team.

Multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) meetings provide a structured, embedded approach to multi-disciplinary analysis and evaluation. A collaborative approach to risk management leads to reliable decisions about next steps. At the initial MACE meeting, which decides whether the Get Safe team will become involved, the opportunity is missed to involve children and their family at the earliest opportunity. It is not sufficiently clear why they are not invited or asked for their consent. Children and their families are encouraged to attend subsequent MACE meetings, which increases their understanding and ownership of planned intervention. For children who are not subject to MACE review, closure decision-making is less strong. It is not consistently clear what actions and interventions remain in place to support and sustain progress already made to reduce risks for the child.

Most Get Safe risk assessments relating to risks outside of the family are clear and comprehensive. They utilise a wide range of multi-disciplinary information and intelligence, which is reviewed through regular MACE meetings. This means risks for children are mostly well understood, leading to effective protective action and support. Alongside the allocated social worker and multi-disciplinary partners, the Get Safe team considers the level of risk and what action is needed to best support the child.

Child and family assessments and plans completed in other parts of the service in recent months are of improved quality. Most assessments are detailed and reflect

children's overarching needs. They include an exploration of the current risk and level of need. For the vast majority of children, they are updated when circumstances change. For a small minority this is not the case, particularly for children in care with more complex needs, who have experienced placement disruption and unplanned change. A very small number of children in care are placed a long way from home or have experienced significant placement change. Delay and disruption to their needs being met means that their risks are not sufficiently well managed.

Children's risk management plans vary in quality. Some are formulaic and not tailored sufficiently to the particular child's circumstances. Staff are able to talk about how they tailor these plans in practice, but this stronger practice is not sufficiently reflected in these documents.

Children are able to access some helpful specialist support services to address issues which contribute to their vulnerability. While some children in care and care leavers benefit from activities including sport and exercise, for others there is little evidence of support to engage in physical and social activities that could enhance their lives and help address mental health and isolation.

Across the service, management oversight and supervision of social workers and personal advisers continues to need improvement. Most supervision is regular and the proportion of permanent managers has increased. Supervision does not effectively address drift or ensure that actions are progressed to improve children's circumstances.

The continued turnover of social workers means that some children experience too many changes of social worker. While this is starting to improve, the amount of change in these important relationships, experienced by some children who already have great difficulties with trust, has a negative impact on their capacity to form meaningful relationships with their social workers. Children are engaged in planning and assessment, but their voices are not consistently reflected authentically in documents.

Children who go missing from home or care are offered return home interviews. Leaders have started to address the need to improve the take up of these interviews, which they recognise remains too low. When return home interviews are completed, they are timely and completed in a way which makes the child feel comfortable. Most return home interviews explore risks and factors influencing risk, but some lack sufficient professional curiosity to fully understand risks.

A significant focus on improving performance management is enabling leaders to understand the areas that have started to improve and where further improvement is needed to ensure that developments are embedded with continued pace and momentum.

The effectiveness of the approach to quality assurance remains limited. The audit programme was recently reset. Revised judgement guidelines have resulted in a more accurate understanding of practice quality. Audits are now being moderated, but this is not being done in a way which consistently provides a reflective commentary to aid learning. It is positive that auditors consult with workers and parents, but the engagement of children remains under-developed.

Staff are consistently positive about the leadership of both the new DCS and wider senior managers. They report a sense of an improving service. Staff like working in Herefordshire and are positive about the range of suitable training and development opportunities. Caseloads are manageable, and staff recognise that their workloads have started to reduce, enabling them to see children more often. They feel well supported and are positive about the recent changes and feel that the service is changing for the 'better'. They feel that there is a 'drive to improve' and that this is shared across the workforce. They report a visible and approachable leadership in recent months that seeks the views of staff, meaning that they feel invested in and listened to.

I am copying this letter to the Department for Education.

Yours sincerely

Alison Smale  
**His Majesty's Inspector**

## **Title: West Mercia Police responses to Herefordshire Council Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee lines of enquiry.**

**Committee:** Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee  
**Meeting date:** 27 May 2025  
**Topic:** Child exploitation

- **What is the extent and profile of the different types of exploitation in Herefordshire?**

The Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) profile for West Mercia has been completed and published on 10<sup>th</sup> April 2025.

The profile is completed in line with National Police Chief's Council and Child Sexual Exploitation Taskforce methodology and standardised template.

This profile evaluates Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) within the West Mercia force area over the 12-month period between 01/03/2024 and 28/03/2025

### **Data uncertainty**

There is not yet a specifically recordable offence of CSE or CCE (Child Criminal Exploitation). The Department for Education, 2023, Working Together to Safeguard Children has been used to identify recorded CSE offences.

Child sexual exploitation: Is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

### **Findings**

The profile concluded that child sexual exploitation is at a relatively low level on the West Mercia force area.

There were no incidents linked to group-based child sexual exploitation identified and there are no current operations running concerning CSE in the force area.

Only one offence of CSE was recorded in Herefordshire during this time period. This relates to an offence committed online.



There were no repeat victims in Herefordshire in this time period.

There were no specific groups of individuals or associates identified as being targeted for CSE, such as groups of pupils in the same school, or young people attending a social group.

Youths who regularly go missing are likely to have the vulnerabilities which make them targets for perpetrators who want to sexually exploit them, such as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). There were no victims of CSE in Herefordshire in this time period who had been recorded as missing persons.

There were no repeat perpetrators identified in Herefordshire over the 12-month period analysed. Their six offences are based on two events involving three victims in each.

There were three offences which involved a perpetrator who was in a position of trust and had educational links. None of these were in Herefordshire.

There were no cases where it was evident that the individual involved had progressed from being a victim to a perpetrator.

### **Group based CSE**

Analysis of each individual CSE offence shows that there were no incidents which were deemed to be committed by a group of two or more offenders.

At the date of publish, there are currently no CSE organised crime groups mapped on West Mercia and no ongoing operations concerning CSE.

### **• What plans and strategies exist to tackle different forms of exploitation?**

West Mercia Police are committed to working along with other agencies to safeguard children.

We aim when policing child abuse to ensure that the welfare of children is paramount.

- We investigate all reports of child abuse and neglect and protect the rights of child victims of crime.
- We seek to take effective action against offenders so that they can be held accountable, through the criminal justice system, while safeguarding the welfare of the child.
- We adopt a proactive multi-agency approach to preventing and reducing child abuse and neglect and safeguarding children.

Child Protection and investigation of crimes against children is the responsibility of all officers and we have a number of dedicated teams of officers and staff investigating child sexual exploitation.

We also have dedicated teams of detectives working with children's social care to investigate crimes against children within the home.

West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner John Campion holds Chief Constable Richard Cooper to account for tackling CSE. Assurance and Accountability minutes are published online.

- **How do partners work together to tackle different types of exploitation**

There is a wide variety of CSE provision available across the West Mercia force, this includes Office of Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC) funded provision, police resources, local authority resources such as the Safe Team, schools and local charities. Two of these provisions are dedicated to dealing with CSE, Branch and The Holly Project. Many of these services deal with multiple forms of exploitation and more generally with victims of crime.

### **Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Provision**

- Primary provision is focussed on the prevention of CSE occurring and includes parental input, age-appropriate education, identification of at risk individuals and open channels of communication.
- Secondary Provision emphasis on early intervention of the emerging issue to resolve it, with targeted intervention and protective work with those who have known vulnerabilities.
- Tertiary provision is aimed at those affected by CSE to manage the ongoing situation and prevent further abuse.

### **Safe Team – Herefordshire**

The team deal with all risk levels (significant, moderate and emerging) and give support based on the level of risk. Emerging risk will receive preventative work/early help. Moderate and significant risk will have a Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meeting chaired by the Local Authority where a safety plan will be developed.

The provision offers support to children and young people (CYP) who have experienced CSE (including online) and adult victims of historic CSE



Victim Support are an independent charity that offer help to people affected by crime. Whilst they do not work specifically with CYP affected by CSE they may work with adults that have disclosed historic CSE.



Supporting children aged 8-18 and young people up to the age of 24 with additional needs, who are impacted by Child Criminal Exploitation or Child Sexual Exploitation.



Branch is for CYP between age 5-18 years, or under the age of 24 years for those with additional needs, who are victims and/or at risk of CSE. The CYP does not have to have formally reported/disclosed CSE.



Purple Leaf is the early intervention and prevention arm of West Mercia Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre (WMRSASC). They provide training and education on sexual violence to schools and professionals. Purple Leaf provide psychosocial education in schools to children and young people between age 5-18 years who are at risk of, or experiencing, CSE.



Axis counselling service offers support for women, men, CYP (aged 11+years) who have experienced non-recent (historic) childhood sexual abuse, any form of sexual assault, sexual violence, sexual exploitation or rape.



Are you worried about online sexual abuse or the way someone has been communicating with you online?

[Make a report](#) to one of CEOP's Child Protection Advisors

**Further Local Provisions** – Non OPCC Funded. There are also a wide range of other provision in place including The Holly Project, Street Pastors, Taxi Marshalls, Early Help, and Maris Collins Foundation.

- **What training and awareness raising takes place?**

The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership provides full information on its web site. Age-appropriate information for children and young people about exploitation and support available can be found in the online Youth Hub on the link: [Hub: Exploitation and Crime - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#).

There is a full guide for people affected and to support practitioners to work with them on: [Exploitation Tools and Pathways - Herefordshire Safeguarding Boards and Partnerships](#).

For practitioners

Training delivered to officers and staff on initial recruitment to West Mercia Police

Specialist training delivered to detectives including the Specialist Child Abuse Investigators programme.

The Herefordshire Safeguarding Children Partnership also provides training for all professionals on exploitation relating to children and adults, which is delivered by West Mercia Police.

[Herefordshire Safeguarding Partnership - Learning Management System](#)

For children, young people and families

Our Exploitation and Vulnerability Training workshops are available to anyone living or working in Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin or Worcestershire.

Available both online via Teams and in-person delivery, the workshops aim to cover the various aspects of vulnerability and the signs and symptoms of exploitation.

[Exploitation and vulnerability training | West Mercia Police](#)