

St Helens SOS+ Mentoring Project

Evaluation Report

Introduction

The St Helens SOS+ mentoring project has to date been funded jointly by Merseyside Violence Prevention Unit (VRP) and St Giles Trust (SGT), and delivered by SGT. The project began in September 2020 with the intention of delivering over a 3 year period, however, funding beyond the end of September 2021 is yet to be confirmed.

The overall aim of the project is to deliver a combination of facilitated awareness raising sessions and one-to-one support, provided by skilled mentors with lived experience, with the key objectives of:

- Preventing young people becoming involved in serious youth violence and criminal activity by demystifying gang culture and educating them about the harsh realities of knife crime and prison life;
- Imparting real tools that young people can utilise to make better informed decisions and to avoid negative lifestyle choices;
- Endorsing the benefits of education, and
- Equipping parents and professionals with the knowledge, understanding and tools to help safeguard their young people.

The project works with three schools that cater for a wide range of pupils:

- a mainstream Catholic secondary school,
- an alternative learning provider for children with behavioural/emotional difficulties, usually dual-rolled with a mainstream school
- a day maintained special school catering for Years 4-11, all of whom have Education, Health & Care Plans (EHCPs)

This enables SGT to offer the service to children and young people across the range of ability, engagement in learning and wider circumstances.

Methodology

The evaluation was carried out between July and September 2021, focusing on assessing the development and impact of the project – for children and young people being mentored, and for partners including the participating schools, children’s social care, police and other agencies. The methodology included:

- Discussions with SGT project management and delivery staff, schools and other professionals;
- Discussions with young people accessing the service and family members, and
- Review of relevant materials including project documentation, monitoring data and internal/funder reporting.

Real names and/or identifying information are not provided in the report in order to protect the confidentiality of contributors. The organisational/role background of contributors is provided where this is required for perspective.

Key findings

- ✓ The project has adapted extremely well to the challenging conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic, providing excellent support for young people at risk of criminal exploitation as well as enabling professionals to gain a better understanding of vulnerability, and the impact of trauma and exploitation. The project clearly contributes to delivering on Merseyside VRP's core vision.
- ✓ The project is supporting some of the most vulnerable students. 28 young people aged between 11-16 years have been referred, with the majority aged 14-16 years. 27 of the young people have recognised social, emotional and/or mental health needs and half are under Child in Need or Child Protection arrangements. All are of White British ethnicity, with being 22 male and 6 female. It is particularly positive that girls as well as boys have been identified for support.
- ✓ The mentor's lived experience provides the essential credibility that enables her to engage young people and develop the relationships of trust that can begin to change lives. This, combined with her approachability, professionalism, tenacity and flexibility form the key success factors for the project.
- ✓ The mentoring project is new to St Helens and provides a specialist service that has not been previously offered. The project has been extremely well received by schools and welcomed by staff, other professionals and parents alike.
- ✓ The fact that mentoring could not be delivered on site in schools, combined with the complexity and high level needs of the young people means that the mentor has provided a level of one-to-one support more usually seen in casework projects. This, combined with delivering across 3 schools overburdens the current capacity of just one mentor.
- ✓ The service provided by the mentor is enabling young people to develop more positive relationships with other professionals and with parents/carers. In doing so, it is strengthening the all-important wider support network that helps to sustain progress for the young person.
- ✓ The sessions delivered for around 500 Merseyside police officers, combined with the teamworking with other professionals is helping to increase understanding in agencies of how exploited and vulnerable young people present and how best to respond to them.

Early recommendations

- Commissioners should consider how this successful and effective project can continue, particularly since the one-to-one mentoring is at a critical point of progress for many of the cohort. Joint funding solutions that include social care, education and health as well as criminal justice could help in promoting a public health approach. Other areas of Merseyside should consider how the mentoring project could benefit their vulnerable young people.
- Given the demand and need for the project and the current pressure that the mentor is under in covering 3 schools, an additional mentor should be considered. A male mentor would provide good diversity of the team. Delivery on school premises should begin as soon as practically possible.
- Additional group sessions for the police and other professionals should be planned, alongside delivery of those for young people and parents as the pandemic recedes.
- SGT should strengthen the referral pathways to the organisation's Merseyside-wide county lines specialist service (CLISS) so that young people affected by this type of exploitation can benefit.
- SGT should continue its work to develop how the impact of mentoring projects and group sessions are evidenced so that this can be more fully demonstrated as the work develops.

