



CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE & EDUCATION COMMITTEE

Thursday, 10 March 2022

REPORT TITLE:	WIRRAL CHILD EXPLOITATION AND MISSING OVERVIEW
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee with an overview of the response to Child Exploitation and Missing Children in Wirral.

The report sets out the working arrangements across partners, in Wirral and regionally; and includes a brief overview of themes, trends and impact. The working arrangements and governance are described with the intention of reassuring members that exploitation and missing remain priorities for the directorate and partners, with resources and time directed to identifying and managing the risk of harm.

Tackling Child Exploitation links to the Wirral 2021-2026 Plan against delivery of the following:

- Brighter futures for all regardless of their background.
- Safe and pleasant communities that our residents are proud of.

This matter affects residents across the borough.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to Note the approach and ongoing work relating to child exploitation and missing children.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 Wirral Council and partners have a statutory duty under section 10 of The Children Act 2004 to safeguard and improve the well-being of children in the Borough so far as relating to:
- (a) physical and mental health and emotional well-being.
 - (b) protection from harm and neglect.
 - (c) education, training, and recreation.
 - (d) the contribution made by them to society.
 - (e) social and economic well-being.
- 1.2 Section 11 of the 2004 Act states that partners must make arrangements for ensuring that:
- a) their functions are discharged having regard to the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children; and
 - (b) any services provided by another person pursuant to arrangements made by the person or body in the discharge of their functions are provided having regard to that need.
- 1.3 The Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2021, to be enacted in 2022, places 'responsible authorities' under a 'serious violence duty'. Such authorities are defined by the act as Police, Justice (including Youth Justice), Fire and Rescue, Health and Local Authorities. The duty requires authorities to work together to reduce and prevent serious violence. This includes *areas of criminality where serious violence or its threat is inherent, such as in county lines drug dealing*. The definition of serious violence in this context can be informed by local partnerships. As such sexual exploitation and abuse may feature within our local strategic needs assessment.
- 1.4 In view of the statutory responsibilities and duties set out in the Children Act 2004 and the forthcoming Police Crime Sentencing and Courts Act 2021, the Local Authority has a key role to play in tackling Child Exploitation and supporting young people who may go missing.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Other options would be not to report to committee, however it was felt that keeping the committee appraised was beneficial in view of the points referenced in Section 1, above.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 Tackling Child Exploitation is a complex and ever evolving area of safeguarding. The National Crime Agency (NCA) Strategic Assessment of Serious Organised Crime 2021 highlight 'Exploitation of the Vulnerable' as a risk area for the UK – citing Sexual Abuse/Exploitation, Modern Slavery and Trafficking as areas of concern.
- 3.2 There are several national organisations that provide guidance and resources to help inform exploitation strategy, policy, and practice. These include; Barnardo's, The Children's Society, The National Working Group for Child Exploitation (NWG),

National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) St Giles' Trust and Catch 22.

- 3.3 There are numerous sources of material relevant to this topic, some produced by those organisations listed in 3.2, above. The Local Government Association (LGA): Tackling Child Exploitation Resources Pack (Aug 2021) provides links to further reading, highlighting key national reports and guidance relevant to Child Exploitation.
- 3.4 Working Together to Safeguard Children (DfE, 2018) is the primary guide for inter-agency safeguarding work. Exploitation as a specific harm theme has featured within several versions of this document in recent years. Of note, however, is the broadening concept of 'risk outside the home' or 'extra familial harm'. This may also be referred to as 'Contextual' safeguarding. Working Together 2018 (Page 25, Section 40) recognises that children can be vulnerable to multiple threats, in several different contexts.

As well as threats to the welfare of children from within their families, children may be vulnerable to abuse or exploitation from outside their families. These extra-familial threats might arise at school and other educational establishments, from within peer groups, or more widely from within the wider community and/or online. These threats can take a variety of different forms and children can be vulnerable to multiple threats, including: exploitation by criminal gangs and organised crime groups such as county lines; trafficking; online abuse; teenage relationship abuse; sexual exploitation and the influences of extremism leading to radicalisation.

