JOINT CSE REVIEW GROUP

2026 ANNUAL REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. In addition to the two-year review report from the Chair of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Telford (IITCSE), this is the fourth annual Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) report presenting data, analysis and trends in relation to CSE in Telford & Wrekin together with information about the activity that has taken place to safeguard those at risk. The core focus of this report is:

    - the contacts that were made to Telford & Wrekin Council's children social care Family Connect[1] because of concerns about CSE; and,

    - CSE crimes recorded by West Mercia Police and a profile of those suspected of committing these crimes.

2. Each annual report covers a financial year. The reporting period for this report is April 2025 to March 2026. The headline findings of the report are set out below.

<u>CSE Contacts into Family Connect</u>

3. In 2025/26 there were 105 contacts about 92 children into Family Connect where risk factors associated with CSE were a concern. In 2023/24 there were 115 contacts about 94 children and in 2024/25 118 contacts about 95 children.

4. When assessed by a qualified social worker to identify what action and support should be taken, of the 105 CSE contacts, 46 (42%) were referred to the Council's Children Abused Through Exploitation team (CATE) and/or traditional statutory safeguarding for additional detailed assessment and allocation. This mirrors the finding from the 2024/25 report where 43% of CSE contacts into Family Connect were referred to the CATE team for further detailed assessment.

5. The CATE team provides specialist support to children and young people who are at the greatest risk of, or are, a victim of exploitation. When a child is referred to CATE, a detailed second assessment is completed of the context of the referral and the child's family dynamics to ensure that the most appropriate support is provided to them. Those contacts into Family Connect that were not referred to the CATE team all received appropriate support informed by the level of assessed risk. Detailed information on these outcomes can be found in paragraph 36 of the main report.

6. From the 46 contacts that were referred to CATE, 33 contacts were "opened" to receive appropriate support from the team. These contacts related to 28 children and young people. In addition to these 28 children, 4 other children were referred to CATE in 2025/26 because of concerns about CSE. These

[1] Family Connect is the first point of contact into children social services when an individual (whether member of the public or safeguarding professional) has a concern about the safety of a child.

referrals were from statutory safeguarding services or from a referral that had been made in the previous year.

7. Of the 32 children and young people that were opened to CATE because of CSE, 18 (56%) children and young people were found to have been sexually exploited and 14 (44%) were found to be at risk of becoming a victim of CSE. In 2024/25 there were 11 (38%) children found to be a victim of CSE and 18 (62%) at risk of becoming a victim of CSE. Again, following detailed assessment by CATE, where a child or young person was not opened to CATE, appropriate support was provided. Detailed information on these outcomes can be found in paragraph 39 of the main report.

8. In terms of the profile of children and young people that received support from the CATE service in 2025/26, 93% were female (87% in 2024/25), the average age was 14 (15 in 2024/25), 78% were of a 'White' background (89% 2024/25), 47% were in receipt of support for special educational needs and disability (SEND) (46% in 2024/25), and, 42% had persistent absence from education (50% 2024/25).

West Mercia Police Crime and Suspect Profile

9. Against the 64 children open to CATE, 34 offences and incidents were investigated by the Police. Of these, 14 related to child protection incidents which were notification of concerns about a child's wellbeing and so were not recorded as an offence. The 20 recorded offences were modern slavery (7), make or distribute obscene publications (3), rape (4), sexual activity with a child (2), sexual assault (1), engage in sexual communication with a child (1), arrange or facilitate travel with a view to exploitation (1) and blackmail (1).

10. In terms of the 2025/26 suspect profile, there were 12 suspects recorded against the 34 crimes and incidents which involved the 64 children and young people open to CATE for support because of concerns about CSE. Further analysis of this data shows that there was one suspect who was recorded against two crimes, therefore this suspect profile is based on 11 unique suspects.

11. Of these 11 suspects, all were male and 8 were aged less than 25. In terms of ethnicity, for 4 perpetrators, no ethnicity was recorded, of those where their ethnicity was recorded, 4 were 'White British', 1 was from 'Any Other Asian Background', 1 was 'Black African' and 1 was from 'Any Other Black Background'.

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INTRODUCTION

12. This report is the fourth annual child sexual exploitation (CSE) report presenting data and information in relation to CSE in Telford & Wrekin, and the activity taking place to respond to CSE and safeguard those at risk. Additionally, in 2023, a further report presenting the review of Tom Crowther KC, the Chair of the Independent Inquiry was presented to Telford & Wrekin Council's full Council. Based on financial year, the reporting period for this report is April 2025 to March 2026.

13. In July 2022, Tom Crowther KC, the Independent Chair, of the Independent Inquiry into CSE in Telford (IITCSE) commissioned by Telford & Wrekin Council, published his report which contained 47 recommendations and 148 specific actions for several organisations, including the Council, West Mercia Police, the NHS and West Mercia Police and Crime Commissioner.

14. Recommendations 1 to 5 required the publication of an annual CSE report whilst other recommendations set out other information to be included in this report.

15. In 2023, a first annual report was published that focussed on three years' data from 2020/21 to 2022/23 to ensure a robust baseline. A second annual report was published for the period April 2023 to March 2024, followed by a third annual report covering the period April 2024 to March 2025.

16. In July 2024, the IITCSE chair, Tom Crowther KC published a 2-year review of his assessment of progress against the 47 recommendations of his IITCSE Report. Of Recommendations 1 to 5 his review report commented:

> ***'This data collection and analysis not only meets what I contemplated in Recommendation 1, it goes beyond it. In my view, the stakeholders have taken the Recommendation as a foundation and have gone further, creating a framework for data sharing and analysis which is plainly relevant not only to the direction of support and disruption resources, but also to a greater public understanding of the nature and extent of CSE within Telford. This is an extremely positive approach which shows in my view a wholehearted adoption of the spirit of the Recommendation'***[2]

Recommendations 1 to 5: publication of CSE DATA and information from the Council, Police, health and schools

Multi-agency Safeguarding Arrangements

17. Telford & Wrekin Council, West Mercia Police and the NHS Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin have a statutory duty to have in place multi-agency safeguarding

[2] twoplusyearplusreviewplusreportplus-plus16plusjulyplus2024.pdf Paragraph 109, Page 33.

arrangements that ensure vulnerable children are protected and supported. This responsibility is discharged through the Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Partnership. Membership of the partnership includes representatives from:

- Telford & Wrekin Council including Education & Skills (representing early years, schools and colleges), Children's Safeguarding and Family Support, Licensing, and Housing
- NHS Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin
- Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust
- Midlands Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust
- Shropshire Community NHS Trust
- West Mercia Police
- Shropshire Fire & Rescue Service
- Probation
- Youth Justice Service
- Community & voluntary organisations.

18. Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Partnership works to:

- create an environment where Child Exploitation (CE), and specifically CSE, is prevented, identified, and challenged, and;
- ensure that children, young people and families whose lives are affected by CSE will receive a high level of support as well as protection, and the perpetrators are held accountable for their actions, and brought to justice.

Threshold Guidance

19. The Safeguarding Children Board has developed and adopted 'threshold guidance' to ensure that anyone who works alongside children, young people, their families and carers work together, share information and ensure that effective support is provided.

20. The guidance describes a range of different needs and the intervention that will meet that need. Consistent application of threshold for statutory intervention and early help provision is crucial in identifying and meeting the needs of families and maintaining quality of provision of support across all services.

21. This approach should ensure that all partners respond to concerns about CSE in the same way. It enables partners to understand each individual report or case, share information with partners and ensure that those who have been subject to CSE, and those at risk of CSE, are receiving the right support.

22. The document describes factors associated with CE (which includes CSE) such as:

- Running away/going missing
- Coercion/control
- Contacts with abusive persons and/or risky environments
- Substance misuse
- Education

- Use of social media/technology
- Emotional & physical health and sexual health
- Accommodation and family relationships
- Offending/criminal activity
- Community/social isolation factors

23. The CE threshold guidance has four levels of need. For each of the above factors the guidance sets out the relevant signs and behaviours for each of these levels of risk:

    Universal - a child or young person's needs are adequately met by universal services and no additional support is required.

    Vulnerable - children and young people defined as needing some additional support as there are early indicators of potential exploitation. Without support, these issues may develop into more worrying concerns. An Early Help Assessment may be undertaken to identify need and the support required to be undertaken by a single agency.

    Complex - the child or young person remains vulnerable to exploitation. They are potentially at risk of developing acute/ complex needs if they do not receive targeted intervention. A multi-agency response will be provided.

    Acute - exploitation is known or suspected and there are urgent and immediate safeguarding concerns for the child or young person. A multi-agency response will be provided, informed by specialist assessments.

24. The threshold document sets out the concept of significant harm and how harm should be understood and managed. In the context of CSE and CE, the guidance sets out how harm outside the home should be assessed through 'contextual safeguarding'.

25. When an agency or practitioner has safeguarding concerns about a child or young person, they assess the information known to them to identify the level of risk and harm. Where the risk is assessed as 'complex' or 'acute' then this information is shared with Family Connect. As well as practitioners from partner organisations, members of the public, family and friends share safeguarding concerns with Family Connect.

    <u>Family Connect</u>

26. Family Connect is the Safeguarding Children Board's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (known as the MASH) comprising qualified professionals from the Council, NHS (including mental health services, hospitals and '0 to 19' services), Youth Justice, Probation, education, Wrekin Housing Group and the Local Authority Designated Officer (responsible for managing allegations against adults who work with children). They work to build a picture of a child or young person's safeguarding risk. This is developed from the information that comes directly to Family Connect and their own organisation's information

systems. This picture is screened by qualified social workers to identify what immediate action should be taken to safeguard the child or young person.

Child Abused Through Exploitation (CATE)

27. The Council's CATE team and the partnership 'CATE pathway' are a core part of the Safeguarding Children Board's response to CSE and CE more widely. Research has established that, using traditional safeguarding procedures which see children being identified as children in need or placed on a child protection plan, is not always the most effective approach to support young people at risk of / suffering from exploitation. To address this, the Council's Child Exploitation Care & Support Pathway is a process for safeguarding children underpinned by a contextual safeguarding approach to understand and respond to children and young people's experience of significant harm beyond their family and outside the family home.

28. The Council's CATE Team, alongside the local Child Exploitation Police Team from West Mercia Police, takes a central position within this pathway. For those children and young people where it is not appropriate for them to be supported solely by this pathway, they also receive support by statutory children's safeguarding services ensuring that they continue to receive specialised CATE team support.

CSE Contacts into Family Connect

29. Since publication of the 2023 baseline report, changes have been made to better support those who make referrals to Family Connect with concerns about CSE, to improve the quality and appropriateness of those referrals and to enhance understanding of the indicators of CSE and the threshold guidance. These actions are:

- **Review of the CATE pathway** - since an initial review in line with IITCSE Recommendation 10, the CATE Pathway has been further reviewed. Lived experience consultees played a fundamental role in challenging the Council's processes and testing the thinking around what the documents said versus what the Council did in practice. This work has led to the production of a suite of documents which set out when a child might be supported through the CATE team. It was also updated to reflect those changes brought about by other recommendations, such as the introduction of the adulthood transition meeting (known as the post-17 transition meeting) required by IITCSE Recommendation 11.

- **Development of 'Explore More' document** – this was coproduced between lived experience consultees and practitioners. The document, which addresses the potential indicators of CSE and provides wider context around the questions that practitioners can ask when receiving details of concerns about CSE, helps to ensure that any decisions are based upon all relevant information available at the time of referral. The Explore More is used by a wide range of people, e.g. school professionals

and health professionals to enable them, when making a referral, to better articulate factors that have led to concerns about CSE.

- **Introduction of weekly consultation sessions with the CATE team to support practitioners with concerns over CSE** – these consultation meetings were established to develop practitioners' understanding and knowledge of CSE and the CATE pathway, to drive improvement in the quality, appropriateness and outcome of CSE and Child Exploitation referrals.

