# Final Learning Report (2019-22) Executive Summary

# Programme overview

This is the executive summary of core learning from three years of delivering the Tackling Child Exploitation (TCE) Support Programme. The Department for Education funded the TCE Programme from 2019 to 2022 to work with local areas[1] in England on tackling the complex challenge of child exploitation and extra-familial harm and to disseminate findings both locally and nationally. Delivered by a consortium led by Research in Practice, with The Children's Society and the University of Bedfordshire, the Programme was commissioned to explore the systems-level[2] challenges faced by strategic leaders and to identify levers for improvement.

The Programme has sought to influence the system in two key ways:

a) By working with leaders to deliver Bespoke Support Projects (BSPs) in one or more local area on a theme identified as relevant by safeguarding partners[3]

a) by amplifying learning via the **TCE microsite**, and through a series of open access learning events.

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1. For the purposes of the Programme, a local area means the footprint of a Children's Safeguarding Partnership.
2. The TCE Programme views the 'system' from an ecological perspective (drawing on ecological systems theory - Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In doing so, the Programme has considered the systems and structures that shape the local and national contexts in which children, young people and their families live, and has sought to exert influence both 'up and down' these circumstances. Taking a systems-level approach reflects the interconnected and ever-changing nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm (Lowe et al., 2021a; Lowe et al., 2021b) and the benefits of taking a 'systems leadership' approach when tackling 'wicked issues' (Ghate et al., 2013).
3. TCE uses the term 'partners' broadly to mean agencies, organisations and others with a role to play in relation to safeguarding children and young people.

# Context of the TCE Programme

Four factors were particularly relevant to the context of the TCE Programme. The first three were known from the outset and the fourth – the Covid pandemic – was unexpected and unprecedented.

## 1. The complex and challenging nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm

Defining child exploitation and extra-familial harm is not clear-cut. Exploitation is a type of abuse, characterised by control, coercion and manipulation. There are agreed legal definitions for some elements of child exploitation but not others.[4] Extra-familial harm refers to forms of harm that happen outside of the home.

The TCE Programme's remit was to consider strategic responses to both child exploitation and extra familial harm. Whilst there are clear areas of overlap and common ground between them, they are not synonymous and, as forms of abuse, retain clear and important distinctions. For example, child exploitation can happen within the home (for example, a parent / carer forcing a child into modern slavery) as well as beyond. Not all extra-familial harm involves exploitation (such as some forms of peer-on-peer abuse), and not all forms of abuse involve exploitation.

Identifying and responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is challenging. The constantly evolving nature of child exploitation, in which perpetrators adapt the way they operate to avoid detection, makes it difficult for services to disrupt them and stay one step ahead (Brewster et al., 2021). The safeguarding system was primarily set up to respond to intra-familial harm, which happens to children and young people within their home / family contexts. Extra-familial harm has only recently been recognised as a child protection issue, to which approaches like Contextual Safeguarding[5] respond.

Perceptions of choice in relation to children and young people at risk of or being exploited are also problematic. The notion of 'constrained choice', whereby, if the options available all result in adverse outcomes, a young person can be perceived as both making a choice and being a victim, is highlighted in the work of Beckett et al. (2017). The coercion and manipulation that typically underpin these exploitative situations can be overlooked if the young person is perceived as 'receiving' something in return for their actions (ibid) and / or the presenting behaviours result in a criminal justice response rather than

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4.  Please see **this briefing on language and definitions** commissioned by the TCE Programme.
5.  **Contextual Safeguarding** is an approach to safeguarding children and young people from harm outside of the home developed by Professor Carlene Firmin, OBE, of the University of Durham. **This briefing** explains what Contextual Safeguarding is (and is not).

a safeguarding response (Maxwell et al., 2019).

This becomes even more important when the experiences of minoritised groups are considered. Some factors, such as being in care or having a special educational need or disability (Karsna & Kelly, 2021; Franklin & Smeaton, 2017), are associated with children and young people at higher risk of being abused, but there is no definitive list of well-evidenced indicators. Importantly, children and young people can become victims of exploitation and / or extra-familial harm regardless of personal circumstances.

