



Report to the Children's Social Care and Learning Select Committee

Title: Looked After Children: Child Sexual Exploitation and Safety

Committee date: Tuesday 15 May 2018

Author: Gail Hancock, Service Director - Improvement

Contact officer: Michelle King, Ofsted Improvement Officer

Cabinet Member sign-off: Cllr. Warren Whyte

1.0 Purpose of Agenda Item

The purpose of this Select Committee report is to provide an overview of exploitation and safety issues in relation to children looked after by Buckinghamshire County Council. More specifically the report will consider the risks and service responses associated with child sexual exploitation (CSE), child criminal exploitation (CCE), missing episodes and other related safeguarding issues.

2.0 Background

Many children come into local authority care in order to address concerns about their safety and wellbeing. Children can be looked after as a result of a Care Order, under section 31 of the Children Act 1989, which is granted as a result of court care proceedings initiated by the local authority. They may also become looked after and accommodated by the local authority with agreement of their birth parents or those with parental responsibility under section 20 of the 1989 Children Act.

Children looked after enter local authority care as a result of suffering, or being at risk of suffering, significant harm as a result of abuse, neglect and exploitation. Child abuse is a form of maltreatment whereby children are physically, sexually or emotionally abused and/or neglected often as a result of the parenting that they have received. Children can also come into local authority care if they are beyond the control of their parents and this may include risks associated with child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation and risks associated with going missing. Unaccompanied migrant children will also come into local authority care and accommodated as part of the general welfare principle of the 1989

Children Act when there is no parent or carer with parental responsibility available to care for them. Unaccompanied migrant children may also have been exploited as a result of being trafficked into the UK.

In Buckinghamshire County Council, at the end of March 2018 there were 482 children looked after, aged under 18 years of age, of which 30 were unaccompanied migrant children, and 201 care leavers, aged over 18 years of age, of which 42 were unaccompanied migrant young people. All children looked after have an allocated social worker and all care leavers have an allocated personal advisor.

3.0 Definitions of Exploitation, Missing and Trafficking

The definition of child sexual exploitation is as follows:

“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. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”⁽¹⁾

Louise Casey’s report about the CSE scandal in Rotherham and the response of Rotherham Council⁽²⁾ stated that “CSE is a form of child abuse in which perpetrators develop total control over their victims. It starts with a grooming process, in which victims are showered with gifts and attention. They are treated like adults, for example, by being taken out in cars. The young person can believe that the perpetrator is their boyfriend and that they are in love. This is a powerful thing, especially for young children or young people who may have difficult family backgrounds and crave love and attention. As a result, they do not complain. The grooming process isolates the victim from friends and family.

At some point, drugs, alcohol and sex may be introduced. They are forced not only to have sex with their abuser but sometimes other men too. This is coupled with more overt coercion, threats and violence. By now, victims may be dependent on drugs and alcohol, afraid of their abuser, isolated from their family and scared that they will not be believed or that worse may happen to them or their families if they make a complaint.

The consequences of CSE are appalling. Victims suffer from suicidal feelings and often self-harm. Many become pregnant. Some have to manage the emotional consequences of miscarriages and abortions while others have children that they are unable to parent appropriately. The abuse and violence continues to affect victims into adulthood. Many enter violent and abusive relationships. Many suffer poor mental health and addiction.

¹ “Child Exploitation - Definition and a guide for practitioners, local leaders and decision makers working to protect children from child sexual exploitation” DfE (February 2017)

² “Report of Inspection of Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council” Louise Casey CB (February 2015) DCLG

The predators often target children with difficult backgrounds, including those in care, who are particularly vulnerable to grooming. But they are also sometimes able to exploit those from stable backgrounds. That families, despite their very best efforts, are unable to prevent the abuse reflects the power of the abusers and the degree of control they exert.” (2) (page 15 – 16)

The criminal exploitation of young people is commonly referred to as “county lines”:

“‘County lines’ is the police term for urban gangs supplying drugs to suburban areas and market and coastal towns using dedicated mobile phone lines or “deal lines”. It involves child criminal exploitation (CCE) as gangs use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money. Gangs establish a base in the market location, typically by taking over the homes of local vulnerable adults by force or coercion in a practice referred to as ‘cuckooing’.³

The Thames Valley Police definition⁽⁴⁾ for a missing child is “anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character or the context suggests the person may be subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.” The definition of absent person is when “A person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.”

