Community engagement in tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm – rapid scoping review

January 2021

This paper sets out a selection of the research evidence on how communities can effectively engage in tackling child exploitation. It is not a systematic literature review, so highlights key themes and issues. Much of the research focuses on child sexual exploitation (CSE), reflecting the emergent nature of the evidence base about child criminal exploitation (CCE) and modern slavery and human trafficking.

- **What is community?**
  - Community is a much used word. It is worth reflecting on the fact that it means different things to different people: it can be a place or a feeling; be defined by shared political allegiances, religions or ethnicity; be online or offline and have positive or negative associations and is constantly evolving (Chavis and Lee, 2015; Dhaliwal et al, 2015).
  - So when working with 'communities', local areas should be clear about what this means and the implications for different stakeholders.
  - Meaningful engagement of communities is not straightforward. Participatory action research is one approach that can be helpful: '*it engages, enables and empowers both residents and services through positive conversation and other holistic 'bottom up activities' that are delivered on participants own terms (rather than the terms of practitioner/organisation)*' (Siddle, I, 2020).

- **The importance of community in tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm**
  - As the title '***Working Together*** to Safeguard Children' indicates, the safety of children and young people safe is a joint effort, summed up by the oft used phrase: '*safeguarding is everyone's responsibility'* (Department for Education, 2018, p.11).
  - The role of communities is one element of this collective effort to safeguard children; one that is particularly important in relation to child exploitation where harm typically happens outside the home.
  - Local Safeguarding Partnerships are the engine room of a local area's response to child exploitation. The evidence on what constitutes good partnership working repeatedly highlights the following elements:
    - **Clear vision and leadership**:
      - strong leadership;
      - a shared vision;
      - clear communication channels,
      - common goals; and
      - buy-in within and across partner agencies (Institute of Public Care, 2018, Crawford and L'Hoiry, 2015).
  - The following statement from a Local Government Association (LGA) report about building cohesive communities is arguably applicable to the leadership role of the safeguarding partnership in responding to child exploitation:

'Councils should be at the forefront of working with partners and communities to promote local cohesion; and all the work that councils do in different service areas to support this should be underpinned by strong and visible leadership.' (LGA, 2019)

- **Complexity of child exploitation and extra-familial harm**
- Child exploitation and extra-familial harm are hugely complex and poorly defined areas. The abuse can manifest in multiple forms: sexual or criminal exploitation and often both; through the use of labour or other forms of modern slavery; on and off-line. Each type of exploitation falls under different legislation and is responded to differently (Holmes and Smale, 2018).
- It can be perpetrated by adults or be peer-on-peer abuse; young people can be both victim and instigator, raising the challenge of whether an appropriate response is safeguarding or law enforcement.
- Exploitation typically occurs during adolescence, which can leave affected young people highly vulnerable when they turn 18 and move from children's to adult services. This has led to the development of 'transitional safeguarding', whereby ongoing support is provided to young adults experiencing or having been victims of exploitation (Holmes and Smale, 2018).
- The child protection system was set up to deal with child abuse perpetrated by family members or carers within a home environment (Beckett et al, 2017), whereas child exploitation tends to happen outside of the family home, requiring systemic change to respond effectively.
- What exploitation looks like in practice differs widely depending on multiple factors, driving a need for local areas to understand their context (Firmin, 2019).

- **What do we know about the role of community in tackling CE?**
- **Raising awareness** is a key first step to a community's ability to intervene early and prevent child exploitation. '*Children and young people, professionals, parents and carers, neighbours and friends can help prevent abuse by being well informed about the issues*.' (Dhaliwal, S et al 2015 p. 5)
- The Ofsted report of joint inspections to examine the multi-agency approach to child sexual exploitation and missing children found that: *'Prevention and raising awareness in local communities was seen to be a real strength. This was most effective when the work was informed by a good understanding of the local risks and patterns of offending and young people were involved in developing prevention and awareness resources.'* (Ofsted, 2016, p.3)
- A literature review of effective approaches to community awareness raising of CSE (Bostock, 2015) sets out four supportive factors:
  - having clear aims and objectives
  - understanding the needs of the target audience
  - engaging with stakeholders, and
  - using designated workers to promote awareness and access to services.
- The role that the wider community can play in tackling child exploitation is arguably gaining traction as awareness of child criminal exploitation is currently rising, just as awareness of child sexual exploitation was on the up a few years ago.
- The Children's Society's recent #LookCloser campaign is a good example of this, highlighting the role that everyone can play in looking out for children and young people that may be at risk of or being exploited (The Children's Society, 2020).

- The difference that raising community awareness can make will take time and will not be easy to quantify or attribute to particular interventions.

- **Contextual safeguarding** (Firmin, 2017): the importance of this approach to understand and respond to the risks that children and young people face outside the home has been widely recognised; adopted by many local areas and included in 'Working Together' (Department for Education, 2018).

- A feature of contextual safeguarding is the role that can be played by '**community guardians'**: adults within communities that can help safeguard young people against exploitation. This includes working with the private sector: fast food outlets, taxi drivers, hotels or hairdressers where exploitation is known to happen, as well as other adults, such as park wardens and parents, in order to raise awareness of exploitation and how to respond.

