

Overview and Scrutiny Panel Report

REVIEW TITLE	O&S PANEL	DATE
Child Criminal Exploitation	Education, Skills and Growth	March 2023



“The review was originally in our forward plan to investigate how County Lines operate within Bracknell Forest and consider how a range of partners work together to reduce opportunities for exploitation. However, the Covid Pandemic had a huge impact on how these operate. Therefore, the review was broadened to look at Child Criminal Exploitation and looked at any changes to CCE activity because of the pandemic. National evidence pointed to an increase in localised CCE activity. Safeguarding of our young people is incredibly important in this age of fast communication and social media pressures that can make them far more vulnerable to exploitation. How our council and community work in partnership is key to protecting them.”

Councillor Gill Birch, Chair: Education, Skills and Growth Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Recommendations



1. Collaborate with Thames Valley Police and other relevant partners to develop and implement regular Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) awareness campaigns within schools, targeting both children and parents. **12 months.**
2. Engage with local businesses and community organisations to develop strategies designed to both raise awareness of CCE and promote the creation of safer places for children and young people. **12 months.**
3. Conduct a comprehensive review of the website to enhance its usability and accessibility in relation to child exploitation. Ensure the information on the relevant web pages is clear and concise, and that there are links to relevant external resources. Engage with children and young people during the process and consider ‘Good Practice’ from other Local Authorities identified by the Education, Skills, Growth O&S Panel. **6 months.**
4. Develop and implement a survey focused on CCE for safeguarding leads from schools in the borough. Use the findings to identify gaps and areas for improvement in existing policies and practices relating to CCE. Consider working with the Education, Skills, Growth O&S Panel on this. **6 months.**
5. Conduct regular awareness campaigns on the use of cannabis and its impact on vulnerable children and young people. Use a variety of communication channels such as social media, print materials and public events to reach a wider audience. **6 months.**
6. Work with partners to develop and maintain a map or database of vulnerable areas and hot spots related to CCE. **12 months.**

Key findings

The Panel found that:

- Councils have a key role in identifying support as early as possible to help children and young people escape and recover from the exploitation that they have suffered.
- Raising awareness of child exploitation has the potential to disrupt or prevent exploitation. There are a number of ways awareness can be raised, from communication campaigns to drama productions, social media and word of mouth.
- Exploitation around drugs has become more localized and grooming is increasingly happening online.
- Child Criminal Exploitation hotspots do change, partly due to multi-agency work but also as groups and children move on.
- The multi-agency group is getting stronger in sharing intelligence and educating children about technology use.
- There's a screening tool in place that is suitable for all exploitation and referrals are encouraged from anybody that's worried that a child might be exploited. When a referral is received it goes to a triage meeting where there are a number of agencies involved including Makesafe, Youth Justice, Youth Services and the permanency team within children's Social Care.
- Where the victim, the perpetrator, and the location are known, then there is a strategy in place to disrupt one of these three things in an attempt to prevent harm or a crime. An increasing challenge associated with this approach is that while locations used to be predominantly physical locations, they are now often online which makes it harder to detect the perpetrator, and therefore makes it harder to disrupt.
- Every two weeks, internal departments within Thames Valley Police meet and review all the intelligence around county drugs lines that are currently operating in the area. That meeting is broken down into vulnerable persons and locations.
- Nationally, there isn't a strong data set around the crossover between CCE and Children Looked After (CLA). However, children who come into care (particularly later on in their lives) are more likely to go missing. In this context, a young person under the age of 18 years is to be considered "missing" if they are absent from their place of residence without authority, or in circumstances where the absence causes concern for safety of the child. Research shows there is a strong correlation between children who are missing and CCE. There is also a strong correlation between children excluded from school and CCE.
- Community prevention and contextual safeguarding are developing aspects of CCE prevention at the Council. More work is needed to make sure that our communities are vigilant and supportive.
- One important aspect of responding to exploitation is the more holistic the service's responses to young people are, the better trajectories are for children and young people.

Good practice:

- There has been much multi-agency work undertaken in Bracknell Forest to tackle County Lines. Additionally, a lot of prevention work relating to CCE is done within the partnership with the Thames Valley Police, Missing And Child Exploitation (MACE), and Makesafe. This has led to a yearly decrease in number of children who are reported as missing.
- The Council has undertaken considerable work on developing and embedding a language that is considerate and careful and does not include victim-blaming vocabulary towards children who are being exploited.
- In the financial year of 2018/19 greater resources were put into the missing and exploitation team by the Council, which led to the creation of the exploitation prevention manager post. As this has continued to develop a strong emphasis on seeing young people face to face was introduced, particularly for return conversations, and this has played part in the decrease of the number of missing children in recent years. This new approach facilitates a conversation in a much more informal way. As a result, the quality of the information from return home conversations has become much better and much more effective in helping identify sources of harm. Now, these conversations are one of the most important sources of information.

- It was recognised by officers at all levels that the staff support offer for officers in Children Services is strong. The work within social care (including work around CCE) can be emotionally demanding and so it is important that officers feel supported. Some of this work includes a monthly supervision meeting where a well-being score takes place.

Background

Child exploitation is a serious and growing crime. It is complex and continually changing. In general, child exploitation occurs when an individual or group takes advantage of a power imbalance to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into criminal or sexual activity or modern slavery. The effects of child exploitation can be devastating and have a profound impact on children for the rest of their lives.

Child criminal exploitation (CCE) activity can include children 'being forced to work in cannabis factories, being coerced into moving drugs or money across the country, being forced to shoplift or pickpocket, or threatening other young people. One of the most common types of CCE activity is County Lines. This involves 'organised drug dealing networks that exploit children and vulnerable adults to move, hold and sell drugs across the UK using dedicated phone lines to take orders'. Exploitation is a key component of the business model and gangs use children because they are 'cheaper, more easily controlled and less likely to get picked up by the police.' More local carrying of drugs, across the same borough or district, is also increasingly seen by councils and partners.

The Bracknell Exploitation Annual Report 2021/22 noted significant multi-agency work in Bracknell Forest to tackle County Lines drug dealing. In this period, there was one county drugs line active in Bracknell that was known to have exploited children to move drugs and there were no known missing children linked to CCE. These reductions suggest the problem profile is now largely confined to the town itself.

Councils have a key role to play in tackling child exploitation, from awareness-raising and staff training to prevention and support for children who have been victims. Councils cannot do this alone and so close working with partners including the police, NHS and schools is vital if areas are to have the right systems in place to prevent and disrupt criminal activity putting children and young people at risk.

Review findings

Makesafe

The Bracknell Forest Makesafe is a small team comprising a manager, a specialist social worker and a specialist family worker. The team undertakes direct work with children at risk of exploitation. In 2021/22 the Council's Makesafe team reported that the number of vulnerable children assessed as Level 3 (evidence of active exploitation) had halved from the previous year.

	2020/21	2021/22
Assessed as Level 1 (Vulnerabilities to exploitation but no indications child is being groomed)	51%	67%
Assessed as Level 2 (Indicators that the child is being groomed for the purposes of exploitation)	24.5%	22%
Assessed as Level 3 (Evidence of active exploitation.)	24.5%	11%

The reduction in level 3 cases creates a shift towards more awareness raising and preventative support for young people.

The Makesafe team noted that “nothing has been usual for children since the pandemic began”. The goal is to move forward collaboratively to make Bracknell Forest as safe as it can be for children as they regain some of the opportunities lost in covid. This review aimed to support that goal by considering key aspects of safeguarding and scrutinising how effective they are.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

The MASH is the ‘integrated front door’ for all new safeguarding concerns about children consisting of staff from Social Care, Early Help, Youth Justice, Police, Education, Health, Housing, and Probation collectively working to triage new reports about children. Reports are received from referral partners all across the Borough – including members of the public, professionals and families of children directly.

