

Multi-agency child exploitation team – Norfolk Constabulary

Norfolk Constabulary's multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) team helps put young people at the centre of serious violence prevention.

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Key details

Does it work?	Smarter practice
Topic	Violence including homicide Vulnerability and safeguarding
Organisation	Norfolk Constabulary
Target group	Communities

Smarter practice

Overview

This is a [smarter practice example](#).

Norfolk Constabulary faced two key challenges relating to serious youth violence and child exploitation.

The first challenge was a self-sustaining county lines model and a 'home grown' model of rival gangs. These gangs predominantly involved young men aged 13 to 20.

The second challenge was a lack of coordinated processes between partner agencies involved in the serious youth violence and child exploitation space.

Norfolk Constabulary's Multi-Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) Team forms a key way in which the force is addressing its serious youth violence and child exploitation challenges – through putting young people at the centre of serious violence prevention.

The team works alongside multi-agency partners to offer interventions and support for vulnerable young people, their families, and the wider community.

Problem

Norfolk Constabulary recognised the need for a joined-up, multi-agency response to serious youth violence linked to gangs.

There was a need for greater consistency between police departments and partner agencies when it came to the treatment of young people. Some agencies and police departments were treating young people as victims, some as offenders, some as reluctant witnesses, and some as missing people. Coordinated activity was required.

This problem led to the creation of a series of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements involving Norfolk Constabulary. These included the following.

1. A serious youth violence protocol – setting procedures designed to bring partner agencies together for golden hour learning following an incident of serious youth violence.
2. The vulnerable adolescent group – a multi-agency strategic level forum (chaired by Norfolk Constabulary) to design and deliver a strategy to tackle child exploitation and serious youth violence in Norfolk.
3. The exploitation operational oversight forum – comprising senior leaders from key agencies (including Norfolk Constabulary) to offer exploitation case scrutiny through dip-sampling a selection of high-risk cases.
4. A movement towards a 'prevent and protect' approach to serious youth violence. This combines traditional reactive and proactive policing techniques with safeguarding social work to reduce and mitigate risk to children.

The fourth element of these multi-agency arrangements – the 'prevent and protect' approach to reducing child exploitation risks – has provided a key mechanism for Norfolk Constabulary to combat serious violence and homicide. The approach involves putting children at the centre of the violence reduction agenda rather than viewing them as individual, criminalised cases.

Prevent and protect requires different sections of policing and external agencies all working together to inform approaches to serious violence. For example, uniformed response, investigations, intelligence and analysis, and safeguarding, working together with children's services. One of the main ways through which Norfolk Constabulary has been able to help drive this change is through the MACE team.

Response

MACE team

Norfolk Constabulary's MACE team forms a key way in which the force is addressing its serious youth violence and child exploitation challenges – through putting young people at the centre of serious violence prevention.

The team works alongside multi-agency partners to offer interventions and support for vulnerable young people, their families, and the wider community.

The main responsibilities of MACE are to:

- investigate the sexual and criminal exploitation of children
- identify children subject to exploitation and offer outreach and support
- participate and engage in multi-agency serious violence prevention
- offer a flow of information and intelligence relating to serious youth violence

The MACE team was restructured in 2019 to add an investigative remit to its traditional safeguarding function. This restructure has enabled MACE to continue its function of safeguarding children at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation. It has also enabled MACE to investigate some complex cases within these areas where other case holding investigative units may not have the resources to do so.

MACE comprises:

- one detective inspector
- three detective sergeants
- eight staff made up of police constables and detective constables
- four civilian staff members

Through the use of information, intelligence and referrals, the team seeks to identify vulnerable children and young people subject to exploitation. Due to its joint investigative and safeguarding function, MACE can work with children who are both victims and offenders of exploitation.

A key component of the MACE team's responsibilities involves working collaboratively with external partner agencies to establish if a young person is being exploited, by whom, and how the exploitation manifests. MACE forms part of multi-agency efforts to safeguard and support these children.

MACE team logic model

Problem

- Serious youth violence.
- Urban street gangs.
- Exploitation of vulnerable young people.

Response – MACE team

- Investigates the exploitation of children.
- Identifies children subject to exploitation and offers outreach and support.
- Offers a flow of information and intelligence relating to serious youth violence.
- Participates and engages in multi-agency serious violence prevention.

Leads to child planning meetings.

Response – partners

- Norfolk Constabulary
- Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH)
- health
- Norfolk Children's Services
- prison services
- housing services
- probation services
- education services
- local authority
- youth offending team

Leads to child planning meetings.

Child planning meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intelligence gathering. • Risk assessing. • Trust building. • Safety planning.
Outputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of high- or medium-risk new cases allocated to MACE a month. • Number of high- or medium-risk cases open with MACE at a time. • Number of high- or medium-risk cases allocated to MACE in a year.
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reductions in young people subject to serious violence. • Improved multi-agency and partnership responses to young people identified as at risk. • Improved relationships between vulnerable young people and the police.

Implementation

Although MACE is a stand-alone team, it achieves its core function of identifying children subject to exploitation through the use of multi-agency intelligence flows. The team conducts joint work with targeted youth services and children's services, as well as wider partners such as the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

In the first instance of a serious youth violence case, the role of the MACE team is to work with partner agencies to understand whether exploitation is involved. If exploitation is identified, it is the responsibility of MACE to investigate who that exploiter is and how they are operating.

Finally, the team functions as an intelligence and information flow, assisting partners within Norfolk Constabulary and in external agencies to investigate, disrupt and safeguard those involved in the exploitation. At this stage MACE will often work in tandem with targeted youth services, mapping localities and deploying staff to where the children spend their time.

How MACE works

- Any agency referrals for children who are potentially at risk of exploitation come into the [multi-agency safeguarding hub \(MASH\)](#)[\(opens an external website in the same tab\)](#) and are risk assessed by children's services and Norfolk Constabulary. (MASH helps safeguard adults and

children. MASH is comprised of multiple organisations including Norfolk Constabulary.)

Information is considered about the child from a range of sources (for example education or health providers). A screening process is applied in conjunction with police and health colleagues, to arrive at a child exploitation risk rating of high, medium, or standard. Norfolk use an exploitation screening tool that is approved by Barnardo's children's charity (with local adaptation).

- Cases assessed as standard receive targeted family support from children's services. Cases assessed as medium or high-risk fall under s47 or s17 of the Children Act. These children receive intense safeguarding and support from an allocated social worker and are also allocated to a member of the MACE team.
- The MACE team coordinates internal meetings (for example with response colleagues) and external meetings (for example with children's services and other forces) to coordinate intelligence regarding the exploitation. MACE additionally supports the child through conducting joint visits with the child's social worker.
- In appropriate cases, the MACE team liaises with magistrates and the CPS regarding an exploitation case, providing a comprehensive insight into all actions taken by involved agencies to disrupt the exploitation.

Child planning meetings

As part of the support offered to medium or high-risk children, the MACE team and children's services conduct joint child planning meetings.

The child and their parents or carers are invited to child planning meetings, although their attendance is voluntary. Having the child and their carers invited to these meetings forms part of the commitment of MACE to provide support to the vulnerable children, their families and also the wider community.

The key aims of the child planning meetings are to:

- build trust with the child
- establish whether the child faces an exploitation risk (to assist with the relationship building, some risks are discussed without the child present)
- understand what the exploitation risk looks like
- understand who the exploitation risk comes from

These meetings occur at least every two weeks for high-risk cases and every six weeks for medium-risk cases. The meeting is chaired by a social worker, with education also present. The meetings cover topics such as:

- safety plans for the child
- risks to the child's residential, education or training placements
- intelligence relating to future risk
- wider community impacts and risks

The child planning meetings offer one of the key opportunities for the MACE team to become fully embedded with the multi-agency approach to tackling serious youth violence.

The role of MACE in these meetings is to:

- act as a conduit between different agencies involved
- help inform risk assessment
- provide updates on police related safeguarding and investigative activity

Additionally, out of all attendees at the meeting, the MACE team is the agency with the most authority to act on any intelligence regarding exploitation.

The child's risk rating is reviewed at the meeting, and the child is also invited to risk assess their own exposure to exploitation. The child's risk rating may fluctuate between meetings depending on contextual factors in the child's life. The risk assessment ranges from a score of one (completely safe) to the highest score of ten.