Considerable effort is being made to understand what constitutes an effective response for children and young people affected by child exploitation and extra-familial harm,[6] whilst recognising that the context in which harm is happening also needs to be addressed, as do the perpetrators. There are promising signs that some interventions and approaches can be impactful. These include focusing on reachable moments in a young person's life, such as being admitted to Accident & Emergency (Goodall et al., 2017[7]), certain mentoring programmes[8] and building trusted relationships (Lewing

et al., 2018). However, it is important to emphasise that the evidence on responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is emerging and the complex and systemic nature of the issues do not always fit well with traditional quasi-experimental studies of 'what works' at a discrete intervention level.

## 2. Overlapping responsibilities and resulting responses of central and local government and safeguarding partners

Responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm is also complex. Many agencies and organisations are involved, which fall under the jurisdiction of different central and local government departments, engage with different funding streams and policy imperatives, and report to different regulators.[9]

## 3. A system under pressure

For several years now, partners involved in responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm (including children's social care, health, police, youth justice and education) have been under considerable pressure in terms of

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6.   This includes work by organisations such as the **Youth Endowment Fund**, the **What Works Centre for Children's Social Care**, the **Youth Violence Commission** and the **Early Intervention Foundation** amongst many others.

7.   This evaluation covers all ages, not just children and young people, but there are an increasing number of initiatives that focus on young people, such as **Redthread** in London and the **Violence Intervention Project** in Leicester.

8.   See the **Youth Endowment Fund toolkit**.

9.   The challenges associated with joined-up working at central government level were highlighted in the Wood Review (Department for Education, 2021a) **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/wood-review-of-multi-agency-safeguarding-arrangements**

finance and resources (HCLG, 2019) within a context of increasing need (ADCS, 2021) and, with regard to this Programme in particular, the child exploitation agenda has expanded. Short-term funding is another challenge cited by those seeking to effect meaningful systems change (highlighted in TCE annual surveys and in discussions with local BSP sites). Driven in part by electoral cycles (and the need to respond and be seen to respond to new and emerging forms of harm) short-term, single-agency funding still characterises much of the service and commissioning landscape for child exploitation and extra-familial harm.

## 4. Covid

The TCE Programme was conceived, designed and commissioned pre-Covid on the basis that work with local areas would take place face to face. At the onset of the pandemic it was agreed that the work would continue in an online space, requiring the Programme team to adapt its approaches accordingly. Delivery therefore took place alongside the considerable pressures local areas were facing and affected the ability of agencies, especially those working in health, to participate.

# TCE principles and approach

Given the breadth of the Programme's scope, it was important that the TCE team had a clearly defined approach to bring methodological consistency to its work. This approach drew on what is known from the three pillars of evidence-informed practice,[10] i.e.:

a) the relevant research evidence base

b) practice wisdom / professional knowledge

c) those with expertise through lived experience.

A clearly articulated set of principles underpinned the Programme's work, with the 'how' of the work undertaken considered as important as 'what' was focused on.

The three underlying principles were:

1. To be **constructively disruptive**. The consortium had a clear vision from the outset of wanting to work in ways that supported local areas to think critically, to act as 'grit in the system'. Constructive disruption is proposed by innovation theorists as a way of, 'Disrupting a process, industry or organization in a beneficial or constructive manner, via the constructive questioning or challenging of the traditional or assumed status quo, wisdom or structures of an area.'[11] (Bowyer, 2021)

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10. Bowyer (2011), drawing on Barlow & Scott, 2010.
11. See **https://www.qeios.com/read/Y4SQO1**

2. Drawing strategic leaders' attention to **those whose voices are often less heard**. This included the children and young people identified as being at risk of or being exploited, their parents and carers, and minoritised groups who are disproportionately over or under-represented across different parts of the system.[12] For example, the literature highlights the concept of 'adultification', whereby Black boys and girls are assumed to be older than they are (Goff et al., 2014), meaning their needs may be overlooked and safeguarding responses less robust as a result (Davis & Marsh, 2020). Strategic leaders need to be aware of lived realities such as these, and actively address them in order to be able to provide an appropriate response.

3. Acknowledging the need to **respond to local context**. Child exploitation and extra-familial harm manifest in different ways around the country. Multiple child safeguarding practice reviews (e.g., Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board, 2020[13]; The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020[14]) emphasise the importance of partners working together effectively. Therefore, TCE projects with local areas were bespoke and multi-agency,[15] responding to locally identified priority issues.

