

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel



Date of meeting:	08 October 2025
Title of Report:	Child Exploitation Update
Lead Member:	Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications)
Lead Strategic Director:	David Haley (Director for Childrens Services)
Author:	Martine Aquilina (Head of Service, CYPFS)
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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 who go missing and are at risk of child exploitation (harm from outside the home).

Recommendations and Reasons

For the Panel to note the information contained within the report and endorse the continued work of the service to provide a response to children who go missing and are at risk of harm outside of the home.

Alternative options considered and rejected

- I. Information Only

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

This report links to the priority within the Corporate Plan of 'keeping children, adults and communities safe.

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

Legal Implications

(Provided by Liz Bryant)

The report complies with the obligations under sections 10 and 11 of the Children Act 2004 it being a duty to consider the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young persons.

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.*

N/A

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

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>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Lisa Davis											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes Date agreed: 30/09/2025											
Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Laing approved via email Date approved: 30/09/2025											

1. Introduction and context

Child exploitation refers to situations where children and young people are manipulated, coerced, or forced into activities for the benefit of others. This includes sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation (such as involvement in gangs or drug trafficking), and other forms of abuse. We take Child Exploitation seriously in Plymouth and offer a robust safeguarding response. Missing episodes are a key indicator of vulnerability and often correlate with exploitation risks. The Be Safe team leads on Return Home Conversations (RHCs) and multi-agency responses to missing children to prevent and disrupt contextual risk and exploitation for adolescents, and those on the edge of care. This includes risks that occur outside the home, such as exploitation by peers or adults in the community.

2. Children Going Missing and Contextual Risk Outside the Home:

Plymouth has three services working directly with adolescents in need of protection and support from exploitation that sit alongside our traditional statutory safeguarding services:

- Be Safe
- Edge of Care and 16+ Homeless Service
- Youth Justice Service (YJS)

These crucial services recognise that children who present as homeless, enter the criminal justice system and are on the edge of care, often due to family breakdown, are at increased risk of going missing and being exploited. We therefore focus on providing risk-assessed, and consistent packages of support to these children, reducing the likelihood of missing episodes and associated exploitation risks. This is achieved by working with families earlier and more intensively, whilst seeking to prevent escalation to long-term care and reduce the risks that lead to children going missing or being exploited.

The teams work closely with colleagues across the wider service to ensure that children who are risk of exploitation are identified as early as possible and provide either direct support or consultation to the social workers who hold case responsibility where needed. Working with children and their families where contextual safeguarding is a risk requires the ability to work with a higher level of intensity, often due to needing to be persistent and consistent and therefore the specialist teams are required to have smaller caseloads to be able to have a level of flexibility in their work.

Be Safe are responsible for completing all Return Home Conversations for children who are reported missing. They work closely with Edge of Care, and Youth Justice Service to reduce safeguarding risks outside the home. The team also work on a 1-1 basis with children and their families where risk of contextual harm is considered high and individual work is required with the child. Return Home Conversations (previously known as Return Home Interviews) are a statutory requirement and therefore are prioritised and this can mean that capacity to provide as much individual on-going support as we would like is a challenge.

The **Edge of Care Team** consists of Social Workers and Family Practitioners who provide intensive support utilising evidence-based interventions including PACE (Playful, Acceptance, Curiosity and empathy) NVR (Non-Violence Resistance parenting support) Aim Assessment and Intervention (AIM is the evidence based assessment of children who present with Harmful Sexual Behaviours), Blocked Care (is where a parent or carer is unable to show empathy or care to their child as a result of historical trauma or stress) and Teenage Child Development and Family Led Decision Making. They offer this support either in the home or elsewhere, maintaining a consistent presence with the family

