

# The role of the voluntary sector in protecting children from sexual exploitation

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Evidence Briefing

This briefing summarises the findings of a three-year evaluation of the 'Hub and Spoke' model of CSE service development. It highlights evidence on the role of the voluntary sector in responding to CSE within the 50 local authorities where these services operated.

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## Key messages

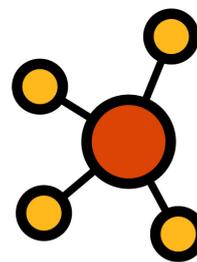
- The voluntary sector has been largely responsible for developing and providing specialist services for victims of child sexual exploitation for over 20 years.
- Children and young people affected by sexual exploitation are often mistrustful of statutory services and voluntary sector CSE services are successful at engaging vulnerable children and young people that other services struggle to reach.
- Services achieve this engagement by offering children and young people meaningful choices, empowering them and being persistent in building relationships over the long-term.
- Having a voluntary sector worker as part of a multi-agency CSE team can improve children and young people's engagement in these wider services. Shared standards of practice can develop when voluntary sector workers model their approach to case work, and deliver training that improves responses to vulnerable children and young people.
- To get the best out of voluntary sector CSE services commissioners need to think about how to use contractual arrangements to protect their independence, distinct approach, commitment to access and their sustainability.

## 1. The Alexi Project

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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

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Evaluating a new model of tackling CSE across England

During the evaluation period, these 16 hub services placed 53 spoke workers into 35 new local authorities (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

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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 role of the voluntary sector in CSE service development

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In 2012/13, when the CSE Funders' Alliance was designing its strategy, successive governments had invested relatively little in tackling CSE. At the same time, cuts to their budgets left local authorities with even fewer resources to respond to growing concerns about sexual exploitation. In this context, it was the voluntary sector that had the expertise and capacity to improve local safeguarding in relation to CSE – as it had been doing for the previous 20 years. Since the mid-1990s, it had largely been charities within the voluntary sector that had been responsible for raising awareness of child sexual exploitation, and developing specialist services for children and young people. In 1995, The Children's Society published 'The Game's Up', (Lee and O'Brien, 1995) a report highlighting the scale of child prostitution in Britain, which was followed by an influential campaign calling for the protection rather than the criminalisation of children. In the same year, 'Streets and Lanes', the first specialist CSE service in the country was established in Bradford, by Barnardo's. A few years later, the charity published 'Whose daughter next?', further raising awareness of the issue of CSE (van Meeuwen et al., 1998).

Despite government policy acknowledging the importance of these services (DoH, 2000; DCSF, 2009), the development of provision has been piecemeal. The first government guidance on 'child prostitution' as it was then called, was published in 2000 (DoH, 2000). An implementation review two years later found that only 31% of local areas surveyed had a specialist resource or service resource in their area, and that these areas relied substantially on the voluntary sector for provision (Swann and Balding, 2002). The next iteration of government guidance arrived in 2009 (DCSF, 2009) and a review of local implementation two years later reported that CSE training for staff still depended on "the willingness and commitment of specialist workers, often in voluntary sector projects – and these have yet to be established in many areas" (Jago et al., 2011: 11). The authors concluded that "While statutory children's social care has been constrained by procedures, priorities and a resource crisis, the role of the voluntary sector has been of great significance in many of the areas delivering an effective child sexual exploitation strategy" (Jago et al., 2011: 36).

## 4. The distinct value of the voluntary sector in engaging children and young people

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The historic role of the voluntary sector in addressing CSE has been well established (Scott and Skidmore, 2006; Jago and Pearce, 2008; Jago et al., 2011). Consequently, there was an assumption within the Hub and Spoke programme, that the voluntary sector's capacity to engage children and young people set it apart from the statutory sector and conferred a 'specialist' status upon it. The evaluation set out to test this, and found wide agreement that the voluntary sector does make a contribution to safeguarding children and young people affected by CSE that is distinct from that of statutory workers and agencies.

Many of the children and young people supported by Hub and Spoke services had previous experience of statutory services and/or were mistrustful of such agencies.

