



Dear Home Secretary,

Re: Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children

I was saddened - but not surprised - to read the findings of this report, which shows the extent and terrible impact of youth violence on our children and young people. Children as young as 11 are carrying knives for protection, 1 in 4 children surveyed have either been a victim of violence or perpetrated violence, and Black children have a greater likelihood of being adultified by the professionals leading to worse outcomes than their white counterparts across many areas of their lives.

I welcome the good multi-agency practice highlighted in this report which we will share widely, to identify, address, and prevent serious youth violence. Additionally, we have created a summary for partners (attached) and have circulated the JTAI findings from Leeds.

The most recent PEEL inspection of West Yorkshire Police highlighted that the force helped to set up a community initiative called Community Action to Create Hope that has helped to improve the lives of many children in Leeds where HMIC inspectors talked with many children, who spoke openly about how they had previously been involved in criminal activity and how CATCH had transformed their lives. I am incredibly proud of the work that is being done in Leeds and is a great example of how we can prevent serious youth violence.

In the Mayor's current term of office, alongside coproducing a Serious Violence Strategy with the communities of West Yorkshire, we are also working with those same communities to pilot new Youth Hubs, which will help to deliver your pledge of a 50% reduction in knife crime. I am excited to see how these pilots, which our Violence Reduction Partnership is leading, transform the lives of young people here, in our county.

As Deputy Mayor I will continue to ensure the good practice, risks and areas for development from this report are effectively communicated with all relevant stakeholders and that West Yorkshire Police are held to account in their duty to protect children and respond to serious youth violence.

Regards,

Alison Lowe,

Deputy Mayor of West Yorkshire for Policing and Crime



Multi-agency responses to serious youth violence: working together to support and protect children

Full report available [here](#).

The report sets out the findings from the 6 joint targeted area inspections (JTAs)¹ carried out between September 2023 and May 2024 which looked at how local partnerships and services respond to children and their families when children are affected by serious youth violence. The inspections considered the work of individual agencies and multi-agency working arrangements between children's social care, health services, youth justice services (YJS), schools and the police.

Inspections focused on 3 themes:

- Strategic responses to serious youth violence.
- Work with children, both individuals and groups, affected by serious youth violence and child criminal exploitation.
- Intervention in specific places to improve safety for children and communities.

This document aims to summarise the findings of the report by highlighting good and bad practice, risks and areas for development. Whilst the report highlights findings from all 6 of the areas inspected, this document has a focus on Leeds but does learning and case studies from each of the areas for additional understanding. Throughout the document there are quotations in blue text which have extracted directly from the Leeds JTA report, to provide local context. The full Leeds report can be found [here](#), and all page numbers refer to this document.

Good practice

The report provides several case studies of best practice.

Multi agency working

Examples of effective multi-agency were detailed, including the importance of including education services, YJS, probation in multi-agency and front door arrangements so that children's specific needs are met and the opportunities for information sharing. This information also helps partnerships to understand the local context, and children's needs and risks within the local community.

Project Shield in Leeds was spotlighted and referred to the working relationships between West Yorkshire Police, YJS, Crimestoppers, Leeds City Council, and community and youth service providers in the city. Housing support charities, and mental health and well-being charities were also noted as being contributory members. Project Shield has improved information-sharing between partner agencies about violent crime affecting children and in the daily meeting, partners share information about incidents that happened the evening before which enables timely responses and strategy discussions if required.

¹ JTAs are carried out by Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMI Probation).



“Most children in Leeds who are affected by serious youth violence and/or criminal exploitation benefit from an effective and well-coordinated multi-agency responses” (p.2)

Partnership working can also include viewing parents and carers as partners. In Leeds, parents and carers alongside representatives from professional organisations worked together in the (Risks outside the home (ROTH) process. All worked in partnership with agencies using a non-blaming relational approach.

Key take away from this point: Having properly planned and well-coordinated responses are central to promising and successful multi-agency arrangements and ensures children are safeguarded at the earliest opportunity.

The voice of the child

Stronger partnerships had consulted with children to better understand their daily lives and experiences of serious youth violence. The importance of establishing relationships, taking account of the child's identity, giving children agency and a sense of control through recognising and responding to their views and wishes were positively noted.

“There is a clear and mutually agreed focus on locally based early intervention and prevention. This includes a high level of engagement and consultation with children and families” (p.2)

Key take away from this point: Children's views need to be prioritised to better understand their experiences, needs and concerns about violence.

Being needs focused

The importance of speech and language was evident in supporting children. For example, in Manchester, most schools, including alternative provision, had trained teaching staff in children's speech and language needs. This was helping staff to identify children's speech and language needs and ensure targeted support is provided at an early stage.

In Merton, there were dedicated child and adolescent mental health service (CAMHS) staff in the child exploitation teams, social work teams and the YJS. Schools in Merton, also delivered training to local police officers on children and neurodivergence so that they could better understand children's needs.

Some professionals expressed concerned that a great deal of hidden harm is happening to girls in the context of serious youth violence. A few local areas had recognised this and were working to reach girls, through specific interventions, to understand and address their needs in relation to violence and exploitation.

Key take away from this point: Taking a strengths- and relationship-based approach to the child and their family. This includes taking time to understand a child's wider needs, their strengths and their sense of identity. Awareness and attention should also be given to girls involved in serious youth violence.

Targeted preventative work for disproportionality

Some partnerships were taking direct action to meet the needs of groups that were disproportionately affected by serious youth violence. This Targeted preventative work was evident in 2 areas, of which one partnership had commissioned voluntary organisations to provide resources such as parenting support, educational interventions, and direct support to children from specific communities that were overrepresented in the data on serious youth violence. Manchester had an equality strategy that aims to address some of the underlying issues that can cause disproportionality. Different partners referred to this strategy and incorporated it into their work. An analyst in Manchester's VRU provided monthly analytics which included reporting on ethnicity disproportionality.



“Children’s diverse needs are considered, and services are designed to address the disproportionality of black and ethnic minority children involved in the criminal justice system, and additional vulnerability factors” (p.2)

Key take away from this point: Partnerships need to work collectively to identify, understand and support those disproportionately affected by serious violence.

Using data for early identification and understanding need

This was a key area of positive practice but also one that should be continually improved. There were several case studies attributed to using data effectively. In Merton, detailed analysis of information about groups of children was used to inform the approach to prevention with the support of the VRU. Leaders and managers in the YJS analysed their data and identified that a disproportionate number of boys, children from diverse backgrounds and children who had experienced abuse and neglect were victims of serious youth violence and/or criminal exploitation. They established a disproportionality task force to explore how to address these issues locally.

Local agencies in Manchester, in partnership with the VRU, have developed an approach to identifying children who may be harmed by serious youth violence but are not involved with statutory services. A multi-agency ENGAGE panel has been set up across the city to offer interventions and support for children. A wide range of agencies can now refer children who are not open to statutory social services to the ENGAGE panel.

In Coventry, the Community Initiative to Reduce Violence took different approaches to working with children, depending on the child’s level of engagement. If children were not able to engage with low-level interventions to prevent and reduce harm from serious youth violence, the police and YJS worked with them individually to identify and address the barriers preventing them from engaging. They then worked collectively with the child to find ways of overcoming these barriers.

The research unit in the West Yorkshire VRP provides regular and detailed analysis of data, research, community feedback and children’s views and experiences. Partners across the system can directly access a partnership dashboard to aid their understanding of serious violence in Leeds. In addition, the research unit can also drill down into the dashboard to understand the local picture and the impact for the local community and children in Leeds. *“This helps to understand where and when serious youth violence is occurring and where resources and interventions need to take place. The partnerships continually look to improve their understanding of the reasons why violence occurs, by interweaving research, community engagement, children’s views and partner intelligence, to achieve a rich analysis and understanding.” (p.4).* This enables the VRP to work in partnership with the Safer Leeds executive board to target training, interventions with children, and direct funding streams for community and third sector projects.

Hospital related programmes were mentioned, Hospital navigators programmes especially in Leeds regarding sharing information about children who attend the Emergency Department for reasons relating to violence is shared at weekly multi-disciplinary meetings. This ensures that children are directed to the right services. Additionally, in Coventry, every call-out for an ambulance to attend a potential serious youth violence incident resulted in an instant safeguarding referral to children’s social care by the call handler.

Key take away from this point: Collation and analysis of data across the partnership can provide rich information to support violence reduction and prevention efforts. By using data sources from varied partners this will ensure that needs can be fully understood. The VRUs can also offer credible support to partnerships by offering experience and capacity.

Police response

In Leeds, when children are arrested for incidents relating to serious youth violence, police custody staff work closely with multi-agency partners to provide a child-centred approach within the criminal justice system. The vulnerability of detained children is well recognised. They are treated accordingly



and seen by healthcare professionals, liaison and diversion professionals, with timely referrals to social care. Alternative accommodation arrangements are in place and community-based help is quickly arranged for these children. This ensures that, in line with their risks and needs, children do not remain in custody longer than is necessary. In Lancashire, police custody staff are trained in trauma-informed practice. Children are only taken into custody when necessary. Health and youth justice teams are involved in a pilot scheme to place therapists in the custody suites.

Places & spaces

It is important for children to have safe spaces that promote education and employment and offers children alternative positive activities to keep them safe from exploitation and serious youth violence. CATCH in North Leeds which is a voluntary sector resource ran by staff with support from the police, education and social care. Children can also access specialist and voluntary sector services. Over 1,400 children have used or are using the service.

In Manchester, examples outreach support, which recognised that some children will not readily attend or access services, known as the Youth Zone. They work to raise awareness across the community, including with transport providers, supermarket security staff and takeaways, as well as across a range of small grassroots charities and groups.

Key take away from this point: Having access to spaces of positive influence and outlets is important for supporting children and offering diversionary activities.

Violence Reduction Units

Where in place, Violence Reduction Partnerships/Units were found to be mostly making a positive difference. VRUs could then complement existing arrangements and build capacity for partners to provide additional services. Examples include Manchester's VRU where working relationships complement local arrangements and the VRU identified where it can support the partnership to deliver interventions and develop strategy more effectively. This included through delivering proactive public awareness campaigns to reduce serious youth violence. Similarly, Coventry's response to the new Serious Violence Duty is led by the police through the Coventry Serious Violence Prevention Partnership.

Poor practice

Inadequate recording and understanding was a significant area of poor practice. Of the 36 children whose experiences we tracked in detail (29 male and 7 female), only 4 had a disability noted in their children's social care record. However, when further reviewed 16 children had a diagnosis of a disability and/or an education, health and care (EHC) plan. A further 15 had additional needs identified and were waiting for an assessment: 10 for a neurodevelopmental assessment (including for autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)) and 5 for a mental health assessment. Of the 36, only 5 had no additional support needs in these categories.

Assessment delays were a key concern with children having to wait at least 2 years for a neurodevelopmental assessment in three of the areas visited. In one area, children then had to wait up to 10 years for a service, by which time some of them would be adults. Again, in the Leeds report the inspectors referred to "*unacceptably long wait for children to be assessed by CAMHS*" (p.9). In addition to CAMHS referrals, the Leeds report discussed how a child's need was identified and referred promptly by the school there was significant delay in the completion of the social work assessment and many months before a risk matrix assessment was completed and a 'Safe' referral made.



“Many children at risk of serious youth violence and criminal exploitation who have emerging mental health needs and/or neurodiverse needs are waiting too long to be assessed by CAMHS. The impact of this delay means not all children have their mental health needs fully addressed, nor are they easily able to access therapeutic treatment” (p.2)

The language used by professionals sometimes reflected an attitude of seeing older children as adults rather than children and not realising the harmful consequences of some of the ways they responded to children, such as blaming them for the harm they have experienced, and/or failing to recognise their need for protection. An example included the **adultification** of a highly vulnerable child with SEND by professionals. These actions resulted in the child being criminalised as professionals failed to assess his special educational needs and to address and understand that he was a victim of exploitation.

Attitudes, assumptions and the use of inappropriate **victim-blaming language** which was not challenged by other professionals. Key standout quotes include *“girls ‘choosing’ to be in a relationship with a ‘gang’ member”* or professionals referring to children as *“placing themselves at risk’ and having ‘risk-taking’ behaviour.”*

The response of the police in some situations was discussed. It was noted that the police do not always recognise the cumulative harm to children and can treat multiple incidents involving a child as separate and unrelated incidents and are not initially seen as part of a pattern of risk. Similarly, regarding analysis of risk, the report notes occasions when PPNs were not submitted following police incidents, which would have added to the multi-agency understanding of risk.

In one area, there was no routine process for making a referral when children came into custody or were interviewed about criminal activity for one of the visited areas.

Data omissions and consistency were noted when discussing police response including details of how when the police make referrals or PPNs, they do not always include all the relevant information needed to ensure the child gets an appropriate response such as ethnicity or cultural heritage. It was also reported that the police do not always make it clear why they are making the referral in the first place. These omissions can mean that vital information is not available to those who decide which support services the child should get to prevent harm. This was highlighted as an area of improvement within the Leeds report. There is a requirement for *“consistent and timely sharing of PPNs when police officers identify risks to children. The quality of PPNs should include detailed information including ethnicity and culture” (p.3).*

Additionally, the combined inspection report inferred there was a lack of quality assurance or police management oversight to ensure that children affected by serious youth violence are referred.