Positive impact for young people and families

The St Helens mentoring project is engaging a range of young people who are at high risk of exploitation for a variety of reasons including one or more of the following:

- Having diagnosed or undiagnosed disability and/or mental health need including ADHD, ASD, anxiety and behavioural/emotional issues
- Being excluded from mainstream education and/or finding it difficult to engage in formal, classroom or digital based learning
- Having a chaotic or unsupportive home life, or being in local authority care
- Poverty, poor housing and lack of positive opportunities

The ethnicity of the cohort reflects that of St Helens which is very predominantly White British. It is very positive to see that 6 of the 28 mentees referred to the project are girls who can sometimes be overlooked in terms of their risk of exploitation, as is certainly the case with respect to county lines. It is also important to note that the majority of mentees are aged 14-16. This age is particularly critical in terms of the potential trajectory into criminal involvement which tends to peak at 18 years of age. Providing an intervention at this earlier stage can halt the descent of a young person into criminality that can be very difficult to exit at a later stage.

There is also mounting evidence to suggest that the type of intervention offered by the SOS+ mentoring project, when appropriately tailored, is highly suitable for primary age children and particularly those making the sometimes fragile transition from Year 6 into secondary education.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated many of the issues faced by the young mentees, including increasing isolation and reducing the opportunities of experiencing positive environments. In addition, whilst education is clearly problematic for many, it is well recognised that schools can provide an essential safeguarding mechanism where young people are at least seen and, where staff have the knowledge and professional curiosity, warning signs of exploitation or other issues can be recognised and acted upon. During periods of lockdown this has not been available, added to which some young people who were not engaging well previously have been reluctant to resume any face-to-face school attendance.

Pre-pandemic, the SGT mentoring project would have taken place largely on school premises. The mentor quickly adapted to the new restrictions and young people have been engaged outside of schools, many of whom were not engaging with other professionals at the time. Although this has changed the nature of the project in some ways, it is clearly of great value to young people and families, as the following comments reveal.

Anna, aged 15 has had a very challenging and chaotic family life, moving between her mum, gran and most recently dad. She moved to St Helens from another area and was befriended by another girl who had prior exploitation through county lines as well as involvement with older males. During the caseworker's early involvement with Anna, significant suspicions began to emerge of inappropriate relationships and possible sexual exploitation on the part of her dad. This culminated in social services removing Anna from her father's care and she is now placed out of area in a children's home. Investigations with regard to her father are continuing. Very recently, Anna and another girl from the home have been sexually assaulted whilst out of the home. Rachel was the person Anna called upon when this happened and she responded despite the call being well out of hours.

Anna: *"It's been great with Rachel. We've been going out doing activities in the holidays like bowling and drives. It helps to take my mind off really stressful things. If something's on my mind I can talk to her. She tells me things that help. We talk about what's best to do. She makes me feel better and it*

makes a difference that she's been through things to. She understands. It's changed how I'm going to be at school when I go back. I'm going to keep my head down and get on with my GCSEs so that I can go to college. I want to be a PE teacher."

Sean, aged 16 is well known to the police and has been arrested several times, including for grievous bodily harm. He has resisted engagement with statutory agencies and turned down the mentoring support initially. Through tenacious efforts from the mentor Sean finally engaged with the project and is now making good progress.

Lisa, mum of Sean: *"I wasn't sure about it at first, with the ex-offender thing. Because of Covid all the contact was over the phone to begin with and Sean wasn't engaging that well. But as soon as we met Rachel – wow – she just put us both right at ease. She's fantastic. My son has got so many professionals involved. At one point there were five different ones all having meetings with him in one week. But the only person he'll get up for is Rachel. He really gets on with her, and she's not soft with him. She'll give him a right talking to when he's out of line, but because he rates her, he'll take it to heart from her and listen.*

Rachel goes above and beyond. When Sean was arrested miles away, the police suddenly raided the house. I was so scared. Rachel came and I thought she'd just stay for a little while, but she said 'I'm not going to leave you' and she ended up with me for 8 hours. She went to court with me and when the hearing was delayed she didn't moan or say she had to go. She has time for us, she doesn't look at her watch. It makes such a difference.

