

March 2025

**Sefton Safeguarding Children Partnership   
  
Child Exploitation   
  
Policy and Procedure**

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# Introduction

Every child and young person in Sefton should be able to grow up free from abuse and neglect and the fear of being abused or neglected. We are committed to improving the safety of all children and young people in Sefton. If children are not safe, they cannot be healthy, happy, achieve or reach their full potential. We hold at the fore, our obligation that keeping children safe is everybody’s responsibility.

Harm outside the Home (HOTH) is a key priority for Sefton Council and Partners. We have developed systems, processes and practice that enhances our capacity and capability to identify and respond to emerging and actual risks to children outside the home, including those associated with criminal and sexual exploitation and child on child abuse.

This includes criminal and sexual exploitation and children who are missing from school or home. These are big issues across Merseyside and nationally and we need to continually adapt our practice and services to enable our practitioners and communities to better respond to these new challenges.

# Our Guiding Principles

The delivery of our strategy is underpinned by Working Together 2023 and the following guiding principles:

* A focus on practice improvement and flexibility to meet emerging need.
* Having a child-centred and whole family approach on our interventions.
* Working effectively alongside children and families to improve outcomes for children.
* Being consistent when working with families.
* Delivering a restorative approach to the assessment and planning to support needs through interventions.
* Ensuring our staff have the skills, resources, support and supervision that will enable them to improve outcomes for children.
* The voice of the child is central to practice.

# Key Outcomes

* Children in Sefton are safeguarded and protected from harm.
* Families are empowered to drive the changes that they want to see sustained.
* Partners are effective at protecting the most vulnerable children and families.
* Partners reflect on practice and share learning to continually improve practice.

# What is Exploitation

To determine whether the child is at risk of or is being exploited, professionals can use the Child Exploitation (CE) Screening Tool to set out concerns and seek further advice and support. *(For agencies crossing more than one local authority area, alternative recognised CE screening tools can be used).*

The ‘When to Use a Screening Tool Guidance’ should be used to acknowledge and guide professional’s application of the screening tool (Appendix A).

**The below nationally agreed definitions are utilised across Merseyside:**

**Child Sexual Exploitation** is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child under the age of 18 into sexual activity, either:

* In exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or;
* For the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child Sexual Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

**Child Criminal Exploitation** occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of a person under the age of 18 and may coerce, manipulate or deceive a child under that age into any activity:

* In exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or;
* For the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator and/or;
* Through violence or the threat of violence.

The victim may be exploited even if the activity appears consensual (i.e. moving drugs or the proceeds of drugs from one place to another). Child Criminal Exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.

**County Lines is** a term used to describe gangs and organised criminal networks involved in exporting illegal drugs into one or more importing areas within the UK, using dedicated mobile phone lines or other form of “deal line”. They are likely to exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store the drugs and money and they will often use coercion, intimidation, violence (including sexual violence) and weapons.

**County lines is a form of Child Exploitation (CE).** It is a major, cross-cutting issue involving drugs, violence, gangs, safeguarding, criminal and sexual exploitation, modern slavery, and missing persons. The response to tackle it involves the Police, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and a wide range of Government departments, local government agencies and Voluntary and Community Faith (VCF) sector organisations.

County lines activity and the associated violence, drug dealing, and exploitation have a devastating impact on children, vulnerable adults and local communities.

**Cuckooing** - Urban gangs establish a base in the market location, often by taking over the homes of local vulnerable adults by force and/or coercion, in a practice referred to as ‘cuckooing’. Urban gangs then use children and vulnerable people to move drugs and money.

**Human Trafficking** - A person commits an offence if they arrange or facilitate the travel of another person to exploit them. It is irrelevant whether the exploited person, adult or child, consents to the travel. A person may, in particular, arrange or facilitate another person’s travel by recruiting, transporting or transferring, harbouring or receiving them, or transferring or exchanging control over them.

