

# Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

## Project Learning Report

<b>Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):</b>	
Partnership Name:	Walsall
Core partner agencies involved:	Walsall CCG Walsall Council West Midlands Police
Number of Local Authority areas covered:	Walsall Council
Regional Area:	West Midlands
BSP Project Size:	Standard
BSP Methodology/ methodologies	Bespoke- Community Engagement
Digital / Face to face / Mixed Delivery	Digital
Date BSP commenced:	June 2020
<b>Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support programme:</b>	
<p>Walsall originally approached the TCE Programme to explore an emerging approach to resilient communities and how that could be developed as an integral part of the local exploitation strategy with an emphasis on prevention and early intervention. This priority was set within the wider safeguarding partnership context which included a shift in emphasis from child sexual exploitation (CSE) to exploitation more broadly and the associated changes running alongside this in relation to developing a coordinated and system wide response to exploitation.</p>	
<b>Overall goal of BSP :</b>	
<p>As part of the early scoping phase, the change goal for the project was identified as-</p> <p>Developing work in relation to <b>community resilience and engagement</b> and consider the role which the wider community can take in developing an effective, strategic <b>all age response to exploitation</b></p> <p>In support of this, the TCE Programme delivery team were asked to work with local partners to begin exploring the following areas-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do the partnership mean by community and how does that definition inform this work?</li> <li>• Who are the local communities across Walsall and how are they affected by exploitation?</li> <li>• What role can communities take in developing a strategic response to exploitation?</li> <li>• What resources are available to support this approach across the partnership?</li> <li>• How do partnership structures and processes need to adapt and develop to account for an approach which places community at the centre of a response to exploitation?</li> </ul>	
<b>Approaches / methods taken to achieve project goal and deliver the BSP:</b>	
<p>The approach adopted throughout the project was one of exploration, reflection and developing and understanding an evidence base. Although originally due to begin in April 2020, the impact of</p>	

# Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Covid-19 had an impact on this project due to revisions in digital delivery by TCE and a change in core local personnel from the core group.

A mixed methodology was adopted throughout the life of the project with a range of partnership workshop sessions, individual agency conversations and focused reflection sessions taking place. Towards the latter stages of the project a [rapid evidence scope](#) was commissioned by the delivery team to support the local area in grounding their approach to community engagement and resilience in evidence-based principles.

## **Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:**

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

### **Delivery of the TCE project within the context of wider partnership change**

The delivery of the TCE project in Walsall coincided with a period of significant change for the local partnership in terms of its response to exploitation. Early in the scoping phase it was highlighted that the partnership were in the process of adopting an all-age approach to exploitation and expanding partnership membership at both strategic and operational levels to support this. Although not the focus of the TCE project, the shift to an all age approach to exploitation in Walsall had a significant impact on local partners and the overall direction that the project took.

### **Leadership and strategic direction**

One of the key principles of the TCE programme is to work alongside local areas, recognising them as experts in their local context. The role of delivery teams is not to take ownership of or to provide solutions to local issues, but to support, empower and enable the conditions for local leaders to do so in a way which is meaningful to them. Throughout this project, the question of where leadership sat for this work was an ongoing conversation and one which the TCE delivery team have taken time to reflect on as part of drawing together learning as part of this report.

### **Notions and understandings of community**

Although the central focus of the project was the role of community in tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm, definitions and understanding of the term community itself are ones which presented challenges across the partnership. For this work to have meaning for local partners, the definition and understanding of community needed to come from the local area itself. Although the delivery team did work to explore this with local partners, within delivery sessions a sense of divergence in approaches and understanding became apparent.

### **When to pause, when to stop and when to capture learning**

Mid way through the project, following a workshop session with a range of individuals from across the partnership, the TCE delivery team reflected that there was a sense that the direction being taken was not meeting local needs. As a result of this, the team shared these reflections back to the core partnership group and looked to identify whether this was a misinterpretation of objectives, an issue of timing in light of wider partnership developments or a mis-match between the TCE approach and the direction the partnership wished to take this work. The power of honest and constructive feedback from both sides was evident within these discussions with clear offers made around the possibility of pausing work, stopping work or changing delivery. Recognising the learning to be gained from the extensive scoping but perhaps more limited delivery phase, the partnership took the option for the TCE team to commission a [rapid evidence scope](#) and to capture the reflections of the TCE delivery team to support ongoing local activity.

# Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

**Joining the dots:**

Describes the thematic approach taken by the TCE Support Programme to respond to system challenges. These three themes are intended to prompt new and innovative thinking and constructively challenge the status quo by encouraging the sector to make new links and approach strategic decisions from new angles and perspectives.

Key reflections on the Joining the dots themes within the BSP:

1. Leading with care
2. Bridging boundaries
3. Holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity

**Leading with Care**

Throughout this project, we saw the concept of leading with care emerge in a number of different ways. At the early stages we saw leadership for the project delegated to senior operational leads within the partnership. Whilst well placed to reflect the experiences of front-line practitioners and to shine a light on the positive activity already underway across Walsall in relation to community engagement, they did not feel in a position to bring clarity, ownership or strategic direction to the project. The TCE delivery team worked with operational leads to identify where levers might sit within the partnership and sought to reflect back that which we were observing.

The theme of leadership and how that relates more broadly to the concept of influence was a feature of much of the work in Walsall. What we saw in this project was a core group made up of statutory safeguarding partners. Throughout our work however we heard about existing work with local communities led by other, non-statutory agencies, and learnt about the influence they had in this space and the role they are often able to take in working alongside communities as part of relationships built on trust. Going forward, work with these partners provides the partnership with an opportunity to further develop and embed this work.

**Bridging boundaries**

Bridging boundaries is a core theme for the work in Walsall. Firstly, in terms of boundaries across and within the partnership, we saw this play out as leadership was delegated, debated and shared across operational and strategic leads within statutory partners. More widely, as the partnership embarked on the implementation of an all-age approach to exploitation, we heard from a range of partners the need to think more broadly about who has a role to play in terms of the emerging strategic direction. As part of this we saw questions arise around the transition from children's to adult services, the understanding of exploitation as experienced by adults, and the diversity of experience and understanding of exploitation within and between different communities across Walsall and the inequalities which are at play as part of this. These are important points for the partnership to reflect on as they take this work forward and provide a starting point for critical reflection as the all-age approach to exploitation is further developed and embedded.

**Holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity**

For the TCE delivery team, holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity underpinned our approach to this project. The team recognised the value which could be found in holding individual agency conversations in order to surface that which might not ordinarily be said within a partnership setting. The issues raised within these conversations such as the visibility of disruption activity across the partnership and the need to fully understand the picture of exploitation within the context of the emerging all-age approach, allowed the delivery team to recognise when things

# Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

were not progressing as intended, begin to understand why that might be and continue to pose questions with a view to supporting local colleagues to progress in relation to their priorities.

The question of defining community as a central theme for this project highlights the complexity at play within this work. For some partners, there was a sense of starting small embedded within their approach to community engagement and working in geographically defined areas before taking incremental steps to expand. For others, there was a desire to 'map' communities across Walsall using a model based around four pillars of education, employment, public and domestic as a means through which community could be understood. What was perhaps missing within all of this was starting with people themselves and inviting those affected by exploitation to work alongside local partners as they begin to shape and understand the concept of community as it relates to this work.

## **Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:**

### **The importance of strong foundations**

As a partnership going through a significant shift in their approach and strategy for exploitation, some partners in Walsall recognised and flagged the need to build strong foundations to underpin the new approach. Issues such as the need to focus on workforce development and internal agency awareness raising were highlighted at key points in the project and a hesitation was expressed around pressing ahead with the more developmental or emergent work identified by local leads within the change goals for this project. The TCE team recognised and reflected back this desire to focus on the foundations, with offers made to pause the project or to shift direction, but there was a strong desire to progress.

Throughout the project the TCE delivery team sought to understand what exploitation looks like in Walsall for young people, communities and the professionals working to support them. What we heard back when exploring this with the partnership was that-

- The new all-age approach to exploitation is welcomed, though it is acknowledged that understanding of exploitation of adults is less well understood across the partnership
- The partnership are working collaboratively on new governance approaches to bring the new approach together
- There is recognition that workforce development has a role to play in ensuring people are skilled in understanding and responding to exploitation across the board
- Although disruption is acknowledged as a priority, further work is required to increase the visibility of this work across the partnership and within communities

Developing strong foundations can allow for local partners to start from a position of strength, with governance, internal awareness raising, disruption and information sharing being particular areas of focus for Walsall specifically within our work together. This highlighted to the team that work on these foundations was a priority for local partners during the time we were working with them and that there was a more pressing need to focus on clarifying and problem solving these issues before beginning to broaden the scope and consider where the idea of community might sit within the strategic approach.

### **The power of pausing and reflecting on what is strong**

Across Walsall, there is a wealth of activity taking place with local communities as part of responses to child exploitation. The work of Street Teams in the Community Futures project and

## Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

One Walsall are just two examples of local agencies working within and alongside local communities. Projects such as these represent a real strength in the local area and present significant opportunity for statutory partners to explore where they might meaningfully align themselves, add value, commit resources, amplify and provide a platform for community engagement work as integral to the emerging strategic approach.

