

Guidance for multi-agency forums: Supporting 16 and 17 year olds

In January 2014, the second meeting of the National Marac Scrutiny Panel took place, consisting of a group of experts and Marac representatives, and chaired by the Home Office. The panel reviewed a number of cases of 16 and 17 year old victims who had been referred to Marac. It was evident from this that Maracs are discussing very vulnerable young people who, as well as experiencing domestic abuse, have multiple complex needs and are exposed to a variety of risks, including being at risk of sexual exploitation and gang involvement.

This guidance highlights the findings of the panel and seeks to assist local areas in supporting 16 and 17 year olds who are assessed as high risk and referred to the Marac meeting.¹

Summary of findings

It was evident at the panel that cases involving young people were different to those of adults in terms of the complexities of cases and risk factors. A number of areas of concern were highlighted:

1. The young people had either no meaningful contact with agencies, or they were being contacted by a large number of agencies and professionals for a variety of reasons.
2. Despite still only being 16 and 17 years old, agencies typically treated young people as adults rather than as children – this was particularly true where they had small children of their own.
3. Young people engage with services in a different way to adults. Cases were frequently closed if the young person failed to attend an appointment or did not respond to phone calls.
4. These cases all involved a variety of complex issues including sexual exploitation, mental health, substance misuse, gang involvement, care leavers and missing from home.

Recommendations

The individual/agency that the young person is liaising with most is identified as their single point of contact and represents their views and wishes at the Marac meeting. This individual should also liaise with and collate relevant information from agencies with which the young person is involved but are not present at the Marac. This could include Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), services supporting young people experiencing sexual exploitation (e.g. Barnardo's, NSPCC) and local programmes offered through Troubled Families.

The professional working with the young person will need to adapt a flexible working approach and be inventive with the means of communication they use to achieve and maintain meaningful contact. Young people may have specific preferences for communicating (e.g. texting, Facebook, instant messaging, FaceTime, Youth Offending Team appointments, college etc.), as well as different priorities to adult clients. Proactive engagement should be a focus for all professionals working with young people.

Where possible, the Marac agenda is ordered so that young people who are referred to the Marac as victims or young people who harm are discussed first. Young people are best managed through an integrated response which combines children's safeguarding and high risk domestic abuse expertise.

¹ For guidance following the change in the cross-government definition of domestic violence and abuse, please see: www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/142701/guide-on-definition-of-dv.pdf

The Local Safeguarding Children Board should monitor outcomes of these vulnerable children and young people discussed at Marac and ensure that they are a particular point of focus for Ofsted when inspecting local responses to vulnerable and at risk children and young people.

At the meeting: Identifying risk

During the Marac meeting, it is recommended that as well as risks identified through completion of the Young People's Risk Identification Checklist, factors specific to young people are also identified that make them more vulnerable and likely to increase the risk of further abuse.² **It is essential that Marac representatives liaise with their counterparts in neighbouring areas, as appropriate, to ensure that they have all relevant information.**

Specific issues of concern and risk factors identified through the National Scrutiny Panel for young people and which you may be able to identify in your own Marac included:

- **Missing from home:** A number of the young people in the cases discussed at the panel had been reported as missing from home by their parents and/or foster carers. Risk assessments had been completed which did not take in to account the domestic abuse they were experiencing and relevant departments within the police did not automatically liaise with one another.
- **Sexual abuse and exploitation:** This can range from apparently 'consensual' relationships, which are in fact exchanges of sex for gifts, accommodation or every day necessities, through to organised crime. Young people may have limited knowledge and understanding around choice and consent.
- **Online abuse:** Social networking sites provide additional opportunities for control and online tracking, and can limit the young person's ability to protect themselves. It is important to be aware that stalking by young people tends to be significantly more violent than that carried out by adults.
- **Gang involvement and multiple perpetrators:** The young person could be affected by gang activity, either directly or through friends or family. This may broaden the number of perpetrators.
- **Isolation:** In the cases studied, the panel noted an absence of support networks for the young people. This was coupled with a high level of normalisation of abuse and controlling behaviour, and meant that they therefore did not recognise the abuse and minimised the harm they were experiencing.
- **Complex needs:** Consideration of the impact of additional complex needs, including substance misuse, mental health issues (including suicide attempts by the victim) and vulnerable young people in care.

At the meeting: Action planning

Once the Chair has outlined all risk factors facing the young person, children and young person causing harm/perpetrator, it is important to encourage actions from representatives which address both the safety of the young person and the behaviour of the perpetrator.³ Leaving these unaddressed could put young people at risk of further harm, murder, self-harm, suicide and deteriorating mental health.

Actions should be appropriate and proactive. Some examples identified at the Scrutiny Panel are listed below. Representatives need to be creative in the actions they offer and this list is not exhaustive.

- **Confirm a single point of contact/'key worker' for the young person (as identified prior to the Marac).** Don't overwhelm young people with appointments and professionals.
- **Ensure that the young person is supported by Children's Social Care.** Re-establish whether the young person meets a formal threshold for social care intervention and child protection. As appropriate, ensure that the transition between child and adult services is managed effectively to give consistent support to the young person and ensure that risks are not missed.
- **Proactively engage the young person.** Offering appointments that fit in with the young person's lifestyle, including venues that meetings take place and timings (i.e. evenings and weekends). Consider that the young person may have limited access to funds, which could affect safety planning.
- **Identify siblings at risk.** Ensure that any risk to siblings (either of the victim or perpetrator) are identified and actions put in to place around them.
- **Be flexible in the type of support being offered and how long it is offered for.** Young people may often require longer-term support to ensure that they meaningfully engage.
- **Ensure all agencies flag and tag their systems** to show that the young person is a high risk victim.

² safelives.org.uk/Young_People/YP_RIC.htm

³ See 'Guidance for Maracs: Addressing Perpetrators' Behaviour safelives.org.uk/documents/Managing_Perpetrators.pdf