Exploitation Thematic Review

Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together

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Contents

Introduction

One of the biggest misconceptions relating to Child Exploitation is that this pervasive and highly complex issue is a new phenomenon.

 It is not.

Children have been targeted, groomed, abused, and heinously used as commodities throughout the ages.

Charles Dickins' *Oliver Twist* provides a romanticised account of Child Exploitation against the backdrop of Victorian Britain. And, as much as we like to believe that society and Child Protection systems have evolved, today that are so many children up and down the county that share a similar plight to Oliver Twist, albeit their experiences and stories are far from fictional.

As we grapple with the legacy left by the recent Covid-19 pandemic, we have come to recognise that not even national lockdowns and periods of restriction were enough to quell cases of Child Exploitation. Instead, those that seek to exploit children for their own commercial gains and gratification, simply evolved their *modus operandi,* highlighting the multiplicity of sophisticated tactics that exploiters have in their toolbox and their ability to change their business models at lightning speed.

As such, I would compare the Child Exploitation landscape to sand that shifts beneath your feet. And this is why no system, agency or practitioner can be complacent, and must be committed to continually evolving their knowledge and understanding of this issue.

For that reason, I welcome the commissioning of this review, and as the review author, working in a world that can often lead to one feeling overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of this issue, felt inspired by the commitment of agencies and practitioners in Wolverhampton to do better. To be better for their children. Their commitment and tenacity to face this problem head on, be reflective, candid and sometimes to have hard conversations, is admirable.

No review will provide a "golden ticket" which provides all of the answers and solutions that we seek. But I do hope that this review provides further critical insights into the complex and multifaceted issues that underpin exploitation and helps to further strengthen the systems and arrangements already in place.

Nikki Holmes.

Phase 1: Landscape and System Response

1.1: Demography and local context

Wolverhampton is a city and metropolitan borough in the West Midlands in England. The city has a diverse demographic. 35.5 % of the population are of non-white British heritage, with a further 16.4% of the population being born outside of the UK. Wolverhampton is a city that has a younger population than the England average (25.6% of the population are aged 0-19), and is currently one of the most densely populated local authority areas in England; home to approximately 265,600 people. The city has the second-highest proportion of Sikh residents in England.

Total recoded Crime (TRC) for the city has risen over recent years and crime rates presently sit above the England average. The rates of children who go through the Youth Justice System and who are sentenced to custody, are significantly higher than the England average.

Wolverhampton, along with Birmingham and Sandwell, is one of the most deprived Local Authorities in the country. Whilst levels of deprivation have risen in recent years, there has been a decrease in the number of children living in poverty. However, given the current economic climate, the numbers of children and families impacted by poverty and disadvantage may increase. There are strategic plans in place within the city, such as the *Children, Young People and Families Strategic Plan (2020-25)* which aims to ensure that that there is a multi-agency approach to tackle the causes and effects of disadvantage.

The number of children receiving formal support has incrementally decreased across all areas of Children's Social Care over the last 5 years. As of the end of March 2021, 547 Children and young people were in care, 243 had a Child Protection Plan and 715 had a Child in Need Plan.[1]

1.2: Review Purpose and Aims

This review was initiated and commissioned by Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together Partnership (WST) and is the second thematic review of exploitation that has been commissioned in recent years, and therefore evidence of a sustained commitment to continually improve knowledge of, and responses to, exploitation in all its forms.

In 2019, City of Wolverhampton Council commissioned a *Whole Systems Review of Exploitation.* This review prompted several strategic and operational changes being made to improve how the system prevents, identifies and responds to all Child Exploitation typologies.

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[1] Wolverhampton Exploitation Profile. January – December 2021.

It has been identified that this review process serves as an important opportunity to explore the impact and efficacy of the improved strategic and operational responses made in direct response to the previously commissioned review.

The purpose of this Thematic Review is to provide further critical insights into the multiplicity of factors that underpin exploitation whilst simultaneously providing assurance of the efficacy, consistency and robustness of current systems and processes.

1.3: Review Methodology and Design

This review aims to be strengths-based and "systemic", meaning that whilst it seeks to identify and understand areas of weaknesses, it simultaneously aims to highlight areas of strength which should be further embedded to enhance further developments and the efficacy of systems and processes.

Therefore, the methodology of this review has been carefully designed collaboratively with commissioners, to provide a systemic and contextual focus of not only the cases that form an essential and fundamental part of this review, but also provides additional assurance that current systems and processes are robust and effective in keeping children and communities safe from harm.

It should be noted that this thematic review was written in tandem with an additional *Thematic Review of Knife Crime*. Due to the inextricable links that often can be found between Child Exploitation, knife crime and Serious Youth Violence, (SYV) there are cross cutting themes that span across both Thematic Reviews. It is therefore advised that this review is read alongside the *Thematic Review of Knife Crime* to provide a more well-rounded and detailed insight of both issues.

The review was carried out in two phases.

Phase 1: This phase of the review sought to understand the impact of the local system, to respond to exploitation and the key characteristics and opportunities to effectively prevent and respond to knife crime.

This was achieved by conducting interviews with strategic and operational leaders and other key professionals to understand and analyse local and systemic responses.

Phase 2: The second part of the review process involved an analysis of two case studies provided. The purpose of this activity was to aid the understanding of how effectively the recommendations arising from the Whole System Review conducted in October 2019, have been implemented to effect positive system change and understand how those changes have led to improved outcomes for children.

1.4: Methodical Challenges and Limitations

Given the sensitive nature of the topics encompassed by this review, there was a propensity that children approached to participate in interviews for the purpose of the review, may be triggered and re-traumatised.

In the context of Child Criminal Exploitation, there is the additional complexity of children being anxious and worried about sharing their views and stories due to fear of undesired police attention, potential legal implications and even reprisals – a legitimate concern especially for those children exploited via County Lines Methodology.

To mitigate these risks and concerns, the thematic review was largely built upon understanding the direct experiences of children and their families derived from agencies' case notes, records, and management information systems.

Due to time constraints and limitations, if data and information was not readily accessible, there was limited opportunity to undertake additional data collection and interrogation.

Commissioners and strategic leads are well aware of the importance and centrality of children's lived experience and views, and so are advised to continue consultation with children beyond the scope of this review. They are also advised that this review is preliminary and should therefore be utilised as a catalyst for further research and systemic evolution which matches the pace of the ever-evolving exploitation landscape.

1.5 Contextual Safeguarding

The Contextual Safeguarding Framework was applied to both phases of the review, to ensure that children's experiences of exploitation, abuse and harm in both inter-familial and extra-familial contexts, such as school, communities and peer groups were fully explored and understood.[2]

The review process was fully supported by senior leaders from across all agencies involved in the review process **(Annex A)** who agreed that the review would seek the involvement of children, parents, front line practitioners and the community.

1.6 Terminology

Knife Crime Throughout this review, the term *knife crime* is used. For context and for the purposes of this review, knife crime is referring to both the use of knives against children (either to threaten or to wound them), and to refer to instances when children may have been carrying or using knives for a broad range of purposes.[3]

Serious Youth Violence (SYV) The term Serious Youth Violence (SYV) is also used within this review and refers to incidents committed against, and perpetrated by, children which results in serious injury, harm or death.

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[2] Firmin, C (2017).

[3] Safeguarding children and young people in education from knife crime: Lessons from London. Ofsted (2019)

Co-Offending Peer Group (Gangs) This review also explores the links between knife crime, Serious youth Violence and gang affiliation and involvement. There are a multiplicity of definitions of the term "gang". However, this review defines a gang as; "*A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who: 1) see themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group; 2) engage in criminal activity and violence; and may also 3) lay claim over territory (not necessarily geographical but can include illegal economy territory); 4) have some form of identifying structural feature; and/or 5) be in conflict with other, similar, gangs.*"[4]

It is recognised that there is considerable controversy and debate about the use of the term gang, as this term often evokes prejudicial and inaccurate beliefs and therefore may impact the way a gang exploited child is viewed. Therefore, in place of the term gang, the term **co-offending peer group** will be used.

Child Exploitation: Occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child, young person (under the age of 18), or adult and exploits them a) through violence or the threat of violence, and/or b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or c) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants. The victim may have been exploited even if the activity appears consensual.
Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology. Children can be exploited in a variety of ways, however most commonly children and young people are exploited for sexual and criminal purposes.

Child Sexual Exploitation:

Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. [5]

Child Criminal Exploitation:

Child Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or (c) through violence or the threat of violence. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual.[6]

County lines: County Lines refers to a method of drug distribution that frequently establishes a supply line between an urban hub and an import location which is typically more rural or geographically isolated where drug markets are less saturated and well established. County Lines typically involves the supply of primarily heroin and crack cocaine, although other illicit substances such as cannabis and synthetics such as "spice" may also be distributed and sold to generate a supplementary revenue stream.

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[4] Dying to belong. The Centre for Social Justice (2009).

[5] Child sexual exploitation: Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation. Department for Education (2017).

[6] Serious Violence Strategy, Home Office, (2018).

A mobile phone line is established in the market, to which orders are placed by introduced customers. The line will commonly (but not exclusively) be controlled by a third party, remote from the market. Children and vulnerable persons are commonly coerced, groomed and recruited to achieve the storage and/or supply of drugs, movement of cash proceeds and to secure the use of premises (commonly referred to as cuckooing).

