



Making Bolton Safer for Children

Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership
Annual Report 2025–2026



PROTECTING



SUPPORTING



EMPOWERING



1 APRIL 2025 TO 31 MARCH 2026



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Executive Summary

This Annual Report sets out how Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP) worked collectively during 2025-2026 to safeguard children and young people, strengthen multi-agency practice, and improve outcomes for children and families across Bolton. The report demonstrates a partnership that is increasingly focused on understanding the impact of its work, using learning, assurance, and scrutiny to drive continuous improvement and ensure children remain at the centre of all safeguarding activity. During the year, safeguarding partners continued to respond to increasing demand, growing complexity of need, and the wider impact of poverty and inequality on children and families. Despite these challenges, the Partnership maintained strong and effective multi-agency leadership, underpinned by positive relationships between Bolton Council, Greater Manchester Police, NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board, schools, health services, and the wider safeguarding network. Independent scrutiny confirms that BSCP remains a mature and effective partnership with a strong foundation for future development.

The Partnership prioritised action in relation to Neglect, Child Exploitation, and Child Sexual Abuse within the Family Environment, recognising these as some of the most significant safeguarding risks facing children and young people. Progress during the year included the development of Bolton's *Respond, Nurture, Thrive* Neglect Strategy, strengthened multi-agency responses to child exploitation, improved understanding of contextual safeguarding risks, and quality assurance activity designed to improve the identification, assessment, and support of children affected by sexual abuse.

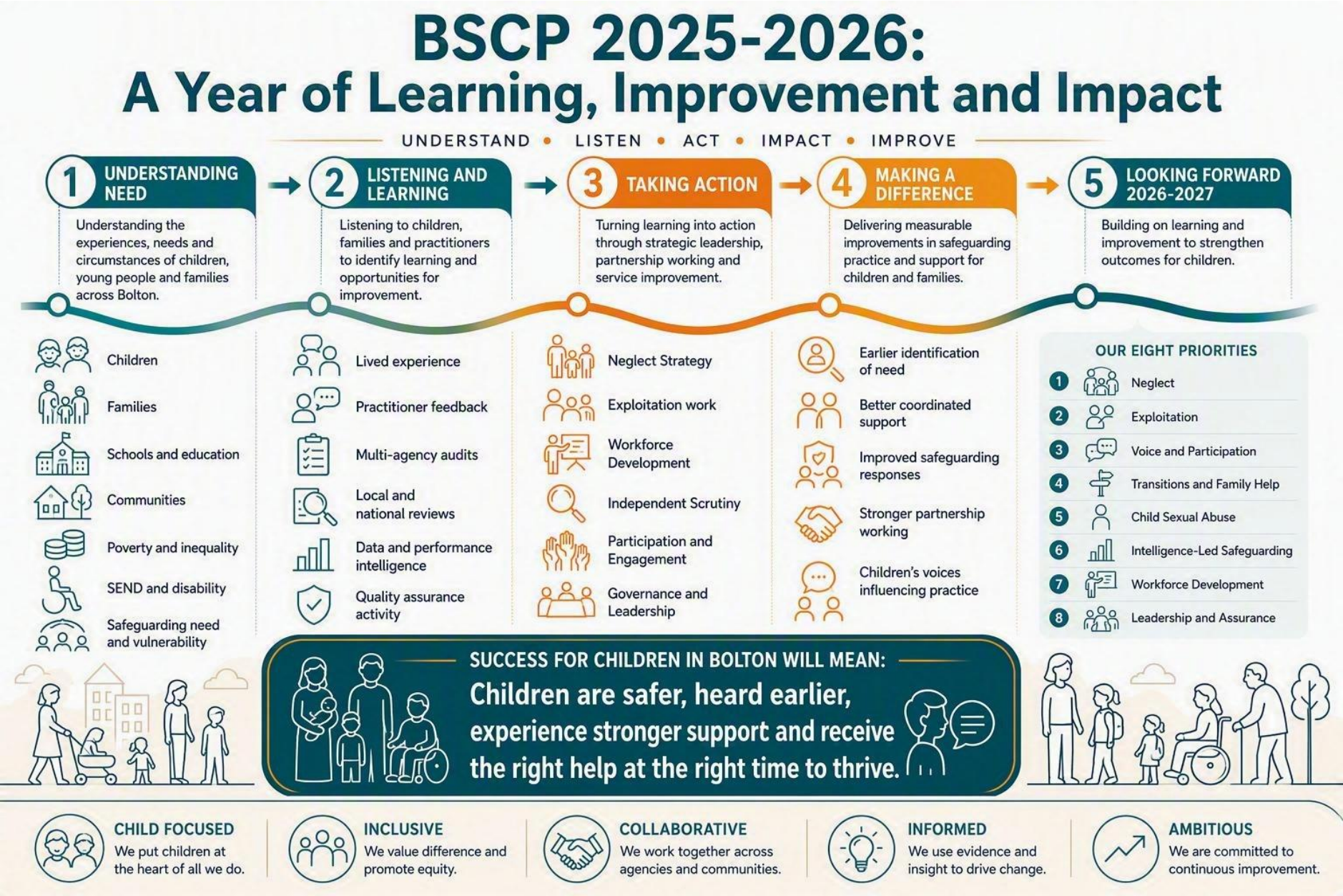
A significant focus has also been placed on strengthening safeguarding effectiveness through scrutiny, learning, and assurance. The Partnership responded to learning from local and national reviews, completed multi-agency audits, strengthened oversight of missing children and exploitation, and enhanced its understanding of children's lived experiences. Learning from a local Rapid Review and the national Victoria Marten review has informed improvements in pre-birth planning, adolescent safeguarding, trauma-informed practice, information sharing, and multi-agency decision making. The report highlights encouraging evidence of impact across the safeguarding system. Repeat Child Protection Plans reduced during the year, oversight and challenge within safeguarding processes strengthened, opportunities for children to participate in decision-making increased, and partnership arrangements for managing allegations against adults working with children became more focused and risk-led. The Partnership also continued to invest in workforce development, delivering a comprehensive multi-agency learning programme that reached thousands of practitioners across Bolton and strengthened confidence in responding to safeguarding concerns.

Central to the Partnership's work has been a commitment to listening to children, young people, families, and practitioners. Feedback gathered through audits, reviews, training, participation activity, Return Interviews, and service engagement has helped shape strategic priorities and improvements in frontline practice. The voices and experiences of children and families continue to provide critical insight into the effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements and the support they receive.

Looking ahead, the Partnership recognises that challenges remain.

Priorities for 2026-2027 include tackling neglect, preventing and responding to exploitation, strengthening transitions and Family Help arrangements, protecting children from sexual abuse, promoting children's voices, developing an intelligence-led safeguarding system, building a confident workforce, and maintaining effective leadership and scrutiny.

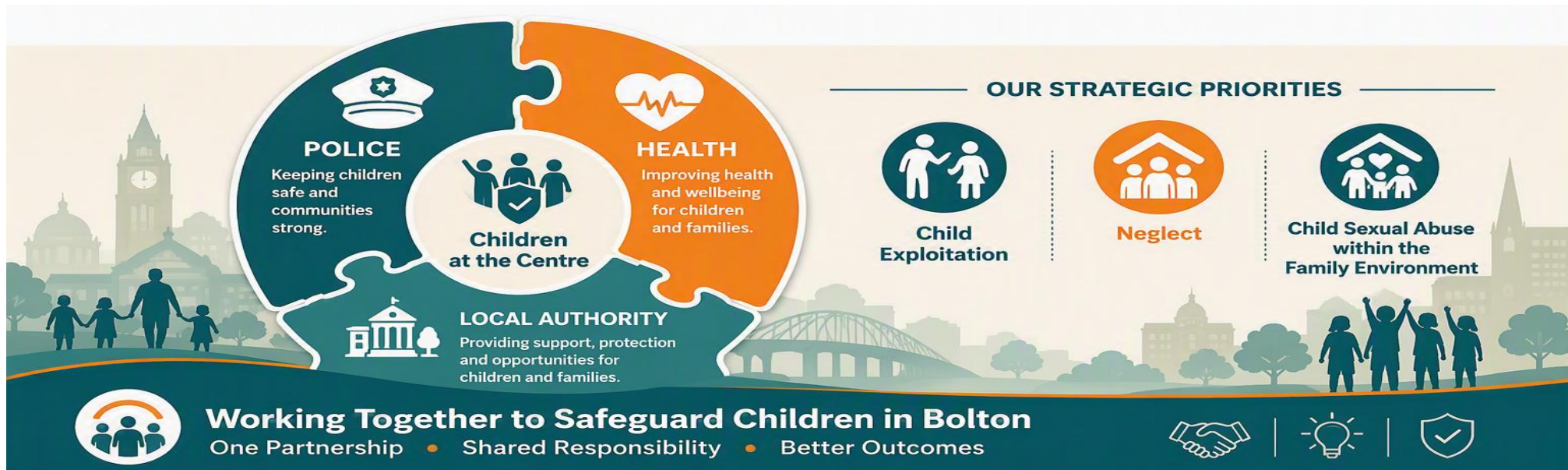
Ultimately, this report reflects a partnership that is committed to learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement. Through collective leadership, shared accountability, and a relentless focus on children's lived experiences, BSCP continues to work towards its vision that every child in Bolton is safe, heard, supported, and able to thrive.



Welcome and Foreword

Welcome to the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP) Annual Report for 2025-2026. This report covers the period from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 and provides an overview of how partners across Bolton have worked together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people. Throughout the report we outline the priorities we have focused on, the activity undertaken across the partnership, the impact this has had for children and families, and the areas where we know further improvement is required. Safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility. The effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements relies upon strong collaboration between agencies, services, communities and families. In Bolton, the statutory safeguarding partners, Bolton Council, NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board and Greater Manchester Police, continue to share equal and joint accountability for leading local safeguarding arrangements and ensuring that children are protected from harm and supported to achieve the best possible outcomes.

This report highlights some of the key areas of activity, learning and impact across the Partnership during 2025-2026. It should be recognised, however, that it represents only a snapshot of the extensive work undertaken every day by partners to safeguard children and support families across Bolton. The examples and case studies presented throughout the report have been selected to demonstrate the breadth of partnership activity and the difference this work makes to children, young people and their families.



During 2025-2026, partners have continued to strengthen collaborative working, improve safeguarding practice and respond to both local and national developments. This report highlights progress against our strategic priorities of Child Exploitation, Neglect and Child Sexual Abuse within the Family Environment, alongside wider partnership activity to improve the experiences and outcomes of children and their families.

This year has seen continued pressures across the safeguarding system, including increasing demand, rising complexity of need and the ongoing impact of poverty and inequality on children and families. Despite these challenges, partners have demonstrated a strong commitment to continuous improvement, learning and innovation. Across the year we have strengthened quality assurance and scrutiny arrangements, enhanced opportunities for multi-agency learning, improved oversight of vulnerable children and continued to develop our understanding of emerging safeguarding risks. The Partnership also recognises its collective responsibilities as corporate parents. We remain committed to ensuring that the voices, experiences and needs of children in care and care leavers are reflected throughout our safeguarding arrangements and that they receive the protection, support and opportunities they deserve.

As safeguarding partners, we have a responsibility not only to deliver effective safeguarding arrangements but also to provide challenge, seek assurance and promote a culture of learning across the system. We remain committed to listening to children and families, hearing the voices of practitioners and using learning from audits, reviews and performance information to drive improvement and strengthen safeguarding practice. Most importantly, we recognise that safeguarding is delivered through the dedication, compassion and professionalism of those working directly with children and families every day. The commitment shown by practitioners, volunteers, managers and leaders across Bolton's partnership continues to be the foundation of our safeguarding arrangements. Whilst there remains much work to do, this report demonstrates a partnership that is committed to learning, improvement and collaboration, and one that remains focused on ensuring that every child in Bolton is safe, heard, supported and able to thrive.



