

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report

Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):	
Partnership name:	North Somerset
Core partner agencies involved:	North Somerset Council- Children's Services, YOS, Community Safety, Commissioning Avon and Somerset Police BNSSG CCG Barnardo's Violence Reduction Unit
Number of Local Authority areas covered:	North Somerset Council
Regional area:	South West
BSP Project Size:	Standard
BSP Methodology/ methodologies	Data/partnership
Digital / face to face / mixed delivery	Digital
Date BSP commenced:	June 2020
Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support programme:	
<p>North Somerset originally approached the TCE Support Programme to explore and support their partnership approach to data as part of a developing child exploitation strategy. Initial scoping took place across the summer of 2020, but following a change in local personnel and a local focus on improvement activity, the project was paused until December 2020.</p>	
Overall goal of BSP :	
<p>Following local activity to refine the focus of the project, the change goal for the project was agreed as follows:</p> <p>To explore how the use of data and intelligence can support and inform the partnership as they move towards embedding a contextual approach to child exploitation. As part of this it was agreed that, throughout, the project work would take place around the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Strategic leads to identify key 'asks' of data to allow them to understand the experience of young people, perpetrators and places across North Somerset. ● Bring together individuals from across the partnership who hold and work with data to form a collaborative network amongst them. ● Map the data currently available across the partnership, consider gaps and explore the role wider stakeholders may be able to take developing the approach further. 	

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- Reflection on the structures, membership and processes in place across the partnership and consider what changes might be required to embed the approach to data in the longer term.

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

The approach adopted as part of delivery of this project was built on curiosity and making connections across the partnership. The intentional pause at the start of delivery allowed local leads to consider alongside the TCE delivery team where value could be maximised from external support within the context of the local area's improvement journey.

Delivery itself took the form of a range of different methods including a number of scoping sessions with a core group of partners, single agency / team conversations to explore approaches to data across the partnership, and a series of broad partnership workshops to explore in depth approaches to data and the partnership structures across the area. In support of these activities, the TCE delivery team also commissioned a [resource](#) to support the theme of young people's voice which emerged throughout our work with local partners.

Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

Pausing to gain the most from external support

Work in North Somerset was due to begin in June 2020, but following changes in key local personnel and for the local authority in particular, a focus on development of a local improvement plan, a decision was made to pause the beginning of delivery until December 2020. During the months the project was on pause, the TCE lead remained in contact with the core group and a number of conversations were held to help refine the objectives and focus for the project, ensuring that the small amount of external support offered through the programme could be maximised for the local area.

Use of flags across the partnership

As part of single agency conversations, it emerged that, across the partnership, there are a number of different flags in place across various data systems which link to child exploitation. The challenge identified as part of this is that flags and the definitions, thresholds which underpin them and when the flags were applied and reviewed, differ from agency to agency and in some cases differ across teams within the same organisation, raising questions of who is and isn't flagged and (therefore) who is missing from the data. Although on the surface this could appear to be a challenge for systems, on digger deeper, partners reflected that at its heart, the challenge is linked to how young people are understood across the system. Local colleagues involved in the project have begun asking questions about the impact of this on young people and how they are able to navigate the local system and access support. The application of flags can be inconsistent based on individuals' understanding of exploitation, the organisational lens through which the issues of exploitation are seen, and the point at which flags may be applied.¹

¹ This links to the literature on the problematic nature of risk assessment more broadly: see <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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Emerging approach to Contextual Safeguarding across the partnership

North Somerset local authority are in the process of rolling out and embedding Contextual Safeguarding² as part of their approach to safeguarding adolescents. As part of this, work is underway with agencies and local authority teams across the partnership to raise awareness of the approach and to scope opportunities to consider the role of non-traditional partners and how they might support place-based approaches in particular. Throughout discussions across the project, it was apparent that understanding of Contextual Safeguarding is at different points across agencies. The role of partners in utilising place-based data also differs across agencies, though throughout our work together positive connections were made, particularly with Community Safety who have the local lead for the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU), providing strong foundations to embed the use of place-based data going forward.

Scope and approach to child exploitation across the partnership

Many partners engaged in this project work across geographical boundaries which extend beyond North Somerset. This can present challenges when looking to agree the scope and approach to child exploitation across the partnership. In the case of Avon and Somerset Police for example, who are working across five different local authorities, the different approaches and scopes adopted by different Children's Safeguarding Partnerships can present challenges for operational colleagues as they look to navigate different geographically defined systems. Similarly, as part of this project we heard from a range of partners who are all working closely together but who have different 'types' of exploitation which are in scope for their activity, often defined by commissioned contracts or different funding streams. In the case of the VRU, the primary focus is serious violence, but as part of this there is significant cross over with exploitation³. The result of these differences can be that young people are only able to navigate the system based on definitions and thresholds rather than presenting needs. Partners across North Somerset highlighted this as something they wished to address going forward as the understanding of child exploitation continues to develop and evolve.

Data as a jumping off point

At the start of the delivery phase of this project, local colleagues were focused on developing their approach to data across the partnership. As work developed however, the focus of activity began to shift with curiosity emerging around the questions partners wanted to ask of data and the different questions that might lead us to ask in terms of how partnership processes and structures might enable or hinder how we might begin to work towards answers.

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:

² The approach to safeguarding developed by the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at the University of Bedfordshire <https://www.csnetwork.org.uk/en/>

³ This issue was highlighted in the [Wood Review](#) as emanating from a lack of joined-up working at central government level.