- **Introduction of anonymous referrals through an online referral form** (IITCSE Recommendation 21) – for many different reasons, an individual may not wish to provide their personal details when making a referral to Family Connect about CSE. Recommendation 21 of the IITCSE report called for the implementation of a fully anonymous online child exploitation referral reform to Family Connect. This has been implemented (https://webforms.telford.gov.uk/form/489).

- **Development of "Pathway to Support"** – in 2025/26, the threshold guidance was reviewed as part of the Safeguarding Children Partnership's response to the Government's Family First policy agenda. This agenda is about supporting families earlier, keeping children safe within their families where possible, and making services more joined-up and easier to navigate. The threshold guidance was updated and renamed "Pathway To Support" and now includes the Explore More guidance for Child Sexual Exploitation – so providing integrated, consistent guidance to practitioners. This revised guidance was launched on the 15th April 2026 at a Family First Conference which was attended by 407 practitioners and leaders from the Council, Police, NHS provides and education settings.

30. In 2025/26, there were 105 contacts about 92 children to Family Connect where CSE was reported to be a concern. Compared to 2024/25, whilst there were fewer contacts (118 vs 105) the number of children and young people these contacts were about was similar (92 vs 94).

31. The ratio of "contacts to children" in 2025/26 was 1.1 and in 2024/25 this ratio was 1:2, as it was in 2022/24. This compares with a ratio of 1:4 for the baseline study. A lower ratio means that fewer contacts are required before a case is acted upon by Family Connect. This ongoing improvement reflects the work described above to improve the quality of contacts into Family Connect about CSE, enabling a more thorough assessment to take place at an earlier stage. It is reassuring that this impact has improved from the baseline report through to 2025/26. The improved quality of information provided to Family Connect has enabled better-informed decision-making at an early opportunity.

32. An important contributing factor to this improvement in the quality of the information provided to Family Connect about those children and young people with CSE risk factors has been "CATE consultations". These provide the opportunity for a practitioner who has concerns about indicators of CSE to meet with a CATE practitioner to discuss the child or young person's circumstances.

In 2025/26, 142 consultations were completed. A majority of these consultations - 97 - were at the request of a member of Telford & Wrekin children's social care, 35 were from an education setting, the others were from a mix of Telford Stars, Youth Justice, Steer Clear or external social care services.

33. In 2025/26, the Police made 41 contacts into Family Connect (39%, 37% 2024/25), the Council 31 contacts (30%, 27% 2024/25), schools/colleges 20 contacts (19%, 15% 2024/25), the NHS made 3 contacts (3%, 8% 2024/25), there was 1 anonymous referral (1%, 3% 2024/25) and 7 from individuals (7%, 6% 2024/25) and 2 from other agencies (2%, 5% 2024/25)).

34. As can be seen by the percentages in the brackets, there were some changes in this profile compared to 2024/25. Together the Police, Council and schools/colleges accounted for 88% of the contacts in 2025/26 compared with 80% in 2024/25. The proportion of contacts from the NHS, anonymous referrals, individuals and from other agencies fell.

35. In response to the small number of contacts from NHS providers, an assurance exercise has been completed by each provider concerning how they ensure that all practitioners are appropriately trained to identify risk indicators of CSE and the appropriate safeguarding response, and, in addition, what other awareness raising activities are undertaken. All NHS providers demonstrated that they had appropriate training in place and worked to the threshold guidance.

    ACTION: A 'dip sample' audit activity should be completed of NHS referrals and information sharing with Family Connect and reported to the Safeguarding Children Board.

    ACTION: A rolling communication campaign targeting both practitioners and members of the public should be implemented to raise awareness of CSE. Progress and the reach of this campaign should be reported quarterly to the Safeguarding Children Board.

36. Following initial screening by qualified social workers in Family Connect, the outcomes for the 105 contacts were:

    - 45 (44%, 41% 2024/25) contacts were referred to another agency for early help. This support is given to a family when a problem first emerges to avoid concerns escalating, with the objective to quickly improve outcomes for the child or young person. The support provided can take many forms and might include home visiting programmes, school-based programmes and mentoring schemes. For example, a school has identified concern around a child not adhering to agreed boundaries with parents, coming home late and peer group association. This case would be referred to the Council's Strengthening Families service for support around risks to safety and wellbeing. The Strengthening Families service will also provide support to parents.

    - 14 (14%, 16% 2024/25) CSE contacts were provided with information, advice and support. For example, a parent contacts Family Connect as they are

concerned about their child's online safety and want to know how best to monitor usage and broach the issue with their child. The parent would be provided with relevant information and advice and with links to appropriate websites.

- 46 (42%, 43% 2023/24) contacts met the threshold for referral to CATE and/or traditional statutory safeguarding. These contacts related to 39 children. This happens when the child who is the subject of the contact is deemed to be at significant risk of becoming a victim of CSE. For example, the child has been contacted by adults online or in person and the content of messages indicates that the child is being targeted for grooming. In such a case, the contact is referred to CATE and/or statutory safeguarding for additional detailed assessment and allocation. This second assessment process is a very detailed analysis of the context of the referral and the child's family dynamics to ensure that the most appropriate support is provided to them.

37. Compared to the 2024/25 reporting year, the outcomes of CSE contacts in 2025/26 were broadly comparable. The proportion that received early help support had increased to 44% from 41%. The proportion that received information, support and advice at 14% was down from 16% in 2024/25, whilst the proportion that were referred to CATE and/or traditional statutory safeguarding at 42% was broadly comparable to 43% in 2024/25. It is important to highlight that the proportion in both 2025/26 (42%) and 2024/25 (43%) that were referred to CATE was significantly higher than the baseline report (32%). That more cases in these years than in the baseline report were referred to CATE is symptomatic of improved quality to the information contained in referrals as a result of the process changes described in paragraph 29 of this report enabling practitioners to have a more holistic view of the child's circumstances.