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12. Reasons for this include assumptions and bias and / or what data is (and is not) collected and how it is categorised. TCE commissioned **this literature review** to explore what data collected by local areas can and cannot tell us about equalities, diversity and inclusion.

13. **https://www.walthamforest.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2021-11/WFSCB%20-%20SCR%20Child%20C%20May%20 final_.pdf**

14. **https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/870035/ Safeguarding_children_at_risk_from_criminal_exploitation_review.pdf**

15. Taking part in a BSP required as a minimum the support of strategic leaders from each of the three statutory safeguarding partners.

The **core features of the TCE approach** were:

## Utilising a **strengths-based approach**

In essence this means focusing on the assets, protective factors and strengths inherent in an individual or family (or, in the case of TCE, within a local area) and seeing these as the foundations on which growth and change can develop. A strengths-based approach sits in direct opposition to the deficit model that focuses on a problem that needs to be solved, and features as an important principle in social care (SCIE, 2018).

## Working relationally

This is about attending to the quality of relationships at and between different layers of the system (of which the Programme is a part), in a way that nurtures relationships and allows for a shared culture to develop that can offer high support, high challenge and high expectations. Working relationally refers as much to the (multi agency, multimodal) relationships between professionals as to the children and families supported by them. The evidence shows the importance of such relationships to achieving intended outcomes and goals both in social work (Ruch et al., 2018) and with vulnerable children and young people (Lewing et al., 2018).

## Applying the principles of **restorative practice**

This stems from the notion of restorative justice,[16] but takes a broader view that, 'repairing harm or resolving problematic situations is best achieved by building or restoring relationships rather than penalizing those involved.' (Williams, 2019)

One of the foundational concepts of restorative practice, the social discipline window (McCold & Wachtel, 2003), was also a key part of the TCE approach. This sets out a way of thinking about communicating with others, characterised by 'doing things with people, rather than to them or for them,' (Wachtel, 2013, p. 3) and aims to achieve high challenge and high support. The Programme committed to modelling and embedding this way of working across its activities and internal behaviours.

The TCE team aimed to communicate and model the principles and approach in all Programme activities, from working with Delivery Partners, local areas and central government commissioning colleagues, to the design and content of the microsite and curation and delivery of the Learning Programme. By doing so, the team sought to demonstrate a different way of approaching the challenges associated with child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Working with local areas, not doing the work for them meant there was a focus on identifying actions for partners to take forward at the end of a BSP, thus supporting the sustainability of the work beyond the direct involvement of the TCE team.

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16. Restorative justice is defined by the **Restorative Justice Council** as a process that brings 'those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for the harm into communication, enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward.'

## Delivery

The TCE Programme delivered 31 BSPs across England, with at least one completed in every region (see figure 1 below). Across the range of types of BSP delivered (single, complex and regional) TCE worked with a total of 84 local areas.

BSPs were designed to be short-term. Typically, TCE worked with one or more child safeguarding partnerships for 7-10 days over 3-6 months, depending on the number of partners involved and the size of the geographical footprint. Once the aim of the project was agreed, the Programme team would plan a series of focused activities interspersed with workshops to bring partners together.

