



**West
Yorkshire
Policing
& Crime**

**Tracy
Brabin
Mayor of
West Yorkshire**



**Alison Lowe
Deputy Mayor for
Policing & Crime**

Item 5

Report to: Police and Crime Panel

Date: 12 July 2024

Subject: **Online Harms and Interventions - Including Cyber Crime**

Report of: Alison Lowe, Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime

Author: Policing and Crime Team, West Yorkshire Combined Authority

1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This paper is to update the Police and Crime Panel with regards to online harms and interventions, including cyber crime.
- 1.2 This paper covers those online harms which are linked to the Police and Crime Plan's 'Reducing Vulnerability' priority and are allied to West Yorkshire Police's safeguarding agenda.
- 1.3 The issues, and the work to address them, is increasingly complex and more important than ever, for a variety of reasons:
 - 1.3.1 Today's children can find themselves living in an increasingly complex world of online interactions and influences. The drivers of those interactions are not unique to childhood – the need to make friends, socialise, be seen, and to enjoy life, are universal.
 - 1.3.2 However, within the online space, there are specific challenges which we need to prepare our young people for. The increasingly young age in which children are accessing technology and social media makes them more vulnerable to exploitation.
 - 1.3.3 Crimes linked to the criminal use of technology can include online grooming, the distribution of indecent images of children, radicalisation, stalking, and hate crime. In some cases, harassment and abuse on social media can lead to low level violence and conflict and, in rare cases, incidents of serious violence.
 - 1.3.4 In addition, many young people experience poorer mental health as a result of viewing distressing content on social media. We know from research carried out by the Knowledge Hub at our Violence Reduction Partnership (VRP), that more than two-thirds of young people who use social media view upsetting content on it.
- 1.4 Section three of this paper covers the national policy context, while section four

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

details the work of West Yorkshire Police (WYP) in this area, with a particular focus on child safeguarding. Finally, section five covers the work of the West Yorkshire Combined Authority.

- 1.5 This topic area is regularly reviewed through our usual scrutiny arrangements with WYP, with senior officers held to account through our Community Outcomes Meetings and through the Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime's Performance Scrutiny Meetings with the Chief Constable.

2. OVERVIEW

- 2.1 Over the span of thirty years, the online world has grown to become an integral part of most people's everyday life. The advent of the smartphone has brought a new way to engage with information, goods and services. The internet, and the mix of social media and communication apps, allow people to connect instantly and often anonymously. Reflecting society as a whole, some of these interactions will have a criminal purpose.
- 2.2 This paper covers those online harms which are linked to the Police and Crime Plan's Reducing Vulnerability priority and are allied to WYP's safeguarding agenda. Other 'internet enabled' crimes (such as large-scale fraud, hacking, use of ransomware, and criminality associated with the 'dark web') are more closely associated with Serious and Organised Crime, which was covered at the Community Outcome Meeting held in February 2024. There may be an 'online' dimension to a wide range of crimes, but some key areas of concern are set out below.

2.3 Sexual exploitation

- 2.3.1 This is a wide topic area, and offences can be committed in a variety of ways, but at its core this is the incitement of any child to engage in a sexual act. This could be removing clothing to perform a sexual act on themselves or another, and filming/photographing it.
- 2.3.2 In the online space, there is usually an element of friendship/trust built through messaging prior to the sending of imagery. Once the first image is sent, a request is made for more, until they become more explicit. The suspect will then blackmail the victim that they will share these images online unless they continue to provide material.

2.4 Radicalisation

- 2.4.1 Radicalisation can be considered as a form of ideological grooming. Radicalisation is the process through which a person comes to support or be involved in extremist ideologies. It can result in a person becoming drawn into terrorism and is, in itself, a form of harm.
- 2.4.2 Children can be exposed to different views and receive information from various sources online. The nature of many online platforms means that some apps or websites may 'feed' more and more information on an extreme topic to the user.
- 2.4.3 All organisations that work with children and young people have a responsibility to protect children from harm. This includes becoming radicalised and/or being exposed to extreme views.

