



Norfolk Safeguarding Children Partnership

Reflective Learning Review

Criminal Exploitation and Serious Youth Violence

Summer 2024

Introduction

A young person, named as Delta in this report, sadly died after being fatally stabbed. Delta was eighteen at the time. Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) statutory guidance applies to children under the age of eighteen therefore a CSPR could not be completed in these circumstances. However, Norfolk Safeguarding Children Partnership (NSCP) were keen to understand Delta's life, and the services provided to him and his family, to identify any relevant learning that may strengthen the services provided to children affected by criminal exploitation and/or Serious Youth Violence (SYV).

Process of this Reflective Learning Review

The following steps were taken to inform this review:

- Desktop analysis of the information held by multi-agency services
- Panel meetings involving multi-agency senior practice leads who reviewed and analysed the information received
- A Practitioner Event involving multi-agency practitioners who worked with Delta and his family
- A meeting with Delta's parents to gain their perspectives

Context: Criminal Exploitation and Serious Youth Violence

The review took place during a period of considerable public and political concern about the number of children dying or being seriously injured, often by other children or young adults as a result of serious youth violence. Data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS), relevant to the time when Delta sadly died, showed there were 282 deaths involving knives in the 12 months to March 2022 - this is an increase of nearly 20% on the previous year.

Responding to serious youth violence (SYV) continues to be a developing area of multi-agency work. The complex interplay of several factors that contribute to SYV and the absence of a robust national evidence base, identifying what a successful model of intervention looks like, hampers local areas in providing an informed multi-agency response.

Policy Context: In 2018 the government published a Serious Violence Strategy¹. Whilst this emphasised the importance of law enforcement this, and the subsequent 'Serious Violence

¹ Serious Violence Strategy April 2018 HMG

Duty'², emphasised that partnership work across all partners and good engagement/ involvement of communities are essential components of the SYV approach.

Governance/Inspections

The recently published Joint Area Targeted Inspection Serious Youth Violence framework guidance³ emphasises the complex and multi-faceted causes of serious youth violence and the need to focus on the individual acts of serious youth violence whilst not losing sight of the causes at a societal level such as inequality, poverty and structural racism. This guidance highlights the World Health Organisation reference to four interrelated factors that can increase the likelihood of someone being involved in violence, as victim or perpetrator:

- Individual
- Relational
- Community
- Societal

These factors will be considered when exploring a summary of the learning themes.

Young Person Delta – Multi-agency service provision

Delta and his family received a variety of multi-agency services when Delta reached adolescence. Prior to this time Delta and his family were known only to universal services. Delta first came to the attention of multi-agency early help services when he was thirteen. At this time there were concerns in school about fighting with peers and alleged use of cannabis. After being found in possession of a knife whilst at school (for which he received a fixed term exclusion) and a subsequent period of being missing from home, Delta and his family received support from the Early Help Service. The following years of Delta's school life were characterised by concerns about Delta's behaviour at school, which featured anger and violence to peers, deteriorating school attendance, a managed school move and fixed term exclusions.

Multi-agency services over Delta's adolescence included the involvement of police, the youth justice service, the early help service and children's social care. There were numerous concerns about Delta dealing drugs, being missing from home and his association with high-risk offenders. A medium risk of criminal exploitation was identified when Delta was fourteen and five months, a high risk of criminal exploitation was identified when Delta was fourteen and eleven months and a very high risk of exploitation when Delta was fifteen. A month prior to Delta's 18th birthday, the risk of exploitation was reduced to medium after Delta appeared to have settled in a relationship with his girlfriend and was working with his father. Sadly, one month later, Delta died.

Various services were provided in an attempted to safeguard Delta; these included statutory child protection services, child in need services and youth offending services. A range of interventions were attempted - Delta and his family engaged well with the practitioners involved. However, the interventions by services did not appear to materially change the risks of extra- familial harm faced by Delta.