- Mapping the potential **exploitation hotspots** in local areas and identifying **disruption activities** are also part of a contextual safeguarding approach. Involving young people in the mapping process to identify locations of safety as well as harm is advocated as good practice as well as being a way to avoid stigmatising certain localities or young people (Firmin et al 2019).

- **Importance of trusted relationships**: there is increasing acknowledgement of the difference made when children and young people are able to build trusted relationships with an adult. 'Working Together' cites one of the key messages heard from children is that they need '*stability: to be able to develop an ongoing stable relationship of trust with those helping them'* (Department for Education, 2018, p.8).

- **The role of the voluntary and community sector (VCS):** by virtue of not being a statutory safeguarding service, the VCS has particular strengths when responding to child exploitation:
    o They are able to engage vulnerable children and young people that other services struggle to reach; young people engage of their own choice and can choose not to, which helps develop a sense of control and self-efficacy (Harris et al, 2017)
    o Being able to work in partnership with families in a strengths-based way to maximise capacity of parents and carers to safeguard their children is viewed positively (D'Arcy et al, 2015).

- However, whilst viewed positively by statutory services, Beckett et al (2014) found evidence that the VCS is not always sufficiently included in information sharing or strategic planning.

- **Utilising the 'teachable moment'**: services that engage with a young person at a point of crisis, such as on admission to A&E (Redthread) or when arrested (The Children's Society) are seeking to use this moment as a catalyst for change.

This evidence briefing demonstrates the potential value to be gained by engaging communities as a partner in tackling the complex problem of child exploitation. There is a growing evidence base on effective ways to achieve this, through awareness raising, contextual safeguarding and the important role that the VCS can play. Underpinning these approaches, the importance of strong leadership and effective partnership working are emphasised as being key.

References

Beckett, H; Firmin, C; Hynes, P and Pearce J (2014) *Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: A Study of Current Practice in London,* London Councils and London Safeguarding Children Board

Beckett, H; Holmes, D; Walker, J (2017) *Child sexual exploitation, Definition & Guide for Professionals: Extended text* University of Bedfordshire and Research in Practice

Chavis, D and Lee K (2015) What Is Community Anyway? *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, May 12, 2015, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/what_is_community_anyway#bio-footer (Accessed 14.01.21)

Crawford, A. & L'Hoiry, X. (2015) *Partnerships in the Delivery of Policing and Safeguarding Children*. An Exploratory Knowledge Platform for Policing: Exploiting Knowledge Assets, Utilising Data and Piloting Research Co-production. University of Leeds

D'Arcy, K; Dhaliwal, S; Thomas R with Brodie, I and Pearce, J (2015) *Families and Communities Against Child Sexual Exploitation (FCASE) Final Evaluation Report,* University of Bedfordshire, Luton

Department for Education (2018) *Working together to safeguard children*, Department for Education: London.

Dhaliwal, S; D'Arcy, K and Thomas R (2015) Community awareness raising on child sexual exploitation: possibilities and problems. *Safer Communities* **14** (1) 4-15

Firmin, C. (2017) *Contextual Safeguarding: An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework.* University of Bedfordshire, Luton

Firmin, C (2019) Contextual Safeguarding: theorising the contexts of child protection and peer abuse. In Pearce, J ed *Child Sexual Exploitation: why theory matters.* Policy Press, Bristol

Firmin, C; Wroe, L; Lloyd, J (2019) *Safeguarding and exploitation – complex, contextual and holistic approaches*, Research in Practice

Harris, J. and Roker, D. with Shuker, L., Brodie, I., D'Arcy, K., Dhaliwal, S. and Pearce, J (2017) *Evaluation of the Alexi Project 'Hub and Spoke' programme of CSE service development: Final Report* Luton: University of Bedfordshire

Holmes, D and Smale, E; (2018) *Transitional Safeguarding – adolescence to adulthood;* Research in Practice and Research in Practice for Adults

Institute of Public Care, Oxford Brookes University (2018) *Alternative Delivery Models: rapid research review,* Department for Education, London

Local Government Association (2019) *Building cohesive communities: an LGA Guide*, London

Nelson, C (2020) *The Children's Society Prevention Programme: Year 1 Evaluation Report April 2019 – March 2020,* The Children's Society, London

Ofsted (2016) *'Time to listen'– a joined up response to child sexual exploitation and missing children*, Ofsted, London

Siddle, I (2020) *Going back to roots: the use of Participatory Action Research as a tool for effective multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working with a Contextual Safeguarding approach,* 26.10.20

Contextual Safeguarding Network https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/blog/2020/going-back-to-roots-the-use-of-participatory-action-research-as-a-tool-for-effective-multi-disciplinary-and-multi-agency-working-with-a-contextual-safeguarding-approach-1&login=true (accessed 14.01.21)

The Children's Society (2020) Look Closer. Available online: *https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-10/Look-Closer-Leaflet.pdf* (accessed 14.01.21)