



Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review

'Jason'

Lead Reviewer and Author
Maureen Floyd

1. Introduction

This Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR) was commissioned by Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP) following 16-year-old Jason sustaining serious stab injuries in April 2019.

Jason had been missing for the first two weeks of April, during which time he was involved in selling drugs (county lines¹) in a large town many miles from his home. On his return he presented as traumatised and disclosed that he had been assaulted and threatened that he would lose his life by those organising the drug-selling. He was highly anxious about his safety.

The day after, Jason was taken to hospital after being stabbed in his leg and back. On 13th June 2019, MSCP decided that these events met the Working Together 2018² criteria for a local child safeguarding practice review. This decision was agreed by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.

2. Review Process

2.1 LCSPR Panel

A panel was appointed to work with lead reviewers during the review process. The panel was comprised of the following representatives:

- Designated Nurse, NHS South West London Alliance Kingston, Richmond, Merton, Wandsworth & Sutton CCGs (**Chair**)
- Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust (Merton)
- Adolescent and Family Service, Children Schools & Families (CSF), LB Merton
- Catch-22
- Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust (Merton)
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- Pupil Referral Unit
- Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership (MSCP)
- Named GP Safeguarding
- Quality Assurance and Practice Development (CSF), LB Merton
- Social Inclusion, Children Schools & Families (CSF), LB Merton
- South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust
- Specialist Crime Review Group (SCRG), Met Police
- St George's Hospital Trust

2.2 Lead Reviewer

Maureen Floyd was appointed to lead the review and Bridget Griffin provided supervision. Bridget has extensive experience as an author of Serious Case Reviews (SCRs), and Maureen has collaborated and contributed to many SCRs. They were co-authors together of Croydon Safeguarding Children

¹ County Lines is where illegal drugs are transported from one area to another, often across police and local authority boundaries (although not exclusively), usually by children or vulnerable people who are coerced into it by gangs.

<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/>

² [Link to Working Together to Safeguard-Children.pdf](#)

Board Vulnerable Adolescent Review³, a thematic review which examined the lives and circumstances of 60 vulnerable adolescents.

2.3 Methodology

The agreed methodology for this Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review is outlined as follows:

- **Chronologies & IMRs**

Chronologies of involvement between February 2017 to April 2019 were requested in addition to Individual Management Reviews (IMRs), all of which were discussed by the review panel.

- **Engagement with Practitioners**

The practitioner learning event enabled staff who had worked directly with Jason and his family to gain an overview of 'Jason's Story'; to share comments from the family, explore the emerging themes and discuss their experience, views, and perspectives. They were able to contribute to the recommendations and advise of positive changes in practice since the stabbing. A range of views, emotions and reactions emerged, which are considered within this report.

- **Engagement with Family**

Jason, his mother and paternal aunt spoke on several occasions with the Lead Reviewer and the LCSPR Panel Chair. This enabled the panel to understand their experiences and gain their perspectives about the services provided.

- **Overview report**

A final draft of this report was agreed by LCSPR Panel and shared with Jason and his family before being finalised and presented to the Executive of the Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership for approval.

3. Family Background

Jason is Black British, born in the UK, his parents are Black Caribbean (Jamaican) and separated before his birth. Jason always lived with his mother although her immigration status of No Recourse to Public Funds⁴ (NRPF) has been a pervasive issue throughout his childhood. The family lived with uncertainty; they had no home of their own and depended on help from wider family and friends. His mother told Youth Justice Service (YJS) staff that they were reliant upon their charity to meet the family needs. She did not have the right to work or claim any benefits. It is understood that mother undertook casual work, which would entail working long hours. Her NRPF status was settled in late 2018, when she finally gained the right to work and remain until 2021, when Jason will reach maturity.

³ [Link to library NSPCC 2019 Croydon Vulnerable Adolescents Overview](#)

⁴ Section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 states that a person will have 'no recourse to public funds' if they are 'subject to immigration control'. This means they have no entitlement to the majority of welfare benefits, including income support, housing benefit and a range of allowances and tax credits.

As a teenager, Jason and his mother shared a room and a bed in a friend's house for approximately four years. Jason told workers he was scared that his mother could be deported at any time. He said it was unfair that they had no money, and his mother could not claim benefits even though he was British.

2007 to 2016

Jason's childhood was peppered by moves; moves of home and moves of school. It would appear most of the time was spent in Merton, but he never enjoyed stability. Key family members, maternal grandmother and paternal aunt who live in Merton have kept a caring relationship with him throughout. His aunt advised they maintain regular contact and Jason stayed with her regularly throughout his life.

Jason attended three primary schools, the first in Merton and two in another London borough where he and his mother moved in 2007. Jason's first few school years were marked by poor attendance, which was raised with mother and thereafter his attendance improved. The last two primary schools he attended consistently found him to be a 'delightful, well behaved, friendly, and polite pupil'. By the end of primary school, he was a house captain and regarded as an excellent role model. Despite his good behaviour, he did not achieve expected levels in all subjects.

His first secondary school was in Merton, as they had moved to stay with maternal grandmother. His attendance was good and, whilst his academic achievement fell below expected standards, he was highly commended: 'in recognition of excellent performance in lessons and other elements of academy life'.

During the first two years of secondary school life, he accessed daily support from the student support services to discuss his emotions, peer issues and his family living circumstances.

