



# Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

## **Project Learning Report**

<b>Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):</b>	
Partnership Name:	East Sussex
Core partner agencies involved:	East Sussex County Council Sussex Police British Transport Police (BTP) Youth Justice Board (YJB)
Number of Local Authority areas covered:	East Sussex
Regional Area:	Sussex Police
BSP Project Size:	Standard
BSP Methodology/ methodologies	Bespoke - Disruption/ Data
Digital / Face to face / Mixed Delivery	Digital
Date BSP commenced:	August 2020
<b>Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support Programme:</b>	
<p>East Sussex's original ask was in relation to embedding locally commissioned research on children and young people's voices into strategic responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. The impact of Covid-19-related restrictions delayed scoping, so at the point of being able to take the project forward the emphasis had shifted locally and a change goal was agreed to support the local area in developing and implementing a shared approach to using soft intelligence or qualitative sources of information to effectively disrupt child exploitation.</p>	
<b>Overall goal of BSP:</b>	
<p>Work with East Sussex did not follow a standard TCE approach and as a result this report differs from other project learning reports published by the programme. Much of the work taken forward focused on scoping activity, clarifying objectives and individual agency conversations to support local leads in driving forward local objectives. As described in this report, the delivery phase of the project did not progress as planned. A number of workshops and multi-agency sessions were put on hold to allow locally led activity to develop.</p> <p>Although the TCE project in East Sussex was not based on a standard delivery model, this report contains valuable reflections on TCE's ability as a programme to support systems improvement priorities in the context of strategic landscapes that both enable and constrain partnerships' ability to respond to child exploitation and extra-familial harm.</p> <p>The change goal for this project was scoped in September 2020 and was closely linked for the local partnership to their recent <a href="#">JTAI</a>, which specified an action to increase local focus on disruption.</p> <p>East Sussex have a complex case planning approach for young people presenting from across a range of services with statutory safeguarding and criminal justice concerns, which sees senior managers from a range of services agree a single (umbrella) care plan across agencies directly held</p>	

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as a multi-agency child exploitation (MACE) caseload. The individual characteristics and circumstances of this cohort vary, including the harms they are both vulnerable to and at risk of causing to others. There are concerns amongst the professionals engaged in MACE that these young people:

- remain vulnerable to exploitation
- are engaging in criminal activity
- are engaging in exploitative activity
- all of the above.

As a result, local colleagues wished to develop their approach to the sharing of soft intelligence as a means of supporting multi-agency disruption activity.

In these cases the MACE panel's main concern was that despite 12-18 months of relational support, interventions were not seen to be reducing risk so additional levers were required. The key to unlocking this was seen locally as being a focus on partnership working with a threefold aim to:

1. **Widen the MACE strategic partnership** to include Criminal Justice representation.
2. Create a **shared understanding** of individual agency's roles / remits / powers and constraints in relation to disruption.
3. Agree a **common aim** in relation to disruption.

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

Throughout the project a range of different approaches were adopted to support East Sussex in working towards their change goals. These included:

- single agency conversations in order to understand individual priorities
- challenges and opportunities for this work
- partnership workshop sessions
- reflective conversations with core partners
- locally owned task and finish activity designed to provide momentum behind the TCE led activity with a view to supporting longer term activity amongst local partners.

One of the key values underpinning the programme is that delivery teams look to work with local partnerships to ensure projects are locally defined, owned and driven. The role of the delivery team as external facilitators is to provide space to support and challenge local colleagues to move objectives forward in a way that aligns with local priorities and at a pace that fits with local capacity.

In working with colleagues in East Sussex, the TCE delivery team deliberately sought to support and enable local leadership by holding space but not 'stepping in' to 'do for' or 'do to'. Much of the activity of the delivery team was focused around scoping and individual conversations with local leads to offer support in shaping and defining activity so as to promote a sense of local ownership rather than the delivery team stepping in and pushing forward objectives from an external perspective.

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Within this project we observed conversations beginning to emerge amongst local partners which drew attention to the fact that there was a sense that the TCE team were directing local action. Being mindful of the unhelpful dynamics of this in supporting local colleagues to own and drive their own strategic agenda, the delivery team took the decision to step back from direct facilitation and provide space for local leads to further shape their own activity. Although potentially uncomfortable, this approach felt important as at its core, the programme is about supporting and promoting local ownership of activity. This is especially important when we consider the sustainability of activity beyond the short involvement of the TCE delivery team as external facilitators.