There was evidence of **the poor or ineffective use of data** to understand serious youth violence with only police data being collected was police data. Consequently, only a small number of incidents were likely to come to the attention of the police which meant the partnership had seriously underestimated the extent of risk and need within the community. In another area, the partnership did not collate or use vital information on ambulance services’ responses to children affected by serious youth violence, even though this was readily available.



Risks

A key failure was regarding the inconsistency of identifying serious youth violence as a **safeguarding issue** is leaving too many children at serious risk of harm. Not all inspected areas had arrangements for transitional safeguarding in place to support older children and risk and need does not end at the age of 18 so multi-agency work needs to be planned and coordinated in good time for older children as they move into adulthood.

The report also highlighted gaps in **appropriate training and supervision regarding safeguarding** especially regarding medical staff. This was also evident in the ambulance service and the emergency departments can treat children according to a purely medical model. Professionals did not always make the connection with girls and serious youth violence with the example being girls presenting at hospital with mental health issues linked to trauma, or to health services as a result of sexual violence.

The report emphasised a **postcode lottery** effect whereby coordinated child-centred response was not available to children in all areas. This variation in multi-agency responses, sometimes depending on where a child lives means children are being let down and left at serious risk.

There was evidence that areas were not fully **understanding or identifying risk factors**. Similarly, disproportionality was not always well understood, especially issues of inequality, such as poverty and racism. Assessment tools being used did not include or reference risk factors for serious youth violence meaning risk and need were not always identified. In addition to not identifying risk factors, known **children's needs were not being addressed holistically**. This included not considering the EHC plans of children who were on child protection plans or looked after and at risk of serious youth violence. Shifting the focus to need is important, but this should not mean ignoring or minimising harm to others. YJS supported was noted to do this, as once children are seen by the YJS, they receive valuable input, support and assessments but for many this is too late.

Even when the police had clear strategic approaches, these did not always have an impact on frontline policing. As such, police responses to children affected by serious youth violence were inconsistent. More work is needed by police leaders both nationally and locally to ensure consistency across police forces in identifying and meeting the needs of children affected by serious youth violence.

Funding both for VRUs and for interventions to address serious youth violence is often short term. This poses a real challenge, both in terms of partnerships' ability to evaluate the projects, and in terms of finding the resources to continue projects that are working well for children.

Opportunities for development and next steps

Partnerships should continue building and expanding their **child first approach** to take a more coordinated and overarching approach to consultation. They need a better understanding of the best way to engage with the children most affected by serious youth violence. Collectively, the evidence base needs to be reviewed and children should be involved in conversations about preventative interventions. For example, more work is needed to understand which approaches work best to prevent children from carrying knives. There was evidence of professionals asking questions, such as those in CAMHS and sexual health services who assess children's needs routinely asked questions about child criminal exploitation. However, the tools they used did not direct them to ask questions about serious



youth violence. This is an opportunity to identify children's needs for support and protection earlier by asking questions and listening to children.

Strategic partnerships must make it an objective to **reduce the overrepresentation of Black and other ethnic minority children** affected by serious youth violence in their area. This needs to have a clear strategic approach. The formulation meetings as when done effectively, they can lead to a much more detailed understanding of the child, their situation and their journey to their current life circumstances.

Ensure no examples of **victim-blaming language** and this must be recognised and responded to at a strategic level. Professionals should understand adultification, its impacts and know of effective approaches to avoid adultification were in place. This should be addressed with appropriate strategic leadership, and training and support for staff.

Multi-agency front doors need to continually develop to provide a more **consistent response** to serious youth violence. This response should include better working relationship with **Serious Organised Crime teams**. In the Leeds summary report, there were *"some inconsistencies in how partners share information at the front door" (p.5)*. This included no consistent access to youth justice information, and health and education practitioners are co-located only one day a week. As mentioned previously, police officers did not always record information about risks to children on PPNs. These omissions can mean the full picture of the child's circumstances is missing and not considered in next steps decision-making. Further training for officers should continue to improve compliance with the police force policy and emphasises the importance of correct data collection.

In regard to Leeds, it was noted that *"the sheer number of meetings and professionals can be confusing and overwhelming for many children and their parents" (p.7)*. The local report detailed how some multi-agency meetings lacked efficient coordination to serve multiple functions and reduce bureaucracy. Multi-agency partners have recognised there is some duplication and are working towards better alignment of key meetings to make them more efficient. These steps should be ongoing to continually improve efficiency.

The full report detailing the findings of all 6 inspections can be found [here](#).

The full Leeds report can be found [here](#).