

Child Criminal Exploitation Inquiry

An Overview and Scrutiny Report



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www.birmingham.gov.uk/scrutiny

Chair's Foreword



Councillor Des Hughes, Chair of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) Scrutiny Inquiry and Councillor Kerry Jenkins, Chair of Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

It is difficult to understand the true scale and prevalence of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) and although we have figures of how many children and young people are assessed to be 'at risk' we were advised that the figures put forward are likely to be an underestimate.

This underestimate was linked to several factors, with one of them being that there is no statutory definition of CCE. The Inquiry found little appetite for one. Whilst we cannot be sure of the numbers, or the ages of children and young people in Birmingham being criminally exploited, we can be sure that it is happening and that it is likely many are also being sexually exploited.

Councils have a key role to play in tackling child exploitation, but they cannot and should not be doing this alone and this Inquiry looked at how Birmingham City Council is working with partners to reduce both the risks of exploitation for children and young people and the impact, not only on those exploited but also on families, neighbours, and wider communities.

We also recognised that any discussion of CCE should not just be about the children and young people identified as being victims of exploitation, but there was the need to recognise that all children and young people are vulnerable to exploitation.

We heard from a range of partners from within and external to the Council and it was encouraging to hear about the work being done by them to disrupt this criminal activity, support children and young people and prevent further harm to both victims and communities. But we also uncovered inconsistency stemming largely from the way CCE is defined in legislation and policy and difficulties linked with case referral and the sharing of information.

Where children and young people who had been arrested came to the attention of partners, we heard that the approach used was likely to be down a criminal justice route rather than a safeguarding one, with victims often viewed as offenders rather than as victims. We also learnt that Black and Minority Ethnic children are less likely to be seen as victims, and far more likely to be subject to adultification; this is borne out by research.

As elected representatives, as corporate parents, and as community leaders, councillors have a responsibility to be aware of the signs of child exploitation and to understand what action is needed

where there are concerns. But this is not where our responsibility ends. We must also be ensuring that this understanding is shared with our communities and that we work with them to protect our children and young people from those wishing to exploit them.

We have all heard of the proverb 'it takes a village to raise a child' but it has real meaning when you are talking about CCE which by its very nature is insidious, remains hidden, misunderstood and is often 'othered'. It is not spoken about, not accepted, and not recognised as happening in that community.

We know that being criminally exploited in childhood can have a serious, long-term detrimental impact on children's lives, so it is far better to prevent it from happening in the first place. The Inquiry recognised the need for more action to increase the visibility and understanding of CCE, within the Council, throughout partner organisations, within our schools, and amongst young people.

We all have a part to play here but we also need entire communities working with us, working together, to ensure the safety of all our children and young people. A whole systems approach to awareness-raising and engagement across a range of agencies, who must be working in partnership with parents and children and communities to alert them to the signs of grooming, exploitation, and coercion.

We must work in partnership to ensure that children and young people who experience exploitation are recognised as being victims of abuse and that they are coerced into criminal activity, that they are not blamed and criminalised for their 'behaviour', and they are recognised as being children and young people and as such are appropriately safeguarded.

We need to ensure that there is comprehensive training and information for all professionals who work with vulnerable children and that this is mandatory rather than by choice.

At the time of concluding this Inquiry, there are very real concerns about the rise in CCE, seen here in the West Midlands by a large increase in County Lines, and the difficulty by agencies to accurately determine how many children and young people are at risk or are being exploited. The financial challenges we face here in Birmingham will have a significant impact on the non-statutory services currently delivered for children and young people. This is extremely worrying given the difficulties there are already to identify children being exploited.

As already stated, local authorities and partners cannot tackle CCE alone and if it does take a village to raise a child then we need national government to be an active and willing member of the village. Whilst we cannot make recommendations to Government, our Inquiry recognised the urgent need for Government to invest in and expand the provision of support and preventative services for children and young people.

Two of our recommendations therefore ask the Leader, and Cabinet Members to lobby the Government for this investment. For a statutory youth service enshrined in law with sufficient ring-fenced funding and a Minister for Youth, bringing together the scattergun approach to youth policy currently seen in Westminster due to the cross over of departmental responsibilities.

We realise that we have only touched the surface of what is a complex and challenging issue but believe that when our recommendations are carried out then they will make a tangible difference and will help to safeguard more children and young people from those looking to criminally exploit them.

Finally, we would like to thank members of the Committee who contributed so much to this Inquiry and the ongoing support, knowledge, and experience of scrutiny officers throughout this process.

Summary of Recommendations

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Definition and Scale		
R01	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to request the Birmingham Community Safety Partnership (BCSP) commissions a Child Criminal Exploitation problem profile.	Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	July 2024 (3 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Early Intervention and Resilience		
R02	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to request the stakeholder engagement group convened by the Violence Reduction Partnership is extended to statutory organisations with a remit for Child Criminal Exploitation*.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R03	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to work with the Contextual Safeguarding Board and Partners to explore delivery of a campaign to increase the awareness of parents and carers of the risks of exploitation and what steps they can take.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R04	Recommendation: Council asks the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to lobby Government (and any future change in government) to adequately fund the provision of youth services, with ring fenced funding and to protect this in statute with a Youth Service Bill.	Leader of the Council Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
R05	<p>Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to request the Contextual Safeguarding Board and Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership work with organisations to review their mandatory training offer to better equip staff to recognise signs of Child Criminal Exploitation and minimise the risk of bias in decision making.</p>	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R06	<p>Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to work with Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Children’s Trust to ensure all staff working directly with children receive mandatory training on Child Criminal Exploitation and this is part of a continuous professional development approach.</p>	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R07	<p>Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to provide a report to the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the impact of the Council’s work with schools to address exploitation as part of their safeguarding policies. This should include academies and primary schools.</p>	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R08	<p>Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to provide a timeline for the development and publication of an Exclusions strategy, engage with the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny in its development, and commit to providing regular reports on outcomes from the new strategy once in place.</p>	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	April 2025 (12 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
R09	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to report to the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on how the Council is monitoring the risk of exploitation with children and young people who receive Elective Home Education.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Supporting Young People to Exit Exploitation			
R10	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to consider how intelligence and information can be better shared with community partners and public sector organisations.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Enforcement			
R11	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to lobby for a national and/or regional campaign to highlight enforcement action against Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) which are exploiting young people.	Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Governance and Strategy			
R12	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families and the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to report back on the	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice,	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

	progress, and outcomes achieved of the strategy and delivery plan: Tackling Exploitation of Children and Young People 2023-26	Community Safety and Equalities	
R13	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families and the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to clarify the governance and accountability arrangements for this strategy.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R14	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families and the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to lobby Government (and future Government) for a Minister for Young People to enable joined up and holistic policy making in relation to young people.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Tracking		
R15	Recommendation: Council agrees that the Executive Member reports on progress towards achievement of these recommendations no later than October 2024. Subsequent progress reports will be scheduled by the Committee thereafter, until all recommendations are implemented.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

1.1 Introduction

- 1.1.1 The Education and Children’s Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided to undertake an Inquiry into Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE), and this was confirmed on 20 July 2022.
- 1.1.2 A cross party Inquiry Task and Finish Group was established comprising members from the Education and Children’s Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee (later renamed the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee from June 2023). The members of the Inquiry Task and Finish Group were:
- Councillor Des Hughes, Chair of Inquiry and Deputy Chair of Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
 - Councillor Kerry Jenkins, Chair of Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee
 - Councillor Debbie Clancy
 - Councillor Morriam Jan
 - Councillor Jane Jones
 - Councillor Shehla Moledina
- 1.1.3 The key question the Inquiry Task and Finish Group asked was: **‘How are the Council and Partners working together to reduce the risks of criminal exploitation for young people?’**
- 1.1.4 In seeking to answer this the Task and Finish Group considered the following lines of inquiry:
- What is the definition of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) being used in the city? If different definitions are being applied by partners, how does this impact upon the effectiveness of joint working?
 - What is the current scale and nature of CCE in Birmingham? How has this picture changed over the past four years? What are the projected risks and threats for the future?
 - How are organisations informed by evidence based practice? How do organisations capture ‘what works’ and what doesn’t work’, and how has this information changed their services? How is Birmingham learning from other areas, and how is this learning being implemented to make a difference?
 - What is the current partnership strategy in place to address CCE in the city? How is this strategy being supported and delivered through partners? What are the

partnership mechanisms for collaboration, and how effective are they? How effective is its governance structure?

- Who are the key statutory organisations and what are their respective roles in addressing CCE? What investment is provided to these organisations, and has this changed over the past four years? What are the current plans for investment to meet future demands?
- What is the role of the third sector and community-based organisations involved in tackling CCE? What are the key challenges they face, and what are the solutions they have identified to tackle these challenges? How effective is the cross sector working?
- How do the Council and Partners identify and assess risk for children and young people together for CCE? How are they responding to the challenge in identifying girls and young women as victims? How are the Council and Partners working together to deliver effective interventions when children and young people are likely to be both victims and involved with committing offences at the same time?
- How are the Council and partners working with families to support children and young people at risk, or involved with CCE? How are schools and partners working together to reduce the risk of school exclusion?

1.1.5 You can access the [Terms of Reference](#) here.

2 Background and Context

2.1 What is Child Criminal Exploitation?

- 2.1.1 “Criminal exploitation is child abuse where children and young people are manipulated and coerced into committing crimes. One of its forms is County Lines which is the “police term for urban gangs exploiting young people into moving drugs from a hub, normally a large city, into other markets - suburban areas and market and coastal towns - using dedicated mobile phone lines or “deal lines”...This can involve children being trafficked away from their home area, staying in accommodation and selling and manufacturing drugs” ([NSPCC](#)). Children who are criminally exploited may also be sexually exploited.
- 2.1.2 Child Criminal Exploitation is a form of modern slavery.
- 2.1.3 The West Midlands Region have a combined definition for all types of exploitation: ‘An individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child, young person or adult and exploits them:
- Through violence or the threat of violence, and/or
 - for financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or
 - in exchange for something the victim needs or wants.
- 2.1.4 The victim may have been exploited even if the activity appears consensual due to his/her specific situation. Exploitation does not always involve physical contact, it can also occur through the use of technology, e.g., as the result of a grooming process which takes place during conversations in chat rooms, or through the use of social media.’
- 2.1.5 The trauma of young people’s experiences is highly likely to have a long-term impact on their future and of future generations.
- 2.1.6 While exploitation of young people is not new, it has evolved in many ways presenting increasing risks for children.
- 2.1.7 Research carried out by [Dr Alex Chard](#)¹ (commissioned by the West Midlands Combined Authority and the Police and Crime Commissioner for the West Midlands) concluded that known risk factors ‘appear to have created a virtual escalator’ whereby young people are ‘propelled towards crime and the criminal justice system’, and which leads to their exploitation and abuse. These risk factors include:
- Poverty

¹ [Punishing Abuse: Children in the West Midlands Criminal Justice System](#), WMCA, the WMPCC and YCTCS Ltd, 2021

- Physical disabilities or poor mental health
- Family or individual substance misuse
- Known to Criminal Justice system
- Known to Social Care services
- Experienced parental loss
- Family violence
- Family criminality
- Victim or abuse and violence in the community
- Disrupted education
- Special Educational Needs

2.1.8 The Cost-of-Living crisis has also been identified as a more recent driver for exploitation with children’s charity Barnardo’s stating that “organised criminal gangs are capitalising on rising costs and financial pressures, leaving children more exposed to criminal and sexual exploitation”.²

2.2 Why the Committee Decided to Look at Child Criminal Exploitation

2.2.1 All Councils have a duty under the [Children Act 2004](#) to work with local police and health partners to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area. In Birmingham, the Birmingham Children’s Trust is responsible for carrying out assessments of children deemed at risk of significant harm and work with partners to put in place plans to keep children safe where necessary.

2.2.2 As corporate parents, councils are responsible for supporting and advocating for their children in care and care leavers. Councils will need to ensure that these children and young people are fully supported if they are at risk of exploitation, including ensuring they are in appropriate accommodation.

2.2.3 Councils also have a duty under the [Crime and Disorder Act 1998](#) to work with partners to develop a community safety strategy that reflects priorities in their local area around tackling crime and disorder, and work with their Police and Crime Commissioner, including through the Police and Crime Panel which is responsible for scrutinising local police and crime plans. The more recent [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act](#)

² [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation](#), 2023, Barnardos

[2022](#) introduces duties for public bodies such as councils, police, health and education to tackle and prevent serious violent crime.

- 2.2.4 The Committee had concerns whether the prevalence and threat of CCE had increased in recent years, and if this was the case, how this challenge was being addressed to protect children. The Inquiry Task and Finish Group decided to consider how partners were working together in a broad sense rather than adopt a specific focus for one theme in particular. The key lines of enquiry were developed in line with this.
- 2.2.5 During the scoping, engagement with officers from Birmingham City Council, Birmingham Children’s Trust, and partner organisations was undertaken to ensure this Inquiry added value and was not duplicating effort. The Inquiry was welcomed as an opportunity to provide new insights.

2.3 Outcomes

- 2.3.1 The Inquiry agreed the following outcomes:
- Reduce the number of children and young people becoming at risk of CCE.
 - Improve the effectiveness of partnership working to reduce the risk of CCE.

2.4 Evidence Gathering

- 2.4.1 Evidence gathering commenced in November 2022 and concluded in September 2023. A schedule of the Inquiry’s activities is provided in Appendix 1.
- 2.4.2 Eight face to face sessions took place with partner organisations in addition to written evidence. Appendix 2 lists the organisations who contributed to this Inquiry.
- 2.4.3 All councillors were also invited to provide evidence.
- 2.4.4 A survey on the Council’s Be Heard consultation platform was also carried out to capture information from parents and carers. Unfortunately, as only four responses were received, the Inquiry Task and Finish group decided an analysis of these results would be too limited. However, individual contributions from the survey have been captured throughout the report, where possible.

3 Key Findings

3.1 Definition and Scale

Definition

- 3.1.1 Definitions may play an important role in ensuring there is a shared understanding of an issue. This is particularly useful when partnership activity is required to address it. Different partner organisations will have different roles and responsibilities. If these roles and responsibilities are interpreted through a common lens of what the issue is, this may lead to more effective partnership practice and better outcomes.
- 3.1.2 The Inquiry learnt the following:
- There is no current national definition in law for CCE. However, there is a [Home Office description for County Lines](#), which has come to be associated with CCE.
 - There is a West Midlands regional definition for all types of exploitation – contained within the Contextual Safeguarding Board’s [Tackling Exploitation of Children and Young People 2023-2026 Strategy and Delivery Plan](#).
- 3.1.3 For the most part, organisations did not support the view that a national definition would improve partnership working around CCE locally. They felt that the regional definition provided a common understanding and basis for partnership activity.
- 3.1.4 The Birmingham Children’s Trust highlighted that this definition ensured a consistent understanding of how exploitation can manifest and supported effective joint working practice. Importantly it promotes a ‘[Child First](#)’ approach’ viewing children as victims first and foremost.
- 3.1.5 In fact, concerns were raised that the introduction of a statutory definition would limit the effectiveness of partnership working instead. For example, it would be too rigid and restrictive, and not be flexible enough to respond to emerging threats. This view was particularly expressed by third sector organisations.

Scale

- 3.1.6 As of 31 July 2023, there were 337 children assessed as at risk of CCE in Birmingham. This is based on the number of referrals to the multi-agency Child Exploitation and Missing Hub in the Birmingham Children’s Trust. Birmingham Children’s Trust also highlighted that Birmingham is within the top three areas for County Lines nationally.

- 3.1.7 Of those 337 children identified as at risk, 21% are assessed as high risk; 37% medium risk and 42% as low risk³.
- 3.1.8 In summary:
- 63% are children from non-white backgrounds.
 - 76% are aged 15-17 (with no children under the age of 10).
 - Boys are significantly prevalent within the referrals.
 - 82% of children had either a Child Protection or Child in Need Plan or were a Child in Care.
- 3.1.9 However, it is difficult to understand the true scale of this issue facing Birmingham, and how many children are at risk of, or involved with, CCE.
- 3.1.10 Birmingham Children's Trust believes that the number of children identified is too low for a city the size of Birmingham and the size of the city and its challenges can make it difficult to understand the scale and nature of CCE across the whole system. The Inquiry Task and Finish Group were advised that there is no partnership problem profile in place to assist with this understanding and to drive partnership activity. For example, Birmingham Children's Trust questioned whether it had the right partnerships in place. A problem profile would help them to review this and address, if needed.
- 3.1.11 Reasons provided by witnesses why referral numbers are lower than expected include:
- CCE is complex, as a victim of exploitation may also be exploited to commit harm. While their offending is recognised and investigated, their vulnerability as a victim may not be identified.
 - Children may not understand themselves that they are victims of exploitation.
 - Unconscious bias on the part of professionals. For example, the 'adultification'⁴ of boys who are Black may also mean that they are not identified as at risk or

³ Birmingham Childrens Trust, Empower U Missing and Exploitation Hub provided a further up to date position (as of 1 March 2024). At this time, there had 291 children identified as at risk of CCE. Overall, the percentage of children identified as high risk has fallen, and the number of children assessed as low risk has increased to 54.3%. The majority of these children are boys (74.6%), and the majority is aged 16-17 years old (58.3%); there is also one girl aged 10. 65.4% of referrals are from non-white backgrounds. 69.8% are children who have either a Child Protection or Child in Need Plan in place.

⁴ [Adultification is a form of bias where children from Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic communities are perceived as being more 'streetwise', more 'grown up', less innocent and less vulnerable than other children. This particularly affects Black children, who might be viewed primarily as a threat rather than as a child who needs support \(Davis 2022; Davis and Marsh, 2020; Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019\). Children who have been adultified might also be perceived as having more understanding of their actions and the consequences of their actions. For example, an analysis of case reviews found that practitioners assumed Black boys who were involved in gangs would be able to protect themselves from harm, even after they had been reported missing from home or care.](#)

behaviour which may indicate girls are at risk is not being recognised, and therefore referrals are not being made.

- Due to the changing nature of CCE and the impact of social media, all young people are at risk. However, assumptions that this issue does not affect some communities and neighbourhoods may prevent referrals being made.

3.1.12 The Inquiry heard that many children grow up in Birmingham in environments which leave them vulnerable. Some of these children may be known to services or are Children in Care. However, many children may be invisible and growing up without adequate support. The Transitions and Preparation to Adults team described the ‘growth of ghost children during and post pandemic’ as a ‘significant concern’ with many of these young people ‘totally isolated’.

3.1.13 Nationally, [analysis by The Modern Slavery Policy Unit](#), a joint initiative led by an anti-slavery charity Justice and Care and a leading think tank, the Centre for Social Justice, highlights that almost half of the victims of criminal exploitation in the UK are British boys aged 18 and under and 45% are aged 17 and under.⁵ This is based on referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).

3.1.14 A number of witnesses highlighted their concerns that the age range for children at risk is becoming younger.

3.1.15 The ‘[Punishing Abuse](#)’ Report⁶ by Dr Alex Chard and published by the West Midlands Combined Authority and the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner researched 80 cases of young people known to Youth Offending Teams across the West Midlands (including Birmingham). It identified that:

- The majority are ‘educationally disenfranchised’.
- Girls are the most at risk victims experiencing ‘highest levels of abuse and exploitation’.
- There is a significant chance of under-recording, in particular related to the sexual exploitation of boys.
- 31% of these cases (including all cases relating to girls) had resulted in multi-agency referrals for sexual exploitation.

3.1.16 When a child goes missing, this could be an indicator for being at risk of or involved with CCE. West Midlands Police advised that the number of young people reported as

[This resulted in the practitioners not acting to protect the boys from sexual exploitation, youth violence and drug and alcohol misuse \(Bernard and Harris, 2019\).](#)

⁵ [Criminal exploitation: Modern slavery by another name](#), the Modern Slavery Policy Unit, 2024

⁶ [Punishing Abuse: Children in the West Midlands Criminal Justice System](#), WMCA, the WMPCC and YCTCS Ltd, 2021

missing has doubled. They suggested that this was due to better recording rather than an actual increase.

- 3.1.17 More young people have high levels of mental health need, often undiagnosed and often are more vulnerable in a group of young people already under severe pressure and increases the risks they face. The number of young people referred to emergency mental health services in England has increased by more than 50% in three years since 2020⁷, and the number of school age children referred to child and adolescent services (CAMHS) has increased by 76% in England since 2019⁸. In 2022, one third of all referrals did not receive help by the NHS as it struggles to managing this caseload.
- 3.1.18 Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust work with the most complex mental health cases for young people in Birmingham – approximately 15-20 young people per year. Their experience is that these young people are vulnerable to exploitation and nearly all have had experience of it. In January 2024, Council approved the recommendations arising from the Scrutiny Inquiry '[Children and Young People's Mental Health: Is Birmingham meeting young people's mental health needs?](#)'. This outlined the growing challenges for our city's young people with poor mental health.
- 3.1.19 Birmingham's Youth Service and third sector organisations witnesses highlighted how they felt that Child Criminal Exploitation had increased over the last few years. One witness described it as:

"It is growing and getting worse. It has become more organised, violent and deadly"

- 3.1.20 Witnesses identified these factors as increasing the vulnerability of young people:
- Growing prevalence and impact of social media.
 - Cost of Living crisis.
 - Disruption from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.1.21 **Key Finding:** There was no consensus whether a national definition will provide real benefits. As it is constantly evolving, there are concerns a national definition may restrict victims' access to services in the future.
- 3.1.22 **Key Finding:** There is no partnership profile of CCE in Birmingham. It is difficult, therefore, to have a common and evidence based understanding of the true scope and

⁷ '[Children's Emergency Mental Health services referrals soar by 53%](#)', The Guardian, 7 February 2024

⁸ '[Record number of children seek mental health help from NHS England](#)', The Guardian, 27 June 2023

nature of CCE in Birmingham. Moreover, this limits the capacity of all partners to play their part.

3.1.23 **Key Finding:** The true scale of CCE in Birmingham is hidden and is likely to be much higher than the current number of referrals. Its evolving nature means increased numbers of young people may be at risk.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Definition and Scale		
R01	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to request the Birmingham Community Safety Partnership (BCSP) commissions a Child Criminal Exploitation problem profile.	Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	July 2024 (3 months after report has been published)

3.2 Early Intervention and Resilience

3.2.1 Dr Chard’s [‘Punishing Abuse’](#) report concluded that known risk factors ‘appear to have created a virtual escalator’ whereby young people are ‘propelled towards crime and the criminal justice system’, and which leads to their exploitation and abuse. This report raises the challenge of how to prevent ‘children from being pushed onto this escalator’⁹. This challenge was also highlighted by witnesses to this Inquiry citing recent trends around increased use of social media; cost of living and the impact from the pandemic as new factors to consider and increasing the number of young people at risk of recruitment for exploitation.

3.2.2 It was clear from the evidence provided to the Inquiry the value of early intervention services and programmes to keep young people safe from exploitation.

3.2.3 In summary, examples provided to the Inquiry include:

- The provision of safe spaces for young people outside of school and home.
- Professionals delivering front line services must be equipped to build positive relationships with young people and to make referrals if they have concerns.
- Access to support services which work with children and families and adopt a person centred approach.

⁹ [Punishing Abuse: Children in the West Midlands Criminal Justice System](#), WMCA, the WMPCC and YCTCS Ltd, 2021

- 3.2.4 Birmingham Youth Services and third sector witnesses suggested that they felt services were operating better since the introduction of the [Early Help](#) offer and the setting up of Birmingham Childrens Trust's Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub. However, it was also felt that it could be improved further.
- 3.2.5 The financial challenges facing Birmingham City Council over the next few years and the impact on relevant services, both within the Council and at the Birmingham Children's Trust, will make it difficult to sustain this progress and deliver more. Activity is commissioned through non Council funding streams. However, this funding is often short term and may result in funding 'cliff edges' such as at the end of a financial year. Altogether, delivering an effective programme to meet the diverse needs of young people in this city at risk of exploitation is now even more difficult.
- 3.2.6 Defining 'what works' and using this information to inform service delivery is essential when there is limited funding on the table, but it is difficult to measure results against what was prevented with early intervention¹⁰.
- 3.2.7 Stronger and sustainable networks for organisations to collaborate and prevent duplication is needed. Informal networks have already developed but this will strengthen them. Community organisations suggested that there needs to be a bigger role for all city stakeholders including business - it takes a village to raise a child.
- 3.2.8 **Key Finding:** Early intervention is key to preventing CCE. This provides the best opportunity to identify young people at risk. Working with young people at this stage delivers better outcomes.
- 3.2.9 **Key Finding:** The early intervention offer has improved in recent years. However, the financial context will make it challenging to sustain and continue to improve. The sector needs to continue to find ways to collaborate in spite of these challenges.

¹⁰ Feedback from Birmingham Safeguarding Childrens Partnership (BSCP) highlighted that more work could be undertaken to capture learning from other areas as well as case reviews involving exploitation and serious violence. The inquiry will consider this along during their report tracking.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Member	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Early Intervention and Resilience		
R02	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to request the stakeholder engagement group convened by the Violence Reduction Partnership is extended to statutory organisations with a remit for Child Criminal Exploitation*.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

*This will prevent the need to establish a second group and duplicate activity.

Role of the Community

- 3.2.10 Most witnesses highlighted how community awareness of CCE needs to improve. Specifically, this is to help parents, families and the community to recognise signs of exploitation and protect young people. The Violence Reduction Partnership outlined the progress it has made through developing relationships with faith based settings. Many witnesses described CCE as child abuse and not a lifestyle choice, and that this is currently a national crisis. Witnesses did not believe the public are seeing this in these terms. When talking about CCE, it is important that we use language which recognises young people as victims. Witnesses suggested that a hard hitting national campaign (reinforced locally) was needed to convey this message into all communities.
- 3.2.11 In particular, specific community awareness raising around girls was also raised as important. There are different and subtle indicators which could suggest girls are being targeted.
- 3.2.12 More information is needed to understand how to best work with parents and families. Improved analysis of the issues within this city will help to inform this.
- 3.2.13 **Key Finding:** The evolving nature of CCE means young people from all communities and neighbourhoods throughout the city are at risk, and at younger ages. Parents and carers for all young people need to be aware of these risks and understand what steps they can take at an early stage.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Early Intervention and Resilience		
R03	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to work with the Contextual Safeguarding Board and Partners to explore delivery of a campaign to increase the awareness of parents and carers of the risks of exploitation and what steps they can take.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Youth services

- 3.2.14 A consistent theme arising from the evidence is the value of skilled, qualified professionals able to build positive relationships with young people, as well as spaces for young people to feel safe and engage with these professionals. Youth workers support young people to build resilience (by empowering young people to cope in difficult situations) but it also increases the opportunities for early identification and referral, if necessary.
- 3.2.15 The nature of youth work means that youth workers are often the first to notice key indicators of risk or abuse (such as behaviour and mood changes). The youth work relationship (one that centres on young people and is based on trust and reciprocity) means that youth workers may well be the first people that young people turn to when they are ready to disclose a safeguarding concern.¹¹
- 3.2.16 The Inquiry heard how Birmingham Youth Service (BYS) currently has 16 Safe Spaces across the city, and that during 2022-23, worked with 7,010 young people in an average of 13.9 attendances per young person. This also includes an increase in dedicated sessions for girls and specific work with boys to counter the negative impact of social media influencers. Tackling CCE is an integral part of their service offer, and staff receive training to deliver this. BYS outlined that part of their approach is to work with young people to build resilience, so they feel able to make the right choices. They also felt that through their relationships with young people, they are in a good place to become aware of any behaviour which may indicate a young person is at risk, and to respond proactively.
- 3.2.17 The Violence Reduction Partnership, funded primarily by the Home Office, and commissioned by the West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner, brings together

¹¹ [National Youth Agency – How to fulfil your statutory duty: A toolkit for local authorities](#), 2023.

police and other criminal justice agencies, local government, health, education, community and voluntary sector to tackle serious violence and its causes. A range of early intervention activity has been commissioned including Red Thread with a team of specialist youth workers based in A&E departments and a street outreach programme, Step Together which saw chaperones on some of the routes students most commonly take to get home after school. Step Together chaperones were youth workers with training and expertise on how to de-escalate violence and provide guidance and support to children and young people whilst working closely with the relevant local schools and police to help identify and respond to risks.

- 3.2.18 The Inquiry heard from three youth sector organisations who despite delivering some great work with young people, shared a common frustration about funding models which forces them to compete against each other for small pots of funding and results in short term activity focused within communities, often delivering a specific and targeted youth offer. These issues are compounded by the detrimental effects on relationship building with young people and the inability to continue or sustain that relationship once the project had ended. This issue has also been highlighted by 2020 Youth Violence Commission which identified serious problems with the provision of youth services by voluntary youth sector organisations, writing that:

“An extraordinary number of third sector organisations are being forced to compete for small pots of short-term project funding leading to the closure of many organisations and a ‘toxic climate of inadequate and ineffective services.’”¹²

- 3.2.19 Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide a local youth offer for young people and, in line with the strengthened guidance published on 28 September 2023, are required to ensure that their local youth offer is responsive to the needs of young people.¹³

- 3.2.20 [‘Times Running Out: Youth Services under threat and lost opportunities for young people’¹⁴](#) published by the National Youth Agency and the YMCA England and Wales recommended that funding for youth services should be prioritised and be long term and ringfenced:

‘Without a clear commitment by government, strengthened statutory guidance and significant investment in the spending review, with ring-fenced funding in grant settlements for local authorities, the youth sector will be decimated. Young people must be a priority and it is imperative that the government acts to prevent these missed

¹² 2020 Youth Violence Commission, <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/YVC-Final-Report-July-2020.pdf>

¹³ National Youth Agency - <https://www.nya.org.uk/stat-duty/>

¹⁴ [Times running out: Youth services under threat and lost opportunities for young people](#), National Youth Agency and YMCA England & Wales, 2021

opportunities for young people to get the support they need, and from which we all benefit from as a society’.

3.2.21 **Key Finding:** The contribution that youth services make to young people’s lives is highly valued by stakeholders who recognise how effective youth work can be in addressing complex issues and preventing them from requiring more costly intervention. There needs to be a joined-up approach and existing services need to be utilised to strengthen the coordination and cohesion of youth support on the ground.

Key Finding: Early intervention and prevention are critical. [Section 507b of the Education Act \(1996\)](#) requires local authorities to, so far as reasonably practicable, secure access for all qualifying young people to a sufficient quantity of ‘youth services’. Given the loss of youth services in England, and the unprecedented financial pressures faced by local authorities, young people are struggling to find the services they need. To ensure sufficient provision of services for young people, funding for youth services should be prioritised, be long term and ringfenced. Youth services should be protected in statute and Government should commit to funding a statutory Youth Service.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Early Intervention and Resilience			
R04	Recommendation: Council asks the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to lobby Government (and any future change in government) to adequately fund the provision of youth services, with ring fenced funding and to protect this in statute with a Youth Service Bill.	Leader of the Council Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Transitions and Preparations to Adulthood

3.2.22 This stage refers to the period for young people as they are approaching adulthood. This can be a particularly challenging time as the level of service need may remain the same while the nature and amount of service around the child is likely to reduce as they shift to become adult.

3.2.23 In Birmingham, the Transitions and Preparations for Adulthood Service was set up in early 2020 to help young people bridge this challenging period. This is an innovative

prevention and early intervention service for young people aged 18-25¹⁵ which focused upon identified goals and aspirations by empowering them to make positive changes in their lives. During February – August 2023, this service worked with 865 young people from all parts of Birmingham; 13.2% were aged 18 or under.

3.2.24 The service shared with the Inquiry that:

- They had identified a lot of young people referred were identified as at risk of, or involved with, exploitation.
- They wanted to ensure the right support was offered to these young people.
- They also wanted these young people to understand the signs of exploitation for themselves.

3.2.25 The Transitions and Preparations for Adulthood Service highlighted that although there are a number of services working within this field, many are over stretched. They found that they were very much embraced by other agencies who welcomed the additionality they provided.

3.2.26 They identified that around 70% of the young people they supported had either a diagnosis of autism or ADHD, or the service suspected it was un-diagnosed. They worked with young people to understand that the offers of gifts and money are techniques associated with grooming and ways of luring them in and how it is then very difficult to get out.

Increase reporting of young people at risk of CCE

3.2.27 All witnesses highlighted staff from their organisations have undertaken training in CCE. This training focused on what exploitation is; how to identify it and how to make a referral. Nevertheless, concerns were raised that there remains gaps in awareness, and this is leading to missed opportunities for referrals.

3.2.28 The coverage of services is inconsistent across the city. Some services have reduced, stopped or may not have been delivered in parts of the city. Given the evolving nature of CCE and its broader geographic spread, a geographic targeted approach may mean some children are not coming into contact with services who can then refer them to Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub.

3.2.29 However, witnesses also felt that some children who were at risk of, or involved with, exploitation, may not be referred even though they have come into contact with services.

¹⁵ At the time of providing evidence to the inquiry, the service supported young people aged 14-30 years old.

3.2.30 Reasons suggested for this include:

- Unconscious bias in decision making. For example, boys who are Black may not be seen as victims by some professionals due to ‘adultification’¹⁶, or alternatively, certain behaviour for girls which indicate they are victims of exploitation may not be understood in that way.
- As the child is offending, it may not be recognised that they may also be a victim of exploitation.
- Due to high turnover or staff moves in organisations, it may not mean that all staff are up to date with relevant training. This is exacerbated by the evolving nature of CCE.

3.2.31 The Inquiry was concerned that the National Social Work programme does not include specific training on Child Criminal Exploitation. Birmingham Children’s Trust highlighted that they are exploring this as part of their social worker induction package.

3.2.32 West Midlands Police described how they support their officers to deliver the right response at the right time. They ensure officers are trauma informed and use self-reflection to understand the context for each individual. They highlighted how they have the challenge to navigate their responsibilities to catch and convict for serious offences and early intervention. The Police and Crime Commissioner advised that well-resourced community policing is important for early intervention, prevention and diversion.

3.2.33 The Police and Crime Commissioner also highlighted that his team were developing a policy to address unconscious bias in decision making.

3.2.34 Proposed ways to improve this awareness raising for staff included:

- Helping professionals to understand CCE in real terms. For example, training which is delivered with practical examples, case studies and informed by lived experiences. Further this could be tailored to different organisations who will interface with young people in different contexts.
- Using language which recognises young people as victims rather than a lifestyle choice.
- Ensuring a training offer is provided at all touch points including GPs and Children’s Social Workers.
- Training is offered as part of a continuous professional development rather than as a one-off.

¹⁶ See footnote 3.

3.2.35 **Key Finding:** The Inquiry is concerned that young people at risk of, or involved with, CCE are not consistently being identified and referred at an early stage. There are different reasons for this including the availability of services as well as bias in decision making.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Early Intervention and Resilience			
R05	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to request the Contextual Safeguarding Board and Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership work with organisations to review their mandatory training offer to better equip staff to recognise signs of Child Criminal Exploitation and minimise the risk of bias in decision making.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R06	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to work with Birmingham City Council and Birmingham Children’s Trust to ensure all staff working directly with children receive mandatory training on Child Criminal Exploitation and this is part of a continuous professional development approach.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Missing Children

3.2.36 Councils have a responsibility for preventing children from going missing, and safeguarding and protecting them when they do. There should be an up-to-date local [Runaway and Missing from Home and Care Protocol](#) (RMFHC), and all children who go missing should be offered an independent return home interview. Analysis of these interviews should be considered by local safeguarding partners to identify any patterns or emerging issues. Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership particularly highlighted the need to maximise these interviews with young people to help to protect them in the future. Any child who appears to be a victim of exploitation should be supported through safeguarding arrangements.

3.2.37 For the West Midlands, the Violence Reduction Partnership co-ordinates the regional Exploitation and Missing Board, which is co-chaired by the Head of Service at Birmingham Childrens Trust’s Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub. This Board

provides a platform to share good practice across the West Midlands region and has undertaken work such as the development of a core competency framework.

Education

- 3.2.38 All witnesses highlighted how the pastoral support provided by schools is a vital service to protect young people from exploitation. Together with families, schools are well placed to become aware of factors which indicate increased risks to exploitation or see behaviour changes from young people which may indicate exploitation.
- 3.2.39 Key areas where schools make a difference could include incorporating exploitation into Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum; training to staff; monitoring attendance; making referrals to the right agencies and to consider alternatives for exclusions for children. This does take place, but witnesses felt more could be done.
- 3.2.40 Witnesses recognised that this is a challenging role for schools. The following factors were identified by witnesses as contributing to this including:
- 3.2.41 **Strength of the school's pastoral team** – are they offering trauma and child centred approaches? Some witnesses indicated that while they understood the focus for schools is on teaching and learning, they felt that in some schools their pastoral offer did not consider challenges such as exploitation. There were questions about how exploitation features in schools' safeguarding policies.
- 3.2.42 **Delivering a consistent approach** – the varied and complicated nature of the education sector makes it difficult to ensure a consistent approach is undertaken across all schools in all parts of the city, and there are too many schools, where their students and staff are missing this opportunity. Particularly given how CCE has changed in recent years and reinforced by the expectation that a number of young people have not been identified as at risk, a more consistent approach is required. Witnesses did highlight pockets of good practice. For example, schools who had taken up the offer of Violence Reduction Partnership funded programmes. Birmingham Children's Trust Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub also advised that they had a dedicated schools' officer to deliver a more effective interface with schools. The Inquiry queried whether there was a role for Birmingham City Council to influence this.
- 3.2.43 **Resources** – as with many areas of the public sector, available resources are stretched. To deliver more, schools may need additional support and investment to deliver directly, or consideration for joint delivery with other services.

Awareness Raising

- 3.2.44 Witnesses recommended that campaigns need to start from Years 5 and 6 at primary school level right through to senior school. This needs to be a regular, evolving age appropriate package (not just a one off) and supplemented by sessions for staff and parents.

Exclusions

- 3.2.45 The risks between young people not in education and exploitation are well documented, and the Inquiry was already aware that Birmingham has too high a level of exclusions, both at secondary and primary level.
- 3.2.46 There are long term questions whether organisations and partnerships are fully considering and developing alternatives to exclusions. The approach should be 'inclusion not exclusion' to support all young people to succeed in school.
- 3.2.47 The Council outlined the range of panels to assist with this. However, they need to get the right preventative structures in place. There is a new duty for improving attendance that will give them the opportunity to do this. They provided the following summary of activity:
- An Exclusion Strategy is in development – there has been a step forward in the use of data to understand what is happening with exclusions. For example, who is getting excluded. It is important to understand the Head Teachers role in school exclusions and make sure the support is there. As part of the role of the strategy, they will need to monitor more effectively 'what works'.
 - The Tackling Exclusions Group – chaired by Birmingham City Council, and which comprises schools, City of Birmingham School and Birmingham Children's Trust, as some of its members. This group is exploring how they work with schools; address risk factors (such as Children in Care) and base their activity on 'what works'.
 - The Safe Taskforce is a Department for Education funded school led programme with c.£6m for 38 schools to assist with schools' exclusions in Birmingham. There is a re-focus around children with wraparound universal services.
 - Birmingham Youth Service has been working with primary schools on 'from resilience to resolve' project. This has involved 690+ children.

Gaps in Delivery

3.2.48 Three areas were highlighted for potential gaps in delivery:

- Higher Education – Birmingham Children’s Trust felt that there was potential for further engagement.
- Home Schooling – the Inquiry was concerned that these young people (if at risk of, or involved with, exploitation) are invisible to services. Their concern is exacerbated as they understand there has been an increase since the pandemic in home schooling.
- Independent sector including faith schools – it was not clear to the Inquiry what activity took place in independent schools.

3.2.49 **Key Finding:** The pastoral offer in schools needs to be strengthened to reflect increasing challenges around exploitation and embedded in schools’ safeguarding policies including primary schools and for parents.

3.2.50 **Key Finding:** Delivering a consistent offer across all schools is complicated by the structure of the education sector together with resource levels. Partnerships should explore how to influence schools as well as support them to deliver more.

3.2.51 **Key Finding:** Alternatives to exclusions need to be fully explored and utilised. The use of data to inform the Exclusions strategy and Tackling Exclusions group is a step forward.

3.2.52 **Key Finding:** It is not clear how the Council is working with young people who are being home schooled to manage any risks to exploitation.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Early Intervention and Resilience			
R07	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to provide a report to the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the impact of the Council’s work with schools to address exploitation as part of their safeguarding policies. This should include academies and primary schools.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R08	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families		

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	to provide a timeline for the development and publication of an Exclusions strategy, engage with the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny in its development, and commit to providing regular reports on outcomes from the new strategy once in place.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	April 2025 (12 months after report has been published)
R09	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to report to the Education, Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on how the Council is monitoring the risk of exploitation with children and young people who receive Elective Home Education.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

3.3 Supporting Young People to Exit Exploitation

- 3.3.1 The [Working Together to Safeguard Children: a guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children 2018](#) outlines the responsibilities of councils and partners in relation to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. The guidance applies to all organisations and agencies who have functions relating to children, including all councils, NHS, police, education, faith-based organisations and sports clubs.
- 3.3.2 Contextual Safeguarding, which has been developed by Dr Carlene Firmin while she was at the University of Bedfordshire's [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#), recognises that as young people grow and develop they are influenced by a whole range of environments and people outside of their family. For example in school or college, in the local community, in their peer groups or online. Children and young people may encounter risk in any of these environments. Sometimes the different contexts are inter-related and can mean that children and young people may encounter multiple risks. Contextual safeguarding looks at how we can best understand these risks, engage with children and young people and help to keep them safe. It is an approach

that has often been used to apply to adolescents, though the lessons can equally be applied to younger children, especially in today's changing world¹⁷.

- 3.3.3 Birmingham adopts the Contextual Safeguarding approach within this city.
- 3.3.4 The Inquiry heard about how following a referral, which is assessed using the [Joint Screening Tool](#), information is shared between different organisations to enable a joined up and coordinated approach to keeping the child safe.
- 3.3.5 The key mechanisms to share information were identified as:
- Co-location
 - Formal conversations
 - Digital platforms
- 3.3.6 **Co-location:** The Inquiry heard from witnesses about the formal structures in place to support information sharing between organisations. One of the key mechanisms for this is Birmingham Children's Trust Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub which contains multi-agency staff from both statutory and non-statutory services. The setting up and embedding in of this Hub is seen as a significant positive step.
- 3.3.7 **Formal Conversations:** There are also daily case conferences to discuss young people on an individual basis and co-ordinate responses within the city, as well as the Exploitation and Missing Board which is co-chaired by the Head of Service for Birmingham Children's Trust Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub.
- 3.3.8 As a practical example of the contextual approach, the Inquiry was also advised that community intelligence such as 'what is happening outside on the street or in the wider community,' is also informing approaches to young people. This further reinforces the need to establish the right partnerships within the community.
- 3.3.9 The Inquiry heard evidence from Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust who raised concerns that relevant statutory organisations may be missed in these case conferences. They provided examples where they had not been included in relevant discussions about young people and, as a result, they felt that the assessment of risk for CCE had been made on incomplete information and was assessed as lower than it should have been. They also highlighted how they had been working with vulnerable young people with complex mental health needs who had been involved with exploitation, and they had not been provided with all of the relevant information about this exploitation.
- 3.3.10 **Digital Platforms:** There is no current information IT platform in place to link different organisations; this would make it easier and quicker to share information. Birmingham

¹⁷ [Contextual Safeguarding: What is it and why does it matter?](#), NSPCC, accessed 1 March 2024.

Children's Trust highlighted there are discussions taking place to consider potential solutions for this.

- 3.3.11 CCE networks operate across intra-regional boundaries, the effective dissemination of intelligence across and beyond the region is also required. A digital solution may provide a more effective platform for this.

Third Sector

- 3.3.12 Both national and local third sector organisations are recognised by statutory partners as critical stakeholders with professional expertise; this is both in the early intervention and post assessment stage. They are often able to deliver in a more flexible, agile and bespoke way to the particular needs of young people. This may be more challenging for large public sector organisations with statutory responsibilities and operating across the whole city.
- 3.3.13 As third sector organisations do not have statutory responsibilities, it may be easier for them to build and maintain positive relationships with young people and families. Local third sector organisations are also often rooted in communities. This presents them with a distinct advantage, as their delivery can be informed by contextual knowledge about what is happening in the community, and which may be affecting individual young people.
- 3.3.14 Birmingham Children's Trust Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub has placed particular importance on developing strong relationships with community partners, and they see this as an area for continued growth.
- 3.3.15 Local community organisations acknowledged there has been progress in collaborative working in recent years since the setting up of Empower U Hub and the Violence Reduction Partnership. However, they also specifically highlighted how the current arrangements for information sharing does limit the effectiveness of this collaboration for young people. For example, they feel statutory services are risk averse to sharing information – to address this, third sector organisations have aimed to embed themselves in statutory organisations or partnerships groups to build trust and relationships. However, this may compromise their independence and flexibility in delivery.
- 3.3.16 The following gaps were highlighted:
- Birmingham Children's Trust has concerns that there needs to be more activity for young people who are trying to exit from exploitation.
 - They also highlighted that more work is required with parents and carers to help them support young people to process trauma.

- Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust felt that the system of interventions and in particular the non-statutory sector is not equipped to deal with young people with high mental health needs.

3.3.17 **Key Finding:** Communities themselves have a vital and essential role to tackle CCE. Communities and community based organisations often have valuable information and insight into what is happening. In recent years, community based organisations have played a greater role working alongside statutory organisations to address this issue. This needs to continue. There are more opportunities to better use the information within communities to keep young people safe.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
Supporting Young People to Exit Exploitation			
R10	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to consider how intelligence and information can be better shared with community partners and public sector organisations.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

3.4 Enforcement

- 3.4.1 The Inquiry heard how CCE is linked to organised crime. Young people involved with this exploitation are often the ‘foot soldiers’. Recruitment of young people by these gangs is often sophisticated and adapts to who they are targeting.
- 3.4.2 West Midlands Police outlined their operational model to address CCE. They also provided assurances that prosecutions are undertaken. They highlighted how when a young person commits a serious offence, it is difficult to determine who is the exploiter and who is the exploited.
- 3.4.3 Birmingham Children’s Trust advised they felt that there are more opportunities for enforcement action and in particular, to target the Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) themselves.
- 3.4.4 Further to this, they highlighted that there is a need for information campaigns to get communities behind efforts to prevent exploitation. This campaign should have a national focus to mobilise community opinion against exploitation and stigmatise exploiters, as it has worked in other campaigns previously. Successful prosecutions

will encourage communities to get involved. They described these exploiters as child abusers, and everyone needs to be framing their thinking in this way. They referred to the [Eyes Open](#)¹⁸ campaign – a regional campaign in Merseyside which has aimed to do this and delivered results. The campaign, championed by Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership, asks the people of Merseyside to keep their 'Eyes Open' to the signs of drug gangs grooming the county's young people and provides information and resources to the community, to schools and to partner organisations¹⁹.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Enforcement		
R11	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities to lobby for a national and/or regional campaign to highlight enforcement action against Organised Crime Groups (OCGs) which are exploiting young people.	Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	Oct 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

3.5 Strategy and Governance

- 3.5.1 The Birmingham Contextual Safeguarding Board published its Strategy and Delivery Plan for Tackling Exploitation of Children and Young People 2023-26 last year. This outlines progress over the past three years and its priorities for the next three years. The Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Board is a multi-agency group. This Board acts on behalf of the Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership and Birmingham Community Safety Partnership.
- 3.5.2 The diagram below outlines the governance arrangements in place for the Tackling Exploitation of Children and Young People 2023-26 strategy. The inquiry had concerns that there was not a clear and common understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities to hold the strategy and the Contextual Safeguarding Board to account, or how this would be done. As a result, this may arise in gaps in accountability or duplication of activity.

¹⁸ [Eyes Open: The Campaign to stop Child Criminal Exploitation](https://ourmerseyside.org/cce/) - <https://ourmerseyside.org/cce/>

¹⁹ Feedback received from the Birmingham Safeguarding Childrens Partnership (BSCP) to the report also questioned whether there could be opportunities to question 'is drug use too socially acceptable with little thought to the exploitation that is supporting the supply of drugs'.



- 3.5.3 There is evidence of a public health approach informing this strategy. In essence, this means analysing information to identify what is causing exploitation and using this analysis to develop interventions to prevent further exploitation. It also involves multiple partners working together to implement these interventions and doing more of ‘what works’.
- 3.5.4 However, there is a challenge for the Board to build on this progress and work towards implementing a whole system approach. There remain gaps in education, health, justice and care systems and how they join up their services effectively, which leave children vulnerable to exploitation. There are also further improvements to be made on the analysis of data.
- 3.5.5 The financial context for Local Government and Birmingham City Council in particular raises concerns whether this strategy can be delivered.
- 3.5.6 There is also some confusion about how the strategy and its delivery will be scrutinised and held to account, and how this will be done compared to what is outlined in the strategy itself.
- 3.5.7 The Inquiry considered that there would be local benefits to address exploitation if national policy around young people is more joined up. A government minister for young people could enable a cross governmental strategy to be developed which offers a holistic and joined up approach, delivers a wide range of support and interventions that protects and supports young people, and is delivered by a professional workforce across education, the voluntary sector, and local authorities.
- 3.5.8 **Key Finding:** The introduction of a new specific strategy is welcomed and a needed step forward. Many of the Inquiry’s own findings concur with the priorities identified in the strategy. However, achieving the strategy’s ambitions will be even more

challenging in the current national and local financial context. Current funding envelopes limit the development of longer term programmes which deliver real benefit.

3.5.9 **Key Finding:** The governance of the strategy needs to be more robust and meaningful, so it is truly held to account. There is not a consistent view of who has accountability and whether this provides effective challenge.

3.5.10 **Key Finding:** To deliver a joined up approach locally, there needs to be a joined up approach nationally. A Minister for Young People could deliver real benefits around national policy making for young people.

