

Project Learning Report

Details of Bespoke Support Project (BSP):	
Partnership name:	Dorset
Core partner agencies involved:	Dorset Council – Children’s Social Care Dorset CCG Dorset Police
Number of Local Authority areas covered:	1
Regional area:	South West
BSP size:	Standard
BSP methodology/ methodologies	Partnership, young people’s voices
Digital / face to face / mixed delivery	Digital
Date BSP commenced:	June 2021
Reasons why the local area requested the TCE Support Programme:	
<p>Agencies from Dorset who are currently working together to tackle child exploitation (CE) requested support from the TCE Programme to begin to understand how child exploitation currently presents locally for the children and young people living in Dorset, informed and influenced by children and young people directly. The local area reflected that a significant amount of change and progress had been made to offer a Contextual Safeguarding response.</p> <p>To support this, the partnership also wanted to further understand each agency’s role and responsibility to tackle child exploitation, which would help inform the development of a revised child exploitation strategy, due to be updated in 2022.</p>	
Overall goal of BSP:	
<p>In the longer term, Dorset’s child exploitation partnership wished to engage children and young people’s voices and experiences to understand if responses to child exploitation had changed since Covid-19. The short term goal for this project was to agree on a joint purpose and consistent approaches to allow for children and young people’s voices and lived experience to inform the partnership’s next strategic plan to tackle child exploitation.</p> <p>In particular, the project focused on approaches to meaningfully and ethically engaging young people’s voices and experiences to inform senior leader’s decision-making to tackle child exploitation from a multi-agency perspective. The Programme also worked with</p>	

Dorset's child exploitation partnership to:

- Develop an understanding of the [evidence-based approaches](#) to engage children and young people's voices in strategic decision-making, including learning from TCE's work on this.
- To reflect on the local area's enablers, barriers and aspirations in relation to engaging young people identified from the partnership's single-agency conversations with TCE.
- To begin to agree a consistent approach to engaging young people's voices in strategic decision-making to inform the partnership of what life is like for a young person living in Dorset, who may experience or be at risk of exploitation.
- To begin to define a clear aim and purpose to engage young people's voices in strategic decision-making to inform the landscape of child exploitation and responses to it.

What supported this project was a willingness demonstrated from each agency across Dorset to listen to all the voices of children and young people within their respective communities, with a commitment to ensuring as many voices were represented in co-production work going forward. While acknowledging the challenges for engaging demographics of children and young people who do not want to engage with services, it was noted that professionals are accountable for making attempts, which are creative and flexible, to overcome the barriers of non-engagement.

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

To develop the change goal, two partnership planning meetings were held after seven single-agency conversations that were (with different agencies and teams) facilitated by the TCE Programme. These conversations provided an opportunity for TCE to understand each agency's and team's priority to progressing this work and to identify enablers and opportunities, barriers and future aspirations. Three themes emerged from the conversations:

- Identifying and agreeing consistent approaches to engage children and young people's voices to inform the partnership about their experiences of child exploitation and Contextual Safeguarding within Dorset.
- Data – how can the partnership use data to understand the picture / landscape of contextual safeguarding in Dorset?
- Strategic mandate – to gain clarity about each agency's role and responsibility to inform the child exploitation strategy which is being reviewed in 2022.

In agreement with the single point of contact, TCE took forward two themes:

- 1) agreeing consistent approaches to engage children and young people's voices
- 2) developing a strategic mandate.

TCE facilitated three digital workshops. Two focussed on approaches to engaging children and young people's voices and one on exploring the strategic mandate and identifying each agency's roles and responsibilities in tackling child exploitation. TCE's role was to support the local area to stop, pause and reflect on the themes identified, to share opportunities and enablers, barriers and aspirations, and to utilise these workshops as a starting point to further progress the two areas of work as stated above.

Throughout the BSP, actions were:

- a) identified and reflected to the group by the TCE project lead
- b) factored into the planning of the next workshops.

