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Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

What do we really mean when we talk about effective partnership working?

Introduction

The key aim of the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme is to work with local area partnerships to support the development of an effective strategic response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Given that partnership working underpins this kind of strategic work, understanding what factors drive effective partnership working are therefore of great interest and importance to TCE. Based on learning from the Programme, Ben Byrne wrote a [blog](#) reflecting on his experiences and outlining what he believes to be the core ingredients that underpin effective partnership strategy development. These served as the starting point for this interview with Ben Byrne and Annie Hudson.

1. Why the focus on partnership working when we're seeking to address child exploitation and extra-familial harm?

Annie Hudson and Ben Byrne have been involved in safeguarding and child protection across multiple roles for many years. Both describe partnership working as being key to the success or failure of every role they have had and every programme of work they have contributed to. Byrne described partnership working as being fundamental to any positive change or impact he has ever achieved professionally. Hudson stated that, 'In my experience, I know that safeguarding is only as good as the quality of the partnership working both strategically and operationally.'

Discussion of partnership working within the child protection arena is not new. Hudson traces the mantra of 'working together' all the way back to the '80s, and pinpoints moments over the last 40 years when certain high profile incidents (e.g. the 1987 Cleveland child abuse scandal or the abuse and murder of Victoria Climbié) and policy developments (e.g. Every Child Matters, development of the multi-agency safeguarding hubs, Working Together to Safeguard Children) have added momentum to the partnership working agenda.

So why are we still talking about improving partnership working when it comes to developing child exploitation strategies?

Although the concept of partnership working seems simple enough, Hudson and Byrne acknowledge that in fact it is complex and challenging. Byrne reflects that despite the central importance of relational working – the question of how you build strong relationships is not typically the starting point for service planning. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that for many local areas, effective partnership working still seems to be the 'Holy Grail'. And whilst not a new requisite, Hudson and Byrne discuss why child exploitation and extra familial harm in particular require local areas to urgently solve the age-old riddle: 'How can we all work together?'

'If you were thinking about a child exploitation strategy, probably the first thing you should be saying is what will enable us to build strong relationships with the children we want to protect, and to their parents, and between our practitioners and managers. What are the structures which will enable that? What are the working practices? What's the work environment? But it's not where we start, is it?' – Ben Byrne

Over the last decade, professionals and organisations have been dealing with the seemingly new issues of child sexual and criminal exploitation. Of course, they have always existed, but the child protection sector was set up to respond to intra-familial, not extra-familial harm. Hudson suggested that the ‘traditional child protection system’ was simply not fit for purpose for these forms of harm. Professionals across the board felt overwhelmed and underequipped. Traditional ways of working with children and young people were not helpful, especially given that many young people reject the notion that they are being exploited.

It became evident that the safeguarding system was not fit for purpose in relation to the complex and evolving nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm and that change was necessary.

All of these issues propelled the necessity to think and work differently and brought the importance of partnership working into sharp relief. Hudson states that, ‘The complexity and scariness of what was happening to children who were being exploited made everyone get out of their comfort zone and say ‘we can’t go on doing what we’re doing’. No one agency was able to address the scale and nature of child exploitation. Hudson and Byrne reflected on how the complexity of this harm necessitated partnership working which extended beyond the statutory safeguarding partners to include a wide breadth of perspectives, knowledge and expertise. This meant having to form relationships with non-traditional partners, such as children, young people, families, and community organisations, and develop more meaningful partnerships with schools and the third sector.

2. Particular challenges for partnership working when addressing child exploitation

Four specific challenges were raised in the interview in relation to partnership working in this space:

1) Hudson and Byrne highlighted the challenge to partnerships of working on such a high profile issue that is constantly under a political spotlight. Hudson noted how intense the publicity around child exploitation cases can be. The added pressure that this can place on partnerships can then lead to a defensive stance of ‘it’s not us, it’s them’, which Byrne referred to in his blog – when partners get drawn into the ‘blame game’.

2) Both experts spoke about the ‘clash of paradigms’ when different agencies and organisations come together to address child exploitation. Inevitably each profession, be it the police, social workers, teachers, or health workers, sees the world through a particular lens. This is most apparent with child criminal exploitation, where perceptions of victimhood vary widely.

For example, a young person could either be criminalised or safeguarded as a result of exploitation, depending on the agency in question. Byrne reflected on how powerful and entrenched these differing organisational perspectives can be and how hard they can be to change. Partnership working is integral to the process of perspective shifting. It is only through working together and gaining a better understanding of how other professionals work / their view of the issue that one’s own perspective can begin to evolve. Byrne says, ‘We need that willingness to get into other people’s worlds and look at what they’re doing and how they’re doing it, how you might do it together, to get that paradigm shifting’.

An interesting question posed by Byrne and Hudson was whether the bigger the paradigm shift that is needed, the harder partnership working can be. They acknowledge that the shift in perspective needed with child criminal exploitation raises particularly challenging questions about agency and victimhood. Partnership working may therefore be even more challenging with child criminal exploitation than it has been with child sexual exploitation.

3) Partnership working in relation to child exploitation is made even more difficult by the fact that there is no established body of evidence in terms of how to respond effectively (what works). Our understanding of child exploitation and extra-familial harm is in constant flux, with vast amounts of new research and policy papers being published left right and centre. Byrne referred to partnerships having to work on ‘shifting sands’, where it could be incredibly difficult to assess what evidence to base their strategy on or how to interpret that evidence. Different organisations within a partnership might be accessing and using different resources and evidence, as well as interpreting it through their own organisational lenses.

4) Child exploitation and extra familial harm are complex forms of harm, not neat siloed issues that can be addressed by a single partnership group in any local area. For example, Hudson explained that a local area or individual London Borough would have a local safeguarding partnership, a community safety partnership, a youth offending partnership and a health and wellbeing board (among others), all working to address child exploitation and extra familial harm in different contexts. Hudson says, ‘you are therefore talking about multiple partnerships, which will have overlapping, but not identical memberships’ all working in different ways. Hudson added that not only may these different partnership groups not always coordinate effectively, they can even be in competition with one another to lead on certain issues related to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This arguably mirrors a similar dynamic at the national level, with policy drives from different government departments that are not always coordinated.

1. This TCE [interview](#) with Dr Craig Barlow, Dr Tim Bateman and Tony Sagers explores these issues.

3. Challenges, enablers and opportunities for working with non-traditional partners

Challenges

Both Byrne and Hudson commented on the potential impact of the current child safeguarding partnership arrangements. Whilst the new framework may support the three statutory agencies (police, local authority, health) to work more effectively together, there is a risk that other important partners are side-lined. Byrne warns that this may lead to local partnerships, ‘effectively becoming just three partners who drive and make all the decisions and there no longer being any room for the others’. Hudson argues that as we expand the notion of partnership working to involve children, families, schools, third sector and community organisations, it is imperative that this involvement is not tokenistic. Genuine and equal partnership models must be established – that share real decision-making power with all partners around the table, not just with police, local authorities and health. This involves the three statutory agencies relinquishing power and giving non-traditional partners the space to voice opinions and suggestions that may not always be comfortable to hear.

This will also involve having to persuade many partners, (particularly young people, families and community organisations), that it is worth them taking their time to participate in and contribute to partnership work. There is a long history of these groups being asked for their views and insights and nothing changing as a result. Hudson says asking young people about their views on youth violence is a key example of this: they have been saying the same thing over and over again for years without it making a difference. Consequently, scepticism amongst these groups is high and trust is low. It will take time for local partnerships looking to tackle child exploitation to build trusting relationships with these groups.

Another barrier to working with non-traditional partners is the power imbalance that can exist between statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations. Byrne refers to, ‘a kind of structural parity’ that exists between police, health and local authorities, derived from the fact that each holds a statutory role. By contrast, the relationship between statutory agencies and voluntary and community organisations is uneven. Interactions can feel one sided – often characterised by voluntary and community organisations being asked to input their views sporadically. It can feel like a transactional relationship, exacerbated by the fact that many voluntary and community organisations are commissioned by statutory agencies to provide services. Byrne argues that for genuine partnership working with non-traditional partners to exist – it must be a two-way relational partnership rather than a ‘transactional contractual one’.

Enablers

Both Byrne and Hudson agreed that a hyperlocal model, where partnership structures to address child exploitation are rooted in communities and organised in a way that allows for sustainable long term working arrangements with community organisations, works well. Senior leaders must immerse themselves within communities and spend time in schools, with families, in community venues – talking constantly to people on the ground. They must establish this kind of engagement at every phase of developing a strategy to tackle child exploitation, from developing it, to embedding it and evaluating it.

Hudson reflected on her time as Director of Children’s Services in one local authority where a hyperlocal approach was taken in relation to their work on serious youth violence. She argues that the relative success of this work relied heavily on taking the time to build relationships between individual people. Byrne and Hudson believe relationship building between individual practitioners at all levels is imperative – with both traditional and non-traditional partners. The act of ‘doing together’, whereby practitioners from different agencies directly work on parts of a case together, is extremely useful for this. A lot of relationship building occurs within informal spaces where professionals working across different organisations can get to know one another and build trust. Hudson referred to her own experiences as a social worker when she would go on family visits with a police officer. It was during the car journeys to and from visits that they built the relationship that became integral to effectively working together. Byrne notes that this is why co-location of organisations can be so effective: ‘Because it enables you to have those normal human interactions which aren’t formal or organized, but just enable you to get on the same level with someone – to build a relationship.’

Hudson concurs and cites the [What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care pilot projects](#) where social workers were placed directly into schools. Her experience in one of the pilot areas was that co-location allowed schools and social workers to, ‘reflect on the different professional and organisational backgrounds they come from and the factors and dynamics that can act as barriers to effective partnership working’.

Not only were they able to identify these ‘barriers and differences’ but they were more equipped to address them as they had developed stronger relationships by working more closely together. Hudson concludes by saying, ‘They had much more of a shared understanding of what life was like for a child and therefore what needed to be done in a way that would never have happened when communicating through an email or a telephone call or even a quick face-to-face meeting’.

Opportunities

There was a clear consensus between the two interviewees about the benefits of genuine partnership working with children, young people, families, schools and communities when developing a strategy to tackle child exploitation. Hudson notes that strategic leaders can be disconnected and anaesthetised from the realities of what young people are experiencing. Strategic leaders need to be talking to practitioners, children, young people and their families, otherwise strategies become too theoretical and are not rooted in the lived experience of victims of child exploitation. As Byrne put it, 'For a joint strategy to be connected to what it is actually like to be a young person, it demands that the lived experience, the voice, the participation, the engagement of young people is through every bit of your partnership work or else it will be disconnected and won't have the impact you need it to have'.

Annie Hudson also noted that community leaders and local elected members tend to serve their communities for far longer than many practitioners and professionals working in statutory services (where turnover can be high). They are therefore not only a valuable source of knowledge and expertise, but are also more likely to have trusted relationships with other key stakeholders within communities. Furthermore, they can provide consistency to a partnership since they are more likely to remain in their roles for the length of time a strategy takes to be successfully implemented.

4. Further exploration of the key ingredients for partnership working in Ben's Blog

Creating space to share and learn together:

Hudson and Byrne discussed how senior leaders can create safe spaces where partnerships can reflect together honestly and where individuals can 'admit to vulnerability on behalf of themselves, their agency and the collective':

- > Senior leaders must be brave and model that type of vulnerability. They must be able to stand up and say 'I don't know everything, I don't understand everything, and I need to know more.'
- > Leaders need to feel confident and comfortable with their own authority in order to be able to recognise and reveal their own weaknesses. Leaders must admit they do not have all the answers and, in some situations, reflect on how their own ways of working can be a part of the problem.

'Use your authority to show you are not omnipotent – and that you are open to learning more and that you are vulnerable like everyone else.' - Ben Byrne

Knowledge exchange

Hudson and Byrne talked about how local partnerships can support a ‘common level of understanding’ and dismantle the ‘hierarchy of those in the know and those left feeling vulnerable about their expertise’. In the context of child exploitation, knowledge and understanding are constantly evolving. It is a crowded space with many different agencies and organisations producing knowledge, information and evidence. The problem is not a paucity of knowledge but a surfeit. Professionals are being overloaded with information and different concepts (such as trauma-informed practice, contextual safeguarding, strengths-based ACEs, modern slavery and human trafficking). This can lead to extreme anxiety over knowing what evidence to read and what it all means.

‘There is a rapid amount of evidence emerging from all over the place – and I think that to some extent that is disabling and as anxiety-creating as having none.’ - Ben Byrne

With such an abundance of information – the challenge is how to understand and use this knowledge. There is a lot of space for interpretation and, similarly, misinterpretation:

- > The role of local partnerships is therefore twofold:
 - (1) creating an environment that allows people to acknowledge how anxiety-provoking it can be to respond to all the information being thrown in your direction.
 - (2) ‘sense making’ – partnerships must create spaces that enable the group to collectively make sense of the information.

- > Local safeguarding partnerships should take ownership of the ‘sense making’ task. Whilst central government has a role in setting broad policy direction, in order to operationalise a strategy, you need to interpret the evidence through the lens of a local context. As Hudson says, ‘You’ve got to have local flexibility and adaptability. A strategy must be rooted in local need.’

Both experts saw this as an integral role of the TCE Programme, to support local safeguarding partnerships to make sense of all the available evidence and decipher what it means for them.

- > Byrne noted, however, that it was important to think carefully about who within a partnership takes charge of any 'sense making'. Care must be taken not to exacerbate power imbalances that already exist. Questions arose about the value that external facilitation can therefore play in the sense making process, so as not to replicate the kind of damaging power dynamics that an exploitation strategy is trying to tackle in the first place.