Sue Johnson, LA LSP
Chief Executive, Bolton Council



Sir Stephen Watson, GMP LSP
Chief Constable, Greater
Manchester Police



Professor Colin Scales, ICB LSP
Acting Chief Executive, NHS Greater
Manchester

Our Children

Data correct as of 26/08/26

75,599
Children in Bolton aged **0-17**

8,500
Young people in Bolton aged **16-17**

Percentage of population who are children
Bolton **England**
24.4% **20.8%**
(ONS Data set 2024)

Percentage of children from ethnic diverse communities
Bolton **England**
42.3% **26.6%**
(Census 2021)

Percentage of children in low-income families
Bolton **England**
37.5% **23.1%**
(Children in low-income families local area 2024)



Primary pupils eligible for free school meals
Bolton **England**
26.6% **24.9%**
(DfE Schools, pupils and their characteristics 2024-25)

Secondary pupils eligible for free school meals
Bolton **England**
31.7% **27.3%**



30,281
Children in **primary education**
22,025
Children in **secondary education**
(School census reports Summer 2026)

3,909
Children with an **Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP)**
(DfE EHCP 2025-26)

64.2%
Children reaching **Good Level Development**
(DfE GLD 2025)

65%
of children's **two year take up**
(FRAS Spring 2025-26)

376 (4.3%)
Young people that are **Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and Whose Status is Not Known**
(DfE NEET age 16 to 17 Academic Year 2025-26)

2,930
Children subject to an active **early help plan**
(RIG / RIIA March 2026)

428
Children subject to **child protection planning**

657
Children in **our care**



About Bolton's Safeguarding Children Partnership

Purpose and Vision

Our vision is simple:

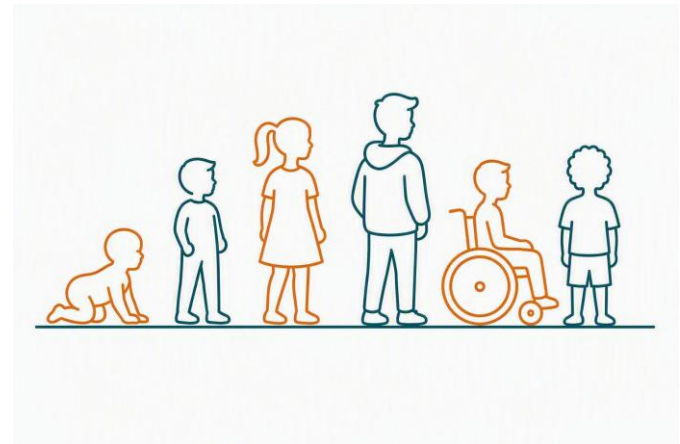
In Bolton, we want all children and young people to have the best possible start in life, so that they are safe, healthy, happy and able to achieve their full potential.

Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP) exists to ensure that children are protected from harm and that safeguarding arrangements across the borough are effective, child-centred and focused on achieving positive outcomes. We recognise that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Effective safeguarding depends upon agencies working together, sharing information, learning from practice and responding quickly when children need help, support or protection. Through our statutory safeguarding arrangements, Bolton Council, Greater Manchester Police and NHS Greater Manchester Integrated Care Board provide joint leadership and shared accountability for safeguarding children and young people across Bolton.

The purpose of the Partnership is to:-

- Promote the welfare and wellbeing of children and young people.
- Prevent abuse, neglect, exploitation and harm through effective early identification and intervention.
- Ensure children receive the right help, at the right time, from the right services.
- Safeguard and protect children who are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing, significant harm.
- Strengthen multi-agency working so that services work together effectively to improve outcomes for children and families.

Safeguarding arrangements in Bolton are delivered through several key groups, with the oversight of Lead and Delegated Safeguarding Partners.



Governance and Structure

The local Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements provide comprehensive information about the Lead and Delegated Safeguarding Partners and the governance framework that underpins safeguarding activity across Bolton. The diagram highlights the Partnership's key governance groups and demonstrates how these connect with wider local and regional partnerships to provide leadership, challenge, assurance and continuous improvement in safeguarding practice. Further detail can be found in our local [Multi-agency Safeguarding Arrangements](#).

Attendance and Engagement

A key indicator of commitment to local safeguarding arrangements is the active participation of partner agencies in governance and scrutiny activity. Regular attendance at partnership meetings supports effective oversight, constructive challenge, shared accountability, and collective ownership of safeguarding priorities.

Effective safeguarding partnerships rely on active participation from all partner agencies. Regular attendance at partnership meetings enables strategic oversight, shared accountability, constructive challenge and collective decision-making to improve outcomes for children and families.

During 2025-2026, attendance across partnership governance groups was generally positive, although variation existed between agencies and groups. At Partnership level, four of thirteen members attended all meetings, while attendance at the Learning into Practice was particularly strong, with two-thirds of members achieving full attendance throughout the year. Safeguarding Effectiveness Group and Exploitation Assurance Group attendance demonstrated consistent engagement from the majority of members, although a small number of agencies attended fewer than half of scheduled meetings.

Attendance monitoring has identified areas where agency representation requires strengthening. Where attendance fell below expected standards, discussions have taken place between group Chairs and partner agencies to reinforce expectations. From 2026-2027, attendance performance will be reported quarterly through the Safeguarding Effectiveness Group, providing increased oversight, challenge and accountability across partnership arrangements.



How We Work Together

The Partnership delivers its responsibilities through a shared commitment to collaboration, learning, challenge and continuous improvement.

Strategic Leadership- We provide strategic leadership for safeguarding across Bolton, identifying priorities, coordinating partnership activity and driving improvement where needed.

Learning and Improvement- We promote a culture of continuous learning by reviewing safeguarding practice, undertaking multi-agency audits, responding to learning from local and national reviews, and supporting workforce development across the partnership.

Voice of Children and Families - We are committed to listening to children and young people and understanding their lived experiences. Their voices help shape our priorities, influence service development and strengthen safeguarding practice.

Scrutiny, Assurance and Accountability - We use performance information, quality assurance activity, independent scrutiny and partner challenge to understand the effectiveness of local safeguarding arrangements and identify areas for development.

Partnership and Community Engagement - Effective safeguarding extends beyond statutory agencies. We work closely with schools, early years settings, health services, voluntary and community organisations, faith groups, families and local communities to create a safer environment for children and young people.

Together, we are committed to creating a culture of trust, openness and shared responsibility, where safeguarding is embedded in every service, every organisation and every decision affecting the lives of children and young people in Bolton.



Partnership Resources

The Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership is funded through contributions from safeguarding partners and relevant agencies in line with the expectations of Working Together to Safeguard Children. During 2025-2026, partners invested £343,218 to support the delivery of statutory safeguarding functions, including independent scrutiny, child protection arrangements, multi-agency learning and development, quality assurance activity and child death review processes.

While total resources were slightly lower than in 2024-2025 (£351,310), partnership contributions remained stable and there was a significant reduction in the use of reserves (£32,099 in 2024-2025 compared with £14,956 in 2025-2026), demonstrating increased financial sustainability and partner commitment to safeguarding children and families in Bolton.

Key Financial Highlights

- £343,218 invested in safeguarding children and their families.
- Stable partner contributions across Local Authority, Health, Police and Education.
- 53% reduction in the use of reserves, supporting longer-term financial sustainability.
- Continued investment in statutory safeguarding functions and partnership improvement activity.
- Resources aligned to the partnership's priorities of protecting, supporting and improving outcomes for children.

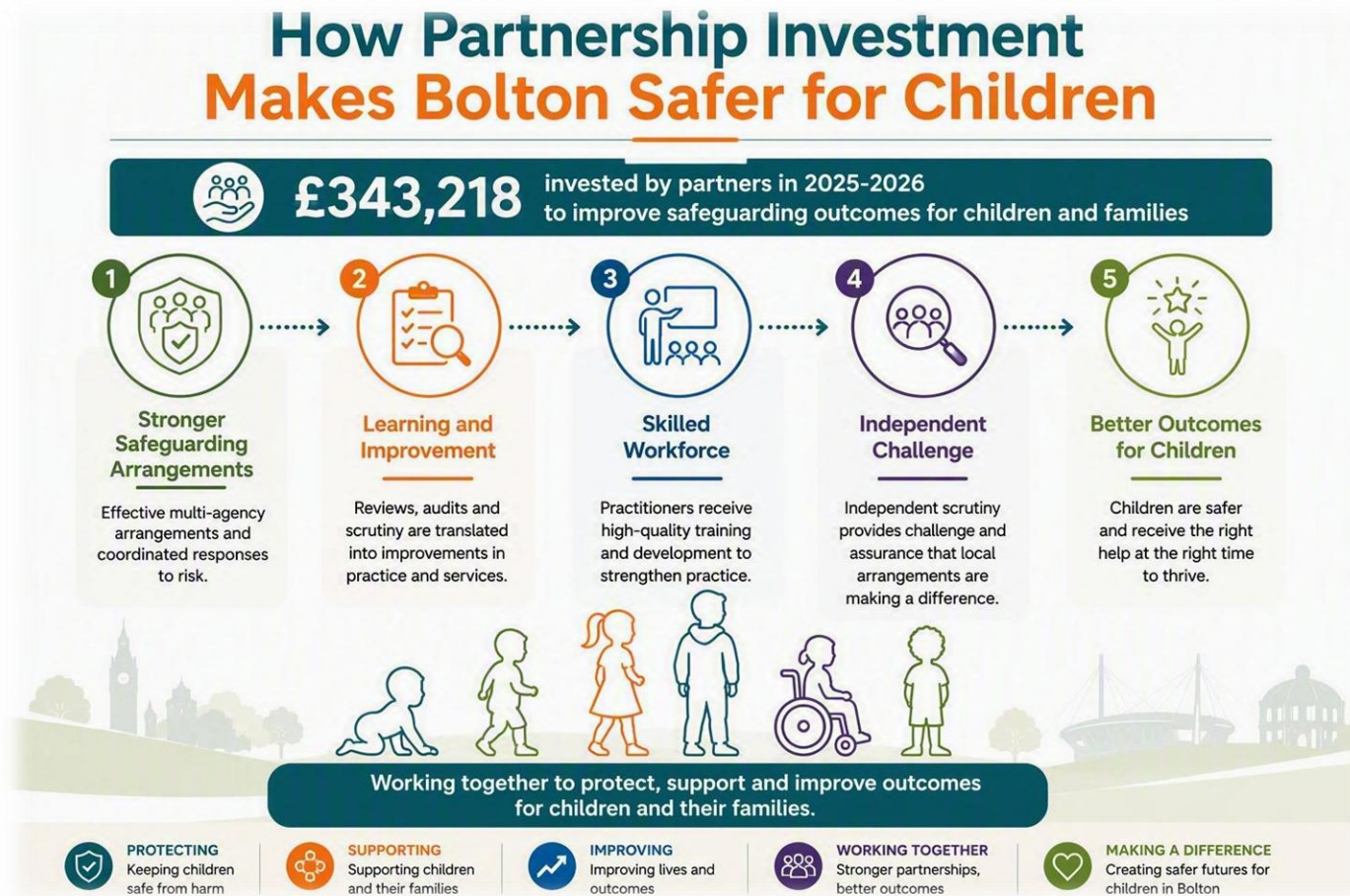


Turning Investment into Impact

Safeguarding children is a shared responsibility that relies on strong partnership arrangements, effective leadership, continuous learning and a confident workforce. During 2025-2026, safeguarding partners invested £343,218 to strengthen local safeguarding arrangements and improve outcomes for children and families across Bolton. This investment has enabled the Partnership to coordinate multi-agency safeguarding activity, deliver high-quality learning and development, undertake independent scrutiny and quality assurance activity, and ensure that learning from audits, reviews and practice is translated into tangible improvements. By bringing together intelligence, professional expertise and independent challenge, the Partnership continues to strengthen its ability to identify emerging risks, respond effectively to safeguarding concerns and support continuous improvement across the system.

Investment in safeguarding is not simply about maintaining services; it is about creating the conditions that allow children, young people and families to receive the right help at the right time. Through improved workforce confidence, strengthened professional practice and more effective partnership working, the benefits of this investment can be seen in stronger safeguarding responses, better-informed decision-making and increased assurance that local arrangements are making a positive difference.

At its heart, this investment supports a cycle of continuous improvement. Learning from reviews, audits, scrutiny activity and children's lived experiences informs workforce development and practice improvement, which in turn strengthens decision-making, partnership working and service effectiveness. The ultimate aim is to ensure that children are safer, families receive the support they need, and practitioners are equipped to respond effectively to emerging risks and vulnerabilities.



What This Means for Children

As a result of continued partnership investment Safeguarding arrangements are stronger and more effective.

- Practitioners are better equipped to identify, assess and respond to risk.
- Learning from reviews and audits is translated into practice improvements.
- Independent scrutiny provides challenge, assurance and accountability.
- Children and families receive more coordinated support.
- The Partnership is better able to improve outcomes and reduce harm.

Partnership investment is not an end in itself. It is the mechanism through which Bolton strengthens safeguarding arrangements, develops a skilled workforce, learns from practice and continuously improves services so that children and families receive the help, protection and support they need to thrive.



BSCP Priorities 2025-2026

The Partnership's priorities provide the framework through which safeguarding partners coordinate activity, direct resources, evaluate impact and drive continuous improvement. They have been developed through analysis of local safeguarding need, evidence from performance and quality assurance activity, learning from practice reviews and scrutiny, and engagement with children, young people, families and practitioners. Collectively, they reflect our commitment to being an intelligence-led, learning-focused and outcomes-driven safeguarding partnership.

Priority 1 - Tackling Neglect

Neglect continues to be one of the most prevalent forms of abuse experienced by children and remains a significant safeguarding concern across Bolton. While neglect can often be less visible than other forms of harm, evidence consistently demonstrates that its impact can be profound, cumulative and long-lasting, affecting children's physical health, emotional wellbeing, educational attainment, relationships and future life chances.

Neglect rarely occurs in isolation and is often associated with wider vulnerabilities, including parental mental ill-health, domestic abuse, substance misuse, poverty, housing instability and social isolation. During 2025-2026, the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership continued to prioritise neglect, recognising that early intervention and effective multi-agency support are critical in preventing cumulative harm and improving outcomes for children. This work has been strengthened through the development of the Partnership's new Respond, Nurture, Thrive: Bolton's Multi-Agency Tackling Child Neglect Strategy 2025-2028, which establishes a shared vision, language and framework for tackling neglect across the borough.

The strategy recognises that neglect can affect children of all ages and backgrounds and that successful intervention requires a whole-system approach which combines prevention, early help, targeted intervention and effective safeguarding practice. Central to this ambition is an unwavering commitment to understanding and responding to the child's lived experience.

Understanding the Local Picture

Neglect remains a significant feature within Bolton's safeguarding system. Analysis of Child Protection Plan data demonstrates that the proportion of children subject to a Child Protection Plan where neglect was identified as the primary category of harm increased from 40.1% in 2023 to 51.8% in 2025, exceeding both the regional and national averages. This reinforces the need for continued strategic focus, partnership investment and early intervention activity.

Whilst this increase may in part reflect improved professional recognition and identification of neglect, it also highlights the ongoing challenges experienced by some children and families across the borough. As a partnership, we remain committed to addressing the underlying causes of neglect and ensuring that children and families receive support before concerns escalate to statutory intervention.

Our Strategic Ambition; Respond, Nurture, Thrive

The development of the refreshed Neglect Strategy in 2025 provided the Partnership with a clear ambition for the future.

- **Respond** - We will ensure children experiencing neglect are identified earlier and receive the right help at the right time through effective assessment, information sharing and multi-agency intervention.
- **Nurture** - We will work alongside children, families and communities to build resilience, strengthen relationships and provide support that recognises individual strengths, culture, identity and lived experience.
- **Thrive** - We will focus on improving outcomes for children by reducing the impact of neglect, strengthening family resilience and supporting children to be safe, healthy, successful and able to achieve their full potential.

What We Achieved in 2025-2026

Strengthening Early Identification and Intervention

During the year, partners worked together to strengthen the identification of neglect across the system and improve confidence in recognising both emerging and chronic concerns. This included:-

- Promoting the use of Bolton's Neglect Toolkit and associated practice resources.
- Delivering multi-agency learning opportunities focused on recognising neglect and understanding cumulative harm.
- Strengthening connections between Family Help and Children's Social Care.
- Supporting practitioners to use professional curiosity when considering a child's lived experience.
- Increasing awareness of the relationship between neglect, trauma and wider family vulnerabilities.

These developments have contributed to a greater consistency of approach across agencies and reinforced the importance of identifying concerns before they escalate.



Strengthening the Multi-Agency Response

Recognising that no single agency can tackle neglect alone, the Partnership continued to promote coordinated and collaborative approaches to safeguarding. Work undertaken throughout the year included:-

- Improving multi-agency planning and decision-making.
- Strengthening partnership working between health, education, police, social care, early help services and the voluntary sector.
- Promoting timely information sharing and joint problem-solving.
- Ensuring neglect is considered within wider safeguarding activity, particularly where there are concerns relating to domestic abuse, exploitation, parental mental health or substance misuse.

Partners have told us that understanding of respective roles and responsibilities when identifying and responding to neglect has resulted in more coordinated support for children and families.

Listening to Children and Families

A key objective throughout 2025-2026 has been ensuring that children's voices remain central to strategic development and frontline practice. Feedback gathered through engagement activity, case reviews and quality assurance work highlighted the importance of:-

- Being listened to by trusted professionals.
- Consistency in relationships and support, with practitioners working together effectively.
- Practical help that makes a difference to everyday life.
- Feeling respected and involved in decision-making.

Children and families consistently told us that their experiences improve when professionals take time to understand their individual circumstances rather than focusing solely on presenting concerns.

Embedding Trauma-Informed and Relationship-Based Practice

The Partnership has continued to strengthen approaches that recognise the impact of trauma and adversity on both children and families. Practitioners have been encouraged to:-

- Understand the broader context surrounding neglect.
- Recognise the impact of cumulative adversity.
- Build trusting relationships with children and families.
- Focus on strengths alongside risks.
- Ensure interventions are culturally responsive, inclusive and trauma-informed.

This approach supports more effective engagement with families and contributes to sustainable change.

Looking Ahead: Priorities for 2026-2027

During 2025-2026, Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership strengthened its focus on tackling neglect through improved partnership working, enhanced professional awareness and the development of the Respond, Nurture, Thrive Neglect Strategy. Whilst progress has been made, neglect remains one of the most complex and persistent safeguarding challenges affecting children and young people. Learning from quality assurance activity, frontline practice, child safeguarding reviews and engagement with children and families has reinforced the importance of early identification, strong multi-agency collaboration and an unwavering focus on the lived experience of children.

The Partnership recognises that sustainable change requires more than responding to presenting concerns. It requires a whole-system response which seeks to understand the wider factors impacting children and families, intervenes early and builds resilience over time.

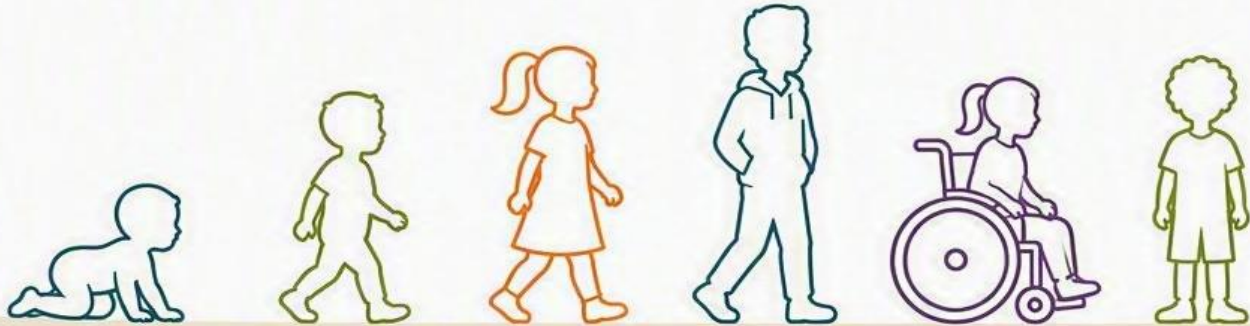
As we move into 2026-2027, our priorities will focus on delivering the ambitions set out within the Respond, Nurture, Thrive Strategy and ensuring that partnership activity translates into measurable improvements in children's safety, wellbeing and life chances.

Respond - Our priority is to ensure that children experiencing neglect are identified earlier and that concerns are responded to consistently across all agencies. During the coming year, we will embed a shared multi-agency neglect framework to strengthen professional understanding and establish greater consistency in how neglect is recognised, assessed and addressed. Building upon learning from audits and practice reviews, we will continue to promote professional curiosity and ensure practitioners maintain a focus on the child's daily lived experience. The Partnership will also strengthen early identification and assessment processes so that children and families receive timely support before concerns escalate. Alongside this, we will develop Bolton's Neglect Profile to improve our understanding of local need, identify trends, target resources more effectively and support evidence-informed decision making. By strengthening our collective response, we aim to ensure children receive the right support at the earliest opportunity and experience fewer episodes of cumulative harm.



Nurture - Our ambition is to ensure that support for children and families is compassionate, relationship-based and informed by an understanding of trauma and adversity. During 2026-2027, partners will continue to embed trauma-informed, culturally responsive and anti-discriminatory approaches across the safeguarding system. We recognise that neglect often exists alongside challenges such as poverty, domestic abuse, parental mental ill-health, substance misuse and social isolation. Therefore, our response must seek to understand the circumstances affecting families whilst maintaining a clear focus on the child's safety and wellbeing. The Partnership will expand opportunities to hear directly from children, young people and families and ensure their experiences influence service design, practice development and strategic decision-making. We will also continue to strengthen Family Help pathways and preventative support services, helping families access the right support at the earliest possible stage. Through this approach, we aim to build stronger relationships with children and families, improve engagement and create the conditions that enable children to feel safe, supported and valued.

Thrive - Ultimately, our success will be measured not by activity alone but by the difference we make to children's lives. During 2026-2027, the Partnership will increase its focus on evaluating the impact of interventions and measuring outcomes that matter most to children and families. This includes understanding whether support has led to improvements in safety, wellbeing, educational attendance, resilience, family stability and long-term opportunities. We will continue to monitor repeat neglect concerns and repeat Child Protection Plans, recognising these as important indicators of whether interventions are achieving sustainable change. Learning from audits, performance information, case reviews and lived experience feedback will be used to drive continuous improvement and strengthen the effectiveness of local safeguarding arrangements. Our ambition is that children and families increasingly tell us that they received help when they needed it, felt listened to and respected, experienced positive changes in their daily lives and were supported to achieve their full potential. Through a relentless focus on outcomes, we will work collectively to ensure that children not only remain safe from harm but are supported to thrive throughout childhood and



Respond
Notice early.
Act early.



Nurture
Build relationships.
Strengthen families.



Thrive
Improve outcomes.
Help children flourish.



Working together
to make Bolton
safer for children
and families.

What Success Looks Like

As we continue to embed the Respond, Nurture, Thrive approach across Bolton, our focus is increasingly on understanding whether our collective efforts are making a meaningful difference to the lives of children, young people and families. Success is not measured solely by activity, assessments or interventions, but by the experiences and outcomes reported by those who receive support.

Throughout 2025-2026, the Partnership has strengthened its commitment to listening to children and families and using their feedback to shape practice, services and strategic priorities. We want children and families to tell us that they received help before problems escalated, that professionals listened and treated them with respect, and that services worked together to provide consistent and effective support.

Our ambition is that children experience safer, more stable and nurturing childhoods, families receive the right support at the right time, and practitioners work collaboratively to achieve sustainable change. Through our shared commitment to Respond, Nurture, Thrive, we aim to strengthen family resilience, improve outcomes and ensure every child in Bolton has the opportunity to be safe, healthy, happy and able to achieve their full potential.



BSCP Priority 2 – Tackling Child Exploitation

Why Tackling Exploitation Remains a Strategic Priority

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) and Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) continue to pose a significant safeguarding risk to children and young people both nationally and locally. Exploitation can take many forms, including sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, county lines activity, online exploitation, trafficking, modern slavery and exploitation linked to serious violence and organised crime. Children who experience exploitation are often targeted because of their vulnerabilities and may not recognise themselves as victims. Perpetrators frequently use threats, manipulation, violence, coercion, technology and the promise of relationships, belonging, status or material rewards to exploit children for their own gain.

During 2025-2026, the Partnership continued to strengthen its response to exploitation through multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, contextual safeguarding approaches and disruption activity. This work has been informed by local intelligence, national learning and the voices of children and young people. The Partnership recognises that exploitation is constantly evolving. Online platforms, social media, peer networks and organised criminal groups continue to create new opportunities for harm. As a result, safeguarding responses must remain dynamic, intelligence-led and focused on both preventing exploitation and protecting children from harm.

Understanding the Local Picture

Analysis of exploitation data throughout 2025-2026 demonstrates the complex and evolving nature of child exploitation across Bolton. The Partnership continues to see children affected by both Child Criminal Exploitation and Child Sexual Exploitation, with evidence highlighting that many children experience multiple vulnerabilities that increase their risk of harm. The demographic profile of children identified through exploitation pathways provides important insights into local need. Data indicates that exploitation concerns are most commonly identified amongst older adolescents, particularly children in mid-to-late adolescence. This pattern reflects learning seen nationally and highlights the importance of strengthening preventative and protective work at an earlier stage to prevent vulnerability escalating into exploitation. As a result, the Partnership continues to consider how opportunities for earlier identification can be strengthened through schools, family help services and universal provision.





The data also highlights distinct gendered patterns of harm. Children experiencing criminal exploitation are more likely to be male, whilst children experiencing sexual exploitation are more likely to be female. This reinforces the need for practitioners to understand how different forms of exploitation can present and to avoid assumptions that may lead to risks being overlooked. Importantly, the data demonstrates that exploitation can affect any child regardless of gender, background or circumstance. Analysis of ethnicity data continues to support the Partnership's understanding that exploitation affects children from a diverse range of communities across Bolton. Whilst some groups are more represented within local data, the Partnership recognises the importance of ongoing analysis and quality assurance to ensure there is no over-representation, under-identification or disproportionality in access to safeguarding support. This remains an important area for future scrutiny as part of our commitment to equitable and culturally responsive safeguarding practice.

The data also demonstrates a strong relationship between exploitation and additional vulnerability. A significant proportion of children identified through exploitation pathways have additional needs, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), or other factors that may impact communication, understanding of risk and resilience. This further strengthens the case for trauma-informed, child-centred and inclusive safeguarding approaches that recognise the unique experiences of each child and adapt interventions accordingly. The findings also reinforce the significant overlap between neglect and exploitation, highlighting how children experiencing adversity, instability, unmet need or a lack of protective relationships are often more susceptible to grooming and exploitation by others. This reflects the Partnership's wider strategic ambition to intervene early, strengthen family resilience and improve children's lived experiences, recognising that reducing neglect is a key protective factor in preventing future exploitation and helping children to flourish.

Alongside this, exploitation frequently intersects with a range of other safeguarding concerns, including missing episodes, educational disengagement, emotional wellbeing needs, substance misuse and care experience. The over-representation of children with care experience within exploitation cohorts continues to reinforce the importance of providing protective relationships, stability and coordinated multi-agency support for children who may already be facing significant adversity. Data relating to online grooming and technology-facilitated harm also demonstrates that exploitation increasingly occurs across both physical and digital environments. This underlines the importance of ensuring children, families and professionals remain equipped to recognise and respond to online risks alongside more traditional forms of exploitation.

Looking Ahead: Priorities for 2026-2027

Throughout 2025-2026, data, quality assurance activity and frontline practice have strengthened the Partnership's understanding of the changing nature of child exploitation within Bolton. This learning reinforces that exploitation is rarely a single issue. Rather, it often develops at the intersection of vulnerability, adversity, exclusion and harm, with many children experiencing a combination of factors including neglect, missing episodes, educational disengagement, trauma, care experience, additional needs and online risks. The Partnership has also recognised the increasing national focus on Child Sexual Exploitation, Child Criminal Exploitation and wider extra-familial harm. In response, our priorities for 2026-2027 will focus on strengthening prevention, improving early identification, increasing disruption of perpetrators and ensuring that children and families receive effective support at the earliest opportunity.

Strengthening Earlier Identification and Prevention - Learning from local data highlights the importance of identifying vulnerability before exploitation becomes entrenched. During the coming year, partners will embed a more consistent approach to recognising indicators of extra-familial harm, exploitation and contextual safeguarding concerns across universal, targeted and specialist services. This will include strengthening professional curiosity, increasing awareness of emerging vulnerabilities and ensuring children can access the right support at the right time.

Listening to Children and Families - We will strengthen our approach to co-production and lived experience, ensuring the voices of children, young people and families directly influence policy, practice development and service improvement. The Partnership recognises that effective safeguarding requires us to understand how children experience safety, relationships, risk and support in their daily lives, and to use this learning to improve outcomes.

Strengthening Support for Vulnerable Adolescents - Analysis continues to demonstrate that older adolescents are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and extra-familial harm. The Partnership will work alongside wider prevention, adolescent and family help services to strengthen protective factors, improve resilience and ensure that young people receive support before risks escalate. Particular attention will be given to children with additional needs, care experience and those facing multiple forms of disadvantage and exclusion.

Creating Safer Spaces and Disrupting Harm - Protecting children requires a dual focus on supporting victims and disrupting those who seek to exploit them. During 2026-2027, the Partnership will strengthen its multi-agency disruption arrangements, improve the use of intelligence and continue to develop its understanding of locations, networks and contexts associated with exploitation. This includes strengthening responses to online exploitation, criminal networks and emerging safeguarding threats affecting children and young people.

Developing a More Contextual Understanding of Risk -The Partnership will continue to develop its contextual safeguarding approach, recognising that exploitation often occurs beyond the family home. This includes improving our understanding of peer relationships, social networks, communities, schools and online environments and how these influence children's vulnerability to harm. Through greater use of intelligence, social network mapping and partnership analysis, we will seek to identify opportunities to reduce risk and create safer environments for children.

Transition and Long-Term Outcomes - We recognise that vulnerability to exploitation does not end when a child reaches adulthood, and that we should be focused on needs and not age. During the coming year, the Partnership will strengthen transitional safeguarding arrangements, ensuring young people vulnerable to or experiencing exploitation continue to receive appropriate support as they move into adulthood. This work will help reduce gaps in provision and improve continuity of support for some of our most vulnerable young people.





Learning and Improvement

We strive to use learning about our safeguarding system to improve experiences and safeguard children and their families.

Learning from Serious Childcare Incidents

In accordance with Working Together to Safeguard Children, safeguarding partners are required to have arrangements in place to identify and review serious child safeguarding cases that raise issues of importance in relation to their local area. A serious child safeguarding case is one where abuse or neglect of a child is known or suspected, and the child has died or been seriously harmed. Learning from local and national Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (CSPRs) forms an integral part of the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership's quality assurance and continuous improvement framework. Timely and proportionate Rapid Reviews are undertaken in line with national guidance. Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews are commissioned where criteria are met and significant learning can be identified.

Learning from local and national reviews is effectively disseminated and embedded across the partnership. Review findings lead to measurable improvements in safeguarding practice, service delivery, and outcomes for children and families. Progress against single-agency and multi-agency actions arising from reviews is monitored through the Learning into Practice Group. Quarterly assurance reports are presented to the Delegated Safeguarding Partners to provide oversight, scrutiny, and challenge regarding the implementation and impact of agreed actions.

During 2025-2026, the partnership undertook one Rapid Review and no Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews. Additionally, the Partnership has proactively considered and responded to the national learning arising from the Victoria Marten Child Safeguarding Practice Review, using the findings to inform local improvement activity and strengthen multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. The following section sets out the actions taken by partners, in relation to both the Rapid Review and the National and demonstrates the impact of this work on practice, service delivery, and outcomes for children.

LEARNING INTO PRACTICE

Using learning from reviews to make Bolton safer for children and families.



1. IDENTIFY

Identify cases that meet review criteria.



2. REVIEW

Undertake timely, proportionate reviews to understand what happened and why.



3. LEARN

Identify key learning and agree actions for improvement.



4. IMPROVE

Embed learning, strengthen practice and drive continuous improvement.



5. BETTER OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

Stronger safeguarding, better services and improved lives.



Learning from reviews
Improving practice
Strengthening safeguarding
Improving outcomes

During 2025-2026, the Partnership completed a Rapid Review following a serious assault on a 17-year-old young person. The review highlighted important learning regarding adolescent safeguarding, the need for professional curiosity, the importance of hearing and understanding children's lived experiences, and the early identification of extra-familial harm and exploitation. In response, partners have strengthened the Bolton Adolescent Approach, enhanced oversight of children reported missing, developed tools to support the identification of exploitation, embedded learning through the Learning into Practice Group, and continued investment in Family Help and targeted youth services.

This work is improving our ability to identify risk earlier, strengthen multi-agency safeguarding responses, build trusted relationships with adolescents, and ensure children and young people receive the right help at the earliest opportunity.

The actions taken in response to this review are helping to make Bolton safer for adolescents by improving the early identification of risk, strengthening responses to exploitation and missing episodes, increasing opportunities for children to be heard, and ensuring vulnerable young people receive timely, coordinated support.



Responding to National Learning: Protecting All Vulnerable Babies Better

In February 2026, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published Protecting All Vulnerable 'Babies Better', a national review following the death of Victoria Marten. The review identified several areas for safeguarding partnerships to strengthen practice, including pre-birth planning, engagement with parents who have experienced the removal of children from their care, trauma-informed practice, domestic abuse, and support for highly vulnerable families. The Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership responded swiftly to the publication of the review by establishing a multi-agency action plan, overseen through the Learning into Practice Group, to ensure national learning is translated into local improvement activity.

What We Have Done

During 2026, partners have:-

- Reviewed local arrangements against the national recommendations and developed a multi-agency improvement plan.
- Commenced a review of the Bolton Pre-Birth Protocol to ensure practice aligns with current national guidance and reflects the needs of vulnerable unborn babies.
- Agreed a multi-agency audit programme to assess the quality and consistency of pre-birth planning and identify further areas for improvement. Meeting Minutes - Response to VM Review 04.06.2026.docx
- Begun work to better understand and strengthen support available to parents who have previously experienced the removal of children from their care.
- Sought assurance from universal services regarding how they engage families who may face barriers to accessing support.
- Aligned this work with the Family First reforms and wider workforce development activity to strengthen trauma-informed and family-centred practice.



Impact for Infants and Families

Although much of this work is still being embedded, the actions taken are strengthening the local safeguarding system for babies and very young children by:-

- Increasing the likelihood that risks to unborn and newborn babies are identified earlier through improved pre-birth planning.
- Supporting practitioners to develop a more coordinated understanding of family circumstances and vulnerabilities.
- Promoting a trauma-informed approach that recognises and responds to the experiences of parents and carers.
- Improving opportunities for vulnerable families to access support before concerns escalate.
- Strengthening multi-agency oversight of the most vulnerable babies and ensuring professional challenge where risks emerge.
- Supporting practitioners to maintain a clear focus on the voice and needs of the baby in all assessment, planning and decision-making processes.



Our Priorities for 2026-2027

During 2026-2027, the Partnership will focus on:-

- Completing and implementing the revised Pre-Birth Protocol.
- Undertaking and evaluating the multi-agency audit of pre-birth practice and using findings to drive improvement.
- Reviewing the local offer for parents whose children have been removed from their care and identifying opportunities for enhanced support.
- Developing sustainable multi-agency reflective practice arrangements to support work with complex and vulnerable families.
- Strengthening workforce knowledge of trauma-informed practice and the impact of domestic abuse on babies and young children.
- Seeking assurance regarding information-sharing arrangements for vulnerable families who move across local authority boundaries.
- Monitoring the impact of all actions through the Learning into Practice Group and reporting progress to Delegated Safeguarding Partners.
- Through this work, the Partnership aims to ensure that Bolton's most vulnerable babies are identified earlier, protected more effectively, and given the best possible start in life.



Impact and Effectiveness of Safeguarding Arrangements

We hold ourselves and others to account for ensuring effective arrangements to keep children in Bolton safe.

Impact and Effectiveness of Child Protection Arrangements

The Child Protection Conference Service has continued to make a significant contribution to safeguarding children across Bolton during 2025-26, operating within a context of increasing demand, rising child poverty, and growing complexity of safeguarding concerns. Despite these pressures, the service has maintained strong oversight of child protection arrangements, strengthened quality assurance activity, and improved scrutiny of safeguarding practice across the partnership.

A key feature of the year was the substantial increase in children subject to Child Protection Plans, rising from 312 children at the beginning of the year to 428 by March 2026, representing a 37% increase compared with the previous year. Conference activity increased significantly, with 564 children presented at Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) and 946 children reviewed through Review Child Protection Conferences (RCPCs). The service successfully managed this increased demand while continuing to provide statutory oversight and challenge to ensure children at risk of significant harm received timely intervention and protection.

The effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements is demonstrated by sustained strong performance in statutory review activity. Review Child Protection Conference timeliness remained consistently above 90%, ensuring that children subject to protection plans received regular multi-agency scrutiny and that risks were reviewed without delay. The service also maintained low levels of long-term child protection planning, with fewer than 5% of children remaining on plans for more than two years and only around 1% from September 2025 onwards. This indicates effective decision-making, reducing drift and ensuring children either experienced sufficient improvements to step down from plans or were escalated promptly where greater intervention was required.

There is evidence that strengthened oversight and improved practice standards are having a positive impact on safeguarding outcomes. Repeat Child Protection Plans reduced significantly during the year, falling from 30.1% to 21.3% of new plans, while repeat plans within two years reduced from 13.3% to 8%. This suggests improved assessment, planning and decision-making, with greater confidence that risks have been effectively addressed before plans are ended. The introduction of a requirement for updated Child and Family Assessments before recommending the discontinuation of a Child Protection Plan has further strengthened decision-making and reduced the risk of children returning unnecessarily to child protection processes.

The service has also enhanced its contribution to quality assurance across the safeguarding system. During 2025-26, Child Protection Chairs raised 350 formal escalation disputes and 398 informal practice challenges on behalf of children, a significant increase on previous years. Most concerns related to delays affecting children, statutory compliance, risk management and the quality of professional practice. This increase reflects a culture of greater professional challenge and stronger safeguarding oversight rather than deteriorating practice. Importantly, most concerns were resolved at Team Manager or Head of Service level, demonstrating effective partnership responses to identified issues.

Alongside challenge, the service has continued to promote learning and recognise effective practice through Positive Practice Alerts, thematic audits and multi-agency quality assurance activity. Joint audits focusing on domestic abuse and participation in partnership audits relating to child sexual abuse have strengthened professional understanding and improved safeguarding responses in priority areas. Child Protection Chairs have also become increasingly integrated into wider quality assurance arrangements through regular case auditing and involvement in strategic safeguarding forums.

Improving the participation and voice of children remains a notable area of development. The launch of the Child Protection Handbook and the introduction of Child Protection Chair visits have strengthened opportunities for children and young people to understand and influence safeguarding processes. During the year, 83 referrals were made to advocacy services, more than double the previous year, and attempts were made to engage directly with 365 children prior to conferences. Children's views were presented in conferences even when attendance was not appropriate, ensuring that decision-making remained firmly informed by lived experience.

The development of Young Person Plans has also demonstrated positive outcomes for older children experiencing extra-familial harm. This approach has enabled more tailored, relationship-based safeguarding responses, supporting engagement, reducing risks associated with exploitation and improving educational participation and community safety for vulnerable young people. Although numbers remain small, early evidence suggests the model is supporting improved outcomes for adolescents whose risks are predominantly outside the family home.



Impact for Children

The true measure of effective safeguarding arrangements is not the number of meetings held, audits completed or processes strengthened, but the difference they make to children's lives.

The infographic below brings together the key areas of impact identified through quality assurance activity, performance information and multi-agency scrutiny during 2025-2026.

It demonstrates how strengthened Child Protection Conferencing arrangements have supported a more responsive, accountable and child-centred safeguarding system, helping more children to be protected from harm, heard in decisions that affect them and supported to achieve lasting positive change.

Together, these outcomes provide assurance that partnership investment in oversight, challenge and continuous improvement is translating into better experiences, stronger protection and more sustainable outcomes for children and families across Bolton.



Impact and Effectiveness of Arrangements for Children at Risk of Familial Sexual Abuse

In November 2024, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published *"I Wanted Them All to Notice"*, a national review examining child sexual abuse within the family environment. The review highlighted significant concerns about the ability of safeguarding systems to recognise, respond to and support children experiencing sexual abuse by family members. In response, Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership undertook a multi-agency audit during 2025-2026 to understand whether the national findings reflected local practice and to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Eleven cases involving children aged 4 to 17 years who had disclosed sexual abuse were reviewed by representatives from Children's Social Care, Greater Manchester Police and Bolton NHS Foundation Trust.

What We Learned

The audit identified significant strengths across the safeguarding partnership:

- Referrals were generally of good quality, with children's voices clearly captured, particularly within police referrals.
- Multi-agency information sharing was effective for the majority of children, supporting informed decision-making.
- Immediate safeguarding responses following disclosures were often strong, including safety planning, strategy discussions and timely police investigations; children requiring medical examinations received them without delay.
- There was evidence of sensitive and child-centred practice, with children being listened to and reassured that the abuse was not their fault.

The audit also highlighted important areas for improvement:-

- While timely strategy discussions were evident for children, the audit identified opportunities to improve consistency across the partnership, enabling earlier multi-agency planning and strengthening safeguarding responses for children.
- The audit reinforced the importance of maintaining professional curiosity where multiple safeguarding concerns are present, as the complexity of family circumstances can sometimes obscure the significance and impact of sexual abuse on the child; there is a need to strengthen practice that recognises children may not always be able to maintain disclosures of sexual abuse and that safeguarding responses should continue to be informed by the wider context of risk and vulnerability.
- Build on existing strengths in assessment and planning by ensuring safeguarding plans consistently focus on risk management, recovery, and improved outcomes for children who have experienced sexual abuse. There is a need to ensure children's access to therapeutic support and recovery services following experiences of sexual abuse, recognising the long-term impact of trauma and the importance of timely intervention.

Impact for Children

Learning from this audit has strengthened the Partnership's understanding of the complex and often hidden experiences of children affected by sexual abuse within their family environment. The findings have reinforced the importance of maintaining a child-centred safeguarding response that prioritises children's safety, wellbeing and recovery, regardless of whether abuse is disclosed, reported through criminal justice pathways, or results in a prosecution. As a result, practitioners across the partnership are increasingly encouraged to remain professionally curious and to continue safeguarding activity even where a child withdraws or retracts an allegation.

Greater emphasis is being placed on understanding children's lived experiences, recognising the impact of trauma, and ensuring that assessments and plans focus not only on immediate safety but also on longer-term emotional wellbeing and recovery. The learning has also strengthened multi-agency practice by highlighting the importance of robust and realistic safeguarding plans that are informed by the perspectives, information and expertise of all relevant agencies. This supports a more coordinated response to risk and helps ensure that children and non-abusing family members receive the protection and support they need.

Importantly, the audit has increased awareness of the barriers children can face in accessing therapeutic support following abuse. This has provided a stronger evidence base for partners and commissioners to consider how services can respond more effectively to children's recovery needs and reduce delays in accessing help. Collectively, these improvements are helping to create a safeguarding system where children are more likely to be believed, listened to, protected and supported. Through strengthened professional curiosity, trauma-informed practice, coordinated multi-agency working and a continued focus on children's voices, the Partnership aims to ensure that children affected by intrafamilial sexual abuse receive the right support at the right time and are better able to recover, heal and thrive.

BOLTON SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP
Working Together to Safeguard Children and their Families

Impact for Children

Learning from this audit has strengthened local understanding of the distinct needs of children experiencing sexual abuse within their family environment. As a result:

- Safeguarding continues** even when a child retracts an allegation. There is increased professional awareness that safeguarding activity must continue.
- Stronger focus on the child's lived experience**, emotional wellbeing and recovery journey, rather than relying solely on criminal justice outcomes.
- Safer children through robust, realistic safety plans** informed by multi-agency intelligence and coordinated action.
- Better access to therapeutic support.** Partners and commissioners are working together to understand and address barriers so children receive help when they need it.
- Professionals' curiosity, ongoing support and coordinated responses** recognise the complex impact of intrafamilial sexual abuse and support children to recover and thrive.

PROTECT **SUPPORT** **EMPOWER** **IMPROVE**

Working together to ensure every child in Bolton is **heard, protected, supported** and able to **thrive**.

Priorities for 2026-2027

During 2026-2027, the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership will focus on strengthening the multi-agency response to child sexual abuse within the family environment. This programme of work has been developed in response to learning from local review activity, audit findings, and national research, recognising the significant and often hidden harm experienced by children affected by intra-familial sexual abuse. The Partnership will prioritise increasing practitioner confidence and understanding through a comprehensive programme of learning, development and awareness activities. Partners will work together to embed the findings from recent audits into everyday practice, ensuring that assessments, planning and decision-making consistently identify and respond to concerns relating to child sexual abuse.

A key area of focus will be seeking assurance that strategy discussions are held promptly, involve all relevant agencies, and lead to robust decision-making. The quality of safeguarding plans will also be evaluated to ensure that risks are clearly identified, protective actions are proportionate and effective, and support for children and non-abusing family members is clearly articulated. and young people.

The Partnership recognises the important role of health services in supporting recovery from abuse and will work closely with health partners and commissioners to better understand and address barriers to accessing therapeutic support. Alongside this, a trauma-informed approach will be promoted across the children's workforce, supporting practitioners to understand the impact of trauma and the reasons why children may delay, withdraw or retract disclosures. Quality assurance activity will continue throughout the year to evaluate whether improvements in practice are resulting in better experiences and outcomes for children and families. Findings will be used to inform ongoing learning and drive continuous improvement across the partnership. Through this work, the Partnership's ambition is that children who experience sexual abuse within their family environment are identified earlier, listened to and believed, protected effectively, and provided with the support they need to recover and thrive.



Impact and Effectiveness of Multi-Agency Arrangements for Missing Children

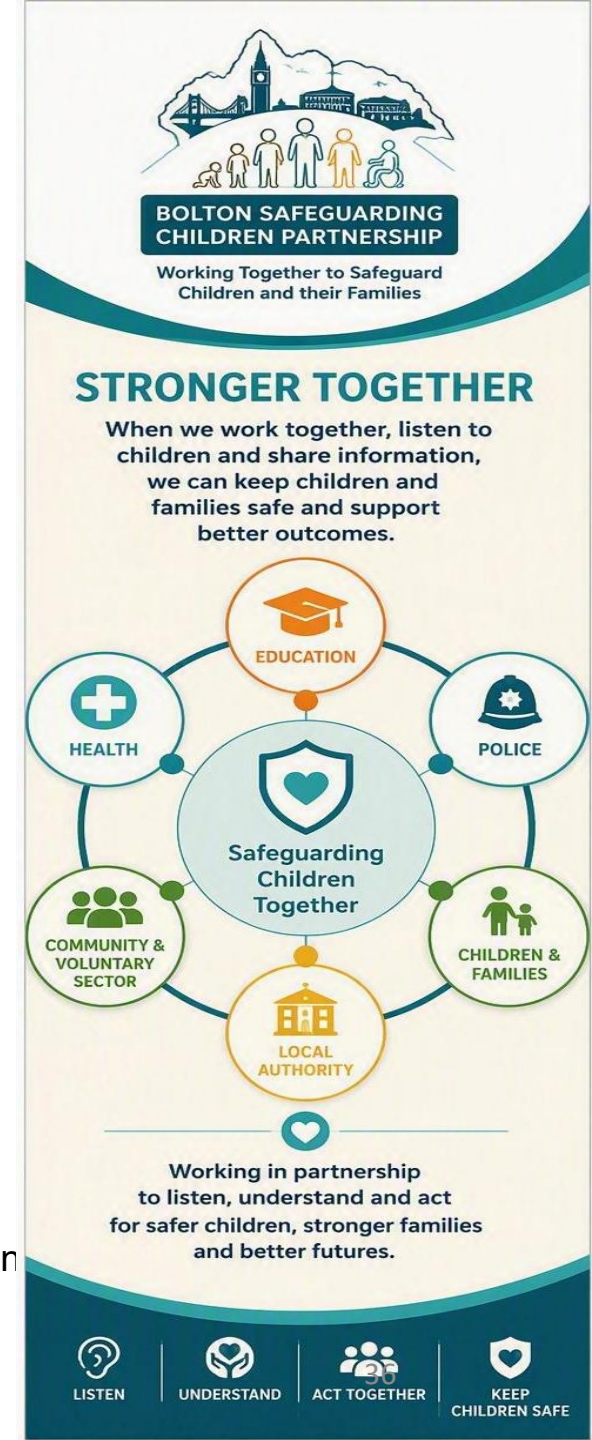
Safeguarding partners are tasked with preventing children from going missing through proactive measures. This includes developing local protocols tailored to community needs, promoting early help services to families, and conducting thorough risk assessments for children identified as vulnerable. Early intervention is key to reducing the likelihood of missing episodes.