Exploited children and individuals regularly travel within and between the urban hub and the importation area to replenish stock and deliver cash. The group is inclined to use intimidation, violence, and weapons, including knives, corrosives and firearms. (National crime agency, 2017)

Modern Slavery: Modern Slavery is a term used within the UK and defined within the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Modern Slavery offences include holding a person in a position of slavery or servitude and either forced or compulsory labour, or facilitating their travel with the intention of exploiting them soon after. Although human trafficking is often viewed as involving an international cross-border element, this is a narrow view. Human and Child Trafficking increasingly originates and occurs solely in the UK. Child Exploitation is a form of Modern Slavery. Children and adolescents cannot give consent to being exploited therefore, the element of coercion or deception does not need to be present to prove an offence (National Crime Agency, 2017)

1.7 Review Author

An Independent author, Nikki Holmes, was commissioned to lead all aspects of the review and author this final thematic report.

The author is an accredited Independent Reviewer and independent safeguarding consultant, with extensive expertise in children's safeguarding and has undertaken several national review processes.

The author began her career in policing and has extensive knowledge of, and experience in, the field of Child Exploitation and Serious Youth Violence (SYV). Her organisation Safer Together, is commissioned nationally by statutory and non-statutory agencies to lead and contribute to a wide range of review processes related to exploitation and serious youth violence.

1.8: Terms of Reference and Key Lines of Enquiry

Terms of reference were agreed by members of the One Panel and the commissioners of this review.

Broadly speaking, the terms of reference for this review required the review author and the review panel to consider if changes to existing arrangements and implemented processes and systems have contributed to a sustained improvement in the way that agencies and individual practitioners identify and respond to all forms of Child Exploitation.

Agencies were asked to identify any significant information that fell within the scope of this review. Pertinent historical information is included in this report where it has been determined that information is important in contributing to the final analysis and recommendations.

The full Terms of Refence are provided in **Appendix B** of this review.

1.9 Case Summaries:

As aforementioned, **two** cases were selected and provided by the partnership to enable the review to ascertain the efficacy of the processes and arrangements that have been introduced post the *Whole Systems Review of Exploitation*. The decision was made that it was appropriate for the partnership to select two cases for analysis.

The first case provided (**that of Child R**), pre-dates the system changes that are explored as part of this review. The second case (**Child J**) was identified post 2021 and facilitates the review to consider how system evolution has impacted on identification and response.

It should be noted however, that two cases are not a representative sample, and the review therefore encourages further opportunity for continuous audit and case review. However, the review is assured that there are effective audit and review mechanisms in place, namely the quality and assurance framework that was launched in April 2021.

The two cases provided are as follows:

Child R

Child J

Further analysis and detail of these cases can be found in **Phase 2** of this review.

2.1 The Whole Systems Review of Exploitation

As aforementioned, in 2019, City of Wolverhampton council commissioned an independent *Whole Systems Review of Exploitation*. This review was commissioned in direct response to recognition of the fact that exploitation was a key theme for the city, affecting not only children, but families and entire communities.

The Whole Systems Review made several recommendations about how the system could be further developed and strengthened, by developing and improving the robustness of governance and partnership arrangements to improve identification and/or response to exploitation in all its forms.

This chapter of the review is focused on the findings from **Phase 1** of the review process, which specifically focused on ascertaining how the system has responded to, and

implemented learning from the whole systems review, and how effective that review has been in driving positive changes to local practice and delivery.

2.2 Governance and Strategic Context:

There is effective strategic oversight of Child Exploitation in Wolverhampton and a palpable partnership approach and continued commitment to robustly tackle exploitation in all its forms. Three strategic boards sit under the banner of Wolverhampton's Tackling Violence structure, and effective interface between these boards ensures the priority focus is on Child Exploitation.

There are also effective mechanisms to ensure that the work and priorities of these boards filter down to operational forums, which in turn effectively influences frontline practice. Perhaps more importantly, there are additional processes in place to enable and ensure the effective sharing of information from the operational frontline upstream to strategic leads, which is imperative to ensure that strategic decision making is influenced and in direct response to the exploitation landscape which frequently changes at pace.

There is also recognition by strategic leads that to truly understand the risk posed to children by exploitation, there is a need to look beyond the local picture and understand the regional landscape. As such, strategic leaders have secured membership on several regional boards, such as the Child Exploitation and Missing Board (CEM) and West Midlands Anti-Slavery Network. Membership at regional boards and forums is important to facilitate shared learning and intelligence sharing.

There is also on-going work to undertake a 'violence needs analysis' which will aid further understanding of serious youth violence, often inextricably linked to the wider exploitation picture. The findings from the needs analysis will be used to inform the local violence strategy review. The timely review of the local violence strategy should provide further strategic direction.

Yet despite the effective strategic response to tackle Exploitation in Wolverhampton, and the extensive work that has been carried out to develop an extensive local problem profile, there is no reference or mention of Child Exploitation and serious youth violence in the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). This is a missed opportunity to ensure that there is a wider partnership and strategic understanding of the complexity and extent of this issue. [7] **(Recommendation 1.1)**

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[7] The Children's Commissioner report, Still not safe: The public health response to youth violence (Feb 2021), the number of LAs quantifying the levels of youth violence in their local health strategies – known as Joint Strategic Needs Assessments (JSNA) –was low. 7 in 10 (73%) local authorities failed to quantify youth violence in their JSNAs.
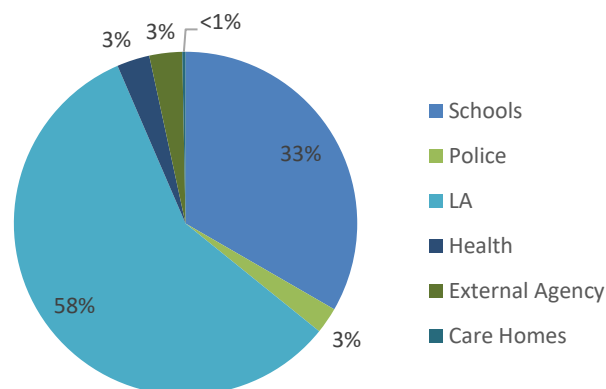
2.3 Screening and Identification:

In was recognised from the Whole Systems Review of Exploitation, that there was a need to improve the identification of children who had been subjected to exploitation, particularly in a criminal context.

In February 2021, a re-designed Child Exploitation screening tool was launched to facilitate the identification of all types of exploitation. The screening tool was co-designed with partner agencies to ensure it is suitable for use across the system and accessible to all sectors. Whilst the tool was trialled with children before it was launched, it was not co-produced and co-created directly with them. **(Recommendation 2.1)**

There is evidence of the tool resulting in significant increases in identified cases of exploitation. Whilst positive, the exploitation problem profile has highlighted that 91% of the initial screening tools completed between January and December 2021, derived from the Local Authority and Education. Conversely, only 3% of referrals were made by health and a further 3% made by police.

[8] **Chart A: Child Exploitation Tools completed by agency (Jan-Dec 2021)**

This finding means that not all parts of the system are yet contributing equitably to the newly improved screening and identification processes. Health is well placed to identify risk factors that may be indicative of exploitation, particularly those practitioners in Accident and Emergency Departments treating serious injuries in children such as lacerations that may have been inflicted in exploitative contexts and therefore should be consistently considered as red flags of exploitation. **(Recommendation 2.2)**

Similarly, police are well positioned to complete exploitation screening tools. At the practitioner learning event the reason for the low completion rates of screening tools was explored with police partners. It was identified that one of the reasons why screening tools

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[8] Wolverhampton Exploitation Problem Profile (January-December 2021).

are less likely to be completed by the police, is due to the belief that generally their interface with children at risk of exploitation and Serious Youth Violence is "*further upstream*" when risks and vulnerabilities are already well identified and risk management strategies in place. **(Recommendation 2.3)**

However, presenting in police custody or the requirement for police intervention, is arguably an indicator of risk escalation. Therefore, the completion of an additional screening tool is a useful exercise to quantify increases or changes to risk and vulnerability.

There is also a window of opportunity that should be explored with all children who present in police custody and the routine completion of screening tools in this context may also ensure that children are viewed consistently as victims first and foremost rather than offending, and criminal activity being the primary point of focus.

Further partnership work should also be undertaken with third sector and voluntary agencies who, at the time of this review, are not consistently completing and submitting screening tools. These agencies undertake valuable work with children in the community, and due to their non-statutory focus, are often well positioned to build rapport with children that would enable them to complete detailed screening tools with them**. (Recommendation 2.2)**

2.4 Screening Tool: Limitations and considerations

Whilst the increased identification of exploitation resulting from the use of the new screening tool is undoubtedly positive, it is important to highlight that research has identified many issues with the use of tools and checklists used throughout England and Wales to identify young people at risk of exploitation.[9]

Examples of such limitations include variation in completion and variations regarding conclusions around risk categorisation. Another common critique of screening tools is that they can result in practitioners adopting a homogenous view of Child Exploitation victims and the contexts of their abuse.

The review, therefore, has extensively considered the current iteration of the Child Exploitation screening tool, and seeks to make recommendations for the further development of tools/checklists that are used in practice.

2.4.1 Levels of risk and safeguarding response:

Upon completion of the screening tool, the child is allocated a level or category of risk. Current levels of risk are: *No risk evident, low risk, medium risk* and *significant risk.* Levels of risk are inextricably linked to the level of intervention and safeguarding response received by the child, and therefore, it is imperative that screening tools are not completed in silo and that they underpin further multi-agency conversation and exploration, even in cases where it is deemed that *no risk is evident.* This is especially important as the practitioner completing

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[9] The use of tools and checklists to assess risk of child sexual exploitation An exploratory study. Brown et al, 2017.

the tool may not have all of the information and knowledge pertaining to that child to complete a tool that provides an accurate and fully reflective risk assessment.