The MASH has embedded the use of an integrated CCE screening tool into practice to collate information and screen these worries or indicators – this is either completed by the MASH or the MASH support other agencies who know children best to complete the screening tool to draw out the level of concern/risk and the next steps. MASH staff are trained to use the tools appropriately, as well as how to use professional judgement alongside the tool.

The MASH is the central point for receiving all missing children notifications from the Police into Children’s Social Care and plays an integral role in coordinating follow-up activity for each child who is reported missing – including ensuring that Return Home Conversations take place by the relevant agency and practitioner.

Return Home Conversations may take place by the Youth Service, Children’s Social Care fieldwork teams or the Make Safe exploitation team – the MASH role is to ensure that contacts are received, triaged and allocated to the correct follow-up agency with minimal delay and no later than 24 hours.

Missing And Child Exploitation (MACE)

The MACE is concerned with oversight and scrutiny and aims to ensure everything that should be done for that child is being done. The MACE may also look at how partners can work together to neutralize hotspots.

MACE convenes once a month, but many other meetings happen as issues emerge. The agenda is fixed, and a child will stay on it until such a time it is agreed as a collective that the risk is lessened. Once this happens the child will go on to the risk management meeting and agenda. This is a meeting between the police and Makesafe.

This allows the sharing of police intelligence, concerns around CCE and any information that provides partners to maintain a grasp on what’s going on. They work together to prevent and avoid the criminalisation of children.

Youth Justice Team

The Youth Justice Team works with children over the age of ten who are at risk of entering the criminal justice system. Some of these children who come into contact with the service may be demonstrating behaviours that could be indicative of CCE – for example using substances or showing violence and aggression at home toward their parents.

The team use a range of assessment tools (including the screening tool) to help identify children whose behaviour may be caused by CCE and work closely with the exploitation team in these instances. The team works with the police to prevent and avoid criminalisation of children who have offended because they have been exploited by others to do so.

Youth Justice Team is multidisciplinary. There is a health worker social worker speech and language worker, and mental health worker. The ability to respond to all areas of a child’s life where they’re struggling or navigating difficult things culminates in playing a part in tackling CCE.

If there is evidence of a child being exploited there is a National Referral Mechanism (NRM). The referral will be evaluated by the staff at the NRM who will then provide conclusive grounds that the child in question has been exploited. This can be used as evidence in court. It is a useful tool that supports a child through a criminal investigation where they are the victim. If a child ends up in court because of a drug offence etc, and there is evidence of exploitation, Youth Justice will mitigate for them on that basis.

The Youth Justice Team works closely with schools to keep young people in school. There is an education worker in the team who links with the schools and will attend some of the exclusion meetings. The education worker will try to put things in place to make it easier in school for that child and to hopefully prevent exclusion. The team have also done some group work in schools where they have talked about exploitation with a group of boys. This started before the pandemic and is starting to resume again now. Children tend to react positively to the sessions.

The Youth Justice Team and Thames Valley Police recently carried some sessions on knife crime with the children and parents at a local school within the borough.



After learning of recent successes of crime related awareness activities in local schools, the Panel recommends Officers collaborate with Thames Valley Police and other relevant partners to develop and implement regular CCE awareness campaigns within schools, targeting both children and parents.

Community Safety Team

The Community Safety Partnership's (CSP's) three-year plan for 2020-23 contains a priority of reducing and responding to exploitation. The plan is required to be reviewed each year and, in 2021/22, a key focus area of Serious Violence and All-age Exploitation was set. In terms of governance, a strategic Serious Violence and Exploitation Sub-Group has been set up to collectively identify how to prevent and tackle it as well as manage performance and progress and report back to the CSP. The sub-group also oversees two operational groups: one for u18s at risk of exploitation and serious violence and one for adult victims at risk and perpetrators (including those who may present a risk to u18s). The strategic group and both operational groups are all multi-partner groups involving organisations and Council services including Involve, Berkshire Youth, BFC Youth Services, police, school representatives, the Lexicon and The Wayz.