Delivery Partners were a core part of the TCE team. A flexible and adaptive pool of experts from a wide range of backgrounds who embedded peer-to-peer credibility and ensured that knowledge developed through the Programme was owned and sustained within the sector. Delivery Partners were matched against the bespoke needs of local areas and developed resources and / or facilitated learning events.
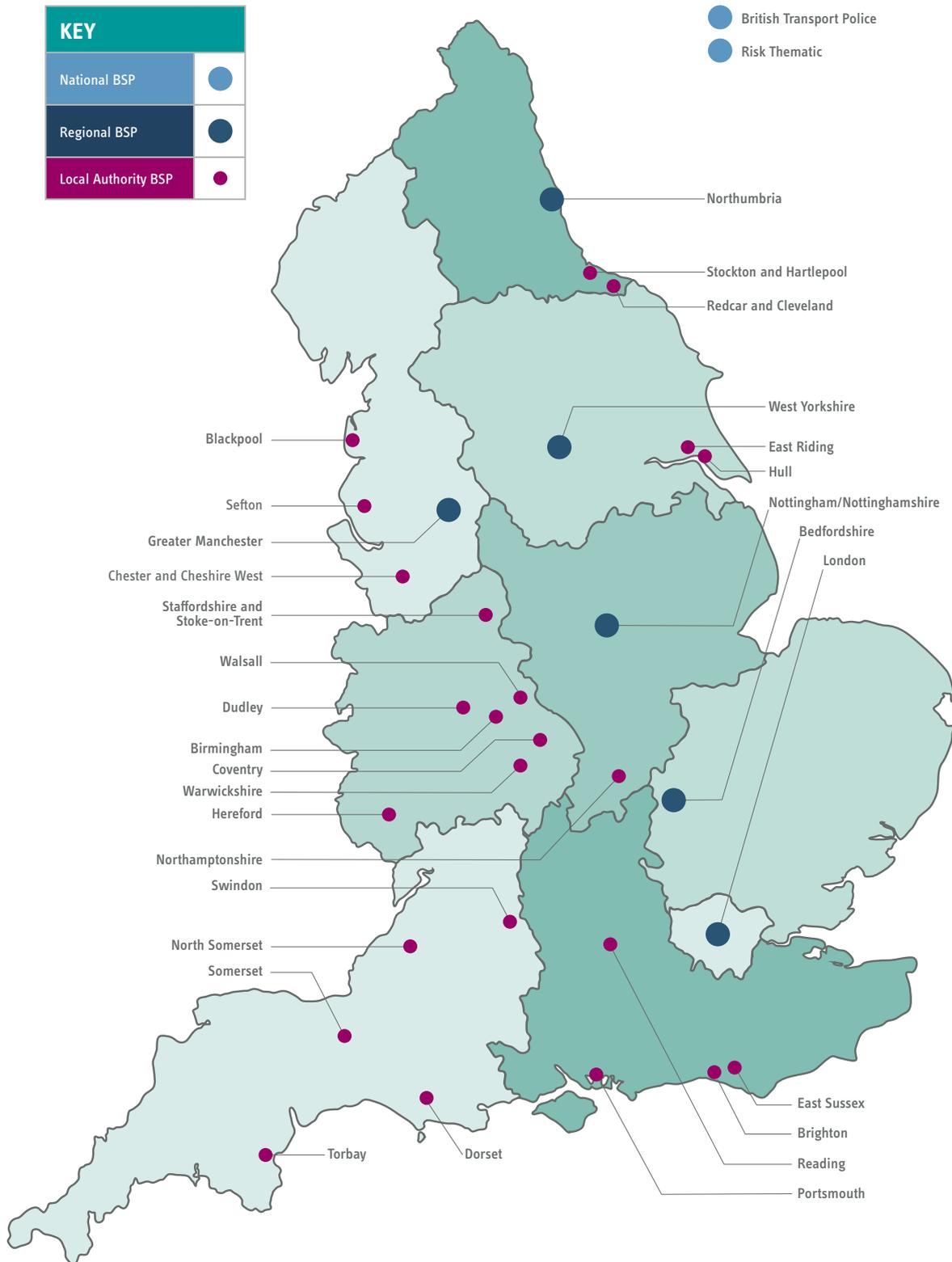
Figure 1 Map of BSPs

**KEY**

| | |
|---|---|
| National BSP | ● |
| Regional BSP | ● |
| Local Authority BSP | ● |

- British Transport Police
- Risk Thematic

Map labels:

- Northumbria
- Stockton and Hartlepool
- Redcar and Cleveland
- West Yorkshire
- East Riding
- Hull
- Nottingham/Nottinghamshire
- Bedfordshire
- London
- Blackpool
- Sefton
- Greater Manchester
- Chester and Cheshire West
- Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent
- Walsall
- Dudley
- Birmingham
- Coventry
- Warwickshire
- Hereford
- Northamptonshire
- Swindon
- North Somerset
- Somerset
- Torbay
- Dorset
- East Sussex
- Brighton
- Reading
- Portsmouth

In year 3, TCE delivered a Learning Programme, a series of 15 events that took place between October 2021 and March 2022. The learning events focused on the three themes identified (from the evaluation data and team experience) as being of key importance to local areas, namely data, risk and partnership working, and were a way of disseminating learning more widely in the final months of the TCE Programme.

