

## **Greater Manchester children's services response to child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation.**

A summary of the findings from the most recent inspections of local authority children's services (ILACS) and joint targeted area inspections (JTAIs) (2021-2025) in Greater Manchester.

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A report commissioned by the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham.

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## Background

1. On 10 July 2024, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, as chair of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), commissioned His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), under section 54(2BA) of the Police Act 1996, to carry out a review into Greater Manchester Police's (GMP) approach to child criminal and sexual exploitation. In particular, how the police force and its safeguarding partners learn lessons and make improvements following reviews of child exploitation investigations. HMICFRS were asked to provide assurance that GMP and Greater Manchester councils have the right culture and systems in place to protect children from sexual exploitation.
2. HMICFRS's role in the review is detailed in its own Terms of Reference as agreed with GMCA.
3. In a related but separate commission from GMCA to Ofsted, GMCA commissioned Ofsted to review its latest children's services inspection findings for the 10 local authorities that make up Greater Manchester. Ofsted has been asked to produce an overview report that aggregates Ofsted's findings on child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, and leadership and oversight of exploitation work, by June 2025.
4. Ofsted agreed to review the evidence bases for its most recent inspections of local authority children's services (ILACS) and joint targeted area inspections (JTAs) for the 10 local authorities that make up Greater Manchester and aggregate the relevant findings on:
  - Child criminal exploitation
  - Child sexual exploitation
  - Leadership and oversight of exploitation work
5. Ofsted has not undertaken any additional inspection activity in order to conduct this review.

## Context

6. Ofsted inspects local authorities under the ILACS framework.<sup>1</sup>
7. These inspections focus on the effectiveness of local authority services and arrangements:

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<sup>1</sup> Inspecting local authority children's services:  
[www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018)

- to help and protect children, and enable families to stay together and get the help they need
  - the experiences and progress of children in care wherever they live, including those children who return home
  - the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after, in stable, loving homes, including adoption
  - the experiences and progress of care leavers.
8. We also evaluate:
- the effectiveness of leaders and managers
  - the impact they have on the lives of children and young people
  - the quality of professional practice delivered by a workforce that is equipped and effective.
9. ILACS is a system of inspection made up of short and standard inspections (with judgements on a four-point scale), focused visits, monitoring visits (when a local authority has been judged inadequate) and annual engagement meetings. Further details about ILACS can be found here: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inspecting-local-authority-childrens-services-from-2018). These inspections cover the range of services local authorities provide to children in need of help and protection and those in care, adopted children and care leavers. Included in these inspections is an evaluation of services and responses to children who are at risk of being, or who have been, criminally and/or sexually exploited.
10. This report takes account of the findings at the most recent and relevant ILACS inspection for each of the 10 local authorities within the GMCA including their latest judgement inspection. Where subsequent monitoring or focused visits have taken place, these have also been included to give the best possible overview of most recent practice.
11. It is important to note that this report includes findings over a time frame from 2021, the earliest report being October 2021 (ILACS inspection of Bury) and the most recent in February 2025 (monitoring visit at Tameside). This report therefore refers to the findings at the point in time that local authorities were inspected. We use the current tense in this report to reflect the published findings from inspections listed in Annex A. We acknowledge that practice can change over time but have used the most recent evidence available to us. As of May 2025, of the 10 local authorities in the GMCA, five are rated as good overall and three are rated 'requires improvement to be good'. Two are rated as inadequate, with regular monitoring visits in place.

12. Ofsted also leads JTAI inspections (Joint Targeted Area Inspections<sup>2</sup>) under section 20 of the Children Act 2004 alongside HMICFRS, CQC and (usually, but not always) HMIP. Two inspections have taken place in the relevant period, an inspection of 'the front door' in Rochdale and a thematic inspection of the response to serious youth violence in Manchester. These inspections include evaluation of children's social care, the police, health, education providers and, in the case of the serious youth violence JTAI, the Youth Offending Teams. Therefore, these very relevant inspections are also included in the aggregated findings.
13. Local area arrangements for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (area SEND) inspections are inspections of the local area. These inspections do not have a specific focus on safeguarding, so they have not been included in this retrieval.