BFC Community Safety co-ordinates bids against the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner's Community Safety Fund which, in 2022/23, has included youth diversionary work in the town centre and a youth project in Crowthorne Parish which involved Parish Council engagement. Both projects are being conducted using community youth organisations.

BFC Community Safety is also currently supporting the NHS to conduct a focus group of professionals across several boroughs to look at the prevention of serious violence and exploitation involving young people up to the age of 25. The project aims include identifying where there are gaps and opportunities in provision to reduce young people's involvement in serious violence.

BFC Community Safety has arranged access to a Serious Violence Dashboard which has been set up by the Thames Valley Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) showing local perpetrators of serious violence and the people (including children and young people) who are at risk from those perpetrators. This data will be used by the two operational groups to manage local offenders and safeguard those at risk from them. A wider programme of work is taking place with the VRU, one strand of which is auditing existing community and voluntary sector provision as well as identify gaps in provision.

BFC Community Safety has a growing network of contacts with the local community through services and organisations including Involve and Parish/Town Councils. For ease, awareness and advice content is mostly shared online or by e-mail as this enables messages to be shared to as wide an audience as possible without incurring costs and requiring large resources - although it is recognised that not everyone regularly uses or has access to the internet. Officers have set up stands and held events in the past but did generally find that engagement was difficult, attendance was sporadic, and reach was limited.

It is acknowledged by officers that CCE awareness does need to be regular and available in different formats. Examples of recent CCE awareness activities include an online modern slavery and exploitation event featuring several different speakers hosted by Involve. Attendance was fair but several resources were produced and shared. Work also took place with Bracknell and Wokingham College's Media Department where films on child exploitation were made and shared publicly.

Contextual Safeguarding

'Working Together to Safeguard Children' and a growing number of other key national publications and research papers provide local authorities and partner agencies with a mandate to address the growing concerns around contextual risks affecting children and young people.

The approach of Contextual Safeguarding was developed by Dr Carlene Firmin and colleagues at the University of Bedfordshire in 2015. It's an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse. Contextual Safeguarding is therefore the intervention into the contexts presenting harm to children- those being peer groups, schools, neighbourhoods and online.

Most of the Council's work with businesses on reducing child exploitation is focused within the town centre, which is the social hub of Bracknell Forest. The Community Safety Partnership has a close working relationship with the Lexicon and the Peel Centre, and this relationship is in place in meetings such as the Partnership Problem-Solving Groups and Town Centre Management meeting. Police, the Council and businesses work together in this way to problem-solve crime and disorder issues. CCTV in the town centre is in place, not only to prevent crime and disorder but also to offer a level of protection to children and young people. Braccan Walk Youth Centre is also a well-placed safe space for children and young people and work is taking place to map what it currently offers as well as what its potential is.

The Bracknell Forest Safeguarding Board is leading on contextual safeguarding within the borough. Identified with the Board's strategic plan is the aim to address contextual safeguarding and the Board aims to achieve this by "promoting a contextual safeguarding approach by partner organisations". Adopting this holistic approach to safeguarding practices encourages earlier identification of any potential harm within the wider environment and promotes collaboration with wider partners to help reduce risk.



As part of the ongoing work to address contextual safeguarding in Bracknell Forest it is recommended officers at the Council engage with local businesses and community organisations to develop strategies designed to both raise awareness of CCE and to promote the creation of safer places for children and young people.

The changing nature of CCE

Officers from the Council highlighted the importance of recognising the changing nature of the issue and how the Council and its partners respond to it, both flexibly and collectively. The impact of the cost-of-living crisis was identified by officers from the Council and its partners as an emerging issue that will have an impact on the ever-evolving nature of child criminal exploitation.

Nationally, recent trends have seen younger children as well as children from more typically middle-class backgrounds being targeted by criminals, with social media increasingly used to lure them in. Snapchat is particularly used by exploiters as the primary function of the popular app is the ability to send impermanent content. In addition, during the Covid lockdowns, there was an increase in the use of children's bank accounts by criminals to store illicit cash. This was also seen across the country.

These changes will require another shift approach, as is often the case with the evolving CCE landscape, for the detection of earlier signs of CCE is becoming harder.



Due to the changing nature of Child Criminal Exploitation and the role education plays in protecting children from exploitation it is recommended officers develop and implement a survey focused on CCE for safeguarding leads from schools in the borough. Use the findings to identify gaps and areas for improvement in existing policies and practices relating to CCE.

As highlighted, exploiters adapt their tactics and techniques. For instance, if there is an increased police presence or more public awareness of exploitation at a particular place then the exploiters will move. This can be challenging to monitor, and the sharing of information is key in ensuring there is a quick response when there is a change of location.

The changing of 'hotspots' is discussed regularly in MACE meetings. Targeting vulnerable locations used by exploiters is part of a wider strategy to prevent or reduce exploitation. Some of these locations may have businesses nearby.



It was recognised by officers there is potential for work to be done with partners to allow for more effective monitoring of hotspots by regularly exchanging relevant information. Therefore, it is recommended the Council work with its partners to develop and maintain a map or database of vulnerable areas and hot spots related to CCE.

It is recognised by officers that cannabis use is a gateway for exploitation in the local area. Moreover, the drug market is changing across the country, and there is a rise in the use of cannabis edibles by children. They are often sold online and are delivered in the post so they are hard to trace as they look like sweets. The consumption of these edibles (as well as cannabis in general) by children and young people is a significant concern. The impact of cannabis on children who are vulnerable (particularly with mental health concerns) can be really dangerous and officers recognise more can be done locally to promote this impact.



It is recommended that the Council conducts regular awareness campaigns on the use of cannabis and its impact on vulnerable children and young people. A variety of communication channels such as social media, print materials and public events should be considered in order to reach a wider audience.

Website feedback

Website Desktop Exercise

The Panel met in person to carry out a review of the Council's website within the context of child exploitation. The Panel concluded:



The information on the '*Report child abuse or concern about a child*' webpage is too long and 'wordy'. The language used is overly technical and is not clear or concise enough.



It is not clear on the webpage who MASH is. It is also unclear what hours the phone line is open.



There are very few links to useful and relevant external resources relating to child exploitation.



The Croydon Council's website was identified as an example of good practice.



Based on their findings during the website review, the Panel recommends officers conduct a comprehensive review of the website to enhance the usability and accessibility in relation to child exploitation. Ensure the information on the relevant webpages is clear and concise, and that there are links to relevant external resources. Engage with children and young people during the process and consider 'Good Practice' from other Local Authorities identified by the Panel during this review.

“It was wonderful to learn how the different partners work together care so much about our young people. The case studies showed how they really make a difference to young people and their compassion and understanding of the problems that our young people face was brilliant.’

This review was fascinating, and all the panel members learnt a great deal about how our Community Partnership and businesses work together. Partnership working has always been a strength of Bracknell Forest Council, but I would like to say thank you to everyone who gave evidence and came to talk to us for their professionalism and dedication in keeping our young people safe. Many thanks to all the officers, police, Community and young people for their input and support.

A special thank you to Joey Gurney and my Vice- Chairman Michael Brossard for all their help and patience.

I commend the recommendations in the report to you all and we will review this in a years' time.”

Councillor Mrs Gill Birch, Chair: Education, Skills and Growth Scrutiny Panel

Review panel

Councillor Mrs Birch (Chair)	Councillor Ms Hayes
Councillor Brossard (Vice Chair)	Councillor Ms Merry
Councillor Ms Gaw	Councillor Skinner
Councillor Gbadebo	Councillor Temperton
Councillor Hamilton	Victoria Hill (Parent Governor Representative)

Contributors to the review

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