Evaluation of Barnardo’s Safe Accommodation Project for Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Young People

Executive Summary

Lucie Shuker
Executive Summary

Headlines

• The Safe Accommodation Project piloted the use of specialist foster placements for young people at risk, or victims, of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking, for the first time in England, as well as providing training to foster carers and associated professionals, and 1-1 support to young people in other care settings.

• Warm, trusting relationships are at the heart of creating safe and stable specialist foster placements. These take time to develop but unlock a series of other positive outcomes.

• Effective specialist placements are supported by a team around the child which shares a common safeguarding approach and attitude toward a young person’s level of risk.

• There is clear potential for specialist placements to be cost-effective, particularly where they deter young people from unstable care pathways and being referred to residential care.

• Where specialist placements are offered in line with the model developed in the evaluation, sexually exploited and/or trafficked young people can be effectively protected and can continue to go on to recover from abuse.

• Specialist placements appear to be meeting a need amongst young people at risk, or victims, of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking. As such it is recommended that this model of specialist foster care should continue to be provided, drawing on the learning generated from the evaluation, in order to ensure that more young people can benefit from such specialist provision.

Background and overview

1 In recent years there has been growing concern about the capacity of the current care system to safeguard looked after young people who are at risk, or victims, of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and/or trafficking. This has often centred on concerns about levels of appropriate training for all carers, and how specialist foster care can be developed to address the specific vulnerabilities and safeguarding needs of these young people.

2 In 2011 Barnardo’s received grant funding from the Department for Education to deliver a two-year ‘Safe Accommodation Project’ in response to these concerns. The project comprised three strands:
   a forty four two-day training courses for foster carers and associated professionals to raise awareness of CSE and child trafficking (see point 8);
   b direct work with 88 looked after young people who were at risk, or victims, of CSE and/or trafficking; and
   c sixteen specialist foster placements for young people at risk, or victims, of CSE and/or trafficking.

3 The Safe Accommodation Project was aimed at under-18 year olds who were at risk, or victims, of
sexual exploitation and/or trafficking. The project adopted the definition of CSE found in government guidance (DCSF, 2009), and the definition of trafficking used in the Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000).

4 Children and young people can be trafficked within and across national borders and for a variety of reasons, including but not limited to sexual exploitation. However for the purposes of the project a ‘trafficked’ young person was defined as one who had been moved into the United Kingdom (UK) from another country for the purposes of exploitation, rather than a young person who had been moved internally within a nation or region.

Evaluation approach and methodology

5 The project was evaluated by the International Centre for the Study of Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Young People, at the University of Bedfordshire. The main aims of the evaluation were to:
   a use findings formatively to contribute to the development of the project and any future work;
   b identify outcomes and how these were achieved; and
   c identify the potential of the specialist foster placements to offer a cost-effective and safe alternative to other forms of local authority care for young people at risk, or victims, of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking.

6 The 44 awareness raising training courses were evaluated in partnership with Barnardo’s Training and Consultancy. Pre and post-training evaluation questionnaires were completed by 95 per cent of attendees, and an online survey was completed by 12 per cent of attendees six months after they were trained.

7 A realist evaluation approach was taken to evaluating the specialist foster placements. This involved gathering mostly qualitative data to identify the key mechanisms and contexts of change that underpinned the outcomes achieved within and across placements. Data was collected in the form of interviews with young people, specialist foster carers, project workers, and local authority (LA) and Barnardo’s social workers, as well as weekly monitoring logs. Although the findings should not be widely generalised, this data was used to identify key theories of change about how future specialist placements can learn from the project.

Findings from the evaluation of the awareness raising training for foster carers and associated professionals

8 The training of carers and other professionals in children’s services has been consistently identified as a route to improved safeguarding. The Safe Accommodation Project therefore aimed to provide a two-day training course to 660 foster carers on the sexual exploitation and trafficking of young people.

9 Training was only delivered to half the original target number of 660 foster carers (n=352). However the courses were also attended by other professionals involved in supporting or caring for vulnerable young people (n=311) and who reported the training to be valuable and relevant for their practice. For a list of the roles of these associated professionals see appendix 4 of the full evaluation report.

