

**North Somerset Child Exploitation Strategy**

**March 2023 – March 2026**



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# Introduction

All children can be vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation, and children of any background can go missing. child exploitation occurs in all communities and social groups, and while some are more vulnerable than others, professionals should not assume that only the vulnerable are at risk of being exploited. It is important for professionals to understand and recognise that both criminal and sexual exploitation can and do overlap. The impact of child exploitation is devastating to children, families, and communities.

This strategy has been written as a response to the Child Exploitation Needs Assessment 2022. The ‘Needs Assessment’ outlines the position of child exploitation in North Somerset. The strategy is designed to increase the understanding of child exploitation in the area. It is also designed to reflect the importance of services working together to prevent and protect children from the harm of exploitation. Children do not always recognise themselves as victims of exploitation, nor that they are in exploitative situations. Child exploitation is pervasive and far reaching, and difficult to identify for several reasons. Local Authorities have a statutory duty to assume that both criminal and sexual exploitation of children occurs within their communities, and to act accordingly and proactively upon this assumption.

# Vision Statement

The overarching aim is to improve the lived experience of children in North Somerset. To do this we will:

* Understand the known prevalence and nature of child exploitation in the local area, this includes criminal and sexual exploitation and how they intersect
* We will take a child first approach, which in practice means we always consider the child first and their offending second.
* Understand county lines exploitation, which may span wider than our own area and require cross border cooperation.
* Understand how exploitation increasingly has aspects which are online, or takes place exclusively online
* To provide evidence that the multi-agency response is improving the lived experience of children in North Somerset
* We will adopt a trauma informed approach to the package of support offered to the child and their whole family
* We will keep learning and sharing the information and knowledge we gain, including any new or emerging themes and threats to inform multi-agency disruption responses
* Those working with children need to be curious and open-minded to the possibility that any child they are working with could be being exploited.

# Defining Exploitation

**Child Sexual Exploitation** is defined by the UK Government as: *“Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity*

*(a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and / or*

*(b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.*

*The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology”[[1]](#footnote-2)*

**Child Criminal Exploitation** is defined by the UK Government as: *“Child Criminal Exploitation occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into any criminal activity*

*(a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and / or*

*(b) for the financial or other advantage of the perpetrator or facilitator and / or*

*(c) through violence or the threat of violence.*

*The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.”*

One form of criminal exploitation is ‘County Lines'

*County Lines is a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.*

*In some cases, criminal gangs will take over a local property, normally belonging to a vulnerable person and use it to operate their criminal activity. This is known as* ***cuckooing****.*

# Strategic Objectives in North Somerset Principles

North Somerset Safeguarding Children’s Partnership has a duty to continue to establish an understanding of the known prevalence and nature of child exploitation in North Somerset. It is important to understand to the highest degree possible the numbers of children who are victims of exploitation and the effectiveness of the strategies in place to reduce it. The North Somerset partnership strategy has five key strategic objectives:

**Inform** – Ensure that identifying and stopping child exploitation is everybody’s business.

**Identify** – To identify children at risk of or already experiencing any form of exploitation and identify those who sexually and criminally exploit children.

**Prevent** – Prevent children, young people from being at risk of or experiencing exploitation.

**Protect/Disrupt & Support** – To safeguard and support all those who have been identified as being at risk of or have already experienced exploitation.

**Pursue & Prosecute** – To investigate, disrupt and prosecute perpetrators of all forms of child exploitation.

# Strategic Objectives

Inform – To continue to develop our understanding of the prevalence and nature of child exploitation in North Somerset. To use this information to educate and empower children, young people, families, and communities to identify and report child exploitation including sexual and criminal exploitation.

We will achieve this by:

* Information sharing with and by partner agencies, will be achieved in a timely manner via a range of strategic and practitioner forums relating to individual children, groups of children and perpetrators.
* The needs assessment also highlights the need to continually share information with partner agencies relating to County Lines, this knowledge will inform and guide the implementation and review of actions taken and/or needed to disrupt this form of exploitation.
* Raising awareness amongst professionals of the processes for tackling child exploitation within their organisations and where to go for support and advice. The Children’s Safeguarding Partnership will ensure that there is up to date webpages with signs to look for, accessible ways to report it and advice for speaking to a child who is talking about being exploited. For example; there are webpages to [identify signs to look for](https://www.nsscp.co.uk/resources-parents-carers/identifying-child-exploitation) and a [child exploitation section on the North Somerset directory](https://nsod.n-somerset.gov.uk/kb5/northsomerset/directory/results.page?qt=exploitation&term=&sorttype=relevance).
* Continuing to deliver a quality assured training programme to all relevant practitioners, in both single agency and multi-agency formats.
* Engage business and night-time economies in awareness training and safeguarding, this includes work with landlords, housing associations, supported housing projects, taxi drivers, transport hubs, train and bus stations, hotel staff, licensed premises, and food vendors. To enable them to spot the signs of child exploitation and know the threats and signs of county lines and cuckooing and how to report it.
* Professionals working with all levels of need have access to advice and consultation through their Child Exploitation/Safeguarding leads.

Identify – For all agencies to work collaboratively to identify individual children or groups of children, at risk of, or already experiencing any form of exploitation and to share information when perpetrators and locations where exploitation has occurred.

We will achieve this by:

* Improving data capture to create a universal and consistent list between agencies of all children who are vulnerable to any form of exploitation. Ensure that there is a proactive and intelligence led approach to identifying victims and those vulnerable to exploitation through problem profiling.

Create a list of venues and locations where exploitation occurs or is at a risk of occurring. Share this list between all agencies, particularly those victims who attend Accident and Emergency Departments, Minor Injury and Illness Units, Urgent Treatment Centres and Primary Care settings that not only includes GPs but also pharmacists as this would be where young people seek advice on emergency contraception or sexual health advice.

* and ensure it is consistent, update and detailed.
* Appropriate agencies to attend monthly meetings with Operation Topaz to support them with both identifying victims, so that their engagement officer can support, and perpetrators of exploitation.
* Monitoring and sharing information about children missing from home, care and education through weekly multi-agency missing children’s meetings.
* In line with government guidance, if the identification of child exploitation leads to indications of modern slavery or human trafficking, this must be reported to the relevant national frameworks. Professionals have a duty to make a referral to the NRM [(National Referral Mechanism)](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/human-trafficking-victims-referral-and-assessment-forms/guidance-on-the-national-referral-mechanism-for-potential-adult-victims-of-modern-slavery-england-and-wales).
* Through mapping exercises identify children who may be at risk of exploitation, any locations, offenders, and any contextual risks. This mapping will be used to expand the vulnerable list of both children and young people, but also venues, settings, and perpetrators.

Prevent-To be proactive in the prevention of children being exposed to the risks of exploitation, and to protect children who are already being exploited from the risk of further harm and disrupt perpetrators who exploit children.

We will achieve this by:

* Raising awareness in schools/colleges and youth projects to build positive relationships with children and increase their confidence in reporting concerns, as is recommended in the Child Exploitation Needs Assessment.
* Raising awareness and knowledge for parents/carers of the risk factors/signs of involvement associated with child exploitation.
* Support must be accessible to all children including those in harder to reach groups or who may face additional barriers in disclosing their experiences, communities including those living in rural areas, LGBTQ children, care leavers, and young people transitioning to adulthood.
* Improving quality and consistency of the referral, assessment and intervention process for all children ensuring the child exploitation toolkit is considered for all children referred to Social Care or Family Wellbeing services.
* Publish and launch the Effective Support Guidance document (to replace the existing Threshold Guidance).
* Establishing a trained team to deliver North Somerset’s return home interviews so that practitioners consider child exploitation in all missing assessments. Collaborate with other Local Authorities to ensure that they are also consistently conducting return home interviews for their children who are placed in the North Somerset area.
* Signposting parents and carers of children who go missing and are at risk of child exploitation to provide information on relevant local support services and online tools. Parents and carers should be actively included in the safety planning for their children.
* To use existing multi-agency risk assessment and management processes such as MAPPA to prevent and disrupt potential child exploitation perpetrators.
* Involve Local Policing Area Teams and Community Safety Partnership in safety and response plans. To ensure that areas of risk/hot spots have been mapped to understand where exploitation takes place and implement disruption methods in these areas, to protect children and track and review the success of these areas.
* Working with partners from across the five Local Authorities which make up Avon and Somerset Policing Area, and the wider South-West Regional Partnerships to combat child exploitation across borders, share good practice, and consolidate learning. Also work with these Local Authorities for return home interviews when they need to take place outside of North Somerset.

Protect and Support- To safeguard and support all those who have been identified as being at risk of or have already experienced exploitation. All children have a right to live freely from harm and exploitation.

We will achieve this by:

* Using feedback and information we will use a child-centred approach to inform the development of practice, strategic plans and service delivery.
* Build relationships with children based upon trust, care, and respect, with the recognition of the impact of exploitation on them, their friends, and their families. Ensuring that parents and carers are offered the right level of support.
* Ensuring that any intervention plans adequately reflect and address the potential risk of exploitation.
* Ensure that there is consideration of contextual approaches that include emphasis on wider actions other than work with the child/family.
* Working with the Criminal Justice System to advocate that children are not criminalised for their abuse or behaviour, or offences committed, while being exploited. Including referring children into the National Referral Mechanism where there are indicators that they may have been victims of trafficking or modern slavery.
* Promoting enhanced sexual health and post-assault care for all children who have been sexually exploited.
* Seeking to locate, protect and return children who have gone missing from home or care promptly.

Pursue and Prosecute - To successfully investigate, disrupt and prosecute those who perpetrate or facilitate the exploitation of children and young people, and to disrupt activities and locations to prevent further incidents of sexual and criminal exploitation.

We are going to achieve this by:

* + Ensuring all partners know how to report crimes of known or suspected criminal and sexual exploitation.
  + Sharing information via Operation Topaz meetings regarding more complex cases to agree an enhanced strategy to pursue and disrupt the suspect and to manage risk.
  + Providing visible policing in areas where child exploitation is suspected.
  + Learning lessons from previous and current prosecutions through multi-agency reviews and consideration of national learning.
  + Ensuring that all children, parents, carers and professionals who have been victims of, or witness to child exploitation, receive support and are empowered in preparing for all stages of the criminal justice and court processes.
  + Professionals are trained in evidence collection (e.g., joint ABE with social workers), so that best evidence is obtained to assist with prosecution.
  + Capturing and using intelligence data to develop problem profiles of individuals or groups who are suspected to sexually or criminally exploit and utilise this information to prevent re-offending and assist with prosecutions.
  + Providing a clear message to the public that anyone engaging in grooming and the exploitation of children including radicalisation, whether physically or through technology, is committing an offence and will be actively pursued and prosecuted.
  + Perpetrators of child exploitation may not always be prosecuted immediately, so practitioners should use all legal methods to disrupt child exploitation as soon as possible, such as the Home Office ‘Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit’ and making best use of child abduction notices, harbourers warnings, civil orders and other appropriate legislation, civil powers and litigation.
  + Aim to strengthen the existing multi-agency structures and information sharing arrangements to obtain a clearer picture of abuse and identify opportunities for earlier intervention.

# Supporting young people transitioning to adulthood

The protocol identifies the responsibilities of services to work together to ensure the transition process is carried out as smoothly as possible and ensure that there is a clear understanding of the commitments made in this document.

The overriding objective of this protocol and behind an effective transition process is that it must be managed safely both for the young person and their community.

What remains fundamental, is the need to jointly assess the appropriateness of the young person’s transfer based on their critical risk and vulnerability factors, whilst being mindful of any statutory responsibilities.

# Principles of good transition

1. Individual needs will be recognised

2. Young people transitioning will be identified at the earliest point

3. Every young person who could transfer to adult services should have a transition plan

4. Transition planning must focus on providing flexible and continuous services

5. Relevant information about young people must be shared between youth and adult services prior to any move to adult services

6. Young people and adult services will work together to achieve effective transition outcomes

7. Young people and their families will be involved in planning for their transition and will understand what it means

8. Each transition will be reviewed, and services will seek continuous improvement

9. The Lammy Review (2017) has highlighted the disparity in outcomes for Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) individuals, particularly among young black males. Therefore, transition planning needs to take account of protected characteristics such as this.

This protocol is underpinned by a Transitions Statement:

‘A successful transition from youth to adult services must focus on:

* addressing a young person’s/young adult’s individual needs and safeguarding requirements.
* considering diversity issues on a case-by-case basis.
* identification and allocation of transfer/Adult staff at the earliest opportunity (not after the young person has turned 18years) • implementing effective case management transfer between services
* achieving a stable resettlement pathway
* maintaining achievements and interventions

# Planning the support to transition

In terms of managing the process it is crucial to have early identification of young people who will be eligible for transferring to adult services once they have turned 18 years.

Additionally, services should consult and work with the young person and where appropriate their family/carer, to inform them of transition arrangements and keep them informed at each stage.

Where consent has been given, Parents/carers should be involved it is likely to aid the young person’s progress and engagement.

Services should ensure the young person has a transition plan as soon as the need is identified and no later than when the young person reaches 17yrs 11months. The plan should recognise all needs, and identify which services are better able to meet those needs. As a minimum the transition plan will aim to address the following areas:

* Seek the views of the young person
* Listen to concerns the young person may have and alleviate their anxiety
* Build relationships with the any allocated professionals from adult services
* Recognise which services will/will not be available after transition and seek to address any gaps
* Where relevant ensure health needs (emotional, mental and physical) are planned for and managed
* Where relevant ensure learning and communication needs are planned for and managed
* Where relevant Educate the young person and their family on the adult justice system

Initial Multi-disciplinary transitions meetings should be held, to review young people who are approaching 18 and eligible to transfer to adult services. Reviews should be undertaken to monitor any cases and identify and manage any issues within the transition process. When arranging a meeting to discuss those eligible for transfer all intervention providers (including health and education, training and employment providers) must be informed of transfers to adult establishments in advance and involved appropriately in transitions meetings to ensure continuity of care.

The effectiveness of arrangements for the transition of young people from youth based to adult based services, and retention of young adults in youth-based services, must be monitored and kept under review.

A regular meeting should be set up between managers from the children’s and adult services to review transition work that has already taken place to identify good practice, lessons learnt and ensure that there is a continuous emphasis on improving services and outcomes for this group of young people.

All feedback from young people and their families will be considered alongside data relating to number of transfers. Any barriers to success should be progressed through to respective safeguarding boards for consideration as to how this could be addressed and where necessary challenged.

Where local young adult offers or young adult specialist staff are in place in, consideration should be given to the use of a transfer to those teams taking into account location. The young person should be consulted regarding such arrangements and the benefits of attending young adult hubs or appointment with specialist workers should be clearly outlined in the initial transfer meeting.

A final joint review should occur, and timescales should be agreed in relation to the withdrawal of children’s and young people’s services, this to take place following the young person successful transition adult support arrangements.

# Governance and Partnership

* North Somerset Safeguarding Children Partnership is the responsible body for the strategy which supports and influences the work in North Somerset to safeguard children who are victims or at risk of exploitation.
* To support the strategy the Partnership has a sub-group who will monitor their action plan against the strategic priorities.
* Progress of this strategy will be monitored by the NSSCP Execs Partnership by working in accordance with an agreed detailed action plan, considering local need and learning from national research and practice.

# Next Steps

* + The Safeguarding Partnership will have responses and procedures in place to safeguard, protect and prevent children from all forms of exploitation, and ensure children are supported to safely identify ways to exit and withdraw from perpetrators.
  + The Safeguarding Partnership will recognise and ensure that the child’s best interests are their top priority, relationship building and maintaining these relationships will be an essential element always ensuring the child’s voice is heard and listened to.
  + The Child Exploitation Sub-Group will be responsible for the development and implementation of the strategic action plan, to enable this exploitation strategy to be delivered. The action plan will include recommendations identified through the need’s assessment.

1. *Child sexual exploitation: definition and guide for practitioners,* <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/child-sexual-exploitation-definition-and-guide-for-practitioners>, p.5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)