

The Needs of Child Victims of Trafficking: A Practitioner's Perspective on Supporting Children through Partnership Work in Wales

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Abstract

This article provides a first-person account of the Safer Wales program and the importance of capitalizing on the United Nations partnership principle, one of the four major pillars considered essential in effectively combating human trafficking. The discussion includes reference to how various legislation has helped to strengthen the partnerships within Wales but notes that several challenges remain to be dealt with. In addition to reviewing how Safer Wales builds and sustains partnerships, a case study is used to illustrate the relative effectiveness of such an approach. The article concludes with several practical observations that show the importance of partnerships to effectively combating the exploitation and/or trafficking of children.

Key words

Partnership; Safer Wales; collaboration; SERAF

Resumen

Este artículo ofrece un relato en primera persona del programa Safer Wales y la importancia de capitalizar el principio de asociación de las Naciones Unidas. Dicho principio es uno de los cuatro pilares considerados esenciales en la lucha eficaz contra el tráfico de personas. El desarrollo del tema incluye referencias a la forma en que la legislación ha ayudado a fortalecer las asociaciones que se han establecido en Gales, pero también hace notar que quedan algunos desafíos pendientes. Además de valorar la forma en que Safer Wales construye y ayuda a mantener asociaciones, se utiliza un estudio de caso para ilustrar la eficacia relativa de ese abordaje. El artículo termina con observaciones de tipo práctico que muestran la importancia de las asociaciones para combatir con eficacia la explotación y el tráfico de niños.

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Palabras clave

Asociación; Safer Wales; colaboración; SERAF

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1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse and trafficking in Wales is a major problem, which presents itself in different ways, to different partner organisations and at different times. As recently as May of 2016, Joan Smith, Chair of the Mayor of London's Violence Against Women and Girls Board, suggested that the United Kingdom has been ignoring an epidemic of child abuse throughout the country. The experiences of children who are internally trafficked for the purposes of child sexual abuse are often challenging for front line practitioners, as the internally trafficked child is often not recognized as such so practitioners may not know the depths of the problems they are dealing with. Thus, partnership working is essential as a prevention strategy. Working in partnership works (see also Winterdyk 2018). Strong, effective partnership work helps prevent children and young people from being subjected to both the risk for and the actual experience of sexual abuse and being trafficked. However, commitment to working collaboratively and valuing the experiences and views of all partners are vital to truly creating a hostile environment for those perpetrating child sexual abuse and trafficking in Wales. Greater collaborative working in Wales has resulted in more rapid, holistic multi-agency approaches, aimed at protecting the child, disrupting the perpetrator and sharing of key intelligence with criminal justice agencies. Increased recognition of the value of partnership contributions has been realised with the development of a dedicated role to support and coordinate responses. It is now, not unusual to have schools, youth services, social services, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and police rapidly developing intensive strategies to protect individuals from abuse, whilst disrupting and detecting crimes.

The partnership principle has been recognized by the United Nations which has been using the 4 *P*'s approach in trafficking for human beings since 2009 when the then Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, introduced the fourth *P* as a pathway to progress in the effort against modern day slavery. There are numerous examples of positive partnership collaborations, but there are still gaps, even when we consider the findings from Rotherham and Ipswich that were generated between 1997 and 2013. The murder of five women in December 2006 who had been on-street sex working in Ipswich, England, drew significant attention from a variety of local agencies, who committed to greater partnership working and the development of a multi-agency strategy to address the risks associated with street-based sex working. The *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham 1997-2013* (Jay 2014) identified more than 1,400 child victims of sexual exploitation and significant evidence of agency inaction, despite disclosures of child sexual abuse and identification of perpetrators, including their ethnic origins and locations. These findings showed us that accountable and ongoing risk management and assessment is vital to ensure continuous safeguarding of victims and response to these crimes, greater collaboration across agencies and departments, specifically recognising the importance of providing a range of preventative services, that community engagement is prioritized, particularly with minority ethnic communities to facilitate community-informed responses to better safeguard victims and to ensure the availability of appropriate resources. However, the contribution of the role of the NGO in facilitating access, safeguarding and identifying and responding to the needs of sexually-exploited young people and those at risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking should not be under-estimated when working together to realise these recommendations. Given the observation from the Independent Inquiry (Jay 2014) in relation to Risky Business (a youth project) that "there were too many examples of young people who were properly referred by Risky Business to children's social care and who somehow fell through the net and were not treated with the priority that they deserved (...) senior manager 'disbelieved' what Risky Business presented, describing it as almost 'professional gossip'" (Jay 2014, pp. 80-81). Importantly, the inclusion of the child's voice in the multi-agency

