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The Children's Society

Evaluation of the Disrupting
Exploitation Programme –
Year 1 Report: Executive
Summary

November 2019

1 Executive summary

1.1 Introduction

Cordis Bright has been commissioned by The Children's Society (TCS) to conduct an evaluation of the Disrupting Exploitation programme. This evaluation is being delivered across the three year length of the programme. This report presents findings from Year 1.

1.2 About the Disrupting Exploitation programme

The Disrupting Exploitation programme (hereafter referred to as 'the programme') will run for three years from 2018 to 2021, and is intended to focus on disrupting the exploitation of children and young people (CYP) across three cities in the UK (London, Birmingham, and Greater Manchester) as well as nationally through systems change interventions including outreach and policy and strategy change, and one-to-one case work.

The Disrupting Exploitation programme is an ambitious, innovative, multi-site programme seeking to work with a range of external partners to improve outcomes for children and young people, professionals and effect systems change in relation to the identification and responses to exploitation. As such, any consideration of its impact on outcome after its first year of operation should be seen in the context of the challenges associated with delivering and evidencing such impacts in a relatively short timescale.

Systems change

Systems change initiatives such as the Disrupting Exploitation programme are focussed on tackling issues which are the result of multiple interacting causes within wider systems which have multiple levels. These types of issues are characterised by complexity and are sometimes referred to as 'wicked problems', for example homelessness or knife crime. The focus is on tackling these issues via the wider systemic factors which hold them in place rather than directly trying to reduce the symptoms of the issue ([Lankelly Chase and New Philanthropy Capital](#)). This could involve improving the pathways which service users take through a system, the level of collaboration between different actors in a system, or the policies, laws, and organisational cultures that exist within a system ([Latham, 2014](#)).

The causal chains between the activities and impacts of systems change are long, complex, and dynamic. As a result, it often takes many years for the impacts to materialise, even when the systems change initiative is informed by the best available evidence ([Medical Research Council](#)). This can be longer than the timeframe for which some initiatives and their evaluations are funded, although evaluations seek to capture early indications of any outcomes and impacts.

However, evaluations can usefully comment on systems change initiatives in a number of other ways: critically appraising the implementation and process of the systems change initiative; evaluating whether the theory of change underlying the systems change initiative is supported by evidence and stakeholder expertise, and is updated over time; investigating the fidelity of the initiative's activity to the theory of change; and making recommendations for data monitoring processes intended to be able to capture systems change impacts longer-term.

It is recognised by the evaluators in the interpretation and reporting of findings that it may take several years for outcomes and impacts from systems change efforts to become evident, because of the indirect way in which systems change efforts are intended to have effects.

1.3 Implementation of the programme

Evidence from interviews with programme staff and wider stakeholders, and from programme documentation, suggests that programme implementation over its first year has taken place largely to plan.

However, there have been some delays experienced in establishing the local teams:

- Establishing a shared understanding of what is meant by systems change amongst programme staff has taken time. This has been addressed through taking a collaborative approach to defining systems change for the programme based on learning from the activities implemented in Year 1 as well as structured training delivered to programme staff, resulting in the production of systems change priorities for the programme. These priorities are seen by staff as important for guiding the direction of the programme going forward, and ensuring all areas are working towards a shared understanding of systems change.
- Engaging external organisations with the programme and embedding understanding of exploitation amongst their staff has also posed a challenge in some places. Staff and stakeholders reported that this was

primarily due to the limited capacity of external organisations, resulting from external factors such as high staff turnover and budget constraints. Staff and stakeholders also reported that levels of understanding of child exploitation, and in particular child criminal exploitation, had been lower than anticipated amongst some external organisations. Whilst this appears to have rapidly improved over the past year, in part attributed to the work of the programme as well as a wider increase in awareness of child criminal exploitation nationally, it has resulted in some of the programme's work taking longer to embed than originally anticipated.

Staff and stakeholders were confident that the programme would continue to progress into its second year of operation.

1.4 Impact of the programme

This report presents findings from interviews with programme staff and external stakeholders, an e-survey of staff and stakeholders, and a review of programme data and documentation. The impact of the programme is explored in relation to three areas:

- Impact for children and young people experiencing or at risk of exploitation
- Impact for practitioners working with children and young people
- Impact on system-level change. The programme's impact on systems change is explored in relation to the following areas:
 - System pathways, i.e. pathways for children and young people, either within an organisation or across several organisations, which are designed to move them through a series of steps, supporting them to achieve positive outcomes
 - System structures, i.e. policies, laws, regulations and organisational cultures which affect how children and young people interact with support services
 - System collaboration, i.e. the level of collaboration, joint-working and sharing of information between organisations involved in providing support to children and young people

As mentioned above, it is important to recognise in the interpretation and reporting of findings that it may take several years for outcomes and impacts from systems change efforts to become evident, because of the indirect way in which systems change efforts are intended to have effects.