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

Leading with care

As part of discussions around data within the project, local colleagues recognised that although technical systems can help, support and enable partnership activity, it is relationships that are at the heart of work to safeguard children and young people from exploitation. That is both in terms of relationships between professionals across organisational and partnership boundaries, and those with children, young people and communities. By using this as the focus for activity, local colleagues began to broaden their focus out from the mechanisms of data and data sharing to considering the supporting structures which enable an effective partnership approach and empower those across the system to consider how best to nurture relationships (this [TCE blog](#) highlights these issues and offers a range of insights for partnership working).

Blurring boundaries

The TCE delivery team observed challenges linked to partnership structures emerge as the project developed. Child exploitation and extra familial harm are issues which span partnership boundaries in North Somerset with the Children's Safeguarding Partnership, Community Safety Partnership (in particular the VRU) and the Youth Offending Service Management Board, with all having some form of strategic oversight and operational response as part of their remit. Through discussions it emerged that there was some duplication taking place and potential inefficiencies across the system, particularly in relation to information sharing. Throughout the project, as relationships began to grow, we observed local leads begin to unpick some of these challenges and explore new ways of working. In beginning to think about the North Somerset system as a whole and considering how boundaries across organisations and within them can be navigated, the partnership are in a strong position to develop this area going forward.

Holding complexity, uncertainty and curiosity

Throughout the project we observed local colleagues looking beyond the immediate issues they had themselves identified for our work together and starting to question the challenges which sit beneath potential solutions such as data or partnership structures. In asking questions such as what is it that the partnership wants to know about child exploitation, or thinking broadly about who might sit outside existing partnership structures who could contribute to the emerging approach to Contextual Safeguarding, we observed local leads engaging with the complexity of the local landscape.

Although the project was delivered with senior leads from across the partnership, we repeatedly heard of the need to ensure that any activity emerging from the project would also be meaningful for practitioners and ultimately young people themselves. In holding the operational as a core to discussions, senior leads were able to ensure that their thinking was grounded in practicalities and reflected the complexity faced by those working directly with children and young people across North Somerset.

Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

Use of data in the partnership context:

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- Explore the use of flags and consider opportunities to look across organisational boundaries to determine how a consistent approach can be developed to avoid duplication or young people 'getting lost' across the system.
- Create opportunities across the partnership for analysts and data leads to come together to share knowledge, skills and expertise to support the partnership in developing their approach to the use of data.
- Consider how to build feedback loops across the partnership so that people are aware of how their data is used and of the impact it has.

Partnership structures:

- A complex meeting landscape can take the focus away from safeguarding itself.
- Child exploitation and extra-familial harm are issues which span the boundaries of various strategic partnerships. For local leads it can be important to map the partnership structures which underpin activity at both strategic and operational levels and then begin to reflect critically as to whether the local landscapes reflect the needs of children and young people or represent best value in terms of partnership resources.
- Complexity at a strategic level is often amplified when it reaches the operational level. This can be important to hold in mind and can provide a basis for senior leads to reflect critically on the impact of strategic discussions.

Scope of the local approach to child exploitation and extra-familial harm:

- Language matters when we discuss child exploitation and extra-familial harm. With the absence of consistent definitions at a national level and the ever-emerging and evolving forms of harm perpetrated against young people, it can be challenging for partners to engage in strategic conversations where scope is not clearly defined. These are important conversations to have at a strategic level as the language and definitions adopted by partners can have a direct impact on the services and support which is made available to young people.
- Definitions are important within a partnership, but particularly to agencies / teams such as the police and health whose remit goes beyond the scope of a single local authority boundary.

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

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As part of this project, a number of positive movements towards system change have begun to emerge across the partnership. Although in some cases, these may appear small, they provide a strong platform from which North Somerset colleagues can further develop their strategic approach to child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

- Local colleagues have developed and enhanced relationships within the safeguarding partnership with a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities as well as limitations and opportunities which exist to inform activity going forward.
- Strong links have been developed between strategic leads sitting across core safeguarding partners and those overseeing the VRU allowing discussions to take place to unpick, clarify and, in the longer-term, work towards simplifying structures and processes to ensure young people are held at the centre of the local approach and operational practitioners are able to effectively support those who require support.
- Conversations which started with a focus on data and how it is shared across the partnership have developed into thinking strategically about what it is the partnership wants to know about child exploitation and considering how these questions might shape collective approaches going forward.
- Questions around definitions and scope of strategic activity are being asked, and honest and open reflections are being shared around the collective implications of these, for individual agencies and most importantly for young people as they navigate the local system.

Immediate reflections from the local area:

There was a pause in North Somerset's programme until December 2020, which included both a change in focus and in those attending locally. One of the key outcomes was the development of stronger multi-agency relationships across the area of child exploitation, with contextual safeguarding being embedded across the authority. It is now our task to maintain those relationships, and to develop further links across all areas, with the aim of fostering a greater understanding of each other's role, duties and practice.

Our shared focus was on areas such as child exploitation, contextual safeguarding and any other areas of harm across localities. We recognised that our professional relationships are imperative to being able to move forward. We were able to identify areas where our practice overlapped, where we needed to work together to streamline processes and reduce unnecessary duplication of activity, and where we were able to function with one line of sight based on clear roles and responsibilities despite our different professional perspectives.

The collection and analysis of data and intelligence and the use of specific flags on recording systems to identify concerns are useful process changes which support our work, but the most positive and effective outcome was the strengthened relationships within this group.

We now need to:

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- Establish our shared data set, aligning information across the partnership in order to inform but not dictate local practice.
- Continue to foster and develop enhanced relationships.
- Agree a clear local understanding and definition of risk to inform both operational and strategic activity.
- Establish our shared data set, aligning information across the partnership in order to inform but not dictate local practice.

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: TICK

Date: 15th July 2021

Signed by local area: Dawn Newton, Head of Family Wellbeing and Front Door, North Somerset Council

Signed by TCE Project Lead: Amy Hurst