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Strengths-based approaches to working with strategic leaders: Briefing paper



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Introduction

The Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Programme was launched in 2019 to support strategic leaders in local areas as they address child exploitation and extra-familial harm. The Programme takes an evidence-informed approach, drawing on research, practice wisdom and lived experience, to offer high support and high challenge to the systemic complexity strategic leaders face in their efforts to tackle these concerns. The Programme's core activities are:

- > Working with strategic leads in safeguarding partnerships and colleagues from across the sector on Bespoke Support Projects (BSPs) and Development Priorities with a team of expert Delivery Partners.
- > Amplifying TCE learning and commissioned Programme research and resources through the [TCE microsite](#).
- > Embedding evidence both within the delivery and through an embedded evaluation of the programme itself.

The Programme works with local areas to reflect on and interrogate their systems' responses to child exploitation, and seeks to:

- > Promote curiosity and critical thinking
- > Identify and, where needed, unlock existing resources and talent across local areas to help build sustainable approaches that are able to keep children, young people and families safe.

Part of the Programme's approach is about modelling key behaviours with strategic leaders identified to be effective in achieving better outcomes for children and families, namely:

- > The principles of restorative, relational and reflective practice.
- > Embedding a relationship founded on high expectations, high support and high challenge.
- > Utilising a strengths-based approach to identify, amplify and build upon strengths in local expertise, to promote confidence in all stakeholders.

While the Programme's approach to working with strategic leaders is a combination and interplay of these key behaviours, this briefing will draw down and examine the evidence base for working in a strengths-based way.

Purpose

This briefing reviews a range of literature to examine how strengths-based approaches have been used throughout social and welfare systems. Its purpose is to look beyond social care and public health practices, and to explain the rationale for the Programme embedding strengths-based ways of working across partnerships and collaborations of strategic leaders seeking to tackle child exploitation.

Overview

This briefing builds on [‘Leading strengths-based practice frameworks’](#) by Research in Practice (Godar, 2018), detailing how leaders’ activity and organisational cultures can support the adoption and use of strengths-based approaches.

Beginning with an introduction to the theoretical underpinning of strengths-based practices, it goes on to explore the application of these approaches in leadership and systems change, before articulating how TCE approaches working with strategic leaders in a strengths-based way.

Methodology

We carried out a rapid review of the literature, which followed the principles of a realist synthesis (Pawson, 2011). A Realist review or synthesis is an approach that aims to review evidence on complex challenges and interventions to explain how and why they do – or do not – work, for whom and in what context. We used principles of a realist review in the inclusion of studies and when extracting data from studies. We searched for studies concerned with conceptualising and evaluating strengths-based approaches across the disciplines of social care, public health, community development, and leadership development.¹

- a) identifying the review terms through an initial background search
- b) searching for empirical evidence to interrogate the explanatory model
- c) quality appraisal
- d) extracting and synthesising the data.

The initial search provided 81 resources, which were appraised, and resulted in 55 of them being included in this evidence review. Evidence was appraised as to their relevance as well as their rigour. The relevance of a source was assessed based on the extent to which the study was defined, conceptualised or measured its interventions. The second assessment was on the rigour of the primary research methodology, including only literature that met the criteria of validity and reliability of findings.

1. A list of key terms was generated to search scholarly databases, including Discovery, PudMed, Emerald, NCBI, JSTOR, Google Scholar. Inclusion criteria for articles included in this briefing adhere to the TCE Programme's quality assurance framework.

What is a strengths-based approach?

Strengths-based approaches stem from humanistic philosophy and are based on a core belief that humans (and, by extension, organisations) have the capacity for growth and change (Early & GlenMaye, 2004; Pulla, 2014). The assumption is that individuals have the agency and capability to make their own choices and overcome adversity, and should be empowered through facilitation without developing an over-reliance on an external agency (Cowger, 1997). When using a strengths-based approach, ‘risk’ is reconceptualised as an enabler and explored with the individual and their viewpoint (DHSC, 2019). This is in line with the re-framing of young people’s experiences of exploitation beyond simplistic binary conceptions of victimhood versus agency. Which in turn, provides practitioners and strategic thinkers with a better understanding of and response to the variable and complex dynamics within forms of exploitation (Beckett, 2019). Therefore, the role of the professional is shifted from attempting to limit and eradicate risk to working with and supporting individuals to manage it appropriately.

In the UK, strengths-based practices have started to become embedded in social care, as evidenced by the Chief Social Worker for Adults in collaboration with the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) hosting a roundtable event at SCIE to explore strengths-based social work in 2017 (DHSC, 2019).

As a starting point to working in a strengths-based way, social care professionals can make plans to maximise the strengths, assets, and capabilities of the children and families they support (Rapp & Sullivan, 2014). It is a collaborative process that focuses on the relationships between those providing care and those being supported, and addresses power relations directly.

The SCIE (2018) defines strengths-based approaches as having these essential characteristics:

- > Right-based and person-centred, with a clear ethical and value-based position.
- > Putting individuals, families, and communities at the heart of social care and recognising their role as integral, as one which can not be replaced by professional intervention.
- > Including new ways of looking at people, embracing the core belief that, even if they are experiencing problems, they have the strengths, skills, resources and capabilities to effect positive change if they are supported to do so.
- > Appreciating that children and young people’s valuable skills and experience are key to getting alongside them and co-producing solutions.

Furthermore, the SCIE (2015) highlighted that the Care Act in 2014 identified a strengths-based approach to assessments and interventions as one of the key principles to achieving better outcomes for children and families.

- > Local authorities should identify the individual's strengths – personal, community and social networks – and maximise those strengths to enable them to achieve their desired outcomes, thereby meeting their needs and improving or maintaining their wellbeing.
- > Implementing a strengths-based approach within the care and support system requires a cultural and organisational commitment beyond frontline practice. Practitioners will need time for research and familiarisation with community resources.
- > The objective of the strengths-based approach is to protect the individual's independence, resilience, ability to make choices, and wellbeing. Supporting the person's strengths can help to address their needs in a way that allows them to lead and be in control of (as much as possible) an ordinary and independent day-to-day life. It may also help delay the development of further needs.

Why a strengths-based approach?

Shifting paradigm in 'care'

Strengths-based approaches to social care can be seen as part of an evolving historical trend of responses to the negative consequences of overly paternalistic or punitive welfare systems that have dominated certain periods of British and American societal structures (Rapp et al., 2005). Strength-based approaches surface as a counter to definitions of a population's health and welfare as deficit models, problem-focused, or pathological models (Guo & Tsui, 2010; Saleebey, 1992; Sharry, 2004).

The starting point of deficit models is that the current situation is problematic and needs to change. Social problems are framed as a set of needs, and interventions are limited to identifying and addressing the deficits of populations (Morgan & Ziglio 2007). Subsequently, policy responses to problems framed within a deficit model prescribe the remedy as requiring external professional resources, skills, and knowledge, which can be unsustainable. Children, families and communities internalise this discourse and subsequently can develop high levels of dependency on social and welfare services.

Challenges for leaders working in complex systems

It is argued (Firmin et al., 2019) that successful safeguarding of young people from multiple forms of exploitation requires strategic leaders to engage and collaborate with a varied and diverse range of stakeholders, including but not limited to: of dependency on social and welfare services.

- > housing
- > leisure
- > education
- > the health economy
- > welfare services
- > transport
- > voluntary sector organisations
- > policing
- > criminal justice
- > communities.

The King's Fund (2012) defines systems as an interconnected and interdependent series of entities, where the decisions and actions taken in one have consequences for the others. Unlike organisations that are largely governed by control, systems are a collection of multitudes and diverse characteristics, different components that can not be governed easily by command and control. Instead, the governing principle of systems is the value and condition of the relationships between the constituent organisations. The complexity of the system increases as strategic leaders are challenged to influence the networks, markets and partnerships that overlap across the system's multiple geographic boundaries.

The Human Learning System (2019) is one approach that speaks directly to the challenge of working in a complex system that is constantly changing. In a complex system, change happens as a result of multiple actions and factors, making it difficult to attribute causation of an outcome to a single individual or organisation. This means that leadership based on command and control tactics, deficit models of social problems and over-reliance on measuring the performance of organisations is misaligned with the reality of how systems actually work.

The Human Learning System argues that strategic leaders need to move beyond conventional leadership and management approaches to public services as articulated in management discourses such as the [New Public Management \(NPM\)](#). And suggests that a focus on relationships and behaviours between different entities is able to adapt more effectively to the challenges and opportunities of a complex system. Working with such complexity requires humility and acknowledgement that knowing and controlling the system are unattainable goals.

As illustrated in Grauberg's (2021) resource for the TCE microsite on approaches to strategy, some of the key criticisms of conventional approaches include:

> **The illusion of control**

Setting out a plan for the future, particularly if it contains detailed output or outcome targets, implies an assumption that the external environment will be stable.

> **Incremental**

The process often 'starts from here' rather than focusing on the desired outcome and asking, 'What would it take?'

> **Uses a deficit model to drive change**

There is often an unspoken premise that the current way of working is problematic, and change needs to happen.

In line with what is known from the literature, the Programme hypothesises that, to engender sustainable systems improvement, the development of new behaviours, values and skills is required. TCE takes what research on strengths-based approaches suggests to be the conditions for improving outcomes for children and families, and uses these principles to collaborate with strategic leaders.

Mirroring across parallel systems

When supporting children suffering from neglect and abuse, the notion of ‘parallel processes’ (Turney & Tanner 2001) has been important to understand how relationship-based practice affects not only the families but also the practitioners.

Turney and Tanner highlight two parallel processes:

- > Practitioners working in partnership with families
- > Agencies working in partnership with practitioners.

And argue that both need to be working well to support good outcomes.

The Programme extrapolates this concept of parallel process to include strategic levels of the system. The TCE delivery model works with strategic leaders using the same guiding principles that practitioners would utilise with families. While acknowledging these two demographics are different in power, capabilities and capacities, the Programme aims to be a catalyst for aligning relationship-based and strengths-based cultures across the system.

Invert exploitation dynamics

Historically, the child protection system was designed to keep young people safe from intra-familial harm (Eaton, 2017, p. 7). It was founded on a deficit-model of thinking and features high-blame and risk-focused interventions. There is increasing acknowledgement and evidence that it is not appropriate for dealing with extra-familial harm, and as a result can be negatively experienced by young people as punitive, stigmatising and isolating (Hallet, 2016; Winter et al., 2017). Such dynamics between young people and practitioners can inadvertently mirror what a young person experiences in exploitation, and risk-focused interventions can result in young people being put in situations that perpetrators are able to exploit.

An illustration of what this looks like in practice is evidenced in the evaluation of Barnardo's Safe Accommodation Project for sexually exploited and trafficked young people (Shuker, 2013). Key differences were found between residential and specialist foster care settings in relation to their ability to disrupt patterns of exploitation.

Shuker states, 'while residential and secure accommodation can be successfully used to disrupt exploitative relationships, it can potentially increase the risk of sexual exploitation [...] as perpetrators target such units' (p. 20). Moreover, young people who have been trafficked and placed in unsafe accommodation, with professionals who are unable to identify and respond to their vulnerabilities, are at increased risk of being contacted by traffickers. This is due to the young person potentially being isolated from the practical and emotional support they need (Pearce, 2012 cited in Shuker, 2013).

In contrast, positive outcomes were achieved where specialist foster carers shifted away from a deficit model of thinking that placed responsibility and blame on the young person and put it instead on the perpetrators who exploit and abuse. Specialist placements helped young people perceive and manage risk more appropriately. Shuker showed that effective carers, 'Looked beyond behaviours that are usually problematic... Rather than focusing on these, they were able to hold the young person's need for acceptance, affirmation, compassion and care at the forefront of their relationship with them' (2013, p. 95). Such behaviours form the basis for trusting relationships between the carer and the young person, creating a safer environment that narrows the opportunities available for perpetrators to exploit.

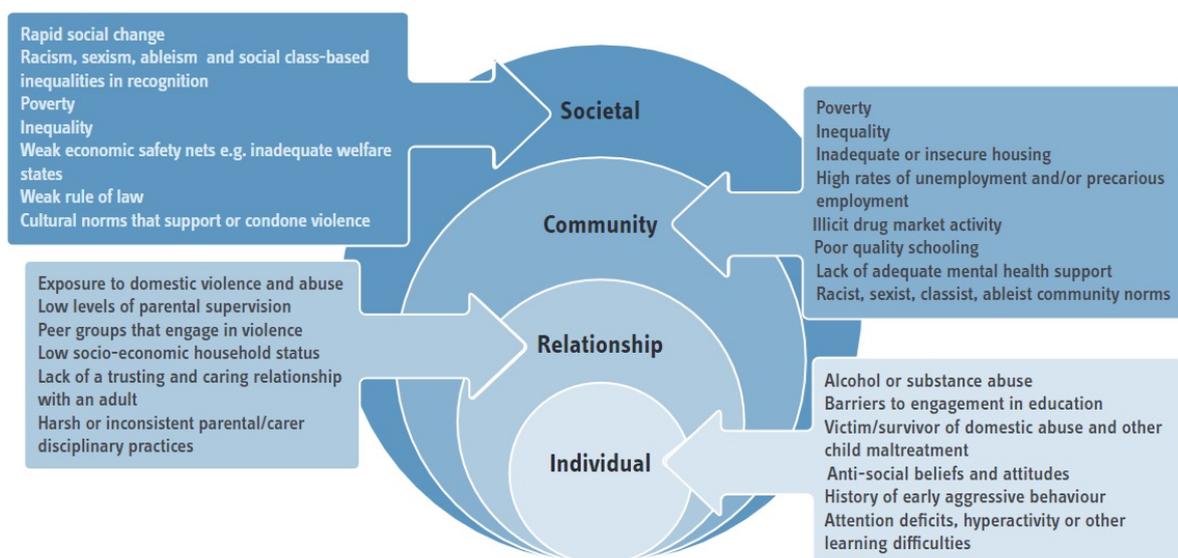
The shift from a deficit / punitive model towards a strength-based and restorative model is a core part of the TCE approach, and is key to undermining the reproduction of systems that can inadvertently mirror some of the dynamics of exploitation. This requires shifting the culture across the whole system, from practitioners through to organisational partnerships.

The Programme hypothesises that adopting a strengths-based approach, alongside reflective and restorative practice, can foster a sense of trust, reciprocity and collaboration that supports the development of a system that is more resilient against child exploitation and extra familial harm.

Our evidence base

The factors that influence and impact on child exploitation and extra-familial harm are complex and interrelated. As referenced in ‘A public approach to violence reduction’ ([Fraser & Irwin-Rogers, 2021](#)), the World Health Organization has adopted an ecological framework to distinguish four layers of inter-related factors that can increase the likelihood of someone’s involvement in violence, either as a victim or a perpetrator:

Figure 1: An ecological framework (adapted from World Health Organization, 2020; drawing on Irwin-Rogers et al., 2020b and Currie, 2016)



This model demonstrates the need for a comprehensive understanding of how interventions at multiple levels are aligning across the whole ecological framework. The Programme’s hypothesis is that effective strengths-based approaches at different levels of the system could reinforce and magnify positive outcomes across it all. As such, the following section draws out the evidence of working in a strengths-based way across multiple levels throughout the ecological framework.

Practice

In 2017, the Department for Education (DfE) published an overarching evaluation of 45 Children's Social Care Innovation Programme projects. One of its key findings suggested that improvements to services could be attributed to 'systemic practice as a theoretical underpinning informing conceptual practice frameworks that translate into engagement in high-quality case discussion, that is family-focused and strengths-based, to build families and/or young people's capacity to address their own problems more effectively' (Sebba et al., 2017, p. 6). This highlights that working 'with' not 'doing to' families underpins successful systemic social work and multi-disciplinary working.

These approaches are also about co-production, about the people providing support working in partnership with those receiving it to design and deliver services. A strengths-based approach focuses on identifying families' strengths and difficulties, then supports the family through personal, professional and community interventions based on maximising such strengths to help overcome their difficulties. Rapp et al. (2006) identify six hallmarks and standards of strengths-based approaches in social care:

1. **Goal-orientated** – practitioners support families in identifying their own goals and have techniques that help families overcome barriers to imagining a better life.
2. **Systematic assessment of strengths** – using tools and techniques to help families identify what is working well and how that can be built on to achieve goals.
3. **See the environment as rich in resources** – practitioners help families to identify opportunities, support and resources from within their family, social groups and the wider community.
4. **Explicit tools are used** – to match strengths and resources to goal attainment.
5. **The relationship between practitioner and family is 'hope inducing'** – through the identification of strengths and resources, the relationship should help the family to increase in confidence, perceive more options and choices and increase their ability to choose from those options.
6. **The provision of meaningful choices and the family's freedom to choose** – the practitioner's role is to 'extend a list of choices, clarify choices and give the clients' confidence and authority to direct the process.'

Both the Department for Education (Sebba et al., 2017) and the Department of Health and Social Care (2019) highlight the effectiveness of using clear, strengths-based practice frameworks. This section has illustrated the evidence showing that the use of such frameworks creates a shared understanding of:

- > What good practice looks like, alongside clear expectations
- > Gives all practitioners a shared language
- > Provides a vehicle for developing direct work skills
- > Supports children and families to be empowered.

What works

Family Values, Leeds City Council

The DfE's Children's Social Care Innovation Programme in Leeds intended to promote whole-system change for how children's services engage and work with families. This programme set out to embed Restorative Early Support (RES) as a new tier of intervention between early help and the statutory social work service, building on and combining with the extensive, existing programme of restorative practice development across the workforce.

One of the three aims of the programme was to embed the Leeds Practice Principles. These are a set of core principles for social workers and wider partner practitioners for restorative practice within families that aim to ensure that interventions are strengths-based and prioritise relational working and collaboration with families.

Evaluation of the programme reported that 57% of families achieved all the goals they set in co-production with their workers by the end of the intervention (typically four months), and progress was made in 84% of all intervention goals (Harris et al., 2020). This is a strong indicator that the strengths-based approach employed was a contributing factor in supporting effective systems improvement. Key learning from the evaluation report was the recommendation for strengths-based coaching and practice development to be provided to all managers in the system in order to support consistent and sustainable changes.

Family Safeguarding Herefordshire Hertfordshire, Bracknell Forest, Luton, Peterborough and West Berkshire

Family Safeguarding is a whole-system reform of child protection services. It brings together the professionals working with a family as one team and uses a motivational practice approach. Multi-disciplinary teams address the compounding factors known as the ‘trio of vulnerabilities’: domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and parental mental health.

The evaluation findings (Rodger et al., 2020) suggest that Family Safeguarding effectively prevents children from becoming ‘looked after’ and reduces the number of children on Child Protection Plans. The analysis also evidenced large reductions in police call-outs in the 12 months after families are transferred into Family Safeguarding, and large reductions in the frequency of mental health crisis contacts. Moreover, the evaluation claims that the cumulative savings to each local authority after implementing the programme are in the region of £2m, making a strong financial case for adopting this approach.

One of the programme’s core principles was the embedding of Motivational Interviewing (MI), a strengths-based approach designed to better engage with families through how conversations are structured. 88% (n 205) of practitioners believed MI to be an effective way of working with families, and 78% (n 205) said that MI had improved family engagement by empowering parents and improving relationships between parents and practitioners.

Community

Literature in social sciences has made a case for many decades that community development and social movements are able to achieve change through principles that focus on strengths and possibilities for growth at both the individual and the community level (Rappaport, 1977). Discourse is emerging to support professionals in mobilising communities to take action and responsibility in co-producing their environment. Strengths-based practices provide a framework for reimagining the relationship between the state, civic society and communities.

One such application is asset-based community development (ABCD), founded on professors Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight's study (1993) exploring over 300 communities across North America. ABCD seeks to problematise the role of professionals (producers of solutions) by highlighting the unintended consequences of prohibiting communities (consumers of professional solutions) from believing they have anything to contribute to the production of just societies. ABCD seeks to flip traditional ways of working with communities (through a deficit model) by supporting them to connect to the social, economic and natural capital already present at the centre of community life (Russell, 2016; Loyd & Reynolds, 2020).

Russell (2010) details the application of asset-based approaches in probation work with youth offenders in Ireland. He argues that there is a need to connect youth offenders back into their communities and to support them to make productive reciprocal relationships. This can be achieved through harnessing the latent strengths of offenders and the untapped reservoirs of care within their communities via the work of skilled professionals who can identify, connect and activate such assets.

The success of ABCD has led to its adoption and adaptation throughout the UK's public and primary health care institutions. Asset-based approaches have been utilised by local authorities through joint commissioning and by Health and Wellbeing Boards in integrated care models (SCIE, 2021). It should be noted that the formalisation of asset-based principles in institutions such as the NHS or local authorities diverges from the original ABCD framework. The social care institute for excellence suggests that effective deployment of asset-based approaches depends on some key building blocks:

- > Re-framing the narrative about people and communities – shifting the emphasis from deficits and needs to strengths and assets.
- > Creating an ethos of co-production and focusing on wellbeing.
- > Effective joint commissioning, partnership working and community engagement.
- > Local service directories to support personalised care planning.
- > Mechanisms for connecting people to each other and to wider community assets through social prescribing, peer mentors, link workers and care navigators.

The evidence is still emerging as to the impact of social prescribing models and varies depending on the characteristics of each specific scheme, but there is some promising evidence to suggest that social prescribing can improve people’s wellbeing and experience, reduce loneliness and support self-care (Eaton, 2020; Foster et al., 2021). Some programme evaluations also suggest that community connectors and social prescribing may significantly impact health service utilisation, resulting, for instance, in reduced GP consultations and A&E attendance (Woodall et al., 2018).

Leadership

The necessary skills and behaviours for leaders to be successful in defining, re-shaping and influencing systems are highly contextual and do not conform to ‘copy and paste’ strategies or leadership theories (The King’s Fund, 2012). Reflecting this, the TCE Programme advocates for system leaders to be guided by principles that facilitate critical, curious and reflective questioning of challenges presented to them while taking an evidence-informed approach to making decisions.

Extensive quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted in corporate and business organisations by the consultancy firm Gallup, which is credited with pioneering a shift in management discourse from a deficit model to a strengths-based model.

Buckingham and Clifton (2001) applied a scientific understanding of neurological development to establish that, a) individual talents are enduring and unique, and, b) the greatest room for individual growth is in the area of strengths. This further demonstrates that at the core of the strengths-based movement is the belief that the greatest potential for growth (of individuals, systems, communities) is when building on the strengths they already have instead of trying to fix their ‘weaknesses’ or ‘deficits’ (Rath, 2007; Rath & Conchie, 2008).

Welch et al. (2014) draw together four key themes shared by leaders and leadership coaches operating in a strengths-based way:

- 1. Strengths development is intrinsically motivating and energising** – building on evidence that, with a strengths-based approach, there is an increased probability of sustained growth over time, because resources are not used up and depleted in mitigating weaknesses (Spreitzer, 2006).
- 2. Strengths develop through relationships** - there is a growing body of research on high-quality relational connections (Dutton, 2003) and the ways in which mutually supportive relationships enhance results and can be a source of strength for leaders (Roberts, 2007).
- 3. Expert strengths work does not ignore a leader’s blind spots or ‘shadow side’** – breaking down the myth that strengths-based work ignores areas of ‘weakness’, flaws, blind spots, or the ‘shadow side’ are all a part of the equation. Part of the work involves reflexive practices (Fitzgerald, Oliver & Hoxsey, 2010), which can help us to reduce our bias, become less narrow in our focus and be more open-minded. This helps us to disengage from what Argyris (1990) calls ‘defensive routines’.
- 4. Leaders who demonstrate high performance** are extremely self-aware and conscious of how to use their presence in an organisational change process (Higgs & Rowland, 2010).

Importantly, Burkus (2011) reports a missing link between the strong evidence base supporting the benefits of strengths-based approaches to leadership and organisational design employing these methods.

Further, evidence of the impact of strengths-based leadership can be found in the adoption of appreciative inquiry by a diverse range of organisations (Cooperrider et al., 2008; Oades et al., 2016).

Appreciative inquiry offers a way of managing change within organisations that is founded on strengths-based approaches. Through its deliberately positive assumptions about people, organisations, and relationships, it transforms the ways to approach questions to management and effectiveness. As a formal application of the 4-D cycle (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny), it encourages 'generative' thinking - new ideas, new approaches and new ways of thinking (Cooperrider et al., 2008). A summary of key characteristics of appreciative inquiry are as follows:

- > Using strengths-based language to frame negative experiences as motivation for change to something better.
- > Ensuring a focus on capacity, resources and problem-solving by asking how we can maintain and build on what is already going well (Lind, 2008; Ballinger & Elliot, 2011).
- > Enacting a process that relies upon mutually respectful relationships and an understanding that the way we do things is as important as the results.
- > Understanding the role of conversation as an intervention in making change happen and using powerful imagery and language to shape the direction of change.
- > The acknowledgement and renegotiation of power relationships via the discussion of multiple perspectives and the telling of 'untold' stories (Bellinger & Elliot, 2011).