1.4.1 Impact for children and young people experiencing or at risk of exploitation

Findings indicate that the programme has had positive impacts for CYP in the majority of outcome areas explored, particularly:

- Safety
- Ability to access support services
- Understanding of exploitation and its risks

Some staff and stakeholders also highlighted a reported increase in NRM referrals as a result of the programme. Where staff and stakeholders reported seeing a positive change to safety, they noted that contributing factors to this had been:

- Efforts to change perceptions towards recognising CYP as victims throughout the system
- Training professionals to focus on contextual safeguarding (therein protecting others such as siblings as well as primary victims);
- Increasing understanding and skills amongst CYP through training
- Creating spaces for CYP to talk about exploitation and build trust with professionals
- Training professionals to improve their awareness, ability, and confidence to identify and support CYP at risk of or being exploited, which had instigated new safeguarding referrals
- The service offer of the programme, particularly one-to-one casework and consultation on casework, therein meeting a recognised need. Stakeholders commented, *“if you think about a year ago, kids didn't have anything to fall back on,”* and *“If it wasn't there, there would be a massive gap.”*
- Providing consultation to external organisations on case work with CYP

The value insight being gathered from CYP involved in the programme through either one-to-one work or systems change activities was highlighted as an important achievement in year 1. Staff members were also enthusiastic that the involvement of CYP in the programme through youth engagement and participation has increased in pace towards the end of year 1, and is set to progress from smaller instances of participation to larger pieces and more strategic pieces of work.

A positive impact on risk was identified by staff and stakeholders during surveys and interviews, with the majority agreeing or strongly agreeing that risk had reduced as a result of the programme. For example, staff reported that risk had been impacted through the programme having increased awareness amongst professionals about exploitation and how they can help tackle it, and that mechanisms had been put in place to affect risk over a longer timescale, including:

- Increased awareness amongst agencies such as housing who have received training
- Increased use of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) amongst professionals as a result of training
- Increased recognition of CYP as victims in the criminal justice system, for example in courts
- Initiating a project to advise a school on their exclusions policy and to inform staff on how better to support CYP at risk of or experiencing exploitation

However, some staff and stakeholders highlighted that it is still too early at the end of year 1 to see impacts on the risk of exploitation to CYP, the mental and emotional health of CYP, and relationships between CYP and family, carers, and peers, as the programme is relatively early in its operation to have supported large numbers of CYP through one-to-one support work and therapy at this stage. Staff and stakeholders were enthusiastic about the prospect of more impacts materialising for CYP as the work of the programme progresses into years 2 and 3, following the setting-up of the programme in year 1.

Tackling the risk of exploitation was identified as a challenging area for the programme, particularly due to the reported need to shift focus to early intervention to make this impact. Staff reported that shifting focus to early intervention presents challenges as it requires a departure from the prevailing focus of wider efforts to tackle child exploitation on higher-risk cases and issues, due to the relatively recent increase in awareness and impetus around this issue and the reported dearth of other programmes focussed on child exploitation. Reflecting this, one staff member reported that one of the most significant challenges faced by the programme is *“changing the narrative from serious youth violence to criminal exploitation and providing an early intervention service based on this.”* The differing local contexts of the three main cities of the programme were also highlighted as influential for this impact type, with some contexts having more support for higher-risk cases available than others.

1.4.2 Impact for practitioners working with children and young people

“It made me think about the way I practice and alerted me to the issues so I am more able to safeguard children.”

External stakeholder commenting on the long-term impact of training delivered through the programme on their practice

Overall, findings based on surveys, interviews, and programme monitoring data indicate that the programme has positively impacted upon both internal and external practitioners who work with CYP, particularly as a result of the training and workshops delivered to professionals. Specifically, evidence suggests a positive impact in the following outcome areas:

- Practitioners' understanding of exploitation and its various forms
- Practitioners' ability to identify CYP who are at risk of or experiencing exploitation
- Practitioners' confidence in identifying and supporting CYP who are at risk of or experiencing exploitation

Over time, these positive impacts may lead to changes in the systems relating to child exploitation, for example if practitioners contribute to culture changes within and across external organisations, changes in policies or laws, increased collaboration across the system, and changes to the pathways through which CYP travel (see Section 1.2). Some changes reported by staff and stakeholders in the practice of practitioners and in the organisational cultures of external organisations indicate a positive direction of travel regarding these impacts. Encouragingly, of the 17 survey respondents who attended training run by the Disrupting Exploitation Programme, 76% reported that the training had a long-term impact on their practice. Some staff members also noted in their survey responses ways in which training had made a long-term impact on their practice.

However, it is recognised that the programme has been operational for a relatively short period of time, including the time setting up the programme, for system-level changes to have materialised at this stage.

It was suggested by programme staff that to meet the programme's intended systems change impacts via the practitioners who come into contact with the programme (for example through attending training or workshops), the programme could further implement approaches to sustain the impact of training beyond the individual practitioners who attend, by cascading learning and encouraging changes in the structures and cultures of the organisations in which training attendees work. As one staff member commented, *“there has been an initial improvement - but sustainability of*

this change and consistency still needs to be established and embedded further". For instance, staff and stakeholders recalled an instance in which programme staff had implemented an activity with a strong consideration of the sustainability of impacts beyond individual practitioners, through training 'healthy relationship champions' in an external organisation.

Building on learning and insight into local systems gathered in year 1, programme staff have also begun to further focus and hone the programme's strategy for creating systems change through drafting a set of systems change priorities with a focus on creating sustainable impacts on the system structures, pathways, and levels of collaboration affecting responses to child exploitation through other mechanisms aside from delivering training and workshops to practitioners.

1.4.3 Impact on system-level change

Staff and stakeholders praised the scale of the programme's systems change ambitions and highlighted that it is understood that these will take time to be achieved. There was some indication that positive progress has been made so far, however it is relatively early in the programme's operation to observe system-level change and as such the extent to which staff and stakeholders were able to comment on this impact type in year 1 was limited. This is to be expected at this stage and given the long-term nature of the programme's intended impacts.

Staff and stakeholders reported that the programme has made a positive impact on multiple elements of system pathways, structures, and collaboration (discussed below in this executive summary).

Additionally, programme staff have made progress through gathering learning about implementing systems change in general, as well as programme-specific learning which has supported the development of a set of systems change priorities to focus the work of the programme going forward. Much of this learning had been in response to challenges faced by the programme in year 1, such as recruiting staff for roles which involve both systems change and one-to-one support work with CYP, and developing a shared understanding of systems change as a programme which can be clearly explained and engaging to external stakeholders and accessible to CYP.

Staff were positive about the progress made in meeting these challenges, and reported that learning gathered will inform activities in year 2, such as implementing rigorous recruitment procedures and knowing what to look for more in candidates, producing an Action Learning Set for systems change training for programme staff, and arriving at a definition of systems change for the programme in clear and accessible language for CYP and external

stakeholders. This reflected a key theme of the learning gathered in year 1 about systems change reported by programme staff: that it must be accessible, inclusive, and above all responsive primarily to the needs and experiences of CYP.

Staff also reported learning that whilst it may sometimes be challenging for programme staff roles to include a dual focus on systems change and one-to-one work, ultimately this was seen by many as beneficial to both strands of work as it encouraged staff to consider the system level when focusing on the individual level and vice versa. Staff highlighted that this can also be helpful going forward as an asset to other operational or future TCS programmes focussed on systems change, and can be brought together with learning from these programmes to inform a TCS-wide approach to systems change training and programme set-up.

Other key learning points were reported from the process of arriving at draft systems change priorities which could also benefit other systems change projects within TCS, specifically:

- Beginning small and prioritising building relationships with key stakeholders and gathering insights when beginning systems change in a new area. For example, programme staff noted that this was key to correctly pitching their service offer in Manchester, which originally came with an age threshold however local stakeholders provided insight that due to the early age at which child exploitation often began in the area, this threshold was inappropriate.
- Carefully considering the wording used when trying to effect systems change within external organisations, as professionals may become defensive. Explaining that collaborative working is for the benefit of CYP
- Clarifying systems change goals and ambitions when it is appropriate, particularly so that this can inform recruitment
- Clarifying standards for the type of data which may be useful to gather when becoming oriented to systems in a new area, and establishing a baseline with partners for understanding an area before commencing work there
- Embedding flexibility into the design of programme work in different areas, to be able to respond as understanding of exploitation in that area increases over time
- The qualities and team dynamics needed in a workforce focussed on systems change (getting managers to start before staff)

- Creating a culture in which professionals feel they can discuss and explore gaps in their knowledge and understanding
- Developing a shared sense of responsibility for and focus on systems change among team members alongside one-to-one work and other job responsibilities; senior programme staff highlighted that this has been an enabler for empowering both staff and external stakeholders

System collaboration

The Disrupting Exploitation Programme aims to improve the ways in which organisations working with children and young people work and share information together.

