

ADCS talk 2021

Research in Practice, together with [The Safer Young Lives Research Centre at University of Bedfordshire](#) and [The Children's Society](#) , have been delivering the [Tackling Child Exploitation \(TCE\) programme](#) for 2 years, supporting local area partnerships to embed an effective strategic response to exploitation and extra-familial harm. To date we have completed 26 [Bespoke Support Projects](#) covering all regions and reaching a total of 66 local areas.

The reflections I offer here are drawn from this work, and from the work [Research in Practice](#) has been doing with local partnerships across the country as they seek to address extra-familial harm and adopt a transitional approach to safeguarding.

These reflections are deliberately intended to invite debate – some of them may seem bordering on heresy...

1. Balancing pace with purpose. The pace at which sector colleagues are working is commendable – but it may not always be effective, especially with an ever-increasing number of players in this crowded field. The urge to ‘do something’ is entirely understandable, but we would observe that leaders and managers also need to take time to think carefully about unintended consequences, to think deeply about system dynamics, and to think critically about the evidence they are drawing on. The idea of slowing down might feel at odds with the imperative to act. But thinking before acting, and ensuring connectivity between the multitude of urgent actions is essential if we are to ensure safeguarding is ‘everybody’s business’, rather than just ‘everybody’s busyness’. There’s something here about understanding the different horizons we are working to... A week may be a long time in politics – but local services are playing the long game, with benefits sometimes realised across generations. Politics is fast and furious, good policy and local partnership working is neither.

2. Measuring what matters. Despite the [evidence on its limitations, New Public Managerialism](#) remains rife. Action plans, KPI scorecards, RAG rating exercises, strategic plans... and every other mechanism used to check whether the work is happening - these activities are not the real work. They are simply the receipts to show the work is being done. Too often, local authorities and partners describe feeling judged on how well they feed the

machine, how good it looks on paper – monitoring mechanisms which sometimes overlook local context, or the quality of sound and ethical judgment. League tables are popular in some quarters but they tell you nothing about the heart and soul of a team.

Of course, accountability matters. But if we are committed to ensuring a culture of learning and continuous improvement, then - as [Andy Brogan](#) said recently - we need to shift from simply 'holding people to account' to 'helping people to account'. This is as relevant for Government and regulators as it is for local leaders. We've been impressed by those local areas – I'll give a shout out to Sefton and wider Greater Manchester colleagues here – who understand that data doesn't give you the right answer it helps you ask better questions, and who are seeking to use data not simply as tool for performance management, but as a tool for dialogue. See the excellent work of [Rebecca Godar](#) on [using data intelligently in child exploitation](#).

3. Parallel processes: It is sometimes noticeable in our work that the both the distinction and the connection between strategic and operational activity is unclear. Leadership and strategy must mirror the practice we seek with YP and families; I'm personally slightly nervous of any 'practice framework' that focuses only on practice and overlooks the system in which that practice exists.

- If local partnerships are engaged only in transactional leadership, then it is hard to promote relationship-based practice.
- If local governance arrangements monitor only that which can be counted, then we might overlook much of what *really* counts for kids and families.
- If we want evidence-informed practice, we need evidence-informed policy.
- If we are serious about tackling racial disproportionality amongst young people in the youth justice and school exclusions population, then we need to be as serious in tackling the lack of diversity in leadership.
- If we want resilient young people and communities, we need resilient practitioners and managers.

As colleagues here know all too well, culture comes from the gaffer down. Think of your best example of a 'team around a child' – the collegiate, collaborative, courageous behaviours we ask of multi-agency practitioners...

we need to ask if we are modelling these behaviours at local partnership level. And if we think of our best local strategic partnerships – the shared values and vision required to meaningfully share risk (and, even better, share resource)... are we seeing these role-modelled at the level of inter-departmental cross-Government working?

4. Emotions matter. Linked to the earlier point re parallel processes...If local systems and organisations aspire to deliver trauma-informed practice, then professionals across all agencies need to be supported to process the emotional impact of the work – why then is reflective supervision too often available only to some professional groups? I commend the recent work by Camden Council, Camden & Islington NHS Trust, Achieving for Children and the Met police – a pilot providing [trauma-informed reflective supervision to serving officers](#) in the Central North Basic Command Unit. This exception should be the norm. Colleagues in educational settings, early help, youth services, voluntary sector agencies and elsewhere are the backbone of an effective response to young people facing harm. It doesn't matter what logo is on your lanyard – if you work with people in pain, and you do it properly, sometimes it will hurt. Access to emotionally literate, safe, reflective supervision should be a right for everyone working in this complex field ([free resources on reflective supervision](#) are available). And leading with care also involves self-care. We need to acknowledge that no matter how far you may be from direct practice, this work is emotionally charged. Even the most senior leaders are not immune from feeling anxious, defensive, upset and even frightened. As the very wise [Prof Louise Grant](#) often says: “please put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others” others”.