Over time, Jason's behaviour changed, and school responded with an intervention plan. In Year 9, he was enrolled in a young men's project with an external agency, who provided work around disengaging from education and a teaching assistant supported his social and emotional needs, relating to his home life and peer relationships. Jason started counselling, as he expressed that he had a lot of anger and struggled to communicate his feelings, the sessions did not continue as he found it difficult to relate to the female counsellor and was placed on a waiting list for a male counsellor. It is not clear if that was ever achieved.

By the end of Year 9, Jason was 14, his effort varied between satisfactory to good, but his progress was well below expected standards. Throughout this period Jason spoke about sharing a room with his mother and the family housing situation being unstable.

4. Overview of events during the timeline

The following section provides a brief overview of Jason's life during the time under review from 2017 to 2019. This section is set out in three parts, it starts with Jason in the second term of Year 10 at secondary school and ends when Jason was the victim of serious stab wounds.

Appendix One provides a detailed account of events and explores the services provided.

- **2017: School exclusion, cannabis use, 1st criminal offence & 'gang' activity**

During the second term of Year 10 Jason received his first exclusion for one day for being confrontational to teaching staff. Despite considerable pastoral support being provided, Jason's behaviour continued to be challenging in school and he was known to use cannabis.

Jason first came to the notice of the police near the end of school term in July 2017. He was on route to visit a friend, a known gang member, who was critically ill in hospital and who died later that same day. Jason and a friend were stopped and searched. He was found to be in possession of several mobile phones, had cash and drug related items, but no arrest was made.

On return to school after the summer holidays he was excluded for 5 days because of conflict with staff. On return from the exclusion, difficulties in his relationships with staff continued and he received another 5-day exclusion, swiftly followed by permanent exclusion.

Jason was transferred to the local Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) where he was regarded as a model pupil, he engaged well with the work, had good attendance, and kept himself apart from the other pupils. By PRU standards he did remarkably well and was able to return to mainstream school, albeit a different one, in December 2017.

Jason was stopped and searched by the police a further 5 times between September to January 2018. Each time he was with friends on an estate in another borough. On one occasion he was found in possession of cannabis, for which he accepted a caution and another, in possession of an offensive weapon, for which he received a 12-month Referral Order in July 2018.

Throughout this period, no agencies sought to engage with Jason and his family to prevent or divert him from potential offending.

- **2018: School exclusion, missing, county lines, weight loss, high anxiety**

In March 2018 it is alleged that he assaulted a member of staff at the new school, which led to his immediate exclusion and he returned to the PRU.⁵ Within a few weeks he went missing for the first time. He initially returned home for one night, then went missing for 15 days. He was found by Police in a rural county, with a large quantity of cash, Class A and B drugs and a 'burner' mobile phone⁶. He was charged with Possession with intent to supply,⁷ (PWITS), to which he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to a 9-month Referral Order. Jason and his mother engaged with services who established that he had been taken against his will for the purpose of county lines and was therefore a victim of modern-day slavery and trafficking.⁸

⁵ Jason disputes this allegation, he advised that he and a teacher were going in opposite directions through swing doors which prompted a dispute, witnessed by other pupils. He states there was no assault, and if there had been he would have expected to be arrested.

⁶ A burner is an inexpensive mobile phone that is designed for temporary use, after which it may be discarded.

⁷ Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

⁸ The Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings is a comprehensive treaty focusing mainly on the protection of victims of trafficking and the safeguarding of their rights. It also aims to prevent trafficking and to prosecute traffickers. The UK government signed the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings on 23 March 2007. The Convention came into force on 1 April 2009.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/510091/NRM_-_guidance_for_child_first_responders_v2.0_EXT.PDF

Jason engaged well with the Youth Justice Service (YJS) school nurse, his weight in July 2018 was on the 9th centile⁹, by November he had dropped to the 2nd centile and at both visits said he was missing meals. In November Jason started to withdraw from agencies, he was reluctant to attend school and presented as low, withdrawn, and anxious. The family were told by their friends, with whom they were staying, that they would have to move out by February.

Over a period of 7 weeks, Jason presented to the hospital emergency department 5 times with a range of ailments, unexplained pain, shortness of breath, most of these were thought to relate to anxiety. He talked to staff about his experiences of being taken against his will and made to sell drugs and of money laundering, without giving any detail of the people involved.

*

- **2019: Anxiety, hospital visits, school refusal, withdrawn, homeless, case closure, county lines, fear, stabbed.**

By January Jason was refusing to attend school, the GP and school referred to CAMHS¹⁰ for support. Staff recognised that the family were due to become homeless at the end of February and that this was having a significant impact upon Jason's functioning and mental health. Nothing was put in place to help the family obtain somewhere to live. Most agencies subsequently closed their intervention with the family.

Jason and his mother became homeless and stayed, often separately, sofa surfing¹¹ with various friends. Within a few weeks Jason again went missing for 2 days, then returned and went missing for 10 days. He then made contact with his family who sought the help of police to find him. On return home he disclosed he had been involved in county lines, had been beaten and threatened and was scared for his life. The day after disclosing his fears, he was stabbed and required surgery and inpatient hospital treatment. On discharge from hospital, Jason and his mother were provided with Bed and Breakfast accommodation in another London borough for their own safety.

