

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel



Date of meeting:	14 November 2024
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
Contact Email:	
Your Reference:	Click here to enter text.
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

The purpose of this report is to provide information to Scrutiny Board to enable them to scrutinise and provide challenge to the service in how we respond to children at risk of child exploitation (harm from outside the home).

Recommendations and Reasons

For the Scrutiny Panel to note the report.

Alternative options considered and rejected

Information only

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

This report directly links to The Plymouth Plan 2014-2034 'to create the conditions where children, young people and families can thrive, assisting them to build resilience through the early development of good physical and emotional health and by equipping young people and parents with the skills to improve their wellbeing'.

A Bright Future 2021-2026 states that 'As partners, we want to make sure all children and young people in Plymouth have a Bright Future, supported by a system which works seamlessly to spot difficulties early, responds quickly and effectively, and makes sure that help is there for as long as it is needed'.

The Youth Justice Plan 2025 vision is to 'To develop a youth justice system in Plymouth that sees children as children, treats them fairly and helps them to build on their strengths so they can make a constructive contribution to society. Diverting Children early will prevent offending and create safer communities with fewer victims in the City.'

Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

Information only

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) <i>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.</i>						
		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) <i>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.</i>						
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Sign off:

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Temilola Salimon											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes											
Date agreed: 06/11/2024											
Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Laing via email											
Date approved: 07/11/2024											

1. Introduction

At the request of the Scrutiny Panel, this briefing report has been prepared to offer a further update on the issue of Child Exploitation in Plymouth. The report presents an updated account of our City's work to address and combat 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 understand and respond 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 who are at risk from threat outside the home. 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

The development of a comprehensive data system that can quantify the type, range and distribution of extra-familial harm across the City will be progressed with urgency with the appointment of a data analysis role with the Plymouth Safeguarding Children's Partnership (PSCP). The Safeguarding Adolescents Working Group, established in Spring 2024, are also devising methods of gathering good quality, multi-disciplinary data. Much of the extra-familial harm we are seeing in the City is peer on peer, particularly aggression and violence between children, Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB) and drug use and supply. Concerns remain regarding some adults of concern and the risks posed to children by County Lines gangs, as detailed below.

Aggression and violence between children

In terms of serious youth violence in the City, the picture is mixed. We have seen a welcome decrease of 6% year on year in the number of boys committing violence offences which result in a statutory intervention from the Youth Justice Service. In addition, knife crime involving children in the City remains substantially below the national average.

However, in Plymouth, we have seen an increase in girls in the criminal justice system, when compared to the pre-pandemic, which have almost doubled (20% (2020) to 38.5% (2024)) - the majority of whom are committing violent offences. The Police have also seen an increase to 35% (girl on girl violence) and Probation, although unable to provide figures, also stated they have seen an increase in female offenders under 25 who are violent. This is a pattern emerging across the 4 Local Authorities in Devon and Cornwall. Within the City, the 3 main areas where female juvenile violence has taken place in the 12 last months are, City Centre (including Stonehouse), Whitleigh and Plympton and the violence appears to be premeditated as the result of peer pressure. The average age of the girls involved is 15 years and 9 months. Often, these violent acts are then posted on to social media platforms increasing the shame felt by the victims.

Of the 20 girls currently open to the Plymouth Youth Justice Service, 19 are the result of violent offences. Often, the girls are telling us they are being threatened themselves and if they do not assault someone, they would be assaulted themselves. As a result, the Community Safety Partnership in the City are commissioning Plymouth Argyle Trust to work with schools, prioritising those in the 3 main areas of the City where we are seeing this violence, to raise awareness of the consequences for both the victims and the child who enters the Youth Justice system. Where an offence has been committed and a statutory intervention has been imposed, the victims are also offered the opportunity to work with a Restorative Justice service in the City known as Make A Mends with the aim of holding a face-to-face meeting with the perpetrator if requested. Nationally, violence perpetrated by females is increasing with very little accredited interventions available. As the result, the Youth Justice Board has instigated a meeting in December to discuss best practice and how to address this issue and Plymouth Youth Justice Service will be attending.

Not surprisingly, we are seeing girls who are both the victims and perpetrators of the violence reported as missing increasing their risk of exploitation.

