Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service Evaluation

Executive summary

March 2024

Introduction

This report presents a summary of findings from the mixed methods evaluation commissioned by Action for Children. The aim of the evaluation was to examine the implementation, delivery and impact of the Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service.

Background

Serious and organised crime (SOC) refers to individuals who plan, coordinate and commit serious offences either individually, in groups or as part of transnational networks (National Crime Agency, 2023). It includes modern slavery and human trafficking, illegal drugs and/or weapons, money laundering, bribery, and corruption (National Crime Agency, 2021). In 2022, there were 7,936 potential victims of UK-based exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2023). Of these, 52% were children and most were reported due to criminal exploitation. The actual number is likely to be higher as all forms of exploitation are under-reported.

Organised crime groups are operated by adults who capitalise on the lack of legitimate opportunities for children and young people, the glamourisation of crime, and criminal or financial exploitation (Ashton, 2020). While any young person can be targeted, Hurley and Boulton's (2021) deep dive analysis concluded that interventions should focus on young people living in deprived areas, with high levels of school exclusion and who have experienced significant trauma in their lives. Regarding exploitation, young people with unmet needs and those with low self-esteem and confidence have been found to be at heightened risk (Radcliffe et al., 2020). Yet, recent research findings have highlighted challenges in identifying, engaging and supporting criminally exploited children

safely away from exploitative relationships (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021). Firmin (2018) revealed limitations in the extent to which existing systems were designed to address extrafamilial harm. This is compounded by the nature of criminal exploitation as young people may not present as stereotypical "victims" and may resist engaging with professionals due to negative experiences with professionals, the culture against snitching or fear of violent repercussions to themselves and their families (Bonning and Cleaver, 2020, Shaw and Greenhow, 2020, Maxwell and Wallace, 2021).

Efforts to tackle SOC are guided by policies developed by the UK Government and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Northern Ireland and operationalised by the National Crime Agency. Yet, no one agency is responsible for tackling SOC. The 2022-23 annual plan (National Crime Agency, 2022) emphasised the need for an increase in partnership working, with Scotland calling for more innovative and proactive approaches in the response to the SOC threat.

The Home Office Practitioner Toolkit (2021) recommends that SOC interventions should be trauma-informed and adopt a holistic approach to address the child or young person's unmet needs through effective partnership working. The toolkit cites Action for Children's Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service as an example of good practice.

The Service

The Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service (hereafter, 'the Service') is a pioneering service from Action for Children aimed at 11-18 year olds. The Service is aimed at identifying young people involved in, or at risk of involvement in serious organised crime, addressing the vulnerabilities that led to their involvement

and diverting them towards more positive pathways. The Service model was established in Glasgow in 2013. Following its success, Action for Children secured funding from the National Lottery Community to test the model in four sites across three nations: Cardiff, Dundee, Edinburgh and Newcastle.

Methodology

The evaluation adopted a programme theory approach to identify the core components of the Service. It had four objectives:

1. To capture information relating to the key components of the Service
2. To provide insight into young people's entry and journey through the Service
3. To examine the views of young people, parents, partners, practitioners and peer mentors of 'what works'
4. To explore the feasibility of using police data to assess Service outcomes.

Aligned with the research objectives, data collection consisted of four phases:

A. Documentary analysis

To identify the core components of the programme, Service manuals, reports and documentation from each of the four areas were analysed. This was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with the three Service managers who were in post at the time of interview.

B. Case files and interviews: Service staff and Partner organisations

To provide insight into young people's entry and journey through the Service, anonymised case files were requested from each area. Case file data included referral forms, risk assessments, contextual safeguarding forms and intervention plans.

To increase understanding of Service implementation and delivery, semi-

structured interviews were undertaken with eleven practitioners. Of these, several had had lived experience of youth offending and/or had been peer mentors prior to promotion. In addition, one peer mentor from the Service was interviewed.

To examine implementation and partnership working, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with ten partner organisations.

C. Case files and interviews: Young people, parents and carers

To assess young people's journeys through the Service, case file data was updated one year later. This was supplemented with semi-structured interviews with eleven young people and eighteen caregivers to examine their views and experiences with the Service.

