



Tackling Child Exploitation  
Support Programme

**Creating a reflective  
space: putting  
Tackling Child  
Exploitation (TCE)  
Support Programme  
principles into action**

## 1. Background

The overarching aim of the TCE Support Programme is to support local areas to improve strategic responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. The Programme does this by taking an evidence-informed approach, which draws on research, practice wisdom and lived experience, to offer high support and high challenge in relation to the complex systems challenges being faced by local partnerships.

Working with local areas, TCE's approach aims to disrupt rather than mirror the power dynamics and loss of control that young people experience during exploitation. We do this by applying three conjoined principles (which we collectively call '[Joining the Dots](#)')

### Bridging boundaries

Where exploitation splits and separates its victims from protective institutions and relationships, 'building bridges' looks to wrap deeper and broader partnerships around children and young people and their families.

### Leading with care

Where exploitation is characterised by coercive control and the manipulation of children and young people, 'leading with care' asks those with power to use it gently. The Programme's ways of working are specifically strengths-based, relational, and hold restorative principles at the core.

### Working with complexity, curiosity and holding uncertainty

Where exploitation constantly moves, shifts and reinvents itself, 'working with complexity, curiosity and holding uncertainty' offers the space needed to stand back, slow down and reflect so we can challenge 'quick fixes' and act with purpose.

This resource is focused on an aspect of the last approach listed – creating a reflective space. A recurrent request from local areas is to hear about what other areas are doing. To explore how strategic leaders are responding to the ever-changing nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, TCE held four sessions during March 2021 with five representatives from safeguarding and community safety partnerships from five local areas to share learning.

Three questions were considered:

- > How have potential shifts in the language we use influenced our responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm?
- > Do traditional pathways for safeguarding need to change?
- > What kind of leadership culture do we need in order to respond to the complexities of child exploitation and extra-familial harm?

The key themes from the discussion are explored below.

## 2. Key themes from discussion

### Language

The importance of language in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm was highlighted. Participants reflected how everyday professional language could, on occasion, unintentionally suggest that young people are to blame for the exploitation they experience. An example of this was police talking about a ‘job being done’, if a case results in a custodial sentence. This binary language does not reflect the potential complexity of exploitation if, for example, the case involved a young person who may have been both victim and perpetrator.

A recurring example cited by the group was the change in terminology from ‘child prostitution’ to ‘child sexual exploitation’. This was seen as a significant cultural turning point, leading to a more accurate conceptualisation amongst professionals of what was happening to a young person being exploited. The impacts of this change were reported by participants as including:

- > The empathy and sensitivity shown towards young people.
- > The type of commissioned services and offers to young people being sexually exploited.
- > Galvanising partnerships to have a shared view of child exploitation as an extra-familial risk that needs to be addressed.

As a strategic leader (for example a chair or partnership lead), being able to ‘change the conversation’ through moderation of language in relation to exploitation discourse was seen as being a desired attribute amongst attendees. Opportunities to encourage better understanding of why some young people at risk of exploitation might be more visible to us as professionals than others were also highlighted (see for example, Beckett et al, 2017). Mechanisms such as supervision and peer-to-peer reflection could provide positive challenge around a more objective framing of a young person’s experience.

It was also noted that leadership on this issue can be championed at all levels of a partnership. We each have the ability to influence the narrative of child exploitation through the language we choose to use, model and challenge in multi-agency discourse and interactions. Bringing professionals from different backgrounds with unique perspectives on where they encounter young people being exploited across local area systems was suggested as a way to be more proactive and culturally sensitive. The group reflected that, whilst tools, resources, frameworks or strategies were certainly helpful, this ‘systems-level approach’, focusing on how child exploitation and extra-familial harm is talked about and understood by all those working in the system, was seen as the most effective way of changing perceptions and promoting significant change.

Using more ‘strengths based’ language in relation to child exploitation and extra-familial harm was described by participants as an important way of underpinning a strengths-based approach more generally. It was also seen as having the potential to support the emotional resilience of partnerships to hold the challenge and complexity of supporting young people at risk of and / or being exploited. Reflections on the potential emotional impact and trauma, for both the communities experiencing exploitation as well as the workforces supporting them, were not to be underestimated.

As much as strategic leaderships need to be ‘tactical’ in response, participants saw the cultural challenge of how we conceptualise and perceive victims and perpetrators of exploitation as being an ever-present issue. Time for reflection on these challenges was seen to be not just an ‘added bonus’ but an essential part of an effective response.

The following were suggested as helpful reflective questions for strategic leaders to consider:

- > Are there particular phrases / descriptors you use in relation to child exploitation that have the power to shape our understanding of how it occurs?
- > Who might be best placed to shape the language and discourse of how we should describe child exploitation? Are there missing influences from this discussion?

## Leadership culture

The first point made about leadership was that, given national policy sits outside partners' control, shifting away from a focus just on roles and responsibilities to identify shared principles and values across a partnership was crucial.

Those highlighted by participants as being important were:

- > Working with the wider community, i.e. reaching beyond the barriers and boundaries of statutory services to harness the wider community as partners in safeguarding.
- > Engendering a collaborative culture of learning and development.
- > Flexibility, i.e. having the bravery to move away from 'what we have always done' to think and respond creatively and with flexibility (see, for example, Gifford et al., 2012).