2.5 Sexting / sextortion on social media

- 2.5.1 The majority of social media platforms also have an embedded messaging service. Examples include Snapchat and Instagram. They are primarily used for

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

picture sharing but do offer a messaging service where images and videos can be shared.

- 2.5.2 These platforms can act as a desensitisation step, prior to sexual exploitation, where sexualised chat is normalised and images are shared. The creation and sharing of 'youth produced images' by young people is a growing area of concern for UK policing. Shame and fear are huge barriers to overcome before any victim of this abuse online will reach out for help.

2.6 Fraud and money mules

- 2.6.1 A money mule allows another person to hide money in their bank account.
- 2.6.2 Children who are involved in County Lines and criminal exploitation may be at risk of this from members of organised crime groups. They will receive a payment or reward for laundering money in this way, but as a consequence, may be exposed to greater coercion from criminal gangs.

2.7 Cyber offending

- 2.7.1 Cyber offending is the unauthorised act of accessing someone's computer or digitally held data. This can be using their login details to access services, using their details and then going on to commit another offence (such as fraud/theft), or getting a computer to perform an act on another computer (ransomware).
- 2.8. In addition to the above list, other issues which are currently a concern include cyberbullying (for example, through gaming sites), children's exposure to damaging material (e.g. sites or accounts promoting self-harm), and safeguarding children with special educational needs or other vulnerabilities in the online world.

3. NATIONAL POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.1. Technological development is enabling a movement of offending from the 'real' world to online or virtual spaces. It is a concern that the technological barriers to online criminality are weakening, and that online platforms are defaulting to encrypted technologies and anonymous communication. This final point is especially relevant to offending that includes the sharing of indecent images.
- 3.2. The most recent edition of the WYP Force Management Statement (FMS) outlines the challenge of online offending linked to child safety:
- The exponential growth in technology and increased capability of offenders to exploit children in this space has led to increased online offending, in particular indecent images of children, which have more than doubled in the last five years. The increasingly young age in which children are accessing technology and social media makes them more vulnerable to exploitation.*
- 3.3. The FMS also goes on to highlight that the proportion of hate crimes which are cyber-enabled has increased from 3% to 21% in four years, and that 85% of fraud is cyber-enabled.
- 3.4. The scale of the distribution of child sexual abuse imagery is staggering. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) identified 275,652 webpages containing or promoting access to child sexual abuse imagery in 2023. 92% of these pages contain 'self-generated' imagery. Recorded child sexual abuse is now heavily influenced by the volume of children sharing or possessing sexual images of themselves or others. However, the IWF point out that this label can be misleading, as children can be groomed, deceived or extorted into producing and sharing a sexual image or video of

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

themselves.

- 3.5. Children aged 11-13 appear most frequently in 'self-generated' imagery, although the volume of imagery including children aged 7-10 increased by 65% between 2022 to 2023.
- 3.6. The Online Safety Act (OSA) was passed by Parliament in October 2023 and aims to tackle many of the threats emerging in the online world. The OSA places legal responsibility on tech companies to prevent and rapidly remove illegal content, and so help stop children seeing material that is harmful.
- 3.7. The OSA puts the onus on social media platforms, search engines, messaging and video sharing sites to protect their users from harmful content. Ofcom is now the regulator for online safety. Rather than Ofcom identifying harmful online content, the legislation requires companies to better manage their platforms, and put systems in place to protect their users from harm. It will still fall to users to report content to host platforms if they think it is illegal or harmful.
- 3.8. There have been criticisms that the OSA does not go far enough, as it focuses on certain types of harmful content (terrorism, child abuse images, content on suicide or self-harm), but cannot police many of the negative aspects of online life people experience (e.g. threats, misogyny, misinformation).
- 3.9. For policing, the OSA introduces a number of new criminal offences, including offences covering false communication, threatening communication, sending flashing images with the intent of causing epileptic seizures, and a cyber-flashing offence.