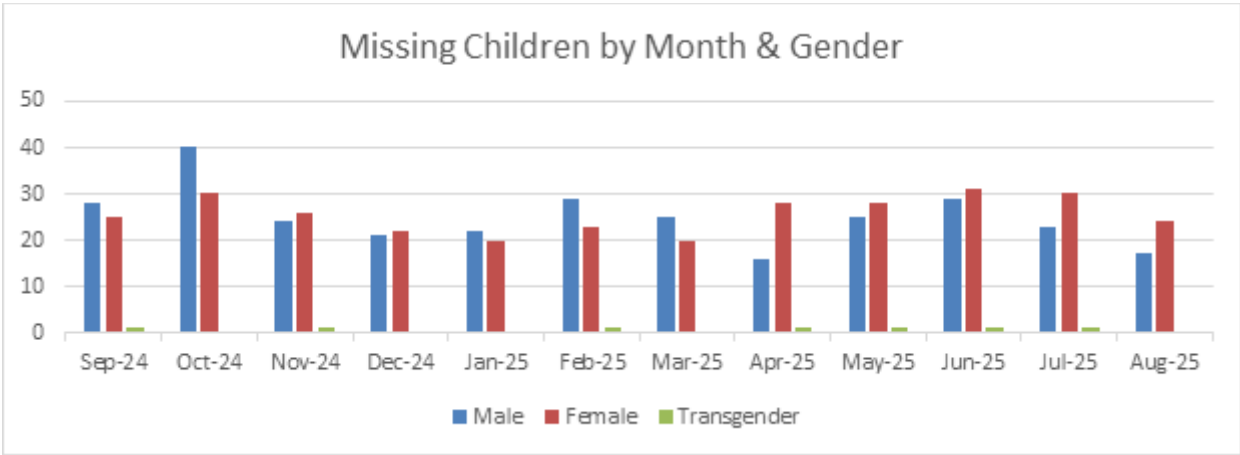
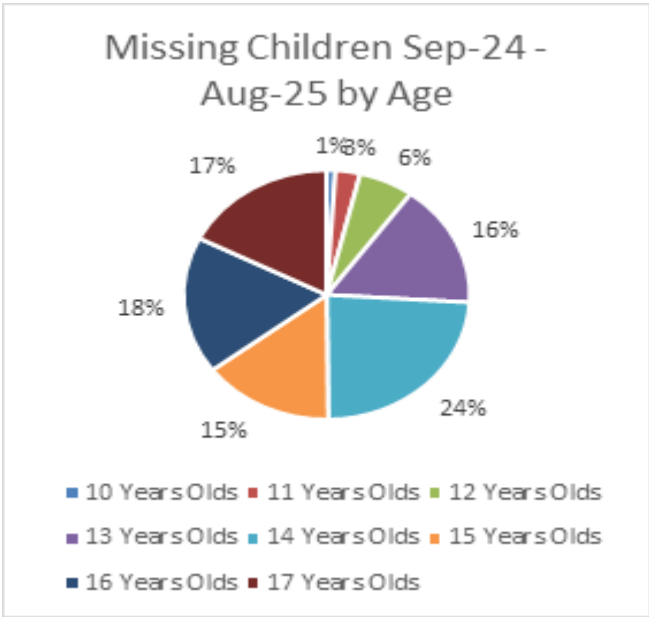
through frequent home visiting and regular contact by phone or text, thereby building a trusting relationship with the family.

