

Crossing Boundaries: Co-Creating a Model of Information Sharing to Support Vulnerable Young People.

Elaine Arnull, Karen Heimer, Melissa Goss, Eva Makri, Frances Breen

Final Report





Main Public Output

**Crossing Boundaries: Co-Creating a Model of Information Sharing
to Support Vulnerable Young People.**

Elaine Arnull, Karen Heimer, Melissa Goss, Eva Makri, Frances Breen

Corresponding Author:

Professor Elaine Arnull

Southampton Solent University

Elaine.Arnull@solent.ac.uk

Acknowledgements

We would like to sincerely thank:

1. The professionals who supported us to complete this research project - you know who you are. By introducing us to people you thought it important for to us to talk to, and enabling us to hear their perspectives, you helped to create and shape this research.
2. The professionals, community members and people with Lived Experience who gave time and thoughts about how information might be better shared to support vulnerable young people and minimise exploitation. You contributed to this tool which creates a more inclusive and holistic model and encourages reflection.
3. Our reviewers for commenting on the report in draft form in such thoughtful detail. Their in-puts, drawing on their specialisms and expertise in child protection, risk management, multi-agency professional practice, inclusive and collaborative research, working with young people and survivors and the practice of academic research, enabled us to reach a more robust output.
4. The Nuffield Foundation and their staff who supported us through this endeavour. By supporting this study, you gave the opportunity to pilot and explore this information sharing idea.

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. It funds and undertakes rigorous research, encourages innovation and supports the use of sound evidence to inform social and economic policy, and improve people's lives. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. This project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation. Find out more at: www.nuffieldfoundation.org. Bluesky: @nuffieldfoundation.org, LinkedIn: Nuffield Foundation.

Aims And Objectives

The aim of this project was to work collaboratively with organisations and the community in a town in the Midlands of England, to identify ways of sharing information to better support children and young people (CYP)¹ who have been exploited or who are at risk of exploitation². The long-range goal is that such collaboration will positively impact criminal justice, social care, education and health policy and practice by going beyond existing information sharing guidance (see for example DfE 2024)³, to address the full range of people involved in supporting children, and inclusive of those children themselves. Further, that mechanisms and means of sharing information around child exploitation can be developed that are cognisant of the complexity of exploitation. This current research therefore addresses the findings of Independent Inquiries⁴ (for example, Jay et al, 2022; Crowther, 2022; Jay, 2014), which showed that organisations and communities knew information that was ignored, unshared or unused. And the methodology was designed to be participative with the aim that this would address those previously identified concerns (see Arnall, et al 2024).

This pilot project was an initial investigation utilising inclusive and participatory methods, designed to identify opportunities, places and methods for more effective sharing of information. The project and funding were small in scale, uncovering important information that can be fruitfully further studied to scientifically assess outcomes and impacts of adopting this approach in communities. The findings of the current research can also inform future knowledge and policy development, emphasising the value of community participation.

Guiding Framework

Our conceptual framework is that co-produced knowledge is more likely to result in workable and effective models for information sharing (International Association for Community Development, 2021). And that this model of working, inclusive of service providers, those with Lived Experience and communities, holds possibilities for creating knowledge about information sharing which extends the bounds of current knowledge and practice. Our work is informed by the work of Sesan (2014) and Hlela (2016), which emphasizes the complexity of ‘community’ and centres equality in participation. At the core of our work is a theory of change that emphasizes that working collaboratively with key organisations and community members to create a model and tool for sharing information is critical to effectively identify and support young people experiencing, or at risk

¹ Terminology that refers to minors aged under 18 years old and exploited by adults varies. UK practice is to use “child”, and all public reports use that terminology. Those subjected to exploitation are most commonly adolescents and many of our respondents used that term and ‘young people’ and international research also uses terms such as ‘young people’, ‘adolescents’ and ‘youth’, so we principally adopt the term “children and young people”, or ‘CYP’, throughout the report.

²The definition of child criminal exploitation used is “. . . where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.” (Home Office, 2023, p. 3).

³ There is a full bibliography which forms Appendix 1 of this report; there is not a separate reference list.

⁴ A Public Inquiry is a UK term for an inquiry when there is need to learn lessons about the cause of a major disaster, accident, or event involving significant damage to or loss of life. Inquiries make recommendations following a thorough, impartial investigation. For example: <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/about-us/what-inquiry.html>

of, exploitation. Our work draws on concepts from the International Association of Community Development (2018) which suggests that a wide range of professionals and others can engage in work aimed at community development.

Undertaking this participatory work goes beyond existing information sharing guidance which is limited by the narrowness of its' focus "... on the legal framework" (DfE 2024:6) which ongoing inquiries have shown to have fallen short in providing timely, acceptable and helpful practice with vulnerable CYP (see for example, Jay et. al. 2022). Our approach is in line for example, with UNDAF's Theory of Change Companion Guidance (undated). This paper articulates how a participatory approach should be embedded within the process of change aimed at addressing complex social problems (for example UNDAF, undated: page 11). Our approach also aligns with the UK government's own guidance which says stakeholders in any articulated process of change should "include everyone who is directly or indirectly affected by, or has influence on, the outcomes of the project or programme" (Government Analysis Function, 2025:8). These participatory models for articulating a process of change to address a complex problem thereby align with our specific aim, to develop an information sharing process and tool that would be adopted by, and helpful to, service-providing organisations, those with Lived Experience and communities in part because they helped to co-produce it (Arnall, Goss, Heimer, 2025; Arnall and Kanjilal, 2022).

The Community Setting

The goal of this project is as described above innovative and designed to explore if we could use a collaborative process to guide the development of an information sharing tool. A longer-term goal is to assess whether our information sharing tool can lead to an improved way of information sharing that will better support CYP at risk of exploitation and grooming. Prior independent public inquiries and research identified serious systemic failings (Jay et. al 2022), and Crowther, (2022) in his inquiry on the response of public organisations to sexual exploitation, emphasised the importance of mutual sharing of critical information and said community members believed lived experiences of exploitation should be understood.

In this research project we sought to engage directly with these aims and draw on a commitment for change identified by the Principal Investigator in prior participatory research projects in this town (e.g. Arnall et al., 2024). We aimed to do this through a collaborative process by providing the bridge and opportunity that would enable community members and those with Lived Experience to communicate their perspectives on what needs to be done by public and statutory organisations to build trust and share information and outline what they can also bring.

The research took place in Telford, a 'new' town in the Midlands of England that became a unitary authority in 1998, comprised of a town (Telford) and rural areas now known as Telford and Wrekin. Telford (named in 1968) was part of a post-war "new towns" programme created to accommodate populations moved there from congested urban centres. The 2021 census shows that 185,600 live there and that the population is predominantly white (88.2%), with minority groups representing 11.8% of the population. Asian people are the largest minority group accounting for 5.4% of the population, with approximately 3% of the population identifying as Black.

Telford is ranked among the 30% most deprived populations in England. This deprivation is masked by areas of relative affluence so that overall patterns of deprivation appear at first sight to be only slightly higher than the English averages. However, 24.9% of the population live in the 20% most deprived areas nationally and the Index of Multiple Deprivation shows that Telford and Wrekin has a score of 6 (with 10 being the highest and most deprived).

The crime rate has been trending downwards over the last five years. However, violent crime incidents place the town and rural area just above the UK average and are higher than the surrounding area and the West Midlands as a whole, particularly for sexual and drug offences. In 2022 an inquiry reported on the child sexual exploitation (CSE) of girls in the town which had been ongoing for over a decade (Crowther, 2022).

Research Questions

The *first research question* was whether it was possible to develop a participatory process for sharing information to effectively identify and serve young people at risk of exploitation.

The *second question* was if we could use this information to develop a tool that could be viewed as acceptable and usable by local service-providing organisations, those with Lived Experience of exploitation, and communities, as a basis for sharing information about child exploitation and collating and mapping that information.

The question of evaluation of the process and tool we develop is beyond the scope of the current small-scale pilot project and would require future research.

Methods

Our fundamental approach is to produce knowledge and solutions to problems by working proactively and collaboratively with key public organisations and community members, building on pre-existing relationships with communities (Arnall, Goss, Heimer, 2025). In work since 2019, the Principal Investigator (Arnall) has worked with community members, public organisations, the third sector and private businesses, and perceived a willingness to work collaboratively to address exploitation and violence in this community in Telford. This foundational work and relationship-building provided the opportunity for the present research because service providers and community groups were willing to collaborate with us, and the local council supported this project.

The research unfolded as follows: In Stage One we gathered data about how information sharing around child exploitation typically occurs within our partner community, focusing on information sharing within and between professionals in service-providing organisations (e.g., police, CYP services, schools, public health), formal bodies (e.g. Council), third sector (charitable or independent not for profit organisations) and community groups. We gathered information through individual and small group interviews and the review of some documentary evidence that participants referenced in the interviews or other communication with us.

In Stage Two, we analysed the data gathered through the interviews in Stage One to develop an information sharing tool. In designing the information sharing tool the specific intention was that it could be used by different types of respondent groups to aid understanding of how information flowed within and between groups and actors within the community and what data was collected. We then presented, explored and refined this information sharing tool in focus groups and small group interviews with participants from the service-providing organisations, Council, third sector and community groups previously interviewed. We first described the proposed information sharing tool and asked participants to describe and “map” their current methods of gathering and sharing information about an exploited CYP utilising the tool that we had developed. We discussed with participants whether and how this proposed information sharing tool might be used in practice and if

it could be implemented and tested. We also shared the proposed information sharing tool with a community youth group and with survivors of exploitation (LE). Therefore, we engaged the research team and the various professionals and community members with whom we worked in a process of discussion and refinement of the information sharing tool to better understand where, how and by whom it could be used.

The next steps, moving beyond this current small grant project, would be a larger scale project. This would be designed to assess whether the process and resultant information sharing tool could be adopted as a basis for understanding and improving information sharing, improve outcomes for CYP at risk of exploitation and increase satisfaction for all actors in the information sharing process.

Interviews and Focus Groups

Our community connections included people that the Principal Investigator (Arnall) had worked alongside previously, such as professionals working for the council in community safety, licensing and night-time economy workers, youth workers, community development professionals, educators, police, and public health professionals. Those advisors introduced us to other professionals (within and outside their organisations) and to community groups, including survivors and people with Lived Experience⁵ (LE) and youth organisations. In all, we worked with more than 27 organisations and groups and more than 70 people⁶ took part in interviews or groups.

In Stage One, we undertook 10 individual interviews and 4 group interviews, with numerous pre-meetings due to the sensitivity of the subject matter in this area. We presented the project at a series of multi-agency and strategy meetings with senior leaders in multi-agency collaborative settings, such as the Safer Stronger Board, and Domestic Abuse Liaison Partnership Board. Multi-agency partners were able to ask questions and organisations gave their formal support to the research; this was critical to securing agreements to interviews.⁷ We were able to interview the most senior leaders of some organisations, many of whom had responsibilities for safeguarding.⁸ In addition some interviewees worked in the third sector and community-based organisations. Based on this process and the data collected we developed a prototype tool for information sharing (see below).

In Stage Two we undertook 14 small group interviews and focus groups where the prototype information sharing tool was presented for discussion and feedback. The participants were professionals, community members, and community leaders, and people with Lived Experience of exploitation (i.e. sometimes referred to as survivors). We were invited to attend a consultation with a

⁵ In this report we use the terms survivor and those with lived experience (LE).

⁶ Gatekeepers organised some group meetings and we attended these and other bodies that were already constituted so we recorded the group name or that of the gatekeeper.

⁷ This may have been because when this research project started there were also processes involving an Ofsted inspection of Children's Services and a two-year review report regarding a national inquiry.

⁸ Safeguarding is a legal duty appertaining to Local Authorities and other organisations and professional groups in the UK. The legal framework, specifically in England, is rooted in the Children Act 1989, with amendments and further guidance provided by subsequent legislation like the Children Act 2004 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Statutory guidance such as Working Together to Safeguard Children was updated in December 2023:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65797f1e0467eb000d55f689/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_2023_-_statutory_framework.pdf

group which included young people and ran a focus group with educational safeguarding leads, which included a wide range of professionals focussed on ameliorating or addressing child exploitation, as well as members of the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). All group interviews and focus groups in Stage Two took place online at the request of participants.

Where permission was given, the focus groups, small group interviews and individual interviews were recorded using Teams or note taken where permission for recording was not given. The digitised recordings were stored securely on a dual-protected laptop backed up to a protected drive hosted by Southampton Solent University. The digital files were transcribed with no names of participants included, and transcriptions stored on the protected drive.

Limitations

The interviews with professionals undertaken in Stage One were drawn initially from organisations already known to us. We generated further interviews using the snowballing technique, i.e. we asked each respondent 'who else we should speak to gain a complete picture'. We reached saturation by meeting with everyone who we were told it was important for us to speak to, with just one interview not taking place. We were not able to interview a social services representative, although respondents from social services were involved in the Stage Two focus groups.

Additionally, we recognise as a limitation that this project focuses principally on the perceptions of professionals and adults in the community. No persons under the age of 18 were interviewed, although we did attend and observe an online focus group led by trained youth work professionals. At no time did we have direct or indirect access to contact information for the young people.

The project and funding were small in scale, uncovering important information that can be fruitfully further studied using a pre-post intervention or other longitudinal design to scientifically assess outcomes and impacts of adopting this approach in communities. This was therefore essentially a 'proof of concept' and initial feasibility study where the prototype tool was designed and trialled, but not at this stage used in practice to gather information by professionals, young people or communities.

Data Analysis

Research team members independently read, coded, and described data from the interviews in Stage One and the focus groups in Stage Two. Coding occurred in three stages. Firstly, we coded the transcripts of Stage One interviews and focus groups for content of discussions. In a second round, we coded the Stage One interviews and focus group transcripts using themes from the literature on CYP exploitation. In a third round, we coded the Stage One transcripts and from those developed an information sharing tool that we planned to take back to groups in Stage Two. This information sharing tool, the Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST), is a key product of this research.

We reviewed policy documentation and website links (e.g. a page on the Council website for anonymous reporting of a concern about exploitation) that were suggested to us by participants during Stage One interviews or pre-meetings. We also reviewed documentation and websites (where possible) including Inquiry and follow-up reports (Crowther, 2022 and 2024 and Ofsted, 2024). The aim was to assess and embed conversations with individuals and small groups within the broader organisational contexts.

The Contribution to the Evidence

MIST: Mutual Information Sharing Tool

The information sharing tool that emerged from our third round of coding the Stage One data was inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) socio-ecological theory of child development. In essence, that theory states that an individual's development is shaped by interconnecting systems that include individual aspects, their family, the provision of services, legal frameworks and enforcement, as well as the communities in which they live and the broader social and political systems which surround them; for Bronfenbrenner these are micro through to macro systems. This theory, alongside our data, was a springboard from which we developed a prototype, the **Mutual Information Sharing Tool**. This tool is able to take into account and make explicit the multi-layered complexity of exploitation and information sharing aimed at protecting CYP.

