

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report

Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):	
Partnership name:	Hartlepool & Stockton-On-Tees Safeguarding Children's Partnership (HSSCP)
Core partner agencies involved:	Police, health, education, voluntary sector, Children's Social Care
Number of local authority areas covered:	2
Regional area:	North East
BSP size:	Regional
BSP methodology/ methodologies	Theory of change
Digital / face to face / mixed delivery	Digital delivery
Date BSP commenced:	October 2020
Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support programme:	
<p>Hartlepool Borough Council and Stockton-On-Tees Borough Council jointly applied for a TCE Bespoke Support Project in the autumn of 2020, with the purpose of further strengthening their joint focus on developing a contextual safeguarding approach¹ across the Hartlepool and Stockton-On-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership landscape.</p> <p>Sitting behind this work was a wider local objective of strengthening the overall partnership structure, which had identified the following as potential areas of focus:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data collection, in particular, using data to better understand the child exploitation picture north of the Tees². • Doing more to collect feedback from children and young people on their experiences of service delivery³. • Managing the 'ever-changing landscape' of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. • Information on governance, storage and systematic recording around elements of contextual safeguarding. 	

¹ [Contextual safeguarding](#) is an approach to understanding, and responding to, young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families that was developed by Dr Carlene Firmin of the Safer Young Lives Research Centre, University of Bedfordshire. A host of resources are available on the [Contextual Safeguarding Practitioner's Network](#).

² The TCE Programme has produced a [series of resources](#) to support local areas to do this.

³ Hearing the voice of children and young people has been a priority issue for TCE – please see [this range of available resources](#).

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Overall goal of BSP :

The overarching objective for Stockton and Hartlepool partners was to find ways, as a safeguarding partnership, of developing a more contextual approach to tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

The local area recognised the long-term nature of this work. The role of TCE was to help understand the issues, catalyse thinking and identify ways to progress towards this goal. It was recognised that momentum and communication post-BSP delivery would be critical to its success.

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

At the start of the BSP, the TCE delivery team facilitated a partnership-wide workshop with the aim to 'begin the journey to developing a contextual safeguarding approach'. Core to this was supporting a partnership-wide understanding of respective roles and responsibilities.

Ahead of the workshop, participants were asked to consider the following questions;

- What change do you want to see?
- In what context does your agency currently work?
- What would be your distinctive contribution to change?
- How / what do we need to work with, or what do we need to influence to achieve this change?
- To what extent do our existing activities make sense against this picture?
- What is the political, social and environmental landscape you operate in, and how is this changing?

The learning and reflections highlighted three key themes:

- information sharing
- ownership and accountability
- empowering partners

These were fed back to the local area with a series of reflective questions which built on the foundations identified in the workshop to help the local area identify the next steps to becoming more contextual in their approach to safeguarding and extra-familial harm.

Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

The high level of **leadership buy-in** and **engagement** with the work of this BSP from across the partnership was invaluable. Leaders and representatives from each of the regional partners' core groups were involved. There was a good balance between those with authority to make decisions and those well placed to join up regional activity (for example, being linked into pan-regional forums and coming from different backgrounds).

Over the course of the project, having a **co-owned set of values** and **shared ambitions** helped to a) bring more partners to the 'table' and b) engender shared responsibility for leadership.

These factors bode well in terms of the sustainability and potential impact of the project.

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

As highlighted above, the initial workshops identified three key themes explored in this section. These formed the basis for discussion on how best to start implementing and working towards becoming a 'more contextual region'.

1. Information sharing:

It was noted that information sharing practices would underpin the efficacy of any ambition to be a more 'contextual' local system. A changed local area system would be one that provides support (around GDPR and legal advice) and empowers partners to feel that they can share information safely. A range of issues were raised:

- Differences between agencies in relation to what information is valued and how it is shared were acknowledged (bearing in mind that information spans multiple agencies and levels of responsibility). This was seen to require strategic clarity and a clear regional steer.
- Current IT systems and compatibility: multiple tools and systems are used across organisations. It was noted that there is a work stream in progress to support a contextual safeguarding approach with a bespoke IT system.
- Some anxiety was expressed about the intrinsic rigidity of information systems making innovative practice challenging and that 'we may not get it right to start with'.⁴
- Consideration of additional support for administrative roles. What do we expect them to do, for example in education services? Training is not currently offered for this. Partners discussed whether training opportunities could be accessed to support staff in this.

One area of future work centred on feedback loops: focusing on the nature and quality of information sharing across the region. This was seen as a valuable way to work through complexity and enable more collaborative working.

The role of VEMT (Vulnerable, Exploited, Missing, Trafficked strategic forum) was discussed. It was seen as an important pillar of quality assurance and a mechanism for monitoring the effectiveness of strategic responses across the region. It was noted that switching the lead agency from the local authority (who have tended to be the lead) could stimulate innovation and greater depth of understanding across partners.

