



## Data for Intelligence

The discussion that follows is based on interviews with three practitioners, all of whom have been involved in improving the collection, analysis and use of data in relation to child exploitation:

**Gary Stratton (Detective Inspector for Public Protection - Merseyside Police)**

**Joanne Beese (Lead Analyst - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester)**

**Kairika Karsna (Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse).**

Data for intelligence is a phrase used by the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Programme that reflects their [approach](#) to the use of data. They have been working with local safeguarding partnerships to move away from seeing data in purely performance terms, and towards data as key to informing practice development and improvement. Local safeguarding partnerships must assess several areas related to their use of data. This includes: the questions they are asking; their data collection and recording methods; the quality of the data; the way in which they interrogate and scrutinize their data; how data is shared between agencies; how data is presented and disseminated; and how data is utilised.

Local safeguarding partnerships in [Merseyside](#) and [Greater Manchester](#) have been involved in TCE Programme bespoke support projects specifically focusing on data. [The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse](#) has done a lot of [work](#) around how to improve agency data on CSA and CSE that is already being collected. This paper explores the aims, challenges, enablers and impacts of local areas trying to improve the collection, analysis and use of data in order to improve policy and practice in relation to child exploitation.

### The value of data

Discussions initially focused on the purpose of collecting data on child exploitation. There was a strong consensus amongst the three interviewees that the principle aim of collecting data was not to monitor performance, but to gain valuable insight that could help inform policy and practice. Without data, services aiming to prevent the exploitation of children and young people cannot develop and improve. Data has the potential to inform policy makers and services about issues, gaps and blockages in the way services are being delivered. For example, data can help services understand the bigger picture, and answer questions such as 'who are we not reaching?' or 'where do our referrals come from and where do they not come from?' Aggregated data can help drive more effective decision making around which geographical areas to focus on, the use of resources and finances, or policy direction.

*"How can you improve the service or learn without having a proper understanding in the first place? And I am not saying that we understand properly at all but I think that information and insight reporting needs to be in place if you are going to grow and learn as a service because otherwise you are just 'winging it'." Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester*

All three experts emphasised the importance of data as child exploitation services begin to understand how limited the field's perspective has been to date. Services have primarily focused on gathering data about the victim – focusing on the child and their behaviour, which feeds into victim blaming narratives that are still evident throughout the sector. It is only relatively recently that some services have begun to view child sexual exploitation through the lens of [contextual safeguarding](#) – and started to focus on sources of harm, individual and contextual, the significance of the wider environment, and the nature of exploitation. In order to understand the wider context and effectively safeguard children from exploitation, we must begin to ask the right questions and improve the way we collect, extract and use data.

*“What we've found is because most services work with victims, there's a lot of data on the victim and the victim's behaviour... It's like we're driving this pre-occupation with the victim and we forget the perpetrator who actually is using lots of tactics and techniques to hone in on the victim. So there is the perpetrator related information and that can be collected from the victim.” Kairika Karsna - Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, CSA Centre*

Another prominent theme to emerge from discussions was the need for a multi-agency approach to the collection, reporting and analysis of data. No single agency or organisation will be able to collect and scrutinize the necessary data to inform policy and practice effectively. All three interviewees commented on how, in this area of work, the focus has often been on police data, which is perhaps unsurprising given the link between child exploitation and the criminal justice system. However, the police are not the only agencies to collect valuable information about child exploitation, nor are they always the best placed, and Gary Stratton, working with Merseyside Police, said *‘police intelligence is only as good as what gets put into it. Now we drive home at every single meeting 'tell us'... You can't just be reliant on one agency alone.’*

Both Joanne Beese and Gary Stratton said that one of the most helpful elements of the bespoke TCE projects that Greater Manchester and Merseyside were involved in was the support they received in identifying and bringing partners together to discuss data. It helped local areas understand what data different stakeholders held, and reassess who should be involved in wider strategic conversations about child exploitation, both at an aggregate and individual level.

*“When they were given an opportunity to speak about ‘what data do you hold’ everyone was coming out of the woodwork and saying 'this is the information we hold on that child and family' and I am sat there as co-chair, stunned, thinking 'I don't know any of this! Why aren't you sitting on a MACE meeting? Why aren't you feeding into us?’” Gary Stratton - Detective Inspector for Public Protection - Merseyside Police*

### **Enablers and challenges**

Discussions explored the key enablers and challenges for local multi-agency partnerships in improving their collaborative approach to the collection and analysis of data.

Multi-agency collaborative projects focusing on child exploitation data work well when they are locally initiated. A grassroots approach is key to the success of data projects of this kind. Furthermore, any momentum created must be capitalised on. When levels of enthusiasm and energy are high amongst relevant partners about how to collectively improve data collection and analysis, do not delay in taking action and moving projects forwards.

*“Everyone became quite excited by it and while it is fresh in everyone's minds - get it done. Just do it.” Gary Stratton - Detective Inspector for Public Protection - Merseyside Police*

Local safeguarding partnerships necessarily involve many different organisations. For example, the partners around the table following the TCE bespoke data project in [Merseyside](#) include the police, housing, education, health, Youth Offending Teams, Troubled Families, Early Help, and Catch 22. Developing effective working relationships across this partnership, as well as creating a framework for data collection, analysis and dissemination that meets the needs and priorities of all stakeholders, can be incredibly challenging. Joanne Beese and Gary Stratton shared learning around key factors that facilitated effective collaborative working across such a complex group of stakeholders. It is important not to rush the process. It is imperative to get the 'right people in the room', and coordinating many busy diaries can take several months. However, ensuring you have influential leaders in the room is worth the wait.

*"I think it was quite an ambitious set of work to take on... within that short timescale and it went over a little bit but it could probably have done with a little bit longer because trying to get into people's diaries that are working within specialist teams and their senior managers is really tricky... we could have done with more people in that room in terms of leads in that respect"* Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester

Any collaborative data project needs to engage and involve all relevant stakeholders. This does not mean simply informing stakeholders, but ensuring that all decisions are discussed and taken together. This will help make it a genuinely collective endeavour, over which all stakeholders have a sense of ownership. This will lead to more sustainable buy-in from all partners. This also ensures that the data collected and shared, as well as the frameworks developed, are relevant and useful for all decision makers. If one team does take the lead in organising the project, it is better when that team is not aligned to one particular organisation or sector. For example, the Complex Safeguarding Hub in Greater Manchester (a multi-agency, co-located service aiming to identify and disrupt exploitation) is taking the lead on the data project. This team is made up of colleagues that have been seconded from different parts of the system. This has been beneficial, as different members of team have existing relationships with key stakeholders, and understand the differing perspectives, challenges and priorities of the wide range of agencies involved.

*"They [partners] see that these things are important for them to understand... so that feels like collaborative working. And I think it shows the strength in co-developing and working together rather than being 'done to', their expertise is integral to developing [the data project]."* Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester

Having external support can be equally useful. Both Gary Stratton and Joanne Beese spoke about how helpful it was to have the TCE programme act as a critical friend, to facilitate group discussions from a neutral position, and offer advice and capacity building support.

Taking time to ensure that senior decision makers in each relevant agency understand the importance of any initiative to improve data collection and analysis is critical. The success of any large-scale multi-agency project needs sign off and support from senior decision makers. They need to understand that improved data will allow them to do their own jobs better. Convincing senior leaders involves building good relationships through one-to-one conversations. It is also important that all those who are encouraging stakeholders to buy into the process are promoting a consistent and simple message that clearly explains the benefits.

*"If we want something to change we need to address different layers of the influencing... the first step is to make it relevant and useful for local decision makers, so that they would understand that for them to be able to be accountable in their local areas, they have to query and understand that*

*this data's important to look at. And once they understand the importance of it, the wheels will be set in motion in local areas.” Kairika Karsna - Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, CSA Centre*

Starting small and prioritising a few key indicators or areas of change can also be helpful. The amount of relevant data that is available for interrogation can seem overwhelming, which can discourage agencies from engaging in the process. Gary Stratton states ‘*I look at data every day and you can almost get paralysis by analysis*’. In Greater Manchester, they have pulled out 5 key indicators from the 50 they collect data on, and report this upfront when sharing their data framework with all relevant stakeholders. It is also important to ensure that participating agencies are only asked to collect and share a feasible number of indicators. Furthermore, when working through a process of improving the collection, extraction and analysis of data, do so step by step. Breaking it down into more manageable actions and emphasising that small changes can make a big difference can help stakeholders feel less overwhelmed and as if they face an impossible task. The Centre for Expertise has created a [template](#) with accompanying guidance to help organisations think about their approach to data collection and use, and how to structure data, but in a manageable way.

*“There are 50 indicators currently included in the performance framework, and that can be an overwhelming amount of information to digest. We prioritised key messages to make it more succinct for strategic leads. We still report on all 50 so that people have got the narrative around all of those indicators, but we also highlight 5 measures that were deemed to be the key outcomes that we discussed very early to describe the changes that you would want the programme to make in terms of improving children's lives and improving outcomes for children.” Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester*

*“A lot of this data is already there and it doesn't have to be a huge organisational burden to make changes in making the data more usable.” Kairika Karsna - Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, CSA Centre*

Working within a very bureaucratic system, in which project managers have to seek permission or sign off at every stage, can create serious delays. It helps if those managing the data improvement projects have the authority and leeway to make decisions and move forward with a project, without having to continually obtain authorisation further up the chain across several organisations and sectors. It is also incredibly helpful when effective governance structures for integrated working across agencies and sectors already exist. The forums and existing relationships within these governance structures can be utilised to discuss the benefits, actions and outputs of data improvement initiatives with all relevant senior decision and policy makers. It provides local areas with effective mechanisms for reaching the right senior leaders in a timely manner and for the right messaging to be cascaded onwards.

*“I honestly do think we are really lucky in Greater Manchester because I think a lot of the work wouldn't have been able to have been driven forwards if it wasn't for those governance structures being in place. The fact that we have a complex safeguarding steering group that 10 areas commit to attending plus all the partnership agencies. We have a Complex Safeguarding Executive Board, which is chaired by a chief executive. Board members include an Assistant Chief Constable, Strategic Health representatives and Director of Children's Services, who has a portfolio lead for Complex Safeguarding to represent all 10 Directors of Children's Services; directly communicating messages back to them, that are being put forward. I don't think that happens in a lot of areas, so I think we are really lucky to have that.” Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester*

A significant challenge for any data improvement project is that all the relevant organisations across the multiple sectors have different data systems. These systems are often well established and not very versatile. Coupled with the fact that each organisation collects data in a different way to suit their own purposes, it is difficult to compare data across different sectors, both at a local level and a national level. This makes it hard to see the big picture. It is also impossible to create a fluid automated system that can easily extract data from each system and put it together. This means that sharing data across organisations does often involve extracting data from each individual system and entering it into a common framework or database, which requires extra capacity and extra funding. The Centre of Expertise would like to explore the option of working directly with the handful of organisations that design and develop the data systems for most organisations – to see if they can make collective changes across the board to IT systems that would make them more useful.

*“Each of these sectors focuses on a different area of it [CSE] and therefore collects data differently dependent on what their priority is. Which may be fine for their organisational purposes, but for strategic decision making it's not very helpful because you can't see the whole picture. You can't compare data across the different sectors locally or nationally. You can't even do the very basic counting of how many victims are being seen by agencies.” Kairika Karsna - Senior Research and Evaluation Officer, CSA Centre*

Another common theme to emerge from the interviews was the importance of each organisation ensuring their staff have the necessary skill sets and confidence required to collect, analyse and use data effectively. The quality of the data will only ever be as good as the confidence and skills of the frontline practitioners who are collecting the data. Kairika Karsna refers to forthcoming Centre of Expertise [research](#) that found that a lack of confidence and fear of being wrong can lead to practitioners not asking young people important questions, or not recording their own concerns. Local areas must provide training and guidance around what and how to record and what evidence is required, so that practitioners in front line child protection services have clarity and confidence in their work. Both Joanne Beese and Gary Stratton spoke about their local areas lacking professionals with specific skills, such as data analysts (to be able to analyse and convey the data) or data experts (who can improve and develop databases and data collection methods). Lastly, strategic decision makers do not always possess the right skill sets to interrogate or scrutinise the data, which means that the quality of data is not effectively assessed and therefore not improved, and that the data is not always utilised properly to inform decision making.

## **Impact**

Local data projects like those supported by the TCE programme or the Centre for Expertise can lead to useful cross sector databases/dashboards and local area profiles that a range of organisations feed into and then utilise. The data improvement projects have also led to partner organisations improving the quality of the data they submit. For example, Joanne Beese spoke about how she is now confident that for the first time the data the partnership collects on referral rates is accurate.