Based on the Bronfenbrenner logic we developed a prototype tool that utilises a template of concentric circles, representing most proximal to most distal connections to a vulnerable CYP. Our concentric circles prototype information sharing tool which we named MIST, was given to participants and was blank except for our placement of the CYP at the centre. (See Fig. 1.)

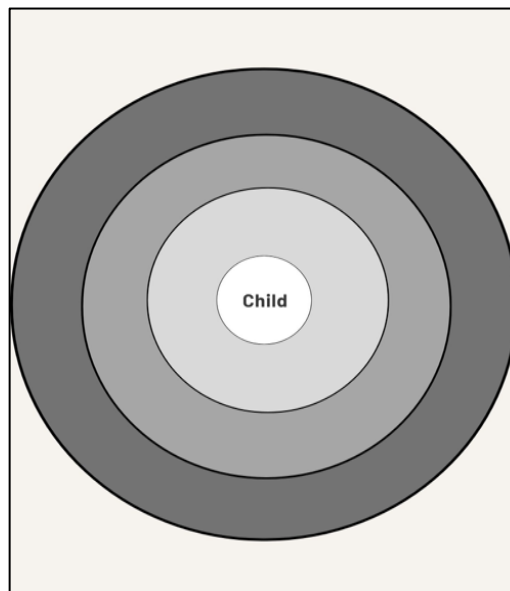


Fig 1. Blank Mutual Information Sharing Tool used with the Stage Two groups.

We asked participants in Stage Two to use the blank prototype tool to discuss or show in writing how and with whom they shared information about a CYP vulnerable to exploitation through the layers of interactions (represented in the concentric circles). Before participants undertook this exercise, we described how the tool could be used to understand the multi-layered complexity of responses to exploitation. We also shared what our participants told us in Stage One about how information was currently collected, stored and shared. Participants (including professionals, survivors, young people and community members) were then asked to work with the MIST tool in Fig. 1. to discuss how they thought information could **best** be shared, and who would need to be included, consulted, and aware of that information sharing process. We instructed that the concentric circles were to be used to “map” the flows of information sharing. We asked the groups to consider how local, national, third sector organisations and community members could best play a

role in the information sharing process with regard to the exploitation of young people, and to discuss or diagram these on the template that we provided. Specifically, participants were asked to use the MIST tool in Fig. 1, with the CYP placed at the centre, to show with whom they (the person in the group) was most likely to share information first and who they prioritise; they were asked to then move out across the circles from there. We showed participants one example with generic categories used⁹; this example is shown in fig. 2.¹⁰

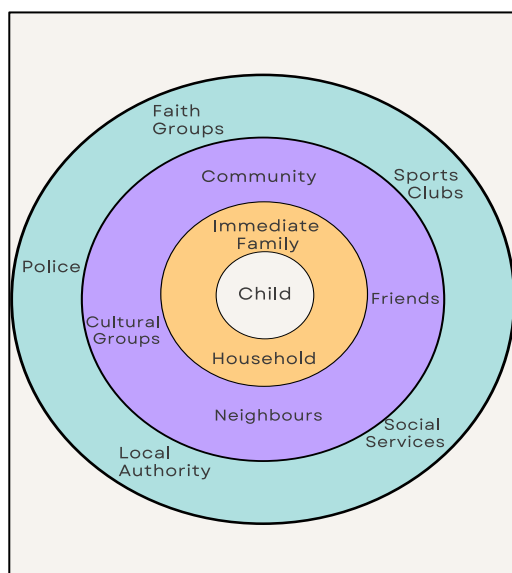


Figure 2. Simplified example of information sharing tool

The simplified explanatory tool we devised (see fig. 2. above) has circles that represent social interactions and in this we describe those that might be considered most proximal to, or distal from, the child. We found that participants could use the blank tool (see fig. 1. Page 8.) to describe how they collect and share information. Young people and survivors used the blank MIST tool to describe how **they** would share information about **their** concerns about exploitation or had shared information about their exploitation.

We collected the responses from participants via audio-recording, note-taking by a research team member observing the group, and through asking participants to submit their written versions of mappings using the concentric circles diagram. We asked participants to say if they thought that the process and use of the information sharing tool was useful to understand and facilitate information sharing about CYP and exploitation. We encouraged them to say if they thought the tool was workable, emphasizing that a response saying that the tool was not useful, or needed major changes, would be just as valuable as any other feedback.

The goal was to get feedback on using the tool as a strategy to allow better collaboration between service-providers, communities and researchers to understand how (and if) CYP were central to professional or organisational systems of information collection and sharing. This was important as safeguarding practice and guidance (DfE, 2024) theoretically requires the child to be

⁹ We have used the term 'immediate family' to denote all family caring methods surrounding a child, as this was the term most commonly used by participants.

¹⁰ The method, model and tool described in this document should not be reproduced without written permission: please contact elaine.arnull@solent.ac.uk

central to the process, but research findings, those with Lived Experience and past UK inquiries suggest this is frequently not the case in practice (see discussion, Arnull, Goss and Heimer 2025). Utilising the prototype information sharing tool we devised, MIST (fig.1.) seeks to make explicit the level of the CYP's involvement, how (or if) a CYP is allowed input into the information-gathering and sharing about them, and the role and part played by others (such as family, professionals, friends, community members).

As we show in the discussion of the findings section below, participants often discussed who they perceived was most/least likely to listen to a CYP. They also described which sort of professionals, adults or other CYP was the most likely to be told about a concern. We describe those findings briefly in Section 1 below, in accordance with key four themes which we devised from a review of the international research literature on child exploitation (see, Arnull, Goss and Heimer 2025). These are critical to understanding not only the complex factors involved in the process of exploitation, but also to understanding the four major factors we see as shaping responses to assisting vulnerable children and young people and minimising opportunities for their exploitation by adult criminal networks. We then move into Section 2 of the findings to discuss how our respondents sought to utilise the MIST tool within the focus groups. We describe how MIST allowed them to map these complex processes and reflect on them. The collaborative process using the MIST tool highlighted examples of good practice and led to suggestions from participants on how to address gaps in knowledge and work more collaboratively in ways that were more inclusive. These findings are discussed below.

Section 1: Findings: Information Sharing About Children and Young People at Risk of Exploitation

The backdrop to our research is found within the numerous public inquiries conducted in the UK since 2014. The public inquiries revealed evidence on the sexual exploitation of children and youths by adult criminal networks who used various forms of coercion. The UK based evidence that we reviewed included (but was not limited to) the Commission on Young Lives (2022), the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (May 2022), the Independent Inquiry into Telford Child Sexual Exploitation (IITCSE, Crowther, 2022), the inquiry into the sexual exploitation of children in Greater Manchester, known as the Coffey Report, (2014), and the Inquiry report from Rotherham, referred to as the Jay Report (2014). Our specific focus in the present study is on understanding effective and acceptable mechanisms for sharing information that engage communities and minimise opportunities for exploitation.

