

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report

| Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP): | |
|---|--|
| Partnership Name: | Birmingham |
| Core partner agencies involved: | Birmingham Children's Trust, Birmingham Children's Safeguarding Partnership, West Midlands Police, CCG |
| Number of Local Authority areas covered: | One |
| Regional area: | Midlands |
| BSP size: | Standard |
| BSP methodology/ methodologies | Partnership |
| Digital / face to face / mixed delivery | Digital |
| Date BSP commenced: | August 2019 – April 2020 |
| Summary: | |
| <p>The Birmingham Children's Safeguarding Partnership (BCSP) requested bespoke support from the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme as an opportunity for exposure and challenge in order to improve their response to child exploitation and improve city wide confidence in their ability to respond. To provide this external support, the TCE delivery team held conversations with partners from across the contextual safeguarding partnership landscape, including strategic partners, and operational partners who are co-located to form the Birmingham EMPOWERU Hub. The purpose of these conversations was to identify opportunities for development in regards to how they work together to tackle and prevent child exploitation across the city. As part of the project, BCSP also requested an external review of the partnership's audit tools and quality assurance process in preparation for a mock Joint Targeted Area Inspection (JTAI).</p> | |
| Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support programme: | |
| <p>The BCSP requested bespoke support from the TCE programme as an opportunity for exposure and challenge in order to improve their response to child exploitation and improve city wide confidence in their ability to respond.</p> <p>Specifically there was a request for the programme to support the partnership in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing shared partnership intentions across partner organisations, making partnership and individual organisations' commitment and accountability explicit¹. | |

¹ Clarity on accountability and delegation were key themes highlighted in the Wood review of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/987928/Wood_Review_of_multi-agency_safeguarding_arrangements_2021.pdf

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- Enabling it to work through and identify what is known and not known about the nature of child exploitation in Birmingham, and build a commitment to tackling child exploitation and identifying any potential gaps within its response.

A longer-term goal for the partnership was to construct a Birmingham wide contextual safeguarding strategy, which would be informed by the findings from the BSP. It was hoped the BSP would support the partnership to establish a robust understanding of the nature of CE in Birmingham, and increase the partnership's confidence in its ability to address it.

The Safeguarding Children Partnership arrangements have developed significantly across the Birmingham City landscape since 2018. Building upon the established Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub, which has been in place since 2014, the development of a Contextual Safeguarding Hub was implemented in October 2019. These arrangements are coordinated through the Birmingham Children's Safeguarding Partnership and are supported by city-wide partners. The EMPOWERU Hub currently brings together professionals and services from Birmingham Children's Trust, West Midlands Police and the local area health economy including agencies from the voluntary sector. Each has committed to an investment in the establishment of the hub towards a long-term sustainable model.

Overall goal of BSP:

The Birmingham partnership identified their shared goal for the project as contributing to the development of an effective city-wide strategic and operational response to child exploitation. Specific focus centred upon:

- What is it that the Contextual Safeguarding Hub now needs to achieve maximum potential and sustainability, and what do we need to do to get it there?
- Beyond the hub, what are the system changes required in provision external to the hub to enable a city-wide approach?

Approaches / methods taken to achieve project goal and deliver the BSP:

Overall, the project consisted of three distinct phases:

1) Exploration with local partners through individual agency conversations broadly considered the questions: 'Is the hub doing what it needs to do?'; 'What else needs to happen?' These discussions were further explored collectively within a partnership workshop. A discursive approach was undertaken initially within phase one, in response to the request from the local area partnership for bespoke support with the development of a city-wide approach to contextual safeguarding, building upon a very newly formed Contextual Safeguarding Hub for the city (the [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) has a host of information and resources about this approach).

2) A deep dive activity was undertaken by the BCSP in phase two, with the programme undertaking a review of the BCSP's quality assurance resources and processes to support the local area in undertaking a mock JTAI.

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3) The project culminated in phase three, bringing the collective learning and reflections back to senior leaders in a workshop presentation. This specifically focused on key messages from the single agency discussions to inform the partnership's developments for the EMPOWERU Hub. The workshop also engaged participants in considering how the voice of the child can be heard² and inform the partnership's understanding of the nature of CE in Birmingham City, as well as effective local responses.

Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

Phase 1: positive messages about the hub, more to do to demonstrate and communicate its impact

For phase 1 of the project, the programme's delivery team held single agency conversations with senior leaders responsible for teams / services operating within the EMPOWERU Hub, or with a strategic interest in tackling child exploitation in the city. Six key themes were identified from these discussions for the partnership to progress:

1. There is a strong understanding of the hub's rationale and purpose among the core partners, and a lot of goodwill across the police and Birmingham Children's Trust. Consistency was observed from all the strategic leaders with regards to the purpose of the Hub and its role within Birmingham City's partnership. Having clarity and consistency at a strategic level enables leaders to agree the direction and priorities for responding to child exploitation within their local area.
2. There were largely positive messages about the Hub's operations, coupled with a recognition that the benefits of its co-location are yet to be fully realised due to Covid-19 (see p.6 of the [evaluation of the Alexi Project](#) for examples of these benefits). Comments about the Hub's operation were framed as 'tightening' and 'strengthening'.
3. There were questions about how young people who are not assessed as medium or high risk³ are supported, i.e. what is the offer to those not supported by the hub? Senior leaders were not viewing the Hub as a 'solution' to responding to child exploitation, but noted that there could be an opportunity for further partnership working with agencies supporting those young people who do not meet the hub threshold for support. For example, how can intelligence in regards to child exploitation be shared more widely to inform agencies' decision-making?
4. It was felt important to be proactive in demonstrating the impact of the hub so that it wasn't vulnerable to changing political or organisational initiatives.

² There is strong evidence about the importance of listening to the views and experiences of children and young people and how to include their voices effectively in practice, as highlighted on the [microsite](https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/topic/young-persons-voice/): <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/topic/young-persons-voice/>

³ It is important to be aware of the potential problems around risk assessing children and young people for exploitation and extra-familial harm, as this research highlights: <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/the-use-of-tools-and-checklists-to-assess-risk-of-child-sexual-exploitation-an-exploratory-study/>

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5. The scope of the hub was understood, but it was felt important to develop some agreed strategic statements about how it was positioned in a city-wide understanding of the full spectrum of child exploitation (e.g. how were links to offenders and adults of concern established, pathways and referral routes for trafficking victims and prevent strategies being made).
6. There was a need for a wider stakeholder communication strategy – including referrers, political leaders and community influencers to reassure the community and demonstrate impact.

Phase 2: Audit tools framed for intra-familial harm rather than extra-familial harm

In phase 2 of the project, the BSP team undertook a review of the tools being used to quality assure (QA) local systems and processes. The key issue from this phase was identifying that the QA tools being used to collect information and data from the partnership needed to be framed to consider extra-familial harm as well as intra-familial harm.

Without intentionally asking about extra-familial harm within the audit tools, agencies or individuals may not be prompted to share the information they hold, meaning that the outcome of the audit will not reflect an accurate picture.

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. Blurring boundaries.
3. Holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity.

Leading with care

A shared and collective understanding of the rationale and purpose of the partnership amongst core partners, where there is respect and cognisance of the constraints that senior leaders are working under, can be a key enabler for a partnership. This is especially the case within the fast-paced and challenging context of child exploitation and extra familial harm, and at a time of new and developing provisions, structures and stakeholder networks. The challenge can be further exacerbated when needing to consider the complex and varied landscape within which a newly implemented service or structure is located. By acknowledging the requirement to work together as key stakeholders, both internal and external to a hub (or similar configuration of services), along with a willingness and mature approach to share and learn from and with one another, a partnership can enhance their response to the diverse and disparate needs of their population. Skill sharing and the recognition of expertise afforded to a partnership from across the continuum of safeguarding and community safety is integral to prevent, disrupt and respond to exploitation across the thresholds for services.

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Blurring boundaries

The EMPOWERU Hub is an example of how a mix of statutory and voluntary organisations work together to provide a varied and wide-ranging response to prevent and tackle child exploitation. It is also an example of working across children and adult services (often referred to as '[transitional safeguarding](#)', reflecting that exploitation has no age barriers. Examples of services from a statutory, voluntary, child and adult perspective include: Birmingham Children's Trust, health providers, West Midlands Police, Barnardo's, The Children's Society and other services which may not typically be aligned within statutory safeguarding guidance. This diverse membership and variety of roles, responsibilities and accountabilities offers the partnership an opportunity to establish a holistic view of exploitation across the city and position tackling child exploitation as a priority within strategic conversations.

Holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity

Curiosity and willingness were observed throughout the project. The agencies working within the hub and from the BCSP were committed to making it work, those reviewing the audit tools were keen to learn from practice elsewhere, and the partnership was eager to understand how it could effectively listen to the voices of children, young people and parents to develop its understanding of child exploitation across Birmingham City. The local area showed drive and motivation to learn from others who had knowledge and connections within their local community.

Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

Hearing from children, young people and families

There was recognition by the local area of the need to develop the ways in which the BCSP and the EMPOWERU Hub heard from children, young people and their families regarding their experiences of child exploitation and of service responses. Previously, the BCSP has utilised social workers' experiences and relationships with young people to ask if young people want to share their story, however reflections were shared that there is a low uptake. Inspectors also request feedback from young people if their case is audited to provide an opportunity for them to share their experiences of the support received.

In order for the partnership to understand the experiences of those young people who are 'open' to the hub and those who do not meet its threshold, they reflected that there were lots of opportunities to receive feedback but it can be difficult to know where to start.

There was a strong recognition that the partnership will want to engage children and parents and build relationships with its communities⁴. Furthermore, the partnership is considering how children and parents can play a more meaningful role within the disruption of child exploitation, from a community perspective. Due to the nature of child exploitation, the partnership reflected on how the hub can attain wider reach, considering those children which are not currently looked

⁴ For a rapid evidence review of evidence about community engagement, see: <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/community-engagement-in-tackling-child-exploitation-and-extra-familial-harm-rapid-scoping-review/>

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after by the local authority, and recognising that not all victims of child exploitation are in receipt of statutory services.

Hearing from others / learning from others

The partnership is clear that the establishment of the EMPOWERU Hub is not the only response to child exploitation. The hub is locally understood to be just one part of a wider and broader city-wide partnership response. It is one part of a system, and services external to it have an equally vital and crucial role to play in strengthening the partnership's response to child exploitation. For each part of the system to meet its objectives with effectiveness and quality, a level of synchronicity, of shared values and understanding, and of collective and collaborative learning is required.

Scale and complexity of the local area

The scale and size of Birmingham City means that child exploitation is complex and diverse. The local area reflected on the live challenges they face regarding influencing and developing agencies' understanding of child exploitation when the size of the organisations and systems they work with across their partnership is so large. Changes in mindset can take time and are a challenge amplified by there being no one form or type of harm with regards to child exploitation, no 'typical' victim or perpetrator. It occurs on and offline and in the spaces and places where we all live, hidden in plain sight and constantly evolving to evade detection (as [this briefing](#) highlights), often staying one step ahead of local areas and partnerships.

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

Organisations' individual accountability and inspection frameworks:

The TCE team and the key managers reflected that BCSP were adapting tools recommended by the JTAI inspectors and it was felt that these tools were being stretched to address and report the scope of extra-familial harm. This example mirrors the way in which safeguarding responses have been stretched to respond to extra-familial harm. There is an inherent tension for all local areas across England, between, a) the partnership approach embedded at the heart of responding to child exploitation, b) its high risk, high stakes nature, and, c) partnerships seeking to achieve balance to adapt tools to meet local and specific types of harm while not being penalised by inspectors.

An exploitation service or hub is not a solution to responding to extra-familial harm:

The BCT shared with TCE that the EMPOWERU Hub was at the beginning of its development and its scope and remit were still being defined. They were facing the challenge of how far to expand the scope of the partnership. For example, BCT were reflective and mature in their thinking about wanting to have responses to tackle child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE) established before the scope is expanded to incorporate missing children, modern slavery and even radicalisation. A tension when creating specific services / hubs is to ensure the wider partnership has shared buy-in, and knowledge / skills / experience are not confined to specialist services / hubs, so that all agencies are empowered to collectively respond to CE. This is a challenge that TCE witness across many local areas which are [explored in this briefing](#).

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Immediate reflections from the local area:

I agree with the contents of the report. I note it highlights the positives of a multi-agency co-located hub with the appropriate partnership buy in and also notes some of the challenges this can also bring. Particularly how the service area within Birmingham City's safeguarding partnership sees the hub as the solution to the issues around exploitation which is not the view of senior leadership and that this is part of the conflict in that the service areas do not feel the hub offer is sufficient as they perceive us to be the solution.

We are at the beginning of the journey and as the landscape around assessing the risks to children outside the family home continues to change, we continue to evolve and flexibly adapt to those changes. We are a learning service and organisation and continue to learn from others and adapt and change and have welcomed the independent review and observations from TCE that are both supportive and constructively challenging.

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: 07th July 2021



Signed by local area: