



Learning Lessons Briefing – Child Exploitation System Review

Methodology:

This Systems Review of Child Exploitation was commissioned to provide further assurance that the various processes and arrangements that have recently been implemented and introduced locally in Wolverhampton post the previously commissioned Whole System Review of Exploitation in 2019, are effective in identifying and responding to cases of Child Exploitation.

A full review of all processes implemented since 2019, were reviewed. To establish the efficacy of these processes and systems, two cases were also reviewed. One case was a case that pre-dated the Whole Systems Review of 2019, whilst a second case was a purposefully selected as a more recent case example. The purpose of this approach was to provide unique and useful insights into how knowledge of, and responses to Child Exploitation have evolved in alignment with practice development.

The review Author is accredited to use Serious Incident Learning Process Methodology (SILP). Whilst not commissioned as a SILP review, the key principles of SILP methodology were applied to ensure that the review process;

- **Is “systems based”** – Avoids apportioning blame on any one agency by ensuring that when things went wrong or did not happen in the way they should have, a systems lens is applied. This helps to understand the system in context and provide insights into the multiplicity of factors and barriers that influenced actions and decision making.
- **Is “strengths-based”** – Whilst the purpose of any review process is to highlight areas of systemic weakness and areas for development, it is equally as important to look for areas of strengths or exemplar practice. This is to ensure that good, effective practice and ways of working that are keeping children, young people, and families safe are highlighted and replicated and embedded into practice.
- **Is a Collaborative Process** – The review involved collaboration with not only system leads, but also with families, children and young people, and front-line practitioners. In this case, the review was co-authored by a young person who has lived experience of Knife Crime. Their generous contributions strengthened the review process by providing unique insights and perspectives.
- **Is an Analytical Process** – The methodology applied ensured that the review was focused on “*the Why*” as opposed to the “*the What*”. There had already been comprehensive rapid review processes undertaken in relation to all three

cases central to this review. Therefore, whilst the review provided some context about *what* happened, the focus was analysing the information available to understand the factors and processes that contributed to *why* events happened as they did. This is key to learning.

Practitioner Involvement:

A total of **two** practitioner learning events were held. The purpose of practitioner learning events is to enable the review author to ask key questions to aid their understanding of events, processes and systems whilst simultaneously providing safe, reflective environments for practitioners to also be a central part of the review process.

Practitioners were also given the opportunity to review the draft recommendations of the review, to ensure that the recommendations proposed, translated into practice in a way that was most likely to result in positive and further practical system change.

KLOE's:

Key Lines of Enquiry (KLOEs) were established to define the purpose, structure, and the key area of analysis of the review. The KLOEs for this systems review are as follows:

- To understand the impact of the whole system approach to preventing and identifying exploitation which was introduced in stages during 2021/22.
- Provide further assurance that the recommendations from the previous whole system review have been effectively implemented and are making an impact.
- To detail and describe how the local approach to exploitation continues to develop and evolve.
- To inform regional learning across the West Midlands footprint.

Scoping Period for the review:

The scope of this review was to focus on how the local response to Child Exploitation has evolved and changed in direct response to the Whole Systems Review of Exploitation that was commissioned in 2019. Therefore, the review scoping period was primarily focused on system activity from 2021/22.

However, it was agreed that a retrospective analysis of a case pre-dating 2019 would be useful to ascertain how system changes have directly impacted on the response and support provided to exploited children. (See Methodology)

Key Findings Summary:

This review found that the system has successfully responded to the key findings of the Whole Systems Review of exploitation at pace, and that locally, there is a better understanding of all typologies of exploitation and the complexities of the exploitation landscape. Consequently, this increased awareness and understanding resulting from a significant investment in training for practitioners from across the system, has resulted in a marked increase in the numbers of cases being identified.

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 implementation of an Exploitation screening tool has also been pivotal in the increased identification of cases, albeit there is still work to be done to ensure that this tool is further iterated and developed and is being used consistently where appropriate by all key agencies.

Locally, there has been a drive to develop a detailed and comprehensive problem profile of exploitation, that provides practitioners a contextual and more complete picture of the exploitation landscape in Wolverhampton. Processes and arrangements such as CMOG and MACE are well utilised and provide rich intelligence and information that continually inform the local exploitation profile.

As part of the problem profile, exploitation cases are now clearly categorised; this is important to understand a child’s lived experience of exploitation and to tailor a response that is safe and appropriate. That said, the review found evidence of how the categorisation system in use could be potentially confusing, and lead to inequitable safeguarding responses being provided to victims.

Whilst the approach to embedding contextual safeguarding is a strength locally, more could and should be done to ensure that the voices of parents, carers and community are being consistently captured and heard, and that intelligence from these sources is given equal consideration and the same “weight” as it would if the source of this information was a statutory partner.

How can you make a difference?

Key messages from the learning to ask yourself for your practice are: -

- *Can I continually improve my knowledge, awareness and understanding of the local and national Child Exploitation Landscape?*
- *Do I need to seek further support, training, or supervision to understand and recognise the factors that underpin Child Exploitation?*
- *What is my role in educating the children and young people I work with about Child Exploitation?*
- *Do I use tools available to protect children and young people from exploitation related harms, such as the screening tool and the National Referral Mechanism?*
- *Do I know how to escalate and share my concerns if I suspect or know a child or young person to be at risk of exploitation?*

Recommendations

Theme 1: Intelligence and Information Sharing

- Pertinent and useful information contained within the problem profile that has successfully provided valuable insights into the scale and scope of Child Exploitation locally, is included within the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. This is to further raise the profile and strengthen the systemic focus on Child Exploitation.
- WST and West Midlands Police 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.
- 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

Theme 2: Screening Tool

- The current screening tool should be revised in alignment with the recommendations made as part of this review and in co-production with children and young people.
- 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.
- West Midlands Police should consider the development of 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.

Theme 3: Training and Professional Development

- WST should ensure the development or commissioning of additional training to raise awareness of the increasing use of digital platforms to facilitate the exploitation of children
- WST should ensure that practitioners from all sectors are supported to recognise, assess, and respond to cumulative harm, and consider enhancing the current extensive training offer to include training on cumulative risk and harm.
- WST should provide further support to agencies to ensure that they are providing support and interventions that are equitable, consistent, truly trauma informed and anti-victim blaming. Trauma informed approaches should seek to look beyond the widely adopted ACE framework, widening the lens through which trauma is viewed.

Theme 4: Risk Assessment and Response

- 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 and that interventions and risk response is in line with the weight those identified contexts have in relation to the child.
- WST and key strategic partners should work in effective collaboration to ensure that the exploitation and SEND agendas are aligned, to ensure that practitioners working with children with SEND are aware of the increased exploitation risks in this cohort of children.
- WST should consider revising the current categorisations of Child Exploitation and consider the use of a separate Modern Slavery category to lessen the propensity of inequitable and inconsistent safeguarding responses.
- WST and strategic partners should consider the development of a perpetrator and disruption strategy which sets out the roles and responsibilities that all practitioners working to safeguard children have in preventing all exploitation.
- WST and Children's Social Care should seek additional assurances that Child Protection arrangements are being used sufficiently to respond to cases of exploitation where there is significant risk of harm.
- WST should consider the development of a Transition from Child to Adult Services Strategy 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.

- Information collated locally to inform the problem profile should be used to provide further insights into the role of females in co-offending peer groups and in the perpetration of exploitation and exploitation - related harms.
- Further assurances should be sought to ensure 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.