² Statutory guidance: Serious Violence Duty Dec 2022. Updated June 2023 HMG

³ Guidance: Joint targeted area inspections of the multi-agency response to serious youth violence. September 2023 HMG

The risk of contextual harm – Serious Youth Violence

At the outset, it is important to highlight that although there has been investment by government in a range of measures to address child criminal exploitation and serious youth violence,⁴ there are no agreed national or local procedures or practice guidance to manage serious youth violence. The new Serious Violence Duty (2023) sets out expectations of local areas in taking a public health approach to tackling serious violence and the recently published Serious Youth Violence Joint Targeted Area Inspection Framework (JTAI) highlights the criteria that will be the focus of forthcoming inspections. This framework acknowledges the complex and multi-faceted causes of SYV and identifies the interplay of key causal factors.

Individual: *Chronic stress in childhood (for example, as a result of neglect, abuse, parental mental ill health or substance misuse) can, without the intervention of supportive adults, affect important aspects of development. This includes the ability to self-regulate, build effective relationships, have good mental health and recognise risk. Children may therefore be more likely to react impulsively to perceived threats.*⁵ There was no information to suggest that this chronic stress was evident in Delta's childhood. As identified in the JTAI framework and relevant CSPRs⁶ the casual pathways to violence/ being the victim of violence are complex - not all children who are the victims of, or who cause violence, have a background of abuse or neglect. As Delta's life journey suggests, this is important to consider when safeguarding children from contextual harm.

Using the Child Protection Framework : Established ways of working that attempt to mitigate contextual harm through mechanisms such as the child protection framework have been used in an attempt to safeguard children from harm outside the family. This child protection mechanism was used in this case as it has been, and continues to be, used across the country. It was an attempt to bring together the multi-agency team in a formalised process to share information, dynamically assess risk and provide a co-ordinated response. To an extent, this was achieved.

However, concerns have been raised by practitioners/services about how effective these processes are in these circumstances including the unintended consequence of families perceiving this mechanism as punitive, and goals being set that are beyond the parental sphere of influence. There was a concern that rather than strengthening families, this approach can erode parental confidence in services and in themselves and there can be a tendency to focus on the intra -familial risks at the expense of the contextual risks. This was the experience of Delta's family who spoke passionately about their experience of the child protection conferences that took place: *. It was horrendous....It was scary – as parents they felt like a major failure.*

It is important to recognise that: *Professionals and parents trying to safeguard teenagers facing harm outside of the home, are being faced by a system that was not designed for the task.*⁷ Norfolk have since recognised these issues and developed new ways of working to bring information together, assess risk and provide a co-ordinated multi-agency response in the form of Child Planning Meetings – these are a good alternative when working to

⁴ Such as: developing Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), establishing the Youth Endowment Fund, funding dedicated task forces to tackle and pursue those running county lines making funding available to support victims in emergency departments, and developing early intervention programmes in schools.

⁵ Joint targeted area inspections of the multi-agency response to serious youth violence. September 2023 HMG

⁶ NSPCC National Case Review Repository

⁷ The Case for Change: The independent review of children's social care. June 2021 DfE

safeguard children from contextual harm where there are no significant concerns about intra-familial harm.

The uniqueness of children: The importance of not regarding children affected by contextual harm/serious youth violence as a homogeneous group, i.e. who share the same life journey, has been mentioned and is expanded upon later in this report. The author and the practitioners involved experienced a compelling drive to try and find features of Delta's life journey that may provide an explanation for why Delta was so vulnerable to contextual harm. The author has concluded that aside from a disrupted school experience (discussed later), there was little that could have alerted practitioners and services to suggest Delta was vulnerable.

Regarding children affected by contextual harm/SYV as sharing similar life stories may provide a frame within which to conceptualise, manage and respond to extra-familial harm but it risks blind spots. Understanding the push and pull factors is highlighted as important, and this was identified as an area of exploration in the desk top review. As discussed later in this report, the classic push and pull factors did not appear to be evident in Delta's life story – he was not a child who faced inequalities, deprivation or poverty, he was not a child whose family home life was conflictual or without love, he had no known additional needs and experienced no known childhood trauma, loss or bereavement. Delta's story, however, reflects a vital consideration linked to adolescent development.

It appears that Delta first became vulnerable to extra-familial harm at thirteen, and possibly just before this age (after he transferred from a small rural primary school to a city secondary school). As previously discussed, it was at this time that concerns began to emerge. At this stage of adolescent development role models and peers are of central importance and a sense of self is developed primarily through social relationships. If these opportunities are not available, adolescents can become confused about their self-value and their place in life.

Research in Practice⁸ suggests that the pathways leading to a number of harms that adolescents experience are complex, not least because they often involve adolescent choices and behaviours. At times, these choices relate to the influence of specific developmental processes. For example, the adolescent stage of development involves increased risk-taking, emotional highs and lows, and sensitivity to peer influence, all underpinned by interacting social and neurobiological changes. These factors can play into a child's vulnerability to contextual harm.

The evidence we draw on in this scope, both research knowledge and practice knowledge, can and should encourage us now to re-design the system in a way that 'works with the grain' of adolescent development, takes a more nuanced approach to risk identification, has relationships at its heart, and is focused on building resilience.⁹

When reviewing the evidence in this case, and in talking to practitioners and family members, it seems reasonable to suggest that Delta's identity and sense of belonging formed in early adolescence was linked to his association with peers who posed a risk of contextual harm. Over time, in the absence of an alternative identity being formed through other routes (combined with the disruption in his school life), his identity as a child who was associated with peers/adults who used drugs/supplied drugs and were prepared to resort to

⁸ Research in Practice is a 'not-for-profit' organisation that exists to support the children and families sector, by embedding evidence-informed practice at all levels of an organisation

⁹ That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risks in adolescence. Research in Practice Dartington 2017.

violence appeared to become established, and his sensitivity to violence appeared to diminish.

Questions that arise:

- How is the uniqueness of children understood and responded to when safeguarding children from contextual harm?
- Is close attention paid to the unique impact of transitions, understanding, and working with the grain of, adolescent development?
- How might reachable moments be identified and acted upon?

Relational: As identified in a significant body of research, trusted relationships are key for older children. Psychological safety is vital to consider in equal balance to physical safety. It appeared that some trusted relationships were formed with Delta by the practitioners involved however, these relationships were characterised by inconsistency and loss and the ending of these relationships were a source of evident distress for Delta. These changes were largely due to the routine changes of practitioners from statutory services, and this is inherent in the very nature of professional involvement in the lives of children and families. But, according to Delta's parents, there were other factors that influenced the quality of these trusted relationships including; Delta's disrupted school life, promises made to Delta that were broken and the ending of relationships when Delta reached his eighteenth birthday.

Another important relational consideration, raised by practitioner and family alike, was the organisational response to when a child dies. It was clear that there were very different responses by the various organisations to news of Delta's death. These organisations/services had been intensively involved with Delta and his family shortly before Delta died. None of the practitioners were supported to be in contact with the family to express condolences and attend Delta's funeral and some were told not to maintain contact with the family. The emotional consequences of this, firstly for a family in immense grief and secondly for practitioners, needs to be understood. It is appreciated that thoughtful rationale underpinned these decisions, however, for the practitioners who were directed to have no contact with a family they knew well clearly caused distress and led to feelings of shame and regret – these feelings have remained over time and were evident at the practitioner event.

Responding to help seeking behaviour: Delta's behaviour at school was an area of concern; he was described as being involved in violent incidents/ fighting with peers, threatening to stab others and killing people 'when he became annoyed'. These behaviours escalated throughout Delta's adolescence. The author was keen to understand more about Delta's help seeking behaviour at this time and sought to understand what emotional wellbeing support was provided. Reference was made to Delta occasionally seeing a counsellor at school and of Delta's mother seeking support for Delta through a private therapist - Delta's mother has confirmed that none of this support progressed. Therefore, it seems that Delta was not in receipt of any meaningful emotional wellbeing support throughout his life.

