

Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme

Project Learning Report

Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):	
Partnership name:	Cheshire West and Chester
Core partner agencies involved:	Adult Safeguarding Partnership Children's Safeguarding Partnership Community Safety Partnership
Number of local authority areas covered:	1
Regional area:	North West
BSP size:	Standard
BSP methodology/ methodologies	Partnership – transitional safeguarding
Digital / face-to-face / mixed delivery	Digital
Date BSP commenced:	June 2021
Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support Programme:	
<p>In their initial application to the TCE Support Programme, Cheshire West and Chester identified that they wanted to create an 'all ages exploitation strategy'. The local area was keen to explore transitional safeguarding, with a particular focus on what the exploitation picture looks like as young people transition into adulthood.</p> <p>Reflections from the partnership, which included both statutory and non-statutory safeguarding partners, centred on the increasing difficulty of managing complexity and risk when young people reach 17 years of age, i.e. nearing the age when children's service provision stops. The different legal frameworks for those under 18 who needed protection and those over 18 were perceived to be a barrier to smooth transitions. This was particularly the case for adults deemed to have capacity to make decisions for themselves, who were therefore not assessed as needing care and support under the Care Act.</p> <p>A commitment to working in partnership on this priority had already been made in the local area, to work towards offering a continuation of services to young people post-18 who required support for exploitation concerns.</p> <p>The partnership demonstrated in its application a strong appetite for joint working and a cross-partnership commitment to the improvement of transitional safeguarding arrangements, which provided a strong basis for the launch of the Bespoke Support Project (BSP).</p>	

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Overall goal of the BSP:

The overarching objective for Cheshire West and Chester was to identify what 'good' looks like for young people as they transition to adulthood, with a view to supporting the partnership in its development of an all-ages exploitation strategy. The strategy would build on an existing All-Age Contextual Safeguarding Vision, agreed in March 2021.

However, further discussions with the local area identified two foundational issues that needed to be addressed to 'create the right conditions' before moving to what 'good' looks like and the development of a strategy. These were:

- Developing a shared language amongst the partnership: exploring and agreeing a shared conceptualisation of and approach to risk and need in adolescents to enable effective joint working.¹
- Developing a better understanding of 'what exists' in terms of service provision across the partnership with a view to enabling greater confidence in holding risk through improved multi-agency working and collaboration to support young people in transition.

These foundational issues were therefore prioritised and agreed as the change goals for the BSP.

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

Four online workshops were held with the aim of providing a reflective space for the partnership to consider the 'right conditions' for progressing towards an all-age exploitation strategy. Each had accompanying reading and pre-session activities. The focus of each workshop was as follows:

- **Language:** a session to move the partnership towards developing a shared language in relation to exploitation which could then underpin its approach to transitional safeguarding.
- **Mapping:** a session for the partnership to develop awareness, at both a strategic and operational level, of existing services, initiatives and responses available in relation to exploitation in order to contribute to the development of a locally owned action plan to support an all-ages exploitation strategy in Cheshire West and Chester going forward.
- **Developing an approach:** for the partnership to reflect on the need for transitional approaches and to consider what 'good' looks like for young people as they transition to adulthood, including considering some of the barriers and enablers to moving towards 'good'.

¹ The importance of effective partnership working and what this looks like has been a recurrent theme across TCE's work with local areas. [This interview with Annie Hudson and Ben Byrne](#) explores these issues.

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- **Action Planning:** to give the group space to move from 'raising issues' to creating 'areas of action', allowing for specific actions to be committed to, and to leave the project group with a plan for progressing, post Programme involvement.

Throughout the BSP, actions and key themes were a) identified and reflected back to the group by the TCE Project Lead, and b) factored into the planning of the next workshops. This was to ensure that delivery remained focused on the local area's identified needs.

Ending the BSP with an 'action planning' session provided the basis for Cheshire West and Chester colleagues to produce an action plan to drive them forwards into the next stage of development of their transitional safeguarding project, beyond the life of TCE involvement.

Key issues that arose during the delivery of the BSP:

- for a local area and those delivering the BSP

Creating the right environment for change

Throughout the project, a recurring theme was what conditions and environmental qualities were required to underpin change and progress, which were seen to include:

- Strong multi-agency relationships.
- Solid internal and external communication about the vision for the local area.
- A shared 'culture' and way of working.
- Permission to innovate.
- The principle of community engagement being threaded through all work.

Although the ultimate goal was about moving towards a transitional safeguarding approach, as the project progressed, local partners recognised that there was a distinction between 'the work' and 'the conditions'. Partners reflected that doing 'the work' without the necessary underpinning conditions in place would at best result in stunted progress and at worst create written documentation that remained stuck within the realms of policy and did not translate into professional practice or improved experiences for adolescents. A reflection of the project was that 'this work is not a sprint' and that the importance of 'getting it right', namely creating positive conditions for change, needed to override the temptation to push on with rapid action.

Within these discussions, senior leaders from across the partnership reflected on the importance of 'modelling good' as part of creating the right environment for change. Some talked about how easy it was as senior leaders to lose touch with practice and therefore lose knowledge about and relationships with multi-agency partners. Many also felt time-poor in their roles due to competing priorities such as high-caseloads, increasing complexity in need, and funding cuts. They had therefore felt unable to spend time building networks and holding space for the creation of a culture of innovation. Partners reflected that engagement with the BSP had highlighted to them the importance of changing their own ways of working to prioritise building networks and holding space for reflection in order to model conditions that could then filter into the rest of their systems.²

² Local areas working with the TCE Programme reported the positive impact of creating the space for partners to come together, connect and communicate. This forms a key part of our 'Joining the Dots' framework ([see resources here](#)).

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Value of shared principles & priorities

As the project progressed, the focus moved away from developing a strategy and towards the value of shared principles and ways of working. Being consistent in ways of working across different partnerships (e.g. children's, adults', and safeguarding and community) emerged as a key element of good transitional practice and bridging the gap between children's and adults' services. The partnership reflected that it's the 'how' that matters.

This reflection allowed for broader thinking about what 'good' could look like within their systems, and to focus on what the different elements of this might look like in practice, rather than thinking within the space of policy and strategy alone.

Youth and community voice

In relation to the above point, the project's necessary focus on what 'good' could look like allowed the voices of the community, and adolescents in particular, to be highlighted as a key gap in knowledge. When speaking about what 'good' could look like, partners found it noticeably easier to do this from the perspective of a professional working within the system than for a young person experiencing transition into adulthood, a family member concerned about a young person, or a community identifying exploitation in their locality. This was also true of the mapping of the current system, which focuses primarily on the professional perspective rather than on the experiential perspective of a child or young person.

Partners reflected that hearing the voices of and collecting views from young people and their families / carers at an individual service level was impactful across many areas of the partnership. However, there was work to be done in collecting these insights and utilising them to inform service design and delivery. Local leads pushed this thinking one step further in discussions about how, as well as voices being 'used to inform', young people could also become partners in delivery so that communities are active participants in services rather than passive recipients. The partnership recognised the need to work innovatively and engage with complexity in order to make this a reality.³

Local vs regional

At the time of the BSP, wider work was happening within the pan-Cheshire region to develop an all-age exploitation strategy. This added a layer of complexity to the local area's work. Cheshire West and Chester grappled with the desire to move things forward in their local area against the need to avoid duplication and / or the production of a local strategy that conflicted with the pan-Cheshire work.

In response to this challenge, the delivery team sought to ensure that the following two factors were highlighted in discussions:

1. The importance of governance and communication between the local area and the pan-regional area to ensure consistency and coherence in direction, through the sharing of learning from TCE and other Cheshire West and Chester initiatives in

³ The Programme has done a lot of work on how the voices of young people can be heard by strategic leaders. [See these resources.](#)

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this domain.

2. The ability for partners in Cheshire West and Chester to focus on creating the right conditions for change and taking steps that would be conducive to taking an all-ages approach and to good transitional practice regardless of the outcome of high-level strategy development.

Whilst there was a commitment across local partners to engage with these two factors, the impact from this project should be considered in light of the pan-Cheshire context. Coordinating between pan-regional and local strategies may affect the coherence of approaches across Cheshire West and Chester partners involved in the strategic and operational response to child exploitation.

Knowing the landscape

The importance of understanding one's own local area came across strongly in the project. Local area partners spoke of understanding what is available on the ground as being crucial to providing high-quality support and avoiding duplication.

The idea of a 'transitions service' developed during the BSP, by reflecting on what a local offer could look like through leveraging existing resources within the system. During mapping exercises, some participants expressed surprise at the wealth of available services, which they didn't know existed and hadn't thought to link in with before. The concept of 'using the right partners in the right way' became central to the formulation of a local support offer, and participants once again stressed the importance of professional relationships (rather than flat library-like resources) as the key to better understanding and shaping the local offer.

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

The TCE delivery team hoped that their programme design would create the framework for the local area to 'springboard' from the BSP into the next phase of their work on transitional safeguarding. This was supported by the delivery of a final 'action planning' session in which members of the partnership were encouraged to begin a specific, timebound and measurable action plan to build on in subsequent work beyond the life of the BSP.

Reflections from both the delivery team and the local area partners suggest that the learning and outputs from the project are beginning to inform local activity, which will have a positive impact on the local strategic response to child exploitation and the further development into the next phase of their transitional safeguarding project.