These leadership approaches were seen to mirror the skill sets required by practitioners in holding the complexity, uncertainty, risk and vulnerability that operational management of child exploitation and extra-familial harm caseloads demand. Where participants identified these skills and behaviours in strategic leaders, they shared how they influenced the approach and mindset across a partnership, resulting in a reduction of hierarchical challenges (as highlighted in Mason et al. 2017).

## Traditional approaches to safeguarding

A significant challenge highlighted by participants was how the changing landscape (with broader forms of extra-familial harm intersecting with child criminal and child sexual exploitation) resulted in additional complexity for the 'system' of local safeguarding partnerships to navigate. The speed at which perpetrators of exploitation adapt to stay one step ahead of those trying to respond was noted.

As highlighted in the previous sections, participants saw these being met most effectively with a systems-wide response. Thinking beyond 'traditional safeguarding partners' to include, for example, licensing teams within the local authority was one suggestion. We have seen the value of a dynamic and expanded partnership in the TCE Bespoke Support Projects to disrupt

child exploitation, which includes agencies working in spaces / places in local communities or with offenders.

Changing a pathway or developing an isolated process would not address and respond to the harm young people experience when they are at risk of or being exploited (see Asmussen et al., 2020). Any change that may ‘need’ to happen concerning exploitation will also involve a shift in mind-set on the part of partnerships, agencies and organisations.

## Risk

The group discussed how a partnership and local area needed to consider how they can shift and support partners (at all levels within the system - operational and strategic, voluntary and statutory) to ‘collectively’ hold risk ([see this example from Scotland: The Scottish Government 2010](#)).

Consideration of how risk assessments and subsequent interpretation of thresholds (see Risk assessing child sexual exploitation, a presentation by Helen Beckett) impact on which young people receive or don’t receive support should be the focus of critical reflection.

## Configuration of services

As is typical with complex challenges, there is no one standard model for alignment of systems and structures which is suitable and / or even possible for all partnerships (FitzSimons & McCracken, 2020; Scott et al., 2017). Geographical footprint was viewed to be one significant factor for standardisation and / or alignment, both in relation to size and reach. Other factors included organisational memory and the relational nature of the partnerships. Some participants talked about how exploitation doesn’t stop at the border, which meant that more than just a local approach or pathway might be needed to handle the complexity of the issue.

### 3. Implications for strategic leaders

A significant challenge in responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is driven by the understandable need to respond to urgent current cases. The emotional toll this takes was emphasised by the group. It is challenging for partners to find time to lift their heads above the busy-ness, to pause and reflect on what, beyond the immediate threat, might disrupt this form of harm in the long term.

The importance of having a space to come together and learn from the experiences of those outside the local area was described as invaluable for both strategic leaders and as a way to encourage creative and innovative responses. Some examples of how this can help were shared by the group:

- > Listening to the experiences of operational colleagues who were working directly with children, families and communities to tackle child criminal exploitation and extra-familial harm was one example of how a partnership was taking its first steps towards holding space and giving permission for risk and vulnerability to surface.
- > Being able to reflect on what is and what is not within our control was also identified as being helpful to consider when thinking about how we can develop / support leadership and take proportionate risks to do things differently.



## 4. Next steps

We recognise that this information was generated from a small sample of contributors. The TCE Programme has commissioned a piece of follow-up work - a series of stakeholder interviews with partnerships across England who are working in exploitation teams / services / hubs to explore how local areas (individuals, agencies or partnerships) have responded to the challenges of shifting responses to focus on child sexual, child criminal and other forms of child exploitation.

## References and further reading

Asmussen, K., Fischer, F., Drayton, E., & McBride, T. (2020). *Adverse childhood experiences: What we know, what we don't know, and what should happen next*. TCE Support Programme

Beckett, H., Holmes, D., & Walker, J. (2017). *Child sexual exploitation: definition & guide for professionals: extended text*. University of Bedfordshire

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Mason, P., Ferguson, H., Morris, K., Munton, T., & Sen, R. (2017). *Leeds Family Valued: evaluation report*. Department for Education

Scott, S. & Botcherby, S. with Ludvigsen, A. (2017). *Wigan and Rochdale Sexual Exploitation Innovation Project: Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: evaluation report 26*. Department for Education

The Scottish Government (2010). *A Guide to Implementing Getting it right for every child: Messages from pathfinders and learning partners*



**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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Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme  
The Granary Dartington Hall  
Totnes Devon TQ9 6EE

tel 01803 867692  
email [ask@researchinpractice.org.uk](mailto:ask@researchinpractice.org.uk)  
 [#researchIP #TCEProgramme](https://twitter.com/researchIP)

[www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk](http://www.tce.researchinpractice.org.uk)

**Author:**  
Alice Yeo & Ellie Fairgrieve

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The Dartington Hall Trust which is a company  
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Company No. 1485560 Charity No. 279756  
VAT No. 402196875

Registered Office:  
The Elmhirst Centre, Dartington Hall,  
Totnes TQ9 6EL