5. Key learning themes, analysis, and recommendations.

The Panel discussed a range of issues through the course of the review and individual agencies have identified specific learning about their own systems, processes, and engagement with children and their families, which have been drawn up into individual action plans to be overseen by the MSCP. **See Appendix Two – Agency recommendations from IMRs**

The themes noted below are those which have been identified as those most pertinent to effect positive change, the consistent elements that have been recognised as being of most importance are those of early intervention and prevention. The importance of intervening early in children's lives to prevent escalation to almost inevitable consequences is well established in research and literature.

Modern Slavery Act 2015 Section 1) A person commits an offence if the person arranges or facilitates the travel of another person ("V") with a view to V being exploited.

⁹ <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/uk-who-growth-charts-2-18-years>

¹⁰ Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

¹¹ sofa surfing - the practice of a homeless person staying temporarily with various friends and relatives while attempting to find permanent accommodation. Collins English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers

In commissioning such a detailed examination of the events and actions which led to the stabbing of Jason, it is important to consider what will be different next time? There is a responsibility on all agencies to share the learning from this process to effect positive change for those children who follow behind Jason with similar life experiences to promote better outcomes.

5.1 Immigration status, poverty, and homelessness

*'There are thousands of children in the UK facing deep, long-term poverty because of strict immigration rules, which mean their families cannot access mainstream benefits or vital support, even in a crisis. Living in poverty has significant detrimental effects on children's outcomes, both in childhood and later in life. Living on low income negatively affects children's school attainment, cognitive and behavioural development, and their physical and mental health, even for short periods of time.'*¹²

*"Homelessness has a massive negative impact on children, on their mental health and their attainment in school and just their life chances." Teachers and education professionals communicated that changes to a child's mental health, attitudes and behaviours directly impacted their ability and willingness to learn and participate at school...Children experiencing homelessness whilst at secondary school were often found to be oppositional toward towards teachers and peers – at times, lashing out, starting fights, or refusing to do any classwork or homework.*¹³

Jason's Story

Jason's mother had no recourse to public funds (NRPF), he and his mother were homeless and lived with acute financial difficulties for almost the entire period under review. As Jason got older, so his recognition and understanding of the family's housing and financial circumstances increased. When he was 13, he talked of feeling anxious about their situation with a teaching assistant in school. Jason often spoke of his various moves, his fears of being homeless and about sharing a bed with his mother. When Jason lost a significant amount of weight and said that there was no food to eat at home, this was a clear sign of the family's acute difficulties.

In November 2018, Mother's status changed to time-limited Leave to Remain which gave her permission to work, this was welcomed by mother. But a short-lived relief as she told the lead reviewer; she went to the Housing department in February 2019 when they were facing homelessness where it was explained despite the changes to her status, they still were not eligible for any help.

In March 2019, an attempt was made by the Youth Justice Worker to secure a rental deposit and an application was made to the MARVE Panel¹⁴ for their assistance. The application stated: *Jason was*

¹² <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/a-lifeline-for-all-summary.pdf>

¹³ https://england.shelter.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1474652/2017_12_20_Homelessness_and_School_Children.pdf

¹⁴ Multiagency Risk, Vulnerability and Exploitation Panel (MARVE) which looks at concern about a child or young person's risk of exploitation, sexual or violent behaviour

a victim of modern slavery and is still highly vulnerable to criminal exploitation. Acute financial stress increases the risk that he could be groomed and engaged in county lines offending in the future. This request was turned down on the basis that issues were related to housing and mental health and there had been no recent incidents suggestive of criminal exploitation, although the risks were acknowledged.

This was a critical moment for Jason and his mother, they needed decisive help to make a significant change to their circumstances. It was clear that the family's situation was made considerably worse with the prospect of being homeless. Over this period Jason increasingly withdrew from services, there were considerable concerns about his emotional and mental wellbeing as he appeared withdrawn, distressed, extremely low, and spoke of feeling hopeless.

From Jason's perspective, nothing had changed. Despite gaining time limited Leave to Remain, the family were evicted, his increasing cries for help did not change those circumstances. Within weeks, he had returned to working county lines.

Multi- Agency Learning

This was a family who were struggling financially, and mothers' NRPF status provided an explanation as to why this was the case. There were occasions when it was recognised that poverty could be impacting upon both Jason's care and increasing the risk of criminal behaviour. Knowing the family were in poverty was an important factor that needed to be properly explored.

Although Jason was subject to two Child in need (CIN) plans for short periods, there is no evidence to suggest the assessments adequately included consideration of the family's finances and issues surrounding the family's NRPF status.

The family were entitled to a 'No Recourse to Public Funds' (NRPF) assessment, conducted jointly between Children's Social Care and Housing. Following an assessment such as this, it was likely that the family would have been eligible for support. However, a full NRPF assessment never took place and financial assistance under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989¹⁵ was not used, as it could have been, to support the family. LB Merton has NRPF guidance in place which states on page one:

Support may be provided by a local authority to children and families in the UK under the Children Act 1989, where a child is found to be a Child in Need. .¹⁶

Members of the multi-agency network were aware that the family were struggling with poverty and imminent homelessness and made those concerns known to Children's Services. In the Practitioner Learning Event they described 'advocating strongly but hit a lot of brick walls', there was a 'block', and their 'hands were tied'. They felt frustrated and did not understand why support could not be given. The housing situation was described as the root cause of Jason's difficulties and because it

¹⁵ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/section/17>

¹⁶ https://mertoncs.proceduresonline.com/p_no_recourse_pub_fund.html?zoom_highlight=no+recourse+to+public+funds

was not dealt with it affected every aspect of his life. They said he would have wanted to protect his mother and would have been drawn into county lines as he would want to provide for them.

