

Safe Steps: St Christopher's Child Sexual Exploitation Innovation Project Evaluation Summary

Background

The St Christopher's Fellowship Safe Steps Innovation pilot was developed as an alternative to placing young women being identified as sexually exploited, or at risk of sexual exploitation, in secure children's homes or homes far from their own area. It was based in 2 specially adapted London children's homes. All staff were trained in a social pedagogy model and to work in ways that emphasise relational security and a personalised approach to risk assessment.

Aims

Safe Steps aims to test whether providing intensive support and supervision, while working within existing regulations on restrictions to liberty, can keep young women safe outside a secure setting. It aims to enable young women to continue to live locally in order to limit disruption to their education and family ties, and to minimise the possibility that they will feel blamed or 'punished' for having been exploited.

Evaluation

The aim of the evaluation was to assess whether the intended milestones and early outcomes for young women were achieved. Outcomes for young women were partly assessed using standardised measures administered at baseline and at 3-monthly intervals. Staff also undertook repeat risk assessments for each young woman.

A total of 66 interviews were conducted with staff, stakeholders and residents at 4 time points. Twenty-five members of Safe Steps staff also completed 2 surveys to assess knowledge, confidence and organisational support for working with child sexual exploitation (CSE).

Findings

- Buildings and staff were in place by July 2015, but the complexities of establishing 2 new homes meant that young women did not begin moving in until October 2015. Hence the operational period evaluated was 12 months, during which time 12 young women aged from 14 to 17 (mean age 15) have been placed with Safe Steps.
- At October 2016, one young woman had made good progress and moved on in accordance with her care plan, and 3 young women were currently making progress in this regard. The other 8 young women had been transferred to other placements. These transfers took place because of anxieties about their safety, which were particularly acute because of their traumatic histories and mental health. During their time at Safe Steps they had begun talking with staff about their past and current abuse and exploitation. However, their multiple vulnerabilities and short time period at the homes meant that there was limited evidence of other positive outcomes.

- High quality training and external supervision has increased staff knowledge and competence. This is enabling the development of trusting and meaningful relationships with young women and an emerging model for working with sexually exploited young women in residential care which is trauma-informed and underpinned by a social pedagogy approach.
- Most of the young women referred have significant mental health difficulties. Recognition of this has informed the development of an appropriate referral protocol and a variety of approaches to providing therapeutic support.
- As relationships with staff developed some of the young women became more secure and less confrontational, reflected in a decline in the frequency of 'incidents' (involving actual or potential harm to self or others).
- On the basis of 12 months experience, staff, managers and commissioners believe that having greater powers to restrict liberty of movement would not be helpful to these young women. However, managing risk through building relationships and empowering them to make choices for themselves has generated huge anxiety amongst stakeholders.
- Recruiting and retaining staff to high stress and low pay residential work in London is difficult, and effective leadership of homes, including line management support for operational staff, is crucial.

Implications

Learning from this innovation has a contribution to make to understanding possible approaches to working with CSE-affected young women. This is an essential endeavour when out-of-area or secure placements to keep them safe are at best a short-term solution which may add to their difficulties, and after which they are likely to return to their home communities. Therefore:

- For the Safe Steps model to be properly tested the approach to managing risk differently, through empowerment and building relationships, needs to be fully supported by local authority corporate parents. Stakeholder anxieties need to be contained so that young women can remain in placement for long enough for changes in their lives to occur.
- St Christopher's is committed to continuing this provision but needs to find a financial model for the service that is viable and acceptable to commissioners.
- In order to effectively safeguard exploited and at-risk young people in their own communities interventions such as Safe Steps need to be accompanied by strong multi-agency responses directed towards perpetrators.

This evaluation was carried out between May 2015 and October 2016 by Sara Scott and Jennie Williams working with the University of Bedfordshire International Centre: Researching Child Sexual Exploitation, Violence and Trafficking & NatCen Social Research. Some follow up findings will be available in April 2017.

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A full copy of this report can be found at www.gov.uk/government/publications