38. From the 46 contacts, relating to 39 children, that were referred to CATE and/or statutory safeguarding, 28 children were "opened" to receive appropriate support from CATE. In the year, an additional 3 children were opened to CATE who were identified from existing statutory safeguarding cases and another child was opened from a contact in the previous year.

39. The outcome of the other 11 children and young people that were referred to CATE and/or safeguarding by Family Connect following detailed assessment were:

    - 3 were from out of the borough and were supported through their home local authority.
    - 6 following Child & Family (C&F) assessment found that CSE was not a factor. Of these:
        - 3 were safeguarded and supported through a statutory child in need plan;
        - 2 were referred to another agency for early help. This support is given to a family when a problem first emerges to avoid concerns

escalating, with the objective to quickly improve outcomes for the child or young person; and,
    - 1 was supported through a proactive parent safety plan.

- 2 following C&F assessment where CSE was a factor were referred to another agency for early help. This support is given to a family when a problem first emerges to avoid concerns escalating, with the objective to quickly improve outcomes for the child or young person

Children and Young People Receiving Support from CATE for CSE

40. As part of this review, detailed qualitative case analysis was undertaken by senior managers in the CATE and Safeguarding Service to identify which of the 32 children were a victim of CSE and which were at risk of becoming a victim of CSE – these are the new cases opened to CATE in 2025/26. This analysis was based upon the definition used by the Inquiry Chair to describe CSE. It found that 18 (11 2024/25) met the definition and 14 (18 2024/25) were at risk of becoming a victim of CSE.

41. With 18 cases meeting the definition of CSE, this has increased on earlier years. The baseline report found that, across the three years, there was an average of 12 new confirmed cases of CSE each year and an average of 13 cases that were at risk of becoming a victim of CSE. In comparison in both 2024/25 and 2023/24, there were fewer (11 and 6) confirmed cases of CSE and more children and young people (18 and 28) at risk of CSE.

42. The characteristics of ***all*** children and young people receiving safeguarding support from CATE because of CSE in 2025/26 is presented below. There are 64 children in this cohort as almost all children and young people that receive safeguarding support from CATE do so for more than 12 months.

43. Sixty of the 64 children and young people receiving support were female. At 93%, this is higher than the 87% in the 2025 report and the 89% in the 2024 report with the baseline report rate being 98%. Together, these reports highlight that ***both*** males and females are at risk of CSE.

44. At 14, the average age of these children and young people was younger than in previous reports, which all reported an average age of 15 (2025 report, 2024 report and the 2023 baseline report).

45. Forty-six (72%, 81% 2024/25) of these children and young people were ‘White British’, with a further 4 (6%, 8% 2024/25) ‘Other White’. A further 7 (11%, 8% 2024/25) were of a ‘Mixed’ ethnicity, 3 were ‘Black’ (5%, 1% 2024/25) and 4 were ‘Asian’ (6%, 1% 2024/25). Compared to previous reports, this ethnicity profile is more diverse with fewer numbers of children and young people from a ‘White’ (‘White British’ and ‘White Other’) background (78%) compared to previous years (89%) and larger numbers of children from ‘Mixed’, ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’ backgrounds.

46. Eleven children and young people had an Education, Health and Care Plan ('EHCP') (17%, 17% in 2025) compared with 5.5% borough-wide) and 30 were in receipt of support for special educational needs and disability (SEND) support (47%, 46% in 2025 compared with 23% borough-wide). SEND covers a wide variety of need and, broadly, can be categorised as social, emotional and mental health, communication and interaction, cognitive and learning and sensory and physical difficulties. In 2023/24, a multi-agency case file audit was completed to aid better understanding of the way in which we can support children and young people with SEND and who are at risk of CSE. This led to greater integration between the CATE team, Strengthening Families and SEND team, specialist training for schools' staff curriculum adaptations around healthy and appropriate relationships involving SEND pupils, and raising parent awareness.

47. Twenty-seven (42%, 50% 2024/25) had persistent absence from education (attendance <90% and >50%), 8 (13%, 17% 2024/25) had severe absence (<50% attendance), and 26 (41%, 30% 2024/25) had satisfactory attendance. In comparison with the 2023 baseline report, there was a smaller proportion of children with severe absence (26% 2023 baseline report) and more with satisfactory attendance (26% 2023 baseline report). Compared with attendance in all secondary schools within the borough, school attendance of those children and young people that have been in receipt of safeguarding support from CATE because of CSE was noticeably lower.

48. Support for pupils with absences may be in the form of early help or more targeted support which can take a variety of forms, including working with other agencies, consideration of an adapted timetable to support a return to school or referral to a local authority alternative provision or targeted work with the child, their family members, care-givers, and the school.

49. There were 34 (38 2024/25) missing episodes[3] recorded against 8 (12 2024/25) children and young people, all of which were eligible for a return home interview. Return home interviews are undertaken to help identify any support that children and young people might need to help keep them safe. All received an interview, with 97% (97% 2024/25) completed in timescale (3 days) – a sustained improvement on 91% from the 2023 baseline report. Reasons why return home interviews are not completed within the 3-day target include there being back-to-back missing episodes or when episodes occur over a bank holiday period.

50. Of the children and young people open to CATE, 63% (54% 2024/25), had also been open to statutory safeguarding based on presenting needs in comparison to 59% in the 2023 baseline report. This is an important element of the CATE pathway model; a child or young person can receive specialist support from CATE and statutory safeguarding services to ensure that all children and young people are given all appropriate support and are safeguarded based on their needs.

[3] A child reported as 'missing' to the Police by their family or carers.

Other Support Pathways

51. As well as referrals and support through the CATE pathway, there are other support pathways available to victims of CSE and their families. Two of these are Catch 22 and the Holly Project.

Catch 22

52. Catch 22 was commissioned by the West Mercia Police & Crime Commissioner to deliver an integrated Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) service across Telford and Wrekin. Prior to this, these provisions were delivered separately, with CCE support provided by Climb at The Children's Society and CSE support provided by Purple Leaf at WMRSASC. The new, integrated service provides support to children and young people aged 8–18 years, and up to 25 years where a young person has additional needs. The service offers both prevention and protection interventions for children and young people who are vulnerable to, at risk of, or experiencing exploitation.

