

Plymouth City Council Children's Service Improvement Board

Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership - Child Exploitation update

Introduction

1. This report is submitted to provide the members and attendees of the Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an overview of the local partnership response to child exploitation across Plymouth.
2. Child exploitation has emerged as a significant threat to our children, nationally, regionally, and locally. It affects children from all backgrounds and can have devastating effects on the lives of children and their families.
3. It is a particularly difficult safeguarding issue to respond to. Children often do not realise they are being exploited, have strong personal relationships with those exploiting them, many have vulnerabilities arising from complex issues earlier in their lives, and many are mistrustful of the staff trying to help and support them.

Summary

4. The response in Plymouth, as in many other areas, has developed at pace over recent years. There is a truly multi-agency response overseen by the Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership (PSCP). The response is supported by senior managers from the Devon and Cornwall Police, Plymouth City Council's Children, Young People and Families (CYPFS) and Education Participation and Skills services (EPS), NHS Devon Integrated Care Board, University Hospitals Plymouth NHS Trust, Livewell Southwest, Barnardos, NSPCC and the local education community.
5. The level of awareness overall, across the partnership, is adequate. Staff from key organisations understand what child exploitation is and can outline its different forms, i.e., sexual, criminal, radicalisation, modern slavery.
6. Staff from a range of different organisations identify the key signs and indicators and flag their concerns. This is encouraging and demonstrates a commitment across the partnership.
7. However, it is felt the number of children being identified does not reflect the true prevalence of child exploitation in Plymouth. More work is required to develop practitioner awareness into a greater and wider understanding. It is hoped this understanding will lead to signs and indicators being recognised more frequently, children being assessed accurately, their needs and risks identified, and appropriate courses of action determined.
8. The support provided to children who are assessed as being at higher levels of risk is assessed as good and effective. These children are supported by professionals who have appropriate levels of skill, experience, and time. The support provided to children with lower levels of risk, or for whom there is limited information, is variable. The universal workforce capability and capacity is inconsistent. Further work is required to improve understanding, confidence, and skill levels.
9. There are a range of meetings in Plymouth that support the overall response. At the operational level the higher-level risks and threats are managed well. Strategically, more work is required to improve how the PSCP drives improvements forward, in a timely way. There are promising signs

with plans to conduct a system assessment, review the local adolescent safety framework and improve data collection. These need to be achieved without any delay.

10. In conclusion, there is still much to do but the level of knowledge and expertise available within Plymouth should enable the improvements to be made. The gaps, and the means to close them are understood. Partnership leaders need to commit resources to ensure the plans are followed through as soon as possible.

Awareness of child exploitation

11. PCSP and its partner organisations have provided learning over recent years to ensure practitioners are aware of and understand child exploitation. This has been supported by national publications, including 'Keeping Children Safer in Education', the national statutory guidance for safeguarding in education settings.
12. Child exploitation features in all induction training and in many refresher inputs. Learning inputs are regularly updated as knowledge about child exploitation grows.
13. The level of knowledge, as a whole, is assessed as adequate, although it has been suggested that further learning would be useful to improve understanding and enable staff, including those in schools to be more confident. It is hoped this will enable certain staff to manage more cases at lower levels of risk.

The response to children who go missing

14. All incidents of children being reported as missing to the police, are notified to CYPFS' Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Care and Home (REACH) team. This team is the local authority's specialist team in this area of child safeguarding and examines each notification it receives.
15. All children reported as missing to the police are monitored by police managers. Risks are continually monitored, and all cases are reviewed at local daily police tasking processes where risks are assessed, and where necessary, action decided upon. There is evidence of appropriate and effective action being taken through these processes.
16. Efforts are made for family support workers from the REACH team to speak with every child who is reported as missing, to conduct Return Home Interviews (RHIs). There are good rates of engagement and the information gathered is used to identify risks in relation to children, individuals who pose a threat of harm to them and locations of concern. This information is fed into local risk management systems (outlined later in this report).

Referral and allocation of child exploitation cases

17. The pathway used by practitioners to access support has changed recently. All referrals are submitted to the local Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). The MASH ensures referrals are allocated to the relevant staff dealing with this subject. Work is being undertaken to ensure referrals are managed in a timely way by staff who have a good understanding of child exploitation and the support options available. It is intended that advice and support will be available to professionals dealing with cases, when they have queries. The partnership will check on these arrangements post-implementation to assess how they are working.