Such an approach can however present challenges for statutory partnerships, as at its heart, working alongside communities requires some abdication of power and the building of relationships which are founded on trust. Looking to those who have already built and gained the trust of local people can provide insights and a way of navigating a landscape which can at first feel alien and out of step within a landscape governed by statutory frameworks. Some of the central observations within the project were around a need to focus on relationships within the partnership itself, perhaps mirroring the way in which we might seek to work with children, young people and communities experiencing exploitation.

Another strength observed within the project was the recognition that exploitation is a priority for both the safeguarding and community safety partnerships. The expertise across the two partnerships affords local leaders a valuable opportunity to draw on different skills and expertise as the strong foundations are established to underpin the emerging all age approach to exploitation. Building on the work emerging from this project, the local community safety lead has taken a significant role in developing the local child exploitation strategy, further embedding the shared priorities and expertise which sit across and throughout the local strategic landscape.

### **Visible leadership and the role of influence within partnerships**

At all stages of this project, visible leadership is something which partners recognised as a core component in driving forward this work. What we saw was a searching for, or pointing towards leadership within existing hierarchies or statutory frameworks, but that not always being visible within the work taking place. Whilst hierarchies and statutory frameworks may provide a structure when exploring governance, it is important to acknowledge that leadership, and in the context of the change goals for this project specifically, leadership in driving forward work with local communities may sit elsewhere. That is not to minimise the role of statutory safeguarding partners or to suggest that they have no role to play in this work, but rather to consider the value each actor within the system can offer. Championing new ways or working, endorsement and empowerment to enable those with delegated authority or established relationships founded on trust to drive forward and own change and reflecting on learning are all components which would support effective next steps within this project.

Linked to this, within the work we observed the value the operational staff can bring to strategic conversations as part of partnership activity. Towards the end of the project we heard from strategic leads that although operational staff may not have been in a position to set strategic direction for the project, their experiences, knowledge and insight are vital in shaping this work as it continues to develop and there is a local commitment to taking this forward.

### **Emerging evidence of how the project has positively disrupted the system response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm :**

Much of the learning captured within this report has been mirrored through conversations with local partners across Walsall. Local leaders recognise and are supportive of getting the foundations

## Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

of the emerging approach to exploitation in place as a way of underpinning the wider strategic objectives of the safeguarding partnership.

Local partners have reflected that at times there is an understandable drive to get things right from the word go when taking forward and seeking to embed ambitious strategic change but that there is a clear opportunity present within the local landscape to explore next steps further, ensuring opportunities for learning and reflection are embedded as part of developments going forward. The timing of the work within this project coinciding with wider strategic developments supports this and has allowed local strategic leads to consider how best to take this forward.

The commitment to community engagement and resilience remains within the partnership and there is a strong sense that the learning emerging from this work and the evidence collated as part of the [rapid evidence scope](#) commissioned by the TCE team provides as starting point for this to be taken forward.

The work emerging as part of the Walsall project presents an opportunity for local strategic leads to share their learning and reflect on their developments with other local partnerships in the West Midlands area. The TCE delivery team are currently exploring opportunities to create space for this learning to be shared so that further joined working might be taken forward if synergies both in terms of strengths and opportunities begin to emerge.

Although the project did not achieve all that it originally set out to do so in relation to the change goals, the strength and learning emerging from the work has come from the active decision to pause, reflect and take stock rather than forging ahead with an approach which did not meet the needs of local partners at that particular moment in time.

### **Immediate reflections from the local area:**

We would like to thank the TCE team for the opportunity to work with them around Exploitation in Walsall. The project has allowed the Partnership to reflect and focus on what has worked well in Walsall and also the direction we want to take with the Exploitation Agenda moving forward. We will ensure the learning report is shared within the appropriate forums to ensure Exploitation continues to be a focus in Walsall.

We are aware that other areas across the Black Country are also working with the TCE Team so there is a possibility of sharing learning across a wider area.

In terms of health, the TCE Team and the CCG are presenting the work undertaken in Walsall at the NHSE Regional Conference in April and are keen to be involved in any future projects, particularly as there will be a focus on Health and Exploitation.

## Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

**Please tick this box if there is an agreement for the Project Learning Report to be shared via the TCE Support programme's Microsite for other local areas:**

**Date:** 22/03/21

**Signed by local area:** Sophie Read-Willets, Alison Jones, Carol Broughton, Dez Lambert

**Date:** 22/03/21

**Signed by TCE lead:** Amy Hurst