



# Practitioner Briefing #2: Auditing your local response to peer-on-peer abuse

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MsUnderstood Partnership (2015)



## Introduction

“Most of the young people and family members interviewed saw factors outside the family as having a greater influence on their gang association. Issues widely seen as more significant included growing up in a ‘hostile’ environment where gang membership, criminality and violence was normalised; negative experiences of school; the pull of peer subculture...and the search for identity, independence and respect. ”

(Catch 22, 2013:4)

In 2013, 40 local safeguarding children boards (LSCBs) applied to the MsUnderstood Partnership<sup>1</sup> (MSU) for support in building their response to peer-on-peer abuse. 11 LSCBs were selected and since January 2014 we have worked with them to develop responses to peer-on-peer abuse. This briefing explains our approach to the first phase of the support process – a local audit, and is intended to support other areas to audit their own response to peer-on-peer abuse.

## How we understand the issue

Whether it’s defined as teenage relationship abuse, peer-on-peer exploitation, serious youth violence, sexual bullying or harmful sexual behaviour<sup>2</sup>, research consistently implies that a range of social environments are associated to young people’s experiences of peer-on-peer abuse (Firmin, 2013, 2015; Firmin and Curtis 2015; Letourneau and Borduin, 2008; Messerschmidt, 2012). Peer groups (Barter, et al., 2009; Chung, 2005; Franklin, 2013), schools (EVAW, 2010; Finkelhor, 2009; Frosh, et al., 2002) and neighbourhoods (Anderson, 1999; Beckett et al., 2013; Pitts, 2008), in addition to homes, have all been identified as contexts in which young people can encounter harm. As a result, local responses to the issue need to identify, assess and intervene with all the environments associated to peer-on-peer abuse – and in essence take a ‘contextual’ approach to the phenomenon.

## The audit process

In order to develop a response to peer-on-peer abuse you need to understand what the current response looks like:

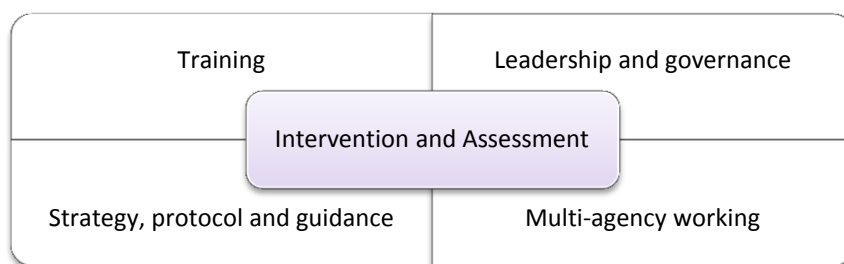
- To what extent is the approach ‘contextual’ as outlined above?
- Where is the response located across the issues of domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, serious youth and gang-related violence, harmful sexual behaviour, bullying and so on?

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<sup>1</sup> A partnership between the University of Bedfordshire, Imkaan and the Girls against Gangs project, established in 2013 to respond to young people’s experiences of gender inequality

<sup>2</sup> For greater detail on definitions please see Practitioner Briefing #1, Firmin and Curtis (2015)

The local area audit seeks to answer these questions by assessing the operational and strategic response to peer-on-peer abuse across the following areas:



To replicate the approach taken by the MsUnderstood partnership the following steps could be considered:

### **Step 1 – Strategic Review**

Responses to peer-on-peer abuse are often featured in multiple areas of strategic concern. Most frequently, strategies to tackle child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour, domestic abuse/violence against women and girls, serious youth violence, gang-associated violence and bullying will have implications for how peer-on-peer abuse is managed. In reviewing all of these documents the audit process asks:

- What are the implications of each of these documents for peer-on-peer abuse?
- To what extent do these documents recognise, and engage with, environments beyond the home that may be associated to peer-on-peer abuse?
- Are the separate governance arrangements for each strategy sufficiently coordinated to demonstrate a clear line of accountability for the local response to peer-on-peer abuse?
- Taken together, do these documents provide a consistent message on the local response to peer-on-peer abuse or does the message differ dependent on the issue under consideration (for example – what is the difference between the strategic position on peer-on-peer sexual exploitation and harmful sexual behaviour)?

Sitting underneath local strategies are protocols and guidance for responding to these respective issues. The audit process asks the same questions of these documents as it does over strategic documents: what are the implications for responses to peer-on-peer abuse; do they engage with contexts as well as individuals; and taken together, are they consistent, on this occasion, regarding referral pathways, assessments and partnerships?

### **Step 2 – Observations**

The second step in the audit processes is assessing the extent to which the approach outlined in strategic documents is mirrored in local multi-agency working, training and assessment/intervention. Over a period of approximately three months the following multi-agency meetings could be observed, each of which may discuss cases, or trends, of peer-on-peer abuse:

- Child sexual exploitation strategic group (sometimes a sub-group of the LSCB)
- Child sexual exploitation operational group – referred to as a multi-agency sexual exploitation (MASE) group, or sexual exploitation risk assessment conference (SERAC) in addition to other names
- Multi-agency risk assessment conference for domestic abuse (MARAC)
- Violence against women and girls or domestic abuse strategic group
- Harmful sexual behaviour strategic and/or operational group
- Gangs panel, bronze group or gangs action group – operational
- Gangs and/or serious youth violence strategic group
- Fair access panel (regarding school exclusions and managed moves across schools)
- Youth crime disorder or anti-social behaviour panel
- Youth Justice risk and vulnerability panels
- Multi-agency planning meetings (MAP)

While not an exclusive account of all local meetings, the list above indicates the spread of strategic and operational structures/forums in which peer-on-peer abuse may feature.

During observations of meetings, the audit considers the extent to which meetings:

- Explore the contexts in which peer-on-peer abuse has occurred and task partners to intervene with those contexts to reduce risk
- Share trend data and identify overlaps in their cohort of individuals and contexts of concern
- Use consistent language to describe peer-on-peer abuse and the risk associated to the phenomenon
- Assess risk and vulnerability in comparable ways for peer-on-peer abuse cases
- Allocate interventions that are age and gender appropriate in peer-on-peer abuse cases (for example can CSE meetings access appropriate support for boys and young men, do domestic abuse meetings have access to services for young people)

Training sessions are also observed during the audit process, including sessions on:

- Harmful sexual behaviour
- Teenage relationship abuse
- Child sexual exploitation
- Gangs and serious youth violence

During training observations the audit process considers the extent to which sessions:

- Utilise shared definitions and language to describe peer-on-peer abuse
- Promote shared referral pathways and assessments for young people affected by peer-on-peer abuse
- Utilise evidence from research into domestic abuse, child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour and serious youth violence to inform content
- Draw upon the local problem profile of peer-on-peer abuse

Drawing together the findings of training and meeting observations the audit is able to identify whether:

- Practice differs locally from strategies, guidance and protocols
- Operational and strategic responses engage with contexts as well as individuals
- Operational and strategic responses are sufficiently linked across siloed areas to offer a consistent response to peer-on-peer abuse

### **Step 3 – Follow-up meetings and practitioner forums**

Following a review of strategic documents and observation of their application in practice, the third step in the audit process involves follow up meetings, focus groups and workshops with practitioners. During these sessions practitioners are supported to understand the contextual nature of peer-on-peer abuse by working through a real-life case study, following which they are asked:

- How do you, and the partners you work with, respond to cases like this at present?
- What do you consider to be the most effective components of your local response to peer-on-peer abuse?
- What do you consider to be the most critical challenges in your local response to peer-on-peer abuse?

The answers given are aligned with the findings from observations and the strategic overview to identify the strengths, challenges and areas for development in the local response to peer-on-peer abuse.

### **Outcomes**

The outcomes of the audit process are shared with the LSCB in the form of a report and presentation. Strengths, challenges and areas for development are identified in relation to:

- Assessment of, and intervention with, individuals
- Assessment of, and intervention with, home environments
- Assessment of, and intervention with, peer groups
- Assessment of, and intervention with, school environments

- Assessment of, and intervention with, neighbourhoods
- Leadership and governance
- Multi-agency working
- Strategy, protocol and guidance
- Training
- Overarching findings and recommendations

Laying out the findings in this manner draws attention towards two key aspects of an effective response to peer-on-peer abuse:

1. The extent to which the strategic and operational response can identify and engage with both individuals and environments associated to the issue
2. The extent to which the response is coherently linked across the siloed strategy and practice areas including child sexual exploitation, harmful sexual behaviour, domestic abuse/teenage relationship abuse, gangs and serious youth violence

The recommendations that are made suggest ways in which current strengths can be developed to better realise these two components of effective practice, and in doing so address some of the challenges identified during the audit process.

### **Conclusion – considerations for practice**

The MsUnderstood Partnership has applied this approach to audit the response of 11 local authorities to peer-on-peer abuse. In doing so, we have identified similar challenges across the country which manifest in different ways dependent on local expertise, resources, structures and histories. The process has enabled us to design a package of support for each local area that we will be delivering until July 2016. Our list of delivery objectives will be published on our website in the summer of 2015 along with a thematic briefing outlining the findings of the 11 audits. We would strongly encourage LSCBs to use this briefing to conduct their own local audits into peer-on-peer abuse, and would be happy to assist by answering any questions in the process.

If you have any queries on this briefing, or the training that accompanies it, please contact [london@msunderstood.org.uk](mailto:london@msunderstood.org.uk).

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