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Implementation of Multi-agency Safeguarding Arrangