

# Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting:	18 July 2023
Title of Report:	<b>Contextual Safeguarding, Exploitation and Extra-Familial Harm</b>
Lead Member:	Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	Sharon Muldoon (Director for Childrens Services)
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Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

## **Purpose of Report**

The report provides a detailed account of our city's efforts in addressing and combatting child exploitation within the context of a wider extra-familial harm definition, including the progress made in implementing a contextual safeguarding approach, through the Adolescent Safety Framework.

## **Recommendations and Reasons**

To note the report.

## **Alternative options considered and rejected**

n/a

## **Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan**

Report has relevance for delivery of 'a Bright Future' as the Children and Young People's Plan for Plymouth.

## **Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:**

N/A

## **Financial Risks**

N/A

## **Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:**

N/A

## **Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:**

\* When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council's duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.

## Appendices

\*Add rows as required to box below

Ref.	Title of Appendix	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	Briefing report title							
B	Equalities Impact Assessment (if applicable)							

## Background papers:

\*Add rows as required to box below

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

Title of any background paper(s)	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

## Sign off:

Fin		Leg		Mon Off		HR		Asset s		Strat Proc	
Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Jane Anstis (Service Director for Children, Young People and Families)											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes											
Date agreed: 10/07/2023											

## **1. Introduction**

At the request of the Scrutiny Panel, this briefing report has been prepared to offer an informative update on the issue of Child Exploitation in Plymouth. For convenience and reference, appended are the definitions of Child Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation. The report presents; a detailed account of our city's efforts in addressing and combatting child exploitation within the context of a wider extra-familial harm definition, including the progress made in implementing a contextual safeguarding approach, through the Adolescent Safety Framework. The report also includes an overview of the various approaches adopted by agencies in responding to missing children.

'Extra-familial harm' refers to a broad category of harm types, including peer-on-peer harm, sexual and criminal exploitation and bullying. Often, these different harm types share overlapping drivers, methods and consequences for young people.

Contextual Safeguarding is 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 in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Parents and carers have little influence over these contexts, and young people's experiences of extra-familial abuse can undermine parent-child relationships.

Children's social care practitioners, child protection systems and wider safeguarding partnerships have developed new ways to engage with individuals and sectors who do have influence over/within extra-familial contexts, and recognise that assessment of, and intervention with, these spaces are a critical part of safeguarding practices. Contextual Safeguarding, therefore, expands the objectives of child protection systems in recognition that young people are vulnerable to abuse beyond their front doors. Our holistic framework for this approach in Plymouth is called the Adolescent Safety Framework.

## **2. What we know about extra-familial harm in Plymouth**

For many safeguarding partnerships, including Plymouth, the development of a comprehensive data system that is able to quantify the type, range and distribution of extra-familial harm across the City, remains a challenge. The development of the Adolescent Safety Framework (below) will address this. This will allow better visibility of data and these at the strategic level and make possible a 'helicopter view' of the City in a way that is currently not possible.

### **County Lines**

County lines is a form of criminal exploitation where urban gangs persuade, coerce or force children and young people to store drugs and money and/or transport them to suburban areas, market towns and coastal towns (Home Office, 2018).

It can happen in any part of the UK and is against the law and a form of child abuse. County lines gangs are highly organised criminal networks that use sophisticated, frequently evolving techniques to groom young people and evade capture by the police.

Perpetrators use children and young people to maximise profits and distance themselves from the criminal act of physically dealing drugs (National Crime agency, 2019). Young people do the majority of the work and take the most risk.

Dedicated mobile phone lines or “deal lines” are used to help facilitate county lines drug deals. Phones are usually cheap, disposable and old fashioned, because they are changed frequently to avoid detection by the police.

We have seen an increase in active county lines investigations with one Operation, Op Fitter, designed to break up a county line in the city which had been identified at the Operational MACE. Whilst successfully identify 2 adults responsible for exploitation, who are now both in custody, the exploitation of the children continued. Therefore, we have followed a previous intervention (Op Hypural) by using a network of services, including the youth service, youth justice Impact Project (diversion programme) and Children's Social Care to offer support to the children identified. This has provided effective preventative and supportive interventions with young people and families to reduce the risk of harm or entry into the youth justice system. This work is ongoing and reviewed with the Community Safety Team to ensure system join up approach to prevent any escalation of concerns or issues. We believe there is at least 2 active county lines in the city with children being coerced/ forced to collect, hold and deliver drugs. We are working closely with the Police to disrupt these activities and share intelligence.

### **Knife Crime**

There have been some concerns that the number of young people involved in knife crime is escalating. In the last quarter, April to June 2023, the Youth Justice Service have worked with 2 young people arrested for knife crimes with a further 6 young people stopped / arrested in the same period. These young people will be offered evidence based interventions approved by the Youth Justice Board.

Children coming through the prevention / early help pathway are being supported with relationship based approaches, specific programme work completed around knife crime via the knife crime programme we use.

### **3. Adolescent Safety Framework**

Plymouth's Adolescent Safety Framework has been fully operational since January 2022. The Adolescent Safety Framework sets out a coherent contextual safeguarding multi-agency response to extra-familial harm, at practice, operational and strategic levels. The Strategic Missing and Child Exploitation Group continues to lead the development of the Adolescent Safety Framework.

Plymouth has adopted and adapted the approach initially developed in Devon County Council to support regional consistency and its commitment to evidence-informed practice models. The ASF has a strong evidence base and was developed in consultation with Research in Practice and the Contextual Safeguarding Network/ Bedfordshire University.

The ASF offers a single and holistic approach to assessing and responding to; individual children; peer groups; neighbourhood, location or person/ people of concern. The underpinning assessment tool, the 'Safer Me' assessment identifies risks, protective factors and supports corresponding responses through a range of pathways including at the individual level through Safer Me and Safer Me Plus (Child Protection) meetings designed to ensure a strong focus on contextual / extra-familial risks, maximise the participation of the young person and focus on collaboration with them to cultivate safety; peer Group, Neighbourhood (Location) and School Context conferences. These conferences provide a mechanism to coordinate interventions and improve safety in the context of concern.

Work is needed to develop confidence, understanding and confidence within Children's Social Care and within the wider partnership of both the ASF and responses to exploitation and strong leadership and direction was applied during June through the setup of a task and finish group and series of partnership training initiatives, and this work is on-going. The task and finish group will also address the data and intelligence reporting capabilities of the SMCE and MACE

The Strategic Missing & Child Exploitation (SMCE) Sub-group has been established by the Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership (PSCP) to:

- Provide strategic oversight, scrutiny, and challenge of the multi-agency response to extra-familial risk.
- Understand how agencies are working together to identify, respond and prevent extra-familial risk.
- Agree and monitor the effectiveness of the Partnership extra-familial risk strategies, policies, and groups, ensuring national requirements and developments are considered and, where appropriate, incorporated.

The Terms of Reference and chairing arrangements for the Operational MACE groups has been recently reviewed and updated with the Chair of the MACE meetings shared between a CSC Service Manager and a Police Inspector. The terms of reference for the Strategic MACE partnership have also been reviewed and this group is now chaired by a Police Chief Inspector.

The MACE meeting focus on offering and seeking assurance that the right children and groups are being supported, and follows a format used in the London Metropolitan area known as VOLT – Victims (children) Offenders (Adults exploiting children) Locations and Themes. This new process has been running for 6 months and at a recent review (January 2023) was praised by the partnership. During the review, it was suggested we widen the VOLT format to include gangs, and this will be implemented in March 2023.

#### **4. How we respond to children who go missing in the city**

REACH (Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Care and Home) is a dedicated team providing support to children in Plymouth who are reported missing or at risk of exploitation. The team consists of 1 Senior Professional Youth Worker, 3 Professional Youth Workers, and 3 Family Support Workers.

