

Children placed out of area as a result of extra-familial harm

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This spotlight briefing by the Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme (VKPP), reflects on the operational and/or strategic police practice learning drawn from both published Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) and other publications reflecting the challenges of placing children and young people in out of area care settings.

It is important to note that although this briefing is focussed on the police learning, the SCRs highlight learning for other agencies too.

Introduction

In 2021 over 80,000 children were in the care of local authorities within England. These children represent some of the most vulnerable within society. Historically the majority of children placed in the care of local authorities have suffered neglect or abuse within their family home. However, increasing numbers of older children are now being taken into care as a result of extra-familial risks, such as child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, risk of violence from gangs and trafficking.

Outcomes for looked after children in education are poorer than their peers, and the gap in attainment gets wider as children get older. A high proportion of care leavers are not in employment and training by the age of 19, compared to their non-looked after peers.

Many children in care experience poor emotional wellbeing and some experience diagnosable mental health problems. Children in care/care leavers 4-5 times more likely to self-harm in adulthood and 4 times more likely to have mental health issue ([National Audit Office 2015](#)). Because of their experiences both before and during care, looked-after children are at much greater risk of poor mental health than their peers. Almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder (compared with 10% of their peers) and two-thirds have special educational needs. ([Mentally healthy schools](#))

There is also disproportionality in terms of the ethnicity of children in care with 22 in 10,000 Asian children were in care, compared with 64 in 10,000 white children and 87 in 10,000 Black children. ([The Guardian, 2018](#))

Care leavers are more likely to have a criminal conviction, and may have experienced unnecessary criminalisation. They are estimated to represent between 24% and 27% of the adult prison population, despite less than 1% of under 18s entering local authority care each year. ([Home office: Care-leavers in prison and probation](#))

The range of care settings in which children can be placed include:

- When a child lives with foster parents
- When a child lives in a children's home run by the local authority
- when a child lives in a children's home run by a private company
- When a child is placed into secure care for their wellbeing, or youth custody due to criminal conviction receiving a custodial sentence.
- 16 and 17 year old children can still legally be placed in unregulated 'semi-independent' accommodation.

In some instances, children may be placed in care settings outside of the local authority boundaries in which they normally reside. In 2019 nearly two thirds (64%) of all children living in residential homes were doing so in 'out of area placements.'

When children are placed out of area the risks posed to them regarding extra-familial harm can increase – 70% of police forces who contributed to the No Place at Home Report - APPG on Missing Children 2019 stated out of area placements increased the risk of exploitation. Disproportionate numbers of children living away from their home authority go missing, often either to try to return home or as a result of the influence of others who may be seeking to exploit them.

This spotlight briefing draws on recent academic and practice research to highlight the challenges facing professionals trying to identify and manage appropriate placements for some of society's most vulnerable children. Whilst local authorities are ultimately responsible for the placement and care of these children, policing has an enhanced role to play in helping keep them safe, as a result of reforms to local safeguarding arrangements. ([Wood Review of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#))

Useful Reading

[Securing Safety Phase 1 Briefing](#)

[No Place at Home Report - APPG on Missing Children 2019](#)

[County Lines and Looked After Children - Crest Advisory](#)

[National Review Panel – Safeguarding Children affected by CCE](#)

[VKPP Meta-analysis of police practice in 126 practice reviews](#)

[Exploitation Disruption Toolkit](#)

[Philomena Protocol](#)

Shuker, L. (2013) 'Constructs of safety for children in care affected by sexual exploitation', in Critical Perspectives on Child Sexual Exploitation and Related Trafficking.

Firmin, C., Wroe, L. & Barnard, C. (2021) 'Last Resort or Best Interest? Exploring the Risk and Safety Factors That Inform the Rates of Relocation for Young People Abused in Extra-Familial Settings'

Decision to place a child out of area

The decision to place a child out of area by local authorities can be driven by a several factors. Practitioners report the principle reason for such a placement being the protection of the child's physical safety – by removing them from the context in which they are at risk of being harmed. The move to place a child out of area is often taken when an increase to the risks they face has been identified.

“The review found that Jeanette began to turn her life around when she was moved a considerable distance from her abusers in Halifax. Whilst this “out of borough” placement worked for Jeanette it should not be assumed that this review has concluded that this is the right answer for children who are being sexually exploited. The importance of schooling, family and good friends should not be underestimated when considering the best way of protecting children.”

[Child M Serious Case Review Calderdale Safeguarding Children's Board](#)

Practitioners often consider out of area placements as a short-term solution to break patterns of exposure to risk or place a geographic barrier to inappropriate or abusive relationships. However, sometimes brief stays in out of area setting do not allow for any significant work to be carried out to address concerns regarding the child's safety.

“The length of out of borough placement was not sufficient to allow time for relationships and trust to build and effect change in Child G as was initially intended and the purpose of the placement, therefore no change occurred. There was too much required of a short-term placement for a child with very complex needs.”

[Child G Blackburn with Darwen Safeguarding Children's Board](#)

Whilst police and partners frequently consider concerns around physical safety when deciding to place a child out of area, such moves can affect the relational safety – recognising the importance of stable relationships for children and young people, and psychological safety of children (Shuker 2013). Moving a child out of area can protect their relational safety by distancing them from individuals who pose risk and create a safe space for positive relationships to be developed. However, placing a child far away from home, their family and friends and existing networks of professionals can also have a detrimental impact on their relational safety.

An out of area placement could improve a child's psychological safety by removing the threat of harm or abuse from individuals or networks in their community. Some residential placements also offer in house counselling and therapeutic support which can positively affect a child's psychological safety.

However, children who are placed out of area could feel like they are being punished despite being victims of abuse. Children in care can also feel isolated and often say that they don't get to have enough contact with important people in their life, including family, friends and positive adults such as school teachers.

Maintaining positive relationships with parents, siblings and wider family members has been highlighted as critical to ensuring the well being of children placed out of area - as well as the threat of ongoing physical abuse or exploitation, relationship breakdown poses a significant risk (Firmin, Wroe & Barnard 2021).

Professionals also highlighted a lack of availability of locally suitable accommodation as the reason for an out of area placement being sought for children. In cases where concerns relate to extra-familial harms linked to criminality and violence, a shortage of appropriate accommodation can be exacerbated by local providers and foster parents feeling ill-equipped to manage those risks.

In some instances, practitioners report the driver for an out of area placement being organisational and partnership pressure. Professionals around a child may feel that the time spent out of area provides them with the space to develop more long-term, sustainable safety plans. In a limited number of cases demand on resources, for example repeat missing episodes, were cited as the main reason for an out of area placement. This could be seen as meeting the needs of organisations, rather than those of the child.

Moving a child out of area and placing them in an unfamiliar setting represents a significant upheaval and a decision which should consider the wishes and feelings of the child. It may not always be possible, or appropriate, to give children a choice over the location of their placement but wherever feasible children should have the opportunity express their needs and concerns.

A child's dissatisfaction at a placement could contribute to push and pull factors which could lead to missing episodes and further risk of extra-familial harm. ([Missing Push and Pull Factors - Catch22](#))

‘I found it difficult being away from [name of place] and I was often bored with nothing to do. I did not know anyone or what there was to do in the area. It isn't always easy to meet new people or make new friends. I personally don't like having to learn new things like having to get to know an area and I don't like travelling which I would have to do when I came back to [name of place] to see family and friends.’ (Young person) ([No Place at Home Report - APPG on Missing Children 2019](#))

Reflective practice: Decision to place child out of area

- ☑ Are senior leaders in policing and partners collaborating with each other on matters related to out of area placements for children and ensuring that their joint approach is evident in case level decisions? Is the force satisfied
- ☑ Has the decision to utilise an out of area placement involved the child and their family? What measures have been agreed to ensure contact between the child and their family is maintained?
- ☑ Has a locality risk assessment been carried out for the residential home? These are not legally required for unregulated placements but forces may wish to consider working with partners to provide an assessment for such placements
- ☑ Are the police force satisfied discussions have taken place on the suitability of the placement with the provider given the needs of the child and those of existing residents, and where appropriate the police have informed these conversations?
- ☑ Is the police force confident the placing local authority has informed the host authority of the placement and the specific vulnerabilities and needs of the child? Consideration should be given to therapeutic or trauma-informed support for the child.
- ☑ Has a trigger plan been agreed in respect of potential missing episodes involving children placed out of area? Have arrangements been made for the completion of return home interviews and the sharing of intelligence with both host and placing authorities and police forces?

National Vulnerability Action Plan (NVAP):

Related Actions:

2.1.1 Recognition & Response

Ensuring that recognising and responding to vulnerability is everyone's business, especially at first point of contact.

2.1.3 Access to Services

Ensure all staff know where and how to access service provision for all strands of vulnerability, especially at the local neighbourhood level.

2.2.1 Appropriate Action

In response to identified risk, ensure staff understand and utilise appropriate referral pathways including how to access partner provisions and are empowered to challenge or escalate decisions.

2.4.1 Voice of Victim

Develop clear processes to ensure that 'the voices of vulnerable victims and witnesses' are heard.

2.6.1 Multi-Agency Hubs

Ensure that MASH/Multi-agency unit staff (where implemented) fully understand the principles relating to vulnerability and professional curiosity and that it is embedded within MASH/multi-agency processes

2.6.2 Officer Norms

Recognise that officer norms will change from exposure to aspects of criminality/vulnerability and that these need to be re-set so that thresholds of acceptability are maintained.

Philomena Protocol

The Philomena Protocol is aimed at safeguarding children in care at risk of going missing. The protocol is considered to work best when delivered through a multi-agency approach.

Working alongside partners in children's social care and children's homes, it encourages carers to compile useful information, which could be used in the event of a young person going missing from care, and will include:

- Known risks
- Key contacts
- Places frequented.

The scheme can save time and resources but most importantly, it has the potential to prevent significant harm. By working with children's homes and carers it aims to establish patterns of behaviour, places frequented, an up-to-date photograph, and known risks if they do go missing.

Engagement with the child can improve the effectiveness of the protocol.

Call takers should ask the reporting person if there is a Philomena Protocol in place that may provide useful information. The officer dealing with a missing child should also remember to ask if a Philomena Protocol has been completed, and if one has not been completed ask the carer/children's home to do so in case of future missing incidents.

Missing from Home Co-ordinators, or the police professional/team responsible for missing children, can work with Children's social care and Children's home managers to ensure that the Philomena Protocol is embedded within their partnership procedures and children who are at risk of going missing or go missing regularly have Philomena Protocol documents in place that are kept up to date.

Durham's protocol can be accessed below:

[Philomena-Protocol-Final-Flow-Chart.pdf \(durham-scp.org.uk\)](https://www.durham-scp.org.uk/Philomena-Protocol-Final-Flow-Chart.pdf)

Ensuring a safe and stable placement for the child

Out of area placements can be seen by professionals as a last resort (Firmin, Wroe & Bernard 2021), often in response to an increase in risk of exploitation and abuse to a child, or a specific moment of crisis. This in turn can lead to placements being secured in a hurry and without sufficient planning to increase the chance of stability. Poor communication regarding arrangements between practitioners and children can also lead to breakdowns in placements.

Inappropriate, or poorly planned placements can expose children to further harm. Placing a child in a setting which is located within a neighbourhood affected by high levels of crime and with links to forms of child exploitation could expose an already vulnerable child to abuse.

As well as considerations regarding the suitability of the location of a placement, the vulnerability of other residents within a setting and the dynamic between them could increase the risk of children placed out of area going missing or being exploited.

Good information sharing between agencies from the placing authority and those within the host authority can lead to effective, well-informed risk management; without this the child could be placed at further risk of harm. If the police force for the host authority is not aware of the placement and the child's vulnerability it may not be able to respond effectively to missing episodes or other incidents.

The psychological and relational safety of children could be impacted if relationships are not maintained during placements. This applies to professional relationships as well as those with family and friends. A lack of activities and access to education could also negatively affect a child subject to an out of area placement.

“The wishes of Bryony in relation to extending the placement (with a view to permanence) do not appear to have been taken into consideration. Bryony’s mother says that she was not party to these discussions and that it was some time later that she was told that the plan had changed and that the plan was that Bryony would remain in the placement in the long term.”

[Bryony SCR, Cheshire West Safeguarding Children’s Partnership](#)

Children placed out of area are often those considered the most vulnerable. This can lead to professional anxiety resulting in children being reported missing when it may not be appropriate. This in turn can lead to further resentment towards professionals from children and destabilise the placement.

The Contextual Safeguarding Network has produced a practice guide on [Things to consider for out of area placements for young people at risk of extra-familial harm](#).

Reflective practice: Ensuring a safe and stable placement for the child

- Has the child’s relational and psychological safety, as well as physical safety, been considered in the decision-making process?
- Have professionals spoken to the child and listened to their wishes and feelings, recording these appropriately?
- Have the police’s views regarding the decision to place a child out of area been presented by an officer with the appropriate safeguarding experience and authority to make the decision at the appropriate multi-agency planning meeting?
- Do police professionals know how to appropriately challenge decisions they disagree with and feel comfortable escalating their concerns?
- Have agencies based their decision solely on the best interests of the child, rather than the interests and resources of agencies?
- Have police forces and partner agencies from the placing and host authority discussed the suitability of the area in which the placement is located, considering any risks associated with the location, including but not limited to known gang activity, CSE concerns or county lines operating in the vicinity?

There are several disruption toolkits which support the implementation of tactics to disrupt the exploitation of children including the [Home Office Child Exploitation Disruption Toolkit](#)

Planning for the child leaving their out of area placement

Children are placed out of area to protect their physical, and sometimes relational and psychological safety (Shuker 2013). When the harm or abuse they have been subject to is from outside their family home within their community, the child could still be at risk if they return to their community from an out of area care setting and no interventions have taken place to address the perpetrators and context in which it took place.

“The return home was carefully considered however; no substantive change work had taken place. Child R returned to a similar situation and the challenges re-emerged almost immediately, the Child Protection Plan continued to prove largely ineffective with no contingency in place. The expectation was that the period away, as a minimum, would have disrupted the risk of CSE. This did not happen and within three weeks Child R herself asked to be “looked after” by the local authority again”.

[Child R Bournemouth & Poole Safeguarding Children’s Board](#)

A lack of intervention to address these issues also leaves other children at risk of exploitation and abuse at the hands of the same perpetrators. Contextual Safeguarding is an emerging approach to addressing the environment and circumstances in which extra-familial harm takes place in a more holistic manner, for example addressing the culture in a school which has led to several sexual assaults, not just dealing with individual children. Find out more from the Contextual Safeguarding network’s [Beyond Referrals](#) programme.

Placing a child out of area could result in professionals feeling the immediacy for intervention to address risks has been removed, resulting in a decrease in investigation and/or disruption work.

Short custodial sentences or a period on remand in a Youth Offending Institute, secure children’s home or a secure training centre should be considered as an out of area placement by police and partners and plans for the return of a child to be made in the same way.

Children who have been placed out of area may feel anxious about returning home, particularly given the disruption to relationships and ongoing concerns about the ongoing threat of harm. As more older children are subject to being placed in out of area placements some may be approaching adulthood and wish to settle in their host area, whilst others may choose to return home.

Reflective practice: Planning for the child leaving their out of area placement

- Has policing supported the identification of contextual risks which lead to the out of area placement to ensure safety should the child return and for other children in that locality? Find out more about [Contextual Safeguarding](#)
- Have disruption tactics been considered as part of the Looked After Child plan to tackle individuals who may pose harm or locations in which abuse may take place? Has a plan been developed with provision for monitoring its effectiveness?
- Has the child had the opportunity to contribute information and insight which may support disruption or enforcement activity? Has the child been asked whether interventions have created increased feelings of safety?
- Have police forces and partners sought to identify the perpetrators, locations and networks associated to the exploitation and develop plans to disrupt these?
- Have disruption tactics been considered, including but not limited to public space protection orders or closure orders been considered to address localities of concern?
- Have civil or behavioural orders such as serious violence prevention orders, slavery and trafficking risk orders or sexual harm prevention orders to tackle perpetrators been considered?
- Have older children placed out of area been given the opportunity to discuss plans for transition into adulthood? Find out more about [Transitional Safeguarding](#) here.

South Yorkshire Police promising practice example:

South Yorkshire Police's County Lines and Child Exploitation Officer works with the district Child Exploitation Single Points of Contacts (SPOCs) to support a joined-up approach to out of area placements and managing vulnerability of children either placed out of area by the force's partner local authority or those hosted within the county. This assists the force to ensure that when children are moved out of South Yorkshire the relevant information is passed to the new residing local authority. For example, Vulnerability Assessment Tracker (VAT) minutes are sent to both the receiving local authority and relevant police force to ensure they are aware of risks posed to the child that is moving into their area.

Whilst the child is out of area any extra-familial risks that were posed to them prior to their move will still be discussed at the Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meeting, including locations of concern and individuals/groups posing threat to ensure enforcement and disruption activity continues in the child's absence. However, the individual safety plan of the child will be at the MACE where they reside. When a child is returning to their own local authority from out of area or secure, a multi-agency meeting is arranged with children's social care and other agencies to plan for the child's safe return - this could be at a South Yorkshire MACE or in a professional discussion.

When South Yorkshire Police are notified of a child moving into the county with existing vulnerability, checks are made to ensure appropriate flags are placed on the child on local intelligence systems as well as PNC. The child will then be taken to the MACE meeting to ensure they are discussed in a multi-agency forum.

The County Lines and Child Exploitation Officer receives notification of any missing episodes involving children with exploitation flags or where the reporter mentions exploitation concerns. If there are no concerns recorded on police systems, an officer will carry out further due diligence from the care home reporting the child missing to understand their concerns and update systems when appropriate.

Lancashire Police & The Children's Society promising practice example:

This briefing highlights the need for police forces to work in partnership with other agencies, including care settings. Whilst all agencies should ultimately have the best interests of children at heart, different priorities and drivers can lead to strained multi-agency relationships which potentially place children at further risk.

Lancashire Constabulary has recently worked with The Children's Society Prevention Programme and 83 children's homes from across the county to try to address information sharing challenges, improve responses to exploitation and reduce missing episodes. The force has started this journey with The Children's Society in order to open up effective dialogue based around what is right for the children and young people we are all working hard to protect and to help them to build positive futures.

The Prevention Officer for the North West facilitated 3 sessions across Lancashire for children's homes, supported by Lancashire Police. The independent facilitation of the events by a professional with knowledge of vulnerability and the impact of trauma on children ensured impartiality in the management of conversations.

Staff from children's homes were asked to rate their confidence in dealing with exploitation and missing on a 'mentimetre' as well as providing comments as to what were perceived to be the main barriers to information sharing and what could help staff support children at risk of exploitation.

Feedback from the events has been positive from both the force and the children's homes, with further events being considered to build on the improved relationship between partners. The initiative is still in its early stages but already partners are seeing opportunities to unpick issues that affect the partnership approach.

As 2021 progresses the force hopes to facilitate more tailored meetings, focusing on operational issues. Lancashire Constabulary have already involved OFSTED in their missing coordinators' meeting to further align the work of partner agencies.

Further information on the approaches taken can be provided by lucy.belcher@childrenssociety.org.uk

Contact Details/Further Information

If you would like to know more, please contact us at:

vkpp@norfolk.pnn.police.uk

Further information can be found on the Knowledge Hub, under our group: [The Vulnerability and Violent Crime Programme](#)

Thank you to the following people for your time/feedback:

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