53. The CCE element of the service is focused on prevention and early intervention and generally provides up to 12 weeks of tailored one-to-one support. Children open to Child in Need or Child Protection plans would not ordinarily be eligible for this pathway. The CSE element of the service provides support to children and young people at all levels of risk and can include those already open to partner agencies. In Telford and Wrekin, a local agreement is in place with the CATE Team to support early intervention responses. CSE interventions are typically delivered over a period of approximately six months. Each child or young person receives an individual support plan, with interventions tailored to their circumstances, vulnerabilities and identified risks. This may include work relating to emotional wellbeing, healthy relationships, consent, sexual health, identity, resilience and reducing vulnerability to exploitation. The service also delivers Awareness and Prevention activity within educational and community settings, including staff workshops, targeted group work, awareness-raising sessions and support for a whole-setting approach to preventing and responding to child exploitation.

54. In 2025/26, Catch 22 provided support to 18 children and young people from Telford & Wrekin. The average age of these 18 children was 15 years. The majority (15) were ‘White British’. Seven of the 18 children and young people were also receiving support from either children safeguarding or another early help provider.

The Holly Project

55. The Holly Project provides a free, independent support service for the survivors of CSE and their families who are aged 17+. Individuals can self-refer or can be sign-posted by other organisations. In 2025/26, the Project received 14 new requests for support. Of these requests, 8 were from survivors of CSE and 4 were from a family member of those who had been a victim of CSE.

56. Of the survivors who received support, all were female and the majority had seen their abuse commence in the 1990s or the 2000s with one more recent case. Whilst some had also been trafficked to the wider West Midlands, all survivors had been abused in Telford. In terms of ethnicity, of the 14 individuals who had requested support from the Project, 11 were 'White' and the other 3 were of a 'Mixed' ethnicity.

57. Each person received tailored support from the Project to meet their individual needs. Examples of support include holistic recovery, a listening service and counselling referrals. In some of the cases practical support was co-ordinated and provided for example about debt, housing and benefit support.

58. In terms of the ethnicity of the perpetrators, where known, individuals from a range of different ethnic backgrounds were identified including 'White', 'Black', and 'Asian'. The majority of perpetrators were male although in some cases abusers were also female.

West Mercia Police Criminal Justice Data

59. Through a CSE key word search, West Mercia Police identified 134 offences or incidents that took place in Telford & Wrekin recorded on their systems in 2025/26 that had a CSE marker applied to them. There were 94 children and young people identified against these offences and incidents as some children and young people were involved in more that one offence or incident.

60. All of these offences or incidents with a CSE marker were triaged and risk assessed and the appropriate response provided to support those children and young people who were at risk of CSE in line with multi-agency safeguarding processes. For some of these offences and incidents with a CSE marker, the subsequent risk assessment process found that the CSE marker had been misapplied and that there was not a risk of CSE.

61. To improve the application of CSE markers, West Mercia Police have now implemented bi-monthly meetings to review the application of CSE and CE markers on offence and incident records. These are also considered in force-wide monthly victim and perpetrator panels. In addition, information processing staff have been retrained on the use of these markers.

ACTION: West Mercia Police CSE-marker audit activity should be reported quarterly to the Safeguarding Child Board.

62. As part of the development of this report, details of ***all*** CSE cases open to CATE in 2025/26 were shared between Telford & Wrekin Council and West Mercia Police analysts to:

- ensure that all relevant cases were known to the Police and that relevant investigations were undertaken and their outcome;
- identify and profile suspects; and,
- identify the location of criminal activity.

63. Following analysis, it was confirmed that all children and young people who were open to CATE for support because of CSE were known to West Mercia Police. All children known to West Mercia Police Child Exploitation Team were known to the Council.

64. Against the 64 children open to CATE in 2025/26 to receive support for CSE, 34 offences and incidents were investigated by the Police. Of these, 14 related to child protection incidents and were notification of concerns about a child's wellbeing and so was not recorded as an offence. The 20 recorded offences were modern slavery (7), make or distribute obscene publications (3), rape (4), sexual activity with a child (2), sexual assault (1), engage in sexual communication with a child (1), arrange or facilitate travel with a view to exploitation (1) and blackmail (1).

65. Analysis of the 34 offences and incidents found that 47% (18) took place online, at least initially, and many involved the sharing of indecent images. This is a similar proportion of online offences that were identified in the 2025 report. Analysis of the type of social media platform accessed by the child or young person showed, where recorded, that Snapchat was the most used (7), followed by TikTok (3), Discord (1), Instagram (1), Roblox (1). There were five offences with online elements where the platform accessed was not recorded. There were also offences where the victim and suspect met on one platform and then switched to another, this was generally either Instagram or Telegram.

66. In addition to the online analysis, geographic analysis has been completed. This has not been presented in this report due to the small number of cases which may present an unrepresentative picture of where CSE does or does not take place in the borough. This intelligence has been shared appropriately with partners.

67. The criminal investigations into the 20 recorded offences resulted in the following outcomes: 4 investigations remain ongoing; 6 concluded with no suspect identified; 4 involved an identified suspect but the victim did not support further Police action; 2 confirmed that a crime had occurred but no suspect was identified; 2 involved an identified suspect but evidential difficulties prevented further action; 1 resulted in diversionary, educational or intervention activity, with no further action considered to be in the public interest; and 1 was concluded because further investigation to support formal action against a suspect was not considered to be in the public interest.

68. Of the 14 incidents, 86% (12) were filed with no further action because these incidents were a 'Child at Risk' notification which were reviewed and dealt with appropriately. Of the other two incidents, for one, appropriate safeguarding action was taken by the child's parents and for the second, an investigation was conducted but no offences were disclosed or established.

West Mercia Police CSE Suspect profile

69. Analysis of the demographic characteristics across the three CSE annual reports has found variation in the annual suspect profile. For example, the 2023/24 suspect cohort was different to the 2023 baseline report suspect profile in that, overall, the cohort was older, and more ethnically diverse. These differences illustrate that perpetrators of CSE can, and do, come from any background or community.

70. In terms of the 2025/26 suspect profile, there were 12 suspects recorded against West Mercia Crimes/Incidents, involving the 64 CATE list children. Further analysis of this data shows that there was one suspect who was recorded against two crimes, therefore this suspect profile is based on 11 unique suspects.

71. Of these suspects, all were male and 8 were aged less than 25. In terms of ethnicity, for 4 perpetrators, no ethnicity was recorded. Of the other suspects, four were 'White British', 1 was 'Any Other Asian Background', 1 was 'Black African' and 1 was from 'Any Other Black Background'. The composition of this profile, although a small number, again reinforces that suspected CSE perpetrators can come from any background or community.

ACTION – in accordance with Recommendation 4 of the National Audit on Group-based Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse undertaken by Baroness Casey, all suspects involved in child sexual abuse should have their ethnicity recorded. In-year audit activity should take place to drive this objective and should be reported quarterly to the Safeguarding Children Board.

72. In response to CSE and as part of a force-wide review, West Mercia Police has transferred the investigation of Child Exploitation from Crime and Vulnerability to Serious Organised Crime ('SOC') to allow for a more robust approach to tackling offenders and supporting exploited children.

NRM Referrals

73. The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive appropriate support. Modern slavery is complex and may involve multiple forms of exploitation.

74. In 2023/24 the Council adopted a new policy in relation NRM referrals such that any child that is open to CATE has an NRM referral made. This change was in recognition that if a child has an open CATE case, then, they are *at risk* of modern slavery which is the essential criteria for a referral to the NRM.

75. As a result of the introduction of this new policy, there has been a significant increase in the number of NRM referrals made by the Council. In 2022/23 there were 11 NRM referrals made, in 2023/24 49, in 2024/25 53, and in 2025/26 52.

76. In July 2025, the Council in partnership with the NHS and West Mercia Police became 1 of 8 authorities chosen by the government for a third phase pilot of local decision-making for the NRM specifically for child referrals.

77. Commencing in November 2025, twice monthly NRM Panels are convened and, by April 2026, had heard 20 cases.

78. The Panel has received very positive feedback from the Home Office, particularly regarding the quality of evidence, decision rationale and alignment with safeguarding pathways. Early impact analysis has found faster and more defensible NRM decision-making.

Recommendation 7. Ring-fencing of CATE Team resource and Recommendation 2.3 Staffing Workloads Telford & Wrekin Council CATE & West Mercia Police CE team

Telford & Wrekin Council CATE Team

79. Alongside calling for the Council to commit to the continued existence of the CATE Team within Telford at no less than its current strength in both numbers and budget (adjusted for inflation), for a period of no fewer than five years from the date of publication of the IITCSE report, the IITCSE report called for the Council to publish information regarding the resourcing and workloads of the CATE Team as part of the CSE Annual Report.

80. The current structure of the team is:

- 9 CATE workers (case holder)
- 1 Social worker (case holder)
- 1 Team Leader (case holder)
- 1 Group Manager (case holder)

81. As to creating a benchmark for the current strength and workloads of the CATE team, the baseline has been taken as July 2022 when the IITCSE report was published.

82. In developing a baseline for the CATE team, an assessment of all cases held by the team has been undertaken and not just CSE cases. Processes have been put in place to monitor, on a monthly basis, the caseloads of the CATE workers by the Director: Children's Safeguarding and Family Support.

83. As of July 2022, the average caseload for CATE workers was 8, in March 2024 7, in March 2025 6 and in March 2026 6.

West Mercia Police Child Exploitation Team

84. The structure of the team is currently:

- A Detective Inspector

- Two Detective Sergeants
- Eight Detective Constables – with four reporting to each of the two Detective Sergeants.
- A CE coordinator
- A Child Exploitation Analyst

85. The team has a caseload of 43 (35 2024/25) open investigations with a caseload of 33 (26 2024/25) victims.

Recommendation 2.7: Details of PCC funded resources and initiatives and Recommendation 40. PCC to commit to continued funding of CSE initiatives: Taxi Marshall scheme and Street Pastors.

86. The Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) commissioned the following services to support those at risk and victims of CSE across West Mercia Police footprint:

- **Catch22 – Supporting Through Exploitation & Prevention Service (STEPS)**
    - Early Intervention & Prevention CCE & CSE service focusing on diversionary activity.
    - Launched in April 2025
    - following the recommissioning of CCE/CSE services formerly Climb & Purple Leaf).
    - 1:1 support for 8-18s at risk of Criminal Exploitation (not open to Social Care)
    - 1:1 support for 8-18s at any level of risk of Child Sexual Exploitation
    - Awareness and prevention programmes for education and community setting.
    - Short to long term 1:1 support offered to referrals open to all partner agencies.
    - Group work in schools and specialist youth education settings.
    - Diversionary activity offered as a primary outcome for those going through the CCE route.
    - Funding £1,200,000

- **AXIS Counselling for Independent Sexual Violence Adviser (ISVA) Services in Shropshire & Telford:**
    - Axis is subcontracted to provide allocated support of:
        - Child ISVA (ChISVA)
        - CYP Disabilities ISVA
        - Family & Civil Court ISVA
    - Funding £1,724,000 (full funding across West Marcia)

Paediatric Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC)

- Funding was provided to the NHS England Sexual Assault and Referral Service (SARS). This region-wide service offers expert care to children and young people who have disclosed sexual assault or may have experienced sexual abuse.

- Funding £173,135

AXIS Counselling – Children's Counsellor in Shropshire/Telford

- Funding was granted for two neurodiversity counsellors and a specialist neurodiversity navigator, providing therapeutic support for survivors of sexual abuse, aged 11+ who have an identified learning disability or are neurodiverse.
- Funding £134,561

Shropshire, Telford, and Wrekin SARC Redevelopment

- The Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) in Telford & Wrekin re-opened In February 2026 following Phase 2 redevelopment work, undergoing significant changes designed to minimise contamination risks and preserve forensic evidence. The work, shaped by those with lived experience, was done through strong partnership between the PCC's Estates team, NHS England, WMP Forensic Services and Mountain Healthcare.
- The Commissioner is committed to establishing a Forensic Science Regulator (FSR) compliant SARC in Shropshire, Telford, and Wrekin. An assessment timetable for West Mercia SARCs is awaited from UK Accreditation Service to ensure that the SARC meets strict medical and forensic standards.
- Funding £44,879 Regional Co-Commissioning

2026 – 2027 Recommissioning

- All current contracts for ISVA, IDVA and DAPP have been extended to the maximum of their current contractual terms. As such the Commissioner decided to undertake a single procurement activity covering all 3 Lots to maximise process efficiency.
- The highest scoring providers for the ISVA and IDVA services were from a combined service organisation, Axis Counselling.
- Axis was notified of the result of the procurement process on the 29th of December 2025, with standstill periods concluded in early 2026. The new combined service commenced operating across the force area on 1st April 2026.
- For 2025/26, the PCC has funded Taxi Marshalls £7,100 and Street Pastors £16,000.

Recommendation 2.10 A summary of any complaints received by any of the member authorities regarding the handling of a CSE matter

87. Telford & Wrekin Council and NHS Telford & Wrekin ICB did not record any complaints in 2025/26 with regard to how they have responded to cases and incidents of CSE.

88. West Mercia Police recorded 1 complaint in 2025/26 relating to a CSE matter. This complaint was received from a partner agency in connection with a case that had been withdrawn at court. The victim felt that they hadn't formally been

informed of the reason why the case was withdrawn and concerns were raised that the evidence hadn't been presented. Following a review the outcome was recorded that the 'service provided was acceptable'.

Schools and Education Settings

89. During 2025/2026, the strategic approach to CSE within education was strengthened through the enhancement of core training for all staff across Early Years Foundation Stage and post-16 settings. Content was aligned to emerging local and national intelligence, with a clear focus on recognising CSE within the wider context of exploitation.

90. A targeted programme of specialist training was delivered to Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs) to build system-wide consistency and depth of expertise. This approach supports the development of sustainable capacity within settings, with trained DSLs expected to cascade knowledge and embed a culture of heightened vigilance and informed practice.

91. Updated CSE pathways and supporting resources have further reinforced a coherent multi-agency response, strengthening early identification, information sharing, and intervention. Education settings are positioned as key partners in contributing intelligence and identifying emerging vulnerability, supporting both safeguarding and disruption activity at a strategic level.

92. During the 2025/2026 reporting period, strategic assurance of CSE practice within education has been strengthened through the Section 175/157 safeguarding audit process. Settings are required to identify a named CSE Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) and demonstrate compliance with mandatory training expectations, including initial training, two-year refreshers, and ongoing termly updates involving DSLs and safeguarding governors.

93. Senior leaders are required to provide a RAG-rated self-assessment evidencing that all staff understand CSE and are confident in recognising its indicators. This forms a key line of assurance regarding workforce awareness and readiness.

94. The audit framework is designed to test both compliance and impact. RAG ratings are used to inform lines of enquiry during validation activity, including engagement with staff and children to assess the effectiveness of the CSE curriculum. This includes evaluating how well children understand and can articulate contextual risks within their communities and online environments.

95. Findings from the audit process directly inform targeted recommendations where gaps are identified, supporting continuous improvement. The approach remains dynamic, enabling responsiveness to emerging local and national intelligence, including adapting curriculum and practice where new risks are identified. Site safety and safeguarding procedures also form a core element of assurance within this process.

96. During 2025/2026, the introduction of a devolved National Referral Mechanism (NRM) decision-making model has strengthened the strategic understanding of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) within education, particularly its links to modern slavery and the presence of multiple and overlapping forms of exploitation.

Training for Designated Safeguarding Leads (DSLs), including both new and refresher programmes, has been updated to reflect these developments, with an increased emphasis on the quality and detail of evidence required from education settings to inform decision-making.

97. Access to enhanced safeguarding training has been widened, with a specific focus on all forms of exploitation, including CSE. High levels of engagement demonstrate the sector's commitment to strengthening workforce knowledge and practice, supported by regular delivery aligned to key points in the academic calendar.

98. A coordinated programme of awareness sessions relating to the devolved NRM model has been delivered across the wider children's workforce, reinforcing a shared multi-agency understanding and approach. The move to local decision-making has further embedded timely identification and response, improving pathways to support for children at risk of or experiencing exploitation.

99. Communication of resources, referral pathways, and consultation mechanisms has been prioritised through DSL networks, with a continued focus on strengthening professional curiosity and the role of education in contributing to disruption activity. Training has reinforced expectations around individual accountability in recognising and reporting concerns, supporting the development of a more robust multi-agency evidence base to address CSE effectively.

100. Progress against these areas is monitored through the established audit and assurance processes outlined above. Education safeguarding visits consistently identify any gaps in practice, with clear recommendations and defined timescales for improvement. Where required, additional support and challenge are provided by the Education Safeguarding Team to secure compliance.

101. Follow-up activity ensures that actions are implemented and that there is demonstrable impact, with a continued focus on assurance that children are effectively safeguarded within each setting. During this reporting period, targeted improvements have been required in relation to the quality of recording and the timeliness of information sharing to support effective safeguarding decision-making.

102. The Education Safeguarding Team has maintained a strong and accessible advisory offer throughout 2025/2026, with CSE-related advice, guidance and training widely accessed through central contact routes and direct engagement. The service has prioritised a responsive and solution-focused approach, supporting education settings to build confidence in identifying and responding to CSE, particularly where experience of referral processes has been limited.

103. This approach has contributed to strengthening practice across settings, ensuring that staff feel supported to make informed safeguarding decisions and take appropriate action to protect children and young people.

