

Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting:	18 July 2023
Title of Report:	Child Exploitation Update
Lead Member:	Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture, Events and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	David Haley (Director of Children's Services)
Author:	Martine Aquilina (Head of Service)
Contact Email:	
Your Reference:	Click here to enter text.
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

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.

Recommendations and Reasons

For the Committee to note the report.

Alternative options considered and rejected

N/A

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

This work contributes to the Corporate Plan on 'Keeping children, adults and communities safe.'

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.

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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Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.						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							

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Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.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

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Temilola Salimon, Service Director for Children, Young People and Families											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes											
Date agreed: 10/07/2024											
Cabinet Member approval: <i>Councillor Laing approved via email</i>											
Date approved: 10/07/2024											

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) has sought to address this and provide 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. Much of the extra-familial harm we are seeing in the city is peer on peer, however we have continued to monitor adults involved in contextual safeguarding.

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 most 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 with Police investigations and operations undertaken to disrupt these activities. Whilst successful, we have noticed, when a line is broken/disrupted, the adult have either been quickly replaced or just as worryingly, we see the same children moving between lines. We believe there is at least 5 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

Last year, there were some concerns that the number of young people involved in knife crime is escalating. However, we have worked closely with our colleagues in the child centred policing team to educate children at their schools and, unlike the nation picture, we have not seen knife crime escalating.

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 (ASF) was introduced in January 2022. The purpose of the framework was to set out a coherent contextual safeguarding multi-agency response to extra-familial harm, at practice, operational and strategic levels. 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.

While the framework offered by the ASF is comprehensive, work has been undertaken over the last twelve months to ensure this is further embedded, and to develop confidence and competence within Children's Social Care and across the wider partnership. Insight and feedback have been gathered at practitioner and management level to ascertain how best to achieve these objectives, with the following actions taken forward:

1. In response to feedback regarding the complicated / complex set up of the ASF 'flowchart' / process, this has been streamlined, with clear guidance included so that any professional engaged with children across the city can identify appropriate next steps once a Safer Me is completed.
2. In recognition of consistent feedback regarding the length of the assessment, this has been reviewed, reducing the document from 18 to five pages, while ensuring that all strengths, vulnerabilities, and indicators are considered and there is opportunity to provide analysis where needed.
3. For practitioners using the Safer Me Assessment to direct their intervention with a child at risk of exploitation, a 'Safer Me Plan' has been introduced, setting out clear objectives, tasks, and timescales to support delivery.

4. A Safer Me Review document has been created to support practitioners in identifying outcomes with the child they are supporting, and to support managers in evidencing wider impact of the work delivered by their team.
5. Collaborative work has begun with the Academy of Social Work to design bespoke Exploitation and ASF training for social workers, supporting understanding of exploitation, with an insight into how the Safer Me can be used as a supportive tool alongside their Single Assessments and other care planning documents.
6. In the absence of one single point of coordination, as was the case when the ASF was introduced, responsibility for key elements of the ASF has been allocated to relevant agencies.

There have been broader developments to strengthen our city-wide offer in relation to contextual safeguarding. The Strategic Missing and Child Exploitation Sub-group (SMCE) has been replaced by the Strategic Safeguarding Adolescent's Group (SSAG) in recognition of the broader safeguarding needs of adolescents outside of exploitation. A working group has been established alongside this to deliver on key actions and priorities set within the SSAG. Finally, the Safeguarding Adolescents webpage, including guidance and toolkits, as well as links to the renewed ASF page, is due to be launched imminently and was presented through workshops at the recent PSCP conference. The webpages are designed to support practitioners and managers across the partnership in understanding and responding to the needs of adolescents at risk of contextual harm.

4. Daily Intelligence Briefings

Daily Intelligence Briefings continue to be held and consistently attended by partners including Police, Health, Education, Children's Social Care, Youth Justice Services, Edge of Care Team, Targeted Help and Community Connections. Work has been undertaken over the last twelve months to ensure representative yet proportionate attendance, ensuring a timely review of intelligence and subsequent responses for children who have been reported as missing, presented as homeless, been brought into custody, or presented at the Emergency Department within the previous 24 hours. Actions are reviewed until the Chair is satisfied that appropriate measures are in place to ensure a child's safety, and / or broader contextual safeguarding measures (e.g. Peer Group Mapping) is underway.

The briefings have received ongoing praise and recognition from partners due to the timely response to children at risk of harm and was recognised during January's Ofsted Inspection as an example of good practice.

5. How we respond to children who are missing, at risk of exploitation or presenting with harmful sexual behaviours

In the last twelve months, REACH (Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Care and Home) has undergone a review, resulting in some realignment of the team's remit and use of resource, which is due to be fully implemented by the end of July 2024.

The team, now known as Be Safe, has now formally been brought into the wider Youth Justice Service, supporting collaborative working across the service and promoting resilience through increased opportunity to share staff resource. Be Safe will continue to meet the statutory duty of responding to children who are reported as missing, with the offer of a Return Home Conversation – RHC (previously Return Home Interview – RHI) within 72 hours of being found. As before, the RHC will explore the reasons for the child going missing, the circumstances surrounding their absence and any harm they may have experienced, the child's perception of potential risk and what support may be needed to prevent further missing episodes.

Children's risk of exploitation is now initially assessed using a Child Exploitation Screening Tool (CE Screen), which was constructed based on key indicators set out by the National Working Group

(NWG). This is completed for very child who is reported as missing and accepts an RHC. Where a risk of exploitation is identified through the CE Screen, a Safer Me Assessment is completed, which offers a more detailed insight into risk, indicators, and appropriate response.

The team continues to offer additional support for children who have multiple missing episodes, and / or are identified as at high or very high risk of exploitation. This work is delivered on a voluntary basis, supporting children to build resilience through identifying and developing existing strengths and interests, as well as increasing understanding around exploitation, such as understanding the grooming process or strengthening online safety.

The offer of support for children with Harmful Sexual Behaviours (that is, sexualised behaviours presented by a child which are harmful to others), and those in need of AIM assessments has now been formally included within the team's remit. This has been pertinent given the overlap in our cohorts of children with HSB accessing support through REACH and Youth Justice Service. Work continues to be delivered in close alignment with the NSPCC's local offer, including a joint triage process. This process ensures that resource across the two services is used effectively to promote timely responses for children in need of support, as well as sharing knowledge and expertise when considering appropriate interventions.

It is for this reason that REACH has become Be Safe, to reflect the broader remit of the team, now including the local authority's response to missing, exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour.

The team structure now consists of one Team Manager, one Senior Professional Youth Worker, three Professional Youth Workers and four Family Support workers. Within this structure, two Family Support Workers hold a specific role in delivering assessment and intervention for children with HSB.

6. Performance

The table below contains performance data for REACH for Q1 of 2024-25. While there was a significant increase in missing episodes for children in Plymouth in May, performance in our core KPI – completing RHI within 72 hours – has remained stable at around 50%, in line with national performance benchmarks. Where children are not seen or seen outside the statutory window of 72 hours, this is due to declines from parents, carers, or the young person, the young person being missing, being in custody or moving out of area.

Indicator	Apr 24	May 24	Jun 24
Missing Children (Overall)	49	75	50
Missing Episodes (Overall)	75	108	71
Average missing episodes per child (Overall)	1.5	1.4	1.4
Missing Children (Children in Care)	13	21	12
Missing Episodes (Children in Care)	24	35	24
Average missing episodes per child (Children in Care)	1.8	1.6	2
First Contact made within 72 hours (Overall)	100%	93.5%	98%
First Contact made within 72 hours (Children in Care)	100%	100%	100%
% of return home interviews booked (Overall)	74.7%	74.1%	66.2%
% declined return home interviews (Overall)	25.3%	20.4%	22.5%
% where the RHI is within 72 hours (date of RHI) (Overall)	66.7%	60.2%	59.2%
Number where the RHI is within 72 hours (date of RHI) (Overall)	50	65	42
% of return home interviews held within 72 hours where YP attended (Overall)	57.3%	49.1%	50.7%
Number of return home interviews held within 72 hours where YP attended (Overall)	43	53	36

7. Conclusion and next steps

As discussed, in the last twelve months there has been ongoing work to adjust and improve our city-wide responses and offer of support to children at risk of exploitation and wider contextual harm. This has been on both a strategic level – with the introduction of the Strategy Safeguarding Adolescent Group, corresponding webpages, and review of the Adolescent Safety Framework – and an operational level in terms of the realignment of resource within the Be Safe Team as described above.

Priorities going forward will include:

- Embedding the renewed ASF, with training to be delivered across CYPFS and communications to be offered across the partnership.
- Launch and promotion of the Safeguarding Adolescents and ASF webpages.
- Delivering changes within the Be Safe Team, with a continued focus on improved performance and achieving positive outcomes for children engaged with our service.
- Ensuring ongoing effective, proportionate, and timely information sharing and actions are delivered within the Daily Intelligence Briefing, specifically strengthening our links with education colleagues.