CSC was unable to provide evidence that an NRPF assessment had taken place. The council's guidance on this is laid out at https://mertoncs.proceduresonline.com/p_no_recourse_pub_fund.html#5.-assessment-process-for-adults

Furthermore, s.17 of the 1989 Children Act outlines the duty of local authorities to provide financial assistance in exceptional circumstances.

The MARVE panel did not include representatives from Housing or Children's Social Care who could have been able to provide advice to address the family's housing crisis.

After Jason was stabbed, support under Section 17 was given to provide the family with Bed and Breakfast accommodation out of the area. At the time, Jason commented : ' Why did it take me to get stabbed, to get help? '

Recommendation 1: No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF)

The formal process for NRPF assessment needs to be established across the multi-agency network, to ensure consistency and compliance with the legal requirements and prevent unnecessary hardship.

Issues for consideration by MSCP

- how are the current arrangements, to undertake an assessment, working?
- are staff suitably trained and supported? are they updated on change of circumstances?
- How are assessments adjudicated and outcomes determined ?

Recommendation 2: Housing & Homelessness

The MSCP should seek assurance that children who are assessed by the Housing department, and who are left without anywhere to live are considered by Children's Services to determine if they are eligible for support as Children in Need.

- Is there anything that needs to be strengthened about the way the multiagency network identifies and resolves housing difficulties for vulnerable children?

Recommendation 3: Section 17 and Section 47 of the Children Act 1989

CSC to ensure that assessment under s.17 and s.47 of the Children Act include an assessment of the family's day-to-day living arrangements.

Recommendation 4 : MSCP to seek further information from CSC about whether the issues identified in this case are systemic, what may be the root causes of the difficulties and what support is needed from MSCP to resolve.

5.2 Educational Journey

*'Excluded children are the most vulnerable: twice as likely to be in the care of the state, four times more likely to have grown up in poverty, seven times more likely to have a special educational need and 10 times more likely to suffer recognised mental health problems... Excluded young people are more likely to be unemployed, develop severe mental health problems and go to prison.'*¹⁷

The National Child Safeguarding Practice Review on criminal exploitation (quoted above) contributed to established research in identifying that children excluded from mainstream school are at higher risk of exploitation and that exclusion can be a trigger point for risk of serious harm.¹⁸

*'We cannot emphasise strongly enough the learning from this review about the impact on children of exclusion from mainstream school.'*¹⁹

Jason's Story

Jason's school attendance and behaviour in primary school were good. His transition to secondary school in September 2014 went smoothly, and nothing remarkable was noted until his behaviour in school showed a marked deterioration in 2017, with his first one-day exclusion in February. By May, aged 14, school referred Jason for cannabis reduction work, and he was placed on internal exclusion. He was said to have an 'attitude problem' and issues with anger management.

At the end of summer term in July 2017, his friend died, and he was stopped and searched for the first time. This was likely to have been a seminal moment for Jason. There is no record of any agencies engaging with him after these events during the school summer holidays that followed.

On return to school in September, Jason's behaviour deteriorated substantially. On several occasions Jason came into conflict with school staff and could not manage his anger. Ultimately, these confrontational incidents led to his exclusion from mainstream school.

Within the space of only a few months a child who had been regarded as polite, engaging, and mature was permanently excluded. He was known to be using cannabis regularly and was repeatedly stopped and searched by Police with groups of friends.

After an unusually short period in the PRU, where he was deemed to be a model pupil, Jason was reintegrated back into a mainstream school. No difficulties had been identified with his behaviour, the anger that had become such an issue in mainstream was not seen in the PRU and was therefore not addressed. Three months later he attacked a teacher, was excluded, and immediately returned to the PRU. Within a month, still aged 14, he was missing and a victim of Modern Slavery for the purpose of county lines drug selling.

¹⁷ <https://www.ippr.org/files/2017-10/making-the-difference-report-october-2017.pdf>

¹⁸ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Report: It was hard to escape. Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation. 2020

¹⁹ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Report: It was hard to escape. Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation. 2020

Early in the summer term he understood that if he again displayed good behaviour he would be allowed to return to a mainstream school. By the end of that term, his case for knife possession had come to court and led to a conviction and it is understood that the school refused him a place.

Jason returned to the PRU in the autumn term 2018. According to his mother, he went in increasingly late, left early to avoid others and became progressively more disillusioned about the PRU. He complained to YJS workers that he was not learning anything, and that the work was too easy and repetitive.

Over time, he stopped attending, the PRU sought an Educational Psychology assessment and arranged some individual tuition. The Educational Psychologist noted that Jason's limited expressive vocabulary, verbal reasoning and non-verbal reasoning were all areas of concern.

Multi – Agency Learning:

Exclusion from mainstream school is a highly significant event in any child's life and places the child at particular risk. Recent Serious Case Reviews (SCRs), Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) and relevant literature highlight that if permanent exclusion is the ultimate decision, a wraparound package of support should be set in place to seek to address the significant risks that face the excluded child.²⁰ There was little evidence to suggest that this happened in response to Jason's exclusions.

Whilst on the surface it appears good practice to reintegrate a child back into mainstream quickly, this needs to be done carefully with full cooperation of multi-agency partners to avoid the potential risk of reintegration failing. To this end, it is important for education panels to have full information about a child when making difficult decisions about exclusion and reintegration.

