

The Home Office Trusted Relationships Programme

Retrospective observations

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Executive Summary

In August 2018, the Home Office awarded grants to eleven Local Authorities (LAs) across England to deliver Trusted Relationships projects between 2018 and March 2022. As Implementation Partner for this programme, ATQ provided support to the projects. We therefore saw first-hand how the projects encountered and overcame their respective implementation challenges. This report presents ATQ's observations which, in summary are:

- **Length and stability of funding is critical.** Any support programme aimed at vulnerable people with complex needs will only work if it is designed and funded on a long-term basis – at least three years and preferably longer, as was the case here. This allows time for programmes to ramp up, overcome teething issues and avoid inefficient and ineffective spending as projects struggle to spend money in a limited timeframe. More importantly, it gives front line teams the time and space to establish working relationships with both the vulnerable young people that the programme is designed to serve, and the networks of statutory and non-statutory delivery partners that are part of any support service.
- **Flexibility of project design is key.** As this programme has shown, there may be common principles underpinning programmes aimed at complex issues but a range of different approaches is possible, and projects should (as these do) reflect local needs and organisational structures, especially if we want to understand better what works best by testing alternatives. A strength of this programme has been that it has allowed for such difference.
- **Services and interventions need to be co-designed with those they aim to support,** within obvious limits. Vulnerable young people need agency rather than top-down solutions to what others perceive as their needs. Services also need to sit both inside and outside statutory services – inside so that they can facilitate joined-up responses; outside so that they can successfully engage with those who have learned to distrust the system. It became very clear from direct involvement of young people with our shared learning events and other visits with officials that young people can be and are very articulate about their needs and how support can best be provided.
- **Cross-cutting issues require joined-up solutions.** This programme has shown how services targeted at a complex problem that do not fit neatly into public service silos can be the 'glue' that binds services together across areas that habitually have a different focus – especially those that treat people as victims needing support and those that treat them as offenders needing sanction and rehabilitation. Based on our four-year involvement, ATQ would contend that Trusted Relationships has provided this 'glue' for an average of around £250,000 per project per year.
- **Understanding why people behave as they do is as important as what they do.** The projects have shown the particular value of trauma-informed practice, and understanding how adverse experiences may shape the way people behave, and their willingness to respond to intervention. In our opinion, this is particularly important in CSE and CCE, where exploitation itself may lead to significant trauma.



1. The Trusted Relationships Programme

The programme was funded by the Trusted Relationships Fund, launched by the Home Office in February 2017 which provided funding of £13m to ‘deliver and evaluate local initiatives to improve support to young people at risk of exploitation and abuse’¹ It followed a rapid review by the Early Intervention Foundation² (EIF), also commissioned by the Home Office, which found that ‘a trusted relationship with an adult is an important part of programmes to support vulnerable children, and that the lack of trusted relationships is consistently cited as a contributing factor in cases of child sexual abuse and exploitation’.

The 11 projects that received funding were designed to test further the benefits of providing an adult ‘trusted relationship’ in a range of different ways in the lives of vulnerable children and young people who were:

- aged between 10 – 17 years; and/or
- vulnerable to Child Sexual Abuse or Exploitation (CSA or CSE) or Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) outside of the home/family environment.

The programme was targeted solely at risks of ‘extra-familial’ abuse and exploitation and therefore considered relationships in a ‘contextual safeguarding’ framework – i.e. an approach that responds to young people's experiences of harm outside of the home, for example with peers, in schools and in neighbourhoods.