Sean trusts her. Me and Sean have a good relationship and one time he told me quite a few things he was worried about. Then Rachel came and he told her everything and more. He doesn't do that with anyone else.

One of Sean's friends got groomed and sent to Scotland. When he told me about it, I started to say about why Sean shouldn't get mixed up in things like that. He said 'I'll stop you there' and he went on to explain to me everything that would happen to him and all the reasons why he wouldn't be doing the same thing. It was everything that Rachel had talked to him about and he obviously really understood and took it all on board.

The professionals and the solicitor have seen a difference in his attitude since Rachel's been working with him. And they notice that Sean is more respectful towards me too. He hasn't changed into an angel, but he has changed a huge amount for the better. He's starting college in September to do plastering. School's been rubbish for him and if it wasn't for Rachel and me, he wouldn't be going, but it's really good.

If Rachel hadn't have been here he'd be in jail for sure. Rachel's life experience really helps – he has respect for that."

Social worker of Sean: *"The young person was quite apprehensive about speaking to professionals and the only person he'll really open up to is Rachel. She's the one he most relates to and he's made disclosures to her which means that he can be helped to move forward.*

It's been really positive working with Rachel. She's very honest, straight and blunt with him and because he's so open with her, she can question him about risky things he might be considering doing – because they have a comfortable relationship. That's very difficult for us to do.

Once he'd built the relationship with Rachel, he was a lot more open with me. So the support that she gives him helps him to work with me. I worked with Rachel on another case where the mum declined social services. Rachel had a conversation with her and then the mum came around and agreed to the service. Her work really helps with relationship building.

There's nothing negative about what Rachel does. It's amazing and I one hundred per cent want it to continue. It's especially helpful for young people who are going down the pathway towards criminality. Rachel can tell them a number of stories from her own experience. That's got so much more credibility than a professional talking to them who hasn't got a clue about their lives. There's nothing else like it. She doesn't work from an office or just visit the home. She does the one to one – taking them out to talk to them. That makes a huge difference."

Building the chain of trust with other professionals and parents

The feedback from the social worker highlights the important role that the mentor is playing in providing the 'chain of trust' whereby she establishes the relationship of trust with the young person and because he sees that the mentor trusts the social worker, he is able to engage more effectively with that service. This is pivotal to the SGT approach and involves a range of professionals including teachers, support staff, social workers, YOT and even the police force, a relationship that can be particularly fraught and problematic. The ability of the mentor to develop this effective communication that puts the young person at the centre of the support is echoed by schools – *"She has also built a good relationship with staff and multi agencies that deal with pupils."*

This aspect of the mentor's work also applies to the young person's relationship with parents and carers. Where parents/carers have the best interests of their children at heart but are struggling with these relationships, the mentor is providing support, explaining the nature of exploitation and its impact on young people and suggesting strategies to help strengthen their relationships with their children. This is critical to building the family resilience necessary for sustaining the progress that young people make in moving away from the risk of exploitation.

In addition to the mother's feedback presented earlier, schools also recognise this important element of mentor support - *"Parents have provided school with positive feedback and on occasions have asked her to provide support in court. Parents have formed a good relationship with (the mentor)."*

More than a mentoring project

As highlighted, an SGT mentoring project would be expected to include a range of partnership working, largely schools focused with some parental input, often by way of group sessions with parents to increase understanding about child criminal exploitation. The pandemic and its restrictions changed the nature of this mentoring project – the project has necessarily been delivered largely in the community rather than schools and the cohort referred to the project have a higher level of need than would normally be catered for. This second point is interesting and may relate to several factors including:

- ➔ The lack of/significantly reduced availability of statutory services during the pandemic
- ➔ The new project identifying exploited young people who had not previously come to the notice of other professionals

- The introduction of a specialist service that could address the needs of these young people acting as a catalyst for referrals that schools previously struggled to find appropriate provision for

The two latter factors relate not only to SGT's specialism in child criminal exploitation, but also to the fact that the project is delivered by someone with relevant lived experience who is recognised by young people as someone they can relate to and confide in through a relationship of trust. This is highlighted by the case of one 15 year old girl who was self-harming but gained enough confidence in the mentor to disclose very serious familial exploitation which led to her being taken into care within a week. This would not have happened without the SGT project.

