IMPROVING THE HOPE OF YOUNG PEOPLE IMPACTED BY SERIOUS VIOLENCE AND CHILD CRIMINAL EXPLOITATION

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INTRODUCTION

In Spring 2023, The Children's Society's Newcastle team commissioned Northumbria University to conduct an evaluation of their SCARPA (Safeguarding Children at Risk – Prevention and Action) service. The Children's Society's SCARPA service works across the whole of the North East region, supporting children and young people aged 10-18 who go missing and/or are at risk of or are victims of exploitation. This includes both child sexual exploitation (CSE) and child criminal exploitation (CCE). Children and young people who experience exploitation are at high risk of harm, including becoming victims and/or perpetrators of serious youth violence (SYV). They may also be at risk of human trafficking. Consequently, exploited young people should also be considered alongside modern slavery in line with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. Recognising this, SCARPA provides targeted, non-time limited, one-to-one support to young people to identify their underlying needs, the risks that they face due to exploitation, promote their welfare and wellbeing, and support them to feel safer. The primary purpose of this evaluation was to understand the effectiveness of the SCARPA service's current practice in supporting young people affected by SYV and CCE. The four specific aims agreed with SCARPA were as follows:

1. **To develop a greater understanding of the changing picture of SYV/CCE in Newcastle and the North East of England.**
2. **To evaluate the principles, approaches, models, and methods used by The Children's Society's SCARPA service to engage with young people affected by SYV/CCE.**
3. **To assess the impact of the work of The Children's Society's SCARPA service on young people, families, communities, and services.**
4. **To establish broader practice lessons about supporting young people affected by serious violence (practice standards in the North East).**

This project was developed to compliment the Youth Justice Board (YJB) '*Pathfinder Serious Youth Violence and First Time Entrants to the Youth Justice Service in Newcastle upon Tyne, 2022*' research, which involved analysis of a large aggregation of data from across statutory agencies in the Newcastle-upon-Tyne local authority area, as well as interviews with practitioners from third sector and statutory agencies and young people involved with Youth Justice (focusing on first time entrants and those involved in serious youth violence). Further information on the Pathfinder project can be found on the YJB Resource Hub. Building upon this previous work, the findings in the present report are more discretely focused on the work of SCARPA but are contextualised against this wider learning.

METHODOLOGY

The study combined a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods, including:

- A review of the existing academic literature and government reports aligned to the areas of SYV, CCE, and effective interventions.
- Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders (7 respondents). This includes three SCARPA staff, a national safeguarding lead, two children's social care workers, and a representative from the SCARPA project's funder. Quotes from these respondents are recorded as "stakeholder" to ensure the anonymity of all research participants given the low number of respondents. Focus here was on interviewing those central to the SCARPA project or not already captured during interviews as part of the Pathfinder project.
- Interviews with a small number of young people who had been victims of CCE (4 respondents), which was in line with SCARPA's (CCE) caseload at the time of the research. While efforts were made to interview more young people, due to their often-complex lives this was not possible.
- Analysis of SCARPA service data and case files relating to 27 young people who were referred into the service from 2020-23.

It is acknowledged that the findings presented here are drawn from a comparatively small number of young people accessing SCARPA and stakeholders and therefore cannot be generalised to the wider geographical area in isolation. However, these findings provide a rich and in-depth insight into the lives of some of the most vulnerable and marginalised young people across the region; a population known to be less likely to engage with services. When contextualised against the Pathfinder research, these findings provide for a more comprehensive understanding of SYV and CCE in the North East region.

FINDINGS

This section presents an overview of the main findings in relation to the four agreed research aims. These findings draw upon data from the interviews with young people, stakeholders, and the service data/case file analysis. An asterisk* is included next to findings that are contextualised/supported by the *YJB Pathfinder* project.

Understanding the changing picture of SYV/CCE in Newcastle and the North East of England.

- The wider evidence suggests that the level, frequency, and severity of SYV in Newcastle-upon-Tyne appears lower than in other metropolitan areas.* However, mirroring findings from other cities (Gray, Smithson and Jump, 2021), interviews with stakeholders and young people interviewed as part of the SCARPA research and Pathfinder project suggest that the picture of SYV and CCE in Newcastle and the North East may be evolving, with levels of SYV increasing.

> *"When I was a 'kid' I don't think it was like this. But now I feel like the youngers are getting crazier and crazier every day... I feel like, I don't know what's going on with them, but now this place is gonna be like London. Because I can see what's happening. Every time I come in town, there's police everywhere. I come in town just with my friend to go play pool or to go for a drink, there's police everywhere. You see gang members everywhere. You see what's going on"*
>
> – Young Person 2.