As Delta progressed into mid- adolescence, practitioners at the learning event reported that Delta was described by his peers (who were known to the Youth Justice Service) as someone who could be extremely violent on the street and his propensity to violence was feared. His sense of being 'ruthless' and 'invincible' was emerging in sharp contrast to his family identity, where he was a loved and loving son and brother for much of the time. It is important to note that Delta's parents have reported that they were not told about the extent of Delta's alleged violence outside of the home – the reason for this is not known although a

contributory factor may have been the potential risks to peers that may have resulted from sharing this information – this is discussed later.

During his early adolescence parents described difficulties in coping with Delta's mood and anger although the extent of the behaviours seen at school, and reported by peers, was not seen at home. At home, he was described by practitioners and parents as a caring child who was kind and funny, who enjoyed cooking and attending family events.

What emerged was a picture of a child who had two very different sides to his personality with little integration of these different sides. Whilst trusted relationships were formed, these relationships did not elicit a clear picture of his lived experiences, of his emotional world, or of how psychologically or physically safe Delta felt in the world. There was a marked lack of any information about Delta's internal world, about what lay beneath his anger in his early adolescence or about what was behind his violence on the streets as he entered mid-adolescence. It was understood that Delta was being criminally exploited and the chronology of events in Delta's life illustrate the extent of this exploitation. It is reasonable to suggest that Delta was increasingly caught up in the manipulation fear and inevitable violence that follows but despite attempts by services, the trajectory of these risks was not abated.

Questions that arise:

- How is help- seeking behaviour understood and responded to early in a child's life through the provision of consistent and pro-active emotional wellbeing services?
- What services could be available in these circumstances that might achieve integration of life on the street and at home – such as community services providing mentoring/ safe spaces/ recreational activities?
- What is the extent/quality of the work in Norfolk in identifying, disrupting, challenging and holding to account adult perpetrators so that the focus is on their exploitation rather than putting the onus on the child to change their behaviours?
- How are open and frank conversations enabled with parents that allow for information, held by agencies, to be shared with parents/carers?

Community: The importance of community in representing a place of identity, belonging, and a potential source of safety, has been identified in relevant CSPRs. This includes the provision of community-based services and the need to find ways to nurture the community to support and protect their children.

There were no community services involved in supporting Delta. The reason for this is not clear although it is reasonable to suggest that this may be as a result of there being few community services available in Norfolk at this time and, as identified by practitioners, the sheer size of the county (which includes a large rural population) means that the reach of community services is restricted.

An additional area explored as part of this review was the evolution of criminal exploitation and gangs in Norfolk and an attempt to understand how this evolution may have impacted Delta when he was thirteen and for the following five years up to his sad death. It was understood that over the past 5 -10 years criminal exploitation and gangs have become established in Norfolk. Previously, whilst Norfolk was a known destination for county lines, Norfolk was not an area known for gang activity/criminal exploitation of local children and young people. Intelligence is growing about this in Norfolk - it is understood that there is increased awareness about the uniqueness of gang culture and affiliation in the local area. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that at the time Delta was the victim of exploitation, particularly during early adolescence, an informed service response was not in place. In

addition, the absence of an agreed local and national approach to address serious youth violence is an important systemic contributory factor.

Panel members discussed the evolving gang culture and criminal exploitation in Norfolk. Suggestions were made that children's gang profiles in Norfolk appeared to be characterised by frequent changes in affiliation, sometimes with immediate and extended family members being affiliated to different gangs. A panel member with extensive experience of working with children and families in the local area raised questions about how the specific experiences of children and families, who may experience fractured and reconstituted families, played a part in the emerging gang culture/affiliation and how emotional literacy/speech and language difficulties may impact.

