

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report

Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):	
Partnership name:	Swindon Local Safeguarding Partnership, Swindon Safeguarding Partnership Executive
Core partner agencies involved:	Police, Health, Social Care, Voluntary Sector Organisations
Number of local authority areas covered:	Single
Regional area:	South West
BSP size:	Unitary
BSP methodology/methodologies	Organisational culture
Digital / face to face / mixed delivery	Digital delivery
Date BSP commenced:	February 2020
Why did the local area request support from the TCE Programme?	
<p>Within the local area, core safeguarding and wider partners acknowledged the complex nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, and the challenges faced when trying to tackle it. Recognising the level of passion and commitment in the local area, the partnership saw an opportunity to explore a different approach to disrupting child exploitation.</p>	
Overall goal of BSP:	
<p>The goal for this Bespoke Support Project was to explore decision-making around risk outside of the family home (extra-familial harm) with a view to addressing 'siloed' approaches and enabling creativity and ambitious planning. The local area identified three specific areas of focus:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop our approach to design specific services to support adolescents at risk and deliver services so that they can respond effectively and in a timely way to this vulnerable cohort. 2. A cultural shift in our approach to understanding and managing the risk that comes from outside the family; supporting practitioners across thresholds and disciplines to be brave, innovative and confident to hold and manage risk in a multi-agency arena. 3. To support the whole Swindon partnership in its commitment to improving the collective response to adolescent risk, and to sign up to a shared set of values and principles for working in this area. <p>The TCE Programme's role in this process was to act as a critical friend, facilitating reflective sessions and capturing the 'partnership' voice to inform a 'shared goal' or ethos to help strategic partners navigate complexity.</p> <p>Given the short-term nature of a BSP, it was agreed that the work would focus on understanding what is meant by 'brave decision making' from the different partner perspectives. This would give the partnership a starting point for their ensuing work on 'how' to influence or implement cultural change.</p> <p>During the BSP, the local area became interested in understanding what could enable a mind-set change across the partnership so that 'braver decisions' could be made for and with young people.</p>	

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This was seen as a 'cultural indicator', that the local area was acting in a more reflective and contextual approach to extra-familial harm (child exploitation being a form of this).

The BSP sought to engage the wider system as the local area worked to develop its understanding of what a 'contextually influenced' approach would look like. Links were made to the [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#) tools and resources. Practitioner and other stakeholder insights were gathered to identify levers in the local system that could support 'brave decision-making' .

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

To provide a better understanding of whether making braver decisions in practice and leadership might affect the local system, three key questions were identified.

1. What does 'brave decision making' mean to partners?
2. To what landscape are these changes being introduced? (and what are the concomitant considerations around implementation?)
3. What do partners feel they have or need to support working to this goal?

These questions were explored in two workshops - facilitated conversations and activities with stakeholders from across the partnership, including health representatives, police partners, voluntary sector representatives and members of the local authority from various teams and differing roles.

To support the BSP work, a resource for the local area has been commissioned and is currently in development. This consists of a series of interviews with senior leaders from the local area reflecting on cultural change which aims to deepen understanding and enable 'braver decision-making', exploring specifically:

- Bringing perspectives on cultural change together from strategic to operational.
- Examples of opportunities to enable braver decision-making.
- What can be learnt from those who are contributing to supporting the workforce to act brave when it comes to responding to tackling child exploitation?

Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

Constraints on capacity:

At one point during the BSP, core group members' time to facilitate TCE work had to be diverted to inspection activities. There were also capacity issues due to Covid-19, with attendance at pre-planned sessions having to be withdrawn at times, despite support from the core group to allow practitioners to attend .

Covid-19 and digital delivery:

Covid-19 not only disrupted capacity but also was present in many of the discussions and reflections in relation to cultural change. Whilst presenting a useful example to reflect on and think through in terms of how this contextual factor has altered the partnership and cultural dynamic, at times it deflected focus away from cultural change in relation to child exploitation.