- Nonetheless, stakeholder perceptions were that the picture of SYV and CCE in Newcastle and the North East remains somewhat distinct when compared to other core cities in the UK. Indeed, wider evidence suggests that gang networks may be less organised and more 'fractured', and that drug distribution may be more localised in Newcastle and the North East than in other cities and regions.*

> *Newcastle is different in terms of county lines – drugs may be being transported, and young people exploited, but sometimes just across Newcastle rather than to different areas of the county. The scene is more localised"*
>
> – Stakeholder 1.

- Interviews with both stakeholders and young people suggest that knife and/or weapon carrying amongst young people across the region is a key issue which is increasingly commonplace. However, many young people carrying knives and/or weapons have no intention to use these, but rather carry them for a sense of protection.* When violence does erupt, our findings from this study and the Pathfinder project suggest that most violence is instrumental. For young people who are being criminally exploited, violence is commonly associated with the high-risk situations in which they have been placed by their exploiters, and for many others it appears that there is often a pressure to engage in acts of violence to gain or maintain territory, status, respect and belonging within 'gangs' (Nayak, 2006; Pickering, Kintrea and Bannister, 2011).

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"Obviously I can't let people walk all over me, innit? So, if I let someone ruin my reputation I'm going to look like an idiot, then everyone's going to try and do it [...] you need to take care of yourself, you need to be smart. Even if police ... don't know, you have to learn yourself how to fight, how to protect yourself"

– Young Person 2.

- Interviews with stakeholders and young people supported by SCARPA further suggest that, while young people are often exploited at the hands of adults, exploitation can and does also take place between young people, particularly in the confines of the 'gang' environment and the hierarchical relationship between 'youngers' and 'olders'. This highlights the need to be mindful of the victim-offender dichotomy that is often used to frame crime and serious violence (Marshall, 2023), and the need instead to recognise that young people involved in SYV and CCE may simultaneously be both.
- This research supports broader national research by highlighting that the issues which feed into young people's involvement in SYV and CCE are multiple and complex and often deep-rooted in broader structural harms (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2022; Densley, Deuchar, and Harding, 2020). Young people are often highly vulnerable and experience a combination of factors including poverty, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), mental illness, learning difficulties, school exclusions, bullying, hate crimes, and discrimination (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2019; HM Government, 2018; Hobart, 2018; Home Office, 2023). Newcastle and the North East of England have some of the highest levels of child poverty, looked after children, and permanently excluded pupils in the country, resulting in many children being particularly vulnerable to exploitation.* A review of SCARPA case files found that 22 of the 27 young people referred to the service were involved with children's social care (CSC), one with adult social care, and one with adult safeguarding. Our research suggests that these young people can feel a strong sense of not 'mattering' (see also Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, 2021) and may seek a sense of belonging through 'gangs'. Of the 27 young people referred to the service, 24 engaged, and 22 of these 24 young people went on to explore issues around identity and belonging as part of their work with SCARPA.

"I mean nobody knows that they're being exploited at the point at which it starts. That's not what young people think is happening. It's not what young people are experiencing at the beginning. They're experiencing being given opportunities, a sense of belonging, friendship, community"

– Stakeholder 7.

"Organised crime or gangs are giving them somewhere to feel like they belong, that sense of family that they are not getting at home"

– Stakeholder 4.

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- Comparatively little is known about the digital lives of many vulnerable young people, however, supporting wider research (All-party Parliamentary Group on Knife Crime, 2019; Brooks et al., 2019; Storrod and Densley, 2017), our findings suggest that social media acts as both a source of recruitment into CCE and 'gang' activities and a catalyst for SYV across the city.* This was a key theme in interviews and was also reflected in a recent high profile murder case in the city.

- For many young people and 'gangs', the image and reputation that they create and portray on the 'digital street' is seen to be as meaningful and important as in the physical world or 'concrete street' (Irwin-Rogers, Densley, and Pinkney, 2018). In addition to a potential source of recruitment, then, the internet and social media platforms often act as 'convergence spaces' (Henry and Mullings-Lawrence, 2017) through which old conflicts are intensified and new ones are generated.*

"Online is huge for the young people. They use the word clout a lot. And they say that people challenge them online for clout... sometimes this can lead to direct conflict in the real world".

– Stakeholder 2.

The Children's Society's SCARPA service's approach to engaging with young people affected by SYV/CCE.

Interviews with stakeholders and young people conducted as part of this evaluation, alongside SCARPA service data, identified the following key features of The Children's Society's SCARPA service's approach:

- The Children's Society's SCARPA service has a distinctive approach to case management which is not defined by the legal definition of the age of a child (under 18) and will instead ensure appropriate support is in place, which is flexible, and needs-driven, as young people transition to adulthood.
- By putting the young person at the centre of the service provision and encouraging their active participation and collaboration to agree the purpose and focus of their relationship with service staff, SCARPA adopt an approach which broadly aligns with 'child first' principles (YJB, 2022). At the same time, SCARPA also recognise that the young people they work with have often experienced and endured things that many adults will never experience, and that to view them simply as 'a child' is in danger of misunderstanding them and the environments they live and operate within. SCARPA seeks to empower young people by giving them choices regarding where and when they want to engage, what activities they'd like to do, what they'd like to discuss, and what goals they want to set. Crucially, young people are given autonomy as to if/when they want to make a disclosure that SCARPA would act upon. This is vital to restore some of the control young people have lost through their exploitation, and to reduce some of young people's fears of engaging with professionals.

"Ultimately, it's up to young people what areas they want to focus on and where they want to meet – somewhere they feel they can speak freely. They jointly decide on goals and when they are ready to finish... It is quite unique in being very value-led and young people led... we don't see this approach in all agencies... Both young people and practitioners work together to set goals"

– Stakeholder 3.

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- Furthermore, without negating the harm young people or their actions may have caused, SCARPA aim to avoid the 'offenderisation' or 'adultification' of young people who may be in situations beyond their control (Marshall, 2023). Analysis of the case file data identified that less than half of the young people referred to the service are involved with youth justice (13 of 27 young people). This raises questions as to the extent to which the activity and the environment the young people are operating in is being identified and responded to.

- SCARPA recognises that rigid timeframes are often counterproductive and will work with young people for as long as they jointly agree is necessary. This is particularly important for those young people who have experienced ACE and CCE. This approach is in contrast with findings from many of the Pathfinder interviews, where the organisational priorities and age of the young person had often shaped the nature and duration of the intervention provided.*

- SCARPA's approach to case management is built on respect and trust. Young people in interviews referred to the value they placed upon the relationship with the individual case manager. Key to SCARPA's ability to build trusting relationships with young people is transparency, consistency, flexibility, and high levels of contact, in addition to the skill of the practitioner in engaging and listening to young people. The impact of this is evidenced through the outcome data discussed below.

> *"She listens to me, and never interrupts. I feel like I can tell her anything, I 100% trust her... She's helped me a lot"*
>
> – Young person 3.

The impact of the work of The Children's Society's SCARPA service on young people, families, communities, and services.

The evidence collected for the purposes of this report including case file data and interviews with stakeholders and young people, shows a range of positive impacts on the lives of young people, their families and wider services.

- The Children's Society's SCARPA service engage young people who usually might be reluctant to make contact with professionals/services. Of the 27 young people referred into SCARPA, 24 engaged (89%) with an average length of engagement of 330 days. One third (9) of young people were referred by peers. This is testament to the credibility and trust young people have in SCARPA and demonstrates their ability to reach young people who may not have engaged with or been identified by other services and practitioners (both statutory and third sector).*

> *"Some of these young people are ones who have declined to work with other services... It's not that they don't want to engage with services, they are just fearful, there are a lot of barriers, they are often experiencing physical/sexual harm, they are being trafficked, there's threats not just to them but to their family members, people they care about, they are fearful of what will happen if they do share information"*
>
> – Stakeholder 2.

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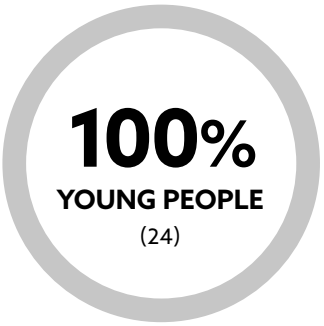
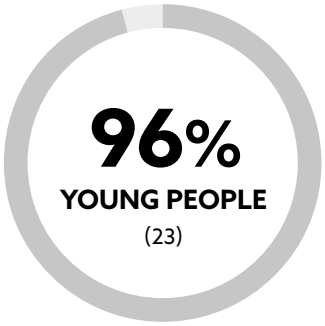
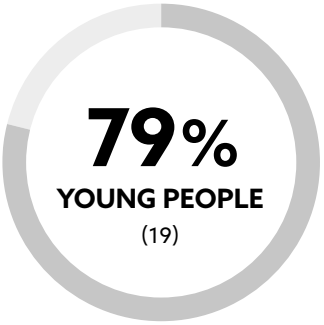
- Engaging with SCARPA helps to keep young people safe through targeted work where, working at a pace and using methods suited to the individual young person, they gradually help them become aware of the grooming and exploitation they have experienced. This knowledge serves to empower young people to make safer choices. For example, case file outcome data shows that 11 of the 24 young people supported by SCARPA have reduced their weapon carrying since engaging with the service. SCARPA work with young people to understand the 'triggers' and the 'risks' that they face, and to develop a way of living that reduces both. They are not idealistic in their approach that these will be completely removed, but rather view that each small step is a step towards risk reduction and that, over time, there will be a cumulative effect. Outcome data for those 24 young people who have engaged with the service shows that following engagement with SCARPA:



