

Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation: Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council

Area: Blackburn with Darwen

Date published: 4 February 2013

Reference: 130037

Brief description

Engage is a co-located multi-agency specialist team set up by Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council and Lancashire Constabulary's Eastern Division to deal with child sexual exploitation (CSE).

Overview – the provider's message

'Lessons from history and current practice tell us that the only effective way of identifying and supporting victims and prosecuting offenders is to do so in partnership'.

Nick McPartlan, Team Manager, Engage Team

The good practice in detail

Background

In 2005, *Operation Engage*, a police-led initiative of one officer and one social worker, was set in motion to consider why Lancashire Constabularies Eastern Division had the highest number of children being reported as missing from home in the county.

Over many months, *Operation Engage* built up a relationship with those children who were repeatedly reported as being missing. During this interaction, they formed a relationship of trust and the children began to feel more comfortable speaking to them. Anecdotal evidence linking missing children to violence, crime and sexual abuse being perpetrated against them by adults was garnered from the children who described previously unreported multiple rapes, physical violence, substance abuse and poor home circumstances. Their interpretation of what constituted a normal boyfriend/girlfriend relationship had become skewed to such an extent that they thought the crimes being perpetrated against them were normal. The grooming process they had undergone changed their behaviour leading them to rebel against their family, which was then reported as a 'missing from home' statistic. The crimes against them remained unreported and uninvestigated.

Between 2005 and 2007, just six cases exhibiting CSE features were investigated, with only one progressing through to charges being brought against the perpetrator.

The development of the team

The *Engage* team was launched in March 2008 by the Blackburn with Darwen Safeguarding Children Board as a multi-agency response to CSE.

Engage actively works to free children and families from sexual exploitation in a non-judgemental way, supporting children and families to develop their full potential in safe environments. Through effective partnerships, the team reduces children and families’ vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation by preventing involvement, protecting victims and prosecuting offenders.

The team is based in a non-threatening, non-statutory community centre. The multi-agency co-location approach allows immediate and effective information sharing of specialist information that is held by each organisation.

The team consists of:

- five staff from the Council; the team manager, administration staff, and young person’s workers
- a Detective Sergeant, three Detective Constables and a Missing From Home coordinator from Lancashire Constabulary
- a Specialist Nurse from the Primary Care Trust
- a Parenting Support Worker from CROP.

The work

The interface with children and their families is done by specialist CSE workers building on best practice from voluntary sector approaches which are significantly different to approaches used by the Police and social workers.



The *Engage* team works to a robust multi-agency safeguarding model that promotes the empowerment of children and families against the need to prevent and protect children from sexual exploitation.

Some current features of the work include working and engaging with boys; ensuring robust services are in place to respond to children aged 16 and over; and working from premises that are not easily identifiable as statutory buildings.

The intention of *Engage* is that support is empowering and sensitive to individual family circumstances. The model builds upon the existing continuum of need response within Blackburn with Darwen Children’s Services and demonstrates the multi-agency response in relation to **prevention, protection and prosecution**. Statutory involvement from children’s services is drawn on as and when required. A child is only subject to a child protection plan if it is determined that the parents have failed to protect the child from harm.



Specific training for a wide range of professionals, foster carers and young people in schools takes place on a regular basis to raise awareness.

There are no CSE-specific national key performance indicators. Partnerships are able to establish their own set of criteria and values. Engage has developed its own which identify that since 2008:

- 1500 children have been supported by the *Engage* team
- a total of 500 years in custodial sentences have been served by offenders
- the current conviction rate for the team stands at 98%.

Engage strives to ensure that children and families lead and contribute to the team's overall aim. Parents and carers, children and young people have designed, supported and launched team events and assisted in the interviewing of staff. Young people have contributed to and participated in local and national events to raise awareness of CSE.

Working closely with local and national media, *Engage* contributes to the understanding of the national picture of CSE and works towards dispelling the associated myths.



Provider background

[Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council](#) is an unitary authority formed in 1998. The council serves 147,500 people and was named council of the year in 2002.

The *Engage* team includes:



Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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