‘Travel’ means arriving in or entering any country, departing from any country and travelling within any country. A person who is a UK national citizen commits an offence under Section 2 regardless of where the arranging or facilitating takes place, or where the travel takes place. A person who is not a UK national commits an offence under Section 2 of the [Modern Slavery Act 2015](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents) if any part of the arranging or facilitating takes place in the UK, or the travel consists of arrival in or entry into, departure from, or travel within the UK. In determining whether or not a child is a victim of trafficking, their consent to being trafficked is irrelevant and how they are trafficked is also irrelevant. Only the act and the purpose need to be present. It is not necessary to prove coercion or any other inducement.

Exploitation alone does not constitute trafficking – there also needs to be recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person.Slavery, servitude and forced or compulsory labour is, or may be, a crime in its own right under Section 1 of the [Modern Slavery Act 2015.](https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/30/contents)

# Sefton Protection Against Child Exploitation – My Space

Sefton’s Multi-Agency Missing and Exploitation Service (MACE), supports children and young people who are likely to suffer harm through exploitation.

Our vision is for our children and young people living in Sefton to feel safe and protected from the risk of exploitation.

In developing our response to child exploitation, we are committed to ensuring that safeguarding remains a top priority, and the following principles will underpin our approach to intervention:

* **Empowerment** - Promoting child and family led decisions through collaboration
* **Protection** - we will safeguard children to protect them from harm
* **Prevention** - we will identify risk and deliver interventions to protect children and promote better outcomes for children and families
* **Proportionality** - Proportionate and least intrusive response to the risk presented
* **Trauma Informed** - we understand that children may have or are currently experiencing trauma. We will understand the impact on the child and tailor our support accordingly.

We acknowledge that children could be exposed to exploitation risk within different contexts outside of their home including their local community, school or college and online. It is vital that we adopt a ‘whole system’ approach to child exploitation, engaging all departments of the council, partners including the voluntary sector, the wider community and other partnerships and businesses to build awareness of the signs of grooming and exploitation and confidence in recognising and reporting safeguarding concerns.

My Space is a multi-agency team committed to safeguarding children and young people who are going missing and/or being exploited or at risk of exploitation.

My Space works with children and young people from the age of 11-18 years of age, **open to Children Social Care**, who are likely to suffer harm from exploitation. My Space will work with young people for as long as necessary or whilst there is consent, with regular ‘**Exploitation Team Around the Child’** (ETAC) plan reviews taking place between 4 - 8 weeks (risk dependent), to assess progress for the child. Children and families are central to the ETAC process and are key stakeholders in developing solutions to help the child and reduce the risk of exploitation. The team also includes relevant partner agencies who can add value to the child life and plan going forward.

**Children who are Missing**

My Space Missing Team supports children and young people who go Missing from Home, Education and Care within the Borough, with the aim that the child and young person is seen, and a **Return Home Conversation (RHC) is offered and completed within 72 hours** of their return.

All Sefton children (both within Sefton and placed outside of Sefton) will be offered a Return Home Conversation (RHC). For those young people placed outside of Sefton and over a distance of 20-mile radius, the return home conversation may be completed over the phone or via video call, however the child’s best interests and risk assessment will be considered as an in-person visit may be required.

In addition, the My Space Intervention workers form a part of the Team Around the School (TAS) and a worker is attached to each of the school clusters offering support, advice and direct work to children, their families, and the wider professional network.

The team is co-located in Magdalen House, Bootle and the team consists of:

* 1 My SPACE Team Manager (Social work qualified)
* 1 Deputy Team Manager (Social work qualified)
* 2 Child Exploitation Social Workers
* 5 Child Exploitation Intervention workers
* 1 Missing from Home Coordinator
* 3 Missing from Home intervention workers
* Business Analysts
* Business Support / Administrator

The service is overseen by the Service Manager with responsibility for Youth Justice and Springboard (Early Help 11-18 years), so My Space forms part of an adolescence focused service. My Space also work in close partnership with Police, Sefton Enhanced Support Team (Health), Youth Justice Service, Virtual School, Family Advice and Support Team (FAST), Child Help and Assessment Team (CHAT), the Emergency Duty Team, and Early Help.

