

Voluntary and statutory sector partnerships in local responses to Child Sexual Exploitation

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Evidence Briefing

This briefing summarises findings of a three-year evaluation of the 'Hub and Spoke' model of child sexual exploitation (CSE) service development, which took place within 50 local authorities (LAs). It focuses on evidence that can support the development of effective partnerships between voluntary and statutory sector agencies when responding to CSE.

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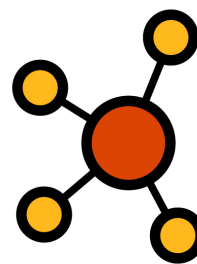
Key messages

- There has been evidence of the value of co-located, multi-agency teams in tackling CSE for over 20 years, but only limited implementation of this approach.
- Voluntary sector CSE services make a distinct contribution to local safeguarding through the diffusion of their safeguarding ethos and methods amongst partner agencies.
- This occurs where workers model their approach to casework, provide tools and resources, and deliver training in order to increase the local capacity and effectiveness of responses to CSE.
- The Hub and Spoke evaluation highlighted three key ways that the local context affected how far voluntary sector CSE workers could influence local safeguarding: the quality of local relationships, perception of expertise and location.
- Commissioners and managers need to take account of these, when considering how to best utilise the expertise and independence of the voluntary sector as part of local safeguarding.

1. The Alexi Project

The Alexi Project was an £8m service development programme, funded by the Child Sexual Exploitation Funders' Alliance (CSEFA). A key part of the project was the implementation of a 'Hub and Spoke' model, designed to rapidly increase the capacity and coverage of specialist, voluntary sector child sexual exploitation (CSE) services within England. Sixteen CSE services were funded for three years each, over a five-year period, with the aims of:

1. Making specialist support available to children and young people in a series of new locations; and
2. Improving the co-ordination, delivery and practice of local services responding to CSE – including police, children's services and other partner agencies.



The Alexi Project

Evaluating a new model of tackling CSE across England

During the evaluation period, these 16 hub services placed 53 spoke workers into 35 new LAs. The spoke workers provided one-to-one support, group-work and awareness-raising sessions to children and young people, and offered consultancy, training and awareness-raising to practitioners as well.

2. The evaluation

The Hub and Spoke programme was evaluated by a team at 'The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking' at the University of Bedfordshire. The team conducted 276 interviews with a range of stakeholders across the 16 sites, as well as collecting 30 case studies from spoke workers, and a range of quantitative data relating to the activities of the hub and spoke services. This briefing is based on the final report 'Harris et al. (2017) Evaluation of the Alexi Project 'Hub and Spoke' programme of CSE service development' which can be read at the Alexi Project website.

3. The historical development of multi-agency partnerships in responding to CSE

There has been evidence of the value of co-located, multi-agency teams in tackling CSE for over 20 years, but only limited implementation of this approach. In response to campaigns highlighting the scale of 'child prostitution' in the UK, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) published joint guidelines in 1997 and piloted a new 'child protection' response to CSE in Wolverhampton and Nottingham. These pilots demonstrated the value and impact of more proactive and strategic responses to CSE including the development of multi-agency teams involving all relevant statutory and voluntary sector agencies, and close professional relationships that enabled information sharing (Duffin, 2004; Gregory and Winton, 2004; Lucas et al. 2004). The Children's Act (2004) provided further impetus for multi-agency work by establishing a duty on LAs to promote inter-agency co-operation in order to improve children's well-being and a duty on key partners to take part in those arrangements. Guidance accompanying the act promoted co-location as an effective way of delivering improved services that were accessible to children.

Despite evidence and guidance advocating for integrated, multi-agency work, three reviews of local responses to CSE in the 2000s highlighted that CSE was generally not a priority, was not being systematically addressed and had only been 'mainstreamed' by local agencies in a few areas (Swann and Balding, 2002; Jago and Pearce, 2008; Jago et al., 2011). Jago and Pearce (2008) identified a number of reasons for this including CSE being 'a new issue' that was burdensome to identify and respond to, did not contribute to achieving local targets and was 'hidden from' and therefore not a priority for local communities.