process (often via representation from the NGO) and explicit recognition of the equal recognition of contributions made by NGOs, especially when advocating for the child, is key to informing this process. This is the reason why the identification, risk management and safeguarding of children who are sexually exploited and their related experiences of trafficking forms the focus of this article.

At numerous points within their lives, children encounter institutions, both Government and Non-Government. Most children will attend school, be registered at a doctor, some may attend holiday provisions or youth clubs, some will have been in contact with police, including community policing, social services, family support services. Changes in the behaviours of young people, often resulting in low school attendance, increased risk of multiple school exclusions, a rise in behaviour change in the school is an important indication for increasing vulnerabilities. As such, schools and education providers are key to recognising the early indications of changing behaviour patterns for young people. In addition, low literacy, struggling to form positive peer relationships and low self-esteem contribute to a child's vulnerability, as well as adverse childhood experiences including parental separation, known history of violence and/or abuse in the family, substance misuse in the family (Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, cited in Bellis *et al.* 2015). The absence of strong, robust partnerships among these institutions creates the risk that vulnerable children may fall through the net and therefore not receive the supports and safeguards necessary to the prevention and reduction of the risks involved in future sexual exploitation and trafficking. The primary focus for this discussion will be on experiences of Safer Wales, a Non-Government Organization, interactions, partnerships and collaborations to safeguard children from sexual exploitation and trafficking. To explore this challenge, I next consider how some of the different aspects of children and young peoples' safety is facilitated and hindered within a Welsh context. Partnership working works in Wales, partly because it is small enough to enable agencies and practitioners to engage with the right people, but also because of the devolution of powers to Wales's Welsh Government from the UK facilitating locally-informed decision-making and action.

2. Safer Wales: The program

Safer Wales is an independent Welsh charity, working on the interface between the Third Sector and the criminal justice system in Wales. For nearly 20 years, Safer Wales has supported some of the most vulnerable and marginalized people in Welsh communities. These include housing and outreach services, support for women offenders, the Safer Wales StreetLife project for women who are exploited through prostitution, Cardiff Women's Safety Unit to support high-risk survivors of domestic abuse, the Dyn Project for male victims of domestic abuse and young people's services including dedicated services for young people at risk of sexual exploitation in Wales. Robust risk management, effective engagement with those accessing services and providing a voice for individuals is at the heart of Safer Wales service delivery. Safer Wales has a history of multi-agency and multi-sectoral partnership working since its inception. Its organisational routes include coordinating the Community Safety/Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, established within the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

The Safer Wales organisation and its services are known and trusted and provide significant aid to partnership work. There have been major changes over the years that Safer Wales has been delivering services, but its ability and flexibility, to adapt to the challenges within this timeframe have enabled it to continue to deliver and develop cross-cutting, innovative services that advocate for and safeguard the most vulnerable members of our communities. Safer Wales's experience in identifying, responding and sharing information relating to sexual exploitation and trafficking, incorporating new assessment and information sharing tools and advocating for vulnerable people is particularly relevant in relation to findings from Rotherham, which emphasise the importance of up-to-date risk assessment and that

professional judgements about risk should be clearly recorded. However, as you will see from the real-life experiences of women and children supported through Safer Wales there are still challenges in maximising the effectiveness of partnerships.

3. Legislation that enables Partnership Working

Partnership working is not a new concept for the UK. In fact, the UK has demonstrated its commitment to increasing collaborative working in relation to safeguarding children for more than 25 years. This is evident within numerous pieces of Government legislation and guidance. Key pieces of legislation including the Children Act (1989, 2004), Crime and Disorder Act (1998), the Sexual Offences Act (2003), Social Service and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014) and Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015) strengthen partnership working, embedding this approach into the fabric of decision-making that impact upon the lives and safety of children. A core element of assessing a child's risk and developing an appropriate and accountable safeguarding and welfare plan was introduced with the Children Act (1989). This element requires that professionals in all the agencies that child is involved with share information that is pertinent to the child's welfare. Since then, partnership and multi-agency collaboration has been strengthened through subsequent legislation and policy guidance that stipulate (or re-enforce) partnership working to identify, safeguard, intervene early and prevent harm and escalation of risk to the well-being of vulnerable children and young people.

