

1 June 2021		ITEM: 7
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Report for Members on Missing Children, Child Exploitation, Return Home Interviews and Contextual Safeguarding focussed on Children Looked After		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-key	
Report of: Clare Moore Strategic Lead Youth Offending Service and Prevention		
Accountable Assistant Director: Janet Simon, Interim Assistant Director Childrens Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director Childrens Services		
This report is: Public		

Executive Summary

This report provides members of the Corporate Parenting Committee with an overview in relation to Children Looked After that are at risk of Child Exploitation, frequently Missing from Care, Return Home Interviews and the approach of Contextual Safeguarding to reduce risk and disrupt activities that place children at risk of harm.

Staff across Social Care, Youth Offending and Early Help are committed to supporting children who are at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation and with our partners aim to minimise risks using a multi-agency approach.

Ofsted undertook an inspection of Children's Services in November 2019 with an overall outcome of "Good". Ofsted identified the following needed improvement:

Alignment and effectiveness of systems that support children at risk of criminal and sexual exploitation and children missing from home and care, to ensure that children can tell their stories.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 This report provides the Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee with an overview into the work that has taken place since January 2020 and the improvement journey. There is a commitment from staff to implement these changes, with areas of good practice. Members are asked to note the contents of this report and the provision of support given to young people at risk of exploitation.**

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Following the Ofsted Inspection in November 2019, Childrens Services commissioned a consultant with a focus on Child Exploitation to undertake some improvement work with the service for 3 months. This included:

- A review and rewrite of the Child Exploitation (CE) and Vulnerability Risk Assessment tool, so that Social Workers had clarity about the factors that placed a child at risk. The tool included scaling to identify those children at low, medium and high risk
- A planning tool that brought together the partnership to help safeguard young people at medium and high risk
- A Strategy Meeting template that provided guidance to the Social Worker of the additional professionals required to disrupt and reduce risks
- Training to staff on how to use the new templates and an introduction to Contextual Safeguarding which is an approach to assessing and planning for abuse that occurs outside of the family home in schools, the community and via peer groups. In order to do this effectively, it needs the input from professionals from a wider network that includes Community Safety, the Police, Youth Offending Service, Housing, Trading Standards and Licensing
- Improved data reporting on CE and Missing Children

2.2 Further changes to practice have taken place, which includes:

- Monthly Tracking meetings looking at individual cases within the Child and Family Assessment Teams, Family Support Teams and Children Looked After Teams
- A refresh of the weekly Risk Management Meetings (RMM) and multi-agency meetings to discuss Missing Children and plan for their safety
- A change in April 2020, of the commissioned service for Return Home Interviews to INSPIRE, with clear performance indicators, that are monitored monthly
- Ongoing training for Children's Social Care staff on Gangs, CE and Contextual Safeguarding that are delivered quarterly
- Training to taxi drivers and hotel staff on CE and how to identify and report concerns

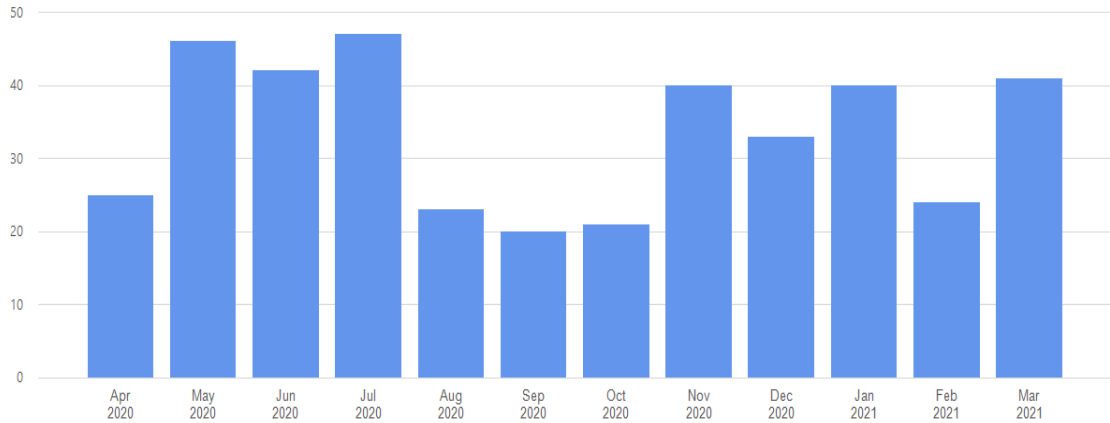
- Recruitment of a CE and Missing Children Manager to co-ordinate and support individual workers with case management
- Recruitment of a Gangs and CE senior practitioner in the Youth Offending Team that works alongside Case Managers and Social Workers, to support and upskill them in working with high risk cases
- Additional support to schools and colleges to identify young people and their peer groups at risk and provide interventions
- Audits of cases where CE and Missing Children are the focus, improvements in practice have been evidenced
- Bi monthly Contextual Safeguarding reports which identify those children most at risk and the places and peer groups that they associate with in order to disrupt activities
- Extensive mapping, including the early identification of young people who may be involved with or on the periphery of gang activity in Thurrock involving partner agencies to support diversion, disruption and enforcement activities
- CE Champions identified within the Social Work teams to drive performance and interventions
- A number of Operations across Thurrock, Southend and Essex that includes targeted support on trains and at transport hubs to identify young people at risk

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 Missing Children

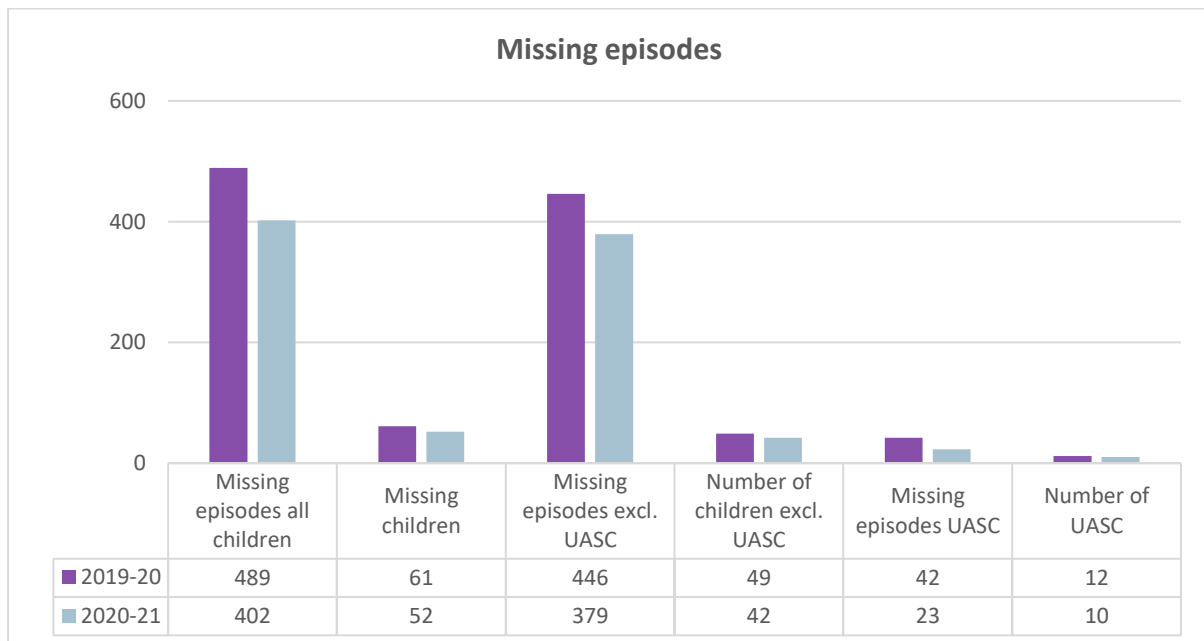
Thurrock records all missing episodes for Children Looked After. These episodes may be for an hour or less rather than days. Foster carers and placement providers are required to follow the Council's procedures and report young people missing to the police and advise the service if they are unaware of the young person's whereabouts e.g. if a child was not home by an agreed time. Once a child returned home, a return home interview will be held with the child through Inspire. Often the same children have had a repeat episode of missing. Each episode is recorded which contributes to the overall number.

The below graph demonstrates a fluctuating picture in the number of missing episodes across the year. In 2020/2021 we had a total of 402 missing episode relating to 52 children (including 10 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking children). 400 of these episodes were for short periods and the young people returned to their placements. 2 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking were missing from care on 31st March 2021



Apr 2020	May 2020	Jun 2020	Jul 2020	Aug 2020	Sep 2020	Oct 2020	Nov 2020	Dec 2020	Jan 2021	Feb 2021	Mar 2021	Total
25	46	42	47	23	20	21	40	33	40	24	41	402

The table below is a comparison of performance in 2020/21 to the previous year and shows a reduction in missing episodes, the numbers of children who have had a missing episode, and a significant reduction in the proportion of missing episodes in the UASC cohort.

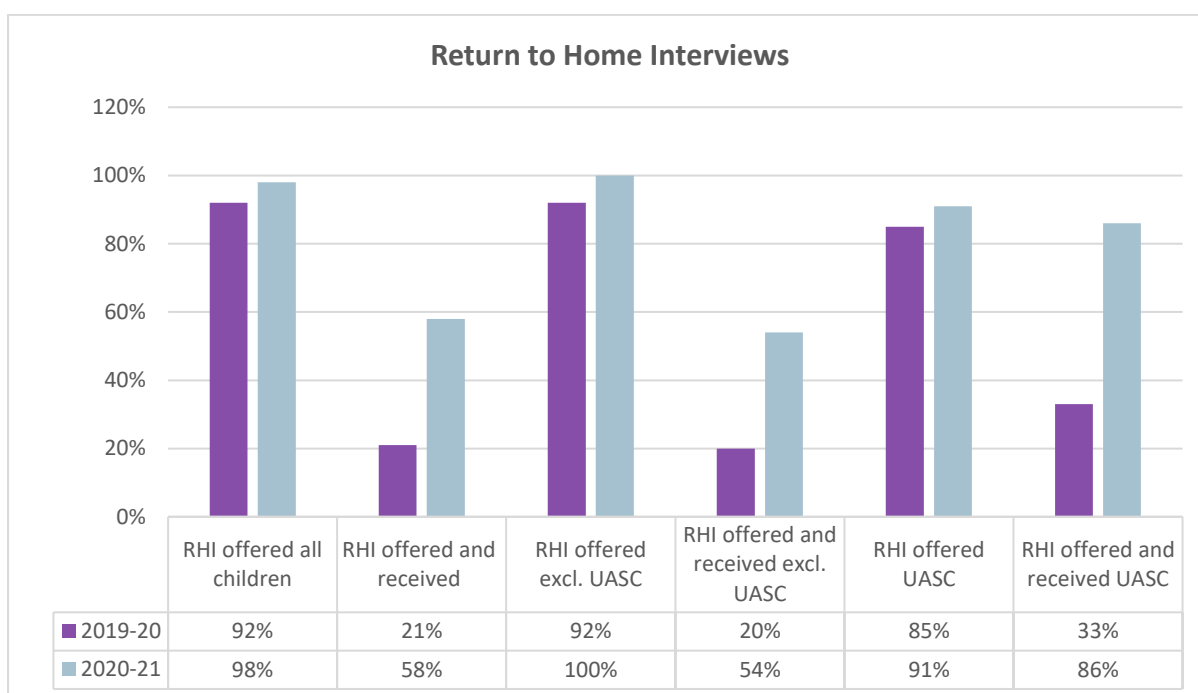


3.2 Return Home Interviews (RHI):

Return Home Interviews are an opportunity for young people who go missing to talk about why they go missing, to share where they have been, with who and any other details they may want to share about the episode including their reasons for going missing. Examples of reason given by young people for

going missing include; *'I want to be with friends', 'I don't like my placement.'* *'My placement is too far away' and 'I have been placed there without any discussion'.* The completed RHI's, are of good quality, and are used towards contextual safeguarding, planning and mapping exercises and are shared with the Social Workers to support their work with their children.

A referral for a Return Home Interview is made as soon as a child is no longer missing. The expectation is that these will be completed by Inspire who provide the service, within 72 hours of receipt. The data below demonstrates an improvement in performance in relation to the number of RHI's offered and interviews taken up and compares performance over the last two years;



3.3 Oversight and planning for children considered at risk of exploitation

Contextual Safeguarding

Is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families. It recognises that the different relationships that young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools and online can feature violence and abuse.

Thurrock has four operational structures overseen by the Thurrock Local Safeguarding Children's Partnership, Community Safety Partnership and the Thurrock Violence and Vulnerability Board which supports the sharing of information and planning together using a contextual perspective;

Thurrock Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) Meetings

Meets every six weeks and collates information and data from partners to help to identify developing CE and exploitative concerns across the Borough to

inform collaborative strategic and operational response to safeguard, protect victims and to target, and disrupt with a view to prosecute possible perpetrators.

Risk Management Meeting (RMM)

Multi-agency forum held weekly which reviews the cases of all weekly reported missing episodes; those who are assessed to be at high risk of CSE / CE, or those children who are currently being exploited. The RMM provides an opportunity for the multi-agency network to share information and plan.

Child Exploitation tracker Meetings

An internal operational CE tracker meeting which supports social workers and their managers with CSE/CE cases ensuring strategy meetings, CE Risk & Vulnerability assessments and risk management plans are completed and that these processes are supporting the care planning and safeguarding of children and young people at risk of exploitation.

Gang Related Violence Forum (GRV)

The GRV is a YOS led multi-agency forum which meets monthly and has oversight of gang nominals and those that are at risk/being exploited across the borough. Multi-agency plans are developed and put in place to reduce the risk of harm, manage safety and wellbeing and look at gang exit strategies.

3.4 Impact of the work undertaken

- Audits outcomes highlight that the work done so far regarding CE has improved our practice over the last year. Practitioners are becoming familiar with CE issues and the safety planning to support this
- The Exploitation Manager is reaching out to various agencies to continue raising awareness of CE through training and multi-agency meetings. This is supporting positive relationships as well as identifying crucial hotspots and patterns of concern. There are monthly meetings with the Community Safety Partnership, Police, Trading Standards and any other relevant partners to advise them of any concerns and action required to minimise and disrupt risk
- The number of Thurrock children going missing has declined year on year over the last three years
- There is good management oversight of missing cases and children are routinely offered return home interviews
- There are effective strategic responses to operational information, which can be evidenced within the SET and multi-agency partnership approaches to child exploitation

- Practitioners are familiar with the CE Champions across Children & Families and are actively seeking advice. There has been 45 separate consultations in the last 3 months
- Information arising from return home interviews are being used to inform strategic safeguarding approaches such as identifying spaces, places and peer group associations that have led to some successful planning in disruption from other agencies.
- Operational link between the CE & Missing Lead encouraging information sharing and opening up links with partner agencies including detailed information sharing at the Risk Management meetings which have led to robust multi-agency safety plans being implemented to reduce risks.
- The involvement with several SET projects aims to support raising the awareness of 'hard to reach' agencies and providing a consistent approach
- The ongoing delivery of the training is continuing to develop practice in understanding exploitation, not just with our partner agencies, but also internally with practitioners and is receiving positive feedback.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Members of the Committee are updated and aware of the developments and improvements in practice in both the operational and strategic management of Missing Children and children and young people at risk of exploitation.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

Not applicable

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 The work undertaken in relation to Missing and Exploited Children meets the recommendations by Ofsted in the Inspection report, November 2019, and the statutory expectations, which are also aligned with Thurrock priorities of People, Place and Prosperity.
- 6.2 The work within the service supports our vulnerable young people to access the opportunities, including education and training provided by Thurrock and its community to live safely from harm.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead Finance

There are no financial implications.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

The Council has a duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of Looked After Children under Section 22 of the Children Act 1989. Further it has the duty to make arrangements with other agencies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

The Council must have regard to the Statutory Guidance on 'children who run away or go missing from home or care' in exercising its functions.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Natalie Smith**
Strategic Lead: Community Development and Equalities

Young people who are or have been looked after are more disadvantaged and face more difficulties than their peers in achieving independence. They often become independent at a younger age and have to cope with major challenges and changes in their lives in a much shorter time and with less support than their peers. Looked after Children are also more likely to be involved with the Criminal Justice System, have addictions, mental health issues and difficulty forming attachments.

7.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

The immediate risks/ impact associated with CLA going missing include:

- No means of support or legitimate income - leading to high risk activities

- Involvement in criminal activities
- Victim of abuse
- Victim of crime, for example through sexual assault and exploitation
- Alcohol/substance misuse

8. Background papers used in preparing the report (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

Not applicable.

Report Author:

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Children's Services