D. Service data and police data analysis, and focus groups: Service staff and co-ordinators

To explore the feasibility of using police data to assess Service outcomes, police administrative data was obtained for young people engaged with the Service ('engagers') and a comparison group of young people who had not engaged with the Service ('comparators'). In adherence with ethical approval for the study, Action for Children sent a list of engagers to each corresponding police force: South Wales Police (Cardiff), Northumbria Police (Newcastle) and Police Scotland (Dundee and Edinburgh). Police data included demographic, crime, arrest, and missing person data for both groups.

To capture outcome information for engagers, focus groups were undertaken in with the four Service managers. Focus groups explored strategic-level service developments on outcomes, information-sharing, partnership working and the journey to desistance.

Programme theory

The Service's programme theory was underpinned by five stages: being stuck, accepting help, believing and trying, learning what works and self-reliance (Mackeith et al., 2017). The Service model also drew upon social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) which asserts that learning is socially constructed based on how individuals interpret their environment and self-regulate their thoughts and behaviours. For the Service, young people's learning was mediated by reciprocal interactions between

by association with a serious organised crime group, repeated offending and involvement in drug dealing. The main source of referrals was Children's Services followed by the Police and Youth Offending Services. This was facilitated through information-sharing agreements and supported by the Service's expertise. Moreover, the Service positively influenced how partner organisations approached exploitation and informed their language-use to ensure that young people were not implicitly blamed for their exploitation.
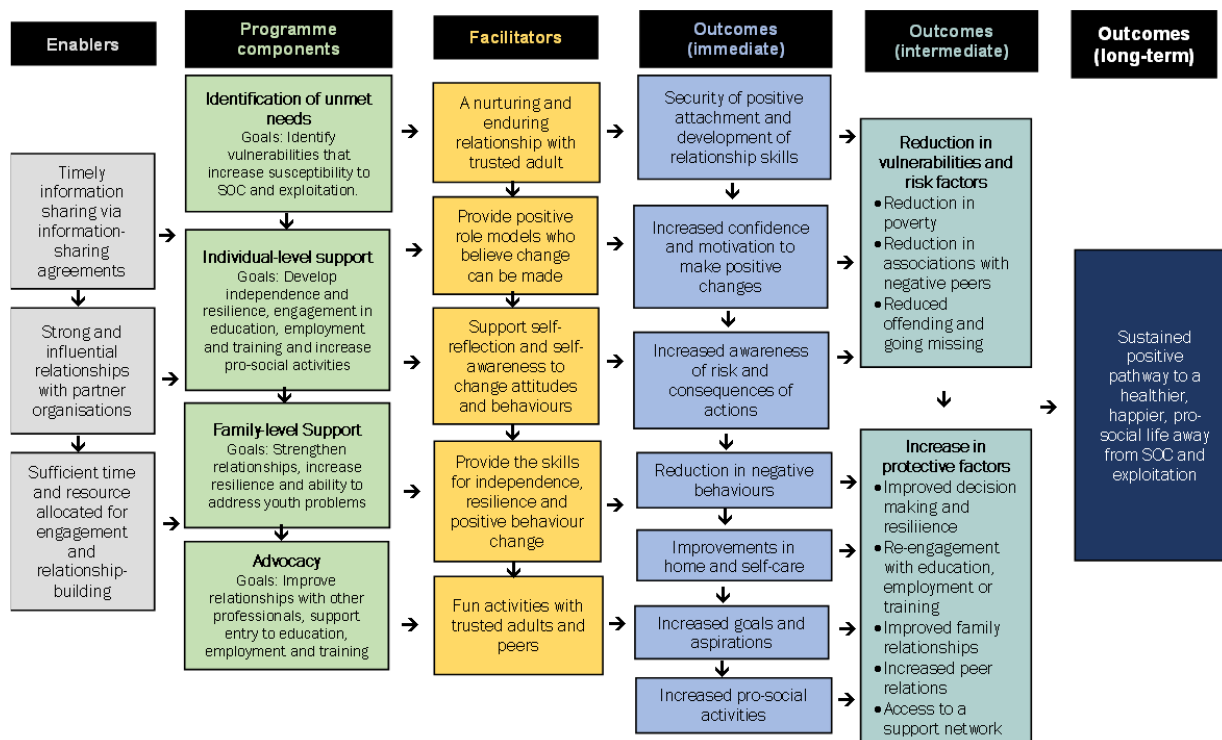
personal factors such as self-belief and expectations, behavioural factors and environmental factors, including the social and physical contexts.

Enablers

Intelligence-led targeting

The Service proactively targeted young people on the cusp or affected by serious organised crime or exploitation. The primary reason for referral was exploitation followed

Assertive outreach

Engaging young people took time. Some young people distrusted professionals due to previous negative experiences and pessimism about the role that services can play in their lives (Menezes and Whyte, 2016). Hyder's (2021) evaluation of the Glasgow Service highlighted how young people affected by SOC and exploitation can feel trapped with no means of escape. The Service overcame these barriers to engagement through assertive outreach

using multiple strategies such as persistence and establishing relationships with parents or carers.

> "The young lad was out of school for two years, the engagement with him was quite poor, so we just kept going. We would go up to the door, tapping on the door, start building up the relationship with his caregiver and that really worked"
>
> (LAURA, STAFF INTERVIEW)

The Service also adapted to the local context, 'because there's no point in doing something that doesn't fit with the area you're trying to implement it in' (Duncan, staff interview). This was reiterated by representatives from partner organisations who said the Service complemented existing provision in the area.

Engagement

The Service engaged with 248 young people between July 2020 and January 2023. Most young people were white males with an average age of 15 years. This supports findings from the Glasgow evaluation (Hyder, 2021) where most young people were male aged between 14 and 16 at the time of referral.

Reflecting the bespoke nature of the Service, there was no one-size-fits-all intervention. The Service supported young people on their own terms and as such, duration of engagement and intervention delivery varied substantially according to each young person.

> It's not a support you get anywhere else. You know? Like, it's genuine. This isn't, like, a lot of times with these [other] workers, if you're switched on enough, you'll notice that it's like, they're doing their job. But with [Practitioner] it's like, almost he's doing his job and he's doing extras on top of his job, you know?
>
> (JUSTIN, YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW)

By adopting an open-ended Service, young people were able to access support when they needed it. Hence, young people could be re-referred if needed while others maintained informal contact with the Service after their cases were closed.

Programme components

Needs assessment

Rather than adopting a deficit model, the Service began engagement with a strengths-based, child-centred conversation about young people's needs and future aspirations using the Justice Star. This assessment went beyond exploitation to identify the unmet needs which made young people vulnerable to grooming, as well as their strengths. For the latter, the Service aimed to 'channel these assets positively, empowering young people to choose a better future' (Paul Carberry, Director Action for Children cited by Hyder, 2021:ii).

The most common needs were emotional regulation, thinking and behaviour, and relationships. Area variations were noted with reference to peer mapping and contextual safeguarding. Guided by the needs assessment, intervention plans were tailored to each individual.

Intervention plans included:

- Individual-level support delivered in a combination of intensive 1:1 support and – where appropriate – groupwork, such as financial help, emotional support, health and wellbeing guidance, decision making, diversionary activities, skill development and access to training, education and employment.
- Family support, e.g. financial help, emotional support, caregiver resilience to stay with young people and manage their behaviours.

Consequently, some outcomes were not quantifiable 'successes' but rather softer outcomes where young people made concerted steps towards positive pathways. Specifically, they included consistent engagement, self-reflection and a willingness to consider the consequences of their actions and a commitment to try new pro-social activities.

Out-of-hours support

In practice, out-of-hours support was only used in emergencies. Nevertheless, the provision of out-of-hours support provided reassurance for young people and caregivers that help was available when required.

Individual-level support

The provision of tailored support enabled the Service to work with young people when they were most at risk of re-offending or being exploited. This included a combination of discrete interventions targeted at the needs assessment and support which was embedded within activities based on the young person's interests:

"He'll take me out for an hour and just, yeah have a coffee or something, chill out, do whatever, go on a bike ride or something like that"

(KARL, YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW)

The provision of fun activities aimed at retaining engagement was balanced with more focused intervention work. They also highlighted the importance of giving young people the opportunity to be children (LKMco, 2018).

Facilitators

Trusted adults

Building trusting relationships with young people and their families was a key mechanism for initiating change. These relationships were based on respect, valuing young people and being honest about what they could deliver. They also gave the young person the '*consistency of the same person, same face, same place and all those things*' (Erica, partner interview).

Trust was also often fostered through mutual understanding of what it was like to grow up in that area. Hence, the Service prioritised recruiting Practitioners and Peer Mentors from the same local communities. For Practitioners, their expertise and youth work skills enabled them to work effectively with young people at the transition phase between youth and adulthood. This provided them with the skills to move between playful banter and difficult conversations whilst retaining the relationship with the young person.

For Peer Mentors with lived experience of SOC or exploitation, their authenticity provided them with insight into young people's lives. This enabled them to challenge risk behaviours and question young people's narratives because '*we're doing everything that he's already done, so he knows what we're like*' (Finn, young person interview). Peer Mentors provided young people with a sense of hope that they could change their behaviours and embark upon positive pathways.

Reducing risk factors

Financial support

Poverty has been described as the main backdrop for exploitation (Jay Review, 2024). Many young people struggled to buy food, clothing and essential items such as a bed.

"He didn't have money to buy plates and cups and spoons and microwaves, but we have got that from these vouchers, so he can now afford to buy the food that goes on

the plate, that fills his belly, that makes him feel a bit better. So it gives him the nutrients he needs, gives him the energy needs, maybe makes him feel a bit better"

(CHARLOTTE, STAFF INTERVIEW)

As Charlotte described, the Service addressed young people's short-term needs by helping them to access benefits, buy food and clothing. For the longer-term, young people were helped to develop their budgeting skills. However, as noted by Hyder's (2021) evaluation of the Glasgow Service, some young people lived in comfortable homes with loving parents. In this regard, any young person can be exploited and as such, the Service worked with all young people regardless of background.

Emotional support

In support of wider findings (Maxwell and Wallace, 2021; Radcliffe et al., 2020), most young people had low confidence and unmet needs such as low self-worth, a lack of purpose and sense of belonging. The Service gave young people Trusted Adults who served as consistent adult role models. This helped increase their confidence and sense of self-worth, especially as Practitioners and Peer Mentors took part in fun activities with them and helped them to develop their skills.

Health and well-being

Some young people required help with self-care, accessing medical care and keeping their clothes and homes clean. Practitioners provided direct support such as teaching young people important life skills and indirectly by transporting them to medical appointments.

Enhancing protective factors

Decision-making

Decision-making was embedded across interventions to promote independence and resilience against re-exploitation. The Service provided real-time opportunities for young people to develop their decision-making skills. By adopting a youth-led approach, young people had autonomy and were able to make decisions about their engagement with the Service and which activities they took part in.

Healthy relationships

Rather than tackling exploitation directly, the Service found that this could deter engagement.

"We have those discussions with the young people around healthy relationships, non-healthy relationships, and sometimes just baby step them through the process if the young person is not fully ready to hear the hard truth of, 'You know what, he's not your mate, he's exploiting you'"

(JASON STAFF INTERVIEW)

Therefore, exploitation was addressed sensitively with reference to unhealthy relationships. This provided young people with agency, so they could reflect upon their existing relationships. This included support with building new friendships and strengthening family connections.

"He doesn't really want his family to know or feel that sometimes he gets into trouble, or sometimes things go wrong, he wants his family to maintain that he's a good lad, and our job is to encourage him to keep being a good lad so he doesn't have to worry about the family changing their opinion on him"

(PATRICK, STAFF INTERVIEW)

Skill development

Pro-social interests were encouraged and developed through programmes of community-based activities and opportunities. Young people were encouraged to articulate their aspirations and supported to realise these ambitions through the provision of skills development and volunteering opportunities. Practitioners helped young people to set goals for themselves and stayed with them, even if they made mistakes. Young people were excited and motivated by the activities and opportunities secured for them. This enhanced their self-confidence as well as developing their skills.

Family-level support

While the Service was primarily focused on supporting young people, it adopted a whole family approach to improve the outcomes for young people. In doing so, it acknowledged the need to support caregivers with financial and emotional support, healthy relationships and establishing a support network. Like the findings with young people, families received help securing benefits and funding to buy essential items for their homes.

Local adaptions

The Service had added two extensions in response to the local context: preventative work in education settings and exploitation mapping. First, preventative work in education settings has been established in one area. This is targeted at young people with high levels of school absenteeism, suspensions or concerns about criminal exploitation. This work has been effective in reducing risk for the majority of pupils who participated. Second, a local mapping exercise has been developed to inform multi-agency knowledge and intervention work across partners in another area. This contributed to the establishment of a network of over 100 partners committed to early intervention and preventative work for young people affected by exploitation.

Outcomes

Rates of offending and missing episodes

Most young people referred to the Service were white, male and in their mid-teens. Around half were living in the most deprived areas of each city (Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019). Seventy-seven percent (190/248) of young people referred to the Service were identified in police administrative data due to their offending behaviour or missing episodes.

According to Police data, most young people were referred to the Service following arrest. Over 70% of young people had multiple arrests recorded. The main offences were for violence, public order, drug offences or possession of a weapon. Following referral to the Service there was a reduction in the number of young people arrested and the number of offences for three of the four areas. In two areas there was a decline in the number of arrests and number of young people arrested for drug offences. Reductions were also noted in the number of arrests for other types of offences.

Rather than demonstrating a negative Service impact, the increase in number of arrests for one area supports findings from Hyder's four-year evaluation of the Glasgow Service (2021) which showed that not all young people have immediate reductions in their offending behaviours. This is to be expected as safely exiting exploitative relationships can increase risk to the young person (Jay Review, 2024). Moreover, engagement with the Service may prevent their situation from deteriorating, *'it's worse, not as bad as it could have been without them'* (Young person cited in Hyder, 2021:33).

Most young people had missing episodes prior to referral, with three quarters of young people having multiple missing episodes. Following engagement with the Service there was a reduction in the number of missing episodes. This is an important finding given the association between missing episodes and exploitation. They can be a warning sign to professionals that a young person is being manipulated or socially isolated, an attempt to hide the young person from professional oversight or the young person's attempt to escape from the people exploiting them (Pearce et al., 2009; Sturrock and Holmes, 2015, Wigmore, 2018).

Examining Service impact

The Service helped young people to raise their aspirations and set goals to realise their ambitions.

> *"I wanna get a nice construction job. A nice car and that"*
>
> (ZACH, YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW)

In order to initiate change, young people needed support with the softer outcomes of engaging with professionals, improving their confidence and self-belief and changing their negative attitudes and behaviours.

> *"I don't have as many workers now. I'm mainly just with [practitioner] and my social worker. So it works, it works nice, man … So you know, there's a lot of, it just feels like pressure's off, innit, it doesn't really feel as much like a worker, you know?"*
>
> (JUSTIN, YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW)

Young people had to be taken '*out of their normal comfort zones of where they may be stuck and just trying to get them to there's a bigger world out there*' (Practitioner). Once young people had a sense of direction (Menezes and Whyte, 2016), young people and their families often needed financial and practical support to begin their journey. By addressing these unmet needs,

Practitioners and Peer Mentors established trusting relationships and gave young people the space to reflect on their current pathways.

Young people also required help and support to establish positive social networks. The provision of group activities helped them to develop new friendships and address postcode rivalries, where it was safe to do so. Through careful planning and facilitation, Practitioners and Peer Mentors gave young people real-time opportunities to develop their communication skills and manage conflict.

Practitioners and Peer Mentors served as role models. They modelled positive relationships with partner organisations to encourage young people to build supportive networks with other professionals.

> *"Yeah like I'll say something like 'They're fucking idiots' but then they'll go 'But... if you don't engage with these people then this'll happen, this'll happen and this'll happen. So is that actually worth it?' And they'll explain things better than I can think things, if you know what I mean. And that kinda helps me"*
>
> (PHILIP, YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW)

Practitioners and Peer Mentors also advocated for young people to help them access opportunities such as re-engaging with education and other training routes.

Conclusion

The Service has established itself as a specialist service for young people involved in serious organised crime or affected by exploitation. Findings showed high levels of engagement even though this group of young people are often known to the police for their offending behaviours despite 'remain[ing] largely inaccessible to the efforts of mainstream provision' (Menezes and Whyte, 2016:8).

"I didn't trust them straight away. Not one bit. Not one bit. To be honest I thought they were all grasses, gonna try feed them information and that"

(FINN, YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEW)

The Service gave young people a safe space to reflect on their lives and consider their existing relationships and the potential consequences of remaining on those negative pathways.

Unlike time-limited interventions, the Service was able to stay with young people and deliver intensive, tailored support at the young person's pace which was cognisant of their developmental needs rather than age-based provision. This was facilitated by the recruitment of highly skilled Practitioners and Peer Mentors from the local communities where young people lived. This demonstrated authenticity and helped them to establish trusting relationships through which they could help to make their own pro-social decisions and positive life choices. Moreover, young people said they would recommend SOCEIS to other young people due to the range of opportunities and benefits they were offered in a supportive manner.

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