Questions that arise:

- How is Norfolk promoting a multi-agency, community, child and family understanding of the Norfolk picture in relation to gangs and criminal exploitation?
- Is there a collective multi-agency understanding of how gangs and criminal exploitation has manifested in Norfolk - evolution to current stage ?
- Is there a clear understanding of how gangs organise themselves in Norfolk and what steps are being taken to disrupt?
- What is the role of social media, and children self educating on how gangs work, influencing the evolution in Norfolk ? What steps are being taken to mitigate the impact ?
- Is it understood what 'success' looks like for a gang member – formation of street identity and success according to gang culture – how does this correlate with adolescent development and what might be done to divert children from being drawn into gang culture?
- Based on an understanding of the evolution of gang culture in Norfolk over past 5 - 10 years is it possible to predict how it will continue to evolve and take action to mitigate ?
- How is Norfolk learning from the experience of other areas in finding ways to nurture place/community and promote this as a responsibility that stretches across multiple services and communities ?
- How is a child's vulnerability to gang affiliation and exploitation understood by considering Norfolk's specific demographics and family networks ?

Societal: It is well established that the impact of inequalities are important to consider for children vulnerable to serious youth violence. Data¹⁰ suggests that some groups of children are disproportionately at risk: *These include children from Black, Asian and ethnic minority groups, children with special educational needs and/or disabilities, looked after children and children who are eligible for free school meals. Some of these issues are likely to be linked to issues of poverty.*¹¹ Whilst these issues are undoubtedly relevant to children and young people in Norfolk, Delta's life journey illustrates that none of these factors were present – Delta was a white British child, he lived in a stable family unit in a well-resourced home in an area of relative affluence. The view of panel members was that this was an important issue that may play into unconscious biases about how vulnerability to contextual risks is identified and understood.

A societal factor that was raised and discussed at the practitioner event related to how masculinity is expressed and valued in current society. There was nothing to suggest this

¹⁰ Such as the Youth Endowment Fund

¹¹ Joint targeted area inspections of the multi-agency response to serious youth violence. September 2023 HMG

was an issue in Delta's life, however, as this is not something that is identified or worked with by services (i.e. understanding a child's sense of their masculine identity and what it means to them) it is not routinely known about. Literature and research¹² about gang affiliation/ gang membership has identified this link exploring 'Gang membership: a crisis of masculinity?' and a relevant thematic CSPR¹³ has raised this as an important area requiring attention:

A further area discussed by panel members, practitioners and parents was how masculinity is viewed in current society. Social movements¹⁴ over recent years have highlighted the power of men over women and the harm that can be perpetrated by men and the term 'toxic masculinity' has gained traction. Whilst the purpose and intentions of these movements are not in any way disputed, the question of how young men interpret this in terms of their own identity was raised: How do young men learn to embrace their masculinity in a healthy way and not be constrained by traditional societal constructs about how men should behave – such as:

- *A man should suffer physical and emotional pain in silence.*
- *A man shouldn't seek warmth, comfort, or tenderness.*
- *A man should only have the emotions of bravery and anger. Any other emotions are weaknesses. Weakness is unacceptable.*
- *A man shouldn't depend on anyone. Asking for help is also weak.¹⁵*

Questions that arise

- How are societal issues relating to increased vulnerability of children to contextual harm addressed in Norfolk ?
- How might practitioner skills be cultivated to understand contextual harm within a wider demographic framework ?
- What work is in place to promote positive masculine identity ?

Learning from Delta's family

The experience of Delta's parent's in relation to the child protection process has already been discussed, the following section highlights additional important learning from a family who has had lived experience of the multi-agency response to contextual harm.