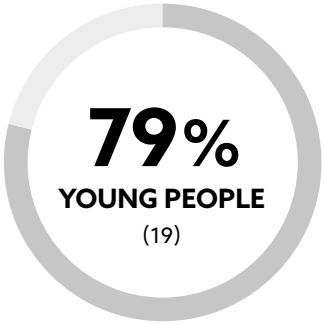
REPORTED GREATER AWARENESS OF GROOMING/ EXPLOITATION AND THEIR OWN RISK AND SAFETY PLANNING



IDENTIFIED MORE POSITIVE STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING EMOTIONS



REDUCED SUBSTANCE MISUSE/ARE USING HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES



HAVE IMPROVED CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES

- SCARPA also supports the families of young people impacted by CCE and SYV. This involves providing practical assistance (for example, support in accessing hardship funds and housing, assistance in navigating the criminal justice system and referrals for parents struggling with the asylum-seeking process) that can relieve some of the pressures that families face, as well as mediation work between young people and their families. Two-thirds (16) of young people report improved family relationships following their engagement with SCARPA, which the evidence shows can work as a protective factor against greater involvement in 'gangs' and SYV (Brooks et al., 2019).

- SCARPA assists wider services by encouraging young people to be more open to trusting and confiding in other professionals. Furthermore, where necessary to safeguard a young person, SCARPA will share information provided by young people with other services to aid in risk management planning.

> *"In their work they've done a little bit of work around what my role is, and this has opened the door for them to speak a bit more with me, they are willing to spend a bit more time with me... I think having that trusted person say you know they are ok you can speak to them, it's really helpful"*
>
> – Stakeholder 4.

Broader practice lessons about supporting young people affected by serious violence (practice standards in the North East)

The wider evidence demonstrates that it is vital that a coherent safeguarding approach is taken by the many agencies that work with young people who are impacted by SYV and CCE which recognises the significant levels of harm, exploitation, grooming, and trauma they have experienced.* Supporting this, the current research shows that:

- Young people should be treated with respect, with the avoidance of victim-blaming language (which is something that SCARPA strongly advocates for). There is evidence of an enduring 'adultification bias' being present across some other frontline agencies in the North-East, where young males are criminalised for their involvement in situations that are beyond their control.*

> *"Trying to arrest your way out of it, you won't learn anything, it won't help society putting them in prison, it won't help them, because someone else will just come along and take their place"*
>
> – Stakeholder 1.

- Organisations working with young victims of CCE need to have a collective commitment to the governance of information sharing.* One of the key principles that SCARPA adopt in their work with young people is to be transparent around how and when their information will be shared. However, these quality standards are not always replicated across the sector. This acts as a barrier to greater sharing of information and collaborative working in this area.
- The contribution of the voluntary sector to tackling issues of SYV and CCE should not be underestimated. Substantial real-terms cuts to funding, as well as increasing managerialism and bureaucracy, have limited the extent to which statutory services can undertake the detailed case management work that is vital to supporting exploited young people.* As the work of SCARPA demonstrates, third sector organisations often have greater flexibility to work in more creative ways and can therefore build levels of trust and credibility with young victims of CCE that might not be achievable for many statutory agencies.

> *"They're (SCARPA) a great resource to have with the young people, especially as social workers are sometimes seen as the enemy... you've got a lot more time to build up really good relationships with them and the children and young people feel a lot more confident and comfortable sharing with them"*
>
> – Stakeholder 4.

- It is essential that interventions to tackle CCE and SYV are not time limited, and are evidence-informed, and monitored for their effectiveness.* When working with young people who may have faced years of grooming, exploitation, and trauma, there is no easy or quick fix. Priority should be given to the co-production of knowledge between stakeholders and young people as to the interventions that are most helpful in tackling the root causes of young people's exploitation.