The ability to share information is crucial for the rapid and appropriate implementation of these obligations. Contained within the Crime and Disorder Act (section 115) and Children Act legislation (particularly the Children Act 1989: sections 17 and 47 and the Children Act 2004: Part 3, section 25) is the ability to share such information between and within agencies. The rapid sharing of personalized information between agencies and individuals can reduce delays, which may otherwise result in increased risks for victims and communities and less effective justice. It can be expected then, particularly given the findings from Rotherham, that the support in legislation to share information would result in practitioners asking themselves why they should not share this information, rather than why they should. Nevertheless, although much improved, issues regarding information sharing still exist. For instance, Safer Wales have experienced multi-agency meetings where discussions regarding vulnerable children at risk for, or who were experiencing child sexual exploitation were restricted to only using the children's initials. We were concerned that while this was done in order to respect confidentiality and this may have hindered safe, multi-agency, information sharing, identification, and coordination and so we were instrumental in stopping this practice following challenges from Safer Wales, Police and Youth Services.

3.1. *Guidance for Safeguarding through Partnership*

The Government of Wales Acts (1998 and 2006) are the constitutional settlements for Wales that underpin any legislation passed for Wales. These Acts commit the National Assembly for Wales to align all its policies, legislation and guidance for children with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; see UN General Assembly 1989). The Crime and Disorder Act (1998), the Children Acts (1989 and 2004), the Social Service and Wellbeing (Wales) Act (2014) and Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2016) all support the principles of the UNCRC (1989) in that the state must act to protect children from exploitation and abuse and must provide a mechanism with which to do so. We believe that is our focus on collaboration and partnership is central to facilitating these principles.

In Wales, taking the appropriate steps to protect children from exploitation is facilitated by the All Wales Child Protection Procedures (2008) and *A Guide to Changes and Additions to the All Wales Child Protection Procedures 2002* documents (All Local Safeguarding Children Boards in Wales 2008b and 2008a,

respectively). These recognise that child sexual exploitation is "(...) a hidden form of abuse though the concepts of exploitation and exchange are central" (All Local Safeguarding Children Boards in Wales 2008b, p. 174) and stipulates that agencies must be cognisant of all the signs of abuse and work collaboratively to protect children. The procedures reflect current legislation (Sexual Offences Act 2003) which protects all children up to the age of 18 years from sexual abuse and exploitation arising from abuse of trust (Sexual Offences Act 2013, section 16) or through prostitution and/or pornography (*Id.*, sections 47-50). The *All Wales Protocol: Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children at Risk of Abuse through Sexual Exploitation* (Barnardo's 2013) defines *child sexual exploitation* as:

(...) the coercion or manipulation of children and young people into taking part in sexual activities. It is a form of sexual abuse involving an exchange of some form of payment which can include money, mobile phones and other items, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, 'protection' or affection. The vulnerability of the young person and the grooming process employed by perpetrators renders them powerless to recognise the exploitative nature of relationships and unable to give informed consent. (Barnardo's 2013, p. 3)

All children below the age of 18 years of age are recognized as being unable to consent to any form of sexual engagement or contact with adults and identifies all such engagement and contact as forced and abusive.

4. Partnership in Action

Since 2012, Safer Wales has supported children and young people under the age of 18 years who are in situations that could heighten their risk of exploitation, including child sexual exploitation. The service provides safe environments for these vulnerable young people in order to support them to gain confidence, life-skills, and build self-esteem. The aim is to reduce the harmful risks that have an impact on these young people's lives. This is achieved primarily by re-engaging them with mainstream education and training opportunities.

Safer Wales has also had over 10 years' experience in supporting and safeguarding women exploited through prostitution, including street-based prostitution. During the delivery of these services, Safer Wales has had to call the police because practitioners have seen children being sexually exploited on the streets, or because the women who are involved in street-based prostitution have raised concerns about children who are at risk and visible on the streets.

Safer Wales's practitioners have reported links between adults exploited through prostitution who were engaging with Safer Wales support services and childhood sexual exploitation. These reports were corroborated in the first study conducted on behalf of Safer Wales with the women accessing our services in 2007. In this report, *An Overview of Street Sex Work in Cardiff, Young People and Their Entry into Street Sex Work: The Perpetual Cycle – "I Worms My Way Back"* (by L. Matts and T. Hall, 2007, unpublished), 12 women who were involved with street-based prostitution as adults were interviewed. Five of the 12 women disclosed being forced into *sex work* and therefore sexually exploited from a young age by known associates or family members. Approximately half of those interviewed were sexually exploited before the age of 16 years old. For these women, their exploitation occurred close to home (or at their home). The link between sexual exploitation and child trafficking (for the purposes of sexually exploitation) was described as follows in the report: "One interviewee reported being pimped at the age of 12 by a 24-year-old man, introduced to heroin and then set to work to feed both her own and the pimps addiction" (*An Overview of Street Sex Work in Cardiff, Young People and Their Entry into Street Sex Work: The Perpetual Cycle – "I Worms My Way Back"*, by L. Matts and T. Hall, 2007, unpublished; p. 13). The report further demonstrates that the issue of internal trafficking of children is often invisible. None of the women interviewed were safeguarded from this exploitation

as children, and the impact of this exploitation has negatively affected them during their adult lives. The following case study provides insight into the long-term impact of sexual exploitation and abuse of children as experienced by a woman supported by Safer Wales.

5. A Case Study

To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the person who agreed to share her personal story of abuse and exploitation, the pseudonym *Alison* was used. Alison was abused by family members from the age of 12. A family member would use coercion and threats to continue sexually abusing Alison. In response to her abuse, Alison began drinking heavily and at 15 years of age was homeless, living on the streets "hooking up" with different people living on the streets. Alison's significant relationships involved substantial experiences of high risk domestic violence, including being thrown around whilst pregnant, having a knife held to her throat, whilst her life and her children's lives were threatened and attempts were made to set fire to the bed she and her children were sleeping in. Alison continued to experience exploitation and abuse as an adult, including trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. She described the control that was being exerted on her as follows:

If I didn't get money quick enough, he wouldn't be happy as he would become very ill because he needed his fix (...). One day I said, 'I don't want to go out anymore' [street-based sex working], so he proceeded to kick me in the face and said, 'You know you need to get money for my fix or I will be really ill.' I knew he was on a methadone script so he wouldn't be ill, but also I knew what the consequences would be if I didn't go out. (From a written account provided to Safer Wales)

5.1. Partnership for Prevention

Throughout the accounts provided by people accessing our services and first-hand experiences of practitioners from Safer Wales, it became evident to all concerned that people were not being identified as being sexually exploited as a child when they were children and were in Wales. In response, Safer Wales sought to work with young girls who were being identified via our partner agencies as requiring additional support. Following the establishment of robust referral pathways between government services, including schools and children's social services, Safer Wales could engage with young girls who were being sexually abused (this service targeted young girls, however recognition of young boys' vulnerability to sexual exploitation should not be forgotten). These young girls were between the ages of 11 and 18 years old and were offered support, either via group work or one-to-one and were given the freedom to choose to engage with service provision rather than being compelled to do so by the authorities. Voluntary engagement by these young people was considered by all practitioners as a vital element for aiding the rapid development of trust and ensuring that an effective, responsive approach to service was developed. The level of engagement and disclosure was considered indicative of the level of trust and effectiveness of the provision. Indeed, as trust increased, so did the young people's awareness of risk-taking behaviours and their resilience which in turn, helped them to stay safe. In addition, the young people's confidence increased, which helped to assist in their feeling safe enough to risk disclosure, which then facilitated multi-agency safety planning and risk management. A vital tool for managing the risk these young people were being exposed to was the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF).

6. Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF)

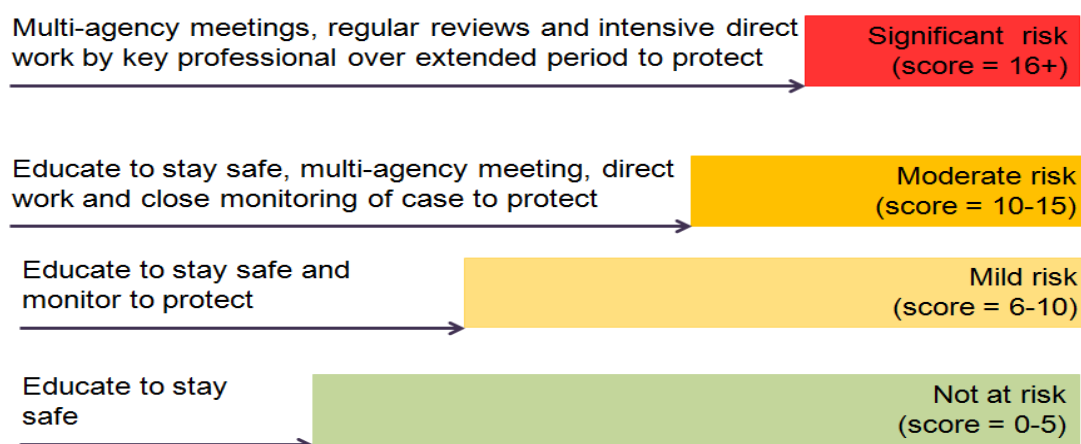
SERAF was developed because of a pilot study, undertaken by an NGO, Barnardo's Cymru (Clutton and Coles 2007). This study involved a close partnership between an NGO, Newport Children's Social Services, Gwent Police and the multi-agency Newport Area Child Protection Committee. The outcome of this pilot was SERAF,

which provides a framework for assessing risk and facilitates the accountable sharing of information to aid prevention and support a well formulated response to cases of child sexual exploitation. The SERAF provides an important tool for sharing information across agencies and facilitating informed decision-making in relation to child well-being and for keeping children safe from sexual exploitation. The SERAF enables practitioners to identify whether a child is within one of four risk categories, ranging from *Category 1: a child is not considered at risk* to *Category 4: a child is at significant risk of harm from sexual exploitation*. Risk scores are determined by behaviours and experiences the child has had and are based upon known vulnerabilities and risks. These can range from lack of educational engagement to unexplained disappearances ranging from a few hours to significantly longer. To ascertain the sexual exploitation risk score for a child, the SERAF stipulates indicators that fall into three distinct groupings:

- Vulnerabilities, such as family relationship breakdown and history of domestic abuse in the family.
- Moderate risk indicators, such as not engaged in school, misusing drugs, out late.
- Significant risk indicators including going missing for long periods of time, controlling relationships with an adult/older boyfriend, money and/or expensive items that can't be explained.

The SERAF recognises factors that indicate a risk for all genders, such as the child having expensive goods, having peers who are involved in clipping (taking payment to perform a sexual act, but not doing it), or going missing overnight. Specifically, the SERAF stipulates having an older *boyfriend* as posing a significant risk. The absence of a direct reference to risks associated with an older *girlfriend*, may require further exploration however, in its current form, the SERAF also classifies any relationship with a controlling adult as a significant risk. Each risk and vulnerability indicator identified has a score attributed to it, with a score of 1 being attributed to each vulnerability indicator and each moderate risk indicator, whilst significant risk indicators attract scores of 1 if present between six to twelve months previously, and 5 if present during the last six months. The combination of these scores indicates the level of risk a child is at and provides an indication of the type of actions required associated with the finding. Indicated in Figure 1, below, partnership working is an integral part of the responses required to keep children safe from sexual exploitation and to reduce their risk of escalation.

FIGURE 1



Clutton, S. & Coles, J. (2007) "Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework, A Pilot Study" pp 37 Barnardo's Cymru

Figure 1. SERAF scores for the associated risk category and the action required by agencies.

Source: Clutton and Coles 2007.

A child assessed as not being at risk (Category 1) would still benefit from education. This could take the form of a school-based approach, focussing upon healthy relationships and how to stay safe. A child with a mild risk score (Category 2) would require, in addition to the above, a harm reduction or risk management plan. Such a plan would include measures aimed at improving the child's safety to prevent any escalation of harm and reduce the child's risks. Both Category 1 and 2 can be considered preventative and early intervention. For a SERAF score to truly represent the risks impacting upon a child, then scores need to be cognisant of concerns as well as evidence relating to a child's risk. A child identified as being at moderate risk (Category 3) of sexual exploitation requires a multi-agency strategy meeting, which will incorporate direct interventions recognised within a protection plan for the child. These plans and interventions are monitored for effectiveness regarding the child's risk reduction. Finally, a child at significant risk (Category 4) recognises the significant sexual exploitation risk to a child or that the child is being sexually exploited. A coordinated, accountable approach is taken, whereby responsible agencies involved with the case agree and deliver a plan through strategy meetings and incorporate specialist services as required to address sexual exploitation.

A key principle for anybody completing a SERAF is that it is based upon the child's word, what they have disclosed and the professional judgement of the practitioner, as opposed to being based upon the presence of hard evidence. This demonstrates a fundamental shift for some organisations, where historically the major focus was on what the adult perspective was in relation to the lived situation of the child. Safe inclusion of the child in the SERAF assessment and planning is encouraged. It is unlikely that clear evidence will present itself to any single agency in relation to trafficking for the purposes of child sexual exploitation, so the child's perspective and disclosures are central to establishing and understanding the risks. As is frequently recognised (Clutton and Coles 2007, ECPAT 2009, Casey 2015), children who are at risk of or have been trafficked do not necessarily see themselves as such, the risk is invisible to them. Working with children at risk of trafficking and child sexual exploitation, it is important that the child is listened to.

Within Safer Wales, we have had situations where a child has talked about receiving a new phone, for example. Listening for key indicators, such as new, expensive items allows the practitioner to engage the child further and establish the story behind the item. It is this child-centred approach, listening to and believing the child that enables practitioners, such as those at Safer Wales to assess risk and confidently advocate for the child. Such an approach poses a significant cultural shift for some practitioners and services, for example social workers. The Welsh approach to child protection and SERAF shifts viewpoint from a purely evidence-based adult perspective towards a more balanced consideration of adult professionals and child disclosures (All Wales Child Protection Procedures 2008). As a process, this provides greater agency to the child, but in practice there is often still some way to go, as the following case study shows.

Ginny (a pseudonym), is a young girl of 13 years, known to Local Authority Children's Social Services. Children's Social Services were aware that Ginny had been sexually exploited by a man when she was 10 years old, but social service workers believed this exploitation was historical, as the case was progressing through the criminal justice system. Ginny was referred to Safer Wales, because she was not engaging well with school, had low attendance and would form unhealthy relationships with other children, including trying to coerce them. Ginny engaged with the NGO and disclosed further information relating to the man who had exploited her (although at the time she was unable to recognise or understand that she had been sexually exploited). Intensive, one-to-one work between Ginny and the NGO ensued. This was a slow process involving untangling the harm to this child through work on healthy relationships, increasing her self-esteem, as well as normalising education through short sessions involving computers, healthy eating,

art and crafts. Within this safe environment, Ginny started making further disclosures about her historical exploitation, including family members being aware and current risks, such as adult males targeting her and her peers. In addition, Ginny disclosed activities that contributed to her risk, such as regularly going missing (which had not been reported to relevant authorities), not feeling safe at home, continuing to visit areas where she had been exploited. The NGO shared this information with Children's Social Services throughout, highlighting risks and advocating for the child during associated multi-agency meetings, completing four Child Protection referrals and four SERAF referrals, by which time Ginny's risk of sexual exploitation score reached over seventy (a score of 16 and above is considered significant risk) before she was received into the care of the Local Authority. As this case demonstrates, the process allows for the child's voice to enter the multi-agency considerations, but that alone is not always enough to instigate rapid action. This could indicate a power differential between the voice of the child and specialist NGO and that of the statutory agency, further hindered through the need to raise awareness of risk indicators. However, having this multi-agency, partnership mechanism in place increases awareness and facilitates reflective practice to continuously improve outcomes. Indeed significant work has been undertaken within the Local Authority to raise awareness and the increase safety of young people who were at risk of being sexually exploited. However, it is through taking a collaborative approach that is based on believing the victim, that positive outcomes and increased child safety can be achieved.

6.1. Multi-Agency Information Sharing

Multi-agency information sharing and partnership working is vital to safeguarding children, reducing risks and bringing perpetrators to justice. Safer Wales works with numerous agencies when supporting young people who we have identified as at risk for child trafficking for the purpose of child sexual exploitation. These agencies include statutory agencies, such as Police, health, local government departments, particularly education and social services. Such multi-agency working facilitates more robust information sharing, enabling the development of a more comprehensive understanding of a child's situation and supports professionals when they are advocating for a child. Achieving such a comprehensive understanding and obtaining such vital information, requires the establishment of trusting relationships between the young person and the support agency. Young people need to know that their voices are important, that they will be believed and that information will be shared so that they can be fully supported. As Casey (2015) notes:

Evidence of child sexual exploitation is unlikely to turn up fully formed at the door of the police station or the local authority and it needs to be searched out. As a spectrum of activity, there are a whole range of behaviours and scenarios which alone do not mean anything significant, but pieced together form a composite. (Casey 2015, p. 7)

Recognizing that no single agency has all the information about a child and drawing the information together helps to present a much clearer indication of a child's risk. This approach to knowledge is important for safety planning for a child and informed decision-making. Safer Wales's proactive approach to sharing information with multiple agencies, spanning different sectors is vital to early intervention for the prevention of future harm.

A young person, supported by Safer Wales, we will call her *Emma* (a pseudonym to protect her identity), was 12 years old when she received support. Emma was known to Local Government statutory agencies prior to her involvement with Safer Wales. Emma's school attendance was poor (36% attendance), she was living in unhygienic conditions at home and her mum was not engaging with any agencies for support. The police had undertaken a welfare check on Emma and found her living in desperate conditions, including no electricity, dirty clothes and home and no fresh food at the property. Following contact with Safer Wales, Emma made

further disclosures regarding sexual exploitation, including a family member permitting another adult to share a bed with her, amongst other concerns relating to her health and safety. Information sharing legislation in the UK enabled Safer Wales to share this information with key agencies. Consequently, information relating to the family members offending history was shared, police shared information with key agencies, such as Safer Wales, Local Authority Children Social Services, regarding warning markers relating to the family member for drugs and violence. Social Services were informed of all disclosures made to Safer Wales and a SERAF form was completed due to Emma's risk of child sexual exploitation. Because of the multi-agency information sharing and advocacy Emma was removed to a place of safety within the care of the Local Authority.

A culture of information sharing amongst agencies facilitates early intervention and prevention of the escalation of risk. A cohort of 13 young people accessing Safer Wales services over a 12-month period yielded 23 safeguarding referrals, seven SERAF referrals, 13 child protection referrals, one domestic abuse (multi-agency risk assessment conference - MARAC), one domestic abuse risk assessment, one sexual health referral, and further resulted three young people who were 18 years of age revealing that they were exploited through prostitution but who, with support, stopped during the year. All information was shared amongst relevant agencies, including the Police (missing persons' teams, intelligence teams, public protection teams), Local Government (Children and Adult Social Services, Education, Communities and Housing) and other NGO and Government organisations such as health. From these examples, it seems notable that the importance of multi-agency information sharing is such that the presumption that information will be shared for safeguarding a child is acknowledged and any reason given for not sharing should be justified.

7. Valuing the Voice of the NGO

The recognition within organisations of the importance of sharing information and the ability to share such information across agencies are - on their own - not enough to result in rapid, robust safeguarding action. It is equally important that the information shared, regardless of which agency discloses the information, is listened to and an appropriate response delivered. To achieve this, professional understanding and knowledge of all agencies who are involved with a child, needs to be equally valued. Casey (2015) alludes to the piecemeal, often ambiguous nature of the information that is available to organisations charged with safeguarding children from trafficking and child sexual exploitation. The following case study demonstrates the importance of valuing and hearing the voice of the NGO to facilitating strong and effective safety planning involving actions that prevent the escalation of risk for a child. A culture where the voice of the NGO and the perspectives of different partners is embraced facilitates the safeguarding process. As previously indicated, particularly in the case of Ginny, above, the full picture of a child's risk of being trafficked and sexually exploited is unlikely to present itself without the search for further evidence. The need, therefore for professional curiosity, as emphasised by Casey (2015) is vital.

On one occasion during an evening outreach session, two adults in a van approached outreach workers to request condoms "to use on the women", a child (discrepancy over age 10–16 years) was in their company. This was immediately reported to the police and the matter was investigated and referred to Children's Social Services. The case was closed as Children's Social Services considered the child to be 16 years of age and not at risk of sexual exploitation, but in UK law, children less than 18 years are protected from abuse through prostitution, recognising this as child sexual exploitation. Safer Wales challenged the decision on this case, as in the professional judgement of the NGO practitioners who were approached whilst on outreach, the child to be between the ages of 10-12 years and at significant risk of child sexual exploitation and trafficking. Through

institutional advocacy, Safer Wales NGO increased awareness and visibility of the current Child Protection Procedure which recognises that children under 18 years of age are entitled to protection, as a child, in relation to child sexual exploitation. Safer Wales have since been informed of several young people who are at serious risk of sexual exploitation being perpetrated by males in the area. Safer Wales, police and Children's Social Services continue to work together to provide information for police Intelligence and multi-agency collaboration to further safeguard these very vulnerable young people.

In this case, it is worth noting though, that the professional judgement of the NGO practitioner was not initially accepted, probably indicating a perceived hierarchy of professionalism between sectors. The view of the statutory sector (Government Organisation) resulted in this case initially being closed with no further action. In fact, the additional corroboration of a government officer who was attending outreach with Safer Wales at the time, aided eventual acceptance that the child may have been younger. Even though, in this situation, the case was re-opened and close partnership work ensued to protect the child, the circumstances in which this occurred relied heavily upon government officers corroborating the professional judgement of the NGO, alongside persistent advocacy from the NGO. This could be construed as the existence, albeit unintended, of a perception of hierarchy of knowledge between sectors, whereby the view of officers from government organisations are given greater credibility than are NGO officers. The existence of such a perception may pose potential safeguarding risks for the vulnerable child. The adoption of any perceived hierarchy of professional or hierarchy of knowledge between sectors is particularly problematic in such cases. This hierarchical positioning has significant implications when it is acknowledged that frontline NGO practitioners are often the very people who can engage with the most marginalised groups.

8. Future Directions

Working collaboratively to reduce child sexual exploitation and trafficking is necessary to ensure children are identified and safeguarded from any further harm. A positive step toward this in Wales is the continued commitment to multi-agency safeguarding hubs. These hubs involve a mixture of physically co-located professionals from various disciplines and sectors and virtual co-located hubs. However, the provision of inclusive environments (whether physical or virtual) and the development of cultures across agencies that maximize the opportunities that strong partnerships can contribute to the safeguarding children and young people, may pose a challenge. Learning from the case examples provides several fundamental considerations which can inform and contribute towards improving safeguarding of children and young people. Recognizing and valuing the contributions different agencies bring to the partnership, their knowledge, expertise and perspective is central to successful partnership work.

For partnership agencies to hear what a child is saying equality within and between partnerships needs to exist. Proactively addressing and promoting the value of partners will reduce the likelihood of a hierarchy of knowledge or hierarchy of professionals being present within the partnership group. All partners must give equal consideration and value to all information provided by different agencies so that together those involved can seek out any risk factors and vulnerabilities while they are assessing the children from whom they are responsible and for whom they are coordinating plans. This is particularly important as the presence of immediately visible hard evidence is unlikely in the case of child sexual exploitation and trafficking. Similarly, it is vitally important to heed the information disclosed by the child and the professional judgement of practitioners working most directly with the child, regardless of sector or agency. This must hold particularly in cases of child sexual exploitation and trafficking where grooming and coercion techniques will not always be overt.

Partners across agencies need to recognize the existence of child sexual exploitation and trafficking of children and young people within their areas. Of the examples presented in this article, no government organisation identified the children who were found to be exploited as being (or potentially being) trafficked even though they were in fact being trafficked. Similarly, where perpetrators were prosecuted, their offences did not include trafficking of children. Raising awareness amongst partners would certainly help practitioners identify potential child victims of trafficking. However, strong collective leadership, that recognises the existence of such crimes and demonstrates commitment to eradicate these serious violations within an area may foster the environment needed to support those frontline workers and children who trying to be heard.

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