2.4.2 Triage arrangements

The system effectively recognises that risk and vulnerability are not static, and therefore further screening should be considered and completed at appropriate junctures of a child's life. There is also recognition of the fact that the category of *No Risk Evident* may lead to practitioners forming the view that exploitation is something unlikely to happen to the child and may not revisit screening with the child in the future.

In response to this, clear and robust arrangements have been implemented to triage completed screening tools.

All "*no risk*" tools are sent to the Exploitation Hub for further review which has arrangements in place to monitor the number of "no risk" tools that come through. If three or more "no risk" screening tools are submitted within a 6-month period for the same child, the child is discussed at the exploitation hub daily briefings.

Completed tools that are scored "*low risk*" where the child is not open to social care or Early Help, should be sent to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)[10] with an accompanying Multi-Agency Referral Form (MARF). This process results in children identified as being at low risk of intervention being offered Early Help intervention as part of a new pathway that has been implemented to ensure that there is a more preventative approach to exploitation.

"*Medium Risk*" and "*high-risk*" cases already open to Early Help or Children's Social Care are sent directly to the exploitation hub via Eclipse[11] notifications and further multi-agency review and discussions are held. There are clear "step-up" processes in place for these cases which includes the consideration of the appropriateness of Multi-Agency Child Exploitation processes (MACE).[12]

2.4.3 Absent Indicators of Risk and Harm

An in-depth review of the current screening tool has found that there are some indicators of risk, vulnerability and harm that are not included within the current tool, which may in turn curtail practitioners' identification and quantification of risk.

Cannabis Use

Whilst the screening tool highlights substance misusing behaviour as a reliable indicator of exploitation, it asks specifically about the "*early use of marijuana* – between the ages of 10-

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[10] Multi-agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) provides a single point of access to the services that help keep children safe. It is a multi-agency team made up of representatives from a range of services that provide advice, support and protection as needed.

[11] Eclipse is the case management system used by Children's Social Care.

[12] Multi-Agency Child Exploitation panels are multi-agency panels that are held to discuss children where there are concerns of Child Exploitation.

12. This specificity is unhelpful, as cannabis use by a child of any age may be linked to their exploitation and potential situations of debt bondage.

The term marijuana is also unhelpful. It is an older, Americanised term, and whilst sometimes used interchangeably with cannabis, increases the propensity of confusing practitioners, particularly those with limited knowledge of substance misuse, who may in turn overlook the use of cannabis. Additionally, some children may not recognise the term "marijuana" leading to the possibility of response to this question not being accurate or reflective of their cannabis use.

Disability and Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

Whilst the tool prompts practitioners to consider the increased levels of vulnerability linked to neurodivergence and seeks to capture some information regarding Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, there are no prompts that ask practitioners to consider physical disability, and whether the child is subject to an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP), which if in place, should lead to further multi-agency conversations about the child's presenting risks and Vulnerabilities.

Research conducted internationally, has found a consistent theme: children with disabilities are disproportionately represented in victim profiles. To apply a national context, The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) published in 2018 a literature review focused on the prevalence of Child Sexual Exploitation in residential schools perpetrated by both school staff and peers under the age of 18: the review concluded that those disabled children are at around three times greater risk of being sexually abused and exploited, with children with learning disabilities being most at risk.[13]

This finding is replicated locally. Children with known or suspected Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and those with an Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), are disproportionately represented in exploitation victim profiles. (68% of children open to MACE between Jan-Dec 2021 had identified SEND. [14] **(Recommendation 4.2)**

Intersectionality

The current tool also lacks sufficient intersectional focus. It does not capture any information about the child's cultural identity or immigration status. Therefore, there is no professional curiosity relating to how children from certain communities and ethnic groups may be locked in positions of disadvantage, or at increased vulnerability to exploitation due to being new arrivals to the UK.

Trauma

Whilst the tool refers to a child's trauma history, this is viewed through the context of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). The ACE framework, when applied, views trauma through a very narrow lens, often focused only on traumas arising from parental conflict and inter-familial issues, not therefore recognising the range of traumas that a child may have been exposed to in community and extra familial contexts.

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[13] Child sexual abuse in residential schools: A literature review.

[14] Wolverhampton Exploitation Problem Profile. Jan-December 2021.

The ACE theory, whilst useful at galvanising conversation around trauma, is not a useful framework to aid practitioners' understanding that trauma is wide ranging and that children, being non-homogenous, respond to trauma in individualised and unique ways. The reference to and embedding of ACEs within the screening tool, may therefore limit practitioners' recognition of trauma in all its forms.

Victim Blaming

The language used to describe and reference children is critical and can have a direct impact on how victim status, agency and blame are assigned, and in turn, the way that children are responded to.

Some of the language and terminology could be argued to increase the propensity of victim blaming, which is problematic as it could lead to interventions and responses being focused on encouraging the child to reduce their individual risks as opposed to being focused appropriately on mapping and disrupting perpetrator activity.

Some pertinent examples of this, is use of the terms *"Aggression traits"* and *"Aggressive and Violent Behaviour."* This is a somewhat clumsy and unhelpful description of behaviour which is often a trauma response, and behaviour which, when understood in the context of the child's situational and lived experience is normal and rational. Reframing this in a more trauma informed way may limit the likelihood of agency, complicity and blame being assigned to the child.

One further example is the use of the term "*involvement in offending*", which again may lead to assumptions and perceptions of agency and choice when the reality is that children who offend as part of their exploitation often do so under duress and because of coercion.

2.4.4 Screening Tool: Strengths

One potential weakness and limitation of the embedded use of screening tools is that reliance on such tools can curtail professional curiosity. However, the tool encourages professionals to capture narrative information that provides an explanation of their suspicions and concerns.

There are also prompts within the screening tool to encourage practitioners to consider cuckooing[15], a highly exploitative practice that is often linked to Criminal Exploitation and in particular County Lines methods of drug supply. This is a real strength, as despite these links, there is little academic enquiry and critical scrutiny of cuckooing. This means that this issue which poses considerable risks to both exploited children as well as vulnerable adults is often overlooked nationally.

Screening tools in use nationally have been criticised for the lack of situational, environmental and perpetrator/potential perpetrator factors contained within the body of the tool. However, there are sections within the screening tool dedicated to capturing contextual and perpetrator information.

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[15] Cuckooing is a term used to describe the highly exploitative practice where the home of a person, who is often highly vulnerable. Is taken over and used as a base to facilitate exploitation and criminality such as drug distribution and supply.

2.4.5 Early identification

The review aimed to explore if the current arrangements for screening and identification are facilitating the earlier identification of exploitation, or resulting in exploitation cases being identified further upstream, resulting in responses that are more reactive than preventative.

The review found some emerging evidence of early identification, with some screening tools completed in 2021, identifying cases of exploitation concerns for children as young as 8, providing the opportunity for much earlier preventative work. Additionally, further analysis of these cases has highlighted a common theme of exploitation of younger children via social media and gaming platforms which should in turn steer intervention planning and awareness raising. **(Recommendation 3.1)**

2.5 Assessment of Extra-Familial Risk (Contextual Safeguarding)

Contextual Safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding children which recognises and responds to experiences of significant harm beyond the boundaries of their home often referred to as *extra-familial contexts.*

Whilst the Contextual Safeguarding framework has been in place since 2016, and first referenced in both Working Together to Safeguard Children and Keeping Children Safe in Education in 2018, there are still some variations and confusions about the framework and its applications nationally.

That said, it is evident that the partnership is accurately embedding the contextual safeguarding approach, recognising that contextual safeguarding approaches must "*promote awareness of vulnerability in the context of the spaces where adolescents spend their time, for example online, in parks or at school*" (Brandon et al, 2020).

There has been significant drive and investment in raising awareness and application of contextual safeguarding which is imperative in keeping children safe from harm in places and spaces beyond the family home. One school spoken to as part of the review process stated*: "**There have been improvements in the way that we now understand the lives of children and what life is like for them outside of school. There has been a real culture change within the school and a commitment to understand all aspects of children's lives."**

Furthermore, there has been extensive training delivered across the system to enable practitioners to be able to practically apply principles of the Contextual Safeguarding framework. For example, the application of "context weighting" which facilitates the exploration of the weight of influences contexts have on the lived experiences of children.

That said, there could be further steps taken to ensure the consistent and equitable application of contextual safeguarding to all processes and forums. For example, MACE paperwork could be updated to include a section on context weighting where agencies are prompted to consider all the contexts that have relevance to the child and prioritise interventions dependent on the weight of influence of those contexts. (**Recommendation 4.1)**

2.5.1 Barriers that impede knowledge of extra familial risk
Information sharing across professional and geographical boundaries:

Whilst the commitment to embed contextual approaches to safeguarding is positive, there are some factors that impede effective contextual safeguarding practice, namely effective and timely information sharing. Without the sharing of pertinent information, practitioners' contextual understanding of children and young people is inhibited, fragmented and incomplete.

Whilst improving cross-border information sharing is a key area of focus of *Wolverhampton's Serious Violence and Exploitation Strategy (2018-22)*, the sharing of information remains a particular challenge when there is a requirement to work across geographical and professional boundaries.