104. An emerging strategic theme during this period has been the need to further embed understanding and use of multi-agency resolution and escalation processes. Work has focused on empowering education staff to confidently engage in these processes where required, ensuring that safeguarding concerns are effectively challenged and progressed to achieve appropriate outcomes for children at risk of CSE.

Recommendation 26.1 The Council should publish annually, as part of the 'Joint CSE Review Group's' Annual Report, a taxi licensing review.

105. It is estimated that there are around 900 taxis operating in Telford & Wrekin, of which around a third are licensed by Telford & Wrekin Council with the remainder licensed by other authorities. In 2025/26, the Council received 40 complaints about taxi drivers:

- 29 related to drivers licensed with Telford & Wrekin Council
- 11 were about drivers licensed with other local authorities

106. These complaints related to a number of different concerns, such as service standards, vehicle standards or driving standards.

107. For many years, Telford & Wrekin Council has referred complaints about drivers licensed with other local authorities to the relevant licensing authority. However, under the Taxi and Private Hire Vehicles (Safeguarding and Road Safety) Act 2022, this was introduced as a duty for licensing services from 31 May 2022. The Act also requires complaints about taxi drivers which relate to safeguarding or road safety concerns to be acted upon in a specified timeframe. This covers relevant information indicating that a person has committed a sexual offence (regardless of whether the person was charged with, prosecuted for, or convicted of, the offence). All complaints referred to other authorities are followed-up by Telford & Wrekin Council Licensing team for a response on the outcome of the complaint.

108. On conclusion of a complaint, or upon relevant information being received, the Council can take the following actions:

- For a new or renewal application, the authority can refuse to grant a licence or put conditions / time limits on a licence.
- Once licensed, the council can suspend a licence, issue warnings, retrain drivers or revoke a licence.

109. The actions taken against taxi driver complaints in 2025/6 were:

- All of the 11 complaints for drivers licensed with other local authorities were referred to the relevant authority. Of these, 2 were safeguarding-related. None of these safeguarding matters were of a CSE nature.

- Of the 29 complaints that related to drivers licensed with Telford & Wrekin Council, none were of a safeguarding nature and the outcomes were:
    - 13 had advice issued;

- 1 driver was referred to complete and pass the Council's Knowledge and Driver Course;
- 5 cases resulted in enforcement action and driver licence review hearings, which resulted in written warnings
- 10 complaints were found to be unjustified because of inadequate evidence.

Licensing Enforcement Activity

110. In October 2025, the respective regulatory committees approved joint authorisation for Telford and Wolverhampton Licensing and Compliance Officers. This reciprocal enforcement arrangement, under Sections 68 and 73 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976, allows officers to suspend vehicles deemed mechanically unfit in either local authority area and carry out a check on the driver, allowing for better enforcement and a visual deterrence for illegal practices/ breaches of licence conditions. i.e. Signage and plates and driver ID being visible.

111. In 2025/26 the Council's licensing team carried out 14 multi-agency taxi licensing enforcement exercises. This included:

- 10 vehicle stop checks conducted in partnership with the Police under the multiagency targeted enforcement strategy (MATES) initiative, focusing on roadworthiness and safety.
- 25 checks on designated taxi ranks to monitor compliance.

112. On all operations both the driver and vehicle are checked to ensure compliance with their licensing conditions. These include checks on the driver's identity against their licence. This has not identified any concerns about potential badge swapping, although advice and warnings have been given to drivers not wearing their badge in accordance with their licence conditions.

113. Alongside licensing compliance activity, Taxi Marshals carry out checks on private hire vehicles collecting passengers to ensure that journeys have been pre-booked. They also discourage individuals from entering un-booked vehicles while performing their duties in the night-time economy.

Recommendations 2.6, 37, 42 call for CSE training

CSE Awareness Training

114. In 2023, the lived experience consultees developed a training package that set out what CSE is, the behaviours and risk factors, and the action which should be taken when a child or young person was identified as being at risk of CSE. It was agreed that the content of this package was the minimum level of knowledge that **all** staff, irrespective of role, across the three statutory partners should have and, as such, would ensure consistency in the understanding of and response to CSE. It is important to emphasise that this training is a minimum, and that depending on role, practitioners will continue to receive other relevant CSE training of an appropriate level.

NHS Shropshire, Telford & Wrekin

115. The roll out of the CSE awareness training across the health system has continued to progress, with all trusts working towards staff compliance. Each trust has developed a trajectory to ensure the teams who are a high priority has the training first and are continuing to roll out the session across the rest of the trusts. Due to the high numbers of staff that required this training, this has been rolled out in stages, with and aim that the training will be embedded into their training platform systems to allow all staff to access this. There have also been discussions regarding the option of delivering this training face to face for some staff groups if required. The current compliance data is below:

    - Integrated Care Board – 91% (94%)
    - Shropshire and Telford Hospital Trust – 90% (94%)
    - Midlands Partnership Foundation Trust – 43% (48%)
    - Shropshire Community Health Trust – 93% (73%)
    - Robert Jones Agnes Hunt - 92% (92%)

116. CSE is also discussed as part of each trust's learning and development programme, with trusts sharing information leaflets, posters within their areas. The ICB monitor referrals to children's social care with a concern related to CSE through safeguarding committee meetings.

West Mercia Police

117. West Mercia Police have commissioned NWG Network, a charity that is focused on tackling child exploitation through working with organisations and parents and carers to deliver appropriate training on CSE in the context of modern slavery that includes the core training described above. Roll-out of this face-to-face training focussed on Police officers and relevant civilian staff, initially prioritising Safer Neighbourhood Teams who work out in the community. Rollout of this training is currently at 30%.

Telford & Wrekin Council

118. Completion of the CSE training package is mandatory for all Council employees and is monitored to ensure compliance. The completion rate for this course in 2025/26 was 96% with the main reasons for the 4% non-completion being parental leave, sickness absence or new starters who complete it as part of their initial induction training.