



# **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.**

## 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

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