In bringing together the knowledge, expertise and resources of all partners, My Space are able to share information swiftly, understand risk and need and deliver a creative and effective response that is always guided by the particular needs and wishes of the child and family.

**This is underpinned by our Core Principles which are:**

* **Youth voice and experience** - listen to young people at every stage of our work to understand the multi-faceted issues of development and transitions in their lives. Treat children as children and understand their lived experience to avoid adultification.
* **Intervene early and help prevent further harm** - working in collaboration with the child and family to deliver the right help at the right time.
* **Strengths based** - work on the child’s strengths and interests to build a positive sense of self through a multi-agency offer that responds to the needs of children to improve their outcomes.
* **Information sharing and data analysis** - collect, analyse and understand key data sets so that we understand the cohort’s needs and risks that they face to support effective prediction, prevention, intervention and diversion responses.
* **Diversion** - deliver a holistic package of intervention so that children are supported to exit organised crime groups or gangs and be free from child exploitation and the risk of harm.
* **Disruption** - how services can disrupt child exploitation at micro (child specific) and macro (borough wide) scales through multi-agency panels including MACE (Multi Agency Child Exploitation) and MARTHR (Multi Agency Response to Threat, Harm and Risk).

**Who can refer?**

If you have any exploitation concerns for children/young people, please contact the **Children Help and Advice Team (CHAT) on 0151 934 4013.**

After some brief details are taken, you will be put through to a Social Worker to discuss your concerns and a referral will be taken, which may require an exploitation screening tool to be completed. Following this discussion, a decision will be made about next steps. family as well as partners.

If there are any immediate safeguarding concerns, then a strategy meeting will be considered.

**What Happens Next?**

If a child is thought to be at risk of exploitation, they will be allocated a social worker to undertake a Child and Family Assessment to explore these concerns. A Child Exploitation Screening Tool will be completed, which will then be forwarded to the My Space team for further discussion.

The young person will then be discussed at the Daily Morning Meeting which is a multi-agency meeting consisting of the Police, Health, Early Help, Youth Justice and Social Care. There are also links to Education. This enables timely and important information to be shared at the earliest opportunity.

If a young person is thought to be at risk of exploitation, they will be allocated to a My Space intervention worker for further support, safety planning and diversionary activities. The Exploitation Intervention Workers will work with no more than ten young people at a time, as this allows a more intensive approach with frequent visits and direct work.

Safety planning can include measures such as drawing together a missing action plan or looking to gather evidence to support an NRM application (National Referral Mechanism – Home Office), for those people who are being heavily exploited or trafficked.

A wide range of options are considered for each child and their family. Each safety plan should include:

* Immediate actions as necessary to safeguard the child
* Contingency plan that all contributors have knowledge of to support the safety of the child
* Actions that focus on addressing wider environmental factors that have contributed to risk, including disruption activity relating to perpetrators and / or locations.

# My Space - What We Do and How We Do It

An Exploitation Team Around the Child (ETAC) meeting will take place, where possible within 72 hours. If there are any immediate safeguarding concerns, then a strategy meeting will be considered. The Child Exploitation Pathway is at Appendix B.

The development of an ETAC plan will support how partners will reduce risk for a child or a young person who may be exploited. It focuses on multi-agency information sharing, intelligence gathering, planning interventions and diversion work. It does not replace any other meeting for the young person such as Cared for Reviews, Core groups, Child in Need or Strategy meetings but will align with those pathways.

**The purpose of the ETAC is to**:

* Agree a safety plan for the child
* Ensure that all available information is shared and considered.
* Agree positive outcomes with the child and family
* Identify and support needs and vulnerability through a holistic plan that aligns with any other plans that exist such as Child in Need and Child Protection plans.
* Complete a Trigger plan
* Define roles and responsibilities
* Agree timescales
* Agree regular review and monitoring arrangements

The initial ETAC meeting will focus on immediate safety concerns for the child and a contingency plan so that the child, family member and agencies understand and agree how to keep the child safe.