Equally, given Jason's exclusion was related to threatening, confrontational behaviour and aggression, it was crucial that he learned strategies to help cope with his angry feelings and had options available to enable him to seek help to avoid any repetition.

The National Panel found that exclusion has a major impact on children's lives and:

"...if it is unavoidable then there needs to be immediate wrap around support to compensate for the lack of structure, sense of belonging and rejection that exclusion from mainstream school can cause".

Practitioners advised of marked improvements in the PRU since this time where the focus is to help assess and address the social, emotional, and mental health issues. They were disappointed that restorative justice had not been implemented.

Recommendation 5. MSCP to oversee the development of a multiagency plan to formally address how the findings and recommendations from the National Panel report will be achieved in Merton - See Appendix Three

Recommendation 6. Education Panel/ oversight of exclusions

²⁰ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Report: It was hard to escape. Safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation. 2020

MSCP to work in partnership with Merton Hard to Place Panel (secondary fair access) to develop a re-integration strategy for children who have been excluded to ensure that the difficulties that led to a child's exclusion are addressed.

5.3 Emotional health and mental well-being

*'Trauma experienced young people are less likely to finish school and find employment, poverty and trauma exacerbate one another and limit a young person's chances of achieving interpersonal, economic, or social safety.'*²¹

*'Children are not quickly made safe when they have had traumatic experiences. The adolescent reviews analysed here have demonstrated the need for prolonged and persistent engagement as a means of supporting adolescents. There needs to be a balance of preventative work and crisis management.'*²²

Jason's Story

Jason's experiences during 2018 were pivotal; he started in mainstream school and ended refusing to attend the PRU, he started with a caution and ended with two criminal offences, he was recognised as a victim of modern slavery, he suffered a beating by other young people, was hit by a van in the street, was wary of other young people at YJS, lost weight, was not eating, and repeatedly called for help, via ambulance and attended hospital multiple times for various ailments. Whilst at the hospital, he experienced a flashback of the trauma he had endured whilst on county lines. He used cannabis throughout and, as time went on, he hardly left the house. He ceased to engage with almost all the agencies that were seeking to help him.

By February 2019 he felt his position was hopeless, he presented as low, withdrawn, and distressed, and saw the family housing and financial situation as overwhelming. He stated that they had asked for help, but nothing had changed, therefore, to engage further was pointless.

Multi-Agency Learning

The school, the GP, and the hospital became increasingly concerned about Jason. Appropriate referrals were made to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), although he did not meet the CAMHS criteria as he did not have a mental health diagnosis. Despite this, CAMHS offered some time-limited support, which importantly included organising a Team Around the Child meeting of relevant professionals.

This raised debate in the panel about mental health issues and mental health diagnosis, and about services available to address the wellbeing of children such as Jason who were experiencing, for example: anxiety, panic attacks or depression.

²¹ <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/3118/trauma-informed-approaches-with-young-people-frontline-briefing-2018.pdf>

²² <https://TRIENNIAL-SCR-REPORT-2014-to-2017.pdf>

It was acknowledged that over time, organisations, and services have become increasingly specialised – with specific thresholds and remits. This risks an approach of ‘referral on’, in a belief that there may be another service or professional who can deal with the issue or provide a solution. There is an expectation that a service will be offered, unless notified to the contrary

At the Practitioner Learning Event staff spoke of feeling sad about Jason’s experiences. They reflected upon their roles and services and that a referral on to a more specialist service would mean they stepped back on the assumption that the issues are being dealt with. They questioned how much knowledge there is within different agencies of each other’s processes and protocols and the reasons behind the decisions that are made. They considered what could have been done differently that may have helped. For example, ‘if CAMHS cannot do X because of Y, what can we do instead?’ What could have been done to get Jason to a point where intervention could be offered?’ They said Jason must have felt bounced between services and passed on all of the time.

Research²³ suggests that children need to feel heard and accepted by an adult with whom they can build a trusting relationship to help them explore their circumstances in a safe, respectful, and non-judgemental way. Jason was expected to engage with multiple adults, from a host of services; Education (School and PRU), Youth Justice Service (YJS), CAMHS, Children’s Social Care (CSC), GP, Targeted Families (TF), Health. Jason’s patterns of behaviour changed, his engagement reduced, he began to withdraw, from school, from services and society. He presented to hospital with unexplained ailments. It has been suggested that he may have been seeking medical help to find safety.

By February 2019, Jason’s apparent withdrawal from services, led to some key services closing their involvement with him (CAMHS, Catch22, Children’s Social Care and Transforming Families).

These services are consent based and therefore non-engagement or withdrawal can be interpreted as an absence of consent. However, closure of cases by services in these circumstances may unintentionally compound a withdrawal or lack of engagement, particularly by young people. Therefore, it is important for services to be flexible in their response to young people and consider how they may maintain involvement by supporting the network around the child who continue to have contact with them in an attempt to provide a scaffold of support. This is particularly important for vulnerable adolescents whose engagement is likely to fluctuate over time.