How has TCE used strengths-based approaches in the programme?

Rather than developing a practice framework, the TCE Programme uses the following guiding principles, which are informed by strengths-based practice, so strategic leaders can expect to work with Implementation Leads and Delivery Partners on:

Use of strengths-based language

- > **Shaping the language used in local areas** – one of the first steps in adopting strengths-based approaches is reframing how challenges are discussed and conceptualised. Recognising that this way of working is not embedded across all local areas and partners, the Implementation Leads use strengths-based language throughout workshops and single-agency conversations. They set the tone to foster relationships based on equal power dynamics and cultivate collaborative work throughout the life cycle of the BSP.
- > **A strengths-based approach supports analytical decision-making when working with complexity, curiosity, and uncertainty** – strategic leaders are supported to evaluate opportunities to expand existing skills, knowledge and capabilities in response to emerging forms of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. However, understanding service models should not be ‘copy and pasted’. The Programme challenges local areas to think critically and test the efficacy of tackling child exploitation. An example of this is the question of expanding or integrating models for tackling CSE to CCE.

Goal orientation

- > **Change goals** – the Programme sets out to start with what is strong, not what is wrong. TCE locates the resource for change within the local areas rather than in external skills and resources that cannot be sustained once the BSP has run its course. When working with local areas to identify their own change goals, the delivery team set out to support the local partnerships to harness the enabling factors that the local area can draw on throughout the length of the project.
- > **Moving beyond short term consultancy models** – our delivery team seeks to disrupt the expectations of external organisations doing things to or for local areas. Instead, the Programme works with local areas to build on what is already positive and strong in pursuit of a more sustainable solution.

Expertise through lived experience

- > **Challenging power dynamics** – two priorities that run as a thread throughout the BSPs focus on hearing children and young people’s voices, and equalities, diversity, and inclusion. Work to support local strategic partnerships to improve and / or provide opportunities for lived experience to inform strategic decision making is likely to require disrupting power dynamics across the system. The Programme’s strengths-based approach supports a way of reaching out, listening and working with minoritised voices.

Understanding the system

- > **System mapping** – the Programme supports local areas through workshops to identify their system’s strengths, resources, and capabilities. Outputs can take the form of multi-level mapping canvas, stakeholder and network analysis, and data and information flow. These exercises are a starting point to equip local areas to make informed strategic decisions to influence their systems.
- > **Approaching service reconfiguration** – working within budget constraints, staff turnover, the ebb and flow of need and demand in the system, the expansion or integration of services requires an approach that draws upon the achievements of services in other parts of the system. The Programme supports the amplification and adoption of those pre-existing strengths across different parts of the system.
- > **Sustainable improvement requires systems change to happen** – strengths-based approaches have a higher probability of supporting local areas to continue to take up the challenges of systems change by organising their energy in utilising strengths and assets within the system.

Conclusion: realising the potential of strengths-based approaches with strategic leaders

This rapid literature review has been produced to demonstrate the rationale and evidential underpinning of working in a strengths-based way. Building upon an ecological framework for understanding how to tackle child exploitation, the literature describes how strengths-based approaches are effective at the level of practice, community and leadership. It suggests there is significant merit in mirroring what we know works in order to support young people and their families across all levels of the system.

The core features of a strengths-based approach are challenging deficit models of social problems and seeking to empower and collaborate with partner organisations and stakeholders to mobilise existing resources, skills and capabilities. There is a robust evidence base to suggest strategic leaders will be more effective at managing change and adaptation across their local systems by starting with 'what is strong'.

The Programme acknowledges the potential tension in applying these principles to the challenges and opportunities of systems improvement. And recognises that the complex systems that make up our responses to tackling child exploitation consist of different organisational cultures, priorities, and concerns.

This literature review concludes that strengths-based approaches are just one of a collection of emergent discourses that strategic leaders can mobilise to deliver system improvement more effectively and sustainably. Through evaluating what works, for whom and under what conditions across our BSPs, we hope to contribute to a national discussion on whether / how strengths-based approaches can help strategic leaders to improve systems.

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