At times, digital delivery also hampered participants' ability to engage fully in workshop settings. This happened as a result of either connection issues, confidence in engagement on digital space,

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or technical challenges.

Local area commitment

Through the workshops, there was a clear existing strong network of operational partners seeking to adopt a 'positive', brave organisational culture, particularly where partners recognise the constraints of the current context and strategic framework impacting on their ability to disrupt extra-familial harm. This is a common shared value and source of resilience for strategic leaders to galvanise and catalyse longer term change.

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

Approaches to risk

There was a lot of discussion and reflection during the BSP on how 'risk' is conceptualised. It was acknowledged that shifting mindsets might necessitate a change in how risk is perceived and 'held on to', which could raise anxiety as 'traditional' attitudes towards risk management were let go of, along with familiar and safe ways of working.

As part of the ongoing discussion around changing mind-sets, the partnership reflected that current risk assessment tools and processes might unwittingly contribute to a narrow interpretation of risk. They wanted the emphasis to shift from 'complete risk reduction' to 'effective risk management', sharing a reflection that complete eradication of risk is not achievable. Work is already taking place to review the current use of risk assessment tools and how they impact on the pathways to support for young people. It was felt that this would also prompt critical thinking about 'levels of risk' and thresholds. This was seen as an important way of linking reflection to tangible outputs for practice and strengthening multi-agency cooperation in child exploitation disruption.

Leadership

An anticipated area of challenge that did surface in the workshops was, quite simply, **who is responsible for leading on cultural change?** The answer from partners was no one and also everyone. As with the principle of safeguarding being everyone's business and responsibility, we learned from partners and stakeholders at different levels how they can be a potential 'leader' or driver of cultural change. However, this could have both positive and negative consequences. For example, workshop participants reflected on the fact that a coherent set of values across a partnership approach could support an effective response to child exploitation, but that it would only take one partner pulling in a different direction to potentially undermine or hold back the cultural bravery of said partnership. Given that 'leaders' in this space could be those in an operational context, the ask of strategic leadership was to facilitate 'local leaders' to have more flexibility in their decision-making.

It was acknowledged that, as strategic leaders seek to make braver decisions themselves, they might need to hold more risk than feels comfortable. The group reflected on the fact that strategic leaders will need to provide one another the **resilience** to hold space within a context in which operational teams become more ambitious in planning and intervention. Combined with this was the recognition that breaking down siloed working and striving for cultural change would require **more empathy and space for reflection / peer support amongst strategic leaders**.

There was recognition that responding effectively to child exploitation was about managing – not eliminating – risk. Part of 'brave decision-making' was seen by participants as being about the importance of having safety nets for operational colleagues to 'try things' which might be ambitious but fail. 'Tough' or perhaps 'unfavourable' decisions might need to be taken to impact on disruption.

They also shared their feelings that in order to feel safe and yet be braver in decision-making at an operational level, strategic leaders needed to prioritise tools and processes such as reflection and supervision to support the system to be more ambitious.

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Reflective space

During the BSP, the different perspectives of stakeholders on how 'cultural' change might impact or alter the partnership at an individual, organisational or partnership level – both in expected and unexpected ways – were explored. The local area valued having a reflective space to consider – at a local level as well as from a more strategic perspective – what might happen to the local system dynamics if they were to ask workforces to be 'braver' in their decision-making.

There was recognition amongst stakeholders, at different points of the project, of the impact this work had on teams, individuals and even organisational cultures. In order to be braver (and achieve more positive outcomes in relation to child exploitation disruption), partners frequently pointed to the need to feel 'safe' at all levels within the local area system. It was seen to be important to plan for the emotional impact on teams of more relational-based practice. Trauma-informed practice was seen to have a key role to play in this, not just in relation to direct support for young people but also to support the wider workforce (akin to the resilience structures between strategic leaders).

A final reflection also centred on the cultural 'challenge' of asking early intervention teams or youth engagement workers, who might be 'caught up' in more complex forms of harm when supporting young people, to feel they can also effectively utilise their soft skills in more preventative contexts. This asked partners to consider what mentoring opportunities between different partners existed so that a broader set of skills, all able to be applied to positive disruption or more ambitious safety planning, could be shared out into the wider context of child exploitation strategy.

Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

Shifting mind-sets

There was recognition of the challenge of aligning values across a sector made up of widely different organisational cultures. Over the course of the BSP, operational stakeholders shared experiences of relational based working with adolescents from their individual contexts. Some felt that the cultural change goal might be perceived as being 'too soft' on young people. This surfaced the issue that young people involved in exploitation can be seen and responded to as victims or perpetrators, with the reality being that they may be both¹.

There was evidence of victim blaming language still being used from some anecdotal examples that were shared in discussions. Again, not unique to the local area, but a key issue for partners to be aware of in relation to agreeing shared safeguarding values. Without investing time to reflect on where underlying attitudes to young people and exploitation have come from, or having the space to support a change in mindset using restorative principles, signing up to shared values across the partnership might be hard to achieve.

Understanding each partner's cultural perspective on child exploitation was seen as a fundamental starting point, after which the structures and governance required for a coherent partnership approach can be addressed. The importance of identifying opportunities to strengthen and invest in the collaborative networks amongst traditional and non-traditional safeguarding partners was an 'ask' of and reflection from strategic partners in the workshops.

There was a tension, inherent in high-risk areas such as child exploitation, that pausing to reflect on how to become 'braver' or more disruptive might unintentionally divert resource or attention away from young people 'trapped' in complex cycles of harm that need immediate help. This was seen as a real challenge for senior leaders trying to empower partners to make brave decisions that could inadvertently result in serious harm.

Support

Supervision was highlighted as one of the most vital areas of support for workforces responding to exploitation. The value of reflection was held up as a behaviour that should be 'culturally sacred' :

¹ [This interview](#) with three experts in young people and the criminal justice system highlights these issues

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i.e. it should be a fundamental part of practice for safeguarding partnerships to be able to strategically respond to child exploitation. Where possible, supervision should be clinical, trauma-informed and separate from line management.

Parallels with working with adults:

Challenges around consent in professional relationships (particularly where challenging decisions around safeguarding young people may need to be made) echoed parallels with adult safeguarding.

Partners reflected on the challenge of wanting to work in a more relational and empowered way with young people, while balancing the 'need' to be accountable and make 'brave decisions', which could go against a young person's wishes even if in their best interest (such as instances of moving young people out of borough for safeguarding reasons).

Barriers to change

A recurrent finding from the workshops was the challenge posed by the limitations of the current legislative frameworks across all levels of the local area system, which, in the views of stakeholders, did not account for 'extra familial harm' and lacked focus on the perpetrators of abuse.

Immediate reflections from the local area:

We agree with the content of the report and this highlights the local issues and challenges.

The ownership of this work originally sat with the Swindon Safeguarding Partnership Child Exploitation group. However, this group has now moved to a pan-Swindon and Wiltshire Exploitation Group, and will remain there.

A Swindon implementation group needs to be formed to develop an action plan, linked to this project and the wider next steps of Risk Outside The Home (ROTH).

There were a number of challenges faced throughout the project, the main one being Covid-19 and the difficulties of digital delivery. In early 2020, no systems were in place for MS Teams, so the project's commencement was postponed until the autumn. This meant the implementation group did lose some momentum (exacerbated by the fact we were all learning to communicate virtually). There was also a change of TCE Implementation Lead at this time, and the consultant was not available to deliver senior leader sessions. However, we did get back on track. The workshops were well attended and sessions with senior leaders across the partnership were engaged with.

There is still a workshop due to be held in the autumn 2021 to finalise the work with one of the TCE Programme Delivery Partners. This will involve reflective discussions with senior leaders across the partnership to consider feedback from the workshops, to join up operational and strategic activity by developing a strategic mandate to respond to child exploitation and extra-familial harm and implement positive change across the area.

Please sign below 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: 28/9/21

Signed by local area: Jeannette Chipping on behalf of the Steering Group