It is clear that Jason experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). There is currently significant acknowledgement about the impact of ACEs on health and wellbeing. Many organisations are seeking to become trauma-informed, whereby the relevant workforce is trained and aware of trauma informed practices and approaches. Taking such an approach has the potential to improve engagement with a young person and reduce the need to routinely refer on to another service.²⁴

²³ <https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/media/3118/trauma-informed-approaches-with-young-people-frontline-briefing-2018.pdf>

²⁴ Dr Karen Triesman 2017 <http://www.safehandstinkingminds.co.uk/trauma-informed-trauma-responsive-organisations-systems/>

Recommendation 7: Mental health pathway & a trauma informed approach

MSCP to explore how CAMHS might assist the multi-agency workforce to adopt a trauma – informed approach in order to support the emotional wellbeing of children and young people and determine how the Thrive Model ²⁵ will be embedded in multiagency safeguarding work.

5.4 Offending prevention

*'There is no single solution to preventing youth offending, reoffending and violence in children and young people. It is clear that in order to tackle this issue a broad range of actions are needed involving stakeholders from across the system. Preventing children coming into contact with the youth justice system is a complex and dynamic problem, where traditional approaches that focus on single interventions are unlikely to work.'*²⁶

*'The Mayor of London's 2017 Knife Crime Strategy identified that most research conducted into weapon carrying pointed to self-defence and protection as a key reason why young people carry knives. There was also a greater likelihood of carrying knives among gang members compared to non-gang members, and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) boys and young men forming the highest percentage of both victims and perpetrators of knife crime.'*²⁷

Jason's Story

Jason was stopped and searched 6 times from July 2017 to January 2018, 5 of those were with a group of friends on the same estate which was well-known to the Police. Few Merlin notifications were sent to other agencies and when they were, no response followed. As a result, none of these incidents led to engagement from any agency to seek to divert or prevent him from becoming involved in criminality. In March 2018, when Jason was permanently excluded from school and only days before he was first involved in county lines, Mother raised her concerns with the Police that Jason was involved in gangs and knives.

In summer 2018, when Jason was under formal Youth Offending supervision, enquiries were made about his potential gang involvement. By this point, there had been multiple opportunities to engage Jason in gang diversion work, but these opportunities had been missed.

In November 2018, almost a year from being found with a knife, Jason engaged in work with YJS on the carrying of knives, and he shared his perspective. Similar to the knife crime survey²⁸ findings, Jason did not think that carrying knives was okay but thought that there were circumstances where it could be justified; for example, if someone had real reason to believe that their life was in danger.

²⁵ <https://democracy.merton.gov.uk/documents/s25555/4.The%20Thrive%20Conceptual%20Framework.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-offending-and-re-offending-by-children/capricorn-summary>

²⁷ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mopac_knife_crime_strategy_june_2017.pdf

²⁸ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mopac_knife_crime_strategy_june_2017.pdf

Jason was of the view that having a knife would scare someone off, but he was also able to recognise that *'things might not go to plan, you could get hurt yourself or end up escalating things'*.

Jason knew people who had been affected by knife crime and said that being stabbed is not something that he feared per se, but he knew that simply being a teenage boy in London put him at risk.

Multi-Agency Learning

The Police have powers to stop and search²⁹ someone if they have 'reasonable grounds' to suspect they are carrying:

- illegal drugs
- a weapon
- stolen property
- something which could be used to commit a crime.

More than 20 years ago the Macpherson Inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence recommended:

*Rec. 61. Police records of all "stops" and "stops and searches" to include the reason for the stop, the outcome, and the self-defined ethnic identity of the person stopped. A copy of the record shall be given to the person stopped.*³⁰

Jason confirmed he was never given such a document for any of those stops.

Merton Youth Justice Service³¹ offer *'Support to young people who have been arrested for the first-time on low-level offences to prevent re-offending'*.

Despite the Police notifications, the opportunity for the YJS to work with Jason to address his offending was missed. Neither his caution for possessing cannabis nor the arrest for knife possession reached YJS records and no action was taken as a result. His mother's disclosure of her anxieties to Police that Jason was involved in gangs and knives in March 2018 was passed to Children's Services, but no action was taken in response.

The first engagement with Youth Justice occurred in April 2018 after he had been arrested in connection with county lines and had pleaded guilty to possession with intent to supply Class A and Class B drugs. YJS routinely conduct screening to gain multiagency knowledge of the children coming to their attention, but for Jason this did not include Police screening, therefore the six stops & searches were still not identified. Equally, the soft intelligence around the other young people Jason was mixing with in those incidents which started in July 2017 was not shared by Police until requested by YJS in August 2018.

²⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/police-powers-to-stop-and-search-your-rights>

³⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/277111/4262.pdf

³¹ <https://www.merton.gov.uk/communities-and-neighbourhoods/young-people/youth-justice-service>

This lack of involvement appears to have been related to several inter-connecting factors:

- Having known Jason had prior involvement with Youth Justice Services, Children's Social Care did not alert YJS of notifications about Jason.

Practitioners advised that circumstances are now different, there is a Liaison & Diversion project whereby the Police submit Merlin's for all Stops & Searches and all are screened within the new service, which seeks to divert children and prevent offending. However, it is understood that this is a time-limited project.

Recommendation 8. MSCP to maintain an overview of this new project and support the establishment of a permanent system that seeks to identify children on the cusp of/or in the early stages offending and develop responses to prevent further escalation.

5.5 Ethnicity

Jason's Story

Jason is a black boy of Caribbean heritage. He lived in poverty, did not achieve within the education system, was excluded from school, suffered poor emotional health, experienced multiple stops & searches, was the victim of modern slavery, gained criminal convictions and was homeless.

Multi-Agency Learning

There is a significant body of research, data and inquiries that highlight the inequalities experienced by young black men.

David Lammy MP for Tottenham undertook an independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in the Criminal Justice System, (CJS) which was published in 2017:

*'YOTs were established by the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, with a view to reducing youth offending and reoffending and have been largely successful in fulfilling that remit. Yet despite this fall in the overall numbers, the BAME proportion on each of those measures has been rising significantly.'*³²

³²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/643001/lammy-review-final-report.pdf

'If CJS agencies cannot provide an evidence-based explanation for apparent disparities between ethnic groups then reforms should be introduced to address those disparities. This principle of 'explain or reform' should apply to every CJS institution. '

Merton's School Standards Report 2019 shows the different performance rates across different ethnic groups in Merton. Black Caribbean children were consistently the lowest achievers across every age group.

The stated priorities for 2019/2020 for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children are:

- Early Years- To improve outcomes for children eligible for Free School Meals; and for Black Caribbean and Asian Pakistani children.
- Primary Phase: To improve outcomes for Black Caribbean and Black African pupils.
- Secondary Phase: To narrow the gaps for key groups at KS4: disadvantaged pupils, pupils in receipt of SEN support and Black Caribbean pupils.

The report noted :

- *Learners with special educational needs, from poorer backgrounds, from some ethnic groups and those who are in contact with children's social care are more likely than their peers to be excluded.*

Despite these priorities, information on the ethnicity of excluded children and those attending the PRU was not available to the review. Practitioners were concerned that there was less tolerance shown towards black children in school, that they receive a harsher response which eventually leads to over-representation in exclusions.

Recommendation 9: MSCP to provide support and challenge to schools in implementing these priorities and determine how the ethnicity data for excluded children and those in the Youth Justice Service will be identified and subject to the David Lammy scrutiny test – Explain or reform.

5.6 Child Criminal Exploitation

'Recruitment and grooming through debt enslavement.' ³³

Older dealers and gangs, such as those in their early 20s, for example, are setting up markets and drug lines, and controlling young people from 14 onwards through placing them in debt for drugs. This debt can involve financial and sexual exploitation often although not exclusively divided along gender lines. Gangs wishing to exploit young people target them in arenas where they are likely to have reduced monitoring and supervision such as, PRUs and Children's Homes. These recruited young people (mainly boys) are also becoming both victim and perpetrators of stabbings.'

Jason's Story

³³ [Link to County Lines National Summary 2018](#)

Jason was first known to be using cannabis in 2017 with a group of friends at school, this group was intimidating to others and involved in a lot of fights. This was not the kind of behaviour previously associated with Jason. The group were referred to a service for cannabis reduction work and this service began one to one work with Jason at the end of June 2017. Jason spoke about his family, his behaviour in school and his peers although he was reluctant to talk about his use of drugs. Three weeks later he was arrested with the multiple phones, cash, and drug related items.

Within just a few months he had been excluded from school, was repeatedly found with groups of other young people on another borough estate and found in possession of cannabis and a large hunting knife.

Only a few minutes before the first missing report, he was found to be a passenger in a car with two men that was stopped by police in another London borough. He returned home the next day only to then go missing again the following day and remained missing for 15 days which ended when he was arrested and found in possession of a large quantity of Class A and Class B drug and a considerable amount of cash. He subsequently pleaded guilty to PWITS.³⁴

YJS sought to engage him and discuss their concerns that he would have incurred further debt because of the drug confiscation and arrest, but he would not discuss this.

His next episode of 'county lines' came very shortly after he and his mother were made homeless and were living separately. On return he disclosed that he had been beaten and was frightened for his life during his 9 days selling drugs. Shortly after his return, he was the victim of serious stab wounds.³⁵

Multi-Agency Learning

On several occasions, throughout the period under review, Jason spoke to various professionals about; being given cannabis that he had not paid for, money laundering, and abduction and it was noticed that he became very wary when other known gang associates attended youth offending sessions.

It was firmly believed that Jason was involved in county lines drug dealing and was being exploited. Professionals shared the information he disclosed and tried to engage him in an attempt to better understand his experiences and to safeguard him from future harm. Jason would not disclose any information about those involved and therefore it was not possible for police to take action, this is common in circumstances of exploitation as there is a very real fear that police action would only exacerbate the risks.

There was information held across the various services that suggested he remained at high risk of exploitation and this included not only the disclosures he made but also as a result of his family circumstances and his social and emotional needs; Jason was suffering from a host of adverse

³⁴ PWITS – Possession with intent to supply. Misuse of Drugs Act 1971

³⁵ It would not be unusual for another exploited young person to have carried out the stabbing as an instruction to help settle their own position. The cycle is ongoing.

childhood experiences, including poverty, multiple moves, housing instability, bereavement and the trauma associated with county lines.

There were several services involved with Jason and there were several professionals who Jason trusted to speak about his experiences. Many attempts were made to work with Jason to reduce the risks he faced, to address his trauma and to support his emotional wellbeing. However, what emerged was a fragmented picture of care and support with only pockets of collaboration and little integration across the services.

An integrated holistic multi-agency approach was needed to bring all agencies together to understand the full range of Jason's needs and to provide a multi-agency contextual safeguarding response.

Contextual safeguarding is an approach to safeguarding children that was detailed in government guidance in 2018.³⁶ Whilst it is positive that in Merton the MARVE Panel uses a contextual safeguarding strategy when assessing the risk to children, those risks are determined primarily on the basis of offending history.