- 3.5 The Universities of Bedfordshire and Durham are supporting several local authorities in developing wider contextual safeguarding practice. In view of the above, future inspectorate activity in this area may move away from specific harm themes; and consider partnership approaches to tackling wider risk outside the home. Wirral's Safer Adolescent Strategy 2021-23 has been developed with this in mind.
- 3.6 Across Merseyside, the predominant visible model of child exploitation is criminal. This is often linked to county lines trafficking in support of serious organised crime drug dealing activity. The role of females in county lines is not fully understood. What is clear is that organised crime and those that abuse children adapt to safeguarding, disruption and law enforcement tactics.
- 3.7 Safeguarding partners remain vigilant to Child Sexual Exploitation, this remains a clear priority for us in Wirral. Whilst the significant work to tackle CSE undertaken across partners over the last ten years has no doubt had impact, the partnership is not complacent in focusing only on criminal exploitation. The WSCP and Merseyside Police violence against women and girls (VAWG) agenda assists in retaining focus on sexual harm, including within a child exploitation context. The recent publication of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) 'Organised Networks' report February 2022 is a reminder as to why we have developed our local approach in Wirral. The IICSA report and its recommendations will be considered by the Pan Merseyside Governance arrangements (See 3.8, below) and Wirral's safeguarding partners (3.15).
- 3.8 Regional approaches to Child Exploitation and Missing Children have been developed through the Pan Merseyside Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE)

governance. This forum has overseen task and finish work to agree Multi Agency protocols for Exploitation and Missing Children. These protocols have been developed with the support of Catch 22 and The University of Bedfordshire; and are endorsed through local safeguarding partnerships.

- 3.9 Pan Merseyside meetings take place quarterly to review performance, delivery, and development activity. This forum is chaired by the Police Detective Superintendent lead for Child Exploitation.
- 3.10 Wirral, in partnership with the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner and other Merseyside authorities, commission Catch 22. Catch 22 are a national social business providing services across several sectors and safeguarding themes. In the context of Merseyside, Catch 22 undertake direct work with young people who may be at risk of being, or have been, exploited. They also undertaken independent return home interviews with young people who have been missing from home or care.
- 3.11 Merseyside also benefits from the support of Barnardo's Independent Child Trafficking Guardian (ICTG) service, commissioned by the Home Office to offer support to several areas in England and Wales. Barnardo's ICTGs can provide direct support to victims of Modern Slavery; and offer practice advice to professionals and local partnerships.
- 3.12 In 2020, the Home Office commissioned St Giles Trust to work with victims of county lines in Merseyside. St Giles Trust have recently added a 'Rescue and Response' service aimed at building relationships with young people when returning them from missing episodes or custody outside of Merseyside.
- 3.13 As Merseyside is second only to London in terms of the number of 'lines' running out of the region, Merseyside Police have received additional funding to tackle county lines as a specific threat. Project Medusa has been set up as a result. This operation has several arms – Investigation, Disruption and Prevention. Colleagues from Project Medusa link to the Pan Merseyside MACE governance.
- 3.14 The Wirral partnership response to exploitation and missing is set out in the Wirral Safeguarding Children Partnership's (WSCP) Safer Adolescence Strategy 2021-23. Exploitation and serious violence are also priorities within the Wirral Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2021-22, whilst the Wirral Community Safety Strategy 2021-26 highlights serious violence and modern slavery as areas of focus. Tackling drugs and the impact this has on county lines is also referenced.
- 3.15 The WSCP Contextual Safeguarding Committee has oversight of the response to exploitation and missing. This forum meets quarterly and whilst the remit is broader contextual safeguarding, exploitation and missing remain priority themes for the group.
- 3.16 WSCP undertook a Child Exploitation Audit in December 2020. This was done using the Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI) methodology, to replicate a multi-agency inspection. This audit highlighted areas of good practice and some recommendations for further improvement. The findings from this audit were fed back to partners and

formed the basis of an action plan, whilst this action plan has been completed, the JTAI is to be revisited in 2022 to support continuous improvement.

- 3.17 Operationally, Compass is Wirral's multi-agency response to exploitation and missing. Catch 22, Police Missing Person Coordinators (MPCs), Police CE Investigations and the Police CE coordinator are co-located at Solar Campus in Wallasey. Whilst Covid has resulted in this moving to a hybrid working approach, the team retain daily coordination through a daily morning meeting.
- 3.18 The daily morning meeting (DMM) is attended by police, probation, youth work, youth justice, health, Catch 22 and Compass Child Exploitation (CE) workers. The agenda reviews all youth related intelligence, stop checks, arrests, missing young people (including those returned) and coordinates key activity for the day. This may, for example, be attendance at CE linked strategy meetings, reviews for missing young people or care planning where exploitation or missing are factors. The Integrated Front Door (IFD) will attend Compass daily meetings where the threshold is not clear and specialist advice is required. In addition to the morning meeting, Compass staff review all CE events daily.
- 3.19 The above governance processes ensure the Compass team have oversight on key events and information where exploitation or missing may be a concern or relevant.
- 3.20 The Ofsted inspection of June 2019 acknowledged this as effective practice, commenting on a strong multi-agency approach which was making a positive difference for children.
- 3.21 The Wirral MACE Panel meets every two weeks, operating under the Pan Mersey CE Protocol. The panel is made up of representatives across statutory partners; and Catch 22. The panel reviews social work led Child Exploitation Assessments to determine if the threshold for a MACE plan is met. Should a child or young person be presented with 'signs or evidence' of exploitation the threshold is met, and the panel retains that young person for further oversight and review. Additional actions may be generated across the Four Ps (Prepare, Prevent, Protect, Pursue). The aim is to reduce the risk from exploitation. Young people may be reviewed between one month and three months depending on the level of risk. Those not meeting threshold have the benefit of MACE panel case discussion and preventative activity is identified wherever possible. Exit strategies will be considered for those young people turning 18 or those being removed from MACE due to reduced risk.
- 3.22 In the calendar year 2021, Wirral MACE identified 88 children and young people with signs or evidence of CE. 25% of these related to sexual exploitation. This appears in line with other LA areas across Merseyside.
- 3.23 Within this period, 77 young people were removed from MACE due to a reduction in risk. 5 were subsequently referred back in. Information presented at the last WSCP Committee reviewed 6 months of MACE data, this showed that 38% of the young people on MACE plans were female and 39% were children looked after.
- 3.24 In terms of contacts into Children's Services, Police and Secondary Schools remain the highest referrers. Prominent wards for CE contacts are Birkenhead and Tranmere, Bidston St James, Seacombe and Rock Ferry.