This was to ensure that delivery remained focussed on the local area's identified needs. Ending all workshops with action planning activities allowed Dorset colleagues to produce an action plan to drive them forwards into the next stage of development of this work, 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:

From the outset of the project, the will, commitment and drive from each agency to listen and incorporate the views and experiences of children and young people into strategic-decision making was evident. The trust, established relationships and passion to progress this work as a partnership felt significant to the momentum of this project. The work with TCE highlighted that current approaches were either undertaken on a single-agency basis, i.e. not coordinated across the partnership (in regards to timescales, purpose and processes. And when partnership wide activity did happen, it was limited to informing senior leader's understanding and decision-making on child exploitation. Through conducting single-agency conversations, it was recognised that some of the reasons for this were the partnership not yet having an explicit conversation about how and why it wanted to engage young people's voices to inform senior leader's decision-making. This included exploring and agreeing what the purpose of both individual agencies and the partnership was when engaging children and young people's responses and listening to their views and experiences. And the extent to which such engagement informed decision-making and responses at a strategic, tactical and operational level.

Silo activities

During the scoping phase of the project, whilst TCE was undertaking single-agency conversations and facilitating planning meetings with the partnership, it emerged that work to hear young people's voices was happening. For example, agencies were capturing or seeking young people's experiences of support offered via single-agency surveys. However, there were limited questions or opportunities to explore young people's understanding of child exploitation across Dorset, other than outreach work undertaken from the Targeted Youth Workers whose role focussed on child exploitation. Each service recognised that it had its own motivations and purposes which were not aligned to a partnership agreement of how to engage young people's voices to understand the landscape of child exploitation across Dorset. This led senior leaders to reflect that, although there were plentiful opportunities for young people to share their views and experiences, there was no specific focus on the theme of child exploitation and no alignment to ensure a coordinated partnership approach.

Under-representation

Another challenge, which we know is a national issue, was that the partnership desired and felt responsible for ensuring fair representation of all young people living in Dorset. All partners wanted to commit to this as a priority and it was identified as an action to take forward. One suggestion of how to progress this was to engage with local communities via voluntary organisations who have pre-existing relationships. Further developing relationships with the voluntary and community sector was also identified as an action as it was felt that predominantly statutory members formed the CE partnership and more could be done to engage the VCS. It was suggested that the Targeted Youth Workers could help build relationships with voluntary organisations who were in the spaces / places of local communities. In addition to the VCS, education colleagues from a variety of provisions (including alternative provisions and further education) were suggested as an opportunity for partners engaged in the workshop to bridge stronger relationships in order to engage with as wide a range of young people as possible.

Some barriers that arose through this work resonated with the [TCE Programme's findings](#) on this topic from other areas, i.e.:

- Feelings of fear and apprehension to avoid tokenistic approaches and the need to 'get it right'. Understanding what approaches were available across the partnership that appeared to be effective to engaging young people's voices and to understand what worked well and how this could be built on were highlighted by TCE as ways to address these concerns see these [expert interviews](#) and [reflective questions](#)). TCE supporting the partnership to 'start small, start somewhere' was also felt to be an enabler to progress this work and put aside feelings of apprehension and fear. TCE offered support whilst the partnership explored what the key purposes were to engage the voices of young people.
- It was felt that the timescales currently in place for a feedback loop back to the young people consulted were likely to be seen by young people as 'too slow'. TCE supported Dorset's partnership to explain this to young people in the context of the complexity and nuance of CE and that there isn't a quick response to 'fix or solve'. The importance of honesty, transparency and regular communication between the young people and professionals were emphasised. In Dorset, we particularly saw this between the young people and the Targeted Youth Workers and then with senior leaders. Being upfront with young people about the time it would take for change to take place was acknowledged as important in order to retain and continue building trust between young people and services.
- What we think we know vs what we actually know. The partnership set a challenge for itself going forward with this work to ensure that any approaches agreed could demonstrate the link to the direct views and experiences of young people.
- Use of language – the partnership needs to ensure the language used by professionals in regards to child exploitation is understood by all agencies and means the same thing. Locally, Dorset has an agreed definition but their challenge to themselves was, 'is this understood by young people?' The partnership has agreed for one piece of work going forward to agree a definition for child

exploitation which is developed by children and young people, ensuring that the language professionals use is meaningful for children and young people living in Dorset.

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

Senior leaders at the TCE-facilitated workshops agreed three core reasons to listen to young people's voices as a way of influencing senior leader's responses to tackling child exploitation:

1. Understanding the experiences of services that young people receive (including young people who are at risk of or experiencing child exploitation).
2. Young people help professionals to understand child exploitation through the language they use and the harm they are seeing / experiencing.
3. In the instances when a young person has shared their personal experiences of exploitation with a trusted professional, this information can appropriately be used to inform the partnership's understanding of the aggregated patterns of exploitation locally.