Partners must work collaboratively to identify warning signs and provide support before issues escalate. This involves engaging with schools, healthcare providers, and social services to create a safety net around at-risk children. By addressing underlying issues such as family conflict, neglect, or mental health concerns, safeguarding partners can mitigate risks and enhance protective factors. Prevention strategies also include public awareness campaigns and training for professionals to recognize and respond to early indicators of risk.

In Bolton these local arrangements are led by the Missing Co-ordinator who supports the effective coordination among safeguarding partners. This role works alongside agencies to clearly define roles and responsibilities to ensure:

- A swift and unified response.
- Information is shared and analysed in a timely manner.
- Support partners to assess risk accurately and make informed decisions.
- Offer challenge to practitioners and leaders when required.

Our local safeguarding arrangements for missing children include protocols for joint working, data monitoring to identify tracking of individual children to ensure appropriate responses and a multi-agency training offer. f



Reducing the incidence and impact of children going missing remains a key safeguarding priority for Bolton. During 2025-2026, 523 children were reported missing across 1,926 missing episodes. Whilst the number of individual children reported missing reduced compared with the previous year (577 children in 2024-2025), the number of missing episodes increased by 73, indicating that a smaller cohort of children experienced more frequent missing episodes and continued to present with complex and enduring vulnerabilities. Throughout the year, safeguarding partners continued to strengthen local arrangements through improved governance, enhanced multi-agency oversight, earlier intervention, and greater connectivity between missing children, exploitation, and contextual safeguarding arrangements. The Missing Coordinator has played a central role in coordinating activity across agencies, ensuring timely information sharing, supporting professional decision-making, and providing oversight of those children most vulnerable to harm.

A key strength of Bolton's arrangements is the timely use of multi-agency strategy discussions. Bolton has adopted a more proactive threshold than national guidance by requiring strategy meetings where a child has been missing for more than 48 hours, rather than the national expectation of 72 hours. This approach resulted in 23 additional strategy meetings being held during the year and demonstrates the Partnership's commitment to early intervention and risk management. Audit activity found that earlier strategy discussions led to improved safeguarding actions, supported quicker efforts to locate children, and contributed to more effective plans to reduce future missing episode.

The Partnership has made significant progress against the priorities identified in the previous reporting period. During 2025-2026, an updated Missing Children Protocol was implemented, supported by a programme of multi-agency briefings and training. This has strengthened professional understanding of roles, responsibilities, escalation arrangements and responses to high-risk missing episodes, promoting greater consistency in safeguarding practice across the partnership. The establishment of the monthly multi-agency Missing Panel has further strengthened partnership oversight and accountability. The panel provides opportunities to review patterns, share intelligence, coordinate interventions and ensure that children who repeatedly go missing receive an appropriate multi-agency response. Integration with child exploitation and disruption arrangements has enhanced partners' ability to identify and respond to contextual safeguarding risks, including criminal exploitation, sexual exploitation, unsafe peer networks and harmful locations.



Understanding the Child's Lived Experience

Behind every missing episode is a child with their own experiences, relationships and challenges. For this child, repeated missing episodes were not isolated incidents but an indication that they were struggling with a range of difficulties affecting their daily life and wellbeing. The child was experiencing challenges at school, tensions within family relationships, and the influence of peers who were themselves vulnerable. These factors combined to increase the likelihood of the child going missing and heightened concerns about their safety and welfare.

While repeated missing episodes can often be viewed primarily through the lens of risk, understanding the reasons why a child goes missing is essential to identifying the help and support they need. Through independent Return Interviews, practitioners created opportunities for the child to be heard, building trust and gaining insight into their lived experience. This enabled professionals to move beyond responding to individual incidents and instead address the underlying factors that were contributing to the child's vulnerability.



Priorities for 2026-2027

The Partnership's priorities for 2026-2027 have been informed by analysis of performance data, quality assurance activity, learning from Return Interviews, children's lived experiences, and intelligence gathered through multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Whilst the number of children reported missing reduced during the year, repeat missing episodes remain concentrated amongst a smaller group of highly vulnerable children, particularly those in care.

The Partnership has also identified opportunities to strengthen the quality and timeliness of Return Interviews, enhance multi-agency oversight, and make greater use of learning and feedback to improve practice. Collectively, these priorities are intended to reduce repeat missing episodes, strengthen safeguarding responses, improve the experiences of children and families, and ensure better outcomes for children who go missing from home or care.





A Safe Workforce

This section of the annual report summarises the impact and effectiveness of the partnership's multi-agency arrangements for Managing Allegations Against those who Work with Children.

The Role of the Local Authority Designated Officer

The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) plays a vital role within local safeguarding arrangements by providing oversight and coordination where concerns are raised about adults working with children in positions of trust. This includes professionals, volunteers, foster carers and others whose work brings them into contact with children.

The purpose of the LADO is not to investigate allegations directly, but to ensure that concerns are managed fairly, consistently, promptly and in line with statutory guidance. By bringing together relevant agencies, providing advice and challenge, and maintaining oversight of decision-making, the LADO helps ensure that safeguarding risks are identified and addressed at the earliest opportunity.

Effective LADO arrangements contribute to a safer workforce by promoting accountability, supporting robust information sharing and ensuring that agencies respond appropriately when concerns arise. The role also helps to balance the need to protect children with the need for fair and proportionate processes for adults who are the subject of allegations.

The Role of the Local Authority Designated Officer

The Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) plays a vital role in overseeing and managing allegations against adults who work with children in positions of trust, ensuring children are safeguarded and that concerns are handled fairly, consistently and promptly.



Impact and Effectiveness of Managing Allegations Arrangements

During 2025-26, the service demonstrated a more focused and risk-led approach to safeguarding, with stronger threshold application, improved referral quality and increased multi-agency oversight of concerns that may place children at risk.

A significant development during the year was the introduction of the LADO Portal in April 2025. The new system has strengthened accountability, improved the quality and consistency of referrals and supported agencies to better understand and apply safeguarding thresholds. Although overall referrals reduced from 476 to 362, there was a substantial increase in the number of cases progressing to formal safeguarding processes, indicating that agencies are becoming more effective at identifying concerns requiring intervention and oversight.

The effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements is evidenced by the increase in formal multi-agency activity. Professional Strategy Meetings increased from 43 to 62, Review Strategy Meetings rose from 11 to 18, and Initial Consideration Meetings increased from 4 to 14. Overall safeguarding meetings increased by almost 60%, from 59 to 94, despite fewer referrals being received. This reflects greater scrutiny of concerns, more robust risk assessment and stronger partnership decision-making when concerns about adults working with children arise.

The proportion of referrals resulting in no further action reduced significantly from 87.6% to 76.2%, demonstrating improved threshold understanding and referral quality across partner agencies. Referrals are increasingly being made appropriately, with fewer unsuitable referrals entering the process and more cases receiving formal safeguarding consideration where required. The absence of any malicious, false or unfounded allegations during the reporting period also provides reassurance that professionals are exercising appropriate judgement when raising concerns.

Education, social care and police services continued to be the largest sources of referrals, reflecting their regular contact with children and established safeguarding responsibilities. There is also evidence of increasing safeguarding awareness across a broader range of organisations, including voluntary groups, sports organisations and residential settings. The growth in referrals from these sectors suggests that safeguarding responsibilities are becoming better understood across the wider children's workforce.



Analysis of presenting concerns highlights improved identification and management of higher-risk allegations. Physical abuse, sexual abuse and risk of harm/conduct remained the most common concerns, with increasing proportions of these referrals progressing into formal safeguarding processes. Sexual abuse allegations demonstrated one of the most significant shifts towards formal intervention, indicating stronger identification, improved information gathering and more confident threshold decision-making. Emotional referrals also increased significantly, suggesting growing professional awareness of the impact of emotional abuse and psychological harm on children and young people.

The service has maintained a strong focus on timely responses. Whilst the increasing complexity of investigations has led to a rise in ongoing cases, most referrals continued to be resolved within one month. No cases exceeded 12 months in duration, demonstrating effective oversight and management of longer-running investigations. However, the increase in open cases and investigations linked to lengthy police enquiries highlights the need for continued monitoring and robust multi-agency case tracking.

Alongside case management activity, the LADO service has strengthened its preventative and improvement role through targeted engagement with safeguarding partners. This has included safeguarding briefings for education leaders, delivery of advanced safeguarding training for Designated Safeguarding Leads, participation in regional and national LADO networks, and the promotion of clearer guidance regarding referral pathways and threshold decisions. These activities have increased practitioner confidence, improved awareness of safeguarding responsibilities and strengthened partnership working across the children's workforce.

Overall, the LADO arrangements in Bolton provide good assurance that allegations against adults who work with children are subject to appropriate scrutiny, challenge and oversight. The service has successfully supported a shift towards a more risk-focused safeguarding approach, ensuring that concerns which may indicate harm to children are identified earlier, considered more robustly and managed through effective multi-agency processes. Whilst increasing complexity and demand remain challenges, the evidence demonstrates a maturing safeguarding system with improving threshold application, stronger partnership responses and greater accountability across the children's workforce.



What Difference Has This Made for Children?

Throughout 2025-26, the LADO service has continued to play a critical role in ensuring that concerns about adults who work with, or have contact with, children are managed effectively, consistently and in partnership. While the work of the LADO service often focuses on professional practice, allegations management and organisational safeguarding, the ultimate measure of its effectiveness is the impact on children.

Strengthened partnership arrangements, increased professional confidence in reporting concerns, and robust multi-agency oversight have helped create a safeguarding system that is better able to identify risk, respond proportionately and hold adults to account where concerns arise.

The following summary sets out the ways in which children have benefited from these arrangements during 2025-26.

What has this meant for children?

As a result of the LADO service and strengthened partnership arrangements during 2025-26:

1



Better protection from adult risk

Children were better protected from adults who may pose a risk of harm, with more concerns progressing to formal safeguarding scrutiny and multi-agency oversight.

2



Risks identified and assessed effectively

Potential safeguarding risks were identified and assessed more effectively, supported by improved referral quality, stronger threshold application and earlier professional challenge.

3



Increased multi-agency decision-making

Children benefited from increased multi-agency decision-making, ensuring that allegations and concerns were considered collaboratively and proportionately.

4



Greater scrutiny of serious concerns

Concerns about physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional harm and inappropriate conduct were subject to greater scrutiny, helping to ensure that risks were investigated and managed appropriately.

5



Wider settings, stronger reporting confidence

Children across a wider range of settings, including schools, residential care, sports organisations and voluntary groups, benefited from increased safeguarding awareness and reporting confidence among professionals.

6



Proportionate decisions, stronger information

Where concerns did not meet the threshold for formal intervention, decisions were made more consistently and based on stronger information, reducing unnecessary processes while maintaining children's safety.

7



A confident and well-supported workforce

Children benefited from a workforce that is increasingly confident in recognising, reporting and responding to safeguarding concerns, supported by training, guidance and improved partnership learning.

8



Stronger accountability and oversight

Greater professional accountability and oversight helped ensure that safeguarding concerns involving adults working with children were not managed in isolation and received appropriate challenge and review.

9



A stronger safeguarding system for children

Overall, children in Bolton have benefited from a stronger, more focused safeguarding system that is improving its ability to identify risk, respond proportionately to concerns and hold adults working with children to account where safeguarding concerns arise.



Overall, children in Bolton have benefited from a **stronger, more focused safeguarding system** that is improving its ability to **identify risk, respond proportionately to concerns and hold adults working with children to account** where safeguarding concerns arise.



**BOLTON SAFEGUARDING
CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP**

Working Together to Safeguard
Children and their Families



Priorities for 2026-2027

Analysis of activity during 2025-26 demonstrates that the LADO service is operating within an increasingly focused and risk-led safeguarding system, with fewer referrals but a greater proportion progressing to formal multi-agency safeguarding processes. The introduction of the LADO Portal has improved referral quality and accountability, whilst increased numbers of Initial Consideration Meetings,

Professional Strategy Meetings and Review Meetings indicate stronger threshold application and greater scrutiny of concerns involving adults who work with children. However, the data also highlights opportunities to further improve consistency of referral quality, strengthen understanding of thresholds across the wider workforce, and address the growing number of complex investigations remaining open for longer periods.