The child planning meetings also explore ways that the child can be supported by participating agencies – ranging from diversionary activities such as gym sessions with a social worker through to help with CVs and employment. If the child cannot attend the meeting, they are visited separately to ensure they are aware of the professional support surrounding them. This is considered to be important as once a child starts to build rapport with the MACE team, their level of risk tends to reduce.

Process chart

Once an at-risk child is referred to MASH:

Child given a risk rating of high	MACE involved through s47 Children Act	MACE attend child planning meeting every two weeks
Child given a risk rating of medium	MACE involved through s47 or s17 Children Act	MACE attend child planning meeting every six weeks
Child given a risk rating of standard	Targeted support from children's services	

Enablers for implementation

Governance structure

MACE is supported by tight governance. The serious youth violence protocol provides MACE with clear guidance regarding parameters, information sharing and briefing expectations with statutory partners.

Senior officer buy-in

The homicide prevention agenda receives both senior and chief officer buy-in in Norfolk Constabulary. For example, the assistant chief constable for local policing receives briefings on key serious youth violence operations in the monthly tactical tasking and coordination group meeting.

Partnership working

MACE benefits from close and effective partnerships. Well-defined boundaries have been created over time between MACE, children's services, and other police investigative units. For example, the Norfolk county lines team keeps MACE updated about any intelligence that will be useful to them.

Additionally, Norfolk Constabulary's golden hour learning ethos means that partner agencies are able to receive early briefings regarding exploitation and incidents of serious youth violence.

Systems

The MACE team and partner agencies benefit from the use of standardised risk ratings and exploitation screening tools to support vulnerable children.

- Standard – identified vulnerability factors or warning signs. The child or young person requires support to increase resilience.
- Medium – the risk to the child is such that they would be unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, or that the child or young person's health and development is likely to be significantly or further impaired, without the provision of support.
- High – the risk to the child or young person's safety is significant.

For example, MACE team records are cross referred to the children's services case management system. This produces a Power BI dashboard that allows for a shared understanding of all children known or suspected to be at risk of child exploitation in Norfolk. This process helps cement multi-agency working and avoids information gaps between agencies.

Outcomes and impact

There has been no formal evaluation of the work conducted by the MACE team.

However administrative data is routinely collected, tracking the number of new and live cases over a monthly and annual period. The MACE team consider around 50 new cases of children assessed as medium or high risk of exploitation a month, with around 200 cases open at any one time and up to 400 cases considered across the year.

All of the children allocated to MACE are regularly engaged with – receiving a child planning meeting at least every two or six weeks depending on their assessed level of risk. Norfolk Constabulary and partners agree that this structured approach enables them to more successfully identify and engage appropriately with children at risk of exploitation.

An [OFSTED inspection report\(opens an external website in the same tab\)](#) published in early 2023 on Norfolk Children's Services commended the relationship between MACE and children's services, stating 'strong relationships with police officers from the multi-agency safeguarding hub support joint working and lead to decisions which are focused on children and their protection'.

Learning and recommendations

Norfolk Constabulary has identified the following learning and recommendations in relation to their MACE team.

Partner relationships

- The importance of sharing information to understand risk and develop safeguarding aims. The MACE team has recognised the potential for there to be strained relationships between partner agencies, especially given potential tensions between safeguarding and investigative roles. Sharing clear aims, identifying a common purpose, and being clear about protocols has helped develop relationships between MACE and partner agencies.
- Ensuring that relationships with partners are supported by strong systems and processes. For example, a Power BI dashboard allows for shared understanding between the MACE team and children's services regarding children at risk of child exploitation in Norfolk. While key agencies within Norfolk operate good partnership working practices, there is always the potential to strengthen these further given the large number of partners involved in working with vulnerable young people.
- Relatedly, the high number of people involved in cases of exploitation and serious youth violence can cause issues for making sure everyone involved has up-to-date learning. Norfolk Constabulary has identified that while those who work in serious youth violence tend to be aware of key learnings and developments, work is ongoing to ensure front line responders are also engaged with this work.

Other learning

- Norfolk Constabulary has accepted the need to tweak and refine their serious youth violence and homicide prevention processes as they progress. The force has adopted a gradual approach to serious violence prevention – of which the MACE team forms one key part.

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