*"My impression is that some of the girls and boys, by the time they've got to this stage, are sort of quite distrustful of social workers, police. So I do genuinely think having listened to victims speak before, that they do see their case workers as somebody who's really advocating for them with no hidden agenda." (Police DCI in Harris et al., 2017: 35)*

CSE workers were tasked with changing these perceptions and experiences. The 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 meaningful choices; empowering children and young people and being persistent in building relationships over the long-term.

### 4.1 Offering choice and control

At the heart of voluntary sector services' safeguarding practice is a recognition of the young person's volition - the power to make their own decisions. At its most fundamental, this means offering them the choice not to engage. This is a powerful and distinguishing feature of voluntary sector intervention for children and young people because it changes the terms of engagement, altering the power relations between the providers of services and those engaging with them.

The most effective interventions were those that created contexts where children and young people could exercise choice and take some measure of control. In practical terms, this meant routinely involving children and young people in assessing their need, and providing them with choice over the venue and timing of meetings, methods of communication, the pace of the work, control over the timing and nature of disclosure, and over the work to be undertaken. This empowering approach extended to the methods workers used to communicate with children. In contrast to phone calls, text messages enabled children and young people to stay in control of the communication with workers, as well as providing them with a way of keeping in touch at any point.

Children and young people frequently tested whether the choice not to engage was 'real', and often only when they saw their choices respected, began to take up the support.

"So the first session if they've agreed to see us is very much about, 'Do you want to?' Every session ends the same, 'Do you want to see me?' And sometimes they'll just say 'no' just to check... 'Is it okay for me to say 'no' and there's no repercussions?' So I think sometimes that feeling of control is a precious thing."

(Spoke worker)



Diagram 1: CSE spoke workers engagement of children and young people through offering choice

#### 4.2 Meeting places emphasised independence and facilitated choice

To engage children and young people in their service, CSE workers had to be perceived as different to statutory services, which meant not meeting in a police or social care office – even if that was where they were physically based. Instead workers undertook direct work in community buildings, resource centres, schools, coffee bars, fast food outlets and quite often in their own cars.

Giving children a choice over where, when and how often to meet (and importantly the ability to meet 'out of hours') emphasised the independence of the worker. Children could benefit from the neutrality of school, the safety of home or just going out for something to eat or drink – whatever was most important to them. Despite some of these venues being less than ideal places to discuss sensitive subjects, workers were creative in adapting the timing and pace of their work, to accommodate children and young people's preferences.

Children who were able to access the physical base or 'drop-in' of a hub service benefitted from this additional resource. It allowed them to get to know other staff, meet other children and young people with similar experiences and identify with the service more strongly.

#### 4.3 Relationship-based

Voluntary sector CSE workers focused time and attention on building relationships with children and young people. This process was characterised by patience and persistence; children and young people described their worker never giving up on them, especially in the initial stages of engagement. Often it was this persistence that persuaded them to eventually accept support. From the workers' perspective, there was a need to counter the damaging grooming process that many of the children and young people had been subjected to. They aimed to slowly replace the harmful attentions of a perpetrator with a positive, consistent and supportive relationship with a worker.

#### 4.4 Reducing risk

Through adopting a relationship-based approach to intervention, CSE workers created contexts which enabled children and young people to develop a sense of control and self-efficacy in their lives. This in turn helped them to disclose abuse, to be supported toward greater safety and to begin to recover from exploitation.

The evaluation collected some data on outcomes for children and young people, which demonstrate the capacity of the voluntary sector to reduce risk for children and young people affected by sexual exploitation. During the period of the evaluation 783 new cases were opened. These were children and young people who would not otherwise have had access to a specialist service. Some services are still delivering work under the CSEFA programme, so these figures will already have increased. It is our estimate that spoke workers will have undertaken casework with approximately 1,060 children and young people per year of the project

Of the 783 new cases opened, 255 cases were closed during the evaluation period. The closing risk assessment for these 255 children and young people showed that 72% were recorded as being at lower risk compared to the initial assessment. For the remaining 28%, a lack of recorded reduction in risk was because the child or young person did not engage with the service, was not contactable, or moved away.