Asking what the positive impact would be for a) young people and b) services if the partnership did this well helped it to think about what it wanted to achieve in the short and long term. It enabled the partnership to reflect on how engaging young people's voices could inform its understanding of the landscape of CE in Dorset.

Thinking about this from a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit model was helpful. Some of the examples senior leaders provided of how listening to YP voice could improve their service provision for young people were:

- A better understanding of child exploitation for professionals and young people would hopefully mean that more young people were identified to receive support.
- Services were designed to directly meet the needs of the current population.

For services:

- Being proud of the work we are doing in Dorset knowing it is informed and influenced directly from young people, with young people.
- All have a shared understanding of the risk profile for Dorset in order to target responses and resources.
- Narrow and eventually close the gap between professionals and young people's perceptions of risk.

As part of the workshops, The TCE Programme worked with the partnership to consider what ownership and accountability they have for this work. Specifically thinking about:

- What ownership do you have, in your role and service to help young people understand what exploitation is?
- What is your responsibility to improving the young people's experiences of services?
- What is within your gift?

This helped inform the group of how individuals could work together to progress this strand of work exploring how resources could be pooled together, who or what could be enlisted to help this work gain traction and support with the identification of next steps. This activity helped inform the third workshop, which focussed on exploring each agency's roles and responsibility in tackling child exploitation and providing a Contextual Safeguarding response.

Strategic mandate

The final part of the BSP focussed on the strategic mandate and clarification of the roles and responsibilities each agency could offer to tackle child exploitation at a strategic level. TCE shared the TCE's [Joining the Dots framework](#) with participants and there were a number of elements that resonated with the partnership.

Firstly, leading with care, particularly from a strength-based approach which was already embedded across Dorset in different parts of the system such as their THRIVE model. Leading with care felt particularly important for this discussion which focussed on roles and responsibilities as they noted that although clarity of roles is important, the next steps for this work is to focus on *how* the senior leadership team ensure people feel enabled and empowered to work bravely and safely to work beyond typical safeguarding responses and boundaries to respond to child exploitation.

When reflecting on the strategic mandate and how this workshop might influence the review of the partnership's child exploitation strategy (which is due to be updated in 2022), we explored one approach which was Mark Moore's Creating Public Value Strategic Triangle (1995).

Moore's triangle provides a helpful guide to the essential conditions to achieve public policy goals, public value outcomes, operational capacity and authorising environment. If these three conditions exist, they should be utilised by the partnership as an approach when updating their strategy. Perhaps less well described are the behaviours and psychological processes which underpin successful partnership strategy development. This was highlighted by Dorset who felt that the culture, values and beliefs of all individuals across a partnership was missing from the triangle, particularly how communities, parents / carers and children and young people were not being included. The partnership agreed that any action undertaken must be done with young people and professionals so senior leaders don't lose people along the way. Some reflections TCE encouraged colleagues in Dorset to consider were:

- When we think about the authorising environment, what permission is senior leaders giving to empower people to take action?

- Operational capacity - where do we have capacity?
- How can we combine resources to create leverage?

As Dorset is in the process of reviewing its child exploitation strategy, we discussed how this is a privileged position to be in and how Dorset is now required to consider what it might need to migrate to a new one. Some reflections by TCE which were deemed helpful to the partnership were:

- Is the partnership confident where the mandate comes from?
 - o Is everyone clear they have a mandate?
 - o Is it politically driven?
 - o Does it draw in all young people from different communities?
- Does this sit in or outside current governance structures?

Following this discussion, the partnership identified actions and questions from the workshop to flag to its CE strategic group to assist with reinforcing the mandate and support with the actions identified to update the strategy.

Significant learning and transferability from the BSP for other areas:

Before the project commenced, there was evidence to indicate from meetings with the partnership as a group and on a single-agency basis that all leaders were willing and motivated to listen to young people's voices. The partnership had agreed with the project goal for the BSP and the TCE delivery team observed no barriers in relation to commitment. This was an excellent and productive starting point and supported the project to commence in a more advanced position.

Opportunities to pause and reflect

Opportunities to pause and reflect were felt to be productive exercises for the partnership and appeared to unlock opportunities to work collectively and from a partnership perspective, as opposed to on a single-agency basis. It was clear that in the busyness of it all, multi-agency partners being brought together by TCE to focus explicitly on agreeing the purpose of and approaches to engaging young people's voices in senior decision-making enabled the partnership to begin developing self-identified actions and an action plan with a clear understanding of what the next steps should be and who could support this work.