Examples include:

- Partnership commitment to a variety of methods of building multi-agency relationships and upskilling staff in this process, for example a commitment to

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organise multi-agency shadowing opportunities, multi-agency coffee mornings and networking events. The project highlighted that the importance of these relationships and networks cannot be underestimated in the context of creating smoother transitions for those moving between children's and adults' services.

- Active engagement with the concept of community voice and the voice of those with lived experience of exploitation. The partnership is now in active conversations with existing service user groups to explore how to better engage community voices in its work on transitional safeguarding. It is also exploring what other groups currently exist that could be leveraged to hear a broader range of community voices.
- Active problem-solving between partners took place within some of the delivery activities, including partners working together to establish better operational and strategic feedback loops between meetings and panels.
- Recognition of the importance of communication about the local area's transitional safeguarding vision. The message around this way of working had not previously reached some groups and so the partnership committed to a 'launch' of the Cheshire West and Chester All-Ages Contextual Safeguarding Vision to bring all partners on board and make a statement about the future direction of the local area.
- The convening of a group of people who are all keen to make change and 'do it well'. This represented significant progress for the partners involved in the project, many of whom had not met before or had not previously been involved in either the transitional safeguarding or contextual safeguarding agenda of the local area. The momentum and enthusiasm of this group will be built on after the life of the TCE delivery team's involvement to sustain progress and push forward positive changes to the local areas' system responses to child exploitation. The local area leads are actively seeking ongoing engagement from the wider partnership group to continue the work of the project.
- A planned session with local executive leaders at the joint board for the Community Safety Partnership, Children's Safeguarding Partnership and Local Safeguarding Adults Board. This session will share learning from the project and inform strategic thinking and decision-making around transitional safeguarding and extra-familial harm.
- A strong sense of the need to work in harmony with what's happening at a pan-regional level, and a commitment to ensuring the presence of strong representation from Cheshire West and Chester within pan-Cheshire initiatives to share learning from the project, informs this work.

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Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

The importance of relationships

The project made time for new relationships to be formed and existing relationships and multi-agency understanding to be strengthened. Partners valued having time to meet each other to both speak and hear about service offers, barriers and enablers. There was a commitment to continue this way of working through initiatives such as multi-agency coffee mornings and joint agency training and learning opportunities.

The idea that strong local network relationships could have a material impact on the coherence of a local support offer for young people in transition to adulthood was implicit in many of the conversations that took place between partners throughout delivery. This was demonstrated by local leaders prioritising making time and space for building relationships to enable smoother multi-agency working. When asked what 'good' would look like for professionals working in Cheshire West and Chester, many partners chose to reflect sentiments that related to multi-agency working and collective knowledge, with examples such as 'services working together in a supportive way', having a 'shared sense of responsibility' and having 'accessible networks and partners'.

Permission giving

The TCE delivery team explored the idea of 'permission giving' and engaged the local area in conversations about where it needs to come from and what it looks like. Local area partners explained the numerous different arenas in which they had to seek permission, i.e. in order to spend time on reflection, to experiment with new ways of working (that may or may not be successful), and to work outside of the boundaries of their own services.

Key learning from this project was about the need for strategic leaders' ability to give explicit permission for new ways of working. It was also interesting to consider where permission lies within a system and who has the power to give it. At times during the BSP, local leaders reflected that they did not hold this power despite their senior positions. This could be due to the complexity of the issue at hand and the high risk, high stakes nature of exploitation.

Professional safety vs actual safety

The notion of safety came up at numerous points throughout the project. The current gulf between children's services' risk-based approaches and the rights-based approaches of adult services was noted. Seeking to blur this dichotomy by taking an approach that worked on a spectrum of balancing risk and rights became a central theme of discussion.

Local partners reflected on the importance of supporting young people as they transition to adulthood and move towards independence. By empowering them to enact their rights and to have more control, partners can support the process of moving steadily away from the risk-focused approach common in children's services. However, they also reflected that giving more control to young people can, as a professional, feel like taking on more risk. The binary boundaries between risk and rights have filtered through into ways of thinking and approaches to working which are unhelpful at best and damaging at worst for young people seeking to navigate their way into adulthood.⁴

⁴ These issues are explored in [this Research in Practice briefing](#).

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How to create space for practitioners to hold 'risk' and work towards defensible practice rather than defensive practice remained a point for reflection. Partners questioned the value of following processes to the letter if it meant that they were not making a difference to the life of a young person. Whilst there were no easy answers to this question, it highlighted the importance of a local area being able to critically reflect on who is served by processes. Are certain elements of practice, 'norms' and ways of working there to create a sense of safety for professionals, rather than focusing on keeping young people in need of support safe?

Date: 01.10.21

Signed by Local Area:

Sian Jones

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