## Methodology

14. The retrieval exercise comprised the review of 25 published reports (see Annex A) following inspections over a four-year period between October 2021 and February 2025. Where relevant, the underpinning evidence base for each inspection was accessed to help understand the broader context of the report findings.<sup>3</sup> All the themes identified in this report include, or rely on, evidence that has been previously shared with the respective local authorities and/or published.
15. The retrieval process focused on the role of local authorities and how they work with statutory partners when identifying and responding to exploitation, the preparedness of partnerships to respond to exploitation, and whether practice has improved based on learning from quality assurance activity and previous inspections. By scrutinising evidence gathered on ILACS inspections, JTAI and focused and monitoring visits, the findings were mapped against several key headings linked to the exploitation of children under the following themes:
  - Initial responses to children who are at risk or have been exploited and who are referred into the 'front door' of the local authority.
  - The response when children have gone missing.
  - The assessment of risk and need.
  - Engagement with children and consideration of the voice of the child.
  - The recognition of any additional vulnerabilities.

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<sup>2</sup> Joint Targeted Area Inspections: [www.gov.uk/government/collections/joint-inspections-of-local-area-services](https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/joint-inspections-of-local-area-services)

<sup>3</sup> For every inspection, Ofsted has an evidence base for inspectors to record all of their evidence. This is used to collate and analyse inspection findings and provide the basis for feedback and the final report.

- How effectively safeguarding partnerships respond strategically.
  - The impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers.
16. The reports reviewed are listed in Annex A. The structure of the complex safeguarding teams (CSTs) in Greater Manchester, which are referenced in this report, are outlined in Annex B.

## Summary of findings

17. Inspection findings reviewed for the purpose of this report show that across the GMCA, the response to children who are at risk of exploitation, and those who are being exploited, is mostly a strength. Inspections found that even in local authorities that are not yet judged to be good, the CSTs provide an effective response to children who are exploited. Underpinning this success is a cohesive, strategic partnership response to the real and present dangers of extra-familial harm, trafficking and exploitation. Across Greater Manchester, this area of work is prioritised by partnerships. CSTs across the GMCA meet frequently, often daily, to assess and refine their analysis of risks to the most vulnerable children and to formulate a multi-agency response. Immediate and frequent visits from workers, who are highly skilled in building trusting relationships with children, reduce risks by giving children support to reduce risk and meet their needs. The inclusion of psychologists, parenting specialists, youth justice workers and nurses alongside police officers and social workers in the CSTs ensures a greater understanding of what leads to children being exploited. Responses, in turn, are increasingly sophisticated, comprehensive and meet children's needs.
18. GMP resource within the GM complex safeguarding hub (GMSCH) and locality safeguarding teams provides a helpful vehicle for intelligence and information-sharing across partner agencies and across local borders. The use of markers on children's records, trigger plans, diversion away from criminal proceedings, use of the National Referral Mechanism and regular multi-agency safety panels that focus on the needs of exploited children all provide additional assurance that children are being protected whenever possible.
19. In terms of identifying risks early and actioning preventative measures within communities, the picture is largely positive. Examples of good practice include 'mapping' localities where exploitation is taking place, as well as children who may be harmed, so that they can receive help and support at the earliest opportunity. Regular multi-agency forums identify new and evolving patterns of exploitation with information used to inform community-based disruption of perpetrators. Stronger links with faith leaders in some areas are helping to bolster community awareness and understanding of risk to children. Training and awareness raising, together with inclusive and wide-ranging partnership working, is leading to improved identification of, and response to, exploited children. For example, this includes work with staff from ambulance services to raise awareness of the needs of children impacted by serious youth violence,

and work with local businesses and transport providers to ensure that those in the community know how to identify risk and harm to children.

20. There is much good practice, but some local authorities have areas they can improve:
  - responses to children who go missing and who are deemed to be at 'low risk' of exploitation
  - meeting the needs of care leavers who have been exploited, or are at risk of exploitation
  - beyond the specialist teams, awareness and understanding of additional vulnerability of some children to exploitation, including disabled children
  - greater professional curiosity and recognition of the needs of older children as they transition into adulthood.

