



Bedford Borough
Safeguarding Children Partnership

Impact Report
April 2025 – March 2026





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1.Executive Summary

This report outlines the work of the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership (BBSCP) during 2025-26 and demonstrates how partners have worked together to safeguard children, strengthen multi-agency practice and improve outcomes for children and families across Bedford Borough.

Safeguarding demand remained high throughout the year. Bedford Borough continues to experience levels of referral, assessment, Section 47 and Child Protection activity above those of many comparable authorities. Neglect remains the most significant safeguarding concern and continues to be the primary reason for Children in Need and Child Protection intervention.

During the year, the Partnership maintained a strong focus on its strategic priorities of neglect, child sexual abuse, the voice of children and young people, learning and improvement, and quality assurance. Significant progress was made in strengthening partnership governance, workforce development, safeguarding procedures, audit activity and performance oversight. More than 2,500 practitioners participated in multi-agency learning and the Partnership continued to expand opportunities for children and young people to influence service development and strategic planning.

Learning from audits, reviews and performance information has increasingly informed improvement activity. A Rapid Review concerning long-term chronic neglect resulted in the commissioning of a thematic Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, which will report during 2026-27 and will contribute to the Partnership's understanding of cumulative harm, neglect and children's lived experiences.

The Partnership recognises that delivering activity alone is not sufficient. During 2025-26 there has been an increasing emphasis on understanding impact, improving assurance arrangements and strengthening evidence of how partnership activity improves the safety, experiences and outcomes of children and young people.

As the Partnership prepares for the implementation of Working Together 2026 and Families First reforms, it remains committed to continuous improvement, robust safeguarding practice and ensuring that children remain at the centre of all decision-making.



2. Safeguarding Partners' Reflections

2.1 Bedfordshire Police – Zara Brown - Detective Chief Superintendent

2025–26 has been another busy and demanding year for the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership. Against a backdrop of significant national reform, increasing demand and continued pressure across public services, safeguarding partners have remained focused on what matters most: protecting children, supporting families and improving outcomes across Bedford Borough.

Throughout the year, the Partnership has continued to strengthen multi-agency working, support practitioners and maintain focus on the safeguarding issues that present the greatest risk to children and young people. This has included continued work in relation to neglect, child sexual abuse, exploitation, missing children, domestic abuse, SEND and ensuring that the voice and lived experience of children and families informs our safeguarding response.

From a policing perspective, safeguarding children remains a core priority. Bedfordshire Police has continued to work closely with Bedford Borough Council, health, education and wider partnership colleagues to identify risk, share information, disrupt those who seek to exploit or harm children, and support early intervention wherever possible. Effective partnership working remains essential, particularly in areas such as exploitation, missing children, domestic abuse and contextual safeguarding, where no single agency can respond effectively in isolation.

A key theme during the year has been the Partnership's continued ambition to move beyond measuring activity and to better understand impact. This means not only asking what we have done, but whether our collective work is making a meaningful difference to children's lives. Learning from reviews, audits, scrutiny, frontline practice and the experiences of children and families has helped shape improvement activity and will remain central to our work moving forward.

We recognise that challenges remain. The implementation of Families First reforms and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 will require further change across the safeguarding system. At the same time, partners must continue to respond to increasing complexity, demand and emerging risks affecting children and young people.

Despite these challenges, this report demonstrates the strength of partnership working across Bedford Borough and the commitment of practitioners, managers and leaders across all agencies. I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to safeguarding children during 2025–26. We look forward to continuing to build on these foundations, strengthening our collective response and keeping children, young people and families at the centre of everything we do.



2.2 NHS Central East ICB – Pol Turner Director of Safeguarding/SEND and Complex Care

The ICB remains committed to working with partners to ensure children, young people and families receive the right support at the right time. Throughout 2025-26 the health system has strengthened trauma-informed practice, promoted the voice of children and young people, improved safeguarding learning arrangements and continued to develop a whole-family approach to safeguarding. The introduction of Trauma Panels, strengthening Children in Care arrangements and improvements to Child Protection Information Sharing arrangements have helped improve multi-agency safeguarding responses and outcomes for children. The ICB remains committed to supporting partnership reform and continuous improvement.

2.3 Bedford Borough Council Children's Services – Harmesh Bhogal – Director of Children's Services

This report reflects a year of both progress and challenge. Across Bedford Borough, partners have continued to demonstrate a strong commitment to safeguarding children and supporting families, despite increasing demand, growing complexity and significant national reform.

The 2025 Ofsted inspection provided important external challenge and highlighted areas where we must improve. We have been open in acknowledging those findings and have used them, alongside audit activity, performance information and learning from reviews, to strengthen our understanding of the areas that require the greatest attention. In particular, the report reinforces the need for continued focus on neglect, cumulative harm, quality assurance and evidencing the impact of our work on children's lives.

One of the Partnership's strengths is its willingness to reflect honestly on both achievements and areas for development. We know that delivering training, developing strategies and improving governance arrangements are important, but they are not ends in themselves. Our challenge is to ensure that these activities translate into better experiences, improved safety and stronger outcomes for children and young people.

There is much to be encouraged by. We have strengthened our approach to neglect, developed our response to child sexual abuse, expanded opportunities for children and young people to influence our work and continued to improve multi-agency learning and assurance arrangements. We have also challenged ourselves to make greater use of data, audit findings and review activity to understand the difference we are making.

As we look ahead to the implementation of Working Together 2026 and Families First reforms, the Partnership is well placed to build on these foundations. We remain committed to learning, improvement and constructive challenge, ensuring that children, young people and families remain at the heart of everything we do.



3. Introduction

This is the fifth annual report of the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership (BBSCP) Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements and covers the period April 2025 to March 2026.

The Partnership's priorities during the year remained:

- Neglect
- Child Sexual Abuse
- Voice of Children and Families
- Learning and Improvement
- Performance and Quality Assurance

This report outlines the work undertaken by safeguarding partners during 2025-26, highlights key achievements and areas for improvement, and sets out the Partnership's priorities for 2026-27.



4. Safeguarding activity and context:

Bedford Borough Safeguarding Snapshot as of March 2026



43,780 children under the age of 18 live in Bedford Borough

22.3% of the total population

17.8% of children are living in low income families



281 different ethnic groups live in Bedford Borough



27.6% of children in primary schools speak English as an additional language

23.8% of children in secondary schools speak English as an additional language



144 children and young people were subject to Child Protection Plans as of March 2026



21.1% of children in primary schools are in receipt of free school meals

24.3% of children in secondary schools are in receipt of free school meals



11,940 contacts were made to MASH and **2,971** referrals were made to Bedford Borough Children's Services



1,091 Early Help case episodes started and **2,442** Single Assessments completed



1,278 child protection investigations were undertaken



256 Initial Child Protection Conferences were held



576 open Children in Need cases as of March 2026

Understanding safeguarding demand and performance remains an important part of the Partnership's assurance framework. During 2025-26, the Partnership strengthened its use of data to better understand safeguarding need, identify emerging risks and provide challenge regarding the



effectiveness of multi-agency responses. Effective information sharing is fundamental to safeguarding children and remains a key expectation within *Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026*. The guidance reinforces that timely, proportionate and lawful information sharing is essential to identifying risk, understanding children's lived experiences and enabling effective multi-agency decision-making. During 2025-26, the Partnership continued to promote a culture in which practitioners share information confidently and appropriately to safeguard children, recognising that no single agency holds a complete picture of a child's circumstances. Audit activity demonstrated positive examples of information sharing supporting safeguarding decision-making, while also identifying opportunities to further improve the timeliness and consistency of information exchange across agencies. Strengthening information sharing arrangements will remain a priority as the Partnership prepares for the implementation of Families First reforms and new Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements.

Safeguarding demand across Bedford Borough remains high and continues to exceed many statistical neighbour averages. During the reporting period, Children's Social Care received 11,936 contacts and progressed 2,955 referrals. A total of 1,342 Section 47 enquiries were undertaken and 254 Child Protection Plans commenced during the year. The number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan increased from 142 at the beginning of the reporting period to 188 at year end, reflecting continuing levels of complexity, risk and safeguarding need. Our performance data demonstrated that Bedfordshire Police were the most frequent referrer of safeguarding concerns and also the partner whose referrals were least likely to result in further action. A multi-agency audit specifically on Police Referrals was completed in July 2025 which identified that Bedfordshire police correctly identify children at the highest levels of need and risk but are less likely to triage effectively at lower level of need. This resulted in changes to the Police Quality Assurance of referrals and some joint triaging to improve outcomes.