Based on a review of the UK independent inquiries and a literature review, we published a paper 'Assisting Economically Marginalised and Vulnerable Youth and Minimising Opportunities for Exploitation by Adult Criminal Groups' in the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Behavior* (Arnull, Goss and Heimer, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548241310436>). This was presented at a conference at the Arizona State University, on 22 January 2025. Our review concluded there were four major common elements critical to the systemic institutional failures and relevant to effectively assisting vulnerable CYP and minimising opportunities for their exploitation by adult criminal networks. Those four themes are –

- *Vulnerability and exploitation,*
- *Not listening to CYP and communities,*
- *Prejudice and bias and*

- *Engagement, prevention and trust*

We conducted a further review to consider participatory approaches to information sharing and inclusive models of intervention that take account of cultural, social, environmental and contextual factors. What we found is that participatory and socio-ecological approaches to understanding and improving information sharing around child exploitation and CSE is supported by the emphasis on the complexity and multi-faceted nature of exploitation in the research literature (Kavenagh & Maternowaska, 2024; Maternowska et.al., 2020; McPherson et al., 2024). Further, because the disclosure of exploitation and abuse is also multifaceted (McPherson, 2024) these approaches may be highly effective at identifying the intersecting, intersectional and systemic factors at play, and the range of information flows around the CYP. The Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse in the UK stresses the important role played by generalist, community-based youth support services (CSA, 2024). And work in South Africa that developed a community approach within townships (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2024) found that shared information around CSE was critical for assisting young people and future prevention. Additionally, Alaggia et. al., (2019) highlighted that we know more about the barriers to supporting young people around exploitation than the facilitators that minimise harm. Evidence points towards a need to know more about the social, environmental, cultural and contextual factors that positively minimise harm.

Below we summarise the evidence for the four major themes and how they relate to the development of our prototype MIST tool. We place the literature at the start of each section and then highlight how our findings related to that theme.

1) Vulnerability and Exploitation

Multiple factors have been found to contribute to the exploitation and abuse of children and young people, but most often cited is poverty and social disadvantage (Franchino-Olsen et al., 2024; Maternowska, et al., 2020; Mercera et al., 2024; Mythen & Weston, 2023). The research suggests that children and young people in poverty are at greater risk of exploitation and that abuse frequently occurs in a social, public space, involving networks of criminal adults who further manipulate children with access to status, goods and entertainment (Home Office, 2023; Jay, 2022; Koch et al., 2024).

In our study participants discussed how schools help to build daily supportive contacts with CYP and develop sustained bonds over a period of years. This, educators considered, placed them in a position to recognise change and assess possible vulnerability and harm. School professionals therefore saw exclusion, going missing from school or just being frequently absent as factors that they observed as limiting a CYP's opportunities for continued integration into school, as well as disrupting their educational attainment and isolating the CYP from their friendship networks. Schools were thereby seen (by educators and other professionals) as likely to serve as a community-based early alert system to potential harm to a CYP. Alongside this, our participants said that the expectations of some young people in the area are low. They saw this as presenting opportunities for exploitation by criminal adults. All communities in Telford were seen to be impacted by economic constraints and low educational outcomes, leading to a set of circumstances conducive to exploitation by adults who could apparently offer opportunities for access to income or enjoyment.

Effectively communicating the dangers and risks to CYP from criminal adults was seen to be exacerbated by cuts to youth and community services in the area. Further, services such as social services or specialist police teams are seen as uninterested in engaging with CYP at risk because their

thresholds were seen as set too high to allow their engagement at this point; but as more generic, community-based resources have disappeared they can be the only resource available. This point of view was represented to us by organisations such as the third sector, commentators from community groups, those with Lived Experience and educators. Third sector, community groups and educators said they are left without the ability to unlock the resources of support needed, because statutory, safeguarding interest is focused on the later stages of the exploitation cycle. Information sharing at this early point cannot therefore be effectively utilised to benefit CYP.

Our findings show schools are the site where statutory responsibilities (for example regarding education and safeguarding), interface directly with individuals, families and communities. Other statutory services, such as community policing teams, and non-statutory specialist third sector organisations and others may also come into the school to provide education or information to CYP or families. And CYP's friends are also important points for disclosure and informal support. Schools therefore offer a pivotal point between statutory services, CYP and young people, friends, families and communities. A participant from the third sector suggested that where support can be unlocked, they firstly attempt to make the CYP aware of vulnerabilities and advise them about the nature of healthy relationships, wanting them "to recognise for themselves that they are vulnerable, that they are at risk. Rather than being told." Sharing information about exploitation and grooming with CYP and parents however, for example within schools, is not easy because "...it is a fear factor. You know, it's easy not to think about child exploitation and CSE and grooming and county lines." Additionally, parents were seen to be concerned about statutory or children's services potential engagement if they sought advice or support. Families were afraid they would lose their CYP or lose control over their family situation. This was raised by many participants across a range of settings.

Information sharing systems aimed at early interventions could carry risks of surveillance, but if developed, shared and owned in a way that was transparent and collaboratively produced was said by participants to have potential to minimise those concerns about statutory services' aims. Currently, the recently developed sophisticated information building and sharing systems described to us are largely unknown within the town, or can seem remote, or are not trusted to act in the CYP's or the family's interest. These systems, as described, are often focussed on collecting statistical data and information with the aim to build and understand patterns of activity; those sharing this information are most commonly different actors within the local authority and the police. This may mean for example bringing together known data about criminal activity, locations of child exploitation, etc. at a reasonably high level, involving digitised information and rarely including community-based organisations or professionals. These actions are therefore either unknown or, if known, can appear surveillant rather than helpful.

More open, frequent, visible communication and support in a community setting could help to address these concerns. And, working alongside communities, statutory actors might identify how those sophisticated information sharing systems, could play a role alongside other more inter-personal, shared exchanges of knowledge with community members. This might also help to address what was repeatedly described to us as the tiredness of parents. Parents were said by numerous professionals to be frequently overwhelmed by everyday demands, fearful of what might be happening to their CYP, or within their communities, and wanting to find ways to protect their CYP. This pressure on parents was also described by the Lived Experience participants and seen by them to have influenced their own families and increased their own vulnerability. More open forms of information sharing based on dialogue and exchange might assist parents, families and communities

to feel professionals (particularly those in statutory organisations) hear and share their concerns and are prepared to work alongside them to address those challenges.

Thus, pressures on parents were described as impacting information sharing because statutory services have created information sharing systems that appear closed to parents and other community members. And those statutory professionals (such as children's services, specialist exploitation teams and police) see themselves, and are described by other actors, as 'owners' of those information systems and the data they contain. These systems are perceived as focussed on the organisation's concerns. Increasing participation in information sharing therefore requires an orientation and change which is profound (see for example, Lefevre et al., 2019). The currently articulated sense is that most statutory services are remote from children, communities and families, whilst supportive youth and community services have been reduced. This situation leaves schools and remaining community groups to fill the gap, adding pressure on their own limited resources and increasing the vulnerability of CYP to exploitative adults willing to fill the gap with proffered 'opportunities'.

2) Listening (or not) to Youth and Communities

The UK inquiries and international research noted the failure of adults and professional services to listen to CYP experiencing exploitation and described ineffective information sharing amongst professionals (Jay et al., 2022; McPherson et al., 2024). Numerous published research highlights the importance of listening to CYP to better understand and prevent exploitation (Allnock, 2019; Koch et al., 2024; Lemaigre et al., 2017; McElvaney & Nixon, 2020; McGill & McElvaney, 2023; McPherson et al., 2024). And address children's fear of reporting abuse because they are afraid no one will listen to them (e.g. Mercera et al., 2024; Manay and Collin-Vézina, 2021; Lefevre et al., 2017).

Young people in our study considered CYP were most likely to confide in their immediate circle (friends and family). They articulated how they might carefully consider who they could trust to protect the information they might share. Young people also recognised that they might share information with a trusted person (most likely a friend) who might go on to share this information in confidence with a trusted adult, because they felt it was helpful to do so. This adult was most likely someone the CYP knew well, who they saw regularly and who the CYP trusted; thus, they were most likely to be a family member, or an adult based in a community, or CYP orientated provision such as youth work, school, sports, cultural, faith or community organisation. Trust was a critical factor in this process, with CYP describing how trust was linked by them to a concept of an open dialogue and exchange. The views articulated to us about information sharing and help-seeking reflected what is known about the process of disclosure in the international literature and what those with Lived Experience also described to us.

Information sharing by professionals was frequently discussed with reference to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). And it was considered that GDPR legislation was often misunderstood or misrepresented. Social services and specialist teams were said to have on specific occasions undermined collaborative work between schools and others in the community. These were collaborative efforts the schools and community groups had found to be helpful and considered to have been in the interest of CYP. Participants described efforts to co-operate and share information about patterns they observed linked to exploitation in more informal, although confidential, ways and how those had been overridden. It was clear these sorts of occurrences had profound impacts and still resonated. And these examples speak to the sorts of tensions outlined by Lefevre et. al.,

(2019) about the profound difficulties in balancing protections between participation and protection when collating, sharing and acting on information about exploitation. Crowther (2024) suggests partner organisations now have a clear understanding of GDPR and appears to suggest this is a shared understanding in his review. Our findings, however, suggest the ways in which GDPR are discussed and currently said to be used are believed by a range of professionals to act, or be utilised by others to act, as a barrier to information sharing at an early stage. There was a strong sense that information sharing could be a one-way street with “...social workers and the police systems, they're very closed.” Even where there were good relationships, tensions arose as the result of delays in information being relayed back by social services and the police. This information ‘gap’ was described as leaving CYP, families and community-based professionals not knowing if their concerns had been heard or acted on. Further, it caused them to feel excluded from decision-making. Some professionals also felt it dis-abled them from offering properly informed support and that this had the potential to undermine the CYP trust in them. In addition, participants were conflicted on whether statutory organisations take into account concerns raised by youth and community workers. It was mentioned that on many occasions their concerns were ignored as they were perceived as ‘non-experts’, leading to missed opportunities for safeguarding of CYP because “some statutory organisations just don't listen and honestly, I think it comes across sometimes there's a bit of arrogance there.” Some respondents said they had experienced some improvements, and they thought this was because some members of youth organisations had secured employment within the council's child exploitation team.

The local authority also assesses a geographic area in relation to that specific CYP and determines whether there are any reasons that area is susceptible to exploitation (such as lack of CCTV, patrols, extra lighting, etc). The local council and police were described as working together to better understand the dynamics of local communities and prevent further criminal exploitation from taking place. Contributors who share information are teams like those working in the night- time economy (NTE). These teams are central to licensing enforcement (e.g. taxis, licensed premises, pubs, clubs, hotels, late night refreshments) and responsible for engaging and educating licensees. Mapping activities for sharing information about vulnerable areas or ‘hotspots’ for exploitation-related activity feed into safeguarding fora that include school safeguarding leads and specialist exploitation team members. This sort of information sharing system (see also page 12), is referred to in Crowther's (2024) review, but this type of activity is not well known or understood within communities with many information sharing activities happening at an ‘exo-system’ level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and inaccessible to young people and communities.

There is therefore ongoing frustration and a perception of missed opportunities to listen to CYP, other professionals and communities. The frustrations and tensions regarding how shared and open the existing ‘shared’ information systems are, the effectiveness of those communications, and a lack of what is perceived as a sufficiently joint, early, commitment to a vulnerable CYP, has the potential to disrupt current system-based information sharing activities. These systems have undoubtedly been devised to bring together robust data but are not perceived to be sufficiently focussed on listening and thereby minimising opportunities for harm to occur, but rather to focus on recording harm that has occurred.

3) Prejudice and Bias

Research suggests that prejudice and bias regarding age, gender, disability, race, ethnicity, sexuality and social status affect disclosure by people experiencing abuse and this in turn impacts on

what information about that abuse is known and shared (e.g., Koch et. al., 2024; Moss et al., 2023). Perceived prejudice and bias can also affect trust toward professionals and impact responses to children, regardless of nation (e.g., Ali et al., 2021; Jay et al., 2022; Kavanagh and Maternowska, 2024; McPherson et al., 2024). Mythen and Weston (2023) say UK legislation may, by blurring the boundaries for professionals between crime, pre-crime and vulnerability, increase opportunities for prejudice and bias. Dhaliwal and colleagues (2015) research suggested culturally sensitive and clear definitions and explanations of abuse, exploitation and CSE, are critical, and her work has been echoed by others who recommend training for professionals (e.g., Crowther, 2022; Jay et. al., 2022).

Research and the UK inquiries have also pointed to gender-stereotyped bias and prejudice in professional decision-making and responses particularly impacting girls (e.g., Ali et al. 2021; Jay et al., 2022; Jay, 2014; McPherson et al., 2024). Misogynistic and frequently classist labelling from a range of professionals (e.g. Crowther 2022; Casey 2025) is a pattern also highlighted in the treatment of parents, particularly mothers who had also been victims of CSE (see Arnall et al., 2024 for UK; see Samati 2021 for international evidence). Further, Ali et. al., (2021) highlight how help-seeking by girls is more broadly impacted by intersectional factors.

Inquiry reports such as Crowther's (2022) discussed the impact prejudice and bias had on the safeguarding of CYP subjected to exploitation, and in our findings misogyny, sexism and systemic racism were factors identified by our participants as ongoing issues within the local area and impacted by external actors and events. Educators in particular raised serious concerns about the impact on boys in their schools from social media influencers and content. And the relevance and pervasiveness of sexist and misogynistic attitudes and the way they could impact on information sharing regarding sexual exploitation was highlighted by some male participants who said they had directly experienced male perpetrators anticipating that they would share the abusers misogynistic, sexist or prejudicial views about their victims and therefore not act to intervene to minimise harm and stop exploitation. One survivor with Lived Experience of exploitation described how sexist attitudes could be internalised, so that victims "downplayed the abuse" and got to a point where they felt this was "their place in the world". And survivors recounted their own past experiences in which they had, as a child been labelled as "prostitutes" and "sluts" and that this had come from abusers, but also from some professionals and community members. These experiences caused harm to the victim and contributed to undermine trust. The relevance for information sharing is that if you do not 'see' or 'hear' the victim you may not recognise the exploitation and not offer appropriate support or share vital information. And because exploiters work to isolate children, broken bonds with families and community make other sources of support more remote and harder to access.

In our research study we also found that professionals from Black, Asian or minority backgrounds were more likely to raise, and deal directly, with the issues of racism, prejudice and bias and talk about how this shaped responses to sexual exploitation. Participants highlighted gaps which exist between some statutory services and communities in the area, with participants indicating that certain communities, both those from white and minority ethnic backgrounds, had negative previous experiences either with the police or children's services, such that, "There is room to improve on how we capture the voice of the community, the voice of children"

Concerns about prejudice and bias led participants to propose more community-orientated educational efforts aimed at information sharing about misogyny, sexism, and the risks of sexual violence, alongside promoting a public understanding of how to report concerns about exploitation. Publicly promoted knowledge surrounding exploitation, we were told, could be embedded in a

variety of ways, from public health messaging through to English language courses. We are aware the council engages in a range of surveys about violence against women and girls, has supported research on VAWG (Arnall et al., 2024), provides information events, including White Ribbon, and that organisations in the area have developed training. We were also made aware in Stage 1 of the research of a publicly available council web page for reporting concerns about exploitation regarding a CYP. We were able to feed back at a multi-agency focus group in Stage 2 that we had found the web page difficult to find and had to go through several stages and know particular information to find it. This further suggested prevention work should be designed utilising participatory methods as supported by international research findings.

4) Engagement, Prevention and Trust

Inquiry recommendations emphasised the need for greater trust to be built amongst professional organisations and communities, advocated for accessible information on exploitation (Ali, et. al., 2021; Dhaliwal et al., 2014; Jay et al., 2022), and educational provision on protective measures (Crowther, 2022; Point 141, p. 27; Jay, 2022) and children's rights. Building trust is seen to sit alongside better information sharing by professionals with communities and the need to take a child-centred approach. Further there is evidence those with lived experience of exploitation should contribute to developing information sharing systems (Firmin et al., 2024; Fouche et al., 2019; Jay et al. 2022; Koch et al., 2024). The literature suggests the importance of a youth worker model (Crowther, 2022; McPherson, et al., 2024), and advocates for participatory practice for effective engagement between the community and professionals (e.g., CSA, 2024; Factor & Ackerley, 2019; Lefevre, et al., 2019).

In this study we found the issues of engagement, prevention and trust were very much shaped by the perspective of the respondent. This meant for example whether our respondent was a person with LE of exploitation, a community member, a community orientated professional or a statutory, centrally orientated professional. Engagement, prevention and trust were also said to have been impacted by a reshaping of resources within Telford, said to be the result of national constraints, some local reallocation of resources, and the loss of particular funding streams (for example, Big Local). The implication for work at a community level seems to have been more profound than at the centre. The losses have impacted areas such as licensing which was highlighted by Crowther (2022 and 2024) as central to addressing critical local issues linked to exploitation and for example, impacting community centres, youth workers and leading to a recent reduction in community development workers. Some participants reflected on the way these developments affected information sharing, which was seen not just as a system but rather a reflection of trust, engagement and relationships. For those with Lived Experience this lack of community-based resources increased the probability that a CYP might not have a dedicated person to support them and would have to repeat their story several times over, leading to the CYP feeling their story was not important and that "nobody's listening". This sort of potential impact that arises from a lack of frontline, community-based services is mirrored in the literature review. In our study, and other studies, youth workers were described by young people and those with Lived Experience as well placed to build relationships with CYP and to gain and share information. The loss of youth work services was seen as removing a space where CYP could feel safe and hold informal conversations. In contrast the replacement by local authority funding focussed on 'youth activities' was seen as not adequate and not 'youth work'.

Participants with Lived Experience of exploitation did not describe having experienced professionals and organisations as generally over-sharing information. Rather they experienced GDPR as a barrier, something used as a reason to not provide them with information about themselves. Examples given included even where information was collated by organisations without their direct involvement or consent; the examples given were both recent and in the past. The focus for survivors was therefore on the individual CYP being clearly informed about information collection and sharing so that they can make an informed decision about what information about themselves they share. This is different from requesting access to records retrospectively, or through formalised systems where the information ‘belongs to’, or is ‘owned by’ the agency and would represent a considerable change to safeguarding systems.

Other participants described policy and procedures they considered well-structured and offering adequate safeguarding and joint working such as support to schools from the community-based police. Other positive examples of co-working cited by some professionals affiliated with social services, local authorities and policing were an offer of family group conferencing, and a multi-agency exploitation panel that considers any CYP considered at risk of exploitation. The latter includes children’s services, the police, the NHS, Prevent and Youth Justice who share information about the CYP and put an action plan together. All professional partners can use that information after securing permission from the ‘data owner’ who will be children’s social services or the police, however this does not include the CYP themselves. And herein lay a key issue. What seemed to centrally orientated services as effective and positive joint working, felt like “extraction” to young people, communities and community-centred professionals. These are not experiences that the CYP, community or community-based professionals feel positively increases their engagement and trust nor enhances prevention. This tension goes to the heart of information sharing and concepts of participation and these are critical issues we consider in more detail in Section 2 of the Findings.

Summary: what encourages and what inhibits information sharing?

Our discussion of our findings above utilises the four major areas critical to the exploitation of CYP – *vulnerability and exploitation; not listening to children and young people; prejudice and bias; engagement, prevention and trust* (Arnull, Goss and Heimer, 2025). Our findings show the impact of these four factors in our study and how they work to inhibit information sharing. Thus, CYP are made more vulnerable by adults if they do not listen to them, or worse still blame them for the harm they are suffering; with poverty, social disadvantage, prejudice, bias, and social isolation playing key roles. Opportunities for intervention by groups and actors known to and trusted by CYP are diminished by a series of financial constraints and cuts. And centrally orientated statutory services and their professionals are often not known personally to CYP and within communities. In addition, these statutory services are seen to utilise and focus information sharing and systems amongst themselves, thereby becoming the ‘owners’ of this information with important decision-making powers appearing to reside with them. Systems which professionals may think support and protect CYP can in this way appear to be surveillant to CYP, families and communities who may have already had negative experiences with those systems.

Factors that encourage information sharing were seen to be those that facilitated participatory, open and more inclusive information sharing. Positive, interpersonal relationships are critical, alongside opportunities to talk and be heard. This applies to professionals working jointly, who want to be equally valued for their skills and opinions, as well as CYP, and those with Lived

Experience for whom trust and knowing someone directly is a major factor. Being able to be sure you can trust who you tell, means a need to know that person will include, and inform you, so that you are enabled to make decisions for and about yourself. For community members, both professionals and local, they also want to have knowledge of, and ownership over, what happens within their area – be it geographic or an area of expertise. They want decision-making with and alongside other professionals, not to be simply conduits of information.

In this study survivors, communities and professionals describe information collection and sharing with, and about, a CYP as it currently occurs and how those impact on trust and engagement. The data highlights the complexity and multi-faceted nature of child exploitation and the opportunities for addressing it through more inclusive and participatory ways of information sharing.

Section Two Findings: Developing an Information Sharing Tool Using Participatory Methods

Building on the Bronfenbrenner socio-ecological theory (1979, 1994), we analysed the data from Stage One to develop a simplified, prototype, information sharing tool with participants, (see Fig. 1 Mutual Information Sharing Tool - MIST). We utilised the prototype MIST to discuss and map information sharing with research participants in Stage Two and employed it as part of our analytical framework.

We believe the prototype MIST tool and process can offer new insights into professional practice regarding information sharing to minimise harm arising from exploitation. The MIST enabled the tensions and interactions that were described in Stage One findings to be more clearly understood. Using the tool, it is possible to get a visual representation of participants actions. This clarifies and makes explicit the ways in which different actors see information flow around child exploitation. The MIST illustrates the fundamentally different perspectives at the heart of information sharing and how these may result in a clash between perspectives that contribute to distrust or a lack of engagement. The discussion below illustrates some of the findings and tensions.

Models of practice and the centrality of the child

The police allowed us explicitly to use the following examples of differently orientated policing professionals and teams with different roles. It has enabled us to use the prototype MIST and examples in this document to demonstrate a key finding. That finding focusses on how a practitioner's role may lead them to act differently to others within their professional group. We found they may come to act more similarly to other practitioners drawn from other professional groups with whom they are working in an inter-agency team. We did not find this behaviour to be located solely in or with policing, but rather use this exemplar to demonstrate a broader issue of how a practitioner interprets their role in conjunction with others with whom they are working; the following discussion and illustration should be read in that light. The importance of this finding is how it directly impacts and shapes a practitioner's response to a CYP experiencing exploitation.

Importantly, working with professionals, we found some practitioners placed themselves directly proximal to the child on the MIST, with the child's family and community displaced to the outer layers. This means the practitioner saw themselves as the most important people in the information sharing process. An example of this is figure 3:

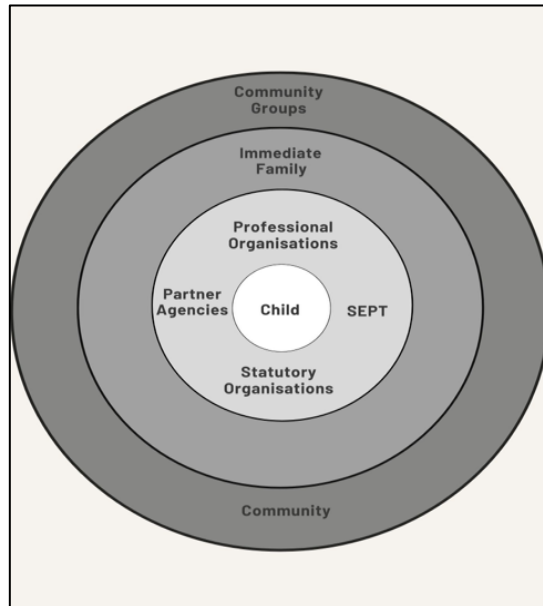


Figure 3. Specialist Exploitation Policing Team MIST example.

This description accorded with how those with Lived Experience, community members, youth workers and some educators had described their experiences of some groups of statutory practitioners (such as social services and the police). Those with LE of exploitation, for example, said they had felt ignored in the process and that those closest to them were not included. We found however, that in general, specialist teams and those practitioners with statutory responsibilities had appeared surprised, or countered survivors and community members descriptions of these types of actions when subsequently related to them.

Importantly, in using the tool in the focus groups however some statutory practitioners, such as those in the policing specialist exploitation team, then went on to illustrate how information collection and sharing activities were centred on themselves and their activities, rather than the CYP and those closest to them. We found that when these specialist teams and those with statutory responsibilities illustrated what they did, using the MIST, it corresponded with what those with LE, community members and largely non-statutory workers had described. The completion of the tool within the focus groups therefore allowed visual clarity of what actions are taken by individual actors. The specialist practitioners showed exactly how and where the specialist teams and those from the statutory services placed people in the circles. This meant the MIST was able to make visually explicit who they considered most central to the process of information gathering and sharing.

For some of those specialist safeguarding professionals this came as a revelation as they drew it. In one instance, a member of a centralised, specialist exploitation policing¹¹ team said that from their perspective the socio-ecological model and thereby the tool is “a little bit back to front”, for they consider the most important people to consult and make decisions with are other professionals within statutory organisations, i.e. children’s services. After then investigating the CYP’s background through information gathering exercises, only then would they expect the CYP or their

¹¹ We thank the police for allowing us to use the example of differently orientated policing teams with different roles.

family to in-put. While the exploitation specialists clarified that each CYP was dealt with on a case-by-case basis, it was made clear that there was a strict protocol and they considered they were following the statutory process within the Children's Act (as they saw it), which they interpreted as a legitimate approach to protecting data.

The perspective of community-based police officers was however different. An inspector described how the CYP would be at the centre of their enquiries with their immediate family in the surrounding circle. However, in the case that a referral or concern had come from the CYP's school, for example, intelligence would also then be gathered from police records and in consultation with children's services to see if any prior engagement had occurred. One of the community-based officers added that "the community, the schools, all those levels of engagement that we've already got would be vitally important". This was echoed by other members of community-based policing teams who said community engagement and becoming a 'familiar face' in communities was of paramount importance to receiving and sharing information and understanding the importance of that information (see fig. 4).

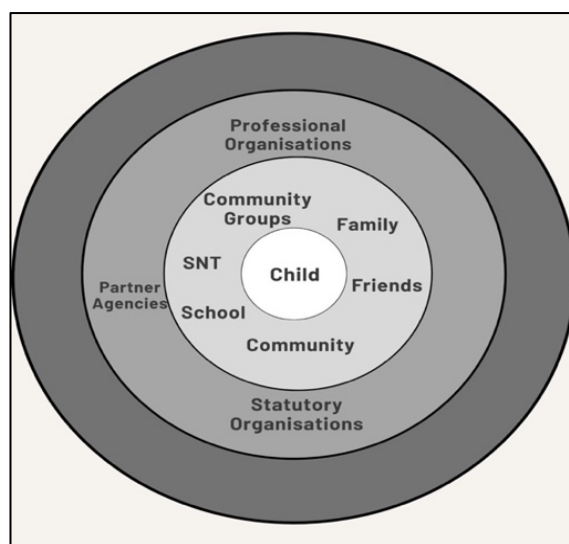


Figure 4. Community-based officers MIST example.

While the community-based officers viewed their place using the MIST as also being in the second circle, immediately surrounding the CYP at the centre, they seemed to do so for different reasons than specialist exploitation team members. The community-based policing team practitioners appeared to place themselves in the more immediate circle because of their role embedded within a community; and for example, as they might know the CYP and/or their family. In seeing themselves as being present in the community and accessible and approachable through the formation of relationships, the community-based police practitioners appeared to put greater emphasis on community dynamics and interactions, including themselves as part of that community. One officer commented that "community engagement prior to involvement helps any investigation".

When asked about information being shared about, and with, victims of exploitation, the specialist exploitation team spoke about the need to comply with the Victim's Code of Practice and said they would follow this in terms of updating victims about the status of the investigation. Again, those practitioners made it clear for them procedure had to be followed, and this drove their practice. They acknowledged however that their communication with victims could be better, but

said from their perspective change was moving in the “right direction”. Citing recent developments, they described improving organisational learning through multi-agency case file audits (also discussed in Crowther, 2024). In these audits statutory partners come together to dissect what happened, identify good learning and what went wrong. The specialist team members presented this as part of a cultural learning and development where continual improvement is sought. However, this culture of learning does not include information sharing with - or from - the CYP who is the victim within that audit process. The progress therefore held up as improved practice appeared to belie the notion that the CYP and their experience was central to the specialist exploitation team’s practice. Rather the CYP appeared to be nominally (or procedurally) central to their concerns, and this accorded with descriptions given to us by those with Lived Experience.

The findings from the focus groups and the MIST drawings provided by those who took part appeared to align therefore with external perceptions of some sections of policing and statutory services. Thus, as self-contained organisations who share information with their chosen partner organisations in a closed loop. The role of community-based police officers in shaping and articulating a different perspective, in which the CYP, family and community are ‘centred’, is an important finding for several reasons.

Firstly, it demonstrates that the MIST enables respondent to depict their actions accurately. Using the tool respondents’ depictions were not filtered through their expectations of what others (such as researchers) expected to hear. Importantly this contrasted with the pushback from statutorily orientated professionals against the accuracy of the descriptions given by those with LE, communities and community-based practitioners when related by us to them, within focus groups and interviews. In the focus groups when using the tool to show what they would do, and who it was important to share information with, those statutorily orientated practitioners illustrated that the CYP, their family and most immediate supports can be displaced by them from being central to the information collecting and sharing process; and from being decision-makers in that process. Those depictions showed that they saw other statutory practitioners as most relevant, alongside themselves, in sharing information and decision-making.

Secondly, using the MIST tool in these instances, showed that the MIST has the ability for a practitioner to use it to illustrate and thereby engage in reflection on their own practice.

Thirdly, our findings suggest a practitioner’s professional training does not denote how they will approach information sharing. Rather our findings show that the practitioner’s current role and day to day workplace setting is a critical deciding factor in their approach to information sharing. Those with a community-centred role undertake information sharing actions more closely aligned with the views of CYP, those with Lived Experience and community.

We consider these important findings which deserve further investigation through research utilising the MIST tool and methods.

Why This Research Matters to Policy and Practice

The participatory nature of this research, embedded within key organisations and communities who trust us to work with them, offered a unique opportunity to research how information is shared around the exploitation of CYP in an economically and socially disadvantaged community. Working together, the aim of this pilot project was to provide the bridge and opportunity for community members to shape the scope of what needs to be done to work across boundaries to better safeguard CYP who are exploited or vulnerable to exploitation.

The Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST) is the main product of this research. It was developed as a prototype from analysis of the data collected in Stage One of this Crossing Boundaries project and then shared with key actors and focus groups in Stage Two and refined as part of that participatory process. The tool itself is (intentionally) quite simple and it is the information sharing tool itself and the process of how it is used that we consider has the potential to make an important difference. The MIST is a potentially powerful tool and process focused on information sharing that can facilitate working with young people at risk of exploitation. The MIST considers the cultural, social, environmental and contextual factors which contribute to the exploitation of CYP and aims to better meet those challenges through a more inclusive, collaborative, mutual, process of sharing information.

In Stage 2 of the project, we found the tool can be used by young people and those with Lived Experience, as well as by practitioners. The tool can be used to map information sharing, record actions and evidence and provide a guide for reflection and dialogue between professionals. In addition, we observed that the tool helps victims/survivors communicate the ways in which sexual exploitation impacts. We suggest that the use of the MIST and our process may go beyond other tools and methods in both collecting and representing information flows around exploitation.

There are a number of areas a process of implementation will help us to understand further. We now wish to test the MIST in practice-based settings as a tool for effectively collecting information, building understanding of how that information is handled and used, and whether practitioners using the MIST are enabled to work more collaboratively with CYP and their families. Or, whether the constraints which those practitioners currently portray as directing their work towards other statutory practitioners, remain. The next research steps are important to implement and evaluate the tool's usability and impact.

We see this pilot and information sharing tool as transferable and scalable in other cities and regions. One of our recognized limitations was that this was a qualitative, participatory study in one town in England. The scale and nature of the exploitation that occurred in this area had particular features. Our literature review however strengthened the sense of comparability, identifying four elements relevant to the exploitation that occurred in this town, demonstrated in other UK inquiries and international research findings (Arnull, Goss and Heimer, 2025). We consider therefore that this town offered a reasonable site for study. Our findings include generalizable elements that can be applied elsewhere by those addressing the policy and practice challenges of working more effectively to share information and reduce opportunities for child exploitation. We hope that we will be supported to develop and test this model and the Mutual Information Sharing Tool in other places.

Key findings

We gathered information in Stage One about what data is collected and how it is currently collated and shared within and across organisations where a CYP is, or may be, exploited. Individuals described to us the mechanisms and tools they used in their organisations. They described joint meetings and fora, but no one identified a single tool that was shared by all. Further we were told mechanisms for sharing information (such as online, inter-agency reporting) could be slow and unresponsive, so practitioners might supplement with telephone calls. We also undertook a literature review from which we devised four major themes relevant to information sharing, child sexual exploitation and child exploitation. We then analysed our data and mapped it utilising the prototype Mutual Information Sharing Tool that we devised. In Stage Two we tested the viability of

this tool with participants via a process we planned and refined - checking for accuracy, gaps and definitions. We also assessed useability, for example, did MIST make sense to people, could it be used to aid discussion and could it be used as an information sharing and mapping tool. In each session we showed an almost blank prototype MIST (figure 1), in which we placed the CYP at the centre. We also presented an example (figure 2), and then asked participants to utilise the blank MIST to 'draw' their own versions. Participants then used their own drawn version as the basis for their contributions to the focus group and small interview discussions. Below we highlight seven key findings:

1. Through a process of refinement and development with professionals, third sector and community groups, young people and survivors **we observed that the Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST) could be used and that it made sense to participants.** Using the tool, patterns of information sharing could be 'visualised' and conceptualised. We found for example that professionals used the tool in these sessions to reflect on their own thinking and practice and were able to reflect on its appropriateness.
2. **We found that the MIST and this method of engagement took practitioners outside of their reiteration of process and engaged them in a way that was not routine, and that encouraged reflection.**
3. We found that the MIST tool and process could contribute significantly to our understanding of information sharing **and that it could highlight how closely information sharing sat to the child or young person.**
4. **The MIST and discussions highlighted how current information sharing and safeguarding processes can obscure the centrality of the child to information sharing activities** and effectively sideline the child and those closest to them in the information sharing process. **This occurs whilst safeguarding processes are ostensibly focussed on the child.** Using the tool professionals showed that within current safeguarding processes, the child or a survivor may have no in-put and limited knowledge of information sharing activities.
5. **Through their use of the MIST, we were able to observe how the practitioner's orientation and role can influence their actions.** For example, a practitioner's role may lead them to act differently to others within their professional group and lead them to act more similarly to other practitioners drawn from other professional groups with whom they are working, perhaps in inter-agency, or multi-agency teams.
6. We thereby observed that **the MIST can make visible and explicit why some professionals are seen by children and young people as more likely to be supportive to them and more open to supporting them with their disclosures, exploitation and recovery.**
7. It also became clear that the tool had potential importance for direct use with a CYP. **Working alongside those with Lived Experience it emerged the MIST has potential for identifying where exploitation is, or may be, occurring.** The research team and those with Lived Experience are now developing this work as a potential tool that does not involve the child in a process which feels extractive.

Concluding Thoughts

This participatory pilot project has led to the development of a prototype Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST), that is useful and puts children and young people at the centre. Our research shows it is possible to develop a tool for sharing information through a process of collaboration. And that this prototype tool and process has been shown in this initial pilot to be acceptable and usable.

Participants' use of the Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST) allowed us to observe the fundamentally different perspectives that lie at the heart of information sharing but are often obscured. Thus, some professionals using the MIST illustrated directly how their actions do sideline or obscure CYP and their families, or immediate supporters. This means that they do act as described by some of those with Lived Experience of exploitation and some other professionals. They do not act this way purposefully to exclude the CYP, but rather because some professionals see other professionals as the most important people to interact and share information with regarding the exploitation of a child. In so doing they may lose sight of the centrality of the child who has been, or is being, exploited. These actions illustrate fundamentally different conceptions about who are the key actors in supporting and protecting a child. For example, for our participants with Lived Experience it is the child themselves and those closest to them who are the most important in the information sharing process. It is this difference in perspective about who is critical to information sharing activities that can lead to distrust, or a lack of engagement, and may prevent the optimisation of collaborative efforts to safeguard a vulnerable child and minimise opportunities for exploitation. We consider this important, and our longer-term aim is to test the MIST and our method over an implementation period. **We propose further research, and application is needed to deepen and extend the evidence base regarding the use of this tool.**

Lastly, it seems reasonable to expect that adopting more transparent, collaboratively constructed, reflective, methods of data collection could impact the perceived quality and trustworthiness of public services because some communities, professionals, those with Lived Experience and survivors continue to experience information collection and sharing as opaque, extractive, and "*done*" to people. We believe current concerns should not lead to an impulse to create more safeguarding, but rather to refine and more effectively use the resources in place. The Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST), devised in this research through a process of participation has been found to have potential as a method for responding positively and collaboratively to the sexual and criminal exploitation of children and young people.