In response to these findings, the Partnership will focus on two key priorities during 2026-27. Firstly, partners will work together to improve referral quality and threshold understanding, particularly within education, private residential settings and the faith sector, ensuring that concerns are identified early, referred appropriately, and responded to proportionately. Secondly, the Partnership will seek to reduce the number of lengthy and ongoing investigations through improved case tracking, stronger multi-agency oversight, regular review arrangements and more timely information sharing between agencies.

Through this work, the Partnership aims to strengthen the effectiveness of allegations management arrangements, improve decision-making, enhance professional accountability and, most importantly, ensure that children continue to benefit from a robust safeguarding system that identifies risk and responds effectively when concerns arise.





A Confident Workforce

This section of the annual report summarises the impact and effectiveness of the partnership's multi-agency arrangements for Multi-agency training and development.

Impact and Effectiveness of Learning and Development

The Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP) recognises that a skilled, confident and knowledgeable workforce is fundamental to effective safeguarding arrangements. Multi-agency learning and development remains a key mechanism through which the Partnership ensures practitioners, managers and leaders across agencies understand their safeguarding responsibilities and are equipped to respond effectively to the needs of children and families. The learning programme supports the implementation of key statutory guidance, including *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, *Keeping Children Safe in Education* and the *Early Years Foundation Stage Framework*, ensuring that safeguarding practice across the partnership remains aligned to national expectations and local priorities.

Central to the Partnership's approach is the recognition that effective safeguarding relies upon strong multi-agency collaboration. Learning opportunities are designed not only to increase professional knowledge but also to strengthen information sharing, professional curiosity, challenge and escalation, critical thinking and understanding of the respective roles and responsibilities of safeguarding partners. By bringing practitioners together from across agencies, the programme promotes a shared understanding of risk, thresholds and safeguarding processes, contributing to more effective and coordinated responses for children and families.

The learning offer is aligned to the priorities identified within the Bolton Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements (MASA) and Partnership Business Plan. During 2025-26, learning activity continued to support practice development in relation to Child Exploitation, Neglect and Child Sexual Abuse within the Family Environment. In addition, learning from safeguarding reviews, audits, inspections and quality assurance activity has been embedded throughout the programme, with a particular focus on information sharing, professional challenge, family help, child-centred practice, cultural competence and understanding the lived experience of children.



Throughout the year the Partnership delivered a comprehensive and accessible programme of learning including trainer-led courses, conferences, webinars, Network Bites, Knowledge Nuggets, e-learning and a Train the Trainer model. This blended approach allows the Partnership to meet the needs of a diverse workforce whilst responding to increasing service pressures and varying learning preferences.

A total of 7,651 training registrations were recorded during the year, including 5,397 registrations for the Keeping Children Safe (Basic) e-learning programme, demonstrating significant reach across the children's workforce.



The programme also provided opportunities for practitioners to engage with emerging safe and partnership priorities. During the year, the Partnership hosted a Child Exploitation Sur Education Safeguarding Conference attended by 150 delegates, Online Safety Live event programme of webinars supporting the launch of the Bolton Child Protection Handbook. K Nuggets and Network Bites continued to provide accessible and responsive learning on e policy changes and specialist safeguarding topics, supporting a culture of continuous learn partnership. A particular strength of the learning programme has been its ability to extend : learning beyond traditional statutory partners. The Keeping Children Safe (Basic) course c widely accessed by education, early years, voluntary, faith and community organisations, : broader safeguarding network across Bolton. In addition, the Train the Trainer programme trained practitioners to cascade learning within their own organisations, resulting in more t additional staff receiving safeguarding training and ensuring consistent safeguarding mess wider audience.

Evaluation data provides strong assurance regarding the quality and effectiveness of the F learning arrangements. Ninety-seven per cent of participants reported that training increas knowledge, whilst 96% rated the quality of learning as good or excellent. Most importantly, delegates reported that the learning would result in significant or substantial changes to th to 97.75% when those indicating minor changes to practice are included. These findings p that learning activity is not only increasing knowledge but is also influencing professional k decision-making and safeguarding practice across the partnership.

Whilst engagement remains strong overall, challenges remain. Attendance at trainer-led c stable at 77%, although non-attendance continues to affect capacity and opportunities for Partnership has also identified variation in engagement across sectors and recognises the continuing to strengthen participation from all safeguarding partners. Maintaining specialis provision and securing input from subject matter experts remains an ongoing priority as de complexity across the safeguarding system continue to increase.



Impact for Children

The Partnership can be assured that its learning and development arrangements continue to make an important contribution to safeguarding effectiveness in Bolton.

Through strengthening professional knowledge, improving multi-agency understanding, embedding learning from reviews and promoting a culture of continuous improvement, the programme is supporting a more confident, connected and capable safeguarding workforce.



What This Means for Children

As a result of the Partnership's investment in multi-agency learning and development:

1



Earlier identification of risk

Children are more likely to have safeguarding concerns identified at an earlier stage through increased practitioner knowledge, awareness and professional curiosity.

2



Better recognition and response

Practitioners are better equipped to recognise and respond to exploitation, neglect, child sexual abuse and other forms of harm affecting children in Bolton.

3



Stronger information sharing

Information is shared more effectively between agencies, supporting timely, coordinated and proportionate safeguarding responses.

4



More consistent decision-making

Children benefit from more consistent decision-making across services, supported by a shared understanding of safeguarding thresholds, responsibilities and local pathways.

5



Learning drives better practice

Learning from safeguarding reviews, audits, inspections and quality assurance activity is more effectively translated into frontline practice, reducing repeated mistakes and strengthening safeguarding.

6



Greater confidence to challenge

Practitioners have greater confidence to challenge, escalate concerns and advocate on behalf of children when risks are not being adequately addressed.

7



Children's voices are heard

Children's voices, wishes, feelings and lived experiences are increasingly reflected in assessments, planning and intervention.

8



Stronger multi-agency support

Children and families benefit from stronger multi-agency working, better coordinated support and improved access to the right help at the right time.

9



Wider safeguarding knowledge

Safeguarding knowledge has been extended across a wider range of organisations, including voluntary, faith and community sectors, strengthening the safeguarding network across Bolton.



Together, these outcomes mean more children in Bolton are **safer, heard and supported** to achieve the best outcomes in their lives.



Early help
and protection



Better support
for children
and families



Stronger
partnership
working



Improved outcomes
and long-term
life chances



Bolton
Safeguarding Children
Partnership

Respond • Nurture • Thrive

Practitioner Voice

Practitioner feedback demonstrates that multi-agency learning is influencing frontline practice. Participants reported increased confidence in recognising neglect, applying professional curiosity, adapting communication and questioning techniques, understanding emerging safeguarding risks and improving the quality of safeguarding decision-making. Feedback also highlights the value of multi-agency learning in promoting reflection, strengthening professional networks and increasing confidence to challenge and advocate on behalf of children.

The success of the Train the Trainer programme further demonstrates how learning is being embedded and cascaded across organisations, extending the reach and impact of safeguarding messages beyond those directly attending Partnership training.

The Impact of Our Learning Offer

What Practitioners Are Telling Us

Real feedback from practitioners shows the positive difference our training is making for children, families and communities in Bolton.



Respond • Nurture • Thrive

1 Increased Professional Curiosity and Confidence



“As a result, it has made me more aware to use professional curiosity and the services that are available to support families.”

✓ Practitioners are more confident in understanding risk, asking questions and identifying support mechanisms for families.

2 Improved Assessment and Identification of Neglect



“The training gives detail of what neglect is and what I as a support worker tend to overlook.” (Neglect Knowledge Nugget)

“I will ensure I look for subtle neglect and be aware of nutritional excess as well as too little food available.”

✓ Practitioners are developing a more nuanced understanding of neglect and are better able to identify indicators that may previously have gone unnoticed.

3 Improved Communication and Engagement Skills



“(I will) be more confident in changing questioning styles.”

✓ Practitioners are reflecting on and adapting their practice to improve engagement with children and families.

4 Increased Understanding of Emerging and Specialist Safeguarding Risks



“I have never done anything like this before.” (Abuse Through Beliefs/Witchcraft)

“I have worked with someone who was in fear of Jin.” (Abuse Through Beliefs/Witchcraft)

✓ Training increases awareness of less commonly recognised safeguarding issues and improves practitioner preparedness.

5 Increased Knowledge and Reflection



“Very interesting, definitely makes you think of your own language and watch other people's language.” (Language Matters)

✓ Practitioners reflect on the impact of professional language and develop more child-centred and strengths-based approaches.

6 Improved Understanding of Safeguarding Responsibilities



“Informative for people who have only little knowledge.” (Adverse Childhood Experiences Knowledge Nugget)

“Really good refresher.” (Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 Knowledge Nugget)

“Very informative training.” (Dealing with a Disclosure of Abuse Knowledge Nugget)

✓ Training successfully reinforces both foundational knowledge and current safeguarding practice.

7 Improved Confidence Through Multi-Agency Learning



“Sharing experiences with others working with young people and constructive feedback. Watching the video of myself back and how I might change my approach at times.”

✓ Reflective practice, peer learning and multi-agency environments build practitioner confidence.

8 Confidence to Deliver Safeguarding Messages Within Organisations



“Slides were excellent... videos very useful.”

“Felt really confident” delivering the training.”

“Generated a lot of discussion around procedures and responsibilities.”

✓ Learning is cascaded across organisations, extending the impact of the Partnership's learning offer.

Stronger learning. Stronger practice.
Better outcomes for children and families.



Earlier identification of risk



Improved multi-agency working



Better support at the right time



Safer children and stronger families



Partners Safeguarding Highlights

This section of the annual report shines a light on how members of Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership contribute to safeguarding arrangements in Bolton.

Partnership Contributions and Impact 2025-2026

Throughout the year, partners across Bolton have continued to work collaboratively to strengthen safeguarding arrangements and improve outcomes for children, young people and families. Activity has focused on the partnership priorities of tackling neglect, exploitation, and ensuring effective threshold decision-making, whilst embedding learning from local and national reviews and promoting the voice of children and families across safeguarding practice.

The breadth of activity delivered by statutory, health, education, voluntary and community sector partners demonstrates a strong commitment to safeguarding and a shared ambition to ensure children receive the right help, at the right time, from the right service.

Tackling Neglect - Partnership Activity

As stated earlier, neglect remained a key priority across the partnership, with agencies working to improve identification, assessment and intervention. Partners have promoted and embedded the Bolton Neglect Strategy and Toolkit through workforce development, safeguarding supervision, multi-agency training and reflective practice. Education services shared learning from rapid reviews, health services strengthened responses to missed appointments, and Early Help services incorporated neglect-focused practice into assessment and intervention planning. VCSE providers supported families through early intervention and practical support designed to prevent escalation of need.

Health partners have strengthened professional awareness of indicators of neglect, particularly within acute and community settings, while probation services have enhanced safeguarding checks and information-sharing arrangements in relation to children affected by parental offending and risk.

Impact

As a result of this work:

- Practitioners report increased confidence in recognising and responding to neglect.
- Earlier identification of children experiencing neglect has been evidenced across services.
- Improved information sharing has strengthened multi-agency planning.
- Families are receiving more preventative support through Early Help and Family Hub services.
- Agencies have increased their ability to identify patterns of neglect and respond to underlying causes affecting children and families.

Tackling Exploitation - Partnership Activity

Partners have continued to strengthen their collective response to child exploitation through awareness raising, prevention, workforce development and targeted support. Education settings delivered awareness activities for pupils and parents, contributed to extra-familial harm activity and embedded exploitation within safeguarding training programmes. Health partners participated in child exploitation peer reviews, awareness events and multi-agency safeguarding forums. CAMHS continued to contribute to Child Exploitation and Missing Meetings, supporting a coordinated approach to identifying and managing risk.

The voluntary and community sector secured additional investment through the One Life Project, providing targeted youth support, prevention initiatives and direct intervention for children and young people vulnerable to exploitation.

Impact

Partnership activity has resulted in:

- Increased professional understanding of exploitation risks and indicators.
- Improved awareness among children, families and communities.
- Enhanced pathways for support and intervention.
- Stronger collaborative working through exploitation forums and review processes.

One education-led awareness event resulted in a parent seeking support regarding concerns for their child, demonstrating the value of preventative engagement and public awareness activities.