Benchmarking information demonstrates that Bedford Borough experiences significantly higher levels of statutory safeguarding activity than many comparable authorities. The referral rate, assessment rate, Section 47 rate, Children in Need rate and Child Protection rate all remain above statistical neighbour averages. This indicates sustained pressure throughout the safeguarding system and reinforces the importance of effective early intervention, family help and robust child protection arrangements. The use of local and joint auditing has assisted in testing threshold and whilst threshold is secure in the vast majority of decisions the outcome of these can lead to an overuse of strategy meetings. This resulted in a program of auditing and training within Bedford Borough Council. This auditing continues on the improvement journey

4.1 Neglect and Cumulative Harm

Performance information continues to demonstrate that neglect remains the predominant safeguarding concern across Bedford Borough.

- Abuse and neglect account for 72% of open Children in Need cases.



- Neglect accounted for 56% of Child Protection Plans started during the reporting period.
- 59% of children currently subject to Child Protection Plans are on plans where neglect is the primary category of concern.

These findings align with learning identified through assurance activity, the 2025 Ofsted inspection, safeguarding reviews and the Partnership's own neglect improvement programme. They reinforce the decision to maintain neglect as a strategic priority and support the continued focus on cumulative harm, early identification, practitioner confidence and effective use of neglect assessment tools.

4.2 Equality, Diversity and Disproportionality Analysis

Bedford Borough is a diverse community and the demographic analysis highlights important differences in how children experience safeguarding and statutory children's services. Understanding these patterns is essential in ensuring that safeguarding services are equitable, culturally informed and responsive to the needs of all children and families.

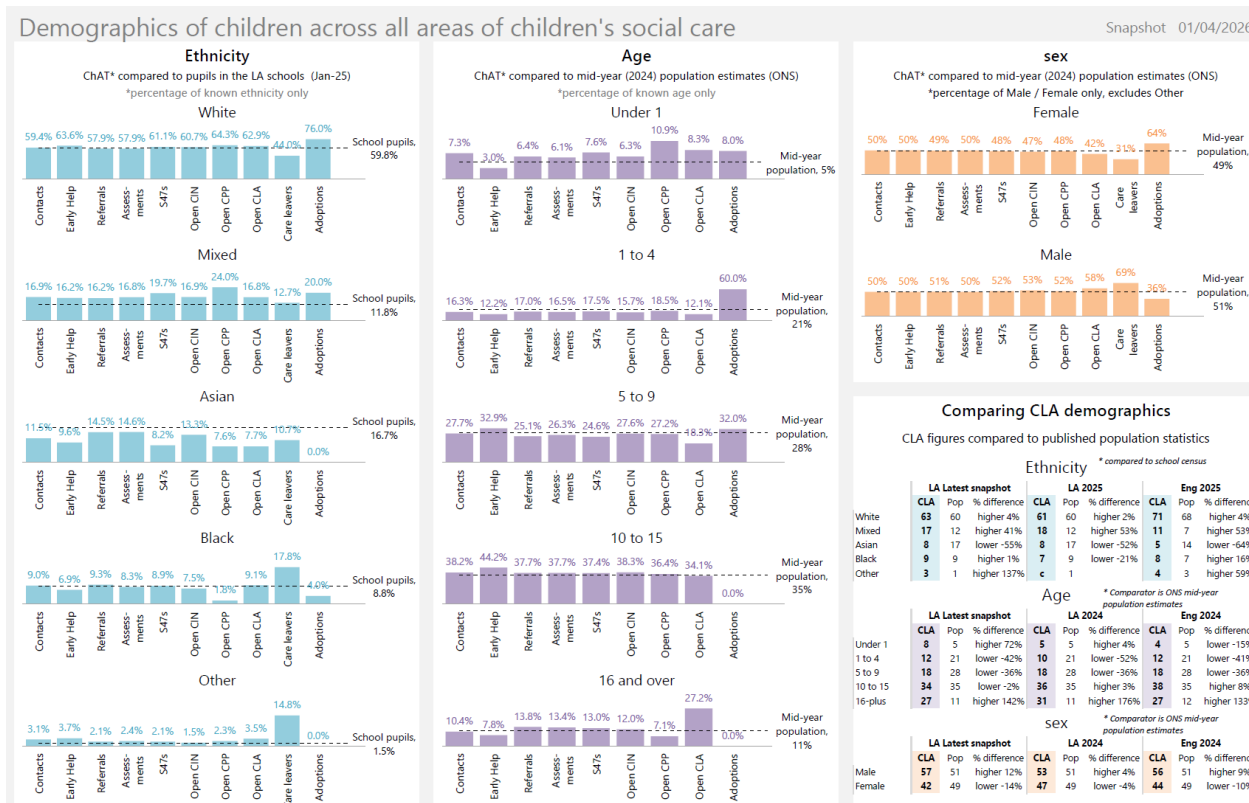


The data suggests that the overall ethnicity profile of children accessing safeguarding services broadly reflects the local population, but there are notable variations within specific groups. Children from Black ethnic backgrounds appear over-represented across much of the safeguarding system. Black children account for approximately 12% of the child population but represent higher proportions of contacts, referrals, assessments, Section 47 enquiries and Child Protection Plans. This suggests that Black children experience higher levels of statutory safeguarding intervention than would be expected based on their representation within the local population and warrants further exploration through quality assurance and performance activity.

By contrast, Asian children appear under-represented across most safeguarding measures. Whilst they represent approximately 35% of the local child population, they account for a smaller proportion of safeguarding activity. This may reflect differing patterns of need, service engagement or referral pathways and should be explored further to ensure that children and families can access support at the earliest opportunity.

Children from Mixed ethnic backgrounds are proportionately represented across much of the safeguarding system, whilst children from White ethnic backgrounds broadly reflect the local population profile.

The age profile demonstrates a clear over-representation of older children within statutory interventions. Children aged 16 and over represent a relatively small proportion of the local child population but account for a significantly larger proportion of children in care and care leavers. This





reflects the increasing complexity of adolescent safeguarding, exploitation, contextual safeguarding, youth violence and preparation for adulthood. It reinforces the need for strong multi-agency responses to the risks experienced by older children and young people.

Gender patterns are relatively balanced throughout most safeguarding activity, with boys representing a slightly higher proportion of Children in Need, Child Protection and Children Looked After cohorts. However, males account for a significantly higher proportion of care leavers. This may reflect the influence of older adolescent cohorts and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children within the care population.

The data also highlights the importance of considering the experiences of disabled children. Disabled children account for a significant proportion of open Children in Need cases, demonstrating their continued need for support and safeguarding services. Learning from audits and escalation activity has reinforced the need to ensure that the voices and lived experiences of disabled children are consistently understood and reflected within assessment, planning and decision-making.

The Partnership recognises that this data provides an important starting point rather than a definitive explanation of disproportionality. During 2026-27, the Partnership will strengthen its analysis of ethnicity, disability, age and gender within safeguarding activity, combining performance information with audit findings, review activity and the voices of children and families to better understand whether different groups experience different pathways, outcomes or barriers within the safeguarding system. This will support the Partnership's commitment to inclusive, culturally responsive and anti-discriminatory safeguarding practice and help ensure that services meet the needs of Bedford Borough's diverse communities.

4.2 Using Data to Drive Improvement

During 2025-26, the Partnership has moved away from using performance data solely as a measure of activity and towards using it as a source of learning, challenge and improvement. The Partnership has established a Performance Board led by the Executive Director of Children's Services to allow focus on key areas. Performance information is increasingly considered alongside:

- Multi-agency audits.
- Independent scrutiny.
- Learning from Rapid Reviews and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews.
- Feedback from children, young people and families.



- Workforce development evaluations.
- Practice assurance activity.

This approach supports the Partnership's ambition to better understand not only how much safeguarding activity is taking place, but whether that activity is making a positive difference to children's lives.

5. Inspection Activity, Learning from Review and Independent Scrutiny

5.1 The 2025 Ofsted ILACS Inspection and the Partnership Response

In July 2025, Ofsted's Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (ILACS) judged Bedford Borough Council Children's Services as Requires Improvement to be Good across all judgement areas. This represented a decline from the previous inspection in 2021, when services were judged Good across all areas. Inspectors concluded that, whilst many vulnerable children continue to receive effective support, the quality and consistency of practice had deteriorated in some areas as the service responded to increasing demand, workforce pressures, management capacity challenges and wider system pressures.

Importantly, Ofsted recognised that leaders had an increasingly accurate understanding of service performance and had taken effective action to strengthen arrangements within the Integrated Front Door. Inspectors also highlighted the breadth of Bedford's Early Help offer and acknowledged that many children and families were receiving effective support at the right time. The inspection also identified areas where partner agencies needed to strengthen their contribution to safeguarding arrangements.

From a safeguarding partnership perspective, the inspection findings have reinforced and validated a number of the priorities already identified within the Partnership's Strategic Plan. The findings regarding neglect were particularly significant. Ofsted highlighted the need for greater consistency in understanding and responding to children experiencing prolonged neglect and cumulative harm. This directly reflects learning identified through local audit activity, safeguarding review activity and performance data, all of which demonstrate that neglect remains the most prevalent safeguarding issue affecting children in Bedford Borough.

The most recent HMICFRS PEEL inspection, published in January 2025, judged Bedfordshire Police's performance in protecting vulnerable people as requiring continued improvement alongside wider challenges in policing demand and service delivery. However, HMICFRS recognised that



protecting vulnerable people remained a core area of focus for the force and that safeguarding responsibilities were embedded within force priorities.

Throughout 2025-26, Bedfordshire Police continued to play a significant role within strategic safeguarding arrangements, child exploitation activity, missing children governance, domestic abuse responses and multi-agency safeguarding hubs. Partnership audit activity identified positive contributions from police colleagues within risk assessment, domestic abuse screening and information sharing processes, particularly within front-door safeguarding arrangements.

The combined findings from both the 2025 ILACS inspection and police inspection activity emphasise the same overarching lesson: safeguarding effectiveness depends not only on individual agency performance, but on the quality of multi-agency partnership working, robust oversight, effective use of data and a shared understanding of children's lived experiences. These themes have therefore become central to the Partnership's improvement activity and priorities for 2026-27

5.1.1 Partnership Response During 2025-26

The safeguarding partnership has used the inspection findings to sharpen its focus on areas where collective action can make the greatest difference. During 2025-26 this included:

- Strengthening implementation of the Pan Bedfordshire Neglect Strategy.
- Improving assurance arrangements through multi-agency audits and performance dashboards.
- Increasing scrutiny of threshold decision-making and responses to cumulative harm.
- Establishing targeted improvement activity relating to neglect.
- Strengthening the use of performance information to understand outcomes rather than simply measure activity.
- Continuing to improve understanding of children's lived experiences through audits, review activity and participation work.
- All Safeguarding partners joined an improvement board to track actions across agencies emerging from the ILACS inspection



5.1.2 Evidence of Improvement During 2025-26

Whilst many of the inspection findings require sustained improvement over a number of years, there is evidence that progress was already underway during the reporting period. Multi-agency audit activity within the Integrated Front Door identified improved threshold understanding, better-quality referrals and stronger partnership communication. Assurance work also demonstrated a greater focus on identifying cumulative harm, providing professional challenge and strengthening managerial oversight. These improvements align with areas where Ofsted recognised that leaders had already taken effective action, particularly within front-door arrangements.

The Partnership also strengthened its performance and assurance framework through the introduction of enhanced scorecards, neglect datasets and more systematic scrutiny of safeguarding demand and outcomes. This responds directly to Ofsted's findings regarding the need for stronger performance management and quality assurance arrangements.

5.2 Learning from Local Review

Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership completed one Rapid Review during 2025-26 concerning long-term chronic neglect. The review identified themes that closely mirrored those raised by Ofsted, including cumulative harm, threshold decision-making, professional challenge, use of chronologies and understanding children's lived experiences. The review subsequently recommended a thematic Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review, which was endorsed by the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and will report during 2026-27. This provides an important opportunity for the Partnership to evaluate whether neglect improvement activity is delivering measurable improvements in practice and outcomes for children.

Safeguarding Partners hold a bi-monthly 'Case review Group' As part of the MASA arrangements. This allows for local learning and has oversight from the Independent Scrutineer. This group reviewed a number of cases for learning and these lead to practice changes, as an example the Sexual Abuse pathway was reviewed in all agencies as the result of local learning and the SARC service brought more closely in.

During 2025-26, the Partnership reviewed the use of professional challenge and formal escalation procedures to ensure concerns about children's safety and wellbeing are recognised, acted upon and used to improve practice. Four formal escalations were received during the year. Analysis identified recurring themes relating to neglect, drift and delay, communication between agencies and management oversight. Notably, two of the escalations involved disabled, non-verbal children, reinforcing wider learning about the vulnerability of children with disabilities and the importance of understanding children's lived experiences.



The Partnership recognised that formal escalation should be viewed as an important source of learning and assurance rather than simply a dispute-resolution process. As a result, the Pan Bedfordshire Escalation Procedure has been re-promoted across partner agencies and further work is planned to strengthen understanding of both professional challenge and escalation processes.

The Partnership also reviewed the effectiveness of the Pan Bedfordshire Child Exploitation Toolkit. Work undertaken with the University of Bedfordshire's Safer Young Lives Research Team identified opportunities to improve consistency, reduce duplication and strengthen the inclusion of children's lived experiences within exploitation assessments and safeguarding plans. This has informed ongoing development of trauma-informed practice and exploitation pathways.

5.2.1 Impact of Local Review

- Four formal escalations were reviewed, providing valuable learning regarding neglect, drift and delay, communication and management oversight.
- Learning reinforced the importance of understanding and responding to the lived experiences of disabled and non-verbal children.
- Escalation activity resulted in increased scrutiny, renewed safeguarding intervention and strengthened management oversight.
- The Pan Bedfordshire Escalation Procedure was promoted across partner agencies to strengthen professional challenge and safeguarding practice.
- Review of the Child Exploitation Toolkit identified opportunities to improve consistency, reduce duplication and strengthen trauma-informed practice.
- Emerging learning from the Jabril Child Safeguarding Practice Review has informed partnership discussions regarding cumulative harm, professional curiosity and multi-agency working.

The Partnership will seek assurance that the escalation procedure is fully embedded across partner agencies and will explore how informal challenge activity can be captured to provide a more complete understanding of professional challenge across the safeguarding system. Work will also continue to strengthen quality assurance arrangements and ensure learning from reviews, audits and escalations leads to measurable improvements in practice and outcomes for children and families.



5.3 Independent Scrutineers Report

The Independent Scrutineer for the Bedford Borough safeguarding Children's Partnership is Sally Rowe. Sally is an experienced senior leader in Children's Services and is formally a Director of Children's Services and Ofsted. Her report is as follows:

As the Independent Scrutineer, I have continued to provide independent challenge and assurance to the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership throughout 2025-26. The scrutiny role has focused on testing whether the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements are sufficiently effective, whether partners can demonstrate collective grip on key risks, and whether the Partnership can evidence the difference its work is making to children, young people and families.

During the year, scrutiny has been provided through attendance at strategic partnership meetings, review of assurance and performance information, contribution to learning and improvement discussions, and challenge in relation to key safeguarding priorities. This has included neglect, child sexual abuse, exploitation and missing children, domestic abuse, workforce development, participation, escalation and professional challenge, and preparedness for national reform including Families First and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026. While these arrangements provide a framework for oversight, scrutiny has also identified that evidence of impact is not yet consistently strong across all areas of partnership activity.

A recurring theme from scrutiny has been that the Partnership still needs to move more decisively from describing activity to demonstrating impact. This report contains evidence of extensive safeguarding work, including workforce development, operational collaboration and work on priority areas. However, activity alone does not provide sufficient assurance that practice has changed or that children's lived experiences have improved. The Partnership should be more explicit about what has changed because of its work, how it knows this, and what remains unresolved.