The Learning Programme offered a space in which professionals could hear and learn from and with each other. It attracted 732 participants from different parts of the country and from all sectors. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive. 65% of respondents scored the event at 8 or above on a usefulness scale of 1-10 (10 being extremely useful). Nearly 8 out of 10 participants said they would, 'do something differently tomorrow,' as a result of what they learned at the event.

A number of priority issues were identified over the course of the Programme, i.e.:

> children & young people's voices

> parents and carers' voices

> minoritised groups (i.e., Equity, Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion - EEDI)

> how services should move from being CSE-focused to also include victims of CCE

> approaches to assessing risk.

These themes were selected as important issues to focus on in order to support sense-making where gaps in understanding were highlighted, a lack of clarity was identified and / or certain voices needed amplifying. Each workstream undertook different activities (for example, action learning sets, literature reviews and focus group discussions). All the outputs created are published on the TCE microsite.

Programme learning has been shared and amplified via the **microsite**, which also hosts a wide range of resources curated for professionals working in the fields of exploitation and extra-familial harm. Microsite traffic has grown from 379 unique hits in quarter 2 of 2020 to 2,919 in just one year, representing an increase of 670%. Over the course of the Programme, the content shifted from a repository of pre-existing literature to TCE-commissioned resources.[17]

17. TCE published 63 commissioned resources with the three most read resources being: **'County lines', inequalities and young people's rights: a moment of pause and reflection** (1802 views); **The hyper-visible and invisible children** (1388 views); **Missing from education: child exploitation, exclusion and risk** (1128 views).

# Evaluation and impact

An internal mixed methods evaluation of the TCE Programme was carried out, including surveys of BSP participants at the start (T1) and end (T2) of working with the Programme, and 3-6 months later (T3). Focus groups happened at T2 and T3. Surveys and feedback sessions with the TCE team and Delivery Partners about their experiences of BSPs and working with TCE were also conducted. Quantitative data was analysed using the software package SPSS. Qualitative data was managed and coded using NVivo software then thematic analysis was carried out.

The impact of the TCE programme must be considered in light of what it was setting out to achieve and what is known from the literature on evaluating complex systems and changes (Skivington et al., 2021; Abercrombie et al., 2015). The aim was to work for a limited time alongside local areas on a locally identified strategic change goal, so Programme delivery did not involve any direct work with children and young people. **Therefore, the impact was explored at the strategic level, not in terms of any quantifiable outcomes relating to individual children and young people**. As a result, the focus of this report is on how new ways of working can change the way systems respond to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Arguably, the findings are also applicable to any work that involves multiple stakeholders working on complex issues.

# Key learning from delivery

The work of the TCE Programme supported local areas in developing their strategic responses to child exploitation and extra-familial harm in six key ways:

## 1. Creating reflective space for partnerships

A recurrent theme was about the importance of creating space to bring partners together away from the busyness of everyday pressures and for them to be able to focus, explore and reflect on one particular issue. Over 80% of those who responded to the T2 survey said bringing people together in workshops was helpful. Being able to slow down meant partners were able to listen to and hear each other's perspectives in greater depth, enabling them to move forward with purpose and understanding. Achieving this was not always easy. There was tension at times, with participants struggling to justify the time needed for 'holding space' given other pressing work demands.

## 2. External facilitation

The value of having independent, external and skilled facilitators was found to be highly beneficial to many local areas in terms of navigating any tensions between partners. This was helpful at the start of a BSP, where points of difference identified in single-agency conversations could be explored collectively. Utilising a strengths-based, relational approach meant this happened in a non-blaming way and was particularly effective at facilitating more in-depth understanding of roles and remits in relation to working in exploitation and extra-familial harm.

## 3. Highlighting local areas' strengths

When working with local areas, the TCE team noticed a tendency to focus on what was not working well. As part of taking a strengths-based approach, the team would invite partners to focus on local approaches and ways of working that seemed to be effective or promising. This was a helpful way of prompting a different – and positive – way of thinking amongst participants and helped identify where partnership assets lay.

