

Minutes of the Meeting of the Hidden and Extreme Harms Prevention Committee held on 4 October 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Gary Collins (Chair), Shane Ralph and Sue Shinnick

Apologies: Councillor Qaisar Abbas

In attendance: Les Billingham, Assistant Director Adult Social Care and Communities
Michelle Cunningham, Thurrock Community Safety Partnership Manager
Iyobosa Osunde, Strategic Lead Social Work Support
Cheryl Wells, Strategic Lead Community Safety, Emergency Planning and Resilience
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Detective Inspector Chris Rose, Modern-Day Slavery (MDS), Human Trafficking, and Organised Immigration Crime (OIC) Team – Essex Police
Rebekah Brant, Services Delivery Manager – South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre (SERICC)
Sheila Coates, Director – South Essex Rape and Incest Crisis Centre (SERICC)

Before the start of the meeting, all present were advised that the meeting was being recorded and live-streamed, with the recording to be made available on-line.

7. Minutes

The minutes of the Hidden and Extreme Harms Prevention Committee meeting held on 23 June 2022 were approved as a true and correct record.

8. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

9. Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

10. Essex Police: Operation Bluebird Verbal Update

Detective Inspector (DI) Chris Rose introduced himself and gave a presentation regarding the work of Essex Police on Operation Bluebird.

The Chair thanked DI Rose for attending the meeting and giving a presentation. He also thanked Essex Police for their hard work on Operation Melrose, when 39 people were sadly found dead in a lorry. He asked if the Organised Immigration Crime (OIC) team had uncovered any firearms in Thurrock during their operations. DI Rose replied that firearms had not been found in Thurrock by the OIC team. He explained that organised immigration crime gangs usually traded in commodities such as people, money, and drugs. He stated that the team were using a holistic approach to tackle organised immigration crime gangs who were people smuggling. The Chair asked why people were trafficked into the UK. DI Rose explained that many people left their home countries due to political unrest or out of fear for their safety, for example the number of people being trafficked from Afghanistan had increased over the past year due to political unrest. He added that it was often a dangerous and expensive journey for people to make, but it was hard to identify all the push and pull factors that led to people coming to the UK.

The Chair queried why the numbers of people being trafficked into the UK increased during the winter months, and if the OIC team were working to decrease these numbers. DI Rose explained that operations were currently in place to mitigate this issue, but there were lots of human trafficking gangs, as it could be a lucrative business. He explained that many human traffickers facilitated crossings by boat across the English Channel, but the numbers of people crossing over land, for example in lorries, increased during the winter months because of the weather conditions.

Councillor Ralph questioned how many individuals had been prosecuted for people smuggling and human trafficking. DI Rose stated that Essex and UK police forces worked closely with EU forces to share intelligence, as many human trafficking gangs operated both in the UK and EU. He explained that this intelligence sharing led to more prosecutions. He added that the Modern-Day Slavery (MDS) team within Essex Police had also started Joint Investigation Teams with law enforcement agencies in other counties and countries, which ensured that MDS investigations could take place across counties and internationally. The Chair queried if Essex Police had had an issue with human organs being smuggled into the area. DI Rose commented that human organ smuggling formed part of MDS, and although had not been seen in Essex, had been seen in other parts of the world.

11. SERICC Data Comparison: Presentation

The SERICC Director introduced the presentation and explained that following the last Hidden and Extreme Harms Prevention Committee meeting that SERICC had attended, they had organised a male sexual violence awareness course with Thurrock officers to highlight the risk of sexual violence against men and boys, as this had been a suggestion by the Committee. She added that many people during this training had assumed that sexual violence was linked with domestic violence, and the training session had helped to dispel this assumption. She added that the Home Office were also writing a Violence Against Men and Boys Strategy, although there was some way to go before this could be shared. She summarised and stated that violence against

women and girls was more prevalent than against men and boys, which was why the focus of the report was on violence against women and girls.

The SERICC Services Delivery Manager explained that the data presented to the Committee compared figures from between March 2020-21 and March 2021-22. She explained that figures for March 2021-22 had remained relatively static compared to the previous year, with a small increase in the number of people reporting aged between 18-24 years old and 13-17 years old, which was partly due to the end of lockdown restrictions. She added that SERICC had seen 587 incidents reported by 527 users, and these could be recent incidents or from a long time ago. She added that SERICC provided all survivors with counselling sessions, advisers, and helped victims report to the police if they chose. The SERICC Services Delivery Manager explained that in 2021/22 346 females had reported incidents to the police, which meant that the number of people not reporting had increased since 2020/21. She explained that SERICC was the only service in the UK which provided a direct referral pathway, which meant that incidents could be reported directly.

The Chair thanked SERICC for their presentation and asked if they had encountered any grooming gangs commuting from London to operate in Essex. The SERICC Services Delivery Manager explained that their data showed that no grooming gangs had been reported in Thurrock. The SERICC Director added that if a perpetrator assaulted a victim more than once, then this could be classed as grooming under the Home Office's Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. The Chair asked why data on female genital mutilation (FGM) did not specify the ethnicity of the perpetrators. The SERICC Director explained that this demographic information was provided by the government rather than SERICC, but could be shared with the Committee.

The Chair highlighted the work on Operation Hydrant that was being undertaken by the National Police Chiefs Council regarding historic abuse. He stated that their figures showed 12,000 total victims, 8,000 of whom were boys and 4,000 of whom were girls. He stated that the perpetrators listed in Operation Hydrant were often TV personalities, sports stars, politicians, or music industry professionals. He felt that the work of Operation Hydrant should be more publicised due to the demographics of victims and perpetrators. The SERICC Director explained that she had been working with Operation Hydrant and felt that the data had to be considered in the context of historic sexual abuse that had occurred to young people who were now in their 40s, 50s, and 60s. She explained that Operation Hydrant looked at institutions such as borstals and boys' clubs which tended to focus on boys rather than girls. She added that the data was further complicated as girls were more often assaulted by family members, and during the period being considered by Operation Hydrant, this type of abuse was not usually reported. The Chair felt that there was a bias focussing more on violence against women and girls, compared to boys and men, and felt more should be done to enable both genders to come forward if abused.

Councillor Ralph felt that even a small increase in the numbers of incidents was concerning, and asked if the data was amended if a report was found to

be a false allegation. The SERICC Services Delivery Manager stated that the police did not refer people who had made false allegations to SERICC, and highlighted that only 3 allegations out of 3,500 in 2021/22 had been found to be false. Councillor Ralph felt that false allegations could be common in custody cases, which were then passed onto social services. The SERICC Director explained that SERICC worked with complex victims, most of whom were not involved in social services or family court.

Councillor Shinnick questioned how many prosecutions came from those cases that were reported to the police. The SERICC Director highlighted that conviction rates were currently at an all-time low due to COVID delays and barrister strikes. She explained that a victim could wait between 2 and 5 years for their case to go to court, during which time many victims withdrew their case. She explained that even if a perpetrator was found guilty, they could wait between 2 and 9 months to be sentenced. She added that this issue made it difficult to track data as the court system was running so far behind reporting. The SERICC Services Delivery Manager added that there was currently a backlog of around 10,000 cases, and current court dates for 2025 were being offered. The Chair asked if Essex had been part of the Nightingale Courts trial to reduce court backlogs. The SERICC Services Delivery Manager explained that Essex fell under the Eastern Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) area, which had not received a Nightingale Court. She added that a new pilot scheme had begun on 1 October 2022 across the country to reduce the backlog. She explained that the first court involved in the trial was in Snaresbrook, and both Basildon and Chelmsford courts could be included in the fourth or fifth tranche of the pilot.

The Chair and Committee thanked SERICC for their attendance and presentation.

The SERICC Director and SERICC Delivery Manager left the meeting at 7.57pm.

12. Modern Day Slavery and Human Trafficking Update Report

The Strategic Lead Social Work Support introduced the report and stated that it had last been presented to the Committee in 2021. She explained that the Committee had requested a standalone Modern Day Slavery statement, rather than being included in the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy, and both the Adult Social Care and Children's Social Care had worked together to build the strategy.

The Strategic Lead Social Work explained that since the last meeting, the team had worked to develop the Modern-Day Slavery statement, and had completed the following achievements:

1. Information on how to spot the signs of MDS had been shared on Thurrock's social media pages.
2. A training session on the MDS Pathway for Thurrock's first responders had been arranged for the end of October.

3. A list of resources on MDS and human trafficking had been uploaded to the Council's website.
4. A pop-up event would be held in Grays High Street to publicise the anti-slavery campaign.
5. A partnership event on MDS was being arranged for early 2023 to discuss how to tackle MDS, increase awareness, and how to successfully share information with colleagues and frontline staff.
6. A regular training programme had been developed in partnership with Justice and Care, and Essex Police, and had been delivered to 64 people including staff members in Adult Social Care, Community Safety and Children's Social Care.
7. A guide on MDS had been developed with Southend City Council and Essex County Council.
8. The team were working with small businesses to tackle MDS and highlight the signs.

The Strategic Lead Social Work asked if Members had any suggestions on how to promote MDS and human trafficking. The Chair highlighted point 2.10 of the report and asked how this scheme would be delivered to businesses. The Thurrock Community Safety Partnership Manager explained that the charity Stop the Traffic had designed a toolkit and guide on how to spot MDS and human trafficking, and this had been delivered to businesses through the Business Buzz. She explained that some businesses had already signed up to the MDS Statement, but this was not currently a statutory duty. She added that the team were working with the communications team to encourage businesses to write their own MDS pledge, or sign-up to the Council's MDS pledge, which they could put in their window. She felt that this could encourage consumers to choose businesses who were committed to stopping MDS and human trafficking. The Chair sought clarification on training outlined in 3.1.1 of the report, and asked if this was targeted specifically at council officers. The Strategic Lead Social Work explained that the training was offered to council officers, the voluntary sector, and frontline staff.

Councillor Ralph felt it was good to see the MDS Strategy was now standalone and not included in the VAWG Strategy. He asked how residents and members of the public could get involved. He also felt concerned that the 'It Could be Your Daughter' picture, only focussed on women and girls. He felt that boys were also affected by MDS, as 24 out of the 39 people found dead in the lorry were men. He also felt pleased to see places such as car washes and farms were being monitored for MDS and human trafficking incidents. The Strategic Lead Social Work stated that she would review the 'It Could be Your Daughter' photograph. The Thurrock Community Safety Partnership Manager added that the version of the of the Strategy on the website would not show photos to ensure there would be no bias. She added that 18 October 2022 was 'Anti-Slavery Day' and an event would be held on 14 October, in conjunction with Hate Crime Awareness week, to highlight the signs of MDS and human trafficking. She asked if Members could promote this event with colleagues and residents. Councillor Ralph asked if a member of the team could attend the Stanford-le-Hope Community Forum, as areas such as Stanford-le-Hope, Corringham and Fobbing were more rural, and

many temporary farm workers lived in the area who could be vulnerable to MDS. The Thurrock Community Safety Partnership Manager agreed that she would look into this meeting, and asked if Hidden Harms Committee Members would also like to undertake training. Members agreed that training on MDS would be useful.

Councillor Shinnick asked if the Anti-Slavery and Hate Crime Awareness pop-up event could be held in other areas across Thurrock, such as Ockendon and Aveley. The Assistant Director Adult Social Care and Communities explained that local area co-ordinators had been appointed within the Adult Social Care team who would be setting up talking shops in every area of the borough.

RESOLVED:

- 1. Members approved the 3-year approach and delivery plan.**
- 2. Members agreed to champion the MDS agenda and act as key stakeholders in being the eyes and ears of our communities, and continue to raise awareness of the issue.**

13. Work Programme

The Committee asked if an update on anti-terrorism could be added to the agenda.

The meeting finished at 8.21 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

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Democratic Services at Direct.Democracy@thurrock.gov.uk**