Scrutiny has identified areas of strength, including continued commitment to multi-agency working, willingness to engage in partnership learning and a broad programme of workforce development. There is also some evidence of progress in relation to neglect, child sexual abuse, domestic abuse and participation. However, the Partnership should avoid over-reliance on attendance data, and process completion as indicators of effectiveness. Stronger assurance is needed that learning is embedded in frontline practice, that practitioners consistently use agreed tools and pathways, and that improvements are visible in direct work with children and families.

Independent scrutiny has also highlighted several areas where further challenge is required. These include the quality and consistency of performance information, the limited evidence of outcomes for children, the need for clearer assurance that learning from reviews and audits is changing practice, and the need to strengthen how children's voices influence strategic decision-making. The gap in strategic governance arrangements for exploitation, missing children and contextual safeguarding during the year has been a particular concern and should be treated as



more than an administrative issue; it has implications for accountability, escalation, oversight of emerging harm and the Partnership's ability to demonstrate strategic grip.

The scrutiny role provides some assurance that partners are engaged and that the Partnership is reflective. However, the level of evidence currently available does not yet allow for a fully confident judgement that partnership work is consistently leading to measurable improvement for children. The Partnership's self-awareness is positive, but it now needs to be matched by sharper improvement planning, clearer ownership of actions, more robust performance reporting and stronger evidence of sustained change in practice.

During 2026-27, independent scrutiny should maintain a clear focus on testing impact, not simply monitoring activity. Key areas requiring continued challenge include implementation of Families First reforms, the effectiveness of neglect improvement activity, delivery of the Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy, the re-establishment and effectiveness of exploitation and missing governance arrangements, and the development of clearer outcome measures across partnership work. Scrutiny should also test whether actions agreed through boards and subgroups are completed, evaluated and translated into improved safeguarding practice.

Overall, independent scrutiny concludes that the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership has made progress during 2025-26, but that progress is uneven and the evidence of impact remains underdeveloped. The Partnership has maintained commitment work across a broad safeguarding agenda, but it must now demonstrate greater discipline in evaluating whether that activity is improving practice and outcomes. The challenge for 2026-27 is to strengthen accountability, close gaps in strategic oversight, evidence the impact of learning and assurance work, and show more clearly how partnership work is improving the lived experiences of children, young people and families.

6. Key Achievements and Challenges 2025-26

5.1 Key Achievements

- **Implementation of the Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy**



- Strengthened partnership responses to child sexual abuse through improved workforce development, development of consistent pathways and enhanced strategic oversight across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton.
- **Improved Family Help and Early Intervention Outcomes**
 - Increased use of Early Help Assessments, reduced escalation into Children's Social Care and supported more children and families to receive help at the earliest opportunity.
- **Strengthened Responses to Domestic Abuse**
 - Implemented the Safe and Together approach, strengthened MARAC arrangements and developed the Bedford Borough Domestic Abuse Strategy 2026-2031 to improve support for children and families affected by domestic abuse.
- **Improved Neglect Oversight and Governance**
 - Strengthened partnership oversight through development of neglect datasets, implementation of the Stop, Think: Neglect campaign and establishment of a dedicated Neglect Task and Finish Group.
- **Increased Participation of Children and Young People**
 - Children and young people influenced service development, community safety discussions, SEND priorities and local safeguarding activity through Pupil Voice Conferences, SEND participation work and wider engagement programmes.
- **Strengthened Independent Scrutiny and Assurance**
 - Further developed performance and assurance arrangements, increased challenge through independent scrutiny and strengthened oversight of safeguarding practice and partnership effectiveness.
- **Improved Pan Bedfordshire Learning and Improvement Arrangements**
 - The Pan Bedfordshire Assurance and Improvement Group strengthened oversight of safeguarding reviews, audits and learning activity across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton.



6.2 Key Challenges

- **Consistently Improving Outcomes:**
 - The Partnership has made significant progress in delivering its strategic priorities during 2025-26. The next stage of development is to strengthen outcome-focused assurance, enabling partners to demonstrate more consistently how multi-agency activity is improving the safety, experiences and outcomes of children, young people and their families.
- **Exploitation, Missing Children and Contextual Safeguarding**
 - Operational arrangements remain strong, however strategic governance and performance oversight arrangements require further strengthening.
- **Families First and Working Together 2026**
 - National reforms will require significant organisational, cultural and operational change across the safeguarding partnership.
- **Increasing Demand and Complexity**
 - Partners continue to experience increasing demand across safeguarding services in areas including neglect, domestic abuse, exploitation, mental health and SEND.
- **Workforce Capacity**
 - Recruitment, retention and workforce pressures continue to present challenges across the safeguarding system.
- **Voice of Children and Young People**
 - Although participation has strengthened, further work is required to demonstrate how children's views consistently influence strategic planning and service improvement.
- **Earlier Support for Children and Families**
 - Partners have continued to strengthen Family Help, Family Hubs, trauma-informed practice, domestic abuse responses and multi-agency support arrangements to ensure children receive support at the earliest possible opportunity.



7. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements and Governance

The BBSCP continues to operate robust Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements in line with statutory guidance. The Strategic Board provides leadership and oversight, supported by the Performance Group, Case Review Group and Pan Bedfordshire Assurance and Improvement Group.

An independent review of safeguarding arrangements was commissioned and completed during the year. The review considered the effectiveness of existing governance arrangements and explored options for future partnership structures across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton. Consideration of the recommendations will continue during 2026-27.

7.1 Policy, Procedures and Practice Guidance

Access to clear, up-to-date safeguarding guidance remains a key component of effective multi-agency safeguarding practice. Throughout 2025-26, safeguarding partners continued to benefit from the extensive range of policies, procedures, practice tools and learning resources available through the Safeguarding Bedfordshire website and Pan Bedfordshire procedures framework: <https://bedfordscp.trixonline.co.uk/>.

The Pan Bedfordshire safeguarding procedures provide practitioners with a comprehensive library of multi-agency guidance covering the full range of safeguarding issues, including child protection, neglect, child sexual abuse, exploitation, domestic abuse, contextual safeguarding, information sharing, escalation and professional challenge, children missing from home or care, safeguarding children with disabilities, online safety, forced marriage, honour-based abuse and many other areas of practice.

Alongside statutory procedures, practitioners have access to a wide range of practice resources and toolkits designed to support effective decision making and improve consistency across agencies. These include neglect assessment tools, Graded Care Profile 2 resources, child sexual abuse guidance, exploitation pathways, escalation procedures, learning briefings, audit tools and thematic practice resources.

The Safeguarding Bedfordshire website continues to act as a central knowledge hub for the children's workforce, providing easy access to procedures, workforce development opportunities, learning materials, briefing documents and partnership campaigns. During 2025-26, the website received more than 454,000 visits, demonstrating its importance as a resource supporting safeguarding practice across Bedford Borough.

The Partnership recognises that the availability of high-quality procedures and guidance alone does not improve outcomes for children. Consequently, assurance activity has increasingly focused on understanding whether practitioners are aware of, accessing and applying guidance consistently in day-to-day practice. Future assurance work will continue to explore how the wealth of available guidance translates into effective safeguarding interventions and improved experiences for children and families



7.2 Pan Bedfordshire Assurance and Improvement Group

The Pan Bedfordshire Assurance and Improvement Group was established to strengthen oversight of multi-agency assurance activity across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton. During 2024-2025 the Group provided a coordinated approach to identifying learning, monitoring progress against agreed actions and supporting continuous improvement across the partnership landscape.

The Group has overseen delivery of recommendations arising from Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, Rapid Reviews, multi-agency audits and national reviews. It has also strengthened links between the three Safeguarding Children Partnerships, helping to ensure learning is shared and applied consistently across the Pan Bedfordshire footprint.

A key development during the year was the revision of the Group's Terms of Reference and the transition from the Pan Bedfordshire Coordinating Group to the Pan Bedfordshire Assurance and Improvement Group. This better reflects the Group's role in driving assurance, monitoring improvement activity and providing oversight of Pan Bedfordshire safeguarding priorities.

The Group has also maintained oversight of the work of Pan Bedfordshire thematic groups, including Neglect, Child Sexual Abuse, Exploitation and Missing Children, Voice of the Child and Safeguarding in Education. This has strengthened accountability and provided greater visibility of both progress and emerging risks.

Key Areas of Focus During 2025-2026

- Monitoring implementation of recommendations arising from Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and Rapid Reviews.
- Strengthening oversight of Pan Bedfordshire priority workstreams.
- Supporting development of the Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy.
- Monitoring progress of the Pan Bedfordshire Neglect Strategy and associated campaigns.
- Strengthening arrangements for learning dissemination across the three partnerships.
- Improving links between audit activity, review findings and strategic decision making.
- Supporting development of shared policies, procedures and practitioner guidance.



What Difference Has This Made?

- Greater consistency in how learning from reviews and audits is monitored and embedded across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton.
- Improved oversight of multi-agency action plans and recommendations.
- Stronger coordination between Pan Bedfordshire safeguarding groups.
- Increased focus on evidencing the impact of safeguarding activity on outcomes for children and young people.
- Improved escalation of emerging safeguarding issues and risks to strategic leaders.
- Enhanced opportunities for shared learning and development across the three partnerships.

Areas for Further Development

The Group recognises that further work is required during 2025-2026 to strengthen the use of partnership data and performance information, demonstrate impact more consistently, and ensure learning from reviews and audits continues to influence frontline practice and strategic planning

7.3 Funding

The BBSCP budget is provided by the three safeguarding partner agencies below and Probation and their percentage contributions are based on previous years. Work to review the budget and establish equitable contributions is in progress. The funding is used to directly support the work of the BBSCP and the expenditure for 2025/2026 covered the Business Manager's salary, Scrutineer costs, a proportion of the training teams salaries, shared costs towards the Pan Bedfordshire Child Protection procedures and Safeguarding website, contribution to the Voluntary Organisations for Children Young People and Families and miscellaneous costs which totalled the budget available below.

Agency	Agreed Contribution 2025 – 2026
Bedford Borough Council	£62,174
Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Board	£62,663



Bedfordshire Police	£18,300
National Probation Service	£2200

8. Workforce Development and Learning

The Partnership continued to contribute to the Pan Bedfordshire multi-agency safeguarding training programme during 2025/26, supporting practitioners across Bedford Borough to develop their safeguarding knowledge and practice. Attendance by Bedford Borough agencies continued to improve, with participation from Bedford Borough Council increasing from 34 attendees in 2022/23 to 66 in 2025/26. Attendance from Bedford early years providers doubled over the same period, increasing from 23 to 46 attendees, whilst participation from Bedford education settings increased from 117 to 166 attendees. Whilst engagement has improved, attendance remains lower than neighbouring partnership areas and increasing participation continues to be a focus for the Partnership.

Training was delivered across a range of safeguarding themes, including Working Together to Safeguard Children, Child Sexual Abuse, Domestic Abuse, Professional Curiosity, Information Sharing and Neglect. Evaluation feedback remained consistently positive, with an overall satisfaction rate of 99%. Practitioners reported increased confidence in applying safeguarding procedures, improved understanding of thresholds and multi-agency working, and greater confidence in recognising, recording and escalating safeguarding concerns.

Feedback from Bedford Borough practitioners demonstrated the impact of learning on practice. A Bedford Early Years Manager reported sharing learning from the Working Together programme within their setting to strengthen understanding of multi-agency safeguarding responsibilities. A Bedford SENDCo highlighted increased confidence in safeguarding responsibilities and partnership working, and a Bedford Attendance Officer described how training had improved confidence in identifying need, supporting vulnerable children and reducing barriers to learning.

Whilst participant feedback demonstrates positive learning outcomes, the Partnership recognises the need to strengthen arrangements for evidencing the longer-term impact of training on practice and outcomes for children. Work is underway during 2026/27 to improve impact evaluation and further increase engagement from Bedford Borough agencies



8.1. Learning from Audits and Assurance Activity

Multi-agency audit activity has played a significant role in strengthening safeguarding practice across Bedford Borough during 2025-26. The Partnership's audit programme has provided a structured mechanism for testing the effectiveness of multi-agency working, evaluating decision-making and identifying areas where practice requires improvement.

Audit activity has demonstrated positive progress in several key areas. Practitioners showed greater consistency in the application of thresholds, improved referral quality and stronger information sharing between agencies. Audits also identified examples of effective partnership working where agencies collaborated to understand risk, make timely decisions and respond appropriately to safeguarding concerns.

Importantly, audit findings have provided valuable insight into areas where improvement is still required. Recurring themes included the need to strengthen recognition of cumulative harm, improve the use of chronologies, enhance the quality of analysis and ensure that children's lived experiences are more consistently reflected in assessments and plans. Audit activity also highlighted the importance of effective management oversight and timely progression of safeguarding processes.

The impact of the audit programme extends beyond identifying strengths and weaknesses. Findings have directly informed workforce development, quality assurance activity, performance scrutiny and strategic improvement planning. Audit outcomes have been used to shape learning events, develop practice guidance and influence the Partnership's priorities, particularly in relation to neglect and cumulative harm.

As a result, audit activity has become an increasingly important source of assurance, enabling partners to move beyond measuring activity and towards understanding the quality and effectiveness of safeguarding practice and its impact on children and families.

9. Voice of Children, Young People and Families

The Partnership continues to place the voice of children, young people and families at the heart of safeguarding practice.



Health partners have strengthened co-production arrangements which have enabled children and young people to influence service design, transformation planning and safeguarding responses. Children and young people have contributed to the development of health services, Children in Care arrangements and local transformation plans.

Public Health has continued to engage children and young people through health and wellbeing surveys and participation activity. Young people have helped shape survey design and will contribute directly to the interpretation and implementation of findings.

The importance of hearing children's lived experiences continues to be reinforced through safeguarding training, audits and reviews.

During 2025-26, the Partnership received feedback from over 130 children and young people with SEND through a range of engagement activities including "My Reviews", "My Tech" and the Shout Out to SEND Conference. Children and young people reported positive experiences of inclusion and support within schools and identified trusted adults they could approach for help and advice. They also highlighted areas requiring further improvement, including greater involvement in SEND reviews and decision-making, increased opportunities for inclusive activities, improved support during changes to routines and continued action to address bullying. The findings have informed SEND partnership priorities and ongoing service development.

9.1 Pupil Voice Conferences

Bedford Borough Council and partners hosted both Primary and Secondary Pupil Voice Conferences, providing children and young people with opportunities to share their views on living in Bedford Borough, community safety, education, health, wellbeing and future developments within the local area.

Children and young people consistently highlighted the importance of feeling safe, being listened to and having opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives. Discussions about the proposed Universal development demonstrated a balanced perspective, with participants welcoming the potential for employment opportunities, investment and leisure facilities whilst also expressing concerns about traffic, environmental impact, affordability and community wellbeing.

Across both conferences, the key priorities identified by children and young people were:

- Feeling safe within their communities, schools and public spaces.



- Tackling bullying, discrimination and anti-social behaviour.
- Ensuring children's voices influence decision-making.
- Access to safe and inclusive places to socialise and participate in activities.
- Improved mental health and emotional wellbeing support.
- Access to healthy lifestyles, education and positive opportunities.

Secondary-aged pupils also highlighted concerns relating to knife crime, homelessness, environmental issues and the need for increased activities and facilities for young people.

The conferences provided direct opportunities for children and young people to engage with senior representatives from Bedford Borough Council, Bedfordshire Police, health partners and the Universal development team, asking questions and challenging agencies on issues that mattered to them.

Alongside highlighting challenges, children and young people demonstrated resilience, optimism and a strong commitment to improving their communities. The feedback has informed ongoing work relating to the Child Friendly Bedford programme, community safety priorities, youth participation and wider safeguarding activity.

What difference has this made?

- Children and young people have directly influenced local discussions regarding community safety, environmental issues and future developments within Bedford Borough.
- Feedback has informed Child Friendly Bedford, youth engagement and community safety workstreams.
- Safeguarding partners have gained a better understanding of the issues that matter most to children and young people, including safety, mental health, discrimination and access to positive activities.
- Stronger relationships have been developed between children, young people and local decision-makers, reinforcing the importance of participation and co-production in shaping services and future priorities.



9.2 Voice, Participation and Impact

The Partnership receives regular feedback from children and young people through a range of participation activities, including the Youth Cabinet, Children in Care Council, surveys, focus groups and targeted engagement work. These opportunities provide valuable insight into children's experiences, priorities and concerns and help ensure that safeguarding arrangements remain informed by the voices of those they are intended to protect.

9.3 Listening, Responding and Demonstrating Impact

To ensure feedback leads to meaningful change, the Partnership has strengthened its approach to capturing not only what children and young people tell us, but also what happens as a result. Through the **"They Said - So What"** approach, services are encouraged to consider how children and young people's views influence decision-making, service development and practice improvement.

Feedback received from children and young people highlighted a range of themes, including mental health and emotional wellbeing, feeling safe in their communities, relationships with trusted adults, support in education settings and access to services. Children consistently emphasised the importance of being listened to, treated with respect and feeling involved in decisions that affect them.

The Partnership recognises that gathering views alone is not enough. A continuing priority is ensuring that children and young people receive feedback about what has changed because of their participation. Strengthening the connection between participation activity, service improvement and evidence of impact remains an important area of development and will continue to inform partnership activity during 2026-27.

10. Impact on Priorities

10.1 Neglect

Neglect remained a key safeguarding priority during 2025-26. The Partnership continued to implement the Pan Bedfordshire Neglect Strategy, strengthen practitioner understanding of neglect and cumulative harm, and promote the distinction between poverty and neglect through workforce development, quality assurance and multi-agency learning.

During the year, partners increasingly focused on whether learning was translating into improved practice. Assurance activity identified that whilst awareness of neglect was improving, the use of assessment tools such as the Graded Care Profile 2 (GCP2) was not always reflected consistently in



frontline practice. In response, the Partnership strengthened management oversight, supported improved implementation of neglect tools and promoted a shared understanding that neglect is a multi-agency responsibility.

A significant focus was placed on improving the identification of cumulative harm, embedding neglect assessment within supervision and decision-making, and developing performance measures to support stronger oversight. The Partnership also delivered the Pan Bedfordshire Stop, Think: Neglect campaign, which included webinars, practitioner learning, lived experience input and resources covering themes such as affluent neglect, educational neglect, medical neglect and exploitation.

Learning from audits, assurance activity and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews informed a programme of improvement focused on strengthening the use of neglect tools, improving front door responses and ensuring neglect interventions achieve meaningful change for children.

Impact

- Improved strategic oversight through the development of neglect datasets and performance measures.
- Increased focus on the effective use of neglect assessment tools and management oversight.
- Greater recognition of neglect as a shared multi-agency responsibility.
- Learning from reviews, audits and assurance activity informed neglect improvement work.
- The Stop, Think: Neglect campaign increased workforce awareness and understanding of neglect across a range of contexts.
- A dedicated Neglect Task and Finish approach was established to address implementation barriers and improve consistency of practice across the partnership.

Areas for Further Development

The Partnership recognises that further work is required to ensure the consistent use of neglect assessment tools across all agencies and to strengthen understanding of the impact of interventions on children's lived experiences. During 2026-27, partners will continue to develop performance measures, strengthen management oversight and seek greater assurance that neglect interventions are resulting in sustainable improvements for children and families.



10.2 Family Help and Early Intervention

Partners continued to strengthen early intervention and family support arrangements in preparation for the Families First reforms and Working Together 2026. The partnership has remained focused on ensuring children and families receive help at the earliest opportunity, reducing escalation into statutory services and improving outcomes through coordinated multi-agency support.

The use of Early Help continued to increase, with 1,091 Early Help Assessments completed during the year compared with 871 in the previous year. Evidence suggests these interventions are helping to prevent escalation, with only 15 of 721 children receiving Early Help support subsequently requiring Children's Social Care involvement. During the same period, 372 families involving 474 children were successfully stepped down from Children's Social Care to Early Help or universal services.

The Integrated Front Door continued to promote earlier intervention, with more than a quarter of contacts resulting in Early Help or Team Around the Family support rather than statutory intervention. Outcome data also demonstrated positive impact, with 82.9% of closed Early Help cases achieving all or part of their intended outcomes.

Family Hubs continued to play a significant role within the early intervention offer, recording almost 30,000 registrations across Bedford Borough. Engagement was strongest within more deprived communities, where 80% of children under three were registered with Family Hubs. Outcome Star assessments demonstrated improvements in children's learning, emotional wellbeing, behaviour and family routines, while parent feedback highlighted increased confidence and a better understanding of children's needs.

Parent support remained a key strength, with 88 parenting groups and workshops delivered to 472 parents and carers covering parenting skills, SEND, emotional wellbeing and family relationships. Early years outcomes also improved, with funded childcare uptake increasing significantly and Bedford Borough achieving the highest proportion of Outstanding or Strong Ofsted outcomes amongst its statistical neighbours.

Impact

- 1,091 Early Help Assessments completed, representing a 25% increase on the previous year.
- Only 15 of 721 children receiving Early Help support escalated to Children's Social Care.
- 372 families involving 474 children successfully stepped down from Children's Social Care to Early Help or universal services.
- 82.9% of closed Early Help cases achieved all or part of their intended outcomes.



- More than 25% of contacts to the Integrated Front Door resulted in Early Help or Team Around the Family support.
- NEET or Not Known rates reduced from 8.1% to 5.1%, with participation in education and training increasing to 94.4%.
- Family Hubs recorded 29,439 registrations, including 80% of children under three living in the most deprived communities.
- Positive outcomes were recorded in children's learning (78%), emotional wellbeing (69%), behaviour (70%) and family routines (66%).
- 88 parenting programmes and workshops were delivered to 472 parents and carers.
- Funded early years uptake increased to 91.2%, with Bedford Borough ranked first amongst its statistical neighbours.

Areas for Further Development

The Partnership will continue to strengthen evaluation of the effectiveness of Family Help interventions and their longer-term impact on outcomes for children and families. Focus will be placed on preparing for Families First reforms, developing outcome measures and ensuring that children and families continue to receive timely support through coordinated multi-agency arrangements.

10.3 Child Sexual Abuse

Improving the response to Child Sexual Abuse remained a strategic priority during 2025-26. Following completion of the NSPCC Child Sexual Abuse Snapshot, partners developed and implemented a Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and Action Plan to strengthen prevention, identification, assessment, support and workforce development across Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Luton.

Partners worked collaboratively to develop a more coordinated response to Child Sexual Abuse through dedicated workstreams focusing on workforce development, data and performance, public awareness, prevention activity and responses to Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Problematic Sexual Behaviour. This has strengthened partnership ownership and strategic oversight of Child Sexual Abuse across the safeguarding system.

Workforce capability was enhanced through dedicated Child Sexual Abuse and Technology Assisted Child Sexual Abuse training, attended by 108 practitioners. Evaluation demonstrated a significant increase in confidence and understanding, with 99% of participants rating their knowledge as good or above following training.

Additional practitioner resources were developed, including a dedicated Child Sexual Abuse section on the Safeguarding Bedfordshire website, specialist guidance and learning materials. Partnerships also strengthened links with the NSPCC, Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, Sexual



Assault Referral Centres, Youth Justice Services and voluntary sector organisations to improve responses to emerging issues such as online abuse, technology-facilitated abuse and harmful sexual behaviour.

Work also commenced on a Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Commissioning Strategy to identify gaps in provision and strengthen support pathways for children, young people and families.

Impact

- A Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and Action Plan was developed and implemented.
- 108 practitioners completed specialist Child Sexual Abuse and Technology Assisted Child Sexual Abuse training.
- Practitioner confidence and understanding increased significantly following training.
- A dedicated Child Sexual Abuse resource hub and supporting practice guidance were developed through Safeguarding Bedfordshire.
- Partnership understanding of online abuse, technology-facilitated abuse, AI-generated abuse material and harmful sexual behaviour was strengthened.
- Work commenced to establish consistent Pan Bedfordshire pathways, assessment tools and training for Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Problematic Sexual Behaviour.

Areas for Further Development

Whilst significant progress has been made, further work is required to strengthen data collection, analytical oversight and evidence of outcomes for children affected by Child Sexual Abuse. The Partnership will continue to develop pathways relating to Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Problematic Sexual Behaviour, improve performance reporting and strengthen support for children, young people and families.