10 Participants reported low levels of confidence in their understanding of child sexual exploitation and trafficking before the training, particularly in terms of their awareness of child trafficking.
Training substantially increased participants’ reported confidence in their knowledge of sexual exploitation and trafficking, as well as their confidence to support a trafficked or sexually exploited young person.

Most participants who responded to an online survey six months after attending training had maintained or increased their immediate post-training confidence in knowledge and understanding of sexual exploitation and trafficking, and their confidence to support a trafficked or sexually exploited young person.

Where foster carers were hesitant about caring for young people at risk, or victims, of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking, their concerns centred on the potential impact on children already in their care.

Participants predicted that the training would impact their practice primarily by improving their awareness of the risk indicators associated with sexual exploitation and trafficking. Those who responded to an online survey reported this as the primary change in their practice six months later.

Findings from the evaluation of the training suggest that there is an ongoing need for training which raises awareness of sexual exploitation, and particularly child trafficking, among professionals who work with children.

Training can be used as an effective recruitment tool for specialist foster care, through increasing awareness and confidence.

Overview of the specialist foster placements

Within the Safe Accommodation Project the model of specialist foster care comprised five key elements:

- a trained specialist foster carer;
- planning and reviewing;
- working in partnership;
- specialist project worker support for the young person and foster carer; and
- advocacy and brokering other services.

The project faced a number of obstacles in attempting to deliver a small number of specialist placements, including difficulties recruiting new specialist carers within the timescale of the project. This may be explained, in part, by the generally low levels of confidence in supporting sexually exploited and/or trafficked young people reported by carers and professionals who attended the two-day training course.

Barnardo’s conducted an online marketing campaign to recruit specialist foster carers which targeted professionals with experience of working with vulnerable young people. The low numbers recruited suggest that it may be easier to ‘up skill’ existing carers than to recruit new carers into these specialist roles, especially in a time-limited project such as this. See appendix 3 of the full evaluation report for more details.

While recruiting carers was difficult, the project also faced challenges in getting sufficient numbers of referrals to match the availability of those carers who were able to take placements. Although placements were provided at no cost to local authorities, some authorities were hesitant to ‘label’
young people as victims of sexual exploitation. Again, low awareness of the needs of these young people may well be a contributing factor. As a result of these challenges the target number of placements was revised down from 16 to 11 in Year 2 of the project, although 13 placements were finally provided in total.

21 Of the 13 specialist foster placements provided, four were to victims of trafficking and nine to young people at risk, or victims, of sexual exploitation. Twelve of the young people were female, and one was male. Four of the 13 placements were pre-existing Barnardo’s placements that transferred into the scheme.

22 The young people in these 13 specialist placements had multiple vulnerabilities including: abuse and neglect; unstable care histories; low self-esteem; bereavement; domestic abuse; self harm and poor mental health; disengagement from education; and going missing. Six were known victims of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking, and the remaining seven were assessed to be at high or medium-high risk of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking.

Specialist foster placements: outcomes

23 The evaluation tracked a series of outcomes across the 13 placements. These were:
   a carers aware of safety strategies;
   b stable, safe accommodation;
   c reduced risk of going missing;
   d increased awareness of the difference between healthy and exploitative relationships;
   e increased protective factors in young person’s life;
   f recovery from abuse/exploitation and improved well-being; and
   g positive relationship built with specialist foster carer(s).

24 Evidence was gathered against these seven outcomes primarily through the collation of qualitative data in the form of interviews with a range of people involved in the placements, and weekly logs produced by foster carers. Some quantitative data was gathered on missing incidences and placement stability.

25 Specialist foster carers learned about and employed a range of safety strategies as a result of the training they received, and ongoing support and advice from Barnardo’s.

26 One of the clearest outcomes achieved was the development of warm and trusting relationships between young people and specialist foster carers in the majority of specialist placements. These relationships enabled the achievement of wider outcomes related to young people’s safety and well-being.

27 Nine placements had either achieved medium-term stability (six), or were expected to continue beyond the end of the project (three). The remaining four placements broke down within three months.

28 Positive outcomes were clearly related to placement length and stability. In general the nine specialist placements that lasted beyond a few months (or looked likely to continue at the end of the project) saw greater improvements across all outcomes than the four that broke down quickly (see Table 9 in the full evaluation report).
Nine out of 13 specialist foster placements lasted beyond a few months, and in eight of these the following outcomes were achieved:

- Young people were reported to be, and reported themselves to feel, safe and protected from exploitation (see section 7.4 of the full evaluation report);
- Young people’s awareness of the difference between exploitative and healthy relationships increased; (see section 7.6 of the full evaluation report);
- There was evidence of protective factors in young people’s lives e.g. engagement in education, development of hobbies or skills, positive friendships, and participation in decisions that affected them (see section 7.7 of the full evaluation report);
- There was evidence of improvements to young people’s physical, emotional and psychological well-being (see section 7.8 of the full evaluation report).

In seven of the nine stable placements, there were either no missing episodes, a reduction in missing episodes, or very few occasions of missing (see section 7.5 of the full evaluation report).

One of the nine placements that lasted beyond a few months did not conform to this pattern, having achieved stability and a positive relationship with a carer, but no real reduction in risk of sexual exploitation. This was primarily because of the young person’s patterns of going missing, which were affected by her unresolved experiences of bereavement and her resistance to receiving support (see case study 5 in the full evaluation report).

In the four placements that broke down quickly there was very little evidence of improvement across these outcomes. Two of these placements ended because the young people went missing and refused to return. One ended because the foster carers struggled to cope with their anxieties about the placement. The other ended because the young person changed her mind about living in the placement and the foster carers were not provided with adequate information about some of her challenging behaviour before the placement began.

Specialist placements: mechanisms of change

The evaluation used qualitative data to identify the ‘mechanisms of change’ captured in the behaviour of specialist foster carers, and others supporting them, that produced the outcomes described above.

The following mechanisms (see 35 below) were identified within the specialist foster placements. They are presented in order of how often they were identified by interviewees as the drivers of positive change, with the most significant categories first. For further explanation of these mechanisms see chapter 8 of the full evaluation report.

Where positive outcomes were achieved, mechanisms that might appear contradictory were often balanced against each other. For example, in the early days of a placement risk was monitored closely, but this often developed into ways of trusting the young person to manage risk safely themselves as the placement progressed. Where safeguarding mechanisms were interpreted by young people as restrictive and even oppressive, it was possible for specialist foster carers to counter-balance this through expressions of care, understanding the young person’s perspective, and sensitive communication.

Caring mechanisms: Seeing past challenges to the need for compassion and unconditional acceptance

- Providing positive attention
b Persisting without evidence of change
c Avoiding escalation
d Helping the young person to communicate
e Meeting practical needs
f Noticing and responding to emotional needs

36 **Safeguarding mechanisms:** Appropriate sensitivity to risk
   a Applying boundaries consistently
   b Disrupting exploitation
   c Making it harder to run away
   d Monitoring risk
   e Trusting the young person to manage risk
   f Ongoing vigilance

37 **Child-centred mechanisms:** Working from the young person’s perspective
   a Therapeutic outreach
   b Making sense of the young person’s world
   c Persistently reaching out to the young person
   d Giving the young person control
   e Valuing cultural identities

38 **Communication mechanisms:** Sensitive communication
   a Taking opportunities to discuss risk in everyday life
   b Challenging oppressive assumptions
   c Talking frankly and openly

39 **Relational/family mechanisms:** A non-abusive environment
   a Being included in everyday family life
   b Modelling healthy relationships
   c Facilitating safe friendships

40 **Activity mechanisms:** Offering viable alternative activity
   a Offering activities to promote positive self-esteem
   b Occupying spare time in the early days of a placement
   c Relieving the pressure and intensity of a placement
   d Building relationships through doing things together

41 **Advocacy mechanisms:** Representing young people
   a Gate-keeping and brokering

**Specialist placements: contexts of change**

42 The impact of specialist placements was influenced by various contextual factors that could hinder or enable the support Barnardo’s was attempting to provide. The following is a summary of the most
significant contextual factors affecting the efficacy of the specialist placements. For a full list of all of the most significant contexts that were coded from interviews and other data, see appendix 5 of the full evaluation report.

43 **Specialist foster carer capacity to provide appropriate care to high risk young people.** Interviewees were clear that not all foster carers would be able to provide the kind of care needed by sexually exploited and trafficked young people. There were five areas that were identified as being relevant to the role of a specialist carer: personality, support, experience, training and availability. Interview data suggested that the approach used by successful carers could be summarised in four Cs: confidence, commitment, compassion, and the ability to cope.

44 **Level of understanding of sexual exploitation/trafficking within multi-agency teams/professionals involved in young people’s lives.** Levels of professional understanding of child sexual exploitation and trafficking clearly affected placement outcomes. A lack of agreement between professionals about risk was particularly problematic in placements that broke down quickly.

45 **Length of placement/commissioned support for young person.** The evaluation clearly demonstrated a positive relationship between the length of time a young person was in a specialist placement, and their safety and well-being. This reflected the time it takes to build a trusting relationship with a young person who may have good reasons to be mistrustful of adults, and consensus among interviewees that short term interventions were generally not appropriate for such young people.

46 **Location of placement relative to risky areas/people.** The location of the foster home could either help to disrupt exploitation, or was too close to risky environments to be effective. Crucially, the impact of the location of the placement depended on the strength of a young person’s attachment to family, friends or adults who posed a risk to them, and their willingness to ‘buy in’ to their placement (see below).

47 **Young person’s willingness and capacity to engage in a placement.** A young person’s desire to stay in a specialist foster placement and get to know new carers was one of the most significant contexts affecting the success of that placement. Some young people embraced 1-1 support or a family environment, while others struggled to adapt to these contexts for various reasons, including finding it hard to reconcile this with their relationships to birth parents.

48 **Young person’s strength of attachment to friends/family/communities that present a risk.** A young person’s strong attachment to risky environments was particularly challenging if the specialist foster home was close by and young people were struggling to build relationships with their foster carers. Moving between care placements can be very destabilising. For young people at risk of sexual exploitation in particular, the people and places they felt anchored to were often considered to be problematic by professionals in their lives.

**Cost effectiveness of specialist placements**

49 It was not possible to undertake a full cost-benefit analysis as part of the evaluation because of the lack of evidence about what would have happened to young people in the absence of a specialist placement, the small number of placements, and the different lengths of time each placement lasted. Consequently the evaluation employed a ‘break-even’ analysis approach.
This approach involved identifying four outcomes that were relevant to victims of child sexual exploitation and/or trafficking, and which carried a financial cost to the tax-payer. These were: going missing, engagement with education, contact with the youth justice system, and placement stability. These outcomes were monitored throughout each specialist placement and then compared with data gathered at the baseline. The costs of delivering the specialist placements were then compared with the savings generated by outcomes achieved in these four areas, to come to a judgment about whether the project had broken even and could therefore be considered cost-effective.

The potential savings to the State arising from improving the outcomes of the highest risk sexually exploited and/or trafficked young people are large, and it would only take a small number of those with the highest risk to see an improvement in their outcomes in order for the overall costs associated with specialist placements to be justified. Costs associated with placement instability are particularly large, and the evaluation suggests that targeting young people who would otherwise go on to placements in residential or secure accommodation is likely to produce the greatest savings.

Assuming the underlying risk profile of young people in specialist placements would not have improved in the absence of a placement there is tentative evidence that the specialist placement element of the project broke even in terms of returns delivered to the tax-payer.

There are, however, important caveats to this finding. Firstly, the small number of placements undertaken means it is not possible to be fully confident of how outcomes would have changed for these young people if they had not been selected to be part of the project. Secondly, estimates of cost savings are subject to uncertainties, and varying the assumptions employed for calculating cost savings associated with placement stability would reduce the validity of this claim. Thirdly there are a wide range of outcomes that have not been costed as part of this exercise which, if factored in, could increase the cost-effectiveness of the specialist placements (e.g. improved earning potential and increased wellbeing).

Theories of change

Together, recurring patterns of key contexts, mechanisms and outcomes can help identify theories of change about how effective safeguarding happens in the context of specialist foster care. The six theories of change below were identified as the most significant for refining the original model of specialist foster care in light of the evaluation findings.

a Specialist placements are likely to be most successful and cost effective when young people are ready, willing and able to engage in them, regardless of their level of risk.

b In light of ‘pull factors’ drawing them away from safe environments, specialist foster care must give sexually exploited and/or trafficked young people a reason to stay and invest in a placement.

c Positive trusting relationships within a specialist foster placement underpin all wider attempts and strategies to improve a sexually exploited and/or trafficked young person’s safety and well-being.

d Safety is multi-faceted. It takes time to progress from short-term physical safety to medium-term relational security (positive trusting relationships), and then long-term recovery.

e A shared, multi-agency approach is crucial to the effective use of safeguarding measures to protect sexually exploited and/or trafficked young people from exploitation.

f Where effective multi-agency partnerships are not present, the model of specialist foster
carers and project workers can act as a buffer against poor practice and continue to create a safe environment.

55 The model of specialist foster care was revised in light of the key contexts and mechanisms of change identified in the evaluation, and the theories of change above. This revised model can be found in section 11.7 of the full evaluation report.

Key messages for practice

56 Specialist foster placements should be in place for at least a year to enable trusting relationships to be built, which are crucial to achieving further positive outcomes.

57 Given the importance of consistent, trusting relationships, consideration should be given to employing project workers to provide 1-1 support to young people to support their transitions between specialist foster placements, into other placements or independent living post-18.

58 Specialist placements are at highest risk of breakdown where a young person does not want to be in a foster family environment and has a strong attachment to people/communities they are likely to run back to. Specialist care plans therefore need to consider how to ‘hold young people in’ to their specialist foster placements by giving them viable reasons to stay and invest, particularly in the short-term.

59 All relevant information should be shared as early on as possible so that all agencies and partners can agree on a young person’s level of risk and appropriate safeguarding strategies. This includes agreement between police and other services about responses to young people going missing.

60 All those in a team around the child supporting a young person at risk, or a victim, of sexual exploitation and/or trafficking should receive appropriate training to ensure they are working from similar perspectives on the risks to young people.

61 A range of therapeutic interventions should be available to young people in specialist placements who are in need of support, including both formal counselling and informal outreach-based project work.

62 In the case of trafficked young people who are new to the UK, the specialist placement team should consider how to ensure young people are able to participate in decision making, without over-burdening them in the early days of a placement. This could include providing explanations in a young person’s language of who various professionals are and the role they play, as well as limiting the number of meetings young people are expected to attend in a week.¹

63 A framework/tool should be developed to support reflection on trafficked young people’s changing levels of risk and resilience in foster/other care placements. This could draw on the perspectives of the young person and wider team around the child to enable safeguarding measures to be responsive to changes in the placement.²

64 An ability to build positive trusting relationships with young people should be the primary quality that fostering teams look for in their recruitment of specialist carers. This is likely to be characterised

¹ Although this emerged as a finding for trafficked young people, it may also be applicable to other young people, such as those who are new to the care system.

² See section 6.4 of the full evaluation report for further information on the assessment of risk for trafficked compared with sexually exploited young people.
by confidence, commitment, compassion and the ability to cope with challenging situations. At least one carer in a placement should be available to provide full-time support to the young person – especially in the early days of a placement.

65 Ongoing support should be available to carers in the form of respite and opportunities for peer-support with other specialist carers.

66 Advanced or more specialist ongoing training should be available to specialist carers. This could include information about the immigration system in order to support trafficked young people, the use of specific safety measures, and challenging societal assumptions that increase young people’s vulnerability to exploitation, including inequality and discrimination. See section 1.1 of the full evaluation report on the need for training to explore gender inequality.

Conclusion

67 The Safe Accommodation Project had three core aims:

- **a** to improve front-line practice through flexible, sensitive intervention with children at high risk;
- **b** to build capacity/expertise within the sector so that responses are better informed and sustainably improved; and
- **c** to keep children safe from harm.

The evidence from the evaluation suggests that, between the outcomes achieved by the training and the specialist placement strands of the project, all three aims were achieved.

68 The evaluation has shown that where placements are offered in line with the model suggested in the full evaluation report, sexually exploited and/or trafficked young people can be effectively protected and can continue to go on to recover from abuse. As such it is recommended that this model of specialist foster care should continue to be provided, drawing on the learning generated from the evaluation, in order to ensure that more young people can benefit from specialist accommodation.

References

