

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Using data intelligently to understand child exploitation

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Child exploitation is an evolving concept, and policy and practice are developing alongside the knowledge and evidence base. While there have been a range of definitions of the different types of exploitation in recent years, the connections and relationships between the types of exploitation are not consistently defined. We only have a very partial picture of the patterns and mechanisms of harm, or how to disrupt those patterns or the effects on young people and communities and how to mitigate and repair that harm. This evidence base is growing, but at the slow pace required for rich and robust academic research.

Local areas need to take strategic action in a much shorter timeframe, using the academic and other evidence we do have as a guide. This means looking for local patterns and trends and exploring and evaluating different approaches to tackling exploitation. To do this, local areas need to interrogate *local evidence* to find relevant insights to guide strategic decision making. One part of this local evidence base is the data collected by a range of public agencies.

This discussion piece explores how data might support local areas in tackling child exploitation by providing strategic intelligence about patterns of harm related to exploitation and the experiences of young people in local communities.

What do we mean by data?

In the course of their work, practitioners and professionals in public agencies find out a range of information about the people and communities they work with. They may find out this information deliberately, as part of their work, or incidentally, through the conversations they have with the people, families and communities that they work with. Some of this information gets written down or recorded in IT systems and is shared verbally or in writing in various meetings with other professionals and agencies.

The main purpose of this information being recorded is to provide **operational intelligence** to those professionals – the “who, what, where, when, how” of a particular child, young person, perpetrator or network. Professionals combine the information they hold to understand who is involved, what is happening, where and when they are involved in exploitation, and how the network operates and how this *specific instance* of exploitation can be tackled.

Combining information about many children and young people, perpetrators or networks and looking for themes and patterns can provide **strategic intelligence**, helping leaders and managers to get a higher-level picture of exploitation locally. This intelligence can then be used to decide on local priorities, and use of resources to tackle exploitation, *in general*, in the local area.

Data are information that has been collected in a standardised way and so can easily be collated and analysed. There are other ways to collate information about lots of individuals or groups, formal methods such as case file analysis, or less formal discussions and information-sharing, but it can be difficult to do these routinely or consistently. Information that can be considered ‘data’ for our

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purpose is standardised at the recording stage, at the point when a practitioner enters information into a computer system or a spreadsheet. This standardisation allowing us to count, summarise and compare over time and between places more easily than with other methods.

A range of different information is collected as data through various IT systems and across agencies. Most consistently, services record the addresses and identifying information of people they work with. Less consistently practitioners assign pre-defined categories (gender, disabilities, type of harm, type of plan) to people or cases, complete checklists (e.g. need or risk assessments) and record numeric values (age, dates, counts). Most organisations also hold data about the people they work with, their employees, other organisations (partners, suppliers, local businesses).

Data analysis summarises this data, for example reporting the total number of arrests for a particular crime, or to identify patterns and trends, such as an increase in the number of adolescents on a child protection plan. Because the data is standardised, it can be represented as numbers. This is what allows us to produce tables and charts showing **how much** of something there is. Some of our data is geographic, it is associated with an address, or a postcode, and so we can draw maps to show **where** particular needs or activities are concentrated, and some data is associated with a time or date, so we can not only ask **how has this changed over time**, but also see if there are seasonal or other patterns on **when** the activity takes place.

Why isn't all our information standardised as data?

There are some fundamental barriers to collecting ever more data. Primarily, time taken recording is time away from direct practice. While recording in general can be a useful aid to reflection and analysis, when information is reduced to check boxes and tick lists, practitioners might find the process less useful. There is an understandable resistance to trying to reduce the complexity of a young person's life to a series of Yes/ No answers. There is a balance to be struck by strategic leaders, between our desire be able to take evidence-informed decisions at a strategic level, and our responsibility to protect practice from unnecessary bureaucracy.

What information gets turned into data is determined by the recording policies and systems of the organisation and the requirements of regulatory and government bodies. Commonly, national requirements focus on measuring the processes that have been completed (How many? How long?) in order to monitor resource use and the performance of organisations. IT systems are then designed around these national requirements. Local conversations about data then tend to focus on what is being measured – how much activity is being undertaken and how well are performance targets being met.

Changing IT systems is cumbersome and time-consuming. The evidence base evolves slowly, and changing systems to reflect that evidence takes even longer. When the data we have doesn't seem to add value to our conversations, there seems little point in investing in the systems to collect it. Collecting more data needs to be preceded by strategic direction as to what we want to know and why, and how the value of the data we collect can be maximised to improve decision-making.