Harmful Sexual Behaviour (HSB)

For three years, the councils Be Safe Team have worked alongside the NSPCC to triage and coordinate support for children in Plymouth presenting with Harmful Sexual Behaviour. In recent months we have seen a significant increase in requests for support as well as Court-directed work. We have therefore secured and delivered training in AIM Assessment (a recognised evidence-based assessment tool to identify sexual harmful behaviour) and Intervention for staff in Be Safe and the wider Youth Justice Service. Both the Be Safe and Youth Justice Team Managers are now trained in specialist AIM Supervision, which ensures that capacity for HSB practice and supervision / quality assurance has significantly improved. Weekly triage discussions continue with the Team Manager from NSPCC to share expertise, ensure a robust understanding of children's needs and promote best use of capacity between services.

Drug use and supply

Drug use and supply has been a consistent theme within the Daily Intelligence Briefing (DIB) since its inception; particularly regarding the use of 'THC / Spice Vapes'. However there has been an increase in intelligence and level of concern more recently. Through the DIB, conducting Return Home Conversations and general intelligence sharing we have in the last month built a picture of a group of children involved in the use and supply of THC / Spice vape liquid. There has been a reported increase in violence and threats of violence between the children, observed both in the community and in their education setting. Further intelligence work has been undertaken between Child Centred Policing, Be Safe, Education, the Youth Justice Service and Community Youth and plans are underway for intervention with individual children as well as in a group context. This will involve supportive engagement as well as more formal measures including police enforcement.

County lines

As identified in our July briefing, 'County Lines' is a form of criminal exploitation concerned with the storage, movement and distribution of drugs and money across the country. County lines gangs are highly organised criminal networks, using sophisticated and dynamic methods to groom vulnerable adults and children in their activity. Involving children in this process is a form of child abuse.

Earlier this year we saw an increase in active county lines with Police investigations and operations undertaken to disrupt these activities. Drugs Groups are operating across Devon and Cornwall at any one time, and that drugs threats in the area largely operate from outside of Plymouth. Police intelligence suggests that there are several active drugs threats currently operating in Plymouth, with Merseyside and London as main exporting areas. Intelligence also suggests an increase in the use of Fast Parcels and Post to move illicit substances into Devon and Cornwall.

Due to the methods used to evade detection and in preventing children from sharing pertinent information, understanding exactly how our children are involved in county lines is difficult. While we

are aware of children's involvement in drug supply, identifying the individuals who are directing them is challenging, meaning that we are not clear as to whether this is led by local adults or county lines gangs. Nonetheless we continue to seek to disrupt these activities on a larger scale through collaborative work and intelligence sharing with colleagues including Police, Community Youth, Education and Children's Social Care, and on an individual scale by persistently seeking to engage with children, their families and professional networks.

Adults of concern

Through intelligence sharing, both within the DIB and between partner agencies / neighbouring Local Authorities, we continue to monitor adults of concern and potential risks posed to children and young people in Plymouth. Where contact from these adults towards our children is identified we work collaboratively with police colleagues to deliver swift, effective and proportionate intervention to disrupt contact and reduce risk to children. This has included, for example, an incident where a 17-year-old child travelled out of area with an adult known to pose a risk to children. Be Safe gathered information regarding the adult's connections to the area they had travelled to, supporting police to identify an address where the child was located and eventually returned safely to Plymouth. The adult is now in custody.

3. Adolescent Safety Framework (ASF)

Following on from the briefing provided in July which detailed significant development within the Adolescent Safety Framework, work is continuing to ensure the revised framework is understood and embedded in practice across Children's Services and the Partnership.

The streamlined Safer Me Assessment and Process has now been shared across Children's Social Care and a cohort of 10 professionals are trained to deliver bespoke training to Social Workers in late 2024 / early 2025. The training has been carefully designed to promote a robust understanding of child exploitation, contextual safeguarding and how the Safer Me Assessment should be utilised in addressing risk in these areas. The initial wave of training has been tailored to social work practice in recognition of key learning points from our Ofsted inspection earlier this year which identified a need for assessment of contextual risks to be better reflected within social work assessments.

