

Practice guide

Family Help and Social Care

Children in Need of Help and Protection-Shield Team, Knowsley

Background, purpose and rationale

The Shield Team was created in 2015 in response to a Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) operation and expanded in 2017 to include criminal exploitation, recognizing the need for a specialised, coordinated approach. It is a multi-agency team which includes police, social care professionals, and commissioned voluntary sector partner, Catch 22. The aim of the Shield Team is to address exploitation and missing children, particularly those who are sexually or criminally exploited. We use the trusted relationship model which means staff build long-term, trust-based relationships with the children and will move at their pace, separate from a traditional social worker role and timeline. We work with police to disrupt the exploiters as much as possible and support children as victims through a police investigation and offer a central point of expertise for guidance and support across all agencies in children's services.

What we did to improve children's outcomes

The Shield Team's work has led to several significant improvements in outcomes for children, particularly those at risk of or affected by exploitation and going missing. These improvements are the result of a carefully designed, relationship-based approach that prioritises the child's pace and needs. By building trusted relationships and offering consistent, long-term support, the Shield Team has been able to engage children who are typically difficult to reach. This has allowed for early intervention and sustained support, which in turn has helped to stabilise their situations and reduce the need for high-cost, high-intensity care placements.

The team's work has also contributed to a decrease in the number of children going missing. Through the implementation of a structured response, including daily meetings between dedicated social workers and police officers, and immediate intervention by Catch 22, the Shield Team ensures that children who go missing receive timely and appropriate support. This proactive approach has been particularly effective in preventing repeat incidents and addressing the underlying causes of children going missing. Another key improvement has been the increased focus on supporting boys who are at risk of exploitation. By challenging professional biases and introducing screening processes for all teenage boys at the point of referral into the front door, the team has broadened the scope of its protective work and ensured that vulnerable males are not overlooked. Furthermore, the Shield Team has enhanced the quality of support for families by involving trusted individuals within the child's network and offering parenting support using the same trust-based model; the future aim is to expand further support for parents. This holistic approach recognises the importance of family and community in safeguarding children and contributes to more sustainable outcomes. Finally, the team's use of tools such as the PAN Merseyside Multi-agency Child Criminal Sexual Exploitation (MACCSE) matrix and their commitment to learning from lived experience and using a range of therapeutic trauma informed approaches have strengthened the practice. By incorporating feedback from young people and

parents, and adapting their methods accordingly, the Shield Team continues to refine its approach and maintain its effectiveness.

What was the impact?

In 2023/24 the Shield cohort was 78 children: 64 children lived at home and 94% have remained at home. At the point of closure for children, the risk of criminal exploitation was reduced for 89% of children, and risk of sexual exploitation for 94%. Only 6 repeat referrals were made back into MACCSE. 17 civil notices issued and 9 arrests of adults.

In 2024/25, Shield Team worked intensively with 73 children who were MACCSE assessed as being, or may be being, exploited sexually, criminally or both. 63 children lived at home with family and 97% have remained at home. At the point of closure for the child, the risk of criminal exploitation was reduced for 82% of children, and risk of sexual exploitation for 100%. Only 6 repeat referrals were made back into MACCSE. 13 civil notices issued, 9 arrests of adults and 2 adults were sentenced to custodial sentences.

Shield Prevention Service demonstrated impact during 2024-2025, 100% of children shown reduced risk at the point of closure, 100% have been able to sustain a reduction of warning signs of exploitation as they have not been re-referred into prevention or referred into MACCSE for a further 6-month period. 92% of the cohort have not gone on to have contact with the Youth Justice Service following Shield intervention. Shield prevention also completed direct support with 85% of parents/carers to increase safety planning and to help sustain positive outcomes.

Ofsted: 'For children who go missing or are at risk of exploitation, the well-established Shield Service provides an effective response in helping to protect children.'

Child: "You taught me about real life and what could happen to me. We had proper conversations, that made me think and change what I think about things, about myself and my future."

Child: "I never had my dad around, or a positive male influence in my life to speak to or give me advice. That really helped with Shield. Having someone I could relate to and openly talk to, not just about risks, but everyday life."

Parent: "You always listened and supported me. You have never judged me. You helped me through some tough times that I have struggled with and gave me time to just be away from home, time to think and seeing it from my side, not telling me off."

Parent: "Thank you so much for all your help and support we are going to miss you. You have not only helped my son but us all as a family."

Resources

- Shield's offer poster
- PAN Merseyside MACCSE protocol 2024

Find out more

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