10.4 Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing

Partners have continued to strengthen emotional wellbeing support and trauma-informed safeguarding practice.

Health partners developed innovative approaches including Trauma Panels which improved multi-agency oversight and safeguarding responses for vulnerable children.



ELFT strengthened safeguarding supervision, workforce development and Think Family practice, supporting professionals to respond more effectively to children affected by adversity and trauma.

Public Health has continued to coordinate suicide prevention activity and support emotional wellbeing within education settings and communities.

Impact

- Trauma Panel arrangements improved multi-agency oversight of children experiencing multiple vulnerabilities.
- Health partners strengthened trauma-informed practice and Think Family approaches across services.
- Increased workforce awareness of the impact of trauma and adversity on children's wellbeing and safeguarding needs.
- Emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention activity continued across education settings and communities.

Areas for Further Development

The Partnership recognises the need to strengthen evidence of the impact of trauma-informed safeguarding approaches and emotional wellbeing interventions. Future work will focus on developing outcome measures, improving access to early support and strengthening understanding of children's mental health needs across the safeguarding system.

10.5 Exploitation, Missing and Contextual Safeguarding

The implementation of the Philomena Protocol, continued development of Operation Encompass and close working with the Violence and Exploitation Prevention Partnership (VEPP) strengthened safeguarding responses and information sharing across agencies. Intelligence sharing remained a key strength, with Multi-Agency Information Submission Forms supporting the identification of risk, emerging themes and safeguarding interventions. Cross-border working with neighbouring authorities and police forces also contributed to coordinated responses for children vulnerable to exploitation.

Specialist services continued to play an important role. Link to Change provided targeted support to children affected by exploitation, whilst Operation Makesafe helped strengthen awareness and safeguarding responses within local businesses and community settings.



During the year, partners also recognised the need to strengthen strategic governance arrangements for exploitation and missing children. Work commenced to develop revised Pan Bedfordshire governance arrangements to improve strategic leadership, oversight and accountability during 2026-27.

Impact

- Bedfordshire Police engaged over 59,000 children and young people through prevention and diversionary activity, including over 121,000 educational contacts through Pol-Ed and more than 9,000 through the Lost Boys campaign.
- Multi-agency partners maintained coordinated responses to children vulnerable to criminal and sexual exploitation and those experiencing repeated missing episodes.
- Between April and June 2026, partners submitted 891 Multi-Agency Information Forms, generating 615 intelligence logs to support safeguarding and disruption activity.
- Link to Change continued to provide specialist support through one-to-one interventions, group work and preventative education.
- Operation Makesafe strengthened community awareness and safeguarding responses within local businesses and community settings.
- Cross-border partnership working improved the response to children vulnerable to exploitation across local authority boundaries.

Areas for Further Development

Further work is required to strengthen strategic governance, analytical oversight, performance reporting and evidence of impact in relation to exploitation, missing children and contextual safeguarding.

10.6 SEND

Partners have continued to improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND through partnership working, quality assurance, participation and workforce development.

Public Health reports continued work to improve wellbeing, access to services and support for children with additional needs and their families.

The needs and vulnerabilities of children with SEND continue to be recognised throughout safeguarding planning and service delivery.



Children and young people with SEND have directly influenced service development through engagement activity focused on participation, inclusion and support arrangements. Feedback highlighted positive experiences of inclusion and support within schools whilst also identifying priorities for further development, including involvement in reviews, access to inclusive activities and action to tackle bullying.

The SEND Partnership strengthened quality assurance arrangements throughout 2025-26. Audit activity identified opportunities to improve the consistency and quality of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), strengthen implementation monitoring and increase multi-agency oversight. Work commenced to develop improved quality assurance tools, dashboards and auditing arrangements to support continuous improvement.

Education partners continued to strengthen support for schools through SEND reviews, SENCO collaboration events, governor engagement and development of a new SEND Evaluation Toolkit. School visits identified strong inclusive practice, effective leadership and good use of external support, whilst findings from quality assurance activity informed future workforce development and support.

Health partners continued to improve the quality of contributions to EHCPs through workforce development and audit activity. More than 90 practitioners accessed SEND training during the year. Multi-agency audits identified improvements in the quality and consistency of health advice, whilst co-produced training and development activity helped strengthen understanding of outcomes-focused practice and the voice of the child.

Impact

- More than 130 children and young people with SEND contributed directly to participation and service improvement activity.
- Children's views and experiences increasingly informed SEND planning, review processes and partnership priorities.
- Quality assurance arrangements for EHCPs were strengthened through enhanced audit and oversight activity.
- SEND leaders and SENCOs received additional support, collaboration opportunities and access to new evaluation tools designed to improve inclusion and educational outcomes.
- More than 90 health practitioners accessed SEND workforce development opportunities, supporting improvements in the quality of health advice and outcomes-focused practice.

Areas for Further Development

Whilst positive progress has been made during 2025-26, partners recognise that further work is required to strengthen outcomes and experiences for children and young people with SEND.



Key areas for development during 2026-27 include:

- Continuing to strengthen the quality and consistency of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), ensuring plans are outcome-focused, reflect the voice of the child and lead to measurable improvements in children's lives.

10.7 Domestic Abuse

Domestic abuse continues to be a significant safeguarding issue affecting children, young people and families across Bedford Borough. During 2025-26, partners worked together to strengthen identification, information sharing, risk assessment and support arrangements whilst preparing for implementation of the Bedford Borough Domestic Abuse Strategy 2026-2031.

A key development was the implementation of the Safe and Together model, promoting a child-centred approach that recognises children as victims of domestic abuse, supports the non-abusive parent and places responsibility for abuse with the perpetrator. Eighty practitioners from a range of agencies completed Safe and Together training, helping to strengthen a shared understanding of domestic abuse, coercive control and children's lived experiences.

Multi-agency responses to high-risk domestic abuse were further strengthened through MARAC arrangements, with 314 high-risk cases discussed during the year. Of these, 160 involved children living in the household, representing at least 319 children affected by domestic abuse. Revised MARAC arrangements improved information sharing, attendance and decision-making, supporting more timely interventions for high-risk families.

Specialist support services continued to play an important role. The IDVA service received 279 referrals, whilst 108 children identified through MARAC were referred to the EMBRACE KIDVA service for direct support. Ofsted also recognised the effective use of domestic abuse risk assessment tools across the partnership, whilst identifying the need to further improve the timeliness of some domestic abuse notifications shared with the Integrated Front Door.

Partners also contributed to the development of the Bedford Borough Domestic Abuse Strategy 2026-2031, which will provide a framework for future prevention, early intervention, support and recovery work.

Impact

- 314 high-risk domestic abuse cases were discussed through MARAC.
- 160 MARAC cases involved children within the household, representing at least 319 children affected by domestic abuse.



- The IDVA service received 279 referrals.
- 108 children were referred to the high-risk KIDVA service for direct support.
- 80 practitioners completed Safe and Together training, strengthening multi-agency understanding of domestic abuse and children's lived experiences.
- Revised MARAC arrangements improved information sharing, professional engagement and the timeliness of safeguarding responses.
- Children's experiences were increasingly reflected within domestic abuse assessments and safety planning.
- Ofsted recognised the effective use of domestic abuse risk assessment tools across the partnership.
- Domestic Abuse Navigator services were introduced through VEPP to support young people affected by violence and abuse.
- Learning from inspection activity has informed ongoing improvements to domestic abuse information sharing and notification processes.

Areas for Further Development

The Partnership recognises that further work is required to strengthen performance reporting and demonstrate longer-term outcomes for children affected by domestic abuse. Improving data collection, information sharing and outcome measures will remain a priority under the Domestic Abuse Strategy 2026-2031.

11. Challenges and Areas for Further Development

11.1 Consistently Improving Outcomes

The Partnership has made significant progress in strengthening workforce development, assurance arrangements, governance and multi-agency working. However, a continuing challenge remains demonstrating the impact of partnership activity on outcomes for children, young people and families. Whilst evidence can often be if training has been delivered, recommendations completed and actions progressed, it is more difficult to demonstrate whether those activities have resulted in sustained improvements in practice and positive changes to children's lived experiences.