Within 4 weeks, the intervention worker will gather all relevant information and develop a relationship with the child and family to understand the root cause of the presenting concerns and vulnerabilities. The child, family and intervention worker will co-produce the ETAC plan to address all of the concerns and the plan will be shared so that all involved fully understand what will happen.

The ETAC plan will be reviewed every four to eight weeks until the risk has reduced, and causation factors have been addressed. All decisions are made with the child and family as well as partners.

**Exit Planning**

Intervention provided by My Space can only cease if there is reduced risk evidenced through the updated CE Screening tool AND following a discussion in a multi-agency ETAC / CIN / CP / Care planning group or Cared for Children meeting and the agreement with the existing CP / CIN / Care Plan. If there is no longer any exploitation risk, low risk, or the young person does not wish to engage, their case may close to My Space. This would always be discussed with the child and their families, and they would be invited to attend the meeting as outlined above. An exit strategy will be put in place which will include access to universal services and information for the child and family on how to access information or further support should they have future concerns.

**Missing Children**

**Return Home Conversations**

If a child is reported missing to police or the local authority, they will be discussed at the Daily Morning Meeting. Any child who is missing or found prior to the meeting will be added to the agenda by the Police Missing Coordinator based in My Space.

Every Sefton child that has been missing and reported to Police is offered an independent return home conversation, which is an opportunity to speak openly about what happened during that missing episode and to identify any support they may need. This would be undertaken by the Missing from Home workers based in My Space.

Return home conversations are expected to be completed within 72 hours of the young person returning home, although it is recognised that the interview needs to take place when a young person is ready to speak and in a safe space. If a young person does not want to meet on a one-to-one basis, a conversation can take place over the telephone, although it is always preferable to meet the young person directly.

If the young person lives outside of a 20-mile radius of Sefton, arrangements will be made for the allocated worker or social worker to take the lead in completing a return home interview or explore a phone call or video call to complete the return home conversation.

**Missing Trigger Plans**

If a child is regularly missing, then a Missing Trigger Plan will be produced which outlines what actions should be taken when that child goes missing. The plan should include addresses that the person has been known to frequent on previous missing episodes and any key contacts they may have. It is also useful to have their current address and telephone number listed so this can be quickly shared with Police, key workers or family members if needed. If a child lives in supported or care accommodation, it is important for the key workers at their home to have access to the trigger plan so that this can be shared in times of crisis. It is important that the Trigger Plan is picked up within initial stages of safety planning. All Trigger Plans must contain an up-to-date photo and description of the child.

# Strategy discussions around Missing Children

If a child is missing for a period of 24 hours or is assessed as high risk due to existing vulnerabilities, a strategy meeting **must** be held in accordance with **Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023.** It is the responsibility of the **allocated social worker to initiate the strategy discussion,** and the My Space Missing Coordinator and/or Return Home Conversation worker will attend.

Having three missing episodes in 30 days, nine episodes in 90 days or a missing episode where a person has returned and disclosed any crime or circumstance that could be linked to exploitation would also trigger a strategy discussion. If you are unsure if a strategy discussion is required – please contact the team for additional support.

Sefton’s Missing Pathway is at Appendix H.

# Professional Consultation

Any professional can consult with or seek advice from **My Space** staff via the **duty number** which is supported daily by a Social Worker. The telephone number is **0151 934 2182.**

**Trafficking Notices and National Referral Mechanism (NRM) status**

If practitioners have concerns that a child may be a potential victim of modern slavery or human trafficking, then a referral should be made to the NRM as soon as possible.