## 4. 'Starting small, starting somewhere'

It was widely acknowledged by the TCE team and local areas that working in such a complex field could be overwhelming at times, exacerbated by systemic problems feeling endemic and difficult to shift. When responding to this, the TCE team found it helpful to encourage local areas to 'start small, start somewhere' as a way of empowering partners and demonstrating their agency – chiming with research that identifies self-efficacy as core to resilience (Reivich and Shatté, 2002).

## 5. Identify short-term as well as long-term outcomes

Aligned to 'starting small, starting somewhere' was the benefit of identifying one or more objectives that could be achieved relatively quickly with local areas. This was found to be helpful as a means of engaging partners in BSP work and engendering some commitment to ongoing parts of the work that might require more time and feel a lot harder.

## 6. Action planning as part of agenda

This helped reinforce the role of the TCE Programme team as facilitators, with responsibility for identifying and taking forward actions sitting with local areas. The TCE team saw the end of delivery as a starting point for local areas to take full ownership of the work they had started. The delivery team described their role as being able to act as a catalyst and 'light the spark' in local areas, which would go on to build momentum.

A range of practical **challenges** around timing and attendance were encountered during delivery. There was a tension between the short timescales of the BSPs and the lead-in time required to get appointments into diaries of senior leaders across partnerships. High levels of staff turnover in local areas impacted on Programme delivery and, arguably, the sustainability of BSP activity.

The nature of the TCE offer was different to many other types of programmes as it was working alongside local areas, encouraging a different way of thinking and not delivering a predetermined 'product' at the end of a BSP, like a strategy or data framework.

Given that the Programme explicitly set out to provide high challenge to local areas (as well as high support and high expectations), it is of note that the overall feedback was very positive (84% said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the support provided by the TCE Programme).

# Exploring what difference has TCE made to local areas' strategic responses to tackling child exploitation and extra familial harm

The Programme identified four key elements that support an effective strategic response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm:

## 1. Developing a shared vision

This is about partners having a shared understanding of their strategic goals and clarity of their roles within this. The process of establishing the vision was as valuable as the outcome. What emerged during TCE's work with local areas was the different ways language and definitions were being used and understood. Achieving clarity across and between agencies was key to ensuring that different interpretations of terms like 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' did not result in different levels of protection being offered to children and young people, because of how risk of harm was assessed or how thresholds were applied. This also related to the importance of partners working together to complement and actively support each other to fulfil their respective duties, particularly where such duties might be in tension with each other (such as when a young person is both a victim and instigator of harm).

## 2. Promoting connection and communication between partners (including non-traditional partners)

Identifying and involving those with a role to play in responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm in local areas was not as straightforward as might be expected. Each statutory safeguarding partner (children's social care, police and health) represents an organisation with not only a broad remit but also (often) different geographical footprints. Other parts of the professional system are also important to involve (e.g., education, housing, and the youth / criminal justice system) not to mention the breadth of the voluntary sector and commissioned services.

Simple mapping activities of local partners and services could highlight the breadth and range of activity and provision as well as any duplication or gaps. Attending to the language used across the partnership was also key. The Programme team drew attention to the importance of including the voices of minoritised groups and experts by experience at the strategic level, with a particular focus on children and young people's voices, parents and carers. This has implications for more traditional agencies, where professional language and acronyms could act as barriers to inclusion. There was a clear appetite in local areas to connect with colleagues across the country to hear about innovative practice and share common challenges, to which the Learning Programme responded.