Overall, findings from interviews and surveys indicate that the programme has had a positive impact on collaboration within systems that are relevant to CYP experiencing or at risk of exploitation. Staff and stakeholders reported a positive impact on the extent to which joint working between organisations has improved as a result of the programme.

A positive impact on information-sharing was also reported, however it was noted that work to target this element of the system needs to focus on improving the quality and type of information-sharing as well as increasing the amount of information-sharing.

System structures

“The way we view children within the criminal justice system is starting to take a turn to looking at the child and not the offence - we look at the reason of offending and the possible victim within the suspect rather than just a suspect of crime.”

External stakeholder

The Disrupting Exploitation Programme aims to ensure that system structures are better placed to identify and respond to exploitation, in particular its various forms and contexts, e.g. a shift away from home and family environment as the main area of both risk and protective factors.

Findings as to the programme's impact on system structures were promising, however the extent to which staff and stakeholders were able to comment on structural system changes at this stage was limited, reflecting the early phase in the programme's operation. Staff and stakeholders reported that the programme had made a positive impact upon awareness of exploitation, and on practice, particularly at the local level, which were seen as valuable impacts and which may support longer-term changes to

the policies, organisational cultures, and laws which structure the systems relevant to child exploitation.

Some stakeholders reported that impacts on practice represented one of the most significant changes they had observed as a result of the programme, for example:

- Schools in Manchester adapting to become more supportive of vulnerable CYP at risk of exploitation
- Discussions around how to adapt custody suites to be more friendly and appropriate to CYP, with some changes being piloted such as more appropriate beverages and books for CYP in custody, as well as appropriate adults from TCS within custody suites to explore the benefit of using custody suites as a point at which CYP at risk of or experiencing exploitation can be linked into services
- Encouraging new roles to be created around CCE, for example a safeguarding lead at a transport station
- Increased recognition by professionals of CYP as victims
- Increased recognition of CYP's mental health needs amongst professionals
- Practice change amongst custody officers following training, with one survey respondent commenting that *"delivered to over 1000 officers, the training is reminding them to stay professionally curious about the child they are dealing with"*.
- An increase in the timeliness and quality of safeguarding referrals
- Practitioners becoming more reflective in their practice

Staff and stakeholders were also positive about the impacts of the programme on organisational cultures, particularly amongst police. Evidence for this included: changes in professionals' perceptions of CYP from perpetrators to victims, different language being used to describe CYP, and an openness at a senior level to collaborating with external organisations such as TCS to receive feedback on organisational procedures and to pilot changes in these procedures. For example, one stakeholder noted:

"It's a massive culture change to the Met and particularly for custody, which is a very unique place and a very old-fashioned culture"

At the same time, staff emphasised the scale of the task of the programme's systems change ambitions, with one staff member reporting that one of the most significant challenges faced by the programme is *"changing culture and embedding systems change, when there is a willingness on the part of partners to do so."*

As above, where impacts on organisational cultures, awareness, and practice were credited to training and workshops delivered by the programme, staff and stakeholders were keen for the programme to implement more activities to ensure the sustainability of these impacts over time and beyond the individual practitioners who attended training.

Some examples of changes to policy were reported at local and national levels. In particular, staff highlighted changes in the procedures in custody suites in pilot sites in London, to improve safeguarding and information-sharing around CYP through implementing points of contact between custody staff and external professionals, as a significant piece of work implemented by the programme. One stakeholder also highlighted that documentation and tools produced by the programme had been used to write the procedures and guidance for responding to the risks of child exploitation for their organisation (a Trust delivering an area's children's services) and supported them to deliver training across their partnership. National policy work undertaken in year 1 includes:

- Programme staff inputting to a review of the Modern Slavery Act and meeting with the independent review panel
- Programme staff being consulted on the potential introduction of Knife Crime Prevention Orders
- The custody work of the programme being showcased in a submission to the Justice Select Committee inquiry into children in custody

Stakeholders were positive about the activities and impacts seen so far around changing systems structures, however it was reported that more information sharing from the programme about these activities and impacts in other areas would be beneficial, as there was an appetite amongst stakeholders for more learning and ideas. This could draw learning from improvements reported by programme staff that were made over year 1 in communicating about the programme more widely within TCS.