With local pressures linked to the JTAI, local partners were understandably looking for a 'solution' to their identified goals. However, the programme has a focus on sustainable change which is delivered through working alongside local areas to shift strategic thinking to achieve systems improvement. This approach differs from consultancy or inspection models, and in some cases can feel at odds with more established models of support which are based in more direct problem-solving approaches.

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

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

This project has underlined both the primacy and the complexity of partnership arrangements in relation to effectively tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Learning from East Sussex resonates with wider TCE learning in relation to both the importance, and challenges, of effectively linking systems improvement at a strategic level with operational needs at a more localised level.

At points, our approach to stepping back felt uncomfortable for the TCE delivery team and for local partners alike. It highlighted three key areas for reflection in ensuring strategic work and more operational developments are aligned in the forward shaping of strategic change across the East Sussex partnership in relation to their identified change goal.

Specifically, in relation to East Sussex achieving their desired change goal, we either observed or had described to us:

### **1. Leadership**

In seeking to develop and implement a shared approach to using soft intelligence or qualitative sources of information to effectively disrupt child exploitation, a potential tension was highlighted in East Sussex in relation to:

- A strategic-level drive from Statutory Safeguarding Partners towards more regional-based, pan-Sussex working.
- A simultaneous and deliberate operational shift towards contextual approaches to tackling exploitation that require place-based working and intelligence at a hyper-local level.

Whilst further strategic integration on the one hand and an individualised / responsive operational approach on the other are not necessarily in conflict, we observed in East Sussex that there remained space for meaningfully connecting the operational expertise and experience with strategic priorities.

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The following reflections might help in seeking to align strategic improvement at strategic partnership level, within individual agencies / organisations and at an operational level:

- What enables or constrains strategic 'buy in' across the partnership?
- How visible do strategic change goals (and linked projects such as TCE) need to be across the wider safeguarding partnership systems?
- Who are the key individuals tasked with leading improvement / bridging the operational and strategic divide and how can they be supported within a partnership context?
- Where do / should lines of accountability sit across the partnership to ensure strategic and operational imperatives align for improvement projects?

## **2. Engagement of wider partners**

In thinking about an approach to disruption and intelligence, are the right agencies and organisations represented and engaged at the right level?

A useful reflection across the partnership might be whether the voice of non-traditional safeguarding partners such as community organisations, housing, community safety, local businesses and children, young people and their families are genuinely included in influencing and decision-making at all the right levels :

- In thinking about an approach to disruption and intelligence, are the right agencies and organisations represented and engaged at the right level?
- Where non-traditional safeguarding partnerships, such as those working in spaces and places with communities, are effective at a local level, what is the best way of translating this to operational and strategic leadership levels?
- Where systems improvement work is being led by regional strategic imperatives across a broad geographic footprint (in this case pan-Sussex), what is the best way of ensuring local leaders hear directly from children, young people, parents, carers and communities, and how might their voices shape and inform local processes and responses<sup>1</sup>?

## **3. Capacity to engage**

Single agency priorities and organisational constraints will always impact on the capacity of the wider partnership to move shared issues forwards. In East Sussex we observed that the pace of change in one agency (in this case an internal review and staffing restructure) has the potential to act as a destabilising influence if it is not named and openly explored at all levels in setting wider change priorities.

- Within the context of competing demands and other priorities, how can local partners create a restorative culture to openly name and explore individual constraints in a collective forum?
- What is needed to enable individual agencies to accurately map and articulate both their strategic and operational capacity to effectively engage in projects such as this?

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<sup>1</sup> The following resources on the TCE microsite focus on hearing the voices of children and young people through participation <https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/?s=participation>

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- When might the partnership need to pause, reflect and in some cases amend or cease collective activity, and what are the local conditions required to enable this to occur in a strengths-based way?

## **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 heard from local colleagues about the impact that intelligence sharing and disruption activity was having on young people both directly and in terms of how they experienced relationships with professionals. The focus which emerged around the ethics of information sharing underpinned this and could potentially be further developed by exploring the idea of feedback loops which place young people at the heart of strategic thinking and decision-making.

