

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

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Summary Report



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*Elaine Arnull^{*1}, Karen Heimer², Melissa Goss*, Eva Makri*, Frances Breen**

This research, **Crossing Boundaries: Co-creating a Model of Information Sharing to Support Vulnerable Young People**, was a participatory pilot project³. The research was innovative and designed to explore if a data collection and information sharing tool could be created, through collaboration between researchers, organisations and the community. A longer-term goal is to assess whether such a tool can lead to an improved way of information sharing that better supports vulnerable children and young people (CYP) at risk of sexual exploitation.

The research framework provided a valuable opportunity to collaboratively 1) map inter-organisational processes, 2) consider communication between key organisations and the communities they serve, and 3) produce and refine a tool for information sharing to more effectively support CYP. Working together the aim of the pilot was to provide the bridge and opportunity for community members to shape and communicate their perspectives on information sharing to better support vulnerable youth.

This work is an initial investigation with clearly defined outcomes, seeking to identify opportunities, places and methods for more effective sharing of information. Our conceptual framework assumes collaboratively produced solutions, inclusive of communities and the populations they serve, are more likely to result in workable and effective models and tools (International Association for Community Development, 2021). Our theory of change is imbued with a sense that by working collaboratively, tools for sharing information should more effectively identify and support young people experiencing, or at risk of, exploitation (Arnull, Goss, Heimer, 2025).

Our *first research question* sought to identify if it is possible to develop a collaboratively created tool for sharing critical information that serves young people at risk of exploitation. The *second question* asks if this tool can be acceptable and usable enough to be adopted.

The research took place in two stages and involved 27 different organisations and groups. Participants included those with Lived Experience of sexual exploitation, key public organisations, the third sector, community members and a number of senior leaders. The research was undertaken in Telford, a town in which the Principal Investigator (Arnull) has been working on several participatory projects since 2019, and the proposal for this research arose out of a perceived willingness to address exploitation and violence within this community. We undertook numerous pre-meetings and were invited to attend and present at a series of multi-agency and strategy meetings, including 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, that turned out to

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be an important part of the process. Working proactively with public organisations and community members we built on our existing relationships to shape and deliver this research project to meet shared objectives.

In the Stage One of the research, we gathered evidence about current information sharing tools and approaches. Participants described to us the mechanisms and tools they used in their organisation. They described joint meetings and fora, but no one identified a single tool shared by all. We also undertook a review of UK and international evidence on child exploitation and sexual exploitation that was published in early 2025: 'Assisting Economically Marginalised and Vulnerable Youth and Minimising Opportunities for Exploitation by Adult Criminal Groups' in the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Behavior* - Arnall, Goss and Heimer: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00938548241310436>).

Based on that review of international evidence and through a process of community collaboration and researcher analysis of Stage One findings we created a prototype information sharing tool, the *Mutual Information Sharing Tool (MIST)*. We devised this prototype drawing on our findings and inspired by socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994), as it recognises the interconnecting systems which shape a child's development. The tool was designed to capture the multi-layered complexity of communication and information sharing regarding child exploitation. Then, in Stage Two, we used the prototype *MIST* tool⁴ to guide discussion with professional and community participants around information sharing around child exploitation. The process was designed to allow us to assess the usefulness of the *MIST* for understanding information sharing and for capturing the multi-layered complexity of exploitation.

The Mutual Information Sharing Tool (*MIST*)

In our prototype tool we explicitly placed the child at the centre and discussed, explored, developed and refined the tool with participants. We asked them to say if the tool could be used for collecting and sharing information. In the *MIST* the concentric circles map information sharing and we gave participants an example (see full report) prior to them drawing their own. We shared a blank version of the *MIST* for them to utilise as part of the discussions. We also showed participants one example with generic categories used; this example is shown in fig. 2.⁵

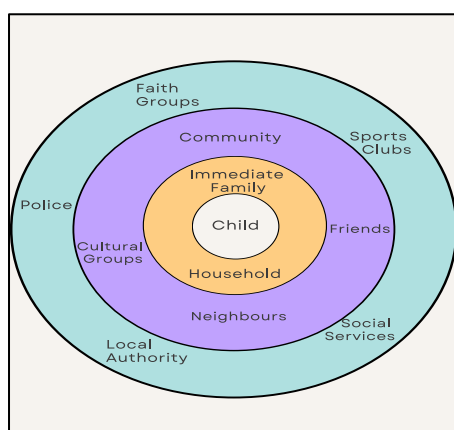


Figure 2. Simplified example of information sharing tool

⁴ The method, model and tool described in this document should not be reproduced without written permission from e.arnall@solent.ac.uk.

We explicitly place the child in the centre and participants who are practitioners use the tool to show what information they share, with whom they are most likely to first share information, and they move out across the circles from there, showing the sections and inter-sections of who they share information with and what they share. Those with Lived Experience and an observed group of young people showed who they had or would share information with regarding exploitation. They also showed us how they believed information should be shared.

We found this tool was acceptable and useable by participants. Its' strength is both its simplicity of application and also the interactive/participative way it can be deployed. We found the process we adopted enabled us to collaborate effectively with participants to map interactions between systems and individuals and understand how (and if) the child was central to professional or organisational systems of information collection and sharing. The process allowed for:

- a rich and varied understanding of how, where and with whom information is shared,
- what is shared,
- the role of the person mapping that information,
- who, how and with whom the person would then share that information
- how central, conscious and engaged (or not) the child is to that process.

We suggest that the use of the *MIST* and our process may go beyond other tools and methods in both collecting and understanding information flows around child sexual exploitation. The next research steps would be to implement and evaluate the tool's usability and impact.

Key Findings

Working collaboratively with individuals and in groups we were able to devise a process of sharing and discussing the *MIST*. In each session we showed an almost blank tool with the child at the centre (Figure 1 above) and then asked participants to 'draw' their own versions. These were then used by participants as the basis for their contributions to the discussion. 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 tool 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 tool 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 tool could contribute significantly to our understanding of information sharing **and that it could highlight how closely information sharing sat to the child/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 these 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 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 child/young person. **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 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 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 communities, some 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.