Ref	Recommendations to Cabinet Members	Responsibility	Completion Date
	Governance and Strategy		
R12	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to report back on the progress, and outcomes achieved of the strategy and delivery plan: Tackling Exploitation of Children and Young People 2023-26	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R13	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to clarify the governance and accountability arrangements for this strategy.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)
R14	Recommendation: Council asks the Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities and the Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families to lobby Government (and future Government) for a Minister for Young People to enable joined up and holistic policy making in relation to young people.	Cabinet Member for Children, Young People and Families Cabinet Member for Social Justice, Community Safety and Equalities	October 2024 (6 months after report has been published)

Appendix 1 – Inquiry Activities

Date	Session	Evidence
30 November 2022	Education and Children's Social Care O&S Committee Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birmingham Children's Trust
17 May 2023	Education and Children's Social Care O&S Committee Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young People's Substance Misuse Service - Aquarius and Birmingham City Council - Public Health • Birmingham City Council - Youth Service, Children and Families Directorate
9 August 2023	Call for Evidence survey launched	
10 August 2023	Task and Finish Group Evidence Gathering Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birmingham Children's Trust • Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub • West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner • Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP)
18 August 2023	Task and Finish Group Evidence Gathering Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (BSMHFT)
25 August 2023	Task and Finish Group Evidence Gathering Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Midlands Police
30 August 2023	Task and Finish Group Evidence Gathering Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birmingham Community Safety Partnership (BCSP) • Birmingham City Council – Community Safety
5 September 2023	Call For Evidence survey closed	
26 September 2023	Task and Finish Group Evidence Gathering Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Birmingham City Council - Thriving Children and Families, Children and Families Directorate • Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP)
20 November 2023	Task and Finish Group Evidence Gathering Session	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Essence Youth Mentoring Service • First Class Foundation • Bringing Hope Charity

Appendix 2: Contributors

Below is a list of all contributors to this inquiry:

Aquarius

Aquarius Action Projects (part of the Richmond Fellowship) delivers the Young People's Substance Misuse Service. The key commissioning intentions are to minimise the misuse of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, and reduce risk/vulnerabilities in a holistic approach.

Aquarius work with young people up to the age of 25 (previously 18), this aligns with other young people services, for example, Forward Thinking Birmingham.

Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (BSMHFT)

BSMHFT work with young people with mental health difficulties who pose a serious risk of violence towards others and/or themselves. A high proportion of the young people they work with have experienced CCE. In their inpatient services, 44% report being exploited with in a gang, whilst 37% of their community referrals are known to be experiencing CCE.

Birmingham Children's Trust

Children's services in Birmingham are managed by Birmingham Children's Trust and Birmingham City Council. Birmingham Children's Trust was set up in 2018 by Birmingham City Council to create the conditions that enabled good social work and family support to flourish.²⁰

Birmingham City Council: Children and Families Directorate

The Children and Families Directorate delivers services such as:

- Early years support and education.
- Services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).
- Travel for children and young people.
- Youth and career services.²¹

²⁰

https://www.birminghamchildrenstrust.co.uk/news/article/164/celebrating_good_news_for_children_s_services_in_birmingham

²¹

https://www.birmingham.gov.uk/info/50320/working_with_children_young_people_and_families/2872/about_the_children_and_families_directorate

Birmingham City Council: Public Health

The Health and Social Care Act 2012 and associated regulations transferred the responsibility for public health from the NHS to local authorities from April 2013. Under the HSC Act 2012, local authorities have a legal duty to protect children from harm, reduce health inequalities and improve the health of their local population by ensuring that there are public health services aimed at reducing drug and alcohol misuse and is a condition of the Public Health Grant that is received into the Council.

Birmingham Community Safety Partnership (BCSP)

The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) mandated all local authority areas to establish Crime and Disorder Partnerships. In Birmingham, this partnership is referred to as the Birmingham Community Safety Partnership (BCSP).

The core membership of the BCSP includes all Responsible Authorities. These include Birmingham City Council; Birmingham Children's Trust; West Midlands Police; West Midlands Fire Service; National Probation Service; and Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board. Co-opted members are Birmingham Social Housing Partnership, West Midlands Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP), Office of the Police & Crime Commissioner (OPCC) for the West Midlands and the Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Trust.²²

The BCSP has responsibility for discharging the following statutory requirements:

- Work together to form and implement strategies to prevent and reduce crime and anti-social behaviour, and the harm caused by drug and alcohol misuse. This will include producing an annual plan.
- Produce plans to reduce re-offending by adults and young people.
- Commission Domestic Homicide Reviews. To work in partnership to reduce serious violence – new duty came into effect in January 2023 and involves the introduction of an Offensive Weapon Homicide Review.
- Consult and engage with the community.

In addition to the above, the BCSP will also support partner organisations to discharge their legal duties for Prevent, modern slavery, contextual safeguarding, domestic abuse and manage the anti-social behaviour case review.

Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP)

The Birmingham Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP) oversees how organisations work together to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children and young people in Birmingham.

Birmingham City Council, West Midlands Police, NHS Birmingham and Solihull Integrated Care Board, working in close collaboration with Birmingham Children's Trust, have a shared statutory

²² BCSP Annual Report 2022/23

responsibility for leading safeguarding arrangements to ensure that safeguarding children is everyone's business.²³

Birmingham Childrens Trust: Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub

Birmingham Children's Trust Empower U Exploitation and Missing Hub is a partnership team which takes a contextual approach to protecting children and keeping them safe and free from exploitation with a coordinated and proactive response from prevention through to safeguarding and prosecution.

It is funded by Birmingham Children's Trust and Birmingham City Council with co-location and/or virtual representation from:

- West Midlands Police.
- Health (includes Red Thread & Sexual and Mental Health services).
- Education.
- West Midlands Police.
- Community Safety Partnership.
- Probation.
- Housing.

Bringing Hope Charity

Bringing Hope is a charity based in Birmingham that works in prisons and the community with those involved in serious violence and crime.²⁴

Essence Youth Mentoring Service Community Interest Company

Essence Youth Mentoring Service works with schools.

First Class Foundation

First Class Foundation is a charity that specialises in tackling youth violence, building mental health resilience and connecting families to positive outcomes. They have street outreach workers and youth mentors and work with other organisations and signpost young people.

Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP)

The VRP is hosted by the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner (OPCC). The Commissioner chairs the VRP Strategic Board. It is funded through the Home Office Serious Violence Fund, which brings together local authorities, police, probation, fire, health, education,

²³ <https://lscpbirmingham.org.uk/about-us/who-we-are>

²⁴ <https://www.bringinghope.co.uk/>

voluntary and community sector agencies to deliver a whole system, preventative response to serious violence, including county lines activity.

West Midlands Police

West Midlands Police is the second largest police force in the country, covering an area of 348 square miles and serving a population of almost 2.8 million.²⁵

West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner

The role of the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) is to be the voice of the people and hold the police to account. They are responsible for the totality of policing. Under the terms of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011, PCCs must:

- Secure efficient and effective police for their area.
- Appoint the Chief Constable, hold them to account for running the force, and if necessary, dismiss them.
- Set the police and crime objectives for their area through a police and crime plan.
- Set the force budget and determine the precept.
- Contribute to the national and international policing capabilities set out by the Home Secretary.
- Bring together community safety and criminal justice partners, to make sure local priorities are joined up.

²⁵ <https://www.west-midlands.police.uk/about-us/our-force>