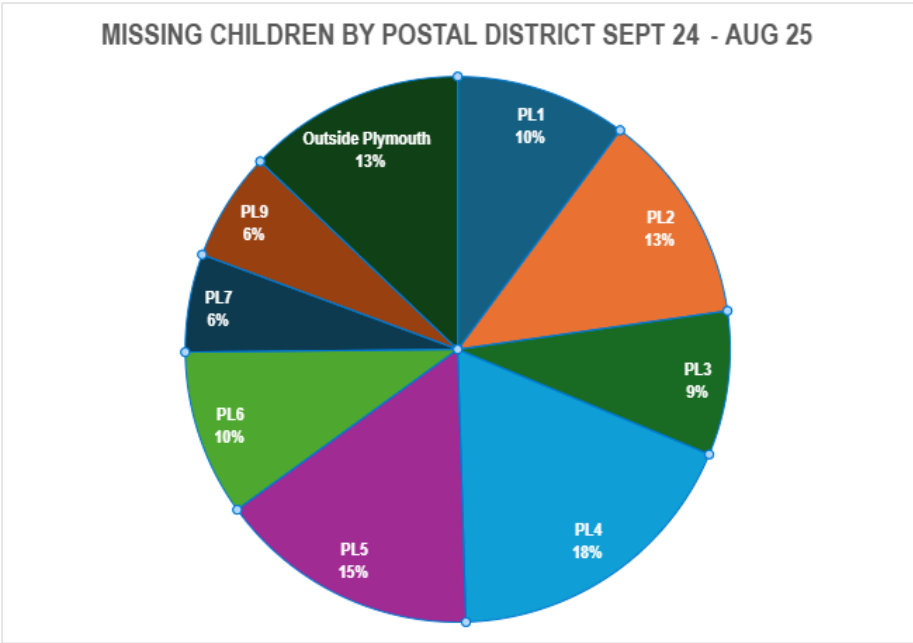
The **Youth Justice Service** delivers its core statutory service with a focus on preventing offending and re-offending. The team are responsible for working with children who have received a statutory order through the courts and children who are being diverted away from the criminal justice system.

3. Our children: September 2024 – August 2025

Children who go missing:

Last year children aged between 10 and 17 years were reported missing and known to our adolescent services:





As you can see from the above chart, there is no specific area of Plymouth that we see increased missing episodes.

Data and Performance – June 25 – Aug 25

Return Home Conversations (RHCs)	Plymouth Data	National Average
RHCs Offered	99%	79%
RHCs Completed (Overall)	67%	53%
RHCs Completed (Within 72 Hours)	52%	33%
RHCs Declined	16%	18%

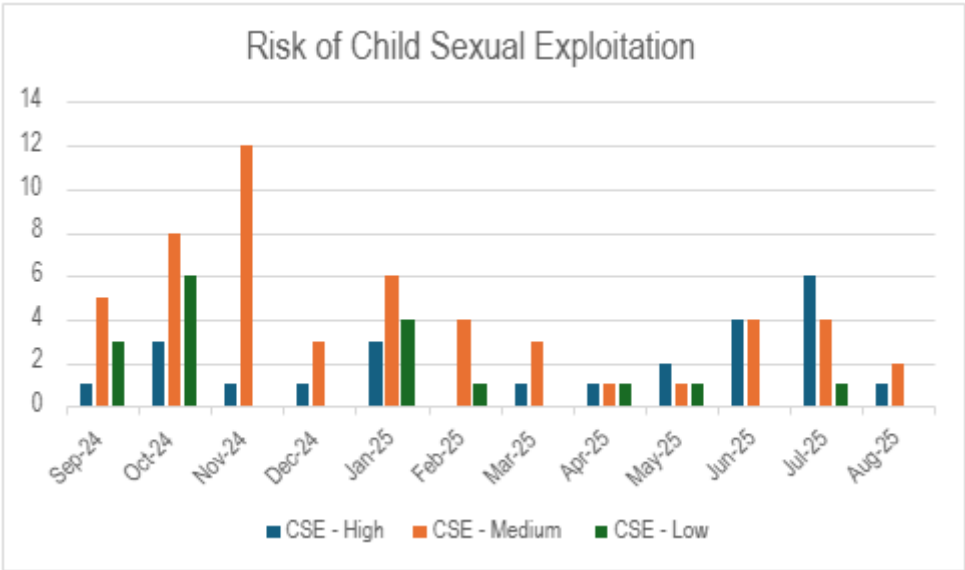
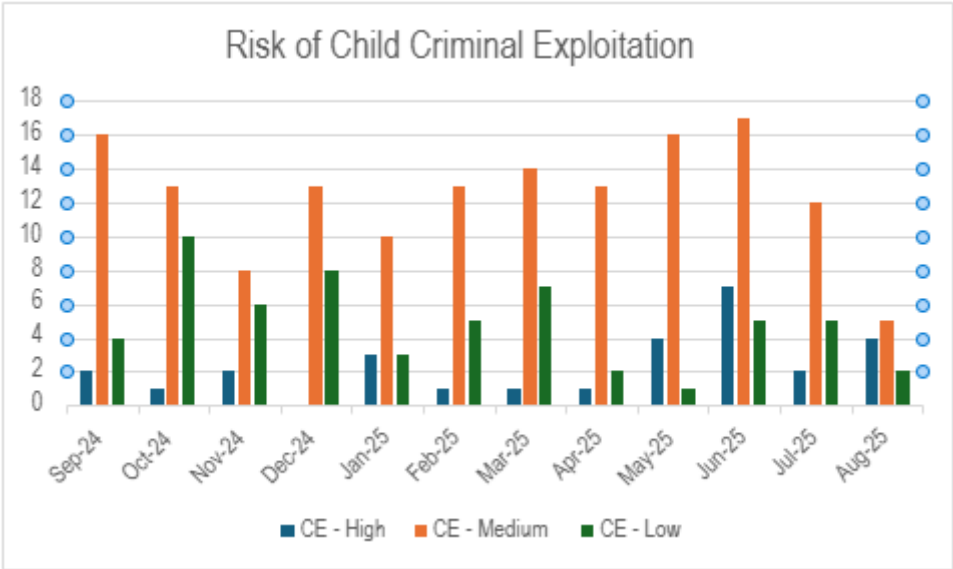
As you can see from the above data, we are currently consistently performing above the national average across all KPI's. However, finding ways to engage children who are at risk of exploitation and who are going missing can be challenging and we continue to be as creative as we can in how we can engage our children.