- 3.25 19 young people were referred to the National Referral Mechanism in 2021. The NRM is the process by which a young person may be identified as a victim of Modern Slavery. This is generally trafficking (county Lines) or forced criminality. The NRM has two stages, Reasonable Grounds or Conclusive Grounds. Conclusive grounds can take some time to be determined due to the volume of referrals into the NRM system. The NRM is important for those young people who may have been arrested in relation to drug supply, being recognised as a victim of modern slavery through the NRM process prevents young people being 'exploited and criminalised', a term recently coined by Barnardo's in their 2021 County Lines report.
- 3.26 The Compass team, Wirral Youth Justice, Police and Barnardo's work closely to track NRMs and prioritise escalation and challenge where a young person is subject to a criminal justice process and has an NRM. There are several examples of successful support to prevent the criminalisation of Wirral young people in other parts of the UK. Wirral is leading on work through the Pan Merseyside MACE to develop guidance for multi-agency working linked to the NRM.
- 3.27 Through arrests and missing episodes in 2021, Wirral young people have been linked to suspected county lines in Scotland, North Wales, Cumbria, Cheshire, and Lancashire. Compass and MACE partners establish links in these areas to develop joined up safeguarding responses. This includes providing leadership, coordination and where necessary, challenge for those vulnerable young children placed in Wirral from other areas.
- 3.28 The Wirral MACE Panel is well established and has continued to develop. The Pan Merseyside MACE protocol was reviewed and updated in January 2021, including revised exploitation assessments developed in partnership with the University of Bedfordshire. 2020 and 2021 have seen the MACE Panel undertake development sessions, sharing new reports and resources; and drawing on external speakers from Barnardo's and Catch 22.
- 3.29 The Multi Agency Risk Threat and Harm (MARTHUR) is the local partnership disruption meeting, supporting Wirral's MACE. Individuals, locations, and premises associated with exploitation risk will be highlighted for partnership disruption activity. An example might be the use of Detached Youth Workers in identified parks and Community Safety patrols around bus stations. Disruption can also be through police enforcement, licensing, or probation amongst others. The MARTHUR reviews activity monthly and flags individuals who may present as a risk, to ensure information intelligence is captured and reviewed in support of disruption and prevention activity. The terms of reference for MARTHUR are set out in Wirral's version of the Pan Merseyside CE Protocol.
- 3.30 Work is currently being undertaken Pan Merseyside to review the MARTHUR terms of reference and broaden local MARTHUR memberships to coordinate more closely with central policing resources.
- 3.31 Investigation and disruption activity, working alongside safeguarding partners and other police forces, has seen Wirral CE police lead the way in securing charges and civil orders for modern slavery offences. This has disrupted and supported the closure of county lines in South-West England, Cumbria, and Scotland.