4. RESPONDING TO ONLINE HARMS – WEST YORKSHIRE POLICE

- 4.1. The area of child safeguarding presents a significant challenge to police forces nationwide. WYP continue to commit significant resources to non-recent investigations with a commitment to investigate child abuse, irrespective of the passage of time.
- 4.2. The increasing volume and complexity of online offending that transcends county and national borders presents a challenge for all forces. The online space and the debate around the OSA continues to impact on how policing tackles the threat that offenders pose to children online, through (for example) sextortion, grooming, and the potential impact on Serious Youth Violence. There is also the impact on children's mental health through exposure to harmful online content to consider.
- 4.3. West Yorkshire Police continue to respond to child safeguarding as outlined in the Police and Crime Plan, the Force's Operational Policing Strategy, and the national Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy. This is translated into practice via the Protecting Vulnerable People Strategic Plan and the Child Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Neglect Tactical Plan.

4.4. Investigation

- 4.4.1. West Yorkshire Police's approach to child safeguarding has developed over the years to match the changing demand and complexity in this area. Each district has a dedicated child safeguarding team, a Child Vulnerability and Exploitation Team (CVET), a Public Protection Unit (PPU), an Abusive Image Assessment Hub, and a Digital Forensic Unit (DFU).
- 4.4.2. The Online Child Abuse Investigation Team (OCAIT) investigates cases involving the making and distribution of indecent images of children.

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

- 4.4.3. At West Yorkshire level, there is also a Modern-Day Slavery and Human Trafficking Team who work with partners to investigate and understand complex and organised offending of vulnerable people.
- 4.4.4. West Yorkshire Police has a centralised Safeguarding Governance Unit which is responsible for all safeguarding policies and fostering continuous improvement through identifying and sharing good practice locally and nationally. This department has overall responsibility for oversight and delivery of the Force's Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation Strategic Plan.
- 4.4.5. District CVETs identify children vulnerable to exploitation, work jointly with partners to assess the risk, and act to safeguard them. The teams investigate offences and seek to identify and target those who seek to exploit children.
- 4.4.6. The nature of online offending can present a challenge as it often transcends force or national borders, and may involve multiple victims or suspects, leading to complex investigations. Safeguarding Governance, Protective Services Crime and Regional Organised Crime Units are currently exploring how WYP review and manage complex cases to ensure appropriate escalation takes place, particularly where offending transcends borders.

4.5. Offender management

- 4.5.1. The nature of sexual offending varies widely, whether against adults or children. Some offences take place offline, some exclusively online, but in many cases offending transcends both the online and offline space.
- 4.5.2. The complexity of the digital age presents a challenge for offender management, with individuals owning multiple internet-enabled devices, accessing multiple platforms, and the ever-expanding volume of digital content.
- 4.5.3. WYP have introduced Child Safeguarding Risk Assessments for use with suspects on bail or released under investigation for offences involving children. This assesses both the risk posed by and to the suspect.
- 4.5.4. In relation to the management of Registered Sex Offenders (RSOs), each district has a dedicated Public Protection Team with specially trained officers and police staff who work with Probation and other agencies to continually risk assess, develop risk management plans, and manage offenders to mitigate the risk of further offending against the public. This includes considering the risk to children and ensuring this is part of the risk management plan where relevant.
- 4.5.5. Over and above the core nationally mandated specialist training, WYP have invested in additional training and equipment to help identify any subsequent offending and protect the public, including providing specialist digital training. Furthermore, staff have attended professional development days, which have included officers attending a conference entitled 'Inside the Mind of Sex Offender' (led by a specialist academic in this field), and in 2023 a number of officers received specialist interview training.
- 4.5.6. West Yorkshire Police continue to maximise funding opportunities (including Home Office funding and the Asset Recovery Incentivisation Scheme) to provide staff with supporting equipment to assist in monitoring and detecting any breaches in offenders' notification requirements or compliance with sexual orders. For example, WYP has invested in the training of two Polygraph officers dedicated to Regional Sex Offender management.
- 4.5.7. It is relevant to highlight that the Force's work to manage Registered Sex Offenders

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

commences right of the start of criminal justice procedures, where officers seek sexual harm prevention orders upon conviction to place restrictions on offenders, and provide officers with additional powers to support subsequent management in the community.

4.6. Developing the initial response

- 4.6.1. To complement the above training, Safeguarding Governance has developed an iLearn training package in relation to Youth Produced Sexual Imagery (YPSI) and Self-generated Indecent Images of Children. This is now a mandatory learning package for all officers and staff who come into contact with members of the public.
- 4.6.2. This iLearn package seeks to support officers to conduct proportionate investigations where there are no aggravating features identified. WYP are one of the first forces in the country to deliver such a package which was developed following a peer review project commissioned by WYP from the NPCC/College of Policing 'Vulnerability Knowledge and Practice Programme'.
- 4.6.3. In November 2023, child protection colleagues from the NPCC's 'Hydrant Programme' delivered a training day for WYP officers in relation to Child Sexual Exploitation investigations. Further training has been arranged for July and September 2024, to ensure that this training is received by all staff working within WYP's CVET.
- 4.6.4. Further to this, in March 2024 Hydrant attended a West Yorkshire 'Train the Trainer' event in relation to their recently issued practice advice for Investigating Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation. A training package was created by Safeguarding Governance and subsequently cascaded to all front-line officers and staff via dedicated training days.
- 4.6.5. On a related point, the Force have developed an app for officer's handheld devices to support them with direct access to advice and guidance on safeguarding matters. WYP are adopting a child-centred approach to their training to act against the use of victim blaming language by officers, staff or partners.
- 4.6.6. Whilst family members are not formally recognised as victims under Ministry of Justice criteria, WYP have acted to recognise the shared trauma they experience. In January 2024, WYP began work with 'Family Matters', who provide support and guidance to families who are impacted when a family member is arrested or investigated for online offences against children. In due course, this pilot will be formally evaluated by Dr. Theresa Redmond (Policing Institute in the Eastern Region [PIER]), Professor Rachel Armitage (University of Huddersfield), and Ashley Perry (Research Fellow at PIER).

4.7. Building resilience through education: Pol-Ed

- 4.7.1. Pol-Ed is WYP's education programme aimed at school-age students. Its purpose is to keep children safe by developing their understanding and knowledge of risks, consequences, and the law. It is being delivered in classroom sessions across West Yorkshire, with the aim of helping children make positive choices in potentially challenging or dangerous situations. 92% of West Yorkshire schools have engaged with the project and are using its resources.
- 4.7.2. Please see Appendix 1 for an example of the online harm lesson content provided under this programme.

5. RESPONDING TO ONLINE HARMS – WEST YORKSHIRE COMBINED AUTHORITY

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

- 5.1. The Mayor and Deputy Mayor for Policing and Crime (DMPC) contribute to the response to online harms through their public support of awareness raising and early intervention projects, and also through the grant funding of important community-led work through the Mayor's Safer Communities Fund (MSCF).
- 5.2. In May 2023, the DMPC gave an opening address at the 'Online Harms: Decoding and Understanding' event held in Wakefield. This multi-agency event discussed the extent of the threats present online, as well as promoting inter-agency working opportunities.
- 5.3. In June this year, the DMPC helped to launch the Leeds Online Safety campaign at an event held at the Hamara Centre in Beeston. This online safety campaign is led by the NSPCC with partners including Child Friendly Leeds, broadband provider Plus Net, and WYP. The campaign provides support and advice to professionals, parents, and children across the city, offering online safeguarding advice while also helping adults feel better able to support children in exploring the online world safely.
- 5.4. Live stage performances of The Net – Sam's Story will be held at dozens of schools across the city in the first phase of this campaign. This is one of several projects recently supported by the MSCF which aim to tackle online harms.

5.5. Recent MSCF projects supporting online safety

5.5.1. NSPCC: "The Net - Sam's Story". Leeds, £8,000.00.

The project centres around a play "The Net - Sam's Story" for all pupils from Year 5 and 6. It explores sharing images, contact from strangers online, exploitation, and appropriate and inappropriate behaviour online, whilst signposting to support; be that parents, other safe adults, and Childline.

There is a workshop for pupils to identify intervention moments with discussions on mental well-being, along with feeling good on social media, and peer pressure to always be online. The project provides schools with resources, lesson plans, and activity suggestions for further work.

5.5.2. Prism Youth Project: Freedom Project. Bradford, £7,660.00.

The Freedom Project supports, guides and empowers young people to have the skills and self determination to make their own independent choices to avoid or free themselves from being victims of crime. The project delivers bespoke programmes to small groups which cover healthy relationships, spotting the signs of abusive behaviours in relationships, choice and consent, and exploitation. The sessions also cover street grooming, blackmail and coercion, sexting and online grooming, internet safety, and peer pressure, with an overall aim of reducing the risk of emotional or sexual abuse, and minimising victimisation.

5.5.3. West Yorkshire Safeguarding Communications Group: Online CSE Campaign. Across West Yorkshire, £7,571.00.

A new online CSE marketing campaign will be created and delivered which will encourage parents and trusted adults to speak to young people about their online activity and will advise them on the language to use and the types of questions they should ask to prevent online child exploitation. The campaign will take the form of digital advertising, such as on websites and social media, as well as non-digital such as the radio. Partners across the district will be involved in promoting the engagement including community engagement groups and school liaison officers.

5.5.4. Yorkshire & Humber Regional Organised Crime Unit: County Lines Fearless

Campaign. Across West Yorkshire, £6,000.00.

WYP collaborated with Crimestoppers to deliver a project to address County Lines drug gangs who exploit children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money. Serious crime gangs use social media to communicate with, recruit and trick young people to become drug runners. This project launched a social media campaign through Crimestoppers' Fearless channel, aimed at under 18s and delivered on the same social media channels used to recruit, such as Snapchat.

The campaign highlighted the ways people can identify those who may be being groomed into a life of drug dealing. Young people were encouraged to visit the Fearless.org website to find out more, to pass on information anonymously, and access safeguarding advice.

5.5.5. West Yorkshire Police - Bradford Children Vulnerable to Exploitation Team: Operation Galanthus. Bradford, £4,722.75.

Galanthus Safeguarding seeks to understand and respond to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families, recognising how the different relationships young people form in their neighbourhoods, schools, and online, can feature exploitation, sexual abuse, violence and criminality. The project aimed to create a bespoke safeguarding service catered specifically for the needs of these young people, creating a safe space which allows them to de-stress in a supportive environment.

5.5.6. Talking Forward: Talking Forward Peer Support. Across West Yorkshire, £6,552.00.

Talking Forward is a charity designed to support families of those being investigated for online child sexual abuse offences. These family members include partners, parents, and siblings who, because they are not direct victims of the offending, have limited access to support for the trauma, stigma, and fear that they are experiencing. The project provided a facilitated peer-support group for families, and a telephone/email support service, and awareness raising/lobbying activity to improve policy and practice for families affected by this trauma.

5.6. Support for West Yorkshire Police Public Information Campaigns

5.6.1. West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) supports the development and promotion of a range of child safeguarding, online safety, and anti-fraud campaigns coordinated by WYP. Through the WY Safeguarding Communications Group, WYP works closely with WYCA and local partners to devise and co-ordinate impactful campaigns to help people understand risks and threats in the online world.

Item 5 - Online Harms and Interventions

5.6.2. A good example is the recent 'Start the Conversation' campaign, which encouraged parents to be confident in talking to their children about their activity online, and to be just as curious as if they were going out with their friends. The campaign aimed to build parents' and carers' confidence in understanding which apps and games their child is using, and to make talking about what goes on online part of their daily conversations.