5. Beware binary thinking. At the heart of leading in complexity is the ability of local leaders and practitioners to hold a ‘both/and’ mindset:

- Young people frequently occupy dual identities – both victim-survivor *and* instigator of harm
- this stuff is not mutually exclusive; children can and do experience intra- *and* extra-familial harm (sometimes simultaneously)
- parents are too often feeling blamed for that which they cannot control *and* being denied opportunities to act as equal partners

- people are multi-faceted; vulnerability, resilience, capacity... these are dynamic and situational constructs. Referring to 'vulnerable children and adults' as if this is a static and tightly defined state of being might make sense to politicians or journalists but rarely reflects the nuance of your work.
- We need to integrate both protection *and* participation – young people need to be afforded as much voice, choice and control as possible. Especially when they have been coerced and controlled by others.
- Beware false delineation - In this field of work (and in relation to SEND), I'd personally argue it is neither possible nor helpful to seek to separate the naughty from the needy, the bad from the sad. And – speaking of unintended consequences – we probably need to be very wary of any arbitrary delineation between protection and support.

The need to radically rethink old boundaries is particularly pertinent to the issue of [Transitional Safeguarding](#). I've been struck by places like Hackney, Sheffield, Suffolk, Warwickshire, Brent, Jersey, Hertfordshire the whole of Yorkshire and Humber, Dorset, Sandwell, Essex, Southend and a number of LAs in the North East... all of whom are working to break down the binary thinking and unhelpful barriers faced by young people facing harm as they transition to adulthood. Your commitment, creativity and tenacity – with little national leadership (and even less funding) – is an inspiration.

6. Think critically about evidence: In what may be a career-ending moment, I want to acknowledge the limitations of evidence. Best practice is a misleading term. Best in relation to what? Other statistical neighbours? Other interventions evaluated to exactly the same standards of rigour? An approach or intervention might achieve promising results in one context, but this doesn't always mean it can be replicated in another context. Scale and spread does not mean copy and paste – identifying [core components](#) and capturing any contextual adaptations is crucial to understanding the system conditions that enable some approaches to seemingly work better than others.

Which brings me to the issue of what evidence is suitable for what purpose...Understanding 'what works' is important, and some traditional research methods are very useful for this. But understanding *why* something appears to work, and for whom, is arguably even more important – and this requires us to draw on qualitative knowledge, the expertise of professionals and those we serve. What are young people, families and communities telling us

about 'what matters'? How are we meaningfully engaging those we serve in service design, service evaluation and service improvement? Coproduction is for life, not just for co-production week.

7. Aim for a system not a service: discrete services can only do so much. A well connected, coherent local system is the real prize. As local leaders, you know only too well that 'wicked issues' like this requires [systems leadership](#) which is collective and participative and is boundary-spanning by design. It is in the spaces between silos that the magic can happen, it is people like you who are the connective tissue between the myriad of services, strategies, and competing initiatives.

Of course, this is easy for me to say - but points 1-7 are all made much more difficult when working under pressure. And it would be remiss of me to ignore that a significant part of this pressure comes from incoherent and counterproductive positions taken by Government. In today's news, we are told the £20 'top up' to Universal Credit will be removed this autumn, plunging many children and families into poverty. How to square this ideology with the evidence from the cross-party [Youth Violence Commission](#) and countless studies that show poverty to be a key driver for violence, and with the numerous statements that tackling serious violence is a top priority for this Government? If mental gymnastics were an Olympic sport, we'd be in the running for a gold medal in Tokyo.

Sticking with sports, perhaps the leadership qualities we need to achieve in football are not a million miles away from the leadership qualities we need to tackle exploitation and extra-familial harm. Don't be afraid to slow it down sometimes, focus on building collective muscle memory before piling on new tricks, celebrate diversity, and give young talent a chance. Your watchwords are Authenticity, Humility, Inclusivity, Integrity... basically, in a world of performative leadership and divisive rhetoric, we all need to "be more Gareth".

For access to the Research in Practice briefing on 'public health approaches to violence, see:

<https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/all/publications/2021/july/a-public-health-approach-to-violence-reduction-strategic-briefing-2021/>