Vulnerable young people are often highly transient and mobile, moving from one local authority to another, for a multiplicity of reasons. Academic research and critical enquiry into child exploitation highlights that children who are actively criminally exploited are frequently trafficked across borders, thus highlighting the need for effective trans-border information sharing agreements.

Therefore, sharing information between local authorities and police forces is essential to ensure that robust, contextual risk management plans are in place which enable all agencies to be sighted on all known risk and vulnerability factors.[16]

The Child Safeguarding Review Panel's Annual Report (2020[17]), highlighted the need for safeguarding systems to address *"stubborn challenges"*, namely weak and insufficient information sharing and risk assessment which undermines effective safeguarding practice. The analysis found that fragmentation of information sharing often resulted in a lack of understanding about UK GDPR[18] and data protection regulations.

It is recognised that achieving borderless safeguarding, requires national sea-change and will not be achieved by any one local area in silo. However additional assurance should be sought via existing audit processes, that information is being routinely sought from other local authorities and police forces when a child has not only been placed in the city or identified as having links with another local authority area.

The partnership spoke of the good, embedded relationship they have with the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP).[19] The West Midlands VRP is operational across the West Midlands footprint, which is comprised of seven local authority areas, including Wolverhampton. There is also one police force (West Midlands Police) that is operational over the West Midlands region.

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[16] Crest. Vulnerable children in county lines drugs networks: are we any closer to 'borderless safeguarding'? Caluori, J (et al) 2020.

[17] It was hard to escape: Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020)

[18] The United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation (UK-GDPR) is the UK's data privacy law that governs the processing of personal data from individuals .

[19] Violence Reduction Partnerships are funded by the Home Office and are a team of professionals from local government, health, education, police, and criminal justice. They work alongside partner organisations and communities to reduce serious violence. Violence Reduction Partnerships adopt public health approaches to violence.

Therefore, whilst embedding more effective national information sharing may not be in the partnership's gift, there are good foundations and opportunities to seek the strategic support of the VRP, West Midlands Combined Authority and the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner to increase the fluidity and promptness of information sharing across the West Midlands Region to facilitate contextual knowledge and approaches to safeguarding. (**Recommendation 1.2**)

2.5.2 Contextual Safeguarding: Understanding Cumulative Harm

There is clear evidence that the system has been successful in raising awareness of harm that can and does occur in a variety of extra familial contexts. However, one risks of embedding contextual safeguarding in practice, is that practitioner focus is shifted entirely away from the child's home environment, and that risk assessments do not adequately understand or reflect the intersect between intra-familial and extra-familial risk factors.

This may especially be the case for children who are in the developmental phase of adolescence.

The case of **Child R** (outlined in **Phase 2** of this report) is illustrative of this. He was a child who was subjected to multiple harms in the home environment and his exposure to the world of criminality occurred and became normalised in early childhood.

However, there is little evidence to suggest that his early childhood experiences were considered as potential pre-cursors for exploitation, given that records reviewed highlighted that exploitation was not considered collectively by agencies until 2016. Even then, the risks identified had not been robustly responded to until **Child R** was a victim of a stabbing in 2018.

Even when a child has been appropriately safeguarded and identified familial risks responded to, care should be taken to not assume that issues presented in previous environments and historical contexts are resolved and are therefore unrelated to current presenting issues.

Children may often be able to overcome and even learn from single or moderate risks, but when risk factors accumulate, children's capacity to survive rapidly diminishes … Newman and Blackburn (2002)

Therefore, the understanding of the impact of cumulative harm is essential to ensure the accuracy of risk assessment. Contextual risk assessments therefore need to ensure that current information is overlaid with understanding children's exposure to previous adverse circumstances and events and support the identification of and understanding of cumulative harm. (**Recommendation 3.2**)

2.5.3 Contextual Safeguarding: The importance of location, place and space.

Further evidence to support the conclusion that the system has adopted the contextual safeguarding framework, in alignment with its key principles, is the extensive work that is

happening to identify and map problematic locations, places and spaces that are exploitation "hot spots".

Intelligence to identify problem spaces is gathered from a multiplicity of sources, such as from information shared at MACE, CEMOG, police intelligence and information from screening tools.

This evidence has successfully identified spaces in the city that are unsafe for children, due to exploitation concerns. Intelligence relating to identified "hotspots" is shared with members at CEMOG, in daily exploitation hub briefings and at police local tasking meetings which drives intelligence led disruption activity.

This ecological and contextual view of exploitation is a real strength but could be further strengthened by the development and implementation of a local disruption strategy. One practitioner we spoke to recognised the good work that is happening locally to intervene with the places and spaces frequented by children in order to make them safer but felt there was a need for a "*consensual disruption offer*" in order to ensure "*that everyone knows their role in disruption and interrupting perpetrator activity*." **(Recommendation 4.4)**

2.5.4 Contextual Safeguarding: Parents and Carers

A number of research evaluations, such as those commissioned by Parents Against Child Exploitation (PACE), highlight that parents of children who have been affected by exploitation, often experience suspicion and even blaming attitudes from statutory services. Professionals may engage with parents in a manner that portrays them, implicitly or explicitly, as failed carers (Palmer and Jenkins, 2013; Shuker and Ackerley, 2017).[20]

The successful systemic adoption of the contextual safeguarding framework recognises that parents can have limited control or influence over harm that can happen to their children outside of the home, and the need to therefore provide support for not just exploited children, by addressing "the needs of the whole family and not just focused on the individual child" (Scott and McNeish, 2017).

Some commissioned services such as The Power2 service, also recognises that it is not just the child victims that are impacted by exploitation, but their families and care givers. In response, the team have developed parental support to educate parents and carers about child exploitation and county lines and a safe space where they can access advice and support.

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[20] Working with parents to address extra-familial harm. Contextual Safeguarding Network. University of Durham (2022)

However, the service has limited capacity, and with the increase in exploitation cases being identified locally, there may be limited scope for the service to continue to provide such valuable support for parents and carers.

The case of **Child J (Phase 2)** highlights how the system is beginning to work effectively with families ensuring that safety planning and risk management is encompassing of whole families, whilst simultaneously building the resilience of families, and increasing the family's ability to build a protective structure around exploited children which "over time, may weaken the control and power of those who are perpetrating harm" (Beckett et al., 2017). As such, future commissioning decisions and strategies should ensure that there is adequate provision to enable family focused work to continue for all partners. **(Recommendation 4.8)**

2.6 Perpetration

Often, problem profiles are singularly focused on the profile of victims. Of course, this is vital, but focusing on victims in silo, means that the lens in which we view child exploitation is too narrow.

In order to prevent exploitation, and afford better protections to victims, there needs to simultaneously be a focus on those that perpetrate abuse and harm.

The partnership is effectively beginning to collate information and develop a perpetrator profile, which gives a vital and valuable insight into those that exploit children and the motivations that underpin their decisions and intent to do so.

In 2021, CEMOG activity led to the identification of 21 perpetrators and persons believed to be harming children through activities relating to exploitation. [21] The identification of perpetrators also highlighted the complex dichotomy that can be found between "victims and offenders" particularly when the exploitation of a child is perpetrated by a child who is also vulnerable and in need of protection.

Interestingly, the analysis of perpetrator activity to date has also highlighted the increase in identified female perpetrators, which provides direct challenge to the widely adopted narrative which overlooks the roles that females play in the exploitation of others in sexual and criminal contexts. This was a finding in the case of **Child J (Phase 2)** which highlighted the role that an ex-girlfriend played in the facilitation of his ongoing exploitation. The review was impressed by the profiling of perpetrators and the system's ability to recognise the complex victim perpetrator overlap. **(Recommendation 4.7)**

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[21] Wolverhampton Child Exploitation Problem Profile. Jan-Dec 2021.

2.7 Categorisations of exploitation and victim status.

Given the absence of a reliable and accurate national mechanism that provides an insight into the prevalence and nature of Child Exploitation, it is imperative that local areas are attempting to profile and map the scale of the issue locally as well as identify and map the characteristics and networks of at-risk populations.

The review found clear evidence of local systematic data collection and mapping which helpfully provides a valuable insight into the prevalence of exploitation typologies.[22]

These current mapping arrangements are also beginning to capture cases where there is evidence of children being exploited in a multiplicity of ways. Too frequently, exploitation types are viewed in silo, meaning that children are categorised as being a victim of one type of exploitation, overlooking the intersect that often occurs between exploitation subtypes.

That said, *the Whole Systems Review of Exploitation* found that "police structures provide a fragmented approach to how risks associated with exploitation are managed which potentially makes a revised partnership approach to preventing, identifying and responding to a broader definition of exploitation more difficult.

The Public Protection Unit (PPU) manages CSE; Force CID[23] manages criminal exploitation; and Neighbourhood Policing manages gangs. It is not clear how the links are made across these departments within the Police or how it impacts on operational and strategic partnership working".

At the time of this review, those structures remained the same, and as such, there remain the same challenges and questions regarding not only the impact on strategic partnership working, but also regarding how the effectiveness of support provided to children subjected to multiple exploitation types are consistently supported. **(Recommendation 4.4)**

Despite the challenges posed by the structures of police departments, local mapping and profiling activity is a strength, which should in turn lead to improved identification and response to all risks and vulnerabilities, lessening the propensity of re-exploitation.

That said care must be taken to ensure that the current systems of categorisation are not leading to inequitable and inconsistent safeguarding responses and the diminishing of victim status.

