

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report

Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):	
Partnership name:	Northumbria Regional Partnership
Core partner agencies involved:	Police, health, social care, education, voluntary sector organisations
Number of local authority areas covered:	6
Regional area:	North East
BSP size:	Regional
BSP methodology/ methodologies	Data project
Digital / face to face / mixed Delivery	Digital delivery
date BSP commenced:	April 2020
Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support programme:	
<p>Northumbria partners applied to the TCE programme for support in a) looking at how child exploitation and extra-familial harm is understood across the region and b) exploring how data could best be used to underpin and develop a regional strategic approach to tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm.</p> <p>The local area noted the relevance of recent changes for this work, including the adoption of MASA (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements) aiming to promote more integrated and aligned responses to child exploitation across the region, and the MSET (Missing Slavery Exploitation Trafficking) process and exploitation framework (screening, assessment, safeguarding, disruption and review).</p>	
Overall goal of the BSP :	
<p>Partners initially identified a long term goal for the project of developing a data collection framework that would support and inform a regional child exploitation strategy. Interestingly, this evolved over the course of working with TCE and ended instead with a plan to utilise existing data more effectively. This report sets out this journey.</p> <p>The specific focus of the (short-term) Bespoke Support Project was to support the development of the data collection framework by working with partners to critically challenge and reflect on the implications of adopting this approach. Could a more dynamic use of data support more innovative disruptive opportunities in relation to child exploitation?</p> <p>Early on in the project, it became clear that there were many different views amongst partners as to what was meant by data and how it could be used. Therefore, the delivery team designed a survey for BSP participants across the region, which helped to understand the strategic ambitions underpinning the desire to improve understanding of exploitation through data¹. Three key findings were identified that the ensuing project work sought to address:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding the evidence, scale and scope of child exploitation across our region: needed in order for partners to consider who, how and where support to tackle child exploitation should be directed. • Understanding the nuance and variation in relation to child exploitation - where there are gaps in data collection (quantitative and qualitative): supporting partners to reflect on who has the necessary skills and leadership around effective data collection approaches and who might need support in this across the partnership. 	

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- **Broaden our understanding of what can support us as a region to respond to complexity caused by emerging exploitation threats or harm:** this was both about responding to emerging types of exploitation, such as child criminal exploitation, but also about effective partnership working. The structures, opportunities and enabling factors that could enable the use of data to disrupt and develop understanding of child exploitation were highlighted.

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

There were three distinct stages to the work in Northumbria:

1. **Data surveys:** to identify what definitions, confidence and skills in relation to data and information sharing were held across partners.
2. **Mapping data challenges:** work with partners to understand where challenges in relation to data were coming from. Building on findings from the survey responses, TCE presented the group with defined challenges for the partnership to think about.
3. **Developing the strategic ask:** TCE supported partners to gather data and learning to demonstrate to senior leaders how teams in the safeguarding partnership could be enabled and supported to promote a more effective use of data moving forward.

Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

A reflection from the TCE Programme delivery team, and heard in discourse throughout the BSP process from local partners, came back to our 'expectations' of exploring this theme. The initial assumption was that data would give concrete answers to issues in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm - both in how it manifests and how we should strategically respond. However, as we moved through the project, reflections highlighted that, ultimately, the exploration of this topic and the use of data in general would only give local areas 'better questions' to ask in relation to child exploitation.

The project highlights some examples of enabling factors in relation to good data practice across the region:

- Examples of good multi-agency information sharing cited within the survey highlighted pockets of emergent practice across the region.
- VRU experience of data collection and analysis across the area. Stakeholder mapping and feedback loops around provision mapping had already been undertaken and reported on by the VRU, which was establishing how this could be incorporated into a public health approach.

Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

The challenges of collecting, sharing and using data consistently and effectively across multiple agencies are well documented². Not surprisingly, these issues were also encountered in this project, including:

- **Information sharing:** GDPR, information governance and consent acting as barriers to sharing information with partner organisations. It was suggested that the processes of information governance can hinder or divert capacity away from using data to inform strategic thinking, as the following quote highlights:
'[We] get tied up in information sharing issues rather than good use of data and [a] strategic approach to addressing information gaps'
- **Different data systems:** tools that do not speak to each other, both between and within sectors. For example, health was described as having 'complex' IT systems across the

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landscape of commissioning and provider trusts meaning that, even at a partner level, bringing together uniform approaches was a complex challenge.

- **Quality of data:** the information produced from the data will only ever be as good as the data put into it by individual professionals.

Assessing risk: There was a lot of discussion and reflection on the implications of having a single regional data framework, both the benefits as well as what could be lost as a result. A key issue, highlighted in the literature about risk assessment³, is the challenge of achieving a shared understanding about the definitions, language and information required such that data collected at a regional level is consistent and comparable. This quote from a survey response highlights this:

'...But for me the main issue is that each local authority either collects or interprets data differently.'

In response to these challenges, it was suggested that partners reflect on the extent of variation within local teams, communities and organisations that might affect the data prioritised, collated or shared across a local area, be that a singular authority or a regional partnership.

The different ways that child exploitation and extra-familial harm manifest and can be responded to across the system means that positively challenging assumptions, perception and bias is critical, as this survey quote highlights:

'We will only be able to capture data and information around exploitation when it is being recognised at the front end. Training and awareness raising of the signs and indicators to allow front line practitioners to record it is still required for some partners ... [Example of a young person presenting at A&E with a stab wound accompanied by an adult] ... only with professional curiosity would you explore the relationship between the two [explanations] and whether the story is accurate.'

Without professional curiosity, there is a risk that young people may be screened out of support. Creating reflective space to pause, step back from the busy-ness of daily work pressures and think about what different approaches to risk assessment mean for children and young people in the local area has been an important component of TCE's work.

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

At the end of delivery, the local area had a deeper appreciation of why data is challenging. They had shifted their focus away from introducing a new data framework to Northumbria and instead were focusing on making better use of the data already being collected around a regional set of shared aims and goals. They felt they had robust approaches in place and a network of partners well placed to progress with this approach.

Over the course of the project, an understanding was reached that being able to gather a 'complete' picture in relation to child exploitation across the region and across all partners was not going to be achievable. Partners reflected that there will always be unknowns given the fast-moving and emerging nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm and the lack of evidence about 'what works' in terms of interventions.

This led to thinking about how partners could or do currently support one another to take a multi-agency approach to collectively holding that complexity and risk inherent with developing work in this area. BSP participants felt that they may need to ask for support from senior leadership to enable more connection across partners, through existing processes and networks, in order for initiatives such as the MSET framework to progress and not get lost in day-to-day activity. The focus on

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'enabling' and embracing the complexity that embedding such processes requires, indicated the potential for positive disruption and a more systemic response.

Finally, when reflecting back on the project's goals at the outset, it was recognised that there may be factors which impact the regional 'system' in ways we don't expect or anticipate. For instance, rather than creating or attempting to create a uniform process for data collection, the BSP identified that, due to geographical and demographic diversity across populations and professional teams, this approach was unlikely to be the most effective way of aligning the region around a strategic approach to child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

There was also concern that a central data framework might potentially sacrifice the 'local nuance' derived from local data collection processes, which captures highly relevant detail about young people in their particular local areas. Issues specific to rural and urban environments in particular were raised as pertinent in Northumbria. Whilst gaining a regional focus comes with the added opportunity to 'join the dots' to wider cohorts of young people, some professionals felt a balance between the two would help to protect 'local nuance' and still support the development of a richer picture through data.

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Signed by Head of Delivery: E. FAIRGRIEVE