Some challenges have been identified in completing some RHCs due to children's complex experiences. For example, some RHCs are delayed or not completed due to police investigations, care placement moves, or child disengagement.

Children at risk of exploitation

Not all children who go missing from home or care are at risk of exploitation however; this is a significant risk indicator. The Be Safe team will offer a Return Home Conversation to all children reported as missing from home to the police within 72 hours of their return home. This is voluntary and not all children agree to meet with a practitioner. Where we are able to meet with children who have been missing, we routinely screen for any exploitation concerns.

The chart below shows how many children over the last year have been assessed as at risk of Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation.



5. Processes and Safeguarding Measures

Notification & Intelligence Sharing:

Police notify Be Safe; cases are then discussed in our Daily Intelligence Briefings (DIBs) and Risk Management Meetings.

Return Home Conversations (RHCs):

Conducted within 72 hours to identify risks and inform support plans.

Exploitation Screening:

All missing children are screened for exploitation; Safer Me tools and plans are used where risk is identified.

Multi-agency Support:

Wider needs (e.g. education, mental health) are addressed through advocacy, referrals, care plans and family support.

6. Daily Intelligence Briefings (DIB) Summary

The Be Safe Team Manager is responsible for the management of the Daily Intelligence Briefing (DIB). This is attended by representatives from Be Safe, Edge of Care (EoC), Youth Justice Service (YJS), Police, Health, Families First Children's Service, Education and Community Connections. Attendees will review missing incidents and other significant events pertaining to risk of child exploitation in the previous 24 hours.

Attendance is consistently attended by all key partners, with efforts to ensure proportionate and effective participation and the process includes reviewing all missing, homeless, custody, and emergency department cases involving children. Actions are tracked on a daily basis until risks are addressed and significantly reduced. There are often emerging themes and trends the multi-agency group raise in their own partnership settings which include: substances and locations in the city where exploitation is likely to take place and Be Safe takes responsibility in taking this information to our Partnership Safeguarding Adolescent Working Group to explore a wider coordinated agency response. Where we identify a theme or a group of children at risk we work with our partners including our Child Centred Policing Team to understand the contextual risk in order to implement disruption techniques which could include increased police presence, deployment of the detached youth team, individual I-I support from a Youth Intervention Officer or practitioner from the team.

Example of mapping and disruption

The Daily Intelligence Briefing identified a concern about drug supply in the area of a supported living project. Concerns were raised for a number of young people and a change in behaviours alongside concerns that known drug suppliers were associating in the area.

A mapping exercise took place with our Child Centred Policing Team, the supported living project, our housing services and allocated workers to map the concerns and identify disruption activity. A plan that involved all agencies was agreed which included additional presence of police in the area and consideration of moves for some of the young people alongside I-I direct work with the young people involved. The exercise also allowed us to support practitioners outside of the social care field to raise awareness around early identification of exploitation and where to get support. Since the activity was implemented, we have had no further concerns raised.

7. The Philomena Protocol

Plymouth continues to use the Philomena Protocol to support children in care, which is a joint police and Children’s Services process to support quick, effective responses when Children in Care go missing. It uses a real-time document with key details (e.g. peer groups, locations, clothing) to aid police in locating the child. It was implemented in Plymouth in April 2024, with strong engagement from services involved with children in care. The Philomena Protocol enables police to improve the timeliness of their response to children in Local Authority care who go missing.

8. Our next steps:

To continue to strengthen our support and interventions for children at risk of and experiencing risk outside the home (ROTH) we are reviewing our current service to ensure that we are able to focus on children under the following criteria:

- Criminal or sexual exploitation concerns, that requires mapping to understand extent of risk, this will include children who are repeatedly missing.
- Substance misuse concerns that require specialist interventions (not classed as ‘normal teenage experimentation’).
- Harmful Sexual Behaviour or Problematic Sexual Harm by young people due to impaired sexual development.
- Risk of entering or re-entering the Youth Justice System due to criminal behaviour arising from risks outside of the home.
- Children edging towards care due to being beyond parental control as the result of the above risk factors.
- 16 – 17-year-old homeless presentations.

In order to do this:

- We will continue to integrate our Adolescent Services with partners to ensure closer alignment of Be Safe, Edge of Care, and Multi Agency Youth Justice team to improve responsiveness and consistency.
- We will continue to offer earlier intervention, and staff will not only be allocated at the point of missing report, enabling earlier contact and support, but they will also offer support and consultation to our Families First Partnership, where early risk indicators of family breakdown and exploitation are identified.
- We propose to extend our hours to include evenings and weekends to improve flexibility and timeliness of RHCs.
- We will work with our partners to strengthen our reporting capabilities to ensure that we understand the nature and extent of the concerns across the city.

Our Service Offer	
Specialist ROTH assessments and interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Safer Me (exploitation screening)• Peer Mapping

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk Outside the home community work with the Community Safety Partnership, Violence Reduction Unit, local neighbourhood teams and Police • Harmful Sexual Behaviour and child sexual abuse assessment and intervention • Safe Carer work • Homeless assessments and interventions. • Substance misuse interventions from the Children's Society.
Intensive Adolescent Parenting Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Violence Resistance Parenting • PACE parenting for teenagers (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy) • Teenage brain development education and support • Mediation / family networking • Exploitation awareness and support. • Access to Family Led Decision Making approaches including FGCs and FNMs.
Harmful Sexual Behaviour Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual development and healthy relationships for teenagers / support for parents • AIM3 assessment and intervention • Problematic Sexual Behaviour advice and support to professionals.
Youth Crime interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Statutory Youth Justice and Court directed work • Prevention and diversion • Early Help and intervention in Youth Crime • Victim work • Parenting teenagers who break the law.

Conclusion

Plymouth continues to make significant progress in safeguarding children and young people at risk of exploitation. Through strong multi-agency collaboration, robust processes, such as Daily Intelligence Briefings, and the effective use of tools like the Philomena Protocol, the city has seen a reduction in missing episodes and improved outcomes for vulnerable children. There will always be some challenges in engaging or maintaining relationships with young people of this age, due to their developmental stage, and their reluctance to work with adults or recognise the risk they may be at. However, we continue to persevere in trying to reach out, being creative in our methods. Our commitment to early intervention, integrated services, and continuous improvement is mapped out. Ongoing focus on specialist assessments, targeted interventions, and partnership working will be essential to further reduce risks and ensure that every child receives the right support at the right time.