Whilst the categorisation and recording of exploitation types is undoubtedly helpful in the creation of a problem profile which is required to continually evolve and strengthen systemic responses, the categorisation of exploitation can also lead to variation of, and potentially inadequate, safeguarding responses, leaving some children exposed to risk.

The impact that the categorisation of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) has on the way professionals view and respond to risk is grounded in academic research, [24] which has

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[22] At the time of writing this review, the categorisations of exploitation being recorded are as follows: Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), County Lines (CL), Modern Slavery (MDS)

[23] The Criminal Investigations Department (CID) is a police department that responds to crimes of a serious nature and organised criminality.

[24] 17 Working Effectively to Address Child Sexual Exploitation: Evidence Scope (2017) Eaton, J and Holmes, D.

demonstrated how children subjected to Child Sexual Abuse outside of the home have been framed and responded to differently than those subjected to abuse within familial contexts (Pearce, 2006). Therefore, there is a need to critically consider and explore how the categorisation of Child Criminal Exploitation may result in practitioners erroneously assigning blame and agency to children in some cases.

The review has found that current data capture systems, in their present format, may increase the propensity of inequitable safeguarding responses. Modern Slavery is recorded as a separate exploitation sub-type, despite CSE, CCE and County Lines exploitation, all being forms of Modern Slavery and potential child trafficking offences.

At the time of writing this review, a total of 326* young people had known exploitation risks.

Please note that the total number of cases identified in the chart below is higher as some children who have been subjected to multiple exploitation types are counted in figures more than once)

Exploitation Typology	Total Number of Cases Identified	Total Number of NRM referrals	Percentage
CSE	202	36	24%
CCE	127	35	23%
County Lines	49	17	35%
Modern Slavery	18	18	100%
Total	**396**	**106**	-

Further analysis of National Referral Mechanism[25] activity in response to the cases identified, highlighted that there were inequitable responses to these cases.

Whilst 100% of victims of Modern Slavery were referred to the NRM, in contrast, the percentage of children referred to the NRM under other exploitation categories are much lower. This may in part, be the result of categorisation, which in turn impacts on perceived victim status.

2.7.1 Modern Slavery: Myths and Misconceptions

Therefore, whilst the categorisation of exploitation typologies is important, and necessary to understand the nature and extent of harms inflicted upon children, it is important that the system revisits the current systems in place and then considers the use of current categorisations.

A common misconception is that Modern Slavery is a separate entity to Child Exploitation. An inaccurate stereotype of modern slavery involves the trafficking of a child, often by use of force, across international borders. This narrative is widely perpetuated despite national datasets highlighting that in a UK context, the majority of Modern Slavery cases involving children under 18 involved the exploitation of British nationals that originated in the UK, most commonly for the purposes of drug distribution and supply.

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[25] The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a statutory framework that has been in place since 2009 which identifies victims of Modern-day Slavery, so they receive appropriate care and support. Any child or adult known or suspected to be victims of Modern Slavery should be referred to the National Referral Mechanism.

For example, The National Referral Mechanism end of year statistics 2021 reported that 58% of potential victims reported to the NRM claimed exploitation in the UK compared to 31% of cases that claimed exploitation took place overseas. [26]
This widely adopted discourse positions Modern Slavery victims as non-British nationals, who fit the "perfect victim profile" and so are provided with appropriate help and protection.

Conversely, children who are sexually and or criminally exploited are not always seen as victims of modern slavery and as such, their victim status is somewhat diminished, leading to safeguarding responses that are less timely and robust.
(**Recommendation 4.3**)

2.7.2 The National Referral Mechanism

There is available locally, a developed National Referral Mechanism (NRM) pathway and the Child Exploitation Problem Profile, that has been developed and does map local National Referral Activity. It is also acknowledged by the review that the local area has plans via their existing audit and governance arrangements, to undertake further analysis of NRM activity.

This analysis should also consider exploring how markers are used on systems used by children's services, health and the police to ensure consistent identification of children who may be at risk.[27]

2.7.3 Exploitation: The Statutory Response.

Locally, the number of children placed on a Child Protection Plan in recent years has decreased.

The review also found that whilst increases in the numbers of exploited children was reassuring, numbers of exploited children placed on child protection plans due to exploitation concerns was low in comparison to the increasing numbers of children flagged as being at high risk of exploitation.

[26] Official Statistics: Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, end of year summary 2021. Home Office. (March 2022)

[27] Counting Lives. The Children Society (2019)

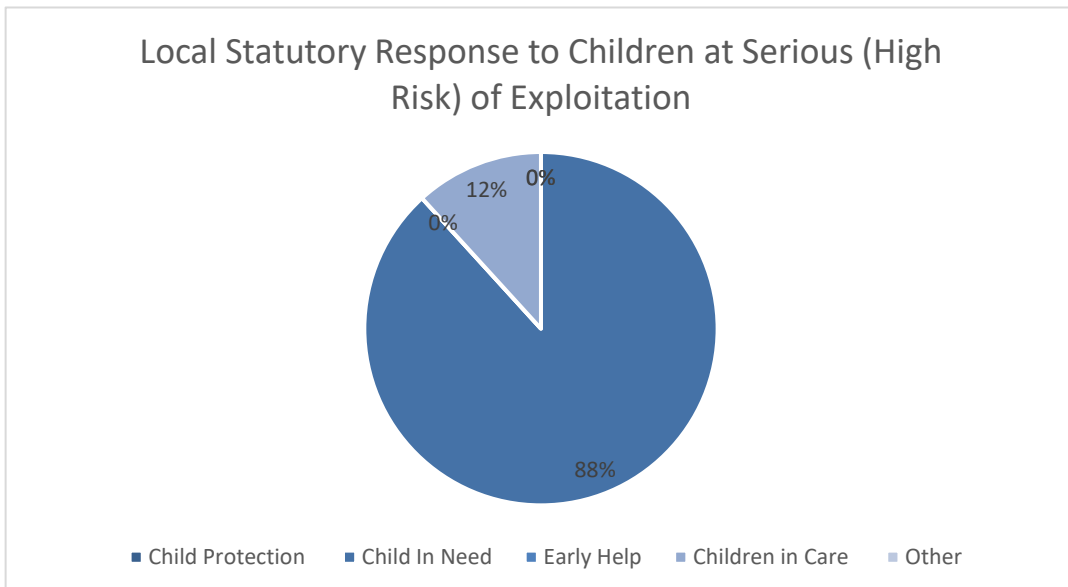**Local Statutory Response to Children with Identified Exploitation Risks**

- Child Protection 39%
- Child in Need 38%
- Early Help 5%
- Children in Care 13%
- Other 5%

Legend: Child Protection | Child in Need | Early Help | Children in Care | Other
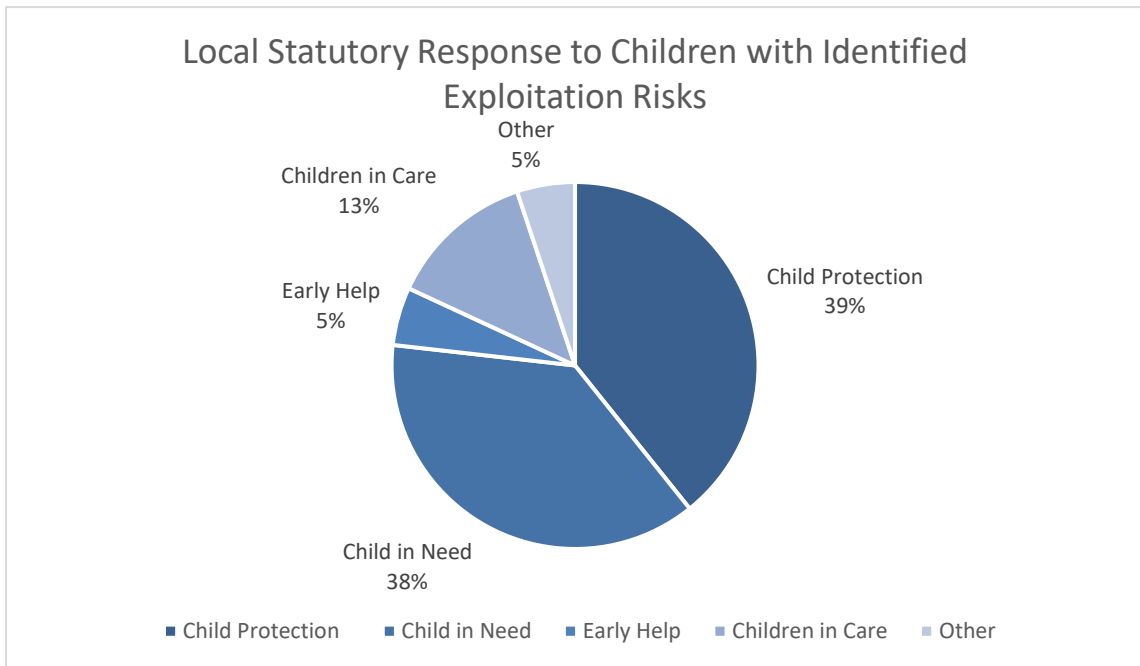
28

The review recognises that a "traditional" child protection response is not required, nor appropriate for all children at risk of exploitation and that responses other than a Child Protection response may facilitate a better assessment of extra-familial harms. However, further analysis found that the numbers of children identified as being at *high risk* of exploitation placed on child protection plans was similarly low.