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CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

SYV and CCE are of huge national concern. While the criminal exploitation of children is nothing new, a rapidly changing drug market, together with austerity, cuts to public services and a cost-of-living crisis have created a 'perfect storm', with a growing pool of extremely vulnerable young people who are being targeted for exploitation (Disley and Liddle, 2016; HM Government, 2018). This research, while limited in the number of respondents, has provided insight into the local drivers of SYV and CCE in Newcastle and the Northeast of England. It indicates that the work of The Children's Society's SCARPA service has considerable impact on the lives of the small number of young people it supports, reaching those that might otherwise not engage with services, building trusting relationships and empowering young people with the knowledge needed to make safer choices, where they are able to. From this research follows a number of recommendations for SCARPA and implications for broader regional practice:

RECOMMENDATION 1:

The SCARPA service should explore how they can expand the breadth of their intervention without losing quality.

Despite the positive impact on individual young people, their peers and families, the small scale, targeted work carried out by SCARPA is currently unable to address the sheer scale of the issues surrounding CCE and SYV in the North East region.* To work with larger numbers of young people would prevent SCARPA from carrying out the time-intensive, needs-directed work that is essential for young people who have faced years of grooming, exploitation, and trauma unless there was considerable further investment in staffing and resources.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

The sustainability of the SCARPA service should be examined, in particular there should be long-term planning and resourcing around the case manager role.

The differing positions of the SCARPA case manager and young people they support challenge the assumption that a successful mentor-mentee relationship requires a shared background. Instead, SCARPA's key to building relationships is transparency, consistency, flexibility, and high levels of contact in addition to the skill of the practitioner in engaging and listening to young people. Indeed, interviews with young people showed how much they valued their relationship with the individual case manager. This does, however, raise concerns over how central the individual practitioner might be to the success of the service, especially as there is currently only one case manager conducting this work with young people who are victims of CCE.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

The SCARPA service should explore how they might further assist young people to access opportunities upon which to build a pro-social identity and a sense of 'hope' for the future.

The young people interviewed by researchers explained how, since working with SCARPA, they had become more sceptical about the value of being part of 'gangs', selling drugs, and carrying weapons, as evidenced in the outcome data discussed above. However, what would form the basis of their identity instead of these activities was less clear. To support long-term change, it is crucial that young people can find legitimate opportunities upon which to base a pro-social identity and sense of hope for the future (Rumgay, 2004; Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph, 2002). While the case manager explores education and employment opportunities with every young person engaged with SCARPA, there are often a range of wider personal and/or structural factors which act as significant barriers including, but not limited to, immigration status and criminal records. Other organisations specially focused on helping young people to access employment, training and education might be better placed to help young people identify these opportunities. However, given that young people interviewed expressed only wanting to engage with the SCARPA service, this might be an area SCARPA could consider developing further.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Agencies working with young victims of CCE need to take a coherent 'Child First'/'Friendly' approach which aims to safeguard these young people from further harm.

This recommendation is probably the most challenging and beyond the direct reach of the SCARPA service in isolation. Until all agencies adopt an approach that recognises the vulnerability and victimisation that many young people involved in SYV have experienced, the sector will continue to be challenged. This necessitates a collective understanding of and a sector-wide implementation of 'Child First' principles which, while ensuring the appropriate safeguarding measures, needs to reflect the very adult lifestyle and environment these young people have experienced.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Multi-agency forums where information is shared need to be tightly governed and led by those who prioritise the safeguarding of young people who have been exploited.

To reduce risks of further harm, there is a need for a clear shared operating model to be used across services and with all young people who have been affected by SYV and CCE, which refrains from the criminalisation and adultification of young people and is informed by contextual risks. Further understanding is needed of the wider contextual risks facing young people in both the 'digital' and 'concrete' streets.

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Interventions in the areas of SYV and CCE should be evidence-informed, monitored for their effectiveness, and driven by the needs of young people.

The evidence collected for this research (including service outcome data) suggests the model that SCARPA have developed and crafted is having a positive impact on the lives of the small number of young people supported thus far. While success in this area is often defined in relation to short term 'primary' desistance measures (cessation of offending behaviour), agencies should consider wider indicators that monitor intermediate measures of progress which can help young people to move towards deeper and more personal changes. Collaborative participation with young people impacted by CCE and SYV should be encouraged to define these measures of positive change.

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