18. The options following a referral being received are:

- a) The referral can be allocated for a social care assessment within the CYPFS Initial Response Team
- b) The referral can be allocated for 'Peer Group' conference when there are concerns about a group of individuals, a location or a person posing a threat. The conference will be coordinated by CYPFS' REACH team.
- c) The referral can be allocated, often back to the referrer, to be managed in a school or community context conference

19. There are issues with Option C, currently, as it is felt there are limitations with the support provided in the school or community context. The limitations relate to staff either not having the level of knowledge, confidence, and experience to conduct the work, or not having enough time. There are plans to use staff from the REACH team to support school and community staff in raising knowledge, confidence, and skill levels to be able to help children more effectively.

20. Once children are managed under Options 1 and 2, it is felt that the response is good. Staff, particularly in the REACH team, have good levels of knowledge, have more time to be able to engage and work with children, have a good understanding of the techniques that work well with children affected by exploitation and access other resources that help child victims.

Adolescent Safety Framework

21. The Adolescent Safety Framework (ASF) is a multi-agency framework designed to identify and coordinate a response to contextual safeguarding risks faced by adolescents. It was introduced into Plymouth in early 2021.

22. The ASF is used effectively by CYPFS staff but is not consistently understood well or used by staff in other organisations, particularly schools.

23. The key document within the ASF is the Safer Me assessment tool. It is a comprehensive and thorough tool, but many staff have found it time-consuming and laborious to complete. A limited number of Safer Me assessments have been completed by staff outside of CYPFS.

24. The Strategic MACE has established a task and finish group to determine what is needed for the whole partnership to use the ASF more effectively and the group is about to start its work in earnest. Part of that work will be to explore if a simpler, easier to use assessment tool can be introduced. Another key part will be to identify what learning is required to fully engage and inform all the relevant staff across the partnership.

25. Another option is for the partnership to identify and implement an alternative framework.

Key Meetings/Forums

26. The local groups responsible for coordinating the response to child exploitation are:

➤ Daily Intelligence Briefing

Each weekday a virtual multi-agency meeting is held in Plymouth. It involves staff from the MASH, the Youth Justice Service, health, police, CYPFS and members of the local alternative

education provider, ACE Academy. It is well attended and well regarded by those who participate.

Children who have been reported as missing, children detained overnight in police custody or identified as a concern through being arrested and children identified as being at high risk of exploitation are discussed. Children may be discussed at the meetings more than once.

Decisions are made over actions, lead professionals, risk assessment and management, and oversight. This ensures children are provided with prompt and appropriate support by knowledgeable and committed staff. This is seen as good practice and has led to good outcomes.

➤ Operational Missing and Child Exploitation Group (MACE)

The group has become a routine feature of the response to child exploitation and is working well. It is chaired alternately by police and CYPFS managers and there is good representation from local partner organisations. With the daily management of children at risk of, or directly involved with, child exploitation, seen as being effective the Operational MACE does not need to routinely consider these cases. This has allowed the group to focus on other threats, i.e., locations, trends and those who pose a threat of harm.

➤ Strategic MACE

The group has good multi-agency representation and is well attended. The group reports into the PSCP Board each quarter with the chair being a full member. The group has a detailed work plan and is the primary driver of improvements.

There are concerns that the group is not fully effective. Over the past eight months it has had three different chairs and this has affected business continuity. There are concerns that some actions are taking too long to complete.

The key activities for the group currently are:

- Completion of the Children's Society Missing Children Response Assessment Tool, a system assessment tool that will allow the partnership to assess its effectiveness in supporting children who go missing and identify improvements that can be made. It is hoped to complete this multi-agency work prior to the Strategic MACE meeting on
- Review and implement the Adolescent Safety Framework. A Task and Finish Group has been established as part of the group. It is looking to understand why the ASF is not working as well as was intended, what needs to be done to make best use of it and then take action to improve its function.
- Improve the understanding of child exploitation through data collection and analysis. Currently, there is a gap in terms of data being collected, key information being recorded and this being analysed. Work is being undertaken to identify best practice and consider then how this can be introduced into Plymouth.

Recommendations

27. The recommendations arising from this review are:

- a) PSCP to identify the learning required to improve awareness, understanding and how to respond to the needs of children at risk of all forms of exploitation. Within three months.
- b) PSCP to review how child exploitation referrals are responded to, allocated and assessed. Between 1 – 30 November 2023.

- c) PSCP to determine how to improve the functionality of the ASF, including identifying the best multi-agency assessment tool and the learning needed to support its widest use. Within six months.
- d) PSCP's Strategic MACE Group to develop a proposal over how to gather and use child exploitation data that will enable the partnership to understand the prevalence and nature of child exploitation in Plymouth. Within three months.
- e) PSCP's Strategic MACE Group to complete the Children's Society Missing Children Response Assessment Tool and identify the actions needed to improve the partnership response. By 17 October 2023 (date of Strategic MACE Group meeting).

John Clements, Independent Scrutineer, Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership