

Minutes of the Meeting of the Hidden and Extreme Harms Prevention Committee held on 15 December 2022 at 7.00 pm

Present: Councillors Gary Collins (Chair), Qaisar Abbas, Daniel Chukwu and Shane Ralph

Apologies: Councillor Sue Shinnick

In attendance: Michelle Cunningham, Thurrock Community Safety Partnership (CSP) Manager
Luke Froment, Service Manager - Children Looked After
Daniel Jones, Strategic Lead - Children Looked After
Cheryl Wells, Strategic Lead Community Safety, Emergency Planning and Resilience
Lucy Tricker, Senior Democratic Services Officer

Detective Inspector Tanya Steele, Operation Raptor Team, Essex Police

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.

14. Minutes

The minutes of the Hidden and Extreme Harms Prevention Committee meeting held on 4 October 2022 were approved as a true and correct record.

15. Items of Urgent Business

There were no items of urgent business.

16. Declarations of Interest

There were no interests declared.

17. Essex Police: Operation Raptor Verbal Update

Detective Inspector (DI) Tanya Steele introduced herself and explained that the Operation Raptor team within Essex Police operated county-wide and was dedicated to tackling county lines drug distribution and high harm groups within this. She explained that the Operation Raptor team was embedded within the Serious Violence Unit and followed the 'Triple P Model' of prevent, protect, and pursue to reduce the risk of harm to Essex residents. DI Steele clarified the definition of county lines, which was gangs and organised criminals who export and distribute illegal drugs within the UK using dedicated

phone lines, and had been agreed upon in Serious Violence Unit Strategy 2018. She explained that the county line gangs often used young people to move and store drugs, and used violence and sexual violence on these young people. DI Steele added that Operation Raptor had a very specific mandate regarding county lines gangs, as their operations focussed on the suspects who could cause the highest harm. She clarified that this was assessed based on categories such as the likelihood they could cause child sexual exploitation and commit acts of sexual violence. She stated that the team focussed on individuals with significant roles in county lines operations, which often meant that investigations were complex and focussed on building cases to ensure the police could prove high culpability. She stated that the Operation Raptor team focussed on significant individuals as these had the highest impact on the county lines operation when they were removed. She confirmed that when the arrest of an individual was made, the Operation Raptor team usually had a case prepared to ensure the Crown Prosecution Service could try for the highest or most appropriate sentence.

DI Steele moved on and explained that the 'Triple P Model' utilised partnership working, both within the police force and wider communities. She explained that as county lines operators often used vulnerable young people to do their work, it made it harder to find the operators themselves. She added that the team also worked with the community to help with the vulnerabilities of young people, who could be arrested if found working for county lines, but would be signposted to the relevant support networks. She added that the team worked closely with the Essex Violence and Vulnerability Unit (EVVU) to reduce vulnerabilities and programmes regarding this were ongoing within Thurrock. She added that the team also used injunctions as a preventative measure to steer young people away from danger, and she had found this to be effective due to the stringent measures put in place. She highlighted that seeking a gang injunction was a time-consuming process due to the level of case-building required, but it formed one of the tactics used by Operation Raptor.

Councillor Ralph asked how many successful prosecutions had occurred within Thurrock in the last 12 months. DI Steele replied that she would send these figures to the Committee after the meeting. Councillor Ralph queried which community groups the Operation Raptor team worked with. DI Steele replied that the team worked closely with the Community Safety Partnership (CSP), as well as other teams within Essex Police to ensure vulnerable individuals were safeguarded. The Thurrock CSP Manager added that the CSP met monthly with the Operation Raptor team, the Youth Offending Service, the child safeguarding team, the adult safeguarding team, social workers, the housing team, and British Transport Police to discuss gang related violence. She explained that the teams met to discuss warrants from Operation Raptor to ensure these were followed up by the Council, for example ensuring that if the person with a warrant lived in council housing, the housing team were aware. She stated that lots of partnership working was done on this issue and ongoing action plan was in-place for both the preventative aspect and the pursuant aspect undertaken by the police.

The Chair asked how successful Operation Raptor had been in preventing young people from joining gangs. The Thurrock CSP Manager confirmed that this was measured using robust Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and was managed through the gang related violence team. She stated the KPI data was shared to the Health and Wellbeing Board, and could be shared with the Committee after the meeting. Councillor Chukwu asked which areas in Thurrock were targeted by the Operation Raptor team. DI Steele explained that the team did not focus on one area, as county lines ran across the UK and they focussed on lines being run by county lines gangs which caused the most harm. The Thurrock CSP added that Thurrock received funding for preventative measures from the EVVU, which was granted by the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner. She explained that the EVVU had undertaken detailed analysis based on where offenders lived, rather than where they offended, and targeted schools in this locality. She stated that in Thurrock these areas were Grays, West Thurrock, and Tilbury. Councillor Chukwu asked how effective the Operation Raptor team and if they had the resources they needed. DI Steele felt that the team were very effective as they prioritised cases where the most harm could occur and focussed on individuals controlling lines, rather than drug runners. Councillor Ralph queried the preventative funding received from the EVVU and asked if the funding could be spread across the borough, including in the east. The Thurrock CSP Manager explained that the Council did not have control where this funding was allocated, as it was prescribed from the EVVU. She added that the funding areas were reviewed annually, so if areas in the east of the borough were shown to have met the criteria then the funding would be moved. She stated that Thurrock CSP received a small amount of funding for preventative issues, and this funding was used to tackle identified issues, for example the park in East Tilbury. The Thurrock CSP Manager explained that the team had organised a pop-up event in an East Tilbury park to talk to the community about preventative measures, and as a result of this the youth team were funded to deliver further preventative work in that area.

DI Steele left the meeting at 7.24pm.

18. Unaccompanied Asylum Seekers: Annual Update Report

The Service Manager – Children Looked After introduced the report and stated that Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) often arrived in the UK after long and dangerous journeys, and it was the job of the receiving local authority to assess their needs and provide them with appropriate care and accommodation. He explained that UASC were received through various means, such as in the backs of lorries in Thurrock's services and in small boats in Kent. He stated that every local authority in the UK was set a quota for the numbers of UASC they were required to take and provide care for, and this quota was set against the child population. He explained that previously the quota had been 0.07% of the child population, but this had recently increased to 0.1%. He clarified that for Thurrock this was an increase from 31 UASC to 45 UASC, which increased the number of placements required; the caseload for social workers; and the caseload for the aftercare team, as many UASC were aged between 16-18 and were approaching adulthood.

The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that due to Thurrock's transport links, the borough often received more than its UASC quota and was able to move children to other local authority areas under the National Transfer Scheme. He explained that this was slowly changing, and Thurrock were becoming a 'receiver authority' due to the number of children arriving in Kent. He stated that UASC were often at risk of harm due to trafficking and exploitation as organised immigration gangs transported UASC to the UK for a fee and could then further exploit them once they had arrived. The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that the team used their initial contact with UASC to build trust and a relationship with the professionals who were going to look after them. He stated that all UASC received a direct visit within 24 hours and were assessed for their levels of vulnerability. He stated that school-aged UASC were offered online education as soon as possible to ensure they were learning before they were enrolled in local schools, as this reduced the risk of them going missing. He added that the team had been successful as officers had run a training event for Ofsted, and the Thurrock model was now being taught as best practice by Ofsted inspectors.

The Service Manager – Children Looked After added that the team utilised multi-agency safeguarding practices to share information regularly with the police, border force, and relevant social workers, as this could help all agencies understand where UASC were coming from and how they could be best helped. The Service Manager – Children Looked After outlined the data within the report and highlighted that from April to November 2022, 14 new UASC children had arrived in Thurrock, which brought the total population up to 34 UASC. He explained that under the previous quota, the limit for UASC in Thurrock had been 31, and this had already been surpassed with the new quota rules. He stated that he had checked the figures, and today there were currently 37 UASC in Thurrock. The Service Manager – Children Looked After clarified that from April to October 2022 there had been 11 missing UASC episodes, but these had been from 3 UASC who had gone missing multiple times. He stated that the Council did not currently have any long-term missing UASC, but strategy meetings were regularly held to ensure this did not happen, and if it did the likely places the missing UASC could be found. He mentioned that all local lines of enquiry were exhausted before a UASC was classed as long-term missing, but the team met border force officers every six weeks to discuss these cases, and some success had previously been seen finding long-term missing UASC. He added that all UASC were offered return to home interviews after a missing episode, and of the three UASC who had gone missing from April this year, two had accepted this offer and one had rejected.

The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that the team received a budget to support UASC, as well as a grant from government of £143 per person, per night to support their accommodation costs. He added that the average cost of housing a UASC was approximately £800 to £1000 per week. He added that in November 2022 the aftercare team looked after 251 people, of which 95 were former UASC. He summarised and stated that

UASC were often at great risk of harm and exploitation, particularly those with missing episodes, and the team worked hard to ensure that all UASC received appropriate support and worked to reduce missing episodes.

The Chair thanked officers for the report and asked about the mixture of genders of UASCs, and which UASCs were received from. The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that the overwhelming majority of UASC were male, and they came from various parts of the world. He added that the Council had recently received several UASC from Sudan, Eritrea, and Albania. The Chair asked why these UASC chose to come to the UK, rather than other European countries. The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that the UASC undertook perilous and dangerous journeys when leaving their countries of origin, and often things happened to them which were beyond their control. He explained that organised immigration gangs often promised great things to the parents of UASC which did not occur, and the UASC did not have a choice in which country they were taken too. He added that UASC were received across Europe. The Service Manager – Children Looked After stated that social workers had a conversation with all UASC to understand the trauma they had gone through on their journeys, and help them to understand that they were now safe with professionals. He summarised and stated that unscrupulous people trafficked UASC, who often did not know what was happening to them and were too afraid to ask or speak up for themselves. Councillor Chukwu asked how the team helped UASC deal with their traumas. The Service Manager – Looked After Children replied that the team helped them to settle into safe places, establish routines, build communities and relationships, and this often helped with the impact of their trauma. He added that the team also had access to specialist resources such as counsellors who were trained in UASC, and would help them to settle in and give them a stable base. Councillor Chukwu asked if UASC were encouraged to share their stories with social workers to help alleviate their trauma. The Service Manager – Children Looked After responded that they were encouraged to share their stories, for example some UASC were persecuted in their home countries because of their religious beliefs or sexuality, and others were persecuted by local militia and had seen family members killed. He added that often UASC parents sent their children from their home countries, as travelling to the UK or Europe was safer than them remaining in their home countries, even though the journey itself was dangerous. He stated that for a young person to make such a journey, there had to be a significant motivation in their home countries.

Councillor Abbas congratulated the team on becoming a best practice model for Ofsted. He asked what happened to a UASC when they reached 18, or had their asylum refused. The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that once a UASC turned 18 they were moved to the aftercare team who ensured they had appropriate housing, and employment or education. He stated that the team worked with the Home Office on a UASC asylum claim and helped advocate for the child. He stated that if their claim was accepted that the team would help them with long term housing and other issues, and a personal adviser was allocated. He added that if their asylum claim was rejected, a human rights assessment would be carried out, and this would

consider the impact of the withdrawal of support, as the UASC no longer had access to public funds but the team still had to meet their basic human rights such as having a place to live. He stated that the team would also work with the UASC and the Home Office on a voluntary return, but pathway planning was in place with every UASC to discuss the eventuality of an accepted asylum claim; a rejected asylum claim; and what would happen whilst they were waiting. Councillor Abbas agreed with the Service Manager – Children Looked After that these were vulnerable children, and asked why the local authorities had to spend money on their care, rather than the Home Office. The Service Manager – Children Looked After replied that the local authority had a duty as Corporate Parents, but the Home Office did have a role to play. He stated that the distinction of duties was outlined within the relevant legislation. Councillor Abbas queried why there was an overspend in the team if a grant was received for UASC housing from central government. The Strategic Lead – Children Looked After replied that the grant covered placement costs, such as foster care or supported accommodation, but did not cover other costs such as social workers or the aftercare team. Councillor Ralph questioned if the team had enough resources and staff to handle the increased UASC quota. He also asked if UASC were receiving their initial health assessments on time. The Strategic Lead – Children Looked After replied that the number of children under the care of the local authority would have an impact on resources, but the quota had been increased nationally. He explained that that no new foster placements had been granted after the quota increase, but the team monitored the workload of social workers closely. He added that overall the level of looked after children within Thurrock remained stable, due to a decrease in the number of local looked after children. He added that UASC initial health assessments were also affected by the capacity issues within the system, but this depended on where the child was placed.

Councillor Chukwu questioned how long it took the Home Office to determine a UASC asylum case. The Service Manager – Children Looked After replied that it was dependent on the case, and had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. He added that the team had a specific link person within the Home Office, and they regularly tracked and worked to ensure cases were progressing. Councillor Chukwu queried how the team were coping with accommodating UASC following the increase in the quota level. The Service Manager – Children Looked After explained that placements of UASC remained a national issue, but the placement team worked with a variety of foster care providers and semi-supported accommodation units to ensure all UASC received appropriate housing. He stated that there were no issues currently within Thurrock regarding finding placements, but this could change in future due to the increased quota levels. Councillor Chukwu asked if the team had encountered any issues with the community being hostile to UASC placed in their areas. The Strategic Lead – Children Looked After replied that this had not been an issue so far as the team considered an area before offering contracts to placement providers. He added that the team also worked to match up UASC, so they were placed together in a safe area. He understood that UASC may face racism and other issues, but the team remained vigilant and were careful where children were placed. The Thurrock

CSP added that this issue had been brought to her attention once in five years, and this had been dealt with swiftly. She explained that the team had recently asked to place a UASC in this area again, and detailed discussions had been undertaken with the police and CSP before a decision was made. She added that the team were trained to spot the signs of racism and knew how to report it. Councillor Chukwu asked if the team had had any problems with community integration for UASC. The Service Manager – Children Looked After replied that this varied for different communities and different children. He stated that the team made culturally appropriate links between the UASC, who were often placed alongside another UASC with similar backgrounds, or shared a first language. He stated that some UASC struggled to fit in and settle, and these children were supported closely by social workers and enrolled in programmes such as English as Second or Other Language.

Councillor Ralph offered Member support to officers and partners, and assured officers that Member assistance was available if required. He thanked officers for their hard work, particularly regarding the training given to Ofsted.

RESOLVED: That the Committee:

- 1. Were advised of the potential harms faced in relation to Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) presenting to Thurrock and the work done to safeguard them.**
- 2. Were aware that Corporate Parenting responsibilities extend to UASC.**

The Service Manager – Children Looked After and Strategic Lead – Children Looked After left the meeting at 8.07pm.

19. Work Programme

The Committee agreed to add an update from the local community policing team or children’s safeguarding team to discuss knife crime in Thurrock.

The meeting finished at 8.22 pm

Approved as a true and correct record

CHAIR

DATE

Any queries regarding these Minutes, please contact

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