Survey and interview data showed that while some progress has been made towards improving contextual safeguarding of CYP at risk of or experiencing exploitation in extra-familial environments as well as familial environments, this element of the system remains inconsistent across areas and organisations, and the programme faces several challenges with

making improvements to the contextual safeguarding response across the system as a whole. Again, this is understandable at this stage given the relatively early point in the programme's operation and the scale of its intended ambitions.

System pathways

The Disrupting Exploitation Programme aims to ensure that pathways are more consistent across statutory partners, and that there is a greater understanding of how they work among practitioners.

Findings indicated a small number of examples of changes to systems pathways, which is understandable given the time required for system level changes of this type in line with the programme's ambitions, and the relatively early stage in the programme's operation. However, where there were examples of changes to systems pathways, stakeholders and staff were highly positive about these, as they were seen to reflect changes which could benefit CYP, and that the programme had made important progress through gaining the trust, relationship-building, and buy-in at senior and operational levels from external system partners to participate in activities to change systems pathways.

However, gaining senior-level buy-in to pilots to change systems pathways was reported to have been particularly challenging, with staff anticipating that this may continue to pose challenges going forward. This challenge was also recognised by stakeholders, with one external stakeholder highlighting that one of the key challenges faced by the programme is *"influencing strategic local authority officers to engage with the programme"*.

The key example cited by staff and stakeholders was changes to the pathways affecting CYP entering custody suites in London in areas piloting changes to operational procedures. These changes include custody staff accessing safeguarding information about CYP when they enter custody, and youth workers being positioned in custody suites to engage with CYP. This work reflects a theme developed by the programme in year 1 of custody being a key point in system pathways where teaching and reaching can occur and safeguarding can be improved, intended to impact both CYP and system agents and structures such as custody policies and staff.

Additionally, survey data indicated that there has been a positive impact upon understandings of pathways and of the experiences of CYP, and how well-suited pathways are to the complex nature of exploitation, however there was a consensus amongst interviewees that at present, pathways remain highly inconsistent across the system as a whole. These interviewees emphasised that it is too early for the programme to have

impacted upon the consistency of pathways taken through the system by CYP. Based on learning and insight gathered in year 1, senior programme staff also highlighted that the differences in the contexts of the three cities in which the programme operates play a strong role on the areas for improvement in local systems, and therefore the programme's targets. It was reported that this variation offers an opportunity for a wide range of learning to emerge from the programme as its work progresses. For example, staff highlighted that the opportunity for focussing on earlier intervention varies by city, as there is a greater support offer for higher-risk cases in some areas than others (such as a complex safeguarding hub in Manchester and a county lines service in London).

1.5 Strengths of the programme

- **Progress and impact to date:** Staff and stakeholders were positive about the promising effects of the programme seen so far for CYP, practitioners, and wider systems, particularly given the relatively short timeframe in which the programme has been operational. They also highlighted that the programme had reached a large number of professionals, built strong relationships with partners, gained valuable insight and intelligence about the areas in which it is working, and refined its systems change priorities. Stakeholders in particular were positive about the impact the programme had made towards tackling child exploitation in their areas, with one stakeholder noting that they “*would be really concerned if it [the programme] wasn't there*”. This progress is particularly promising in light of challenges faced by the programme in relation to staffing.
- **Knowledge and skills of programme staff:** Staff and stakeholders highlighted the high levels of knowledge and skill amongst programme staff, in particular in relation to child exploitation. This perhaps reflects the focus given by the programme on recruiting a strong workforce focused on delivering both systems change interventions and one-to-one support.
- **Networking and reputation:** Staff and stakeholders were also very positive regarding the established reputation of TCS and the impact this has had on the programme's ability to engage external organisations. The networks and networking skills of programme staff were also viewed as similarly helpful in supporting the programme to access the right people in the right organisations in a timely manner.
- **Clarity of programme aims:** Stakeholders were positive regarding the programme's clear set of aims, which are reported to have promoted a clear focus in its work. For example, the clear and defined referral

criteria for one-to-one work has enabled stakeholders to make appropriate referrals and for programme staff to work with the CYP who may benefit the most from their support.

- **Focus on systems change:** Findings indicate that the systems change focus of the programme has been well-received. In particular, external stakeholders were positive regarding the programme's work to develop bespoke approaches to training which focus on the role of their organisation within the wider system of responses to exploitation, supporting practitioners to become more aware of their roles in responding to exploitation and how this supports and is supported by the roles of other stakeholders and organisations.
- **Sharing of learning within the programme:** The sharing of information and learning across programme staff was reported as a positive element of the programme. However, the programme may benefit from communicating this learning more widely to external stakeholders, particularly with regards to the work of the programme in areas other than that in which stakeholders are based.



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