## Themes

### **The response to the risk of exploitation in 'the front door'**

21. The response children receive when concerns of exploitation are raised and referred into the front door of children's services is typically timely, appropriate and in line with the level of risk that they face. Although not universal, clear links between the multi-agency front door and the local CSH for advice and information-sharing are well established. This means professionals making decisions about next steps for children are well informed. The co-location of multi-agency complex safeguarding teams in the front door enhances the holistic offer to children and families in the majority of the local authorities. Similarly, when most effective, risks of exploitation are identified early, and a collaborative partnership approach supports the reduction of harm for many children. Factors indicating the potential exploitation of vulnerable children are clearly recognised by professionals in most front doors, including early help. Children are seen quickly by skilled practitioners, who build purposeful relationships with them.
22. In weaker authorities, the move to a front door that is fully integrated and co-located with the police and other partners has been slower, but in most areas is now providing an effective service. Where previously insufficient capacity in the police to attend strategy discussions or complete initial referrals was an issue, this has been largely remedied, and immediate safety planning between partner agencies is now mostly evident across the GMCA. A good example of this is in the recent improvements in Rochdale, where additional staff and resources are having a positive impact. In Tameside, however, a recent monitoring visit that focused on initial responses to children in need of help and protection found that there remain concerns about the timeliness of responses to children.

## **The response when children have gone missing**

23. When children go missing, and especially where the risk of exploitation is high, partner agencies offer a galvanised and timely response. Daily risk-management meetings mean that children who go missing and are deemed as being at medium or high risk of exploitation are promptly identified, information is shared and actions to reduce risk agreed.
24. Effective trigger plans<sup>4</sup> and support from third sector partners are a strength in better-performing local authorities, meaning they receive well-co-ordinated and timely support.
25. Use of disruption by the police force means adults who pose a risk to children are identified and risks reduced. In Rochdale, for example, the partnership between social care and the police is strong and informs both mapping and escalation into child protection enquiries when needed.
26. Much of the work with children who repeatedly go missing, and with their families, is undertaken by professionals who are trauma-informed and child centred. Most recently, in Oldham, the multi-disciplinary child exploitation team is demonstrably 'creative and persistent' when building relationships with children who have been missing, and with their families, and this successfully reduces risks.
27. Many children who have returned home are then supported by professionals skilled in speaking with children about the circumstances leading to this event. In the best examples, return home interviews are used to support children to reflect on what support they need to help them to stay safe and what needs to be in place to reduce further episodes of going missing. Many areas have a range of support services for children who go missing that meet their needs.
28. For those children deemed to be at lower risk of exploitation when they are missing, the response is sometimes less well co-ordinated, especially when one or more of the key partners have staff shortages. This is particularly noticeable in local authorities where practice needs strengthening in respect of social work assessments, and in some local authorities where workload is far greater than the average because of staffing pressures.
29. The quality of return home interviews for all children, not just those in care, varies in terms of identifying the reasons for children going missing and translating this into remedial action. Sometimes, return home interviews lack analysis and do not always feed directly into strategic planning, although they do contain valuable insights into where children have been when missing from home.

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<sup>4</sup> Trigger plans are pre-agreed multi-agency plans outlining actions to be taken when a child goes missing.



## **The assessment of risk and need**

30. The quality of social work assessment is closely aligned with the inspection judgements for help and protection in individual local authorities. In stronger, and improving, local authorities, assessments take good account of the family's history and factors from outside of the home that increase a child's vulnerability to exploitation. The use of tailored risk assessment tools is commonplace and informs decisions about how best to support children and meet their needs. JTAIs of both the front door and on the theme of serious youth violence highlight the effectiveness of case planning between partners during assessment that results in immediate support for children. The best assessments benefit from the use of research and direct work to understand the cumulative harm to children's lives of past abuse. There is sensitivity to the analysis of the cultural and religious needs of children and families. Support and intervention take place during the assessment so that children and their families do not need to wait for the help they need.
31. There is evidence of some improvements for those children who have been subject to multiple assessments that have tended to focus on the presenting issue rather than a wider understanding of the children's needs. More recent practice shows better understanding of underlying issues and concerns, meaning responses to meet children's needs are better coordinated.
32. In local authorities judged to be less than good, social work focus is sometimes more adult-orientated, more descriptive, and less informed by the intelligence and information gathered from partner agencies. In these examples, children's and families' history and information are not considered in the context of current risks, meaning children's needs and the full range of risks to them are not fully assessed and considered. This is an area of practice that needs continual focus and oversight to ensure that the quality of assessment work across the 10 local authorities meets the standard required, so that all the needs and risks to children are understood and addressed.

## **Engagement with children and consideration of the voice of the child**

33. During both assessment and direct work with children, the tenacity and relationship-based approach of specialist exploitation workers in bespoke teams place the experiences and worries of children at the forefront of their work. Professionals acknowledge that, in order to support and protect children, a joint approach and trusting relationship between professionals and children and families are essential.
34. Many children benefit from access to a range of support including mentoring, support with mental ill health and substance misuse, therapeutic intervention and specialist workers providing support to families. This approach, alongside disruption of adults who pose a risk, is particularly effective for most children.

35. There are many examples of highly skilled workers making persistent efforts to engage children at their own pace. Work with parents and carers is recognised as essential and includes safety planning for children. The unerring efforts of workers to get alongside children is a consistent feature in evidence gathered across the GMCA. When done well, as seen in Oldham, sensitivity to children's cultural and religious needs leads to positive outcomes that involve both the family and the wider community. This way of working is not as well established in a small number of local authorities.
36. For disabled children, their wishes and feelings are not always considered or articulated as well as they are for other children. Some local authorities are focused on driving improvements in this area of practice. Given the high prevalence of children with additional needs, and in particular children with autism and children who are neurodivergent who are at risk of exploitation, this is an area for continual focus and review by local areas.

### **The recognition of additional vulnerabilities**

37. Beyond specialist exploitation services, awareness and understanding of the additional vulnerability of some children to exploitation are too variable across the GMCA and within individual local authorities. For example, when disabled children transition to adulthood and become more independent, social workers and their colleagues in various health departments do not always recognise this as a vulnerability. Notable delays in the assessment of neurodiversity and emotional health are often exacerbated when local partnerships do not work effectively together to provide support while children await assessment. In better practice, disabled children are more fully involved in planning for their future in a safe way. This was only seen in the minority of local authorities. Much of this success relies on practitioners having the skill and confidence to use augmented communication, but this is not always evident.
38. Care leavers who are now adults do not always benefit from the same level of support from the local CSTs. However, personal advisers (PAs) take on the role of identifying risks of exploitation and mobilising adult services and key partner agencies to reduce the risk of harm effectively. For example, inspections in Manchester, Bolton, Rochdale and Oldham all found that persistent and knowledgeable PAs support care leavers well, including planning for their safe release from custody.
39. In Manchester, the recent JTAI found that girls are underrepresented in referrals to the CSH, in relation to known levels of need. This underrepresentation is particularly true of girls who are black or of mixed heritage. The partnership is aware of this and has begun work to understand the causes of the underrepresentation and improve the identification of girls who are at risk.
40. For children who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum, their additional vulnerabilities to exploitation and trafficking are more likely to be appropriately

considered, assessed and action taken to reduce risk. Homeless children aged 16- and 17-years-old often receive an inconsistent response to the underlying causes of homelessness and lack support to help them understand their rights. As a consequence, some are left in unsuitable accommodation, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation.

41. Understanding and responding to the diverse needs of children arising from their ethnicity, religion and culture are improving, driven by strong strategic intent across partner agencies. However, further work is needed to ensure consistency in consideration and recording of children's identity in police referrals, pathway plans and assessments.

### **How effectively safeguarding partnerships respond strategically**

42. Most safeguarding partnerships across the GMCA are described as well-established or strengthening. In local authorities judged to be good, partnership arrangements are well established and strong. Inspection has seen professional and purposeful challenge, accountability and respect grow across the partnerships, resulting in a clearer strategic focus on exploitation. Bury is a good example. It has moved as a partnership from a lack of communication and challenge in 2021 to the point where complex safeguarding has a clear focus and is more aligned to the regional GM model of practice.
43. It is clear from reviewing reports across Greater Manchester that the Greater Manchester response to exploitation, including the role of the Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding Hub and the local hubs, is having a positive impact. It is bringing consistency in approaches and understanding of the needs of exploited children, shared learning between local areas, and cross-border strategies and work to ensure that risks to many exploited children are reduced.

### **The impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers**

44. ILACS reports focus predominantly on the impact of leaders within the local authority. Reports evidence that some areas have strong and established leadership arrangements, and that sustainable progress is being made in those local authorities where this needs to improve. The exception is Tameside, where progress has been too slow. The appointment of a new director of children's services has resulted in a better focus on areas of strength and areas of weakness. A service restructure is being planned to better align with and support the improvements needed.
45. In the main, leaders who are delivering better services have engaged with the 'one-child' Manchester-wide approach, which emphasises collaboration, multi-agency support and early intervention. They have also strengthened their focus on delivering a practice model that enables social workers to see beyond presenting concerns in a family and to consider the impact of complex safeguarding issues. Where there have been pressures on parts of the service

that require a joint approach, such as police representation at strategy discussions, partner agencies have responded well to inspection findings.