Where they had been established, the most robust organisational response identified was a dedicated unit with co-located staff (Jago and Pearce, 2008; Jago et al., 2011), and in other models the development of a virtual team and the appointment of a child sexual exploitation coordinator supported effective partnership working (Jago and Pearce, 2008). However, of the 100 Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) surveyed in 2010/11 only 25% reported that a CSE coordinator was in place, and fewer than 10% of areas had, or planned to have, co-located units in place (Jago et al., 2011). This research also concluded that the involvement of voluntary sector specialist projects in multi-agency partnerships was invaluable for the delivery of intervention packages, but required the support of the LSCB – which was not always forthcoming. The research identified a risk that voluntary sector leadership of the CSE agenda could lead to statutory services abdicating their responsibility. In light of this, Jago et al. (2011: 65) wrote that:

“Specialist work needs to be linked into the generic delivery of services to ensure that the response to the needs of young people is holistic, rather than fragmented”

It was in the context of poor understanding of CSE amongst statutory agencies that the CSE Funders' Alliance designed the Hub and Spoke programme, leveraging the expertise of the voluntary sector to positively influence local safeguarding across England.

4. Voluntary sector CSE workers' impact on local safeguarding

Children and young people affected by sexual exploitation are often mistrustful of statutory services, and the Hub and Spoke evaluation found that voluntary sector CSE services were successful at engaging vulnerable children and young people that other services struggled to reach. They did so by offering children and young people meaningful choices, empowering them and being persistent in building relationships over the long-term. The voluntary sector makes a distinct contribution to local safeguarding when services are able to diffuse their safeguarding ethos and methods amongst partner agencies. Spoke workers modelled their approach to casework, provided tools and resources, and delivered training in order to increase the local capacity and effectiveness of responses to CSE. This helped to develop and diffuse a sense of shared norms or values between partner agencies, and contributed to driving up standards in local safeguarding practice. Where there was trust and mutual understanding of respective roles, voluntary sector services were able to provide constructive challenge (for example, in relation to poor practice), and support improved organisational and cross-agency learning in combating CSE.

4.1 Training

Training was seen as a vehicle for changing attitudes and diffusing good practice in CSE, with some voluntary sector workers contributing to LSCB training programmes as a way of partnering with statutory agencies. Effective training had an impact on professionals' behaviour, with some CSE workers describing an increase in referrals after they had delivered training. Others noted longer-term changes in attitudes and the language used amongst participating partner agencies.

“The language of the professionals has changed. There are still some professionals (who)... would not describe a young person as vulnerable as we would, but I have seen a big shift in the attitude of the workers.” (Hub project manager, Harris et al., 2017: 30)

To effectively influence partner agencies through training, CSE workers needed to have developed experience, knowledge and skills through case work. For CSE workers, this meant achieving a balance in their work-load between direct work with young people, and training other professionals.

4.2 Case work and case consultancy

CSE workers worked directly with children and young people, and also offered case consultancy to other agencies: a key vehicle for affecting the comprehension, attitudes and behaviour of police and other practitioners in responding to CSE. In this way, ‘shared norms’ developed about what was acceptable practice, including the belief that longer intervention times combined with a relationship-based approach are more likely to lead to a young person’s disclosure of abuse. Voluntary sector CSE workers used case consultancy as an opportunity to share the resources they used with young people, which was another way to diffuse good practice.

This modelling relies on CSE workers being sufficiently ‘close’ to statutory colleagues for them to observe the practice and distinguishing features of the voluntary sector approach. This could mean co-location in the same office, joint case-work or being integrated into multi-agency forums. The pressures facing social workers could limit the amount they were able to assimilate relationship based/therapeutic approaches into their own practice – even where these principles were shared with CSE services. Unfortunately, in some cases, the CSE worker’s capacity to take on case work as an ‘expert’ triggered the withdrawal of other agencies, which undermined the possibility of influencing others’ practice. To maintain opportunities for working together, it was important that agencies avoid this, and agree their approach to partnership working at the outset.

5. Conditions affecting the contribution of the voluntary sector to local safeguarding

The evaluation highlighted three key ways that the local context affected how far voluntary sector CSE workers could influence local safeguarding.

5.1 The quality of local relationships

The success of the spoke role was significantly affected by the local relationship between statutory and voluntary sector providers, and the history of that relationship. Where relationships had developed well over time, local authorities were able to tolerate a high level of challenge around working practices and approaches to CSE, and welcomed the independent perspective that the voluntary sector could offer.

“I think the other thing that made it really easy was that we’d worked with [Hub and Spoke provider] for a number of years...they knew our passion and drive and our worries. Helping us think through where our blind spots are, because we’ve all got them... any difficult conversations I think can be had and worked with.” (Children and Families manager, Harris et al., 2017: 28)

In some areas, large-scale police operations had necessitated the development of inter-agency trust and collaboration, and this often led to the hub service supporting the development of local strategy to address CSE. Partnerships between police and the voluntary sector were particularly effective where spoke workers were undertaking direct work with children and young people and were prepared to provide intelligence and share information in support of police operations.

Where good statutory/voluntary relationships did not already exist, successful collaboration was brought about through: developing a shared understanding of and respect for each organisation's role, needs and priorities; agreeing arrangements and protocols for effective communication and information sharing and negotiating clear roles and boundaries. This required dedicated management time from the CSE hub service and the recruitment of statutory 'champions' who would advocate for the role of the spoke worker locally. Relationship-building was more challenging during staff reorganisations, and in rural areas where CSE workers were travelling large distances to meet young people, and had less time to spend in the office.

5.2 Perception of expertise

Perception or recognition of a CSE worker's expertise affected how well integrated they became into the local service landscape - though people understood expertise in different ways. For some, the level of professional or academic qualification was paramount, while others prioritised knowledge and experience of CSE issues, or the skills required to undertake this kind of work with children and young people. The evaluation concluded that the spoke role was at its most effective when rooted in casework, so that workers' expertise and credibility is located in their experience of young people. Without sufficient and current case-work experience, the confidence of CSE workers in their own knowledge could be undermined, and this in turn affected partners' perceptions of them as 'experts'.

"No disrespect to social workers, they spend less time with the children and young people. Obviously [spoke worker] in her role can very much focus on CSE, whereas social workers can't. So her expertise in terms of doing this day in, day out, is so important for people to learn from. I know I've heard there have been occasions where someone's stuck on a case so they've made contact with [spoke worker] to say, "What can I do differently?" ...She [the spoke worker] has built up skills that other people won't have."
(LSCB manager in Harris et al., 2017: 29)

If the 'expertise' of CSE workers is presented in contrast to more generic roles, workers can encounter some resistance or low confidence in the role of other agencies, so workers and managers need to think about how to frame the support they are bringing.

5.3 Location

Finally, the location of CSE workers was key to: ensuring their visibility to the relevant agencies; developing referral pathways and identifying young people targeted for intervention; and maximising young people's access to and engagement with the service.

The evaluation identified five variants of the Hub and Spoke model (see Harris et al., 2017). Of these, 'outreach' approaches (where workers had no physical base) resulted in reduced visibility to partners and therefore fewer opportunities for the diffusion of good practice. These arrangements also presented challenges in terms of providing supervision and support and could result in spoke workers feeling isolated.

In contrast, co-located models of spoke location were the most supportive for individual workers. These would often be with statutory agencies, facilitating better information-sharing, trust-building and allowing CSE workers to model their approach to partner agencies. These arrangements generated referrals from statutory agencies, making it more likely that spoke workers would have a case-load of known/high-risk cases of CSE, or where concerns reached the threshold for social care intervention. This reduced the capacity of the worker to identify other groups of young people in need of support, which needs to be considered in the design of the service. Whilst being co-located with statutory services opened up access to key contacts and resources, it also required voluntary sector workers to maintain their independence and distinct approach, via on-going contact with the hub. If workers lost that, they also lost some capacity to provide critical challenge to their colleagues – a crucial function in multi-agency responses to CSE cases.

6. Implications for multi-agency practice

- Managers and commissioners from the voluntary and statutory sectors should build in time for mutual listening, trust-building and creating shared agreements and protocols for co-delivering service responses to CSE. These should be regularly revisited, and revised if needed.
- Multi-agency CSE teams should include experienced voluntary sector CSE workers, who can offer training and resources and model their distinct approach to other agencies.
- Statutory services should partner with voluntary sector CSE workers to engage children and young people in statutory services and processes.
- Commissioners and managers need to ensure that the location of CSE workers in host agencies/multi-agency teams aligns with the aims of the service in terms of the kinds of referrals that are generated.
- It is important that social workers look for ways to work alongside voluntary sector CSE workers rather than withdrawing from cases when a voluntary worker is able to provide direct support.

7. Conclusion

Multi-agency and co-located teams are increasingly used as part of local safeguarding arrangements e.g. Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (see Home Office, 2014). It is therefore in the interest of local safeguarding partners to understand how to encourage partnership working that protects the distinct functions and contributions of particular agencies. The Alexi Project Hub and Spoke evaluation provides evidence that will support service design and decision-making around multi-agency CSE responses, highlighting the value of voluntary sector CSE services in improving local safeguarding practice.

To view the other briefings in this series, please visit <https://www.alexiproject.org.uk/publications>. For more information about the evaluation please contact Dr Julie Harris, Principal Research Fellow, The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking Julie.harris@beds.ac.uk

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