Where there are reasonable grounds to suspect a child to be a victim of trafficking:

* This should be reported to the police (phone 101 or in an emergency 999) in order for them to investigate the offences committed (i.e. modern slavery and trafficking offences)
* A referral should be made to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) directly via Police and Children’s Services First Responders. Social workers can apply directly via [Report modern slavery as a first responder - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/report-modern-slavery-as-a-first-responder)

**Useful helplines**

* Modern Slavery Helpline 0800 555 111
* Barnardo’s 24/7 professionals support line 0800 043 4303 (deals with modern slavery and human trafficking).

**Governance Arrangements**

The following sections highlight the governance arrangements outside of the ETAC process as highlighted earlier in this document.

**Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) - Overview**

The purpose of the MACE meeting is to provide operational management oversight of the risk and disruption to management for individual children and groups of children identified as being vulnerable to child exploitation. The MACE Pathway is at Appendix C and MACE Terms of Reference at Appendix D.

We know that child exploitation takes places in the local community and therefore information known to statutory services as well as voluntary sector agencies should be used to highlight the vulnerabilities and threats, to establish and reduce risk.

The MACE meeting will provide the framework to allow regular information sharing and identify actions to tackle and disrupt child exploitation across Sefton. The meeting will discuss specific concerns about children and young people who are suffering harm through exploitation where there is a gap in resources, information or a lack of a coordinated response to disruption. Safeguarding partners who attend the meeting will include lead practitioners and managers from; Early Help, Children’s Social Care, Police, Youth Justice Service, Health services, Community and Youth Teams (although this is not an exhaustive list). The MACE meeting will facilitate effective action to prevent and disrupt exploitation by:

* Supporting the effective sharing of relevant information in accordance with the MACE Information Sharing Agreement (ISA).
* Enabling agencies to identify perpetrators and locations of concern to aid disruption of perpetrators and provide support to victims and their families.
* Ensuring that all agencies are working together effectively to prevent, reduce, track and respond to children missing from home, care, or education, including those children in placements outside of Sefton (out of borough).
* Providing advice and guidance, including the promoting of robust and proactive multi-agency investigations where a risk of exploitation has been identified, especially where children and young people do not perceive themselves as victims.
* Seek assurance from all relevant agencies that the full range of disruption measures are being used to target perpetrators.
* Monitor the effectiveness of return home conversations in developing an understanding of risk and emerging safeguarding themes.
* Sharing information to understand the nature and extent of child exploitation in Sefton, as well as enabling the identification of patterns and intelligence gaps.

MACE Meetings are not an alternative to safeguarding and child protection processes and where there is a concern about abuse or neglect within the family, including where parents/carers are not acting protectively, the usual Section 47 processes should be used.

There are 2 main referral pathways into MACE; cases that are already known and open to My Space, and directly from a social worker from Other Local Authorities when they have placed a child in Sefton.

# Sefton Safeguarding Children Partnership

**Harm Outside the Home Subgroup (HOTH)**

Harm outside of the home is often referred to as “extra-familial harm”. Harm can occur in a range of extra-familial contexts, including school and other educational settings, peer groups, or within community/public spaces, and/or online. Children may experience this type of harm from other children and/or from adults. Forms of extra-familial harm include: exploitation by criminal and organised crime groups and individuals (such as county lines and financial exploitation), serious violence, modern slavery and trafficking, online harm, sexual exploitation, teenage relationship abuse, and the influences of extremism which could lead to radicalisation.

Children of all ages can experience extra-familial harm (Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023). The Map to demonstrate the relationships between various groups is at Appendix E and HOTH Terms of Reference at Appendix F.

The HOTH Subgroup has the responsibility to ensure that the overall Child Exploitation Strategy, as agreed by the Safeguarding Partnership, is translated into actions and is carried out across the Partnership by key agencies and stakeholders. Progress is reported on a regular basis along with any barriers to multi-agency working, emerging concerns and threats.

All exploitation performance, processes and pathways are agreed and are overseen by the HOTH subgroup and by the Delegated Safeguarding Partners (DSPs) as part of Sefton’s Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements.

The HOTH subgroup has a strategy and workplan that develops Child Exploitation work and holds partners to account. The chair of HOTH reports progress directly to the Delegated Safeguarding Partners.

