



Strengths-based approaches to working with strategic leaders: Executive Summary

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.

What are strengths-based approaches?

Strengths-based approaches (SBA) 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). They are founded on the assumption that individuals have the agency and capability to make their own choices and overcome adversity. They should be empowered through facilitation without developing an over-reliance on an external agency. The Social Care Institute of Excellence (SCIE, 2018) defines SBA in social care 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 them onside and co-producing solutions.

Why the TCE Programme works in a strengths-based way

The TCE delivery model is based on three reasons for working in a strengths-based way. Firstly, it seeks to invert system dynamics that stem from discourses founded on deficit and problem-focused models, and to re-frame risk. Secondly, it prescribes the mirroring of key behaviours across parallel systems, and advocates their use with strategic leaders, just as practitioners employ them in their work with children and families. Thirdly, the Programme believes that strengths-based approaches are one of the best ways to develop partnerships and services that are adaptive and sustainable in the context of tackling child exploitation at the systems level.

Key messages from evidence base

In this rapid literature review, the evidence is mapped against an ecological framework for understanding the different levels of a local area's system for tackling child exploitation. Analysis of this evidence is explored to describe what has worked for practice, for communities and for leadership behaviour.

Practice

- > An evaluation of 45 Children's Social Care Innovation Programme projects suggests that SBA form part of a broad range of practices to improve service quality and build families' capacity to address their problems more effectively (Sebba et al., 2017).
- > Evaluation of the Family Value programme (Leeds City Council) reported the range of SBA employed contributed to the success of 87% of all interventions made (Harris et al., 2020).
- > Evaluation of the Family Safeguarding programme (Herefordshire) highlighted that Motivational Interviewing (based on an SBA) was an effective way of working with families and contributed to reductions in the number of child protection plans and police call-outs (Rodger et al., 2020).

Community

- > Asset-based Community Development has taken an SBA to probation work with youth offenders by harnessing their latent strengths and the untapped reservoirs of care within their communities via the work of skilled professionals who can identify, connect and activate such assets (Russell, 2010).
- > Innovations in social prescribing point toward an evidence-base that connects primary care patients to assets in their community and delivers more sustainable and appropriate care for patients with low-level mental health and isolation issues (Eaton, 2020; Foster et al., 2021).

Leadership

- > The Gallup global surveys into leadership behaviours demonstrate that at the core of the strengths-based movement is the belief that the most significant 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).
- > Qualitative research (Welch et al., 2014) into leadership coaching evidenced four themes shared by leaders:
 - a. strengths development is intrinsically motivating and emerging
 - b. strengths develop through relationships
 - c. expert strengths work does not ignore a leader's blind spot or 'shadow side'
 - d. leaders who demonstrate high performance are incredibly self-aware and conscious of how to use their presence in an organisational change process.

Key messages

- > While there is limited evidence directly addressing the impact of working in a strengths-based way with strategic leaders in public services, there is a strong argument for mirroring what we do know works with supporting young people and their families across all system levels.
- > The core features of a strengths-based approach are to challenge deficit models of social problems, seek to empower and collaborate with partner organisations and stakeholders, and to mobilise existing resources, skills and capabilities.
- > The Programme acknowledges the potential for tension when 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. However, this literature review concludes that strengths-based approaches are just one of a collection of emergent discourses to deliver system improvement more effectively and sustainably.
- > Through evaluating what works, for whom and under what conditions across our Bespoke Support Projects, recommendations can be made for when a strengths-based approach might support systems improvement in local areas.

References and further reading

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**We want to hear more about your experiences of using TCE resources and tools.
Connect via Twitter using #TCEProgramme to share your ideas.**

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