It was understood that a multi-agency contextual safeguarding approach is currently not established in Merton, but that work has commenced on developing a contextual safeguarding strategy.

Recommendation 10: MSCP to oversee the development and implementation of the multi-agency Contextual Safeguarding Strategy, findings from this review to be incorporated into the strategy and reflected in future service developments.

7. Views from the Family

During the period covered in this review, Jason's mother spoke up for him, shared her concerns about him, engaged with a host of agencies, completed a weekly parenting course, and worked long hours to seek to provide for him. Her commitment to Jason has never been in doubt, yet she feels frustrated and angry with the way they were treated as a family. She recognises some workers engaged well with them and sought to help, but the futility of their situation has left her wary and resistant to engaging with council services again.

She explained she has lived in the UK since 2002 and had never asked for help from authorities; only becoming involved when Jason went missing in 2018. She recalls routinely explaining their housing situation and being advised they could not be helped because of her NRP status.

She described a difficult experience, when she approached the housing department to seek help and was told she had no entitlement to support, which left her feeling humiliated and upset. She felt frustrated that despite her efforts to comply, there was no support or help available to them.

She further explained that when Jason was stabbed and the approach was to move him for his own

³⁶ Working Together to Safeguard Children DfE. 2018

safety, she asked if he could be moved to semi-independence. She had gained employment and had rented a room from a family friend locally and felt Jason would be best served if he could be safe and she could work and save to get a place for them to live.

She says she was advised this was not possible and the family were moved quickly to another London Borough and told they would be helped thereafter. She described them being left with nothing, no food, little money, knowing no-one nearby and her losing the job. She feels hurt and angry for her son and for their experience, both in Merton and in the subsequent borough. She explained her views were dismissed as being of no value and came to recognise that it was pointless to engage.

Jason's aunt has been, throughout his life and is currently, a key support to him and his mother - she has advocated consistently for them both. Jason stayed regularly with her and her family. Her frustration with agencies working with the family, centre upon the consequences of his mother's NRPF status, resulting in them becoming homeless and both having to 'sofa surf' and how much this impacted upon Jason's mental health. She said that some really tried to address these issues but appeared thwarted by management decision making and others just did not seem to know enough about NRPF and its consequences.

Aunt spoke of the actions they took as a family when he was missing, putting up posters, trawling the streets, making connections to seek to find him. And of their sorrow and distress when he was stabbed. Whilst pleased that they were finally provided with housing, Aunt was concerned they were told to go in an emergency and had to leave everything behind. This meant when they arrived there was no means to cook a meal or crockery from which to eat it. They had little money; aunt went out the same day to buy them a microwave and basic items. She feels strongly that the arrangements for this the most basic of care were just not considered or thought through and the impact for Jason and his mother was they were left bereft.

She understood the dilemma for some children living in poverty seeing county lines as a means to earn and the dangers therein. She agreed that early intervention to divert children away from crime would have helped Jason.

Jason talked about his experiences, his engagement in lessons at school and never getting into trouble in class, it was outside of class he would get caught up in confrontation with other teachers, who wanted to split him and his friends up. He recognises that he did not react very well and would get angry quickly. He recognises his love to debate and keenness to win! Jason explained at his first secondary school he got help with his anger, he attended a boys meeting group, where they sat in a circle and the teacher would get them to talk about the problems they had.

He explained that he has learned to calm down and relax more, he says he does not get angry so easily and will talk more.

Jason talked about his time at the PRU, the first period starting alright but not liking the second.

Being mistrusting of other students, no friends there and how he got into a nasty fight. He talked of feeling he was not learning and did not see any point in attending. Jason said that he still feels upset that his move to the PRU meant that he did not get to take his GCSEs alongside his friends in mainstream school.

He talked positively of being able to talk about anything to Catch22, the worker 'was straight' and how he missed working with YJS, the practical workshops, fixing bikes, cooking; plus being taken to the studios. He said he had found it hard to speak about things but has improved now. Jason explained it was a very difficult time growing up, at times he stayed with his aunt, but never lived with his father. He spoke of the frustration of only being helped with somewhere for them to live once he had been stabbed.

In response to the question, what does Merton need to learn?

He said, 'They need to listen, understand a bit more and consider it a bit more. They didn't act on what I was saying'

What should they have done?

'Helped us to get a place to live, they didn't try to give us any help'

And County Lines?

'Felt it was the only way out. Only option I had left'

8. Conclusion

This review has involved multi-agency services and professionals from across the Safeguarding Partnership in Merton. Numerous documents have been reviewed and conversations have been held with professionals who were involved in providing services to Jason and his family, and with Jason and family members. It has shown that there are some excellent practitioners in the workforce who are deeply committed to safeguarding children such as Jason and some excellent services that have the potential to make a real difference to children's outcomes.

The key issues identified in this review include the need for multi-agency partners and services to work together to recognise and act to address the impact of poverty and homelessness on children's outcomes, to act early to prevent escalation of a child's offending behaviour, to provide a joined up trauma – informed approach to children with high risk behaviour, to do all that is possible to avoid exclusion and to take action to narrow the inequalities faced by children from black and ethnic minority groups. These issues are not new, they have been previously identified in local and national reports, reviews, and research.

Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership are deeply grateful for the contributions made by Jason and his family to this review and are committed to work together to build on the action that has already commenced to implement these findings.