1.1 Participating Local Authority partnerships

The eleven Local Authorities and their respective delivery partners were:

London Borough of Barnet with MAC-UK, Art Against Knives and Growing Against Violence
City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council with Barnardo’s, Bradford YMCA, E:Merge, JAMES and Project 6
London Borough of Ealing with St. Christopher’s Fellowship and MAC-UK
London Borough of Hackney with Red Thread and Hackney Marsh Partnership
London Borough of Hounslow with St Giles Trust, Women and Girls Network, Brentford FC, Creative Futures, Contextual Safeguarding Network
Greater Manchester Combined Authority with the Manchester Resilience Hub
Northampton Borough Council with Free 2 Talk CIC
North East Lincolnshire Council with Young Minds Matter and the Voluntary Community Alliance
North Somerset Council with The Fostering Network, Mockingbird, Community Safety, MAVISbus, XenZone, Kooth, Avon & Somerset Police and local mainstream and special schools
North Yorkshire County Council and York Council with North Yorkshire Police, Community Safety Partnership, North Yorkshire and York Safeguarding Children Boards
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council with Barnardo’s

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/trusted-relationships-fund-application-process>

² <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/building-trusted-relationships-for-vulnerable-children-and-young-people-with-public-service>



1.2 Programme interventions

It is to the Home Office's credit that it did not over-specify or mandate how projects should work but allowed bidders to submit solutions reflecting issues in their locality and each project took a different approach.

Projects delivered a range of services from 'one-to-many' interventions aimed at groups of children through to one-to-one support and mentoring for individual young people. There was also wide divergence in the risk profile of those supported from those already at highest risk and usually known to Children's Services or Youth Offending Teams, including looked after children and care leavers to children and young people who are might be at risk or face exploitation in the future. Projects deliver direct support to young people via outreach and/or specific services, sometimes in conjunction with VCSE partner organisations, sometimes using in-house teams. Two projects took a systemic rather than intervention-based approach, providing training and support to those who may have to build relationships with vulnerable young people (e.g. existing support teams, schools and foster parents) rather than intervening directly with them.



2. Funding

Projects were funded for four years, albeit subject to confirmation of funding for years 3 and 4 through the spending review process. Continuity of funding for four years for this type of project is unusual, and was welcome because it gave time for projects to establish delivery models and required partnerships and then enabled them to prove impact over a longer period.

ATQ has seen across Trusted Relationships, and other programmes we have evaluated (for example the DfE Care Leavers Social Impact Bonds) that any programme designed to support vulnerable young people has to be multi-year and allow for potentially lengthy periods of support to be on offer. For example, in one Trusted Relationship project, a sign of successful engagement with one young person was removal of hoodie and eye contact for the first time after six months had elapsed. This was a small first success in a relationship that lasted over 18 months.

Ideally funding for this type of programme should be for a minimum of three years and preferably longer, even if this means providing lower amounts of annual funding (i.e. less funding per year for longer is arguably better than more funding that must be spent quickly).

Very short-term funding (to be spent in less than twelve months) will produce mixed results at best and less-effective spending due to projects following the 'use it or lose it' principle – i.e. they will be tempted to spend the funding on activity that may be only tangentially relevant to project objectives, or less effective than other activities that might take longer to implement, simply because the funding is only available for a limited time.

In our opinion, the diverse Trusted Relationships projects have validated the assumption that introducing an adult whom they can trust into the life of a young person and showing what a good trusted relationship looks like is a key underpinning for any programme. It is also clear that this takes time and the (obvious) finding is that stability of funding is key.

To illustrate the point, if all 150 or so local authorities with Children's Services responsibilities were funded to the Trusted Relationships level of £250,000 per annum, then the annual cost would be £37.5m.



3. Successes and challenges in delivery practice

3.1 Adopting a stewardship role

A key success was the emergence of several projects into a stewardship role, acting as both a catalyst and glue for multi-agency partnership working, especially where there were active participants from both statutory and non-statutory partners. These projects are both 'inside and outside' and found themselves as a central point with a knowledge and understanding of issues facing children and young people in their locations and an ability to co-ordinate or at least de-duplicate responses from different agencies.

We recognise that there have been many ways in which LAs have improved co-ordination of responses in recent years through, for example, Multi-Agency Support Hubs, but in some LAs Trusted Relationships teams appear to be filling a co-ordination role that might not otherwise exist.

Giving the projects enough time and budget envelope to establish their role in each project area has enabled the stewardship role to emerge and is further confirmation of the benefits of longer term or more stable funding.

Beyond wider arrays of support services, there is also the opportunity to create a more permanent legacy for projects through developing links with local community organisations and other private and third sector agencies. These other organisations and partners provide a long-term social capital infrastructure in an area. The challenge recognised by the projects is how to ensure that such community organisations develop their respective skills and capabilities and sustain beyond Trusted Relationships.

3.2 Co-design with service users

In the view of many of the projects the voice of children and young people is important and co-design of services with them is a key principle. As we witnessed at our learning events, young people can be articulate advocates for how their needs could be met.

ATQ has seen evidence both from our observation of the Trusted Relationships projects and our wider work on the longitudinal evaluation of other projects that asset or strengths-based support models, designed in conjunction with service users, appear to generate the best outcomes. It makes a fundamental difference to the perception of the projects in the eyes of users because it gives them agency and, to the extent possible, ensures they deliver what they want rather than what others think they want by way of support.

At the extreme, user input potentially leads to an individual plan of support approach and is actually a way of implementing a 'system change' that gets around silo funding and 'point solution' inadequacies. (There is a much larger debate that could be had on this topic but not within the scope of this paper.)

However, user input means that projects need to be responsive and able to follow up with, for example, referral to diversionary activities. There needs to be a sufficient range of ways of engaging with children and young people. As an example, two projects had a budget for each referred child and young person for discretionary spend that could respond to specific user needs.



3.3 Successfully positioning support outside statutory structures

While working closely with statutory agencies, project staff often position themselves deliberately as being 'not the council' – either literally because they work for a VCSE partner or de facto by standing at arm's length from it. This is a factor that underpins the willingness of children and young people to engage with the projects, and becomes more critical the greater a young person's experience of the care or justice systems, likely to be perceived as being in a sanctioning or policing role.

This is a soft issue which has implications more for the design of projects by LAs than for central government, but it is worth noting that this benefit of being at arm's length from statutory agencies (and therefore perceived as being on the side of those hardest to reach) has been a feature of other successful programmes (e.g. Family Intervention Programmes or FIPs) that should not be discouraged.

3.4 Relationship to statutory safeguarding duties

Given the emphasis on addressing CSE vulnerabilities in the initial prospectus in 2018, ATQ anticipated that we would encounter a level of incidences of CSE risks and worked with Circles UK accordingly. However, CSE risks did not emerge at any notable level at any time over the four years and, if anything, the focus where necessary was on the emergence of CCE as an issue to address.

A key implementation issue was that projects were sometimes working in a grey area on the edge of normal safeguarding practice, for example using mentors who have themselves been offenders in the past. This caused issues for some of the projects and a tension between accepted 'no risk' safeguarding practice and what is sometimes necessary to engage those hardest to reach.

There were almost no safeguarding issues escalated to ATQ's attention across the life of the programme as teams were very accomplished at managing these risks on a day-to-day basis. It also helped to have non-statutory partners involved in delivery as safeguarding risks can be more effectively handled where there are arm's length arrangements allowing for additional discretion.

3.5 Managing the victim perpetrator spectrum

An on-going challenge facing some frontline teams on a day-to-day basis was working with children and young people who could be perceived as both victims and perpetrators or those who have previously offended.

Some projects have taken a dogmatic view that all children and young people are victims, especially in the CCE context, and have used the Modern Slavery Act and National Referral Mechanism (NRM) to ensure young people who commit offences are treated leniently by the courts.

The victim/perpetrator issue also creates challenges in the mentoring context, since former offenders can make very good mentors and role models for others, but clearly this can raise safeguarding concerns.

Home Office policy thinking developed considerably in this area over the four years of the programme. This included, for example, in the language used which evolved to use much more nuanced descriptions such as 'those who have previously offended / been exploited to offend' rather than the negative connotation term 'perpetrator'.



There is an argument for wider acceptance that children and young people should more often be treated as victims. Based on what we see in the projects there does need to be a different response model for children and young people involved with county lines and CCE.

For CSA and CSE, the opportunity to work with the individual and help them understand their situation and then take some control to manage and reduce their vulnerability is clearer and simpler.

3.6 Emergence of trauma-informed practice

Two of the projects in Greater Manchester and North Somerset were centred on using or widening the use of trauma informed approaches. Many of the other projects provided psychological support to their front-line teams and other specific training in line with now well-established good practice.

These approaches have been well received by front line staff. In our view, the wider application of these techniques is worthy of encouragement and could be requested in service specifications of future programmes as appropriate.

Trauma informed practice and approaches emerged as a common theme across several of the projects and a factor that appears to be underestimated or even ignored entirely by some conventional services such as Children's Services and CAMHS, except where staff have had specialist training. There may be learning points from this that have wider application.

3.7 Providing services in alternative settings

An area that appeared to work well with respect to user engagement was the provision of support services at times and places that suited them including in community settings, cafés, parks, etc. These became particularly relevant when lockdowns or severe Covid-19 restrictions were in place around the country.

Some projects scheduled working times after school hours and at evenings and weekends. This created the basis for relationships with children and young people to develop and was another important way of building agency among young people and a sense that services were designed to suit their needs.

The obvious implication is more for the designers of projects than for funders but that projects need to be designed – and preferably co-designed as above – to reflect the environment in which children and young people (or indeed any cohort identified as needing support) lives, works and socialises. In other words, services are better if designed around them rather than to suit those providing support.

3.8 Challenges raised by school policies and practice

Schools have been an area of both success and challenge in relation to the implementation of the projects. On the positive side, several of the projects provided evidence of the important role that schools play in providing safe settings. Teachers also play a role both in spotting signs and early warnings of potential issues that children and young people might be experiencing, and in identifying and sometimes referring children at risk of exploitation.

However, projects found day to day challenges engaging with some individual schools to deliver either whole class or more specific pastoral support to smaller groups or individuals.



A further challenge was found in school exclusion policies and their impact on individual children and young people's vulnerabilities. This is one of the trickiest areas encountered because disruptive children have a potentially disproportionate impact on other students. However early and peremptory exclusion (especially permanent exclusion through triggering of zero tolerance policies) has an even greater impact on those at risk of exploitation – for example one project found that 94% of those identified as victims of CCE were excluded.

On the first point, funders and individual projects cannot assume that all schools will engage in the same way – each must be managed and encouraged to take part individually. A common feature is that there was significant variation in local school policies, which is a consequence of the increased autonomy many schools have gained.

On the second point, there is clearly a tricky balance to be taken between maintaining in-school discipline and not further endangering already vulnerable people, but we believe most of the projects would argue that policy needs to tilt more towards the consequences for individual children and young people once excluded. There is also a role here for communication and engagement, so that school leaders understand better the potential consequences for individual young people after exclusion. However, in making these observations, we recognise that schools fall under a different set of statutory duties and responsibilities.



4. Social capital and infrastructure

It is clear that without cross party consensus on the need for permanent base levels of funding, then short term funding of programmes such as Trusted Relationships will continue to be the norm.

What a continuation of short-term funding of pilots and other programmes misses is the chance to create long term sustainment and legacy through supporting the development of what might be termed 'permanent' social infrastructure provided by community organisations and groups. This local social infrastructure exists before and after short term programmes come and go and there is, in our opinion, an under explored potential to do more.

As noted earlier, the stewardship role that emerged over the four years is one of the possibly unanticipated indirect benefits of Trusted Relationships programme which we observed in that it helped foster the wider co-ordination with permanent local organisations. For example, one of the key Trusted Relationships legacies is from delivery of contextual safeguarding training to wide varieties of local organisations that will help protect young people from extra familial harms.

If the expression "it takes a village to raise a child" has any resonance with policy makers, then finding ways to support local authorities with the fostering and stewardship of local social infrastructure should be included in the design thinking behind any new short-term funded programme or initiative.

As noted earlier, funding the equivalent of Trusted Relationships across local authorities with Children's Services responsibilities would cost £37.5m per year.