Impact of language

Not exclusive to Dorset, but an area which was continuously discussed throughout this project and has been identified as a challenge across the sector by the TCE Programme was the importance of language, specifically how child exploitation is defined, categorised and understood by professionals and children and young people. Learning from the TCE Programme to date has identified that across the sector there are 'significant definitional issues' regarding the different types of exploitation, their relationship to one another and the relationship to other forms of exploitation and abuse¹. Within this and other projects the

¹ Read more in Brodie, I. (2022). *Child exploitation: definitions and language*. Darlington: Tackling Child Exploitation.

<https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/child-exploitation-definition-and-language-strategic-briefing/>

TCE Programme has delivered, there have been recurrent discussions about how the language that is often linked to or associated with child exploitation is developing rapidly, with terms such as 'complex safeguarding', 'contextual safeguarding', 'transitional safeguarding' and 'extra-familial harm' increasingly part of the strategic and operational vocabulary.

The term 'child exploitation' is increasingly used as an umbrella term. The different forms of exploitation which are or are not included within this definition have significant implications for the way in which partnerships are developed and decisions made to design and develop services. As an outcome of this project, partners from across Dorset wish to explore and gain an understanding of how children and young people understand and define child exploitation and if or how this compares with the definition in place amongst the partnership. Reflections were shared during the project that, locally, if partners want to understand whether the landscape of child exploitation has changed as a result of Covid-19, they need to ensure that how professionals define and understand child exploitation is informed and understood by children and young people, thereby breaking down any misunderstandings. If we do not clarify this or involve young people in developing their definition and understanding of child exploitation, it could cause a disconnect and mean that local responses to tackling child exploitation are less effective and not utilised efficiently. The partnership agreed that the first step to progress this work was to engage young people and support them to identify a definition which was understood by them and reflected their experiences.

Development of a set of principles for approaches to engaging children and young people's voice and experiences

As a result of the first workshop, the partnership started to develop a set of principles which it wanted to work towards when engaging young people's voices. These were:

- Relationships are vital when engaging young people's voices and experiences, and even more so in an exploitation context.
- Any approaches undertaken must be ethical and avoid causing trauma for children and young people involved.
- Integrity is important. Young people need to see and feel that we will respond to what they tell us and that what they tell us could change things. We have got to be clear about what we will do with the feedback and show that we have done it.
- Be clear about what we can do and what we can't do. Responsibility lies with professionals to manage expectations rather than blame processes / positions and people for delays, etc.
- It's important to acknowledge and reflect on our own background in this work and how this might impact approaches taken and decision-making. Reflecting on our own attitudes and experiences are important. For example, ensuring young people are seen as victims first.
- The language we use is equally important – identifying a shared language that is developed by children and young people. Professionals must consistently challenge

victim-blaming language and ensure young people are written and talked about in a strengths-based manner.

- Lots of mechanisms are needed to engage young people across the partnership, but the future focus needs to be on specifically considering mechanisms that inform the partnership about child exploitation.
- Acknowledging we won't always get this right and when we don't get it right, we acknowledge that to young people and apologise.

Clarity in regards to roles and responsibilities

In many of the BSPs TCE has delivered, local areas have requested to explore partnership's roles and responsibilities. TCE have reflected with Dorset and other partnerships across England that responding to child exploitation puts an added emphasis on the need to clarify roles and responsibilities.

Child exploitation is complex, evolving and high risk. A degree of uncertainty plus a limited evidence base makes it a very challenging issue for a partnership or agency. Specifically with Dorset, TCE challenged partners to consider:

- What do we all bring to the table to offer responses to or advice about CE?
- Could Dorset develop a framework that acts as 'scaffolding' to the work the partnership undertakes?
- Once clarity is gained from understanding each other's roles and responsibilities in tackling CE, what does the partnership want to do with this information?

TCE provided some suggestions from other projects such as identifying a strategic champion or advocate to tackle CE through a prevention, disruption and intervention 'lens'. This advocate wouldn't be responsible for activity but for supporting accountability. Or, some areas have started to review partnership structures and ways of working as a result of understanding roles and responsibilities. For example, they might look at what is in place across safeguarding partnerships and Community Safety Partnership and try to rationalise or rethink governance structures.

Date: 10.5.2022

Signed by Delivery Team: Ellie Fairgrieve