Local Statutory Response to Children at Serious (High Risk) of Exploitation

- 88%
- 12%
- 0%
- 0%

Legend: Child Protection | Child In Need | Early Help | Children in Care | Other

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[28] Local statutory response to exploitation concerns - accurate as of 18/11/2022

Therefore, the partnership is encouraged to conduct further analysis and audit in order to assure themselves that the statutory response to child exploitation is adequate to respond robustly to levels of presenting risk and vulnerability. **(Recommendation 4.5).**

2.8 Operational Context:

There are several operational forums in place that facilitate multi-agency discussion, risk management and response in relation to children identified as being at risk of all typologies of exploitation, SYV and extra-familial harm. One such forum is the Multi-Agency Child Exploitation panel (MACE).

Prior to 2021, there were only mechanisms in place to discuss children who had been identified as at risk of Child Sexual Exploitation via the Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation panel (MASE). This was recognised as a significant systemic gap, and in direct response to this, the MACE panel was implemented, widening the lens to focus on all exploitation typologies.

These arrangements are well embedded and utilised, evidenced by the fact that there has been a significant increase in the numbers of children and young people being referred into MACE. To put this into context, for the period January to December 2021, there was a 57% increase in referrals made to MACE compared to the same reporting period the previous year[29]. (This increase may be attributable to the fact that previous MASE panels only accepted referrals for CSE cases.)

Two fundamental questions that were key considerations of this review were:

- *How well has the system coped with the increase in referrals to MACE, and;*
- *Has the increase in referrals compromised the efficacy and quality of interventions put in place to keep children safe from harm?*

The strategic partnership was able to evidence that in response to increases in need, there was an increase in staffing capacity to effectively respond to increases in referrals. For example, there have been increases in practitioner capacity to respond to the identified increases in need. Recruitment of this additional resource was carefully considered, and reflects a genuine uplift in staffing capacity, as opposed to simply re-locating practitioners from other teams and departments and thus depleting resource and capacity elsewhere in the system.

The average duration of a young person on a MACE plan, in 2021, was approximately 4 months and the average number of MACE meetings was 4 meetings per young person. Data from between Jan 2022-September 2022 demonstrated that the duration of a young person on a MACE plan had remained consistent at 4.4 months, and the average number of MACE meetings held during this reporting period was 3 per child.[30] This data therefore suggests that the increase in staffing capacity has maintained the consistency of the MACE processes.

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[29] Wolverhampton Exploitation Problem Profile Jan-Feb 2021

[30] Some cases within this reporting period are ongoing and therefore may be subject to additional MACE meetings.

That said, the review suggests that the partnership continues to use the existing audit and quality assurance arrangements to continually assure itself of the efficacy of the MACE processes in accurately identifying and quantifying risk.

2.8.1 Child Exploitation and Missing Operational Group (CEMOG)

Whilst there is commonly a focus on understanding and mapping children who have links due to affiliation and involvement in co-offending peer groups, there is often insufficient focus or understanding of how different children and groups of children are linked with each other and the nature of their relationships.

In addition to MACE, the primary focus of which is to explore individual children's needs, CEMOG provides a space which facilitates peer mapping and the identification of geographical exploitation hotspots and problematic locations, places and spaces.

It is evident that the activity of CEMOG is actively contributing to aiding disruption work. One example of this, is the inclusion of licensing at CEMOG meetings and the effective identification of problematic licensed premises that may have been identified as facilitating child exploitation at this forum.

2.8.2 Partnership and Exploitation Hub

The introduction of a dedicated Exploitation Hub in 2021, has clearly been integral in the development of a whole system and partnership approach to exploitation.

Despite still being in relative infancy, the hub has undertaken a significant amount of work, that has been successful in improved identification of and response to all forms of exploitation. In addition to the development and launch of the screening tool, the hub has led the development of the "*Threshold to Support*" document to ensure more focus on contextual safeguarding.

The Hub has also developed an enhanced training offer, launching a comprehensive online exploitation training package, strengthened CEMOG and MACE processes and further developed a pathway of support which ensures that all children identified as at risk of exploitation can benefit from an enhanced early intervention offer.

Effective collaboration between partners, particularly around information sharing, is essential to the protection of children and preventing the perpetration of exploitation. There is a wide range of behaviours and scenarios that may not initially appear exploitation related, but pieced together and understood contextually, form a bigger picture. Agencies hold different pieces of information and will possess different legislative powers that together help to identify the most appropriate response to protect children from harm.[31]

The Partnership Missing and Exploitation Hub successfully promotes collaborative and inter-agency working, by bringing together key agencies and services that work with children and adults at risk of exploitation.

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[31] Child exploitation disruption toolkit. Home Office (2018).

The Hub is also facilitating the effective systematic sharing of information and ensures that practitioners from all sectors are consistently sighted on the changing landscape of exploitation and risk, threat and harm via daily briefings.

2.9 Transition to adulthood.

It is imperative to recognise that a child does not automatically become less vulnerable or more cognisant of risk as they reach their 18th birthday. In fact, the transition to adulthood can be a turbulent time for many children who face cliff edges upon the approach to adulthood. Sudden ineligibility for support is frequently due to reaching a milestone in age, not because of decreased vulnerability and risk.

Exploitation is not restricted to child victims, and is underpinned by vulnerability and opportunities to exploit, not age. Therefore, young adults may be at increased risk of exploitation and re-exploitation, particularly those who may be living independently for the first time, those who are not in education, training and employment, those with SEND and those with ongoing mental health and substance misuse issues.

There are several key strands that should be considered as children transition to adulthood. Firstly, there may be a continuum of the exploitation identified and experienced as a child into adulthood. Secondly, there may be a consequential impact of childhood exploitation in adulthood, for example children who have been victims of sexual exploitation may be at an increased risk of being exploited for sex work and finally, young adults who may have no history of exploitation as a child, may be targeted as victims due to a reduction in accessible support provision, professional oversight and involvement.

There is a significant body of empirical research which highlights the devastating impact that exploitation and abuse in childhood may have in adulthood. Victims and survivors of Child Exploitation are considerably more likely to be re-victimised in adulthood compared to those who have not been subjected to exploitation. [32]

The system has demonstrated that they recognise the continuum and cyclical nature of exploitation and have responded to this by developing the screening tool so it can be used to screen individuals up to the age of 25, which encapsulates the vulnerable and too-frequently overlooked transitional cohort.

The embedding of practitioners from Adult Social Care within the Partnership and Exploitation Hub also further strengthens the focus on transition and ensures that that practitioners working with both adults and children are viewing exploitation through a much wider lens, recognising the many ways that exploitation can impact across the life course.

Typically, there are several factors which may impact upon ensuring consistent, effective transition arrangements are applied in all instances. Barriers may include, but not be limited to, disparities in budgets and eligibility criteria, limited resources to support and oversee transition, differences in ways of working, culture and thresholds, a multiplicity of databases which do not interface, a lack of awareness of CCE and modern slavery across the adult

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[32] Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, The impacts of child sexual abuse: a rapid evidence assessment, July 2017.

workforce. These disparities are often felt most acutely by the most vulnerable, such as those with additional needs.

Locally, despite the systemic efforts to ensure that practitioners recognise the need to consider the impact of exploitation beyond childhood, there are some barriers that may prevent the effective transition of older children which may limit the likelihood of them being effectively safeguarded from exploitation in early adulthood and beyond **(Recommendation 4.6)**

2.10 Trauma Responsive Practice and Victim Blaming

The impact of Child Exploitation cannot be underestimated, due to the way that it permeates all facets of a child's life, therefore responding to children who have been subjected to exploitation in a way that is trauma informed is vital.

It is evident that the system is aware of the trauma that is inextricably linked to exploitation, and practitioners who formed part of this review at both operational and strategic levels, demonstrated empathy and compassion for the children they seek to support.

In addition to this, there is good recognition of the fact that challenging and risk-taking behaviour should be understood in the context of a trauma response, and not behaviour that should be punished or criminalised.

Strategic leads understand that exploited children are not a homogenous group, and as such will have different presenting needs. The risk of not understanding certain presenting behaviours in the context of trauma, is that children may be further marginalised and disadvantaged. In response to this, the system provides a wide range of commissioned services that offer child-led, holistic and trauma informed approaches and interventions for exploited children.

2.10.1 Responding to trauma and utilising "lived experience"

One example of how the system has responded to meet identified need is the commissioning of the **Power2** service, a multi-disciplinary team, commissioned to work with children at risk of exploitation, comprised of social workers, an educational psychologist, a speech and language therapist, a counselling psychologist and keyworkers from the third sector organisations, namely Barnardo's, Gazebo Theatre and St Giles Trust.

This service is underpinned by the principles of trauma informed practice and seeks to understand the child in the context of their trauma, rather than simply focusing on their presenting behaviours.

One of the strengths of the service is the face-to-face support provided by skilled, compassionate key workers who have lived experience of exploitation and affiliation with co-offending peer networks. The system recognises the immense value of "lived experience", children's need for "*relatability*" and recognises that those with lived experience are able to empathise and support from a unique perspective and place of understanding that cannot be taught via training or research.

As such, there is a commitment to embedding and commissioning practitioners with lived experience into teams within statutory organisations, in order to build meaningful relationships with children who, for a variety of valid reasons, may struggle to trust and work with more traditional statutory services.

The work of Power2 has demonstrated the profound positive impact that the application of trauma informed approaches has on children and their families, but some of the practitioners who engaged with this review felt that trauma informed practice is not yet well embedded across the wider system, but unanimously felt that there is a commitment to be more trauma responsive. **(Recommendation 3.2)**

2.11 Victim Blaming: The centrality of language

Whilst all the practitioners that were directly involved at both operational and strategic levels, spoke empathetically about exploited children, some of the language reviewed in records increased the propensity of victim blaming and the child being obscured behind their presenting behaviours and criminality.

It is not just the spoken word, but the written word that wields the power to position a child in a context that diminishes both their victim status and vulnerability.

Some of the language used in records reviewed was not reflective of trauma informed practice or anti-victim blaming. Examples of this was evident in the case review of **Child R,** who was described as "*damaged*" and a "*future psychopath*."

Language and phrases such as this not only re-position victims of exploitation as being complicit in their exploitation, and perhaps less deserving of support, help and intervention, but may also limit the accessibility of support available. Some services may read unhelpful and inaccurate descriptions of children, and feel that they are not commissioned, skilled or equipped to support children who are framed as being incredibly complex and in the case of **Child R,** dangerous.

An additional risk of using unhelpful language and descriptions of exploited children is that it can increase the propensity of further isolation and marginalisation, which are factors that can result in the further entrenchment in exploitative worlds. One practitioner we spoke with told us about the benefits of providing children with the opportunity to build peer support networks in the community but identified that some children are excluded from doing so because of how they are viewed as posing such significant levels of risk to others, despite being at such high levels of risk themselves. "*I think sometimes we paint a picture [of children], that they are so risky they can't work with others.*"

Phase 2: Case Analysis

Phase 2 – Child R

1. Early Childhood Contexts

Child R has an extensive trauma history, which began in utero. He was placed on a Child Protection plan as an unborn, due to concerns about his mother's mental health and her ability to safely parent him.

At age 2, **Child R** was removed from the care of his mother and placed with his maternal grandmother. However, concerns regarding **Child R's** safety whilst living with his grandmother under a residency order continued. There are records of incidents where, before the age of 4, **Child R** was left unsupervised, and in the company of older peer groups.

There were also concerns raised about other family members, namely **Child R's** maternal uncle who had links to organised criminality and gang networks and lived at the same address as him and his grandmother.

2. Care History

When **Child R** was 6, he made allegations of physical abuse against his grandmother. The concerns raised resulted in **Child R** being the subject of several Child in Need (CiN) and Child Protection (CP) plans over the course of his early childhood and cumulated in him being placed in foster care.

Child R benefitted from a secure and settled foster placement for almost 2 years, before the placement irretrievably broke down in 2016, which resulted in him being placed in a residential placement. Despite the way that **Child R** is sometimes framed in some early case records, this could be argued as evidence that he is able to form healthy and meaningful attachments and relationships with people that understand him in context.

Concerns regarding **Child R's** safety escalated from 2018, after it was identified that he had been stabbed in the buttocks and was identified as weapon carrying and engaging in unprotected sex. He was placed in a secure unit.

3. Out of area placements and placements permeance

Permanence is defined in the statutory guidance that accompanies the Children Act 1989 as providing children with:

'a sense of security, continuity, commitment and identity … a secure, stable and loving family to support them through childhood and beyond'[33]

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[33] Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010).

Whilst some children cannot safely remain with their birth families and foster care may not be a feasible option due to an absence of suitable foster placements, permeance is an importance feature of any placement type*, "as it creates opportunities for children to develop [quality and continuous] relationships, which may take time for children whose previous relationships have been characterised by adversity"* (Boddy, 2013).

Child R has been subject to multiple placements situated all over the county and it is evident that practitioners face significant challenges in achieving placement permanency for children with complex care and support needs.

These systemic challenges have a significant impact on children at the epicentre of placement planning. At one point, despite there being just 4 weeks remaining before a placement came to an end, there was no clear, agreed transition plan in place due to a new residential placement not being successfully identified. The review recognises that that this is not consequence of a lack of forethought and planning from practitioners, but a result of an absence of a lack of suitable provision nationally.

Child R had been consistently vocal about his "*need for a sense of belonging*". Arguably the need for belonging is perhaps of greater paramountcy for **Child R**, given his fractured familial history and the fact that he had highlighted as a Black child, many placements did not respond to his cultural need. However, from records reviewed it could perhaps be concluded that the impact of the uncertainty around placements on the child perhaps lacked focus. Whilst there was a recognition of **Child's R** cultural needs once a placement was found, there needs to be greater recognition of how the uncertainty of placement planning may impact on mental health and emotional wellbeing due to the associated anxiety of leaving behind friendships and supportive relationships that have been built with practitioners.

There is, of course, additional complexity of placement planning when a child has been criminally exploited for the purposes of county lines. Placing a child in multiple placements across the UK, potentially lends itself well to county lines methodology and has the potential to facilitate the development of additional negative peer networks. This was certainly the case for **Child R**, when placed in semi-supported accommodation. This placement coincided with multiple missing episodes, and the formation of new, problematic peer relationships, perhaps underpinned by **Child R's** quest for belonging, a basic human need that in his case, had not been sufficiently met elsewhere.

4. Mental Health Support and Intervention

In 2010, when **Child R** was 5 years old, he was referred to the local Child Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHs) due to him making threats to stab his teachers and talking openly about cannabis.

Child R was re-referred to CAMHs in 2012, at the age of 7, due to concerns about inappropriate sexualised behaviour. In sessions he spoke about "*gangs*", and disclosed that he had witnessed his uncle being shot in the foot.

However, despite there being a multiplicity of factors that increased the risk and propensity of exploitation, exploitation did not appear to be well considered until 2016, when there had been reported missing episodes and **Child R** was found to be in possession of money and designer goods.

Child R was also known to the police, who had intelligence that linked him to County Lines drug supply from the age of 10. However, despite the existence of clear "red flags" of exploitation, no referral to the National Referral Mechanism was made until 2019, when Child R was 14 years old. This is a significant delay in ensuring that his victim status was recognised.

Child R appeared to engage in CAMHs sessions and was candid about how he was feeling and what he was experiencing, talking openly about his problems with "*anger and my head*". He talked openly about hearing voices, predominantly a voice belonging to a *"teenage male who tells me to do things and calls [me] negative things."* However, there is little evidence of practitioners exploring this beyond the context of mental health and considering the likelihood that the voice that **Child R** professes to hear, is his attempt to disclose his lived experience of being criminally exploited by older peers.

Despite **Child R** saying openly that his mental health was *"getting worse",* he was not seen again by CAMHs until 2018, where he was described by his therapist as a *'cold and worrying boy who has been associating with gangs since the age of 10'*, and a *"future psychopath".*

5. Victim/Offender overlap

The language used to describe **Child R** is stigmatising, and positions **Child R** as a dangerous offender as opposed to more accurately a child in need of help and protection who has been neglected and harmed since birth and now a victim of extra-familial abuse and harm.

As explored in **Phase 1** of this review, the way that children are positioned and defined, often has a direct impact on the level and timeliness of help and protection afforded to them.

Phase 2 - Child J

1. Early Childhood Contexts

Child J is from a large family and is one of seven children. There appears from the records reviewed to be no significant history of any intra-familial concerns and parents were clearly supportive of **Child J**, consenting and engaging to all professional involvement and assessment.

Child J was 17 when he first came to the attention of Wolverhampton's Children's services due to his arrest for possession of a bladed article (knife). His arrest cumulated in him receiving a 4-month referral order[34] that was overseen by the local Youth Justice Team (YOT).

There is clear evidence of **Child J's** weapon carrying being understood in context and identified that weapon carrying was a consequence of his exploitation and grooming into criminal activity.

The arrest of **Child J** also resulted in a prompt referral to the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, who swiftly undertook an assessment with parental consent, which concluded that a Child in Need plan was appropriate to respond to the concerns and level of risk identified.[35]

2. Mental Health Support and Intervention

Through collaborative multi-agency working, it was identified that **Child J** was experiencing low mood, despite being prescribed antidepressants and was also simultaneously self-medicating with cannabis. It is evident from records reviewed that **Child J's** identified needs were swiftly responded to and addressed by his Child in Need Plan. He was supported by the YOT nurse to understand and explore his cannabis use, whilst also being supported to access CAMHs where he was supported by a specialist forensic psychologist.

3. Victim/Offender Overlap

Despite intelligence linking **Child J** to weapon carrying (including possession of a firearm) and drug distribution, there was clear unanimous recognition that **Child J** was a victim of exploitation, evidenced by the prompt referral to the National Referral Mechanism which concluded in a Reasonable Grounds Decision being granted just one month after his arrest.

The wrap-around support included psychoeducation and interventions to address and explore weapon carrying, as well as support for anger management and mentoring from a key worker from St Giles with lived experience to explore the risks associated with co-offending peer groups.

It would appear that the holistic, co-ordinated, victim focused approach put in place, also enabled **Child J** to build trusting relationships with the professionals that were supporting

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[34] A referral order may be imposed where a child has pleaded guilty to at least one of the offences before the court for sentence, regardless of previous convictions. The length of the order must be for a minimum of three months and a maximum of 12 months.

[35] A Child in Need (CiN) Plan is put in place following a single assessment which identifies the child as having complex needs and where a coordinated response is needed in order that the child's needs can be met.

him. Perhaps the biggest indicator of this, was that the source of the majority of the intelligence and professional information gathered was **Child J** himself.

4. Outcomes

There were positive outcomes for **Child J**. He was supported to engage with CAMHs until his 18th birthday, successfully reduced his cannabis use, and was supported to safely cease his association with negative peer networks.