In respect of human trafficking, the Palermo Protocol⁽⁵⁾ identifies children as a special case as any child transported for exploitative reasons is considered to be a trafficking victim, whether or not they have been deceived, because it is not considered possible for a child to give informed consent.

4.0 Overview of the local issues and responses

The Buckinghamshire serious case review⁽⁶⁾ about child sexual exploitation was commissioned by the Local Safeguarding Children Board and published in April 2017. It set out to confirm that the right processes, support and expertise were in place to tackle child sexual exploitation in all its forms, and to understand what areas of work needed to be looked at more closely. It looked at the full spectrum of past cases back to 1998 and reviewed a wide range of activities.

The serious case review reported that a number of local reviews conducted in Buckinghamshire on child sexual exploitation between 2012 and 2015 had made recommendations to improve the response to young people. These recommendations resulted in a number of changes including the introduction of the Multi-Agency

³ “Criminal Exploitation of children and vulnerable adults: County Lines guidance” Home Office (July 2017)

⁴ “Joint protocol concerning children and young people who run away or go missing from home or care.” Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board (29th April 2014)

⁵ “Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children.” United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (2000)

⁶ “Serious Case Review: Child Sexual Exploitation 1998 – 2016.” Eleanor Stobart (14th September 2016) Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board

Safeguarding Hub (MASH), the Missing and Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Conference (MSERAC) and the Gangs Multi-Agency Partnership (GMAP).

At the time the identification, tracking and risk assessment processes for young people who go missing or were at risk of sexual exploitation were considered to be effective, despite the 2014 inadequate Ofsted inspection judgement. The Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board had established a Child Sexual Exploitation Sub-Group, which routinely also included consideration of missing children as well. More recently in 2018, the Sub-Group broadened its remit to become an Exploitation Sub-Group to acknowledge the growing concerns regarding children at risk of criminal exploitation or 'county lines'.

The Ofsted 2018 inspection report(7) stated that:

"The establishment of the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) has been effective, and children who need an urgent response receive a prompt and appropriate service. Children who are vulnerable as a result of going missing now receive timely and thorough interviews on their return to home or care. However, the information from such interviews is not being well used to inform planning to reduce the risk of children going missing again in future. Senior leaders have worked effectively with their partner agencies at a strategic level to increase the awareness of risks to children who are vulnerable as a result of sexual exploitation. Further work, building on this, is underway to understand and respond to the complex risks that young people face, such as from gangs, 'county lines' (children forced to traffic drugs) and radicalisation." (Page 3)

The Swan Unit was originally established in July 2015 in response to CSE concerns within the authority. It is a multi-agency team that continues today and includes professionals from Children's Social Care, Thames Valley Police, Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust, and Barnardo's RUSafe? and has virtual representation from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service provided by Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust. The Swan Unit has 5 specific functions in relation to children at risk of sexual exploitation:

- The assessment of risk
- Chairing strategy meetings
- Advice to partner professionals on CSE
- Direct work with children vulnerable to CSE
- Co-ordination of information and intelligence about victims and perpetrators of CSE

In April 2016(8), the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board undertook an audit of practice in the Swan Unit and its work with children and young people for whom there are child sexual exploitation concerns. This was broadly very positive. It found that the Swan Unit provides a professional, dedicated, effective and balanced service to this group of young people.

⁷ "Re-inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers." Ofsted (29th January 2018)

⁸ "Child Sexual Exploitation & the Swan Unit." John Hyder-Wilson and Suzi Ingram of INGSON Ltd. (April 2016) Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board

The Swan Unit continues to undertake work to support and intervene with young people who have suffered, or are at risk of suffering, significant harm of sexual exploitation. The Swan Unit convenes a weekly Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation Meeting to discuss children about whom CSE concerns have been identified. These meetings are used to provide professional support and guidance. This will include child protection strategy meetings, to share information, agree the details of child protection enquiries and criminal investigations, if required. This will also include disruption meetings where Police and other agencies will adopt proactive problem solving measures to identify, disrupt and prosecute those seeking to sexually exploit children.

