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|  | <p align="center"><b>Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee</b><br/>24 November 2020</p> |
|   | <p align="center"><b>Report from the Strategic Director Children and Young People</b></p>    |
| <p><b>Contextual Safeguarding Update</b></p>                                      |  |

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| <b>Wards Affected:</b>  | All  |
| <b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>   | n/a  |
| <b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b><br><small>(If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)</small> | Open   |
| <b>No. of Appendices:</b>   | None   |
| <b>Background Papers:</b>   | None   |
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## 1.0 Purpose of the report

- 1.1 Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on 18 March 2019 considered a Task Group Report on the development of contextual safeguarding in Brent. In March 2020, a report was provided to Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee to update on progress on the recommendations made by the task group.
- 1.2 This report further updates Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on progress with the implementation of contextual safeguarding in the borough and the partnership response.

## 2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 Members of the Community Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee are recommended to consider this update on contextual safeguarding in Brent.

## 3.0 Detail

### 3.1 Overview of contextual safeguarding in Brent

3.2 Safeguarding incidents including child sexual exploitation, county lines and knife crime have become established components of the risks that can be experienced by young people nationally. Young people who go missing from home or care are particularly vulnerable to risks of harm from their environment and associations outside of their family. A contextual safeguarding approach recognises that in these cases, parents and carers may be limited in their ability to protect against these external influences. This requires us to look beyond the family to the young person's peer group, associations, neighbourhood, schools and colleges and public spaces where young people develop relationships and spend their leisure time.

3.3 Due to Covid-19, there have been increased challenges in keeping vulnerable adolescents at home and safe as outlined in the report considered by Scrutiny Committee earlier on the agenda regarding the Management of the Impact of Covid 19 on Education and Children's Services.

3.4 As previously reported to Committee, the development of contextual safeguarding is led at a senior level in the Council. The Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group, chaired by the Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes, is driving forward the contextual safeguarding approach in Brent. A six-monthly update on developing contextual safeguarding in Brent is presented to the Corporate Management Team by the Strategic Director, Children and Young People. This update sets out trends in the needs, vulnerabilities and risks young people in Brent experience and the developing Council-wide contextual safeguarding response to these needs, vulnerabilities and risks.

### **3.5 Impact of Covid-19 on safeguarding vulnerable adolescents**

3.6 The main extra-familial risks to children and young people include youth violence, gang involvement, and child exploitation, including sexual exploitation and criminal exploitation such as county lines.

3.7 Lockdown restrictions announced on the 23 March 2020 meant that young people needed to stay at home. This has led to a complex range of impacts for individual young people. For some vulnerable young people lockdown meant that they were away from extra-familial contexts where they were at risk of harm, in their peer groups, and in their neighbourhoods. However lockdown also separated young people from protective friends, schools and other spaces, leading to isolation. Case learning from the Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group over the past six months during the Covid-19 pandemic period has identified the following themes:

- *A significant reduction in missing episodes and first time missing episodes* – During the period of lockdown beginning in March, numbers of missing and absent episodes began to significantly fall in April and have remained consistently low apart from a spike in May, which correlated with the easing of lockdown restrictions and increased social activity by young people. The proportion of young people who are reported missing for the first time in any given month is generally around 30-35% of the total missing/absent cohort for that month. In the months during the first lockdown, however, this proportion fell to an average of around 20% of the total missing/absent cohort. This suggests that the lockdown saw a higher proportion of children regularly missing. Figures from September 2020 showed the proportion of first time young people going missing was 32% - consistent with pre-lockdown figures.

- *Increase in substance misuse and criminal behaviour concerns amongst those missing from home or care* – the significant decrease in the number of young people reported missing/absent during lockdown also saw an increase in the proportion of young people going missing regularly. Amongst key factors identified within Return Home Interviews during the period, there was also a significant increase in concerns regarding substance misuse, gang involvement and involvement in crime. This supports the hypothesis that those who were continuing to go missing during lockdown were more vulnerable and that the lockdown did not seem to lead to a reduction in vulnerability or exploitation amongst these young people.
- *Mental health and isolation* – Mental health concerns for young people continued and were in many cases exacerbated through the period of lockdown, where protective relationships and social contacts were not possible. Mental health support was identified as a recovery plan priority for Brent Council and a Council wide approach has been taken to ensure support can be available, including from the September term through a voluntary sector grant programme. Online and digital support has been offered throughout the reporting period for young people and partnership work with Brent CCG was undertaken to support young people as they returned to school for the Autumn term. Brent is also engaging in the DfE Wellbeing for Return to Education programme, which is providing training support for schools.
- *County Lines* - The committee was advised last year of the successful Brent Council-led bid to the Mayors' Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) for a pan-London service to respond to the increasing levels of county lines exploitation. In October 2020 a review of the second year of the Rescue and Response County Lines Project was released. The assessment provides an early understanding of county lines exploitation and of the reach and type of county lines activity that London individuals are experiencing. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted county lines activity and the young people being supported through the project. County lines continued to operate during lockdown, and the main observations during this time were the various ways in which exploiters were adapting in order to continue operating their lines; the heightened risks posed to young people as a result of this; and the challenges faced in safeguarding them during lockdown. The impact of COVID-19 on the environment included:
  - Public spaces became empty, including streets, roads and trains. This made criminal activity easier to spot and the grooming of young people more difficult.
  - Drug supply chains were interrupted, leading to some county lines closing; opening up gaps in the market.
  - The demand for drugs during the lockdown period was reportedly very high.

### **How practitioners are being supported to develop their contextual safeguarding practice**

- 3.8 Management oversight of practice has been developed in response to a deeper understanding of risks and vulnerabilities. In September 2019 a merger of different professional decision-making panels identifying and reviewing support for children missing and child exploitation took place in recognition that there is often a correlation between children who regularly go missing from home and care and the

risks associated with child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation. This joined up management oversight is supporting the coordination of practitioner actions.

3.9 Further to the previous report to Scrutiny in March 2020, key developments in developing contextual safeguarding practice when there are known extra-familial risk factors include the following:

- Five Contextual Safeguarding Champions have been identified to drive contextual safeguarding in Brent. These champions are linked to the national Contextual Safeguarding Network where they can receive peer support from champions working in local authorities across the country. The champions are based in services across CYP including YOS, Localities, LAC and Permanency, the Accelerated Support Team and Safeguarding and QA.
- A representative from the Safeguarding and Reviewing Team attends daily Integrated Risk Management meetings and proactively offers consultation and guidance regarding extra-familial harm. Practitioners are using the Vulnerable Adolescent Risk Assessment more routinely when they are concerned about extra-familial risk, including with care leavers, to support transitional safeguarding.
- Practitioners continue to be provided with additional support to understand Brent's contextual safeguarding approach. This includes online training sessions, short briefings, case consultations to support practitioners undertaking their Vulnerable Adolescent Risk Assessments and promoting tools and resources available through the Contextual Safeguarding Network.

#### ***Contextual safeguarding put into practice case study***

*Freya is a seventeen year old young woman in care. She is friends with Zorha who is an eighteen year old care leaver who lives in semi-independent accommodation close by. Both young women have a history of going missing separately and together. They have been reported to be sending and receiving messages from men they have met online and making arrangements to meet them. Both are considered to be at significant risk of child sexual and criminal exploitation. They have gone missing together and been found in various locations around the United Kingdom.*

*The CYP teams working with Freya and Zorha have been collaborating since it became clear that they were going missing together. As Zorha is over 18, the Adult Safeguarding Team is involved given the extent of the CSE worries.*

*Concerns have recently escalated and been reported through the Integrated Risk Management Meeting, leading to a Complex Strategy Meeting to ensure that all the professionals involved, including the Adult Safeguarding Team and Police representatives, share information and any intelligence from their partner police services in the various locations Freya and Zorha are known to have visited.*

*This case demonstrates the complexity in transitional safeguarding for young people at risk of exploitation that includes a change in lead professional, placement changes around*

*age 18, working across multiple local authorities (adult social care and mental health input) and changes in police oversight.*

### **Update on recommendations of the committee**

- 3.10 The Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group action plan has incorporated the recommendations made by the Scrutiny Committee Task Group in March 2019. An update on progress against these recommendations was provided in March 2020. In addition to the report in March, further progress on recommendations is set out below.
- 3.11 **Recommendation 1:** To support bringing together representatives from Transport for London (TfL), bus companies, and employee representatives with schools, further education colleges, the council, and statutory Boards to address concerns about adolescents on the transportation and bus network.
- 3.12 The council's Highways Service and strategic transport planners continue to meet on a quarterly cycle with representatives from TfL as a formal liaison to discuss a range of issues including the wellbeing of passengers on the bus and rail network. This includes addressing any arising concerns regarding adolescents and their safety on the transportation and bus network.
- 3.13 Although delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, safe school travel planning informed by a contextual safeguarding approach and a formal audit of travel planning is being planned to enhance current work in spring 2021.
- 3.14 **Recommendation 2:** To further support organisations working with young people to promote and develop extra-school activities, particularly in the summer months, for Brent's adolescent children.
- 3.15 Good progress has been made following the update to Scrutiny in March 2020 in developing an enhanced youth offer from the Roundwood site from early 2021, as part of the delivery of the Alternative Provision School at the Roundwood site. The Young Brent Foundation is working with a range of local partners on the developing offer.
- 3.16 The Supporting Inclusive Schools Programme previously reported to scrutiny had a delayed start due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Access to additional positive activities for pupils attending Brent's Pupil Referral Units, Brent River College and Ashley College, are planned for later this term.
- 3.17 **Recommendation 3:** Brent's approach to contextual safeguarding should specifically develop its work with further education colleges to help address the risks faced by adolescent children in this context.
- 3.18 Relationships with United Colleges have continued to be strengthened. Representatives from United Colleges sit on the professional decision making panel identifying and reviewing support for children missing and child exploitation. Representatives are also members of the Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group and the Children's Safeguarding Forum, through which they are supporting the contextual safeguarding approach in Brent.

- 3.19 **Recommendation 4:** A future Social Media Strategy should include how the local authority can work in partnership with external organisations or companies to address areas of concern in adolescents using social media and being online which are identified by Brent Council’s approach to contextual safeguarding.
- 3.20 Actions being undertaken by the Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group and through Brent Council’s Digital Strategy 2019-2023 to support adolescents in their use of social media include work to increase positive community connectivity and coordination, including for young people, using technology to put people in touch with and make more effective contributions to their local community.
- 3.21 As part of the London Borough of Culture, the local authority has worked in partnership with the VICE media platform to produce Vent, a series of podcasts produced and led by Brent young people – the Brent Blueprint Collective – which has addressed a range of contextual safeguarding issues, including online relationships and safety, sexually explicit content through social media, and addressing online information and disinformation. The series of podcasts has continued throughout Covid-19. The Covid-19 “fact checker” episodes helped explain the pandemic to young people and responded to myths and misinformation that young people had encountered, to help young people stay at home and keep safe.
- 3.22 **Recommendation 5:** To develop a one-off public information campaign working with partner organisations and the community to support the development of contextual safeguarding in Brent.

The former Knife Crime Action Plan has been reviewed and updated as the Violence Reduction Action Plan. This has been adopted by statutory agencies of the Safer Brent Partnership and updates will be shared at a future Partnership meetings as well as reporting to the Mayor of London’s Violence Reduction Unit. This Action Plan covers actions relating to knife crime awareness and future campaigns.

#### **4.0 Financial implications**

- 4.1 There are no direct financial implications arising from this report. Costs associated with delivery of the services, have been managed within existing resources. The cost implications for priorities identified going forward, will also need to be managed within existing resources.

#### **5.0 Legal implications**

- 5.1 The Local Authority has statutory duties under the Children Act 1989 and the Children Act 2004 to safeguard the welfare of children in the borough with the involvement of other statutory agencies. The Brent approach to contextual safeguarding is in line with the 2018 statutory guidance ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’ that recognises the importance of social contexts outside the family.

## **6.0 Equality implications**

6.1 There continue to be patterns of over representation in risk and vulnerability areas identified in the cohort of young people supported through Vulnerable Adolescents Panel. Interventions in response have been focused on an individual and family level rather than at a community level. Through Brent's contextual safeguarding approach it is intended to consider responses that will achieve positive impact for priority groups at a population level.

## **7.0 Consultation with ward members and stakeholders**

7.1 The Brent contextual safeguarding approach has been informed by members, through the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee Contextual Safeguarding Task Group report in March 2019 identifying recommendations which are reflected in Brent's contextual safeguarding approach.

7.2 As Brent has developed its approach, wider community engagement has been undertaken, building on established community engagement routes, including Time To Talk events, Brent Youth Parliament, Brent Safer Neighbourhood Board and the Young Brent Foundation.

### **Related Documents:**

Contextual Safeguarding in Brent - An Overview and Scrutiny Task Group Report March 2019

Contextual Safeguarding in Brent report to the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee 16 March 2020

#### **Report sign off:**

*GAIL TOLLEY*

Strategic Director, Children and Young People