'I think the problem is less about the paucity of knowledge and more about making good sense of the evidence available. As an individual, I haven't read everything and nobody will have read everything. We need to make sense of the voluminous body of information in, for example, local safeguarding practice reviews, research, national reports. Information is coming out of everybody's ears. The critical task is to make some [sense] of what really matters.' - Annie Hudson

Effective facilitation

Ben Byrne's blog referred to how effective 'external and neutral' facilitation can be when local partnerships are trying to develop an exploitation strategy. It can enable difficult but necessary conversations. In this discussion, Hudson and Byrne reflected on why some local areas can be less open to external facilitation:

- > Both experts acknowledged that there will always be a level of anxiety when one allows external eyes and voices to enter.
- > Hudson reflected on how sometimes even the better performing local areas can be 'closed' to different ways of working. Byrne referred to conversations he had with local areas who had decided not to apply for TCE Programme support. They would often argue that improvements had been made and there was no sense in 'rocking the boat and throwing things up in the air'. The perception seems to be that inviting in external facilitation or support (like that provided by the Programme) is akin to inviting wholesale reform and transformation.

- > Perhaps the key to making local areas feel less anxious about using external support is to badge such support differently. There is a need to frame external support as something less drastic and more as ‘everyday common practice’.

‘Maybe it should be badged as just being a really healthy conversation you can have as a partnership, which will help your continuous improvement rather than having to kind of shake your foundations and overhaul everything.’ - Ben Byrne

Explicitly attending to behaviours and the culture

Hudson and Byrne spoke about how to ensure that partnerships, ‘eschew, rather than mirror, power dynamics and coercive and controlling behaviours’. Both interviewees agreed that partnership working is not just about getting comfortable and ‘cosying up’ together. It requires deep reflection and uncomfortable conversations about how strategies and practice can ensure they do not replicate the types of behaviour that are inherent to child exploitation.

‘In the area of CSE and CCE there are certain behaviours that it is incredibly important we do not mirror. We want to explicitly say, “we don’t want to be like that.”’ - Ben Byrne

Neither expert was convinced this was happening in a purposeful and consistent way across local safeguarding partnerships. Both acknowledged that it was still common to observe disappointing behaviours in senior leaders. Hudson and Byrne made some suggestions about how this could be done:

- > It is necessary for local partnerships to have those reflective conversations as soon as they are created. Both Hudson and Byrne admitted from personal experience that the prospect of starting those discussions can feel nerve racking and uncomfortable. However it was important to explicitly ask those questions early on and to feed that directly into the creation of a shared vision of ‘partnership ways of working’. Partnerships must categorically lay out how they will model positive behaviours as well as how they will avoid and keep a check on negative behaviours.
- > Byrne believes that in order to model this ongoing need for reflection on individual, organisational, and partnership behaviours, senior leaders should invite 360 feedback on their own behaviour. Byrne suggests that senior leaders (and all professionals for that matter) need to understand how their behaviours are perceived and experienced by others in order to effectively reflect on how they can impact the work they are involved in.

‘It’s important to ask questions about how you’re coming across, how you’re perceived, how you’re impacting other people. This process in itself is modeling positive behaviors.’ - Ben Byrne

Underlying all of these key ingredients to partnership working was the need for safe spaces to have difficult conversations. Hudson spoke about there being an art to having difficult conversations, and central to that was asking good questions. Senior leaders need to know how to ask questions that do not ‘imply or attribute blame’. Questions should be motivated by a desire to understand what is going on. Senior leaders must create a culture where constructive challenge is possible. This requires giving feedback about what is working well and not so well in a routine manner, so that this undertaking never comes across as confrontational or like an out of the ordinary event. Constructive inquiry and challenge should become ‘part and parcel of everyday working’. Byrne agrees and sees difficult but honest conversations as the ‘lifeblood of any partnership relationship’.

5. Concluding summary

No single agency can tackle the scale and ever-evolving nature of child exploitation and the current traditional safeguarding system is not able to meet the needs of children and young people who experience exploitation and extra familial harm. Partnership working therefore has a crucial part to play if we are to develop new ways of working that are fit for purpose. Furthermore, now more than ever, partnerships must include non-traditional partners. In order to ensure this is done effectively, statutory agencies must be willing to relinquish power and genuinely share their decision-making authority. Byrne and Hudson reflected on some of the enablers and opportunities for this.

The discussion considered some of the particular challenges associated with partnership working when addressing child exploitation.

These included:

- > the highly politicised nature of these issues
- > the clash of paradigms between different agencies in relation to child exploitation
- > the lack of established evidence about what works
- > the large number of different partnership groups focusing on exploitation within any given local area.

Lastly, this resource aimed to further explore some of the key enabling factors that contribute towards effective partnership working, which Byrne outlines in his blog.

These included:

- > creating safe spaces where partnerships can reflect honestly and admit vulnerability
- > partnerships proactively and collaboratively interpreting current evidence through the lens of a local context
- > utilising external and neutral facilitation to develop local exploitation strategies
- > actively reflecting and ensuring that partnerships do not mirror damaging power dynamics and behaviours that can be inherent to child exploitation.



**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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