



HM Inspectorate  
of Probation



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Dear Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership

### **Joint targeted area inspection of Coventry**

This letter summarises the findings of the joint targeted area inspection (JTAI) of the multi-agency response to serious youth violence in Coventry.

This inspection took place from 18 to 22 March 2024. It was carried out by inspectors from Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP).

### **Context**

The findings in the report evaluate the effectiveness of the multi-agency response to children aged 10 and over who are at risk of or affected by serious youth violence and/or criminal exploitation. Even where the report does not specifically refer to this group of children, all findings relate to this scope.

The inspectorates recognise the complexities for agencies in intervening to address serious youth violence when risk and harm occur outside of the family home. As a consequence, risk assessment and decision-making have a number of complexities and challenges. A multi-agency inspection of this area of practice is more likely to highlight some of the significant challenges to partnerships in improving practice. We anticipate that each of the joint targeted area inspections (JTAs) of this area of practice that are being carried out will identify learning for all agencies and will contribute to the debate about what good practice looks like in relation to the multi-agency response to serious youth violence. In a significant proportion of children seen by inspectors, children had also experienced other forms of abuse, which reflects the complexity of the needs and risks for children.



## Headline findings

Children at risk of criminal exploitation and serious youth violence are safer as a result of the effective partnership work undertaken by both statutory services and the third sector to reduce risks in places and spaces as well as for individual young people in Coventry. Mature partnership arrangements are in place. Since 2019, partners in Coventry have continued to focus on serious youth violence and exploitation. Their response to the new serious violence duty, through the Coventry Serious Violence Prevention Partnership led by the police, with strong links to the West Midlands Regional Violence Reduction Partnership and Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership, further builds on the learning from the city's experience of serious youth violence. A range of aligned subgroups, with exploitation as a clear overarching strategic partnership priority, ensures a mature, coordinated approach across the partnership. This has achieved tangible and sustained progress to reduce harm to children from serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation over a number of years through its public health approach.

Leaders and partners use nearly every opportunity to learn and improve practice in this highly complex area. Consequently, services are continually enhanced to better protect children and to address emerging threats within the community. A strong culture of support, collaboration and learning is evident at every level of the partnership, leading to a positive difference for these highly vulnerable children in Coventry. Despite this, the areas' understanding of disproportionality for children at risk of or who experience child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence is not yet sufficiently well understood.

Partnerships in Coventry have a well-developed understanding of the causes and consequences of serious youth violence and the factors that make children vulnerable, particularly the link with criminal exploitation. There is a systemic approach to ensure that new and emerging threats are identified and assessed which are captured through the key strategic partnerships, operational meetings and partnership subgroups. As a consequence, the risks reduce for many children at risk of criminal exploitation and serious youth violence.

There is a strong and clear focus on prevention and early intervention, which supports the partnership's priorities. Children and the community have been thoroughly engaged with developing strategies and interventions. Adoption of a public health approach over several years has resulted in a range of services to identify children at risk early, followed up with targeted interventions, which keep these highly vulnerable children safer, supported and often in education. The emergency duty team does not offer a sufficiently proactive response to incidents of serious youth violence which occur outside of office hours.



## What needs to improve?

- The emergency duty team provides a minimal safeguarding response to incidents of serious youth violence, meaning that strategy meetings are not held at the earliest opportunity and plans are made to provide immediate protection for younger children in the family without a social worker seeing the child or family to assess.
- Children wait too long to receive mental health assessments from the child and adolescent mental health services crisis teams, and children who become looked after wait too long for their initial health assessment.
- Some professionals are not sufficiently curious and accept children's explanations at face value, which results in risks to children and young people not being wholly understood.
- Transition for children between service provision is not always well enough considered for them, particularly as they approach 18.
- The understanding of the impact for different cohorts of children in relation to serious youth violence and particularly the potential for disproportionate responses to Black boys.

## Strengths

- A well-considered and tailored approach is taken to ensure that the right resources and personnel are matched to the needs of each child to build a trusting relationship.
- Agencies work effectively together, within Coventry and beyond the area's boundaries. The 'no borders' approach adopted by partners benefits children who move between areas to reduce risk for children and their families.
- The specialist Horizon Team is a highly effective multi-agency resource working with key partners who support children at risk of violence, including those children who have committed serious violent crimes.
- Sophisticated and embedded mapping of places and people is done in real time and shared with key partners, including the police and probation, to identify further children who may be at risk.
- Exploitation screening tools are well embedded and used by partners to ensure an up-to-date understanding of risk which includes criminal exploitation and serious youth violence.
- Effective out-of-court disposal arrangements are in place to prevent children being criminalised unnecessarily.



- A well-embedded trauma-informed approach across all agencies supports reflective practice.
- Effective strategic partnerships maintain a comprehensive overview of risks. Partners develop strategic and joint commissioning plans to deliver a range of effective services and interventions that reduce and disrupt child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence, which make children, their families and communities safer.
- West Midlands Ambulance Service supports the area of Coventry to reduce the impact of serious youth violence through a number of well-thought-through initiatives.
- Engagement with communities, children, and parents and carers is strong and service developments are very much informed by their views.

## Main findings

Coventry has high levels of deprivation. It is the 43rd most deprived local authority in England. About 32% of its areas are among the most deprived 20% in England. About 30% of pupils in the area are eligible for pupil premium, compared with 28% for England overall. In Coventry, 58% of children are from ethnic minority groups.

Children at risk of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation receive an effective and timely response from partner agencies in the multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH). These vulnerable children are appropriately viewed as needing help and protection, and receive a response focused on their welfare. Serious violence risks are identified collectively, enhanced by access to the exploitation workers in the specialist exploitation Horizon Team. Additional intelligence gained from complex mapping ensures a strong response to identification of other children who may be at risk beyond those who are the focus of the referral. Parents are involved in decision-making whenever possible and MASH checks reference the strengths in the family as identified by parents and children.

Strategy meetings are routinely attended by all key agencies, which achieve timely and effective outcomes to investigate and reduce risks. However, although information is exchanged out of office hours and advice given, strategy meetings do not routinely take place in response even to serious incidents. This means information is not fully shared at the earliest opportunity and immediate safeguarding decisions are made without full information or seeing the children and their parents.



Agencies work together effectively, within Coventry and beyond the area's boundaries. Children who move between areas benefit from the 'no borders' consideration used by partners to reduce risk. Information is shared effectively across most agencies who work with children and young people. However, there are some exceptions, such as when information is not shared with GPs and acute health services.

Care is taken to apply a tailored approach to ensure that the right resources and personnel are matched to the needs of each child to build a trusting relationship. Practitioners across agencies, including the third sector, build strong, sustained and trusting relationships with children. Strong relationships are achieved with children, as a result of the persistent strength-based and tailored approach to working with these highly vulnerable children. Staff are responsive to individual children's needs, and advocate for the right support to be given, including the right health practitioners. Workers across agencies have a strong understanding of the needs of these children, which includes children's backgrounds, interests and things that motivate them. This enables children to have the confidence to speak and share their experiences and opinions with professionals and trusted adults.

Exploitation screening tools are well embedded and used by partners to accurately understand, analyse and review risks which include criminal exploitation and serious youth violence for most children. This ensures that there is an up-to-date understanding of risk. These children are supported and helped to understand their experiences and the progress they have made to reduce risks. Intensive Multi-Agency Case Consultation (IMACC) assessment is an example of strong planning, involving a wide range of agencies known to the family, which leads to a comprehensive shared assessment of need via a case formulation approach.

Professional curiosity is not sufficiently consistent across all partner organisations. Although many practitioners display an enquiring approach, some lack sufficient professional curiosity, meaning that children's explanations are accepted at face value and that the child's wider lived experience is not fully explored. Occasional overoptimism about parental capacity to change and sustain improvements is evident for a small number of children for whom there are also concerns within the home as well as risks from serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. This results in some potential risks and needs not always being wholly understood at the earliest opportunity.

Robust consideration and delivery of the right intervention at the right time with the right person through a range of interventions leads to positive outcomes which reduce risks. Horizon workers undertake direct work which is creative and encourages children to talk about their heritage and history. This opens the door to



more difficult conversations about risk of criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. Close working relationships with the police promote good information-sharing about these risks combined with joint work and visiting when needed.

There is a clear public health approach across the partnership to reduce the risk of serious youth violence. This is supported and equally driven by all partners and providers at both operational and strategic level. An example of this is with the public health offer from school nursing, where universal health questionnaire findings are being used to inform education and police intelligence.

It is a strength that children within the Youth Justice Service or those who are in care can be prioritised for neurodevelopmental assessments, although not all practitioners are aware of this. Children wait too long to receive mental health assessments when in crisis. This means that families have to manage their child's mental health needs without immediate mental health assessment, support and guidance. For children in care, there is a delay in receiving their initial health assessment. This means that looked after children who experience serious youth violence could have unidentified health needs when entering the care system.

Transition between services as children grow older is not planned for sufficiently well. Progress has been made to improve transition for young people between the Youth Justice Service and the Probation Service. Transition between different phases of education, both pre- and post-16 to 18 years old, is not always considered at an earlier enough stage for this cohort of children, who are more likely to have experienced educational disruption. As children reach 18 years old, plans for their next stage are less clear about how the momentum of the multi-agency protective work already under way will be sustained. For older children after they leave care, the level of intelligence gathering and sharing drops significantly, as does the level and frequency of visiting and support, often at a point in their lives where they may become more vulnerable as they start to live independently.

Staff working with children are well supported with their emotional and personal safety. Most practitioners receive good-quality safeguarding supervision and have access to safeguarding teams to raise concerns. Some services use trauma-informed supervision to support the emotional well-being of their staff as well as consideration of vicarious trauma.

Clear governance arrangements are in place which sight and align several strategic boards on the issue of serious youth violence in the city. Jointly commissioned services avoid duplication and match the best resource to the child. The parity afforded to the third sector provision greatly enhances the offer available to children.



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Development of trust with young people and their families has been instrumental in developing effective solutions and creative ways of working with young people.

Several strategic boards, which include the Community Safety Partnership, Coventry Safeguarding Children Board (CSCP) as well as the regional Violence Reduction Partnership and the more recently established Coventry Serious Violence Prevention Partnership, deliver the overarching exploitation priority. Many subgroups operate effectively and are coordinated through strong executive arrangements within the CSCP executive board which provides a regular forum with leaders from the three core agencies. Exploitation is a key priority across the strategic partnerships, which subgroups address through a range of coordinated and aligned actions. Leaders and managers across agencies share and analyse a plethora of information to better know and understand the prevalence of child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. This means there is a comprehensive, up-to-date understanding of the localities where children may be at risk. Core performance data is shared, and intelligence informs planning for these boards, coordinated by the leaders of the three core agencies through the Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership executive board. Key findings are consistently conveyed to enable partners to overcome challenges and find solutions.

Leaders within these strategic partnerships are aware of some data challenges across the partnership and are proactively exploring ways to use data more smartly to further strengthen their understanding and to further improve services. Partnership work is at an early stage to better understand how disproportionality of risk from serious youth violence and criminal exploitation impacts on different cohorts of children within Coventry. Action has not yet been taken to address agency approaches and outcomes for particular cohorts of children based on ethnicity and gender. Leaders are well aware that headline figures of an improving picture of reduced incidence of serious youth violence should not deflect from the real lived experience of very vulnerable young people.

A range of effective and responsive interventions for individuals and communities impacted by serious youth violence are commissioned by the partnership. A diverse range of partner organisations and interventions are in place which prevent, disrupt and intervene, having a positive impact on serious youth violence across the city. The One Coventry plan brings together partnership activity and actions into a single plan. The collaborative public health approach to serious youth violence aligns well with the One Coventry objective for Coventry to be a child-friendly city. A clear multi-agency strategy and approach enables the partnership to meet and adapt to need and respond contemporaneously to emerging changes. A strong partnership strategic needs assessment leads to recommendations for each agency to continually improve their response to youth violence. The needs analysis uses data from practitioners from each agency and people with lived experience, as well as benchmarking against



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national statistics and research which adds to the understanding of these risks in a much fuller way.

A joint commissioning approach has enabled the development of an extensive and innovative range of third sector provision which has equal footing within the partnership and is valued by children. Many initiatives are research-based and evaluated. The breadth of provision, provided within local communities and involving approaches which encourage aspiration and mentoring by those with lived experience, makes children safer.

Safeguarding children and young people is woven through the practice of the ambulance service in Coventry. A very small, dedicated safeguarding team operates at both operational and strategic levels. Despite some of the challenges that an extremely large regional ambulance service brings, the service is working with place-based partners and the local business community in Coventry to have a number of bleed kits, trauma kits and an increased number of defibrillators accessible for the local community to use while waiting for ambulance services. This is an example of innovative practice and demonstrates how West Midlands Ambulance Service is supporting the area of Coventry to reduce the impact of serious youth violence.

Coventry has a strong and varied third sector offer for vulnerable children and their families, provided by a range of local organisations in a non-stigmatising, connected and well-structured way. A robust partnership approach is in place to inform decisions about the interventions of partners in places and spaces. Relevant partners are involved to make these locations safer. Locations of concern are identified effectively through several channels among safeguarding partners across the city. Each location is evaluated individually, and a flexible approach is adopted, recognising that multiple partners may be needed to enhance safety for young people in a particular area.

The City Outreach offer embodies an effective public health approach which reduces the risk of child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence. It is based on a whole-system approach which includes service design, reducing safeguarding risks within the city spaces, as well as mentoring, practical support and diversionary activities. Jointly commissioned services avoid duplication and match the best resource to the child. The parity afforded to the third sector provision greatly enhances the offer available to children. Development of trust with young people and their families has been instrumental in developing effective solutions and creative ways of working with young people.

Engagement with communities, children, and parents and carers is strong and service developments are very much informed by their views. Community consultation is an integral part of planning. Effective sharing of ideas helps to avoid





duplication. The third sector provides important insights into the day-to-day reality for children and families living with the impact of serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation. The violence reduction partnership heard from children directly via a youth assembly about 'countering the narrative'. This has led to work with a local community and the production of a short film covering the positive bonds within the community. For those children who are already in the criminal justice system, the use of a shadow board by the Youth Justice Service called 'through their eyes' is shaping service delivery, leading to services and interventions which are reducing risks for these very vulnerable children.

Free transport enables children to travel safely in and out of the city to access venues, with alternative venues available for those children who do not feel safe travelling into the city centre, so that arrangements are tailored to give the best service to the child rather than the child having to fit to the service. There are many examples of positive impact. These include increased attendance at school, college and training and improved emotional health and self-esteem. Learning and evaluation of services and interventions are used well to enable continuous improvement and to ensure clarity of the interventions offered. Tangible continual learning enables commissioned services to adapt to trends and changes. The voice and empowerment of children to influence service design are tangible. Staff and volunteers are skilled and knowledgeable, with a strong commitment to optimise impact and to get the best for children.

Welcoming, high-quality spaces for children and families provide prime safe spaces with high-quality diversionary activities and support to families in the city. Safeguarding risks identified in particular city areas are reduced within the city by a coordinated partnership-based approach to design out crime. Examples include changes to licensing of businesses, removal of drain covers around the bus station and improved lighting in certain problem areas.



### **Practice study: highly effective practice**

Child A is part of a family with a history of criminal behaviour and an older sibling is serving a considerable sentence in custody for a serious offence. A bright and able child, they began to get involved in criminal activity with another brother. Although Child A's mother was seen as a protective factor for her children, she found it difficult to fully understand the risks they faced or to trust agencies.

Persistent work by practitioners with the children and their mum developed stronger and more open relationships. Working together, using a case formulation approach facilitated by a mental health practitioner, professionals developed an in-depth understanding, including the factors and triggers for offending behaviour of Child A and their siblings. A trauma-informed approach enabled professionals working with the child to understand how best to develop bespoke interventions.

An effective cross-boundary mapping exercise, attended by a broad range of agencies, including a neighbouring local authority, captured the complex relationships between the children and others in the community, which significantly increased the understanding of risk to the children and others. This led to proportionate safeguarding measures being put into place.

The Youth Justice Service used in-house parenting provision effectively to deliver a Parenting Order. Work continued on a voluntary basis afterwards to engage mum more fully to assist her to meet health and other needs. This helped her understand the risk to her children and increased her ability to better help them. She has continued working with services voluntarily.

Working together creatively using their knowledge of Child A's talent and skills, as well as the risks they faced, meant agencies were able to harness their love of sport to identify an apprenticeship for them. They are now fully engaged with this. They have since passed a GCSE and are on course to pass another. Importantly, the child's views were fully considered when developing these education and training opportunities.

The trusting relationships that have been developed between agencies, Child A and their family are now firmly embedded and have significantly reduced the risk of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation. A realistic understanding of progress and the trajectory of travel have not always been positive, but the partnership has persevered, and for Child A, the effectiveness of this support has been reflected by a sustained period of desistance from offending, reduction in risk and engagement in training and education.



### **Practice study: highly effective practice**

The Guiding Young Minds project is an outreach community-based provision that offers mentoring and specialist holistic services to children. Guiding Young Minds has established four youth clubs in areas of high crime and antisocial behaviour. These youth clubs offer a safe space and access to support for children and young people who require it. Children benefit from positive activities that occupy their time purposefully, meaning they avoid spending time unsupervised on the streets. A mobile outreach van is also offered to engage with communities at times of heightened tensions and antisocial behaviour to offer the community a safe space and source of support.

Guiding Young Minds provides a strong link into communities. They respond quickly to intelligence and provide the Step Together service to provide safe passage for children, for example at school closure times. The service uses an online messaging service to respond and share information, enabling them to relocate to areas where there may be greater concern and provide swift interventions.

Staff carry bleed packs and have been trained in cognitive behaviour therapy, dialectic behaviour therapy and trauma-informed practice. Mentors and staff are excellent role models for children, generously sharing their life experiences, giving children insight into the realities of being involved in exploitation and crime. Mentors offer one-to-one support and guidance to children. This includes visits to children in custody to maintain positive relationships both pre- and post-release back into the community. They have high aspirations for children and help them to realise that there are positive life-altering alternatives, which instil a sense of belief in them. This significantly reduces the risk of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation by raising self-esteem and enables children to think about and act on their long-term identity and goals in life.

### **Next steps**

We have determined that Coventry City Council is the principal authority and should prepare a written statement of proposed action responding to the findings outlined in this letter. This should be a multi-agency response involving the individuals and agencies that this report is addressed to. The response should set out the actions for the partnership and, when appropriate, individual agencies. The local safeguarding partners should oversee implementation of the action plan through their local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.



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CSCP should send the written statement of action to [ProtectionOfChildren@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:ProtectionOfChildren@ofsted.gov.uk) by 27 August 2024. This statement will inform the lines of enquiry at any future joint or single-agency activity by the inspectorates.



Yours sincerely

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