2. Ownership & accountability:

The second theme was about the ownership and accountability associated with becoming more contextual as a region. This was in relation to individual partners but also collectively: how to support one another's resilience and also to act more disruptively as a partnership. Regional partners wanted to avoid leaning towards one single agency taking overall ownership of child exploitation.

Partners reflected that there is good ownership in Stockton and across the region around safeguarding. The cultural mind-set most often referred to was that it is 'everyone's responsibility to safeguard', a good underpinning to bring together partners and challenge the view that child exploitation might sit outside of certain agency domains. Joint decision-making was identified as a key and measurable foundation to be built upon. The importance of establishing 'foundational approaches' before moving too quickly to particular processes was emphasised.

⁴ Innovation and risk taking are key components of systems leadership as [this strategic briefing](#) highlights.

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Participants also reflected on the mind-set shift required when adapting how a local area responds to child exploitation. For example, thinking about the implementation of contextual safeguarding hubs without defining their teams' shared goals around child exploitation risked partners still potentially pulling in different directions.

Some key questions included:

- There was some discussion in a breakout session that there was a 'lack of accountability' within the current framework. This led to senior leaders considering where extra-familial harm fits strategically, compared to the traditional intra-familial response? Where does it align with current legislation?
- There was again discussion on whether current training affords the necessary level of expertise to address contextual safeguarding (e.g. regional training across the sector). Some partners felt that current packages were still too focussed on intra-familial harm.
- How best to be accountable to the community and involve them in strategic decision-making?⁵

3. Empowering partners:

The third theme centred on empowering different partners, both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' through the process of becoming a more contextual region. It was evident from the workshops that positive relationships, positive cultures and collaborative working were widespread amongst core group members. Amplifying and expanding these was also an opportunity to work towards empowerment as a longer-term goal in becoming more contextual.

Communication around goals / values has become a higher priority for the core group in order to help build and galvanise a wider local area understanding around the need to and importance of becoming more contextually informed. The BSP created a space for partners to come together and map existing forums, how they communicate and align, and what shared goals they are working towards – this was seen as providing a solid foundation for strategic planning.

The idea of being 'braver' as a collective partnership was discussed. Two potential areas were highlighted in this regard:

- Focusing on long term changes could enable partners to reflect on working patterns, opportunities for collaboration and how to be more ambitious in their approach to disrupting exploitation.
- Achieving this collectively across a broad coalition of partners included discussion of the part played by external structures, such as commissioning and funding.

Some participants were also enabled to seek and provide feedback from young people and communities ahead of core group meetings.

The 'contextual approach' has also led to the local area seeking evidence, insight and support from neighbouring authorities and [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) initiatives.

Local area participants have also provided leadership and guidance in other TCE forums, reflecting on their own local area experience to shape discussions around changing and influencing local area systems more widely in relation to child exploitation.

⁵ TCE produced a [rapid scoping review](#) of community engagement in tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm

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Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

Embarking on the journey to becoming more contextual was a significant ask of the capacity and skills of all partners, requiring consideration of multiple factors, including geography, cultural backgrounds, commissioning arrangements and local area funding. Reflecting on the learning from the Stockton and Hartlepool BSP, the combination of having a) **a broad range of partners** involved, and b) **space to pause and reflect** with this diverse group, was identified as having been key.

It meant that solutions were generated from a wide variety of stakeholders, not just those with perceived expertise. Purposeful pairing of partners who do not traditionally work together helped identify innovative solutions. It allowed for fresh perspectives that were able to provide critical challenge and suggestions for tackling stubborn challenges.

Having dedicated space to come together enabled the local area to slow down. 'Bigger challenges' were broken down into incremental milestones that could be implemented across the 'whole system' of the local area in its programme of long-term change. Partners pointed to existing pockets of innovation where agencies were already changing their working patterns and processes to respond to some of these challenges of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. For example, thinking about more public health/public protection focused community safety initiatives and police funded disruptive interventions.

A number of challenges were highlighted as important for the local area to consider whilst moving forwards:

- **Holding children and young people at the centre of decision-making.** With lots of day to day challenges, holding young people at the centre of this and providing means for young people to have influence on strategy is a challenge for partners, reflected more acutely due to the restrictions on face-to-face working due to Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.
- **Trust and relationships.** Whilst there are strong existing relationships across the partnership, it was reflected that an ongoing challenge will be in maintaining this trust when it comes to safely testing out new ways of working. The additional challenge of 'bringing in' new partners and fostering relationships with non-traditional agencies or cohorts to develop contextual approaches was also acknowledged.
- **What counts as robust evidence?** The challenge of 'knowing' and acting with certainty in terms of rolling out or implementing strategic responses was also highlighted. The partnership recounted how they were looking to other areas for insight and evidence on what good 'contextual' approaches look like. The reality though, and a challenge facing all partners (and other partnerships throughout England), is that the evidence base of 'what works' to direct the 'right' response to child exploitation is currently emerging. The partnership therefore emphasised the importance of reflecting on how and why they might act without having all the answers.

Date: 23.09.21

Signed by Head of Delivery: E. FAIRGRIEVE