- 3.32 Missing events are reviewed daily through the Compass meeting. The partnership working arrangements are set out in the Pan Merseyside Missing Children Protocol (2021). This is a newly updated protocol, however, builds on practice to locate and recover missing children; and review those who have been missing frequently.
- 3.33 A Pan Merseyside Missing meeting takes place quarterly to review themes and trends, identifying frequent locations and good practice. A review of Police missing data for Wirral shows a 23% decrease in missing episodes for the calendar year 2021, compared to 2018.
- 3.34 Wirral's Compass team also hold a monthly Missing Operational Meeting, attended by Police and Catch 22. This provides performance management for Return Home Interviews, identifies frequent missing young people, reviews episodes for youngest missing children and keeps track of those placed at distance who may have been missing.
- 3.35 Comparison of missing data pre covid (Jan-March 2020) with post lockdown performance (Oct – Dec 2021) shows:
- 14% reduction in missing episodes.
 - 12% reduction in young people with a missing episode.
 - Increased % of Return Home Interviews offered (Approx. 95% Oct-Dec 2021).
 - Young people are missing for less time.
 - The % of episodes relating to Wirral children placed out of borough reduced from 17% to 14% of overall episodes.
- 3.36 Children looked after account for around 60% of the missing episodes for Wirral children, however Children Looked After account for around 40% of the missing cohort. This means our children looked after have more episodes of missing than those not looked after. This is a theme nationally and the % of children looked after with a missing episode is in line with Statistical Neighbours and England.
- 3.37 Compass, Youth Justice, Local Policing and Community Safety have developed projects such as 'Pathfinders', Mini Pathfinders' and 'In the Zone' to deliver prevention sessions in local primary and secondary schools across Wirral. WSCP and The Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership have also developed resources and media campaigns to increase awareness and understanding of exploitation and linked vulnerability. The work undertaken around Child Exploitation Awareness Day in March each year is an example.
- 3.38 Catch 22 and The University of Bedfordshire have delivered contextual safeguarding training and continue to undertake CE training bi-monthly for safeguarding partners.
- 3.39 In the WSCP JTAI Audit December 2020, 100% of agencies said their workforce were suitably trained to combat exploitation. This was an increase of 30% compared to the previous audit (2019).
- 3.40 In terms of Covid 19 impact. The prevalence of incidents of young people missing from home or care reduced by 27% in the period April to September 2020 compared to the same period the previous year. There was also a 38% reduction in the number of individual children having a missing episode. Contacts to the Integrated Front

Door linked to CE reduced by around 19%. The cohort managed through the MACE process remained steady in this period. Compass and multi-agency partners maintained services to children and young people, operating within the Red Amber Green (RAG) rating system and Covid 19 Risk Assessments.

- 3.41 The use of RAG ratings within Children's Services for vulnerable children, the creation of a vulnerable children's panel and close monitoring of those vulnerable children attending school or on a reduced timetable mitigated the risks during lockdown. Information provided to the Home Office, Department for Education and Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government in March 2021 showed that overall attendance and attendance for our vulnerable cohorts was higher than the North-West and Nationally for the Covid 19 lockdown period.

4.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 This report and the recommendation for members to note the council and partnership approach in this area has no financial implication beyond sustaining the existing committed resources.

5.0 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The legal framework underpinning the council and partnership approach to these issues is set out in Section 1.

6.0 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS

- 6.1 This report and the associated recommendation is not seeking the commitment of additional resources, equipment, or assets.

7.0 RELEVANT RISKS

- 7.1 Internally, the Compass Team and wider Contextual Safeguarding service area have a completed Risk Register in line with council practice.
- 7.2 In a partnership context, a register of risk is a standing agenda item within the Wirral Safeguarding Children Partnership governance arrangements.

8.0 ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The response to Exploitation and Missing sits within the Safer Adolescence Strategy 2021-23 and supports the wider Wirral Plan as per the report summary. Supporting young people who may be vulnerable to exploitation is also referenced with the Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2021-22. The strategies have been supported with engagement and consultation across young people and stakeholders; and have benefited from prior presentation and support of members through the committee.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact

Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision, or activity.

- 9.2 The Safer Adolescence Strategy 2021-23 as referenced in paragraphs 8.1 above, was endorsed by members in March 2021, supported by an Equality Impact Assessment. This EIA (below) has been reviewed in the context of this report and remains valid.

<https://www.wirral.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/equality-impact-assessments>

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 In the context of this report, the recommendation for members to note the approach to exploitation and missing in Wirral does not impact on the environment or climate.

11.0 COMMUNITY WEALTH IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 The work being done to tackle perpetrators and reduce vulnerability to exploitation supports the development of resilient local communities. Our support for vulnerable children helps them reach their potential, enabling them to thrive within our local economy and wider society

REPORT AUTHOR: Anthony Kirk
email: anthonykirk1@wirral.gov.uk
Tel:

APPENDICES

None

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The National Crime Agency: National Strategic Assessment of Serious Organised Crime 2021

The Local Government Association: Tackling Child Exploitation Resources Pack 2021

The Department for Education: Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018

The recent publication of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA)

'Organised Networks' report February 2022

WSCP JTAI CE Deep Dive December 2020

Exploited and Criminalised: Barnardo's 2021

Pan Merseyside Multi Agency Child Exploitation Protocol 2021

Pan Merseyside Missing from Home or Care Protocol (Revised) 2021

WSCP Safer Adolescence Strategy 2021-23

Wirral Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2021-22

SUBJECT HISTORY (last 3 years)

Council Meeting	Date