In addition, the HOTH Subgroup scrutinise and hold agencies to account for;

* delivering a safe, responsive strategy in prevention and responding to extra-familial harm in all its forms
* ensuring recommendations are made where effective multi-agency action is taken to combat exploitation of children and those who go missing, to develop an approach to harm outside the home, safeguarding and provide assurance to the Delegated Safeguarding Partners about the effectiveness of arrangements, to disseminate information and raise awareness on emerging issues to assist the workforce and ensure a training plan is in place to support agencies.

**Key Responsibilities:**

* Understand the cohort (local, national and international) by producing and reviewing a dynamic Profile
* Evaluate, monitor and escalate where necessary, the multi-agency response to Child Exploitation
* Be prompt in our response to identified and emerging risks and ensure multi-agency ownership and oversight
* Identify and adopt new working practices to address themes above through the use of qualitative and quantitative data
* Share and disseminate information to assist the workforce to carry out their duties and where gaps/ineffective services are identified, it will be challenged and escalated
* Disseminate learning from multi-agency audits, learning reviews, national reviews and return home interviews.

**Communication:**

Prompt and targeted awareness raising whilst linking with other relevant boards/partnerships. HOTH meetings take place at bimonthly intervals and has clear links to the Strategic MACE and will receive feedback from the Pan Merseyside MACE Group. See the HOTH subgroup Terms of Reference, Appendix F.

Note: Trafficking/Modern Slavery, Harmful Practices and Radicalisation will be the responsibility of the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) – the Sefton Safeguarding Children Partnership will require an annual report from the CSP on these areas.

**Strategic Pan Merseyside MACE**

The Pan Merseyside strategic MACE exists to ensure that there is a consistency of approach in identifying and tackling exploitation in all its forms across the region and to further understand the profile and scale of the challenges, threats, risk, perpetrators and locations on which to base a joined-up approach and collective action.

These meetings are attended by all regional Contextual leads who provide information, intelligence and updates from their respective areas. The Merseyside Protocol for MACE can be found at Appendix G.

**Multi-Agency Response to Threat, Harm and Risk- MARTHR**

This is a multi-agency meeting led by the Police. Its main focus is sharing information, intelligence and levels of risk in regard to adults who pose risk to children, organised crime and locations of concern. It is aligned to both the local and Pan Merseyside MACE, and HOTH Subgroup. It is a mainly Police led meeting who provide a comprehensive picture of local and regional concerns, risk and threats. It is expected that all agencies across Sefton attend and are active partners in sharing and acting on information and intelligence provided both internal to their respective agencies and at a regional level if required. The MARTHR Terms of Reference are at Appendix I.

# Appendices

Appendix A – CE Screening Tool

Appendix B – CE Pathway

Appendix C – Sefton MACE Pathway

Appendix D – Sefton MACE Terms or Reference

Appendix E – Harm Outside the Home Map

Appendix F - Harm Outside the Home Terms of Reference

Appendix G – Merseyside Multi-Agency CE Protocol

Appendix H – Sefton Missing Pathway

Appendix I – MARTHR Terms of Reference

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| **Appendix Ref** | **Document Link** |
| Appendix A – CE Screening Tool and associated guidance |  |
| Appendix B – CE Pathway |  |
| Appendix C – Sefton MACE Pathway |  |
| Appendix D – Sefton MACE Terms or Reference |  |
| Appendix E – Harm Outside the Home Map |  |
| Appendix F - Harm Outside the Home Terms or Reference |  |
| Appendix G – Merseyside MACE Protocol | [Pan Merseyside Multi-Agency CE Protocol (2024)](https://seftonscp.procedures.org.uk/assets/clients/10/Pan%20Merseyside%20Protocols/2024%20Pan_merseyside_CE%20Protocol%20FINAL%20(003).pdf) |
| Appendix H – Sefton Missing Pathway |  |
| Appendix I – MARTHR Terms of Reference |  |