The majority of young people who become known to the Swan Unit tend to misuse drugs and alcohol. A large number have a learning disability and/or concerns about their emotional wellbeing. Many have difficult relationships with their families and experience relationship breakdowns. There are some associated links with 'county lines' which are predominantly in the Aylesbury area. There are also increased reported of peer to peer sexually harmful behaviour between pupils at school which is increasingly difficult to manage. Social workers and police engagement officers from the Swan Unit work closely together to support individual children who are in the process of making disclosures.

As noted by Louise Casey, it is often very difficult to engage young people at risk of CSE and this requires great professional skill, curiosity and tenacity to establish a rapport and build a trusting relationship. Young people can become looked after as a result of CSE and even whilst they are looked after continue be at risk of CSE. Young people do not always readily accept that they are being exploited. The professional approach requires resilience and assertive outreach to identify and engage with young people who may not want, or are unable to, receive a service.

For some young people at risk of CSE being placed out of the county, in other parts of the country where there are specialist residential care homes or sometimes specialist independent foster carers, is considered necessary. Primarily the reason for placing young people at a distance is to move young people away from imminent risk and the strong links and controls that perpetrators continue to have on young people, even when they become looked after by the local authority. Sometimes, despite the best efforts of the police and because of the coercive, controlling and threatening nature of the perpetrators' grooming behaviour, it can be very difficult for young people to break away from these ties.

It is true to say, however, that there are also risks associated with placing young people out of county a long way away from home and this needs to be balanced very carefully with the anticipated advantages. It has been found that with careful planning, tenacity and intensive support, young people can start to benefit from the specialist intervention provided by their placements. They can begin to develop skills and knowledge about developing healthy relationships, keeping safe and re-engaged with education, employment and training. As a result, a number of young people's relationships have improved with their parents and for some this has enabled consideration of rehabilitation plans and an eventual return to their family. It is positive to also note, that when young people are eventually closed to the Swan Unit, the re-referral rate is low. In some of the most positive cases young people who are

the survivors of child sexual abuse have gone on to become mentors providing support to other young people at risk.

On three occasions since January 2018, having obtained a Secure Accommodation Order under section 25 of the 1989 Children Act from the court, it has been necessary to place young people in secure accommodation on welfare grounds as a result of concerns about exploitation. Given the extreme deprivation of liberty associated with placing a young person in secure accommodation this is only ever considered in very high risk situations and as a last resort when all other options have been exhausted.

In Buckinghamshire, three young people who were at such high risk of causing harm to themselves or others, where there was clear evidence of multiple and repeated missing episodes and no alternative community based placement provision identified to keep them safe, secure accommodation was used. Significant risks, as a result of serious physical and sexual harm, had threatened the lives of all three young people whilst they had been missing from local authority care. All three young people were protected for a defined period whilst in secure accommodation which provided professionals with an opportunity to re-engage in a contained environment without any opportunity to go missing.

Engaging with young people at risk of CSE can often be frustrated by frequent periods of young people going missing from care. The Barnardo's R U Safe? Service began delivering commissioned CSE services in 2006 and a missing service from 2007. In accordance with government guidance, the R U Safe? Service undertakes independent return interviews face to face with young people who return after a missing episode. This includes children looked after, including those placed within a 20 mile radius of Buckinghamshire. When children looked after are placed at a distance greater than 20 miles Barnardo's R U Safe? make arrangements with sister organisations. Where this does not exist alternative arrangements are put in place. These arrangements are often explored by the Placements Team when an out of county placement search is underway.

On a weekly basis, Thames Valley Police generate approximately 30 missing referrals for R U Safe? Of these, about 5 relate to children looked after placed in Buckinghamshire by other local authorities and about 6 are for Buckinghamshire children looked after. The average ages are 14 to 15 years old and there is usually an even split of males and females. R U Safe? contact the other local authorities of children looked after placed in Buckinghamshire and offer a service but this is not always taken up. The R U Safe? Service see 60%+ of all referred Buckinghamshire children looked after within 72 hours eventually 78% of all referred children looked after children are seen and receive an independent return home interview. There is a stretch target to see 85% of all young people who are referred but this has proven difficult to achieve given the needs and circumstances of the cohort and this is matched by comparison with benchmarking data from elsewhere.

In terms of impact, the 2017/2018 performance indicated that 51% of young people in care had a reduction in their pattern of missing episodes following the R U Safe? intervention. In part this relates to the follow up sessions that R U Safe? provide to young people who go missing repeatedly.

The Thames Valley Police in Buckinghamshire are pioneering a new missing system called ELPIS which is named after the Greek spirit of hope. This system aggregates and analyses real time data about children who go missing by analysing triggers and pinch points to inform earlier intervention to support victims. This innovative system will enable support to those at risk at all stages, allowing the identification of hidden harm at an early stage and utilises the skills of all partner agencies to intervene effectively together to safeguard children. ELPIS is already operational within Adult Services for adults that go missing. To date in relation to Children's Services, social care staff in the MASH have been trained to use the ELPIS system and a launch date is anticipated by June 2018, subject to the agreed coordination with other partner agencies.

The Youth Service receives a small number of referrals relating to young people who identify as being part of a gang and they are at a stage where they want to make some positive choices to break away. Most of these gang related referrals are of a preventative nature. For this cohort of young people, the common features of concern include periods of going missing, concerns about peer group influence, being found in possession of weapons and vulnerability to exploitation.

From a Youth Offending Service there has been an increase in examples of criminal exploitation as a result of 'county lines'. This inevitably involves young people being exploited by criminal gangs to sell drugs it can also coincide with risks associated with child sexual exploitation too. This is primarily an issue which appears to be affecting the north of the county where criminal gangs mainly originating from London, but also from Birmingham, have established a foothold in the local drugs market mainly, but not exclusively, in Aylesbury.

Individual support has been provided to engage young people at risk. The core focus of this support is to engage with young people to provide them with an alternative focus, including a change in lifestyle, new peer relationships and education, employment and training skills. The Youth Service and Youth Offending Service have established relationships with the Swan Unit and attend the Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation Meetings when required to provide swift and easy access to engage and support young people.

A multi-agency group affiliated with the Buckinghamshire Safeguarding Children Board Exploitation Sub-Group, has recently made an expression of interest to the Home Office 'Trusted Relationship Fund' which is designed to help foster positive relationships between frontline professionals and young people at risk of sexual exploitation, 'county lines' gang crime or relationship abuse. Research has revealed that a trusted relationship with an adult is an essential part of supporting vulnerable children, and the lack of trusted relationships is consistently cited in reviews of failures around child sexual abuse and exploitation. Social support can help children avoid risky situations, as well as help them overcome adverse circumstances in their lives and is likely to help young people to disclose when abuse is happening to them. The Home Office will contact successful local authorities to submit full bids during week beginning 7th May 2018.

5.0 Next Steps

In order to continue developing services for children looked after at risk of exploitation, the following are next steps which are being progressed by Children's Services and allied partners:

1. Deliver the Ofsted inspection recommendations to improve Social Care Services as set out in the Ofsted (2018) inspection report.
2. Enhance in-county placement provision of foster carers and residential care homes as part of an improved placement sufficiency strategy.
3. Improve the R U Safe? commissioned services performance to reach the stretch target for children looked after to be seen and receive a return home interview in 72 hours and enhance return home interview responses for children looked after who are placed at a distance out of county and go missing.
4. Launch the Police EPIS system to improve 'real time' data analysis to enhance risk assessments and safety planning responses for children who go missing.
5. Respond to the Home Office notification regarding the 'Trusted Relationships' expression of interest bid.