Whilst the project retains mentoring and awareness raising at its core, there is significant wider work being carried out, indicating unmet need in St Helens from young people heavily at risk of exploitation, or already exploited. SGT also delivers a County Lines Victim Support Service (CLVSS) across Merseyside which is open to children and young people up to the age of 25. There are indications that one or two of the mentees have county lines involvement and CLVSS would be a highly appropriate project for them to be referred to. This has not taken place to date, partly due to the fact that both SGT projects are new and have taken time to establish, and partly because transferring a case from one worker to another is a very delicate business given the all-important relationship of trust that young people build with their original mentor/caseworker.

Going forward, establishing a good cross referral pathway would be beneficial for young people who are, or who are suspected as being involved in county lines exploitation. This would help to ensure that the mentoring project is more able to maintain its core focus on awareness raising and mentoring as well as relieving some of the pressure on capacity. That said, the importance of maintaining engagement is paramount and therefore any onward referral should be carried out with the full involvement of the young person and at a time that will cause least disruption to the relationship of trust.

Now that schools are returning to more normal activity, it is important that the project is able to establish delivery on site. There will always be an element of off-site delivery which is very valuable, particularly for those young people who have minimal time at school. However, to help embed the knowledge and approach that supports young people effectively, delivery at school will enable further relationship building with school professionals for the benefit of the young people.

Schools see a positive difference

The three partner schools are highly positive about the mentoring project, despite the limitations that the pandemic imposed on the delivery of the original plan. Feedback highlighted a number of key impacts:

- **Engaging the hard to reach** - *"...our pupils have really benefited from the support that a mentor in school provides. Some of our most hard to reach pupils have received support in a safe space and there is a very low drop out rate."*

"This has been very positive with staff and parents happy for children/pupils to engage with the programme."

"We believe that St Giles trust is having a very positive impact on our young people."

- **Encouraging disclosure as the first step to tackling exploitation** - *"The pupils involved have become more open and we have received a number of disclosures as a direct result of the work the mentor has provided."*

- **Positive changes in behaviour** - *“Overall, pupils have benefited from the mentoring service. Their behaviour has improved, and they are using coping strategies to control their behaviours. One pupil who had been engaging in ASB behaviours appears to be changing his attitude towards being drawn in by peers and is trying to move away from criminal activity. This is excellent progress.”*
- **Raising awareness and understanding** – *“Pupils have gained knowledge in areas such as knife crime, gangs and are more aware of criminal exploitation.”*
“Pupils have gained skills for life and understand better how to keep safe. We consider this support to be extremely beneficial to our pupils.”
- **Improving engagement in learning** – *“When some pupils that have struggled in class and needed intervention, Rachel has been there to support. By the mentor providing support to our most vulnerable, it has helped the class to settle. Overall, pupil and parent engagement has also improved across school for pupils that have had interventions.”*

The mentor’s lived experience, highlighted as a key factor earlier in the report, it also seen as an important factor by schools in the support provided – *“Having a St Giles trust mentor with life experience has helped in supporting our vulnerable pupils who are at risk of exploitation. Her work with pupils has been invaluable. Her rapport with pupils and parents is good and pupils have engaged well.”*

The way in which the mentor has built relationships with each of the very different schools is particularly impressive given the circumstances under which the project has needed to operate. Comments from the school identify that she is *“approachable, polite and knowledgeable and this has been recognised by everyone working in the school.”*

One suggestion made by a participating school is that it would be helpful to have more written evidence of the interventions of the mentor and the positive outcomes from these to help with their requirements for Ofsted. This is a helpful suggestion, however, the pressure that the mentor is under in covering three schools and a cohort of mentees with high needs means that it could be challenging to increase the current level of record keeping. Confidentiality is also important but can be overcome through a variety of information sharing mechanisms. If this is considered, the schools could reciprocate by providing data for improved attendance, achievement, attitude etc. for mentees. This would be very helpful in terms of SGT providing further evidence of the positive impact of the project.

Supporting the wider response to tackling child criminal exploitation

Since Covid-19 prevented the delivery of group sessions to young people and school staff, a decision was taken to take a flexible approach and respond to a request from Merseyside police for some specialist input for officers, prompted by the cross force lead for child protection and vulnerability.

This proactive request resulted from a desire to *“bring lived experience in – as an alternative view, to get people to think differently. When people are stopping kids at eleven at night, they deal with what they can see, not what’s behind it. I understand why, but I wanted to raise professional curiosity.”*

The mentor and another, male, SGT facilitator with lived experience delivered 8 sessions in total to around 50-60 police offices in each session. The focus was on officers’ perceptions of young people who are exploited and how the trauma they have experienced and/or witnessed impacts on behaviour. The facilitators talked openly about their own experiences of exploitation and the criminal justice system to help inform officers’ understanding and ‘open a window’ on the realities of these young people’s lives.

The sessions were received extremely well. In the words of the lead officer, *“It went down really, really well. It was the first time we’d used lived experience and I think there’s a real place for it in preventative policing. The biggest thing was them telling it how it is.”*

The importance of this element of delivery is clear. If police officers (and other statutory and voluntary sector professionals) have an increased understanding of how exploited young people present, what to look for and how to respond, then it should be possible to identify these highly vulnerable children more easily, and, hopefully, at an earlier stage in their involvement. The challenge then is to have specialist services to which they can be referred for support. The mentoring project will be appropriate for some but is specifically for those identified in school settings. SGT’s CLVSS (now in its second phase and rebranded the County Lines Intervention Support Service) is specifically for suspected or confirmed county lines exploitation – which can involve sexual exploitation, and there are other services and projects that can meet the needs of vulnerable young people. Discussions reveal that there remains patchy knowledge of SGT projects, not least because the organisation is relatively new to Merseyside. This highlights the need for SGT, along with other agencies that do know of the projects, to ensure that professionals are aware of this specialist provision.

A continuing and growing need for the project

There is a clear wish from young people and parents for the project to continue. This is echoed by schools and statutory sector professionals so that more young people to benefit from the support and avoid being drawn into exploitation and crime:

Schools: “Due to COVID other things we would have liked to do has been impossible. We hope to use the mentor for wider school projects moving forwards. We have started to build a good relationship with the mentor and we hope that she can continue to work with us and build upon the excellent work so far. This project is still new and we want it to grow further into the next academic year.”

Merseyside police safeguarding lead: “There’s a big place for this in schools, particularly in the challenging areas. It needs to be rolled out across Merseyside. If we get the investment right for the 5-12 year olds, we could make a real impact for the generation coming up, for the next 10-20 years. It’s great now, but it needs to be expanded.”

Whilst the project has delivered a more in depth level of service to individual young people than was anticipated, it was always envisaged that one mentor would cover three schools. However, three schools is a significant challenge for one mentor to cover adequately, particularly given that two of these schools cater for pupils who are assessed as too challenging for mainstream provision and are therefore in need of a high level of support if they are to successfully engage with learning and progress.

Given the success of the project to date, and especially in view of the very difficult circumstances of establishing a new service during a time of pandemic, further funding should be found for the mentoring service to allow it to reach its full potential. The capacity should be reviewed and expanded. An additional mentor would not only enable a small increase in capacity but if they were male would be a helpful in terms of diversity of offer to young people and a range of lived experience.

A range of statutory sectors benefit from this project – local authorities, schools, the police force and the health service. The reduction and/or avoidance of public sector service requirements resulting from safeguarding, truancy, missing episodes, criminal prosecution and incarceration, and emergency medical treatment that are likely to occur or continue without the mentoring intervention point to the significant cost savings to the public purse that can result from early action. This does not even touch on the

personal, familial, community and societal benefits of facilitating young people's progress in education that leads to sustainable careers. A jointly funded solution to continuing the mentoring project would reflect its existing benefits, including cost benefits, as well as signalling St Helen's commitment to taking a public health approach to tackling the risks of exploitation for young people.