Effective Thresholds and Early Help- Partnership Activity

Significant work has been undertaken to strengthen understanding and application of safeguarding thresholds across the partnership. Early Help services have delivered training, consultation and reflective support to practitioners, helping agencies understand levels of need and appropriate pathways for intervention. Education practitioners have accessed training and shadowing opportunities to improve their understanding of referral processes and decision-making. Family Hub, voluntary sector and health partners have worked closely together to streamline pathways and improve access to support.

The introduction of enhanced multi-agency arrangements within health services, including specialist safeguarding leadership and strengthened health involvement in front door processes, has further supported timely information sharing and decision-making.

Impact

Partners report:

- Greater confidence in threshold decision-making.
- Improved understanding of referral pathways and support services.
- Better communication between agencies.
- Increased focus on ensuring children receive support at the earliest opportunity.
- Whilst progress has been made, partners continue to identify threshold consistency, information sharing and Early Help capacity as areas requiring ongoing attention.

Learning and Improvement

A strong culture of learning continues to underpin Bolton's safeguarding arrangements. Partners have actively engaged with learning from Rapid Reviews, Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, national reviews and thematic audits. Learning has been disseminated through safeguarding committees, training programmes, newsletters, professional forums and reflective practice sessions. Agencies report that learning is increasingly translated into tangible practice improvements, including policy changes, workforce development and strengthened safeguarding pathways.

Health partners have strengthened assurance frameworks to monitor learning and improvement, ensuring recommendations from reviews are tracked and regularly evaluated through governance arrangements.

Listening to Children and Families

Partners continue to place the voice of children, young people and families at the centre of safeguarding practice. Across schools, health services, Family Hubs and voluntary sector provision, children and families have contributed through surveys, participation activities, service evaluations, complaints processes, forums and direct feedback opportunities. Services have used this feedback to improve communication, redesign support pathways and ensure interventions reflect the lived experiences of children and families. Feedback gathered during the year demonstrates positive experiences of support:

- “I feel safe and confident to talk about anything in regard to parenting.”
- “Will make a huge difference in my relationship with the kids.”
- “I know if I had not walked through the door to the group, I would not be in a better place now.”



Partnership Impact

Behind every figure in this report is a child, young person, or family who has benefited from support, intervention, or the opportunity to have their voice heard. These achievements reflect the strength of partnership working across Bolton and our shared commitment to safeguarding children, strengthening families, and improving outcomes.

Through collaboration, learning, participation, and early intervention, partners have increased access to support, enhanced safeguarding practice, and helped create positive change in the lives of children and families. While challenges remain, our collective commitment to continuous improvement, shared responsibility, and innovation will ensure that children remain at the heart of everything we do as we work together to build safer childhoods and better futures for Bolton.





Independent Scrutineer

This section of the annual report shares the perspectives of the Independent Scrutineer on the impact and effectiveness of safeguarding arrangements in Bolton.

Independent Scrutineer's Summary

It is my view that Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership (BSCP) remains a strong, mature, and effective safeguarding partnership, characterised by committed senior leadership, positive multi-agency relationships, and a culture that increasingly embraces challenge, scrutiny, and continuous improvement. Throughout 2025-2026, the Partnership has demonstrated a growing focus on understanding the effectiveness and impact of its work, moving beyond measuring activity to seeking assurance about the difference safeguarding arrangements are making for children and young people. The annual report highlights significant progress in key areas, particularly the strengthened contribution of education partners, renewed strategic leadership and momentum around child exploitation, and the continued development of the Partnership's response to neglect. These developments provide strong evidence of a partnership that is responsive to challenge and committed to improving safeguarding practice.

While recognising these achievements, I note that important challenges remain. These include maintaining strategic focus during a period of significant national and local system change, embedding improvements into frontline practice, and ensuring that assurance arrangements continue to demonstrate measurable outcomes for children rather than simply evidencing activity. Looking forward, BSCP's continued success will depend on its ability to further develop as an intelligence-led, learning, and outcomes-focused partnership, supported by strong Designated Safeguarding Partner leadership, meaningful engagement from the wider partnership, effective use of safeguarding intelligence, and ongoing independent challenge. I am satisfied that the Partnership has strong foundations from which to meet these challenges and is well placed to continue driving improvements in the safety, wellbeing, and outcomes of Bolton's children.

Leadership and Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements

BSCP continues to benefit from strong and effective multi-agency leadership, underpinned by positive relationships between the statutory safeguarding partners and a shared commitment to safeguarding improvement. Consistent leadership from the Designated Safeguarding Partners, supported by strong NHS representation through the Integrated Care Board, has provided stability, strategic direction, and collective ownership of both strengths and areas requiring development within the safeguarding system. The Independent Scrutineer highlights that the effectiveness of Bolton's safeguarding arrangements is driven not only by governance structures but by visible, engaged senior leaders who work collaboratively to provide challenge, assurance, and strategic oversight.

This culture of shared accountability remains a key strength of the Partnership. Looking ahead, forthcoming NHS and Integrated Care Board reforms will require BSCP to maintain strong health leadership and ensure safeguarding remains a strategic priority throughout organisational change. The role of the DSPs will be increasingly important in shaping the future direction of the Partnership, maintaining system-wide focus, and identifying those areas where independent scrutiny and assurance can add the greatest value in testing safeguarding effectiveness and improving outcomes for children.



Neglect and Child Exploitation

During 2025/26, BSCP made important progress in strengthening its response to two of the most significant safeguarding risks facing children and young people: neglect and child exploitation. While both areas remain complex and require sustained focus, the Partnership has demonstrated a commitment to improvement, learning, and enhanced multi-agency working. Neglect has become a key area of partnership development, with the completion of audit activity and the introduction of practical resources providing a stronger foundation for identifying and responding to neglect. The Independent Scrutineer recognises this as positive progress but emphasises that neglect requires a long-term, system-wide approach due to its cumulative nature and the risk of harm becoming normalised over time. The strategic priority moving forward is to ensure that learning, resources, and professional practice become fully embedded across frontline services and result in improved outcomes for children and families.

Child exploitation continues to present a significant safeguarding challenge, requiring a coordinated response across agencies. The report highlights strengthened leadership, renewed momentum, and improved strategic direction within the multi-agency response, supported by enhanced partnership commitment and scrutiny. Positive progress has been made in reviewing and strengthening operational arrangements, including the CEAM and CEDAM structures, alongside greater examination of the links between exploitation, missing children, contextual safeguarding risks, intelligence gathering, and disruption activity.

Looking ahead, the Partnership's challenge is to demonstrate measurable impact by evidencing how intelligence, risk identification, and multi-agency decision making translate into coordinated safeguarding action and disruption activity. Maintaining strategic oversight of exploitation, missing children, and wider contextual risks will be critical to ensuring emerging threats are identified early and addressed effectively across the whole safeguarding system. These areas should remain central to Partnership assurance and improvement activity throughout 2026-2027.



Step Down from Statutory Intervention

The independent scrutiny of Bolton's step-down arrangements found that the overall framework for transitioning children from statutory intervention to Early Help and wider support is sound, with evidence of positive progress and emerging good practice. Improvements include a reduction in repeat Child Protection Plans, strengthened oversight by Independent Chairs, and enhanced safeguards through updated Child and Family Assessments prior to the ending of Child Protection Plans. Effective professional challenge and examples of strong practice were also identified within the system.

The key finding from the review is that future improvement should focus on achieving greater consistency and reliability within existing arrangements rather than major system redesign. Particular attention is needed to strengthen transition planning, clarify professional responsibilities following step-down, improve communication between services, ensure robust contingency planning, and maintain continuity of support for children and families. Variability in the quality of Child Protection planning also highlights the need for more consistent standards across the partnership.

The scrutiny emphasises that effective step-down arrangements should be viewed as a planned transition rather than the cessation of support, ensuring children continue to receive proportionate help based on their ongoing needs, risks, and protective factors. Workforce capacity and the ability of Early Help and partner agencies to sustain support will be critical to achieving this. The findings provide valuable learning for the Partnership and will help inform the continued development of Early Help services and wider children's reform activity.

Children's Reform Agenda

The Children's Reform Agenda has represented a significant programme of work during the year and has understandably required considerable attention across children's services and the wider partnership. Its effectiveness will ultimately depend upon the collective commitment and leadership of organisations across the children's system.

From an independent scrutiny perspective, I believe there is an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between the reform programme and BSCP. Greater consultation and engagement with the Partnership would help ensure that safeguarding implications are considered collectively and that the expertise of the wider safeguarding partnership informs the development and implementation of reform. Major system reform inevitably changes organisational structures, professional relationships, pathways and responsibilities. It is therefore important that safeguarding assurance remains visible throughout the process rather than being considered separately from reform.

During the next year I would encourage even stronger connectivity between the reform programme, the DSPs and BSCP governance arrangements.

Assurance, Scrutiny and Evidence of Impact

The Partnership has continued to develop its approach to assurance and independent scrutiny. I have seen a willingness from partners to engage with challenge and to examine areas where arrangements could be strengthened. The scrutiny undertaken around child exploitation, repeat missing episodes, intelligence and disruption is one example of this. The next stage of maturity should be to strengthen further the Partnership's ability to demonstrate impact.

Performance information, audit, practitioner feedback, children's experiences, learning from reviews and operational intelligence should increasingly be brought together to provide a coherent picture of safeguarding effectiveness. This is particularly important for issues such as neglect and exploitation, where individual performance measures may provide only a partial picture of the safeguarding experience of children.

Independent scrutiny should continue to complement these arrangements by testing the evidence presented to the Partnership, engaging directly with practitioners and partners where appropriate, and providing constructive challenge to the DSPs and wider Partnership.

Looking Forward: Priorities for Scrutiny and Assurance 2026/27

My scrutiny during 2025/26 indicates that BSCP remains a well-established, collaborative partnership that is responsive to challenge and committed to continuous improvement. I have seen encouraging progress in several important areas, particularly the strengthened response to child exploitation, the growing contribution of education within partnership arrangements, and the development of the Partnership's approach to neglect. As we move into 2026/27, I believe the focus should be on embedding these developments and evidencing the impact they are having on practice and outcomes for children. In particular, I will be looking for continued progress in the Partnership's response to neglect, sustained strategic and operational oversight of child criminal exploitation and associated vulnerabilities, and stronger use of safeguarding intelligence to inform effective intervention and disruption activity.

I also consider it important that the Partnership continues to strengthen the effectiveness of CEAM and CEDAM arrangements, further consolidates the role of the Education Collaborative, and embeds the learning arising from the Step-Down scrutiny review to improve the consistency and effectiveness of transitions between statutory intervention and Early Help support. The Children's Reform Agenda and ongoing NHS and ICB transformation will require particular attention to ensure safeguarding remains visible, well-governed, and supported by strong Designated Safeguarding Partner leadership. A key priority for me will be the Partnership's ability to demonstrate impact. I will continue to encourage the use of data, audit findings, practitioner insight, children's experiences, and wider safeguarding intelligence to provide a clear understanding of the difference partnership activity is making to children and families. Independent scrutiny should continue to focus on those areas where it can provide the greatest challenge, assurance, and added value, supporting BSCP's ongoing development as an intelligence-led, learning-focused, and outcomes-driven safeguarding partnership.



Priorities 2025-2026

This section of the annual report highlights the priorities for 2024-2025.

Strategic Priorities 2026-2027

During 2026-2027, Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership will focus on reducing harm through earlier intervention, strengthening responses to neglect, exploitation and child sexual abuse, improving the effectiveness of Early Help and step-down arrangements, amplifying the voices of children and families, and developing an intelligence-led safeguarding system capable of evidencing improved outcomes. Through strong leadership, effective partnership working, and a skilled workforce, we will continue to ensure that children remain safe, heard, supported and able to thrive.



For further information about the arrangements, share your experiences of safeguarding in Bolton, give your views on the report or get involved in the work we do, contact: -

Phone: **01204 337479**

Email: boltonsafeguardingchildren@bolton.gov.uk

Website: <https://www.boltonsafeguardingchildren.org.uk/>

This document is available in alternative formats, please contact 01204 337974 to request a copy.



Are you worried about a child?

If you're worried about the safety and wellbeing of a child, it's important to take action.

To discuss your concerns, contact a member of our team on 01204 331500 or visit

<https://www.boltonsafeguardingchildren.org.uk/worried-child> .