When a child is reported missing, the team receives information logs from the police. They also receive updates when the child is found. The assigned worker then contacts the child, their parent, caregiver, or social worker to offer and arrange a Return Home Interview (RHI) within 72 hours.

If a child is missing for over 24 hours or on three occasions in a rolling four week period, REACH must notify the allocated social worker and their Team Manager so that a Strategy Discussion can be considered. The child's missing period begins from when they were last seen, not when they were reported as missing to the police.

During the RHI, the team arranges a time and place that is convenient for the child. The purpose is to understand why they went missing, the circumstances surrounding their absence (such as their whereabouts, companions, and substance use), and whether they experienced any harm during their absence. The worker also assesses the child's perception of potential risks and identifies any necessary support from REACH or other teams to prevent future missing incidents. Ongoing risk of exploitation is considered, and the Safer Me assessment is utilised as a tool to support identification and action needed in respect of related concerns. REACH actively participates in city-wide initiatives targeting exploitation, including OpMACE and Daily Intelligence Briefings (DIB).

Since May, we have experienced a reduction in staff with 2 full-time workers leaving. However, there has been an increase in missing incidents, rising from 67 in May to 94 in June. Nevertheless, overall performance has either remained steady or improved. Notably, there has been a significant improvement in meeting our core key performance indicator (RHIs within 72 hours with the child present) for our Children in Care during June.

Indicator	April 23	May 23	June 23
Missing Children (Overall)	33	59	61
Missing Episodes (Overall)	67	90	94
Average missing episodes per child (Overall)	2	1.5	1.5
Missing Children (Children in Care)	14	23	23
Missing Episodes (Children in Care)	40	40	39
Average missing episodes per child (Children in Care)	2.8	1.7	1.7
First Contact made within 72 hours (Overall)	97.7%	95.6%	98.9%
First Contact made within 72 hours (Children in Care)	100%	96.6%	100%
% of return home interviews booked (Overall)	85.5%	83.3%	87.2%
% declined return home interviews (Overall)	4.3%	3.3%	11.7%
% where the RHI is within 72 hours (date of RHI) (Overall)	71%	70%	70.2%
Number where the RHI is within 72 hours (date of RHI) (Overall)	49	63	66
% of return home interviews held within 72 hours where YP attended (Overall)	55.1%	51.1%	57.4%
Number of return home interviews held within 72 hours where YP attended (Overall)	38	46	54

For the last quarter, April 2023 to June 2023 there were 251 missing episodes that related to 153 children (children often have multiple missing episodes in any period). 36 of these children were open on Child in Need plans, 8 open on a Child Protection Plan and 60 were Children in Care.

Over the last 12 months REACH team has also developed an offer for children presenting with Harmful Sexual Behaviours (HSB). This has been pertinent given the overlap in our cohorts of children with HSB accessing support through REACH and Youth Justice Service. We have been able to deliver assessment and intervention for children presenting with peer-on-peer HSB, a risk indicator of children who are exploited or are at risk of exploitation.

During Q1 we identified 28 children as being at medium risk of exploitation, and 10 as being at high risk.

**Daily Intelligence Briefings**

A Daily Intelligence Briefing (DIB) has recently been introduced attended by the Police, REACH, Adolescent Support Team, Youth Justice Service as well as partners from Education and Health. The DIB looks at children reported missing in the last 24 hours, children still missing over 24 hours (i.e., from previous days), children arrested, and any MACE consultation requests deemed urgent. Partners have praised this response as it ensures that we are proactive in our response to the most vulnerable children in the city.

**Conclusion and next steps**

Partnership expertise in the City is strong. There is more to do to ensure consistent understanding at the practice and response level across agencies.

The re-energising of the Adolescent Safety Framework and investment in embedding this with confidence and clarity will enable greater consistency of practice and intervention as well as improved visibility of child and thematic information from which improved strategic oversight and operational deployment can follow.