## **Bridging boundaries**

One of the themes emerging from this project was a recognition that the systems and structures in place across the partnership don't necessarily mirror the experiences of young people for whom experiencing and perpetrating harm are interwoven. There is not always a clear distinction between victim and perpetrator ([see the article - Blurring boundaries: young people, safeguarding and the criminal justice system](#)).

With the involvement of partners such as the British Transport Police who work across boundaries, what could be learnt from the approaches they adopt in terms of navigating a range of different landscapes? How might individual agency structures such as separate CSE and CCE teams impact on how young people are able to navigate and experience the local system, and what might the unintended consequences of local structures be in terms of how the partnership develops its approach to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?

## **Holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity**

In seeking to manage complexity, partnerships can understandably look to identify solutions which can sometimes come at the expense of curiosity. In reflecting on learning from this project, the TCE delivery team have considered whether in naming disruption and intelligence sharing as the focus for the project, did East Sussex and the delivery team move too quickly to name the problem and therefore by default move too quickly to a solution without the opportunity for wider exploration? In some instances this *can* act as an important catalyst for exploring wider issues, but in considering the scope of an individual issue, the extent to which partners are willing / able to

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take it as a meaningful starting point from which to explore the local system benefits from being explicitly named and explored at the outset.

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

At the heart of this project and the learning emerging from it is the importance of partnership. Strategic approaches in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm are underpinned by the breadth and depth of partnership arrangements (highlighted in [this TCE blog post by Delivery Partner, Ben Byrne](#)). Within the local activity we saw the need to consider both the role of criminal justice and social care colleagues who are fundamental to disruption activity, but importantly we also saw questions beginning to be asked about *who else* can contribute. If we expand our concept of partnership, might we begin to unlock new approaches to disruption and earlier opportunities to safeguard young people<sup>2</sup>?

Child exploitation and extra-familial harm present high harm, high risk situations which require immediate responses from local agencies to safeguarding young people. Within a fast-paced and evolving landscape it can be challenging for strategic leaders to pull back and revisit the partnership principles and ways of working which underpin their approach.

For other areas wishing to engage in similar improvement activity or looking to explore similar strategic challenges identified throughout this report, the areas of reflection posed may provide a helpful starting point from which to begin to shape local activity.

### Immediate reflections from the local area:

It is worth noting that the East Sussex multi-agency representatives who participated in this project did find the approach utilised by the programme difficult to adapt their working styles to. A more traditionally facilitated style was anticipated and feedback from the MACE strategic group noted that limited benefit was derived from programme representatives regarding the operational 'output' of the ES Partnership Intelligence Policy.

Feedback from agencies that were historically not so well represented in local MACE structures such as British Transport Police and YJB, have found the opportunity to better understand local needs and challenges helpful and hope that their contact with ES agencies will remain in place going forward to ensure a better response to CCE risks in ES.

Furthermore, the local leads for this programme have found that a focus on a tangible area of operational challenge, in this instance partnership intelligence reporting, has afforded those agencies involved in this process the ability to identify a current safeguarding partnership disconnect between timely strategic responses to operational challenges.

For the partnership, the threat of CCE is both operationally and for many agencies strategically managed at a county level. Furthermore, within a safeguarding context multi-agency responses to CCE are increasingly requiring contextual approaches that have an even greater localised focus or place-specific response.

<sup>2</sup> This is a central tenet of the contextual safeguarding approach, for example <https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/toolkit>

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However, in this problem example, the risk reported by local agencies regarding intelligence sharing was also subject to a strategic review at a pan- Sussex level. This initially prevented key agencies from taking forward timely local solutions. Also a lack of clarity regarding the content of the associated regional review and timescales for that reporting made the wait for a strategic pan- Sussex response unacceptable and a decision to draft a working document was taken by ES stakeholders in order to fit within this programme's timescales. This draft document has now been taken forward as a model of good practice by regional representatives.

The challenge for the East Sussex Safeguarding Children's Partnership is also reflected in the recent Alan Wood review of SCP's two years on – how do **all** agencies ensure that local priorities are reported, assimilated and solutions sought in a timely way?

**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:** 12/07/2021

**Signed by local area:** Vicky Finnemore MACE Strategic Chair

**Singed by TCE Project Lead:** Amy Hurst