During 2025-26, the Partnership increasingly focused on moving beyond measuring activity towards understanding effectiveness. Through audits, reviews, performance information and assurance activity, partners have challenged themselves to better understand what difference safeguarding arrangements are making for children and families. This work will continue during 2026-27 through the further development of performance frameworks, assurance arrangements, outcome measures and impact reporting.

11.2 Exploitation, Missing Children and Contextual Safeguarding

Whilst operational arrangements to safeguard children at risk of exploitation and those who go missing remained active throughout 2025-26, the Partnership identified weaknesses within strategic governance and oversight arrangements. Changes to existing Pan Bedfordshire governance structures and the loss of dedicated business support reduced opportunities for strategic challenge, performance oversight and partnership accountability.

Partners remain concerned about the ongoing risks posed by child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, county lines activity and wider contextual safeguarding concerns. Whilst multi-agency safeguarding responses remain strong, further work is required to strengthen governance, improve performance reporting and ensure strategic oversight arrangements provide sufficient assurance regarding the effectiveness of partnership responses.

The appointment of a Pan Bedfordshire Exploitation Co-ordinator provides an opportunity to strengthen governance arrangements, improve partnership oversight and support delivery of a more coordinated strategic response during 2026-27.

11.3 Families First and Working Together 2026

The implementation of Families First reforms and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 represents one of the most significant system changes facing safeguarding partners. During 2025-26, partners began preparing for these reforms and considering how family help, safeguarding, early intervention and multi-agency working arrangements will develop over coming years.

Delivering these changes whilst maintaining a strong focus on safeguarding effectiveness, partnership accountability and children's lived experiences will remain a significant challenge. The Partnership recognises the need to ensure that new arrangements build upon existing strengths whilst continuing to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

The introduction of Family Help arrangements, Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams, strengthened partnership responsibilities and revised national expectations will require significant cultural, operational and organisational change across all partners. Throughout this period of transformation,



the Partnership will need to ensure that safeguarding remains central to all planning and decision making and that children and families continue to receive timely and effective support.

11.4 Child Sexual Abuse

Whilst significant progress has been made through the implementation of the Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy, Child Sexual Abuse remains a complex safeguarding issue requiring continued partnership focus. National and local evidence highlights the increasing risks associated with online abuse, technology-assisted abuse, harmful sexual behaviour and peer-on-peer sexual abuse.

Further work is required to strengthen workforce confidence, improve data collection and analysis, develop pathways for children displaying Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Problematic Sexual Behaviour, and ensure that children and families affected by Child Sexual Abuse receive timely access to appropriate support and recovery services.

11.5 Workforce Capacity and System Demand

Like many safeguarding partnerships nationally, partners continue to operate within an environment of increasing demand, workforce pressures and organisational change. The complexity of safeguarding concerns affecting children and families continues to grow, particularly in relation to neglect, exploitation, mental health, domestic abuse and extra-familial harm.

Maintaining a skilled workforce, supporting practitioner wellbeing and ensuring sufficient capacity to deliver high-quality safeguarding services will remain important considerations throughout 2026-27. The Partnership will continue to work collaboratively to support practitioners, strengthen learning opportunities and promote effective multi-agency working.

11.6 Voice of Children, Young People and Families

Whilst progress has been made in strengthening participation arrangements, the Partnership recognises that more needs to be done to consistently evidence how the voice and lived experiences of children, young people and families influence safeguarding activity, strategic planning and service development.

The Partnership will continue to strengthen approaches to participation, co-production and engagement, ensuring that the experiences of children and families remain central to safeguarding practice, audits, reviews and decision making.



12. Priorities for 2026-27

The Partnership has identified the following priorities for 2026-27 based on learning, assurance activity, performance information, feedback from children and young people, and emerging national and local safeguarding developments.

12.1 Families First and Working Together 2026

The Partnership will support the implementation of Families First reforms and Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 across Bedford Borough, ensuring safeguarding remains central throughout system transformation.

Priorities include:

- Supporting implementation of Family Help arrangements.
- Strengthening multi-agency safeguarding responsibilities and accountability.
- Supporting development of Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams.
- Ensuring workforce confidence and understanding of new arrangements.
- Monitoring the impact of reforms on children, young people and families.
- Providing assurance that children continue to receive timely and effective safeguarding support during transition.

12.2 Neglect

Neglect will remain a strategic priority for the Partnership.

Building on learning from quality assurance activity, audits and Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, the Partnership will:

- Strengthen identification and response to cumulative harm.
- Improve the consistent use of neglect assessment tools across agencies.
- Further develop neglect datasets and performance measures.



- Embed neglect learning within supervision, quality assurance and management oversight.
- Improve understanding of the impact of neglect interventions on children's lived experiences.
- Continue delivery of the Stop, Think: Neglect programme and Neglect Task and Finish activity.

The Partnership will increasingly focus on evidencing improved outcomes for children rather than measuring activity alone.

12.3 Child Sexual Abuse

The Partnership will continue implementation of the Pan Bedfordshire Child Sexual Abuse Strategy and Action Plan.

Priority activity will include:

- Improving identification and response to Child Sexual Abuse.
- Strengthening workforce confidence and professional curiosity.
- Developing pathways relating to Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Problematic Sexual Behaviour.
- Improving data collection, reporting and performance oversight.
- Strengthening support pathways for children, young people and families affected by Child Sexual Abuse.
- Progressing work relating to commissioning arrangements and service provision across Bedfordshire.

Partners will continue to promote awareness of emerging risks associated with online abuse, technology-assisted abuse and harmful sexual behaviour.

12.4 Voice of Children, Young People and Families

The Partnership is committed to ensuring children's voices influence both operational practice and strategic decision-making.

Priorities include:

- Strengthening participation and co-production opportunities.



- Improving feedback mechanisms so children and young people understand how their views have influenced decisions.
- Embedding children's lived experiences within audits, reviews and assurance activity.
- Strengthening links with participation groups, Youth Cabinet and engagement programmes.
- Promoting the "They Said - So What" approach across partnership activity.
- Improving evidence of impact resulting from participation and engagement work.

12.5 Exploitation, Missing Children and Contextual Safeguarding

The Partnership recognises the need to strengthen strategic oversight and governance arrangements relating to exploitation, missing children and contextual safeguarding.

Priority activity includes:

- Developing revised governance arrangements.
- Strengthening multi-agency strategic leadership and accountability.
- Improving performance reporting and analytical oversight.
- Strengthening understanding of emerging exploitation risks.
- Improving disruption activity and partnership responses to perpetrators.
- Increasing use of learning, audit and assurance activity to inform improvement.
- Re-establishing robust strategic oversight arrangements for child exploitation and missing children activity.
- Embedding learning from the review of the Child Exploitation Toolkit and strengthening trauma-informed exploitation practice across agencies.

Consideration will be given to child criminal exploitation, child sexual exploitation, online exploitation and extra-familial harm.



12.6 Exploitation and Missing Operational Activity

Alongside strengthening governance arrangements, partners will continue operational activity to identify, support and safeguard vulnerable children.

Key priorities include:

- Strengthening multi-agency information sharing.
- Improving responses to children experiencing repeated missing episodes.
- Supporting disruption activity through partnership intelligence.
- Continuing delivery of preventative education and awareness programmes.
- Strengthening contextual safeguarding approaches.
- Maintaining effective links between operational and strategic safeguarding arrangements.

The Partnership will continue to promote a child-centred approach that recognises exploited children as victims and ensures safeguarding, protection and support remain central to all responses.

13. Conclusion

During 2025-26, the Bedford Borough Safeguarding Children Partnership continued to strengthen multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, learning and collaboration across the partnership.

Progress has been made in relation to neglect, child sexual abuse, participation, workforce development and quality assurance. Partners have continued to work together effectively whilst preparing for significant national reforms through Families First and Working Together 2026.



The Partnership enters 2026-27 with a clear understanding of both its strengths and the areas requiring further development. Priorities will include strengthening exploitation governance arrangements, improving evidence of impact, embedding learning and ensuring children, young people and families remain at the centre of partnership activity.

14. Appendices

Appendix 1 – Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements Membership

List of Safeguarding Partners, Relevant Agencies, Independent Scrutineer and governance structure membership during 2025-26.

Appendix 2 – Acronyms and Glossary

Definitions of key safeguarding terms, partnership groups, national programmes and commonly used safeguarding acronyms.