5.6.3. Previous campaigns have also addressed money mule exploitation, child criminal exploitation, and online safety. Further details can be found at:

www.westyorkshire.police.uk/campaigns



5.7. The West Yorkshire Violence Reduction Partnership

5.7.1. The Violence Reduction Partnership's (VRP) work to prevent and reduce serious violence in West Yorkshire has included exploring the factors which influence violence in communities. This strand of work has encompassed the online space, and the ways in which problematic social media activity can act as a driver for violent offending in 'real life'.

5.7.2. The VRP's Knowledge Hub has commissioned a programme of research on this topic to help understand how social media use relates to violence and psychological harm among young people in West Yorkshire, and the potential opportunities for harm mitigation.

5.7.3. Their 'Influential Factors' document has provided an insight to the relationship between online spaces and violence, covering how social media and technology can be a catalyst for violence, cyberbullying and harassment, weapon accessibility, viewing harmful content, the role of algorithms, the metaverse, and the impact of the OSA.

5.7.4. Research by the VRP has identified that cyberbullying and harassment are the most prevalent type of online harm experienced by children and young adults in West Yorkshire. The type of contact respondents have found most upsetting related to bullying, harassment and sexual harassment. Other research has found poor mental health outcomes are associated with cyberbullying and harassment experiences, and further suggests that psychological impacts can be long-term.

5.7.5. The VRP commissioned an Online Harms Pilot in a secondary school in West Yorkshire to raise awareness and inform children of online harms. This included in-classroom interactive workshops providing guidance on how children can protect themselves from negative content and engagement. The pilot also offered one to one support for pupils, into which the school could refer pupils who may have experienced online harms.

5.7.6. More information on the VRP's work in this area is available [here](#).

5.8. Online Harms and the Police and Crime Plan 2024-28

- 5.8.1. We are currently preparing for a major programme of public engagement to inform the development of the Mayor's new Police and Crime Plan, and we can expect the issue of online safety and cyber-enabled offending to feature in our discussions with West Yorkshire residents. Previous consultation prior to the Mayor's first Police and Crime Plan identified that the topic of child safeguarding was the most frequently cited concern for residents.

6. EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

- 6.1. Various equality, diversity and inclusion factors are linked to this topic. Key points considered are the additional vulnerabilities in the online space of people with special educational needs, and the online harassment and bullying of diverse groups, including due to protected characteristics.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN WEST YORKSHIRE

- 7.1. This paper covers the work carried out by WYP, WYCA, and our partners, in collaborating on initiatives to help safeguard young people in the online space and to build resilience across all age-groups to the dangers of online facilitated exploitation and criminality.

8. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1. There are no financial implications to be considered in this paper.

9. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1. There are no legal implications to be considered in this paper.

10. SUPPORTING PAPERS

- Appendix 1: Example Pol-Ed Online Harm lesson content

11. CONTACT INFORMATION

Contact Officer:	Neil Flenley, Policy Manager
E-mail:	Neil.Flenley@westyorks-ca.gov.uk

Appendix 1: Example Pol-Ed Online Harm lesson content

Themed Lessons
Online Safety



These lessons have been identified by the Pol-Ed team to help support educational settings when teaching about online safety.

EYFS

- How can I keep safe at home?

Key Stage 1

- What is bullying?
- How can I keep safe online?
- Why does age matter?

Key Stage 2

- What is bullying?
- What is grooming?
- How can we use our phones sensibly?
- How can I be a responsible citizen?

Key Stage 3

- What is Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)?
- What is the issue with 'nudes'?
- Are we responsible with social media?
- Is this banter or bullying?
- What is child-on-child abuse?
- What is an addiction?
- What do we mean by intimidation?

Key Stage 4

- What is image-based sexual abuse?
- What is radicalisation?

Key Stage 5

- Who are you?
- How do we develop our online brand?
- What is harassment?
- How do we manage cyber security?
- Too good to be true? (Scams, etc.)

Relationships

Keeping Safe

Understanding The Law