The importance of supporting parents/carers to safeguard their child

Delta's parents spoke about the need to support families to process feelings of shame, stigma, fear and intimidation and how this impacts the emotional wellbeing of the whole family. This has been highlighted by parents in relevant CSPRs relating to contextual harm. Viewing the child and family through a lens focussed on care kindness and a holistic family approach that equips families to contend with the very real practical stresses of trying to safeguard a child who is being exploited; including periods of their child being missing, the multiple expectations and tasks set by agencies, the involvement of statutory services in family life and the inevitable emotional costs of all these aspects requires close attention and support. Whilst there were practitioners who provided elements of this support, such as the family support worker, there is a need to place greater focus on this support across agencies

¹² Such as: *Squashing the Beef: Combatting Gang Violence and Reforming Masculinity in East London* Gary Armstrong and James Rosbrook-Thompson Academy of Social Sciences Routledge 2017

¹³ Croydon Safeguarding Children's Partnership: Thematic CSPR Serious Youth Violence 2024

¹⁴ Such as: the #Metoo Movement

¹⁵ Psychology Today <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/talking-sex-and-relationships/202103/what-is-toxic-masculinity>

with particular reference to a family's experience of statutory processes involving the police and Children's Social Care. Particular areas highlighted by Delta's parent included the need to:

- Pay attention to how current processes could provide better care and containment for parents who are learning new information about the extent of danger their child is in.
- Provide as much information as possible about a child's behaviour to enable parents to hold the full picture about their child so that informed decisions can be made about care and risk management.
- Provide better opportunities for professionals to be held to account when they are not demonstrating commitment to the relationships they have built – improve communication with families to manage expectations and disappointments :*Do what you say you're going to do.*
- Recognise the impact of intrusive interventions on all family members such as police searches of the family home – be human and recognise that for exploited children home can often be their only safe space – take a child first approach.
- Focus on the importance of education/schools as key in keeping children engaged and safe and support children who are struggling in school/out of school. Keep promises about supporting a child to access opportunities to learn vocational skills in line with their wishes and, if an activity/course is promised, be confident that this can be provided: keep to your word and support attendance. Making a commitment to a child as an incentive and then letting them down when the child has achieved what has been asked (as Delta experienced) can lead to a lack of trust in practitioners and their vision of a different future can be scarred.
- Whilst the complications of imposing restrictive interventions (such as tags and curfews) are understood, consider these for each child. Recognise and promote the benefits of restrictive interventions i.e. tags/orders, according to each child's circumstances, to allow the child some 'breathing space', allowing them the opportunity to say no to peers and as a deterrent from their exploiters. This empowers parents to say no/impose curfews as they are supported by court and enables them to bring their child back into the family.
- Provide training/education to families about criminal exploitation, adolescent development and the impact of substance misuse on the adolescent brain.

Suggested learning includes the need to consider the findings from this report against the following themes:

Trauma informed leadership and compassionate endings

- Consider the implications for relationship-based practice, i.e. thinking about how 'real' relationships work, the meaning of the relationship/attachment between child and practitioner/family and practitioner and managing endings.
- Pay attention to transitions at all stages of life – such as childhood to adolescence – primary to secondary school

- Evolve the cultural response to how young people are supported into adulthood from age 18 and saying goodbye/withdrawing services.
- Strengthen trauma informed leadership and compassionate endings with families by supporting staff and their response to families after a child has died.

Understanding the adolescent brain and the importance of identity and belonging

- Strengthen an understanding across agencies of adolescent development/providing services that 'go with the grain' of this stage of life – the importance of promoting a positive sense of identity and belonging.
- Understand the difference between normal adolescent behaviour and help seeking behaviour – address the root causes of 'challenging behaviour'/ the unmet emotional needs that may lie beneath (such as anger).

Working with families with children exposed to extra-familial harm: exploitation & SYV

- Develop an approach to working with families whose children are vulnerable to/are experiencing contextual risks based on a child first approach that places families at the centre
- Consider a developing a contextual harm practice framework to encompass the learning from this review and the principles outlined by Delta's family about the support they needed

Understanding the evolution of gang culture within Norfolk

- Consider how data, performance intelligence and local knowledge can be harnessed effectively to understand emerging trends, young people's understanding of gang culture and what can be done to develop early help and prevention strategies.

Recommendation: The NSCP's Vulnerable Adolescent Group consider the questions arising and the thematic learning from this review and develop an action plan for the statutory partners to endorse.