*“I would say the third quarterly return was the first data return that we deemed to be a robust figure for the number of referrals received. Prior to that some areas were still getting to grips with accurately reporting the referral pathway into the specialist teams. We're now confident that all ten areas are reporting consistent data on children and young people referred into their Complex Safeguarding teams.” Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester*

In Greater Manchester, the data framework that has been developed helps organisations fulfil their monitoring requirements: *‘it helps a lot of the areas with their internal reports [that] they have to*

*feed into their local governance structures [and] to their senior managers' (Joanne Beese, Greater Manchester).*

In Merseyside they have created a CSE dashboard that brings together data from all the different partners. The dashboard includes a range of indicators, which can also be broken down by council ward areas. Furthermore, the dashboard includes maps that show where the victims live, where the perpetrators live and where the incidents are occurring. This map can be cross referenced with other maps, like one that charts gang activity in the same area. This illustrates how data projects can open the door to many different levels of analysis which will lead to better informed policy and practice.

All three interviewees echoed one another when reflecting on the impact that these data projects are able to have on local areas. The data projects helped local areas understand: what data was available; what data was not being harvested or utilised effectively; what data needed to be collected more effectively; and what data was not yet being collected. Having these multi-agency discussions also prompted practitioners to reassess what questions they should be asking themselves, as well as young people and other professionals.

*"Once I had actually realised what data was held it made me realise I am not asking the right questions in those MACE meetings to get the best information about that child to make a better informed decision." Gary Stratton - Detective Inspector for Public Protection - Merseyside Police*

When local safeguarding partnerships begin to collate, question, scrutinize and improve their data, it can lead to *'a lot of practice improvement and development'* (Kairika Karsna, Centre for Expertise). Gary Stratton spoke about how his own perception of the importance of data had evolved. He now recognised how data helped him to think more strategically by allowing him to see the bigger picture. He was able to identify the problems, issues and gaps, as well as to think about the solutions. For example, he reflects on how the data the partnership now collect can now report on referral source. Merseyside can now see that the numbers of referrals from the education and health sector are very low. These insights can now facilitate discussions around why referrals rates are so low and what work could be done to better understand the issues and explore potential solutions. All three interviewees agreed that improved data could help decision makers to more effectively: set priorities; design and commission services; assess what and where resources and funding were needed; and understand what training is needed. And above all, it is crucial in allowing organisations to understand who they reach through their services and who they don't.

*"I have never really been a data driven person but in the last 6 months I have... with aggregate data it is more strategic, it informs where your problems are and the blockages and it makes you as a leader someone who can make decisions about resources, finances, [and] policies." Gary Stratton - Detective Inspector for Public Protection - Merseyside Police*

Kairika Karsna from the Centre for Expertise also emphasised the need for the development of policy and practice around child exploitation to be based on evidence, rather than in reaction to scandals and high-profile cases. Both Joanne Beese and Gary Stratton talked about how the data their local safeguarding partnerships were now producing added weight to any suggestions for policy and practice developments. Many of these suggestions were on the agenda prior to the ongoing data improvement projects, but the new data meant they were now better equipped to influence key decision makers.

*"The data project kind of adds to the emphasis that this work really does need to be done and these gaps are still very apparent and there is still a long way to go." Joanne Beese - Complex Safeguarding Hub Greater Manchester*

Data improvement projects can also expand the types of data that local safeguarding partnerships begin to use. Joanne Beese spoke about how in their local area they have begun to explore how qualitative data can be extracted, which will result in their ability to begin to use data based on contextual narrative and professional judgement. Kairika Karsna made the linked point that qualitative narrative also needs to be accompanied by quantitative data, to make it easier to extract – a change *‘which is quite easy to make...and not a huge leap’*.

Data improvement projects have also instigated discussions that have led to partnerships interrogating and debating what data might be telling us. In Manchester this led to challenging assumptions about what re-referral rates might be able to tell services. For example, it could mean that children are not being helped the first time they are referred, or it could mean that children have developed trusting relationships with practitioners and therefore feel they can return. This has led to the local safeguarding partnership reporting on this indicator more neutrally and discussing the range of different interpretations and the consequential lines of inquiry that could be taken up in order to fully understand the implications.

---

### Questions for reflection

- **In your experience, how far is data in your local area used to inform policy and practice improvement? And to what extent is it viewed as a ‘performance measure’?**
- **Can you think of any examples of where the use of data has made a visible impact to policy and practice in your local area?**
- **In your view, in what ways is data relating to child exploitation shared effectively in your local area? Where are the gaps? What are the challenges?**
- **What approaches are in place or being developed that might enhance understanding of local data?**
- **What have been the implications of Covid-19 for the recording, sharing and analysis of data?**