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Conversation starter:

- **What value does the partnership get from current data?**

Why we need to think differently about data about child exploitation

The performance measures described above are often based on a somewhat mechanistic view of work with complex problems, and are particularly difficult to interpret when working with child exploitation. In social care, for example, the length of time a child has been on a child protection plan is sometimes interpreted as “drift”, a lack of purposeful work to “move the case on”, and re-referrals are seen as evidence that the previous work was unsuccessful. However, the evidence about working with adolescents with complex problems suggests that it takes time to build a relationship, that moving at the young person’s pace is important in gaining and sustaining trust and that an ‘open door’ policy for young people to return for further support is a helpful way of sustaining progress (Harris et al, 2017; Thomas and D’Arcy, 2017). Repeated and longer engagements might be a good thing!

Quality and process measures rely on us knowing “*what good looks like*” and being able to define standardised ways of measuring whether what is being delivered meets this description. We don’t have robust answers about what good looks like when tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

Arguably, even where we do have indications of those answers in other areas of work with families with complex needs, we don’t have a good way of measuring the relevant factors, such as the quality of relationships, or of leadership (Spring Consortium, 2018 ; La Valle, Hart and Holmes, 2019). In the area of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, there are not (yet) national requirements to collect specific data items. This is an amazing opportunity to explore what we can get from data when we approach it in a different way.

Conversation starter:

- **Does the partnership have a shared understanding of what good looks like when tackling exploitation? What are the challenges in measuring those good practice features?**

Data for strategic intelligence

The TCE programme data strand aims to work with local areas to explore the potential to use data for **strategic intelligence**. Rather than asking the (possibly premature) question “*How well are we tackling exploitation?*”, first we try to answer the question “***What is child exploitation like here and what should we do about it?***”.

Strategic intelligence is data presented to and used by senior leaders to make decisions about how to allocate resources, design systems and services and develop the workforce to meet local needs. It provides evidence of relevant patterns and trends across a particular place and time period.

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Strategic intelligence is produced and reported across the public sector, in documents like the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, police problem profiles and economic development strategies. In many places, analysts and business intelligence teams are finding new ways of presenting data to provide clear messages for decision-makers, such as interactive charts, maps and infographics on [Trafford's data lab](#). There is a wide range of data and of analytic skills within local partnerships that can contribute to our understanding of what child exploitation is like in any given place.

In our Bespoke Support Projects, we bring these different agencies, analysts and practice leads together to find out what data we have that can support strategic decision-making. Rather than focusing only on *how many* people are in contact with services and for *how long*, we are looking for data that can tell us about patterns in the “who what, where when and how” of exploitation.

- *who* is affected by or involved in exploitation (both victims and perpetrators), what characteristics do they have?
- *what* kind of exploitation, what other needs or contact with public services do they have?
- *where* and *when* does exploitation happen, where and when should we target our efforts to prevent, protect and disrupt exploitation?
- *how does* exploitation happen, *how* do victims seek help? *How* do services and communities respond to exploitation?

It is important that our intelligence doesn't solely focus on the victims of exploitation. Restricting ourselves to only looking at the characteristics and experiences of victims results in conclusions that locate risks and vulnerability in the victim, rather than perpetrator activity (CSA Centre, 2018). Research into young people's experience of exploitation indicates that the community context and response to young people more broadly affects perpetrator tactics and young people's susceptibility to grooming. [In another thinkpiece](#), I explore what public data we might use to answer the question “*What is life like for young people here?*” to support broader thinking about preventing exploitation and extra-familial harm.

Of course, there is no single dataset that give us all the answers, and every dataset has limitations. There will inevitably be gaps in our data and we must always remember that our data only includes those who are known to services, and that there are important aspects of life and needs that can never be fully captured in a tick box. Understanding these limitations is crucial to interpreting the meaning of the data, and, in turn, using that data in a way that can inform strategic decision making.

Getting better data is a long term project and relies on the organisation's broader data maturity. Our approach is pragmatic, building a patchwork of intelligence that can be interrogated by knowledgeable leaders, alongside other sources of evidence about their local area, while highlighting opportunities to improve data access, quality and presentation to inform future data strategy.

If your partnership would like to explore using data intelligently to tackle child exploitation, you might want to consider applying for a Bespoke Support Project.

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