## 5. The role of the voluntary sector in a multi-agency context

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There are a range of benefits to having voluntary sector workers as part of a multi-agency response to CSE.

1. Having a voluntary sector worker involved in a child's case can improve the child's engagement in other services, and support better operational outcomes including prosecutions and convictions.
2. Shared norms or standards of practice develop when other agencies observe voluntary sector workers' approach to case work, or are supported by case consultancy. For example, agreement that longer intervention times alongside relationship based approaches are more likely to lead to disclosures of abuse. For this reason, it is important that children's social workers don't withdraw their involvement when a voluntary sector worker begins direct work.
3. Where the expertise of voluntary sector workers is rooted in case work experience, training can be an effective vehicle for changing attitudes and behaviours toward vulnerable children and young people, and diffusing good practice amongst partner agencies.

*"The alarm bells [for CSE] I can see them [professionals who had attended spoke training] identifying, you know, this missing indicator or sexual exploitation indicator, so they caught on. Also 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 across [the area] about how they define a young person and see the reason why somebody that's behaving the way they are is because they are exploited." (Hub project manager in Harris et al., 2017: 30)*

## 6. Implications for commissioners and local partners

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Commissioners should utilise voluntary sector knowledge and expertise to identify and respond to CSE, and to support the development of good safeguarding practice. To get the best out of such services, commissioners need to think about how to protect the following aspects of service delivery in contractual arrangements.

**Independence** This allows services to advocate for children and young people and challenge poor practice if necessary. It also builds trust with children and young people who may be mistrustful of statutory services. If CSE workers are based out in multi-agency teams, they will need to maintain regular contact with their hub service to retain a clear voluntary sector identity.

**Relationship-based, flexible and longer-term approaches.** This helps to secure the engagement of children and young people in services, but there needs to be agreement on the value of this approach. Without these agreements, partner agencies can lose trust in services when longer intervention times mean they can't always take referrals. Good supervision of voluntary sector staff will ensure progress is being made in individual cases, and service reporting should include evidence of persistent outreach to children and young people, engagement and trust-building (for example, through case studies) so that the value of this work is clearly communicated.

**A commitment to access.** Statutory funding streams or commissioning models can tend to prioritise children assessed as being at high risk of CSE and reduce capacity for early intervention. Commissioners and managers therefore need to consider how to ensure that services reach under-represented groups of children and young people. For lone workers placed in statutory settings or co-located teams, this will involve developing 'soft' access points to the service that increase referrals from the wider community (e.g. youth clubs). Other approaches include deploying 'reach-specific' workers who develop expertise with vulnerable groups including boys and young men, LGBTQ young people and travelling communities.

**Appropriate forms of outcome measurement.** Some services struggle to clearly demonstrate the impact of their work and its added value. A range of stakeholders need to work together to develop innovative approaches that overcome some of the particular challenges involved with evidencing outcomes in relation to CSE. This includes service providers, commissioners, funders, researchers, parents/carers and children and young people themselves.

**Sustainability.** Commissioners and partners need a good understanding of voluntary sector funding models, and the true cost of delivering services. Sufficient funding for voluntary sector services enables them to remain independent and advocate for children and young people. Longer term co-commissioned funding streams should be developed, drawing on both government and voluntary funding, in recognition of the important role of the voluntary sector in safeguarding and child protection practice.

## 7. Conclusion

Recent years have seen statutory services invest greater resources in addressing CSE. The identification of child sexual abuse and exploitation as a strategic crime threat in 2015 has particularly impacted the police, who have taken greater leadership in the fight against abuse in many local areas. Likewise, the introduction of statutory Relationships and Sex Education has highlighted the importance of schools in addressing exploitation. In light of these developments, the Hub and Spoke evaluation shows the enduring value of having independent CSE workers as part of a local response. It also emphasises the importance of other agencies understanding that value, and supporting services to work in ways that facilitate the engagement of children and young people.

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](mailto:Julie.harris@beds.ac.uk)

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