46. Leaders need to do more work to ensure that local authorities are evaluating the impact of services for children who are exploited, and to ensure that learning from local authority audits is routinely implemented and making a difference for children.

## Annex A – Inspection reports in this summary

This report draws from the following Ofsted inspection reports of the 10 Greater Manchester local authorities:

Local authority	Inspection reports and dates
Bolton	ILACS inspection, 11 to 15 September 2023 <a href="#">Published 27 October 2023</a>
Bury	ILACS inspection, 25 October to 5 November 2021 <a href="#">Published 17 December 2021</a>  Monitoring visit, 31 October and 1 November 2024 <a href="#">Published 2 December 2024</a>  Monitoring visit, 1 and 2 November 2023 <a href="#">Published 6 December 2023</a>  Monitoring visit, 1 and 2 August 2023 <a href="#">Published 6 September 2023</a>  Monitoring visit, 28 February and 1 March 2023 <a href="#">Published 9 May 2023</a>  Monitoring visit, 12 and 13 October 2022 <a href="#">Published 16 November 2022</a>
Manchester	ILACS inspection, 21 March to 1 April 2022 <a href="#">Published 19 May 2022</a>  Joint area child protection inspection, 9 to 13 October 2023 <a href="#">Published 30 November 2023</a>
Oldham	ILACS inspection, 13 to 24 May 2024 <a href="#">Published 12 July 2024</a>
Rochdale	ILACS inspection, 23 January to 3 February 2023 <a href="#">Published 17 March 2023</a>  Joint area child protection inspection, 22 to 26 April 2024 <a href="#">Published 12 July 2024</a>
Salford	ILACS inspection, 6 to 10 November 2023 <a href="#">Published 12 January 2024</a>

Local authority	Inspection reports and dates
Stockport	ILACS inspection, 28 March to 1 April 2022 <a href="#">Published 18 May 2022</a>
Tameside	ILACS inspection, 4 to 15 December 2023 <a href="#">Published 13 February 2024</a>  Monitoring visit, 13 and 14 February 2025 <a href="#">Published 25 March 2025</a>
Trafford	ILACS inspection, 21 November to 2 December 2022 <a href="#">Published 31 January 2023</a>  Focused visit 2 and 3 July 2024 <a href="#">Published 1 August 2024</a>
Wigan	ILACS inspection, 9 to 20 May 2022 <a href="#">Published 5 July 2022</a>

## Annex B - The Structure of Complex Safeguarding Teams in Greater Manchester

The structure of the complex safeguarding teams including the role of the GMCSH is outlined in the Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding Strategy.<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Ofsted has not inspected the GMCSH but rather inspected the individual local authorities, including the CSTs and where evident the impact of the GMCSH through the lens of the local authorities.

### Local Complex Safeguarding Teams

All ten local authorities across Greater Manchester have an integrated partnership team, or “Complex Safeguarding team”, incorporating Local Authority, Health, and Police professionals as a minimum to inform their responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Complex Safeguarding provides an intensive, trauma-informed, and strengths-based support service to children and young people experiencing exploitation or at risk of being exploited. To ensure success, interventions capitalise on trusted relationships, allow for professional creativity and autonomy, and are not limited in time. All teams include a Trusted Relationship clinician, who aims to add to the expertise and skills of staff by bringing a psychological perspective to the work.

### GM Complex Safeguarding Hub

Guiding and assisting the 10 local teams, the Greater Manchester Complex Safeguarding Hub supports the implementation of the strategy by providing shared principles of practice to be applied across all Greater Manchester local authorities. The Hub fosters a consistent approach to strategy, policy, and procedure by supporting the local teams with:

- workforce development, providing bespoke training in line with identified needs, via promoting our Weeks of Action and other continuous professional development events.
- quality assurance through the peer review process
- scoping of local/national best practice and evidence to increase performance.
- coordination, governance, performance insights and impact framework
- data collection and analysis, building a picture of needs, trends and capabilities. Research, learning and innovation, aspiring to create a centre of excellence locally.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/2z5p0kqu/greater-manchester-complex-safeguarding-strategy-final-accessible.pdf](http://www.greatermanchester-ca.gov.uk/media/2z5p0kqu/greater-manchester-complex-safeguarding-strategy-final-accessible.pdf)

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, further education and skills, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for children looked after, safeguarding and child protection.

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