It is also recognised that the support afforded to not only **Child J**, but his wider family network, played an important role in preventing an escalation of tensions between **Child J** and his parents. The system recognised how parents, carers and siblings of exploited children are also adversely impacted by exploitation, and can feel compromised by supporting their exploited child, whilst also ensuring the safety of other children in the family home. The statutory response was therefore not only sighted on the risks posed to **Child J**, but the risks and needs of the wider family network. This "think family" approach clearly played a role in circumventing the need for **Child J** to be accommodated away from the family home.

5. Case Comparison and conclusions

Whilst the circumstances of the cases reviewed differed; for example, **Child J** clearly had the unwavering support of his family, unlike **Child R** who had been adversely impacted by family dysfunction from birth, there were some cross-cutting themes found to exist between them.

Both children had been victims of criminal exploitation and had been groomed and exploited in similar ways. As such, it is likely they faced similar challenges.

And yet, it can be concluded that the response to these children differed significantly. Perhaps the biggest disparity between the cases is the swiftness in which the red flags of child criminal exploitation was recognised and responded to.

The review concludes that the timeliness of the response to **Child J**, can be attributed to the increased focus and awareness of the Child Criminal Exploitation and the system's ability to screen and respond to exploitation in all its forms. The robust support and intervention afforded to **Child J's** wider family network, is also indicative of the embedded contextual safeguarding response to exploitation, that understands the need to work in close collaboration with parents and care givers.

It is of course impossible and inappropriate to make predictions about how the response to **Child R** may have differed if all of the systems and processes put in place since 2021, were in situ at the time when concerns regarding his exploitation were initially flagged. Particularly due to the fact that despite the similarities identified with **Child J**, there are additional layers of complexity present due to the intersect between inter and extra-familial risk factors.

However, an extensive review of **Child R's** records demonstrates that records post 2021 have a clear recognition and focus on the risks associated with criminal exploitation and seek to facilitate a clear contextual understanding of the child, enabling a more robust, co-ordinated response to identified risk and vulnerability.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions:

It is not the aim, intention or purpose of this review process to look for or apportion blame for failings or missed opportunities. In fact, this review has been carried out in such a way to take a systemic view of exploitation. That said, a fundamental part of any review process is to ensure that each organisation responsible for safeguarding and protecting children consider if the review raises the possibility that there were instances when opportunities were missed, and practice could be improved.

One conclusion and area of optimism highlighted during the review process is that there is a positive learning culture in Wolverhampton. Professionals that formed part of this review process had all clearly been deeply impacted by their work to safeguard and protect exploited children. They showed a commitment and a real desire to learn lessons, and approached the review with candour, openness, and honesty. The willingness to continually evolve and improve the lives and outcomes of children should be applauded.

There is clear evidence that learning and systemic improvements are already well underway, and so it should be concluded that the recommendations made in this review will be considered and steps taken to further aid and strengthen practice.

Recommendations

1. Intelligence and Information Sharing

Recommendation 1.1 – WST and Local Authority Public Health partners should ensure that the pertinent and useful information contained within the problem profile has successfully provided valuable insights into the scale and scope of Child Exploitation locally, informs the local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. This is to further raise the profile and strengthen the systemic focus on Child Exploitation and to support future service design.

Recommendation 1.2 – WST, SWP and WMP should seek opportunities for further collaborative working with the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership, The West Midlands Combined Authority and The Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, to identify ways to increase the fluidity of information sharing and intelligence regionally. This is to enable the more effective safeguarding of transient children with known or suspected exploitation risks.

Recommendation 1.3 – WMP should further consider and address the impact that current internal departmental structures have on preventing the identification and response to cases where there is an intersect of exploitation typologies. WMP should work collaboratively with the West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership and strategic partners to identify an interim solution to address the challenges posed by current police structures.

2. Screening Tool

Recommendation 2.1 – WST should consider the revision of the current iteration of the screening tool ensure it is revised in line with the findings of this review. The review of the screening tool should also encompass a review of timelines currently in place that prompt a review of risk. Changes and revisions to existing screening tools and assessment processes used with exploited children and young people should only be made in co-production with them. This to ensure that tools and assessment processes meet their needs and have relevance to their lived experience.

Recommendation 2.2 – WST should work with police, health and third sector partners to better understand the barriers that are resulting in low levels of screening tools being completed and work with them to address barriers and challenges identified.

Recommendation 2.3 - West Midlands Police should consider working in collaboration with third sector partners to develop a pathway which sees the completion of a child exploitation screening tool every time a child presents in police custody, which may be indicative of changes in risk and vulnerability.

3.Training and professional development

Recommendation 3.1 – WST should ensure the development of a suite of resources which raise awareness of the increasing use of digital platforms to facilitate the exploitation of children, in response to the local problem profile which identified the exploitation of younger children over digital platforms. Plans should be in place to ensure that this training offer is available and accessible to practitioners working with, and parents and carers of, children of a younger age range to support a proactive and preventative response.

Recommendation 3.2 – WST should consider the implementation of an additional strategic priority which encompasses the strengthening of the current partnership training offer to equip practitioners from all sectors with knowledge and skills need to recognise, assess, and respond to cumulative harm and trauma. When considering the strengthening of the strategic response to cumulative harm and trauma, adaptions of local strategies and policies should be underpinned by *Working definition of trauma informed practice* which sets out the key principles of trauma informed care. (The Office for Health Improvements and Disparities. Nov 2022)

4.Risk Assessment and Response

Recommendation 4.1 – WST and Children's Social Care should consider the development of MACE paperwork to support the equitable and consistent application of "*context weighting*" to ensure that all contexts are considered as part of risk assessment. Interventions and risk response should in line with the weight those identified contexts have in relation to the child's lived experience.

Recommendation 4.2 – WST and key strategic partners should work in effective collaboration to ensure that the exploitation and SEND agendas are aligned, and that

practitioners working with children with SEND are aware of the increased exploitation risks in this cohort of children.

Recommendation 4.3 – WST should consider revising the current categorisations of Child Exploitation to ensure that exploited children are consistently viewed as victims of Modern Slavery and that NRM referrals are consistently made in accordance with the NRM statutory guidance.

Recommendation 4.4- WST and strategic partners should hold a strategic conversation to determine what action is required to ensure that practitioners are consistently aware of the re intersect between victimisation and offending, and are knowledgeable and skilled to work with young people who are both victims and perpetrators of interpersonal violence.

Recommendation 4.5 – WST and Children's Social Care should continually use their quality assurance frameworks to seek additional assurances that Child Protection arrangements are sufficiently being used to responding to cases of exploitation where there is significant risk of harm. Assurances should also be sought to ensure that MACE is accurately quantifying and responding to levels of identified risk.

Social care to review 4.5

Recommendation 4.6 – WST should consider the development of a Transition from Child to Adult Services Pathway to ensure that practitioners are aware of their role in supporting and planning for effective transition, and that the future commissioning of services support effective transition and the continual safeguarding of those with enduring exploitation risks.

Recommendation 4.7 – WST should utilise local intelligence and profiling to provide further insights into the role of females in co-offending peer groups and in the perpetration of exploitation and exploitation - related harms.

Recommendation 4.8 – WST should seek assurance that commissioning partners understand the need to ensure that parents and carers of children who are at risk of exploitation are able to access specialist support, help and advice from relevant professionals. The use of lived experience and the third sector should be central to the development of this area of work.

Annex A:

List of contributors

Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together

Wolverhampton Children's Services

Black Country Integrated Care Board (ICB)

Power2

NHS Royal Wolverhampton Trust

West Midlands Police

Khalsa Academy

Annex B

Terms of Reference (ToRs)

Thematic Review to Understand the Impact of the Local System to Respond to Exploitation

The aims and intention of this review is to understand the impact of the whole system approach to preventing and identifying exploitation which was introduced in stages during 2021/22.

The Thematic Review will provide assurance that the recommendations from the previous whole system review have been effectively implemented and are making an impact.

The review also aims to detail and describe how the local approach to exploitation continues to develop and evolve.

This review also has scope to inform regional learning across the West Midlands footprint.

In order to achieve the aims and intentions of the review, the following activity will be undertaken:

- **Completion of a report setting out what changes were implemented following the initial recommendations from the review conducted and implemented in 2020/21 and current development work which is taking place to continue to improve local responses.**
  - Meeting with Exploitation Hub Manager
  - Meeting with Strategic Partnership Lead for Exploitation
  - Meeting with MASH Lead for Exploitation
  - Meeting with Early Help Lead for Exploitation
  - Meeting with local Police Lead for Exploitation
  - Meeting with local CCG Lead for Exploitation
  - Meeting with local Education Lead for Exploitation

- **Review of two case studies – before and after the changes were introduced, identify different approaches and how the revised system has made a difference and provided opportunities to safeguard more effectively.**
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  - CWC to provide two detailed case studies – one before the new system was introduced and one following the introduction of the new system
  - Review of both case studies
  - Meeting with relevant individuals involved in both cases
  - Report summarising findings from the above, describing the potential difference the new system would have on the earlier case study

- **Meetings with key professionals who work within the safeguarding system to prevent and reduce exploitation and to gather information and intelligence on the impact of the changes**

  - Gather information and intelligence through meetings with key professionals

- o Understand what has actually changed in practice and where there are gaps/good practice/opportunities to improve
- o Produce a report summarising outcomes from the above with recommendations for further strengthening practices and processes