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10 May 2016

Ms Sue Harrison, Director of Children's Services, Central Bedfordshire local authority  
Ms Anne Murray, Director of Nursing & Quality for NHS Bedfordshire CCG  
Ms Kathryn Holloway, Police and Crime Commissioner  
Mr Jon Boutcher QPM, Chief Constable of Bedfordshire police force  
Mr Pat Jennings, Interim Team Manager, Bedfordshire Youth Offending Team  
Ms Alison Hancock, Director of Operations, BeNCH Community Rehabilitation Company  
Ms Alison Harding, Head of Bedfordshire LDU, National Probation Service South East and Eastern Division  
Mr Alan Caton OBE, Chair of Central Bedfordshire LSCB

Dear local partnership

### **Joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect in Central Bedfordshire**

Between 14 and 18 March 2016, Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), HMI Constabulary (HMIC) and HMI Probation (HMI Prob) undertook a joint inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect in Central Bedfordshire. This inspection included a 'deep dive' focus on the response to child sexual exploitation and those missing from home, care or education.

This letter to all the service leaders in the area outlines our findings about the effectiveness of partnership working and of the work of individual agencies in Central Bedfordshire.

Partnerships in Central Bedfordshire demonstrate a clear and collective determination to improve services for children and young people and this is evident in their overarching strategic priorities and plans. All of this emphasises the importance of protecting vulnerable children at every stage in the 'golden thread'. The local authority, as the lead agency, provides a clear strategic vision that is championing improvement. Agencies generally work well together, and the single point of access safeguarding hub and social care assessment teams effectively provide a timely response to the range of problems that children and young people experience. In particular, children and young people generally receive high quality services at the first point of contact with children's social care. The local authority ensures that it



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uses the full range of its powers to protect the most vulnerable, including children who go missing from home, school or care, and those at risk of child sexual exploitation. However, inspectors found that the sound strategic planning and priorities evident in Central Bedfordshire are not yet resulting in consistently improved operational decision making or outcomes. This is partly due to widespread organisational changes at the most senior levels in police and health services locally, and in the rehabilitation of offenders nationally, which have slowed implementation of some of the planned changes. As a result, many initiatives seen by inspectors are either recent or in development. The improvements set out in strategies and plans are not always translated into changes to practice on the ground to tackle child sexual exploitation. Therefore, although there are examples of innovative practice in all agencies, there is too much variability in the responses that children at risk of exploitation receive from police and health services, Youth Offending Services (YOS) and the Community Rehabilitation Company (CRC). At times there is an overreliance on the local authority, which is working effectively to take action. It is vital that all agencies work quickly to ensure that they provide a cohesive and high-quality service to all children and young people, and that they can translate the sound strategic plans and priorities into action on the ground.

### **Key Strengths**

- Current arrangements within the single access referral hub are strong. Thresholds for intervention are generally understood and applied well by almost all agencies. A clear strategic focus on and understanding of the benefits of preventative work results in a good partnership commitment to providing early help to children and families. This, combined with effective managerial decision making at the point of first contact with children's social care, ensures that most children receive the right help at the right time. Multi-agency arrangements in relation to the safeguarding of vulnerable children were changing at the time of the inspection. A shared plan by partners to develop further the current benefits of this approach to children and families through the development of a fully functioning multi-agency safeguarding hub is underway, creating positive change. For example, the co-location of some services, such as housing, to form a single point of access is leading to more timely information sharing and there are plans for health and police services to join shortly.
- Overall, social work assessments of children's needs are well informed by other agencies, and resulting plans are proportionate and effective. Risks are prioritised and assessments are timely, resulting in interventions that protect the majority of children from harm.



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- Joint working by children's social care with the safeguarding nurses at the hospitals, health visitors and school nurses is strong. There is good information contained in referrals, timely responses to requests and good attendance at strategy and other meetings. General practitioners (GPs) are compliant and timely with information-sharing requests. All GP practices have a linked social worker, and this is assisting effective communication. The inclusion of Contraception and Sexual Health (CASH) outreach workers in the Central Bedfordshire teenage pregnancy pathway strengthens relationships with vulnerable young families.
- Police refer risks to children from domestic abuse to a designated social care officer. As part of an initiative (Operation Relay), schools are informed by 8am each morning of any domestic abuse incidents from the previous day which involved their pupils. This means that schools are alert to any welfare needs and are able to report any concerns, such as if a child is then absent from school, so that this can be factored into risk assessments.
- Young people identified as being at risk of child sexual exploitation receive effective advice and support. The Contraceptive and Sexual Health (CASH) service provides a good service to children and young people, both through a six-week programme, and in one-to-one interventions. This includes providing advice on maintaining appropriate sexual relationships (to help young people recognise if they are in an abusive relationship), sexual health, self-esteem, emotional well-being, bullying and family relationships. Brook and Terrence Higgins Trust CASH outreach workers also attend social events in local clubs and bars aimed at lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, to raise awareness and promote good sexual health practices. As well as giving all young people advice and support, these workers are also in a good position to identify and reach those who are at risk of exploitation.
- Amid significant national changes to adult probation services, inspectors found that the National Probation Service (NPS) has retained its focus and commitment to the identification of risks and to joint working with partners. This is evident in good joint home visiting between NPS probation officers and social workers, and the effective imposition of licence conditions on offenders, to help protect victims.
- Partner agencies' strategic commitment to learning from external scrutiny is evident and results in stronger services for young people. For example, the local safeguarding children's board (LSCB), in partnership with boards in two neighbouring authorities, commissioned a review by the National Working Group



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of multi-agency responses to child sexual exploitation within Bedfordshire. Findings from the review are informing strategic planning to develop a single coordinated approach, spanning all agencies, to tackle child sexual exploitation across the county. The development of a consistent approach between the three authorities is assisting partner agencies who work across the county to work more efficiently. This work is appropriately informed by an understanding that children and perpetrators do not recognise geographical boundaries

- The countywide strategic planning to prevent child sexual exploitation is underpinned by the Central Bedfordshire child sexual exploitation group's clear focus on the specific needs of local children. The group has an agreed set of parameters, which offer consistency while retaining sufficient flexibility to respond to local needs and circumstances. Characteristics, patterns and themes identified specific to Central Bedfordshire are identified and receive a response. In addition, children and young people benefit from shared approaches to intelligence gathering, training and licensing within the wider Pan Bedfordshire strategy.
- The commitment of partner agencies to the work of the LSCB is demonstrated through the active involvement of most key partner agencies, including the voluntary sector, in board meetings and subgroups. The LSCB involves all agencies in providing a single coordinated approach to safeguarding, and there are clear links between its strategic priorities and the activities it undertakes. As a result, inspectors found that the LSCB focusing on the activities that will make the most difference to children, both in relation to first response multi-agency safeguarding and those who are missing or at risk of child sexual exploitation (the focus of this inspection's 'deep dive').
- Awareness-raising, in relation to the risk of the issues around child sexual exploitation, with practitioners, elected members, children and young people and key members of the community, has recently been significantly strengthened. Activities include use of an electronic e-safety tool, 'Looking out for Lottie', with primary age children, and performances of a play, 'Chelsea's Choice', in secondary schools. As a result of the tenacity of a police officer in the youth offending service, one young person who did not recognise her own vulnerability reluctantly attended the play and said 'that looks like me' – an important step in her becoming more aware of her own vulnerability.
- There is a strong focus on ensuring that young people understand the risks of sexual exploitation. Considerable work has been undertaken in schools through Personal Social Health and Economic education leads, schools survey activity,



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targeting designated teachers and supporting governor training. The inclusion team has undertaken awareness-raising sessions in schools regarding risks and responsibilities to young people who go absent during the school day. There is a 'zero tolerance' policy in relation to the use of informal exclusions for looked after children, and the local authority has written to children's homes and foster carers outlining the actions to take in the event of any 'invitation' not to attend school.

- Some intelligence sharing between agencies is informing decisive action to protect children. This includes the sharing of information on modern slavery issues in Central Bedfordshire, which led to assertive activity to protect children and young people, with creative multi-agency plans in place to prevent reoccurrence and ensure that the problem does not move elsewhere. However, the good practice seen is not consistently replicated. This proactive approach should be adopted in order to protect all children who are at risk of or who are victims of sexual exploitation.

#### **Case study: highly effective practice**

The co-location of Early Help services, the Missing, Homeless and Child Sexual Exploitation teams is a significant strength, resulting in effective information-sharing and joint work. The quality of return home interviews with children and young people is good. Some children and young people are reluctant to engage, but workers understand the importance of this work and are persistent even if this takes time. This persistence by workers ensures that engagement by young people with the service is high and increasing.

Information collated from return home interviews is shared at the Pan Bedfordshire monthly Missing Young People Panel, which brings together a full multi-agency perspective. Agencies complete an 'intelligence submission' form. This is used to oversee and review cases in the meeting so that action can be taken quickly, based on an informed understanding of current and recent risk and vulnerability to factors which are known triggers for child sexual exploitation (such as substance abuse). As a result of this work, the panel has identified seven Central Bedfordshire young people at risk of exploitation. All the young people have been provided with appropriate services to reduce this risk.





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## Areas for improvement

### Responses to children missing and at risk of child sexual exploitation

- While there is considerable evidence of effective joint work with individual young people subject to sexual exploitation, broader operational activity to robustly and persistently deter, target and pursue perpetrators requires strengthening. Plans to improve prevention of exploitation through targeting places where abuse might occur (such as hotels and licensed premises) are yet to be consistently developed and delivered. In one case, this led to a young person being appropriately placed in secure accommodation for their own protection, but not enough action was taken to deter those who posed a risk to the young person.
- Following the HMIC PEEL vulnerability inspection (published December 2015), the police force has introduced new processes for making more informed assessments about the risks faced by those who are missing or absent. Information relating to children who have been reported as missing and absent is shared with the local authority on a daily basis. However, force decision making about the nature of risks faced by a young person in cases seen was often based on the most recent episode rather than an informed assessment of the wider risks and vulnerabilities faced by the young person. This frequently resulted in poor decisions made in police risk assessments, leading to young people being classified as absent rather than missing when this was clearly not appropriate. As a result of these poor decisions, action to locate the young people was delayed.
- Some good work has been undertaken within youth offending services (YOS) to look at the criminal exploitation of children and young people, leading to increased use of remands. However, the planning for these children has not kept pace with the vulnerabilities that come from serious offending, including risk of retaliation. This has resulted in some known risks not being planned for. In one case, a young person had been kidnapped, and although the police had a marker on his home to be able to respond quickly, the vulnerability management plan produced by the YOS was not then updated for two weeks after the kidnapping had occurred.
- Although work of the YOS at operational level has a number of strengths, YOS does not always ensure that critical links are established and the vulnerabilities these young people face as a result of offending and of child sexual exploitation are not routinely included in assessments or plans. This is of particular importance when children are moved out of Central Bedfordshire to other



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authorities where they may be managed by another YOS. In one case seen, neither the risk of child sexual exploitation one young person faced nor the risk they posed to others was included in the YOS assessment.

- Health services are not actively involved in decision making throughout the child's 'journey' to safety. Although health providers are able to provide information or participate in meetings when requested, there is a lack of proactive involvement with children experiencing sexual exploitation.
- The current tool used to assess risk of child sexual exploitation is widely used within children's social care, but insufficiently detailed. The tool is currently not widely used by other agencies, for example police and health services. Specific potential risks in relation to young men and boys and young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender are not included in the tool. Agencies have recognised these limitations and a more comprehensive tool is about to be launched following work undertaken by the local authority CSE coordinator. However, this means that partners cannot be assured that risk was considered fully in every historic risk assessment.

## Leadership

- Although agencies working with an individual child offer each other professional challenge, when this is not effective, escalation processes are not always used to the point of achieving an effective resolution for the child. In these cases, tasks can be incomplete or insufficiently pursued. For example, senior leaders in the police force and the local authority had not resolved the on-going misuse of classifying individual young people as 'absent', although this was a concern raised by social care staff at an operational level.

## The Local Safeguarding Children Board

- The quality of multi-agency training provided through the LSCB is generally good and linked to board priorities. However, the understanding of the complexities of child sexual exploitation among service providers remains too variable, and the training around the risks and prevention has not resulted in improved decision making. Financial commitment by key partner agencies to training has ensured that it is also accessible to the voluntary sector, encouraging take-up and leading to those agencies reporting improvement in practice. However, this was not seen in all services. For example, health practitioners have undertaken training in



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awareness of child sexual exploitation and use of toolkits and assessments but there is little evidence to demonstrate that this is embedded in practice.

- All agencies would benefit from much more rigorous training in relation to listening to children, to include not only what children say, but also what they do not say and what cues they give with their behaviour. This is of particular relevance in addressing issues of consent in relation to young people who have been sexually exploited. This lack of understanding led to police failing to fully investigate an allegation in one case seen, and referring in some case records to children who have been exploited as making 'lifestyle choices'.
- The NPS and the CRC are now separate probation providers, with smaller numbers of staff and managers than the previous Probation Trust. As a result, they have no resource to track the number of referrals they make, or the response of children's services. In addition, they cannot assure themselves that all the right referrals are made. This limits multi-agency oversight of the application of thresholds through the LSCB.
- Currently NPS and CRC contribute to the work of three separate safeguarding children's boards. This limits their capacity to fully participate in the work of the board in Central Bedfordshire. While NPS is currently still managing to engage in the board meetings and subgroups, CRC has struggled. Additional scheduled changes are likely to further limit capacity in both services. Although the LSCB chair has met with both organisations to consider these changes, their implications both operationally and strategically are not yet fully understood or planned for by the board. Further work is required to ensure that their effective contribution to the work of the board can be assured.

#### **Case study: areas for improvement**

Service design, delivery, and commissioning of services have not been sufficiently informed by the direct experience of children and young people who go missing or those who have survived exploitation. Therapeutic services provided to children and young people through universal services do not always address the underlying effect of sexual exploitation on problems such as anxiety and depression even when they are known. The risk some young people who are victims present to others is not always sufficiently or clearly identified and prioritised. Although the local authority does commission specialised services for young people who present a high risk, this reluctance to 'label' these highly vulnerable young people as perpetrators means that they do not always receive the specialised





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therapeutic interventions they need to help them recognise and address their own exploitative and harmful behaviours. This support would help them at an early enough stage to give the best possible chance of avoiding potential offending.

**Next steps**

The local authority should coordinate the preparation of a written statement of proposed action responding to the findings outlined in this letter. This should be a multi-agency response involving LSCB partnership and specifically health services, the police, children’s social care, the national probation service, CRC and the Youth Offending Service. The response should set out the actions for the partnership and, where appropriate, individual agencies.<sup>2</sup>

The local authority should send the written statement of action to [protectionofchildren@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:protectionofchildren@ofsted.gov.uk) by 15 August 2016. This statement will inform the lines of enquiry at any future joint or single agency activity by the inspectorates.

Yours sincerely

<b>Ofsted</b>	<b>Care Quality Commission</b>
 Andrew Cook Regional Director	 Sue McMillan Deputy Chief Inspector
<b>HMI Constabulary</b>	<b>HMI Probation</b>
 Wendy Williams	 Helen Davies



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Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary	Assistant Chief Inspector
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