## 3.   Enabling courageous leadership

Leaders have to balance being accountable for the statutory responsibilities of safeguarding with the need for service responses to be adaptable and flexible so as to reflect the emergent and evolving nature of child exploitation and extra-familial harm. Concern that trying something new could have unintended negative consequences and / or lead to a poor inspection result could act as barriers to innovation, resulting in defensive (rather than defensible) decision-making and practice.[18] Findings from BSPs highlighted the benefits of providing strategic leaders with a reflective space alongside multi-agency colleagues to critically reflect on what they were doing and why, to think creatively and explore alternative approaches. For leaders to engender an organisational culture where trying something new and different is encouraged takes courage. Not everything will be a 'success'. The importance of a culture of listening was also emphasised, i.e., a non-hierarchical leadership style of wanting to hear and learn from operational and frontline colleagues.
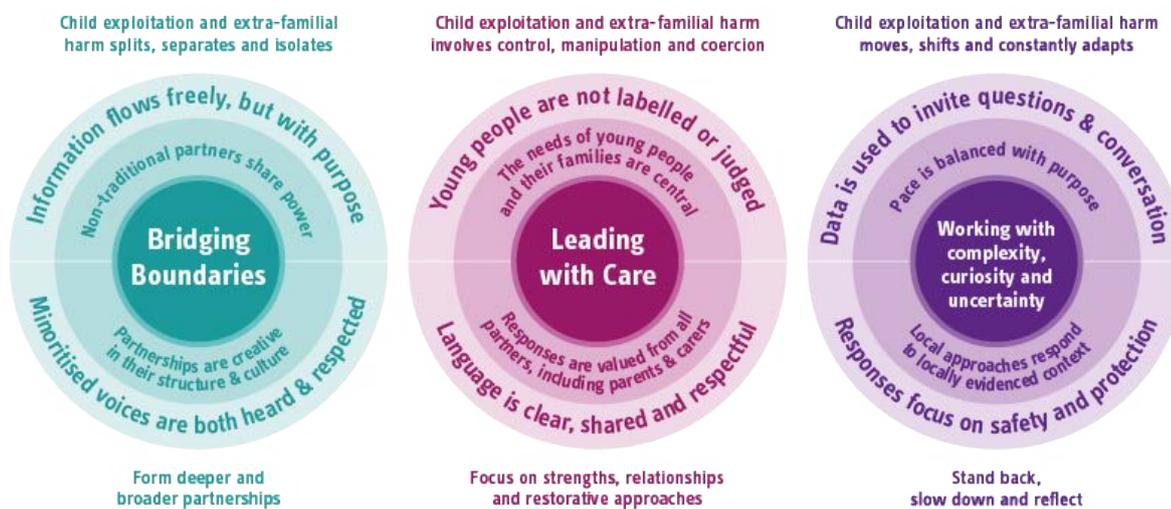
## 4.   Encouraging professional curiosity

The importance of critical thinking could be seen in work with local areas on the broad themes of risk, data and partnership, as well as in relation to thinking differently about young people. Challenging the status quo by exploring the limitations of using checklists to assess risk,[19] using **data for intelligence** rather than performance, and considering **disproportionality in the data** collected, were highlighted as being particularly important areas for strategic leaders to reflect on.

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18. The unintended consequences of inspection are discussed in the **Case for Change** published by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.
19. Research has highlighted that some of the tools used to identify risk indicators (e.g. within CSE) have been found lacking, in terms of the quality of underpinning evidence and / or in their application (Brown et al., 2016; 2017).

# What TCE learning means for tackling child exploitation and extra-familial harm

Drawing on learning from three years of TCE delivery, the team developed an approach called 'Joining the Dots'.



Child exploitation and extra-familial harm splits, separates and isolates

Information flows freely, but with purpose
Non-traditional partners share power

**Bridging Boundaries**

Partnerships are creative in their structure & culture
Minoritised voices are both heard & respected

Form deeper and broader partnerships

Child exploitation and extra-familial harm involves control, manipulation and coercion

Young people are not labelled or judged
The needs of young people and their families are central

**Leading with Care**

Responses are valued from all partners, including parents & carers
Language is clear, shared and respectful

Focus on strengths, relationships and restorative approaches

Child exploitation and extra-familial harm moves, shifts and constantly adapts

Data is used to invite questions & conversation
Pace is balanced with purpose

**Working with complexity, curiosity and uncertainty**

Local approaches respond to locally evidenced context
Responses focus on safety and protection

Stand back, slow down and reflect

'Joining the Dots' is a tool to help leaders make sense of the complex landscape of child exploitation and extra-familial harm, and consider the leadership behaviours and culture that can support an effective response. It focuses on the 'how' rather than adding to the 'what', in that it is intended to complement and add value to the raft of existing priorities and imperatives that local partnerships work to.

The 'Joining the Dots' framework consists of three interdependent principles:

## Bridging boundaries

Where child exploitation splits and separates its victims from protective institutions and relationships, 'bridging boundaries' looks to wrap deeper and broader partnerships around children and young people and their families. It seeks to support communities and to bring different agencies and organisations together. Putting this into practice requires partnerships to think creatively about their structures and share power with non-statutory partners and with communities, ensuring that information and expertise is shared and minoritised voices are heard and respected.

## Leading with care

Where child exploitation involves control, manipulation and the coercion of children and young people, 'leading with care' asks those with power to use it gently. The ways of working encouraged by the TCE Programme are intentionally strengths-based, relational, and put restorative principles at the core of partnerships, thereby aiming to move away from a deficit-based focus on the child and family to consider the interconnected conditions of abuse. When leading with care, the needs of young people and their families are central, responses are valued from all partners, including parents and carers, young people are not labelled or judged, and language is clear and respectful.

## Working with complexity, curiosity and uncertainty

Where forms of child exploitation constantly move, shift and are adapted, 'holding complexity, curiosity and uncertainty' offers the space needed to stand back, slow down and reflect in order to challenge 'quick fixes' and act with purpose. Local approaches respond to locally evidenced need. Data is used to invite questions and conversation. Responses focus on safety and protection. And 'not knowing' presents an opportunity to learn rather than a short-coming.

The three principles are interdependent. Change in relation to one will likely impact the others. Taken together, they work in sync to support and enable sustainable improvement.

**Underpinning the framework is the simple but powerful premise of anchoring strategic behaviour in an approach that explicitly inverts and disrupts the dynamics of child exploitation and extra-familial harm.** This will support organisational responses to children and young people at increased risk of or experiencing child exploitation that do not, albeit inadvertently, mirror the controlling dynamics associated with exploitative situations themselves.

The Joining the Dots approach is not being presented as a 'proven' framework. However, the extent of the read across with the findings from the analysis of evaluation data and Programme learning is an encouraging sign that the principles capture the key components needed to support strategic leaders that might not otherwise be attended to in practice and policy discourse regarding exploitation and extra-familial harm.

# TCE's contribution to systems improvement

The TCE Programme set out to offer something different to the sector and carried out a wide range of activities over its three years of delivery. Its work sought to make a contribution to the complex challenge of talking child exploitation and extra-familial harm by attending to the relational aspects of partnership working (for example, deepening the understanding of different agencies' roles) as opposed to the procedural (i.e., the Programme did not produce strategy documents or service pathways). In working with local areas, the Programme brought senior strategic leaders together and provided a safe space to pause, reflect and consider if / how there were opportunities for improving the local area response to child exploitation and extra-familial harm. This was not an easy task. Senior leaders are busy and working under pressure - there were practical challenges of finding diary time to meet. And a global pandemic ensued.

The Joining the Dots framework is one tangible example of how TCE has made a contribution to shifting the thinking of those working in the system. Feedback from the sector has indicated that the centrality of inverting the experience of exploitation alongside the simplicity of the framework helps prompt practitioners to think differently about the young people, families, carers and professionals they work with, while keeping the experiences of exploited young people at the centre. In this way, it is an example of 'starting small, starting somewhere' by offering a starting point for strategic leaders and local partnerships to navigate how to apply evidence to their local contexts.

Rather than a traditional evaluation approach whereby the outputs, outcomes and impact of a clearly defined programme of activities are measured, the key learning from TCE has been about approaches to working at a systems level and the mechanisms of delivery. Analysis of the evaluation data identified some robust findings about the value that working with the TCE Programme could add to local areas, i.e.:

> strengthening and deepening relationships between partners

> offering a different way of thinking about the risks and vulnerabilities of children and young people affected by exploitation and extra-familial harm

> the importance of working with parents and carers as partners

> considering minoritised groups and those disproportionately over or under-represented in the data collected and monitored about children and young people.

There was also a clear appetite amongst the sector (as evidenced by the 84 local areas TCE worked with and the 700+ participants that attended the Learning Programme events) to hear and learn from each other and to try and do things differently. The TCE Programme will build on this learning for a fourth year (April 2022 to March 2023) to develop Practice Principles[20] for responding to child exploitation and extra-familial harm, in consultation with professionals, children and young people, parents and carers and community organisations. These Principles will be high level and applicable to multi-agency working at different levels of the system, with the aim of promoting coherence and supporting safeguarding partnerships to respond to the complex challenges they face.

20. For more information about the Practice Principles, see: **https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/practice-principles/**

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