The Be Safe Team Manager is now engaging with Child Centred Policing and other partners to consider how ASF processes responding to peer groups can be adapted. This will be to enable a more timely and effective response to children experiencing / at risk of contextual harm where there is no known adult linked to them. Improving these processes will ensure earlier intervention, reduce risk and in some cases driver children from statutory intervention.

4. Daily Intelligence Briefings (DIB)

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 responsible for children who have been reported as missing, presented as homeless, been brought into custody, 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.

Between 1st August 2024 and 1st November 2024, the DIB group have covered 358 case discussions, and 785 since April. Discussions include the review of all missing incidences involving Plymouth children, as well as topics such as new or increasingly used substances, locations and adults of concern. Broad themes are in line with those set out earlier in the report in relation to extra-familial harm, as well as trends in where children are going while missing. This has included Air BnB properties and addresses of vulnerable young adults requiring coordinated intelligence sharing and response across agencies represented within the DIB.

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

The review of REACH (Reducing Exploitation and Absence from Care and Home) in Summer 2024 saw the team re-named as Be Safe, formally moving within the remit of the Youth Justice Service and developing roles to support children with Harmful Sexual Behaviours. The team's core function continues to be the offer and delivery of Return Home Conversations (RHC) for Plymouth children who are reported as missing. Previously all the team offered both RHCs and intervention work, however this was reviewed after we observed a reduction in performance over the summer months. It was recognised that delivering intervention work restricted staff's flexibility in offering RHCs, meaning they were less able to meet the statutory deadline of 72 hours. As such, the team is now configured so that four staff deliver RHCs only, while two deliver specific interventions focused on reducing contextual risk. This has been successful, and we have seen a significant improvement in performance in September and October, as illustrated below.

The team has also begun to develop further specialisms, for example a Professional Youth Worker is now a Care Leaver's link worker, offering guidance and consultation to Personal Advisers supporting Care Experienced Young Adults. This was in recognition that several children who are reported as missing have friendships or other links with Care Experienced Young Adults, who often have their own vulnerabilities and support needs. A more collaborative approach across the teams supports the safety of both groups and the work is positive for Care Experienced Young Adults.

The Philomena Protocol

The Philomena Protocol is a process established by police forces across the country in partnership with local Children's Services. The core focus of the Protocol is to support a timely and effective response to Children in Care who are reported as missing. This is facilitated primarily by a core document, designed for foster carers and residential placement staff to complete and update in real time, for example with information about the child's peer group, preferred locations and items of clothing. This document can then be shared if the child is reported as missing, to support police in locating and safeguarding them.

The Philomena Protocol was formally implemented in Plymouth in April 2024 and visits were conducted by Child Centred Policing and Be Safe to social workers, foster carers and residential placement providers to promote understanding and effective use of the tool. While initial response and implementation was positive – a cohort of children were identified and included in the protocol – it is noted that in recent months engagement and use of the process has reduced. There are some possible reasons for this; where there are changes in placement for children and the protocol may not follow or be as well embedded by new carers. This may also be the case where a child's social worker changes. It is also possible that full understanding of the purpose and scope of the protocol is not yet embedded across the City with placement providers and foster carers. As such, work is being undertaken between Child Centred Policing and the Permanency Service to renew knowledge and use of the tool. There may also be some barriers for carers, and particularly foster carers who may not have the same access to secure information storage and facilities to share information securely as staff in residential settings. To address these barriers, contact is being made with Local Authorities who are further forward in establishing the protocol to gain insight into how this might be replicated in Plymouth.

6. Performance

The table below contains performance data for Be Safe for August to October 2024. While there has been an increase in missing episodes for children in Plymouth in this period, performance in our core KPI – completing RHI now exceeds national performance benchmarks. We have also observed a reduction in children, parents or carers declining RHCs, evidencing improved engagement with our service. Where children are not seen or seen outside the statutory window of 72 hours, this is due to declines, the young person being missing, being in custody or moving out of area.

7. Conclusion

In the last 2 years, the City's response to child exploitation has improved, the Daily Intelligence Briefing has been replicated by Local Authorities locally and nationally and helps agencies respond to the ever-changing picture of exploitation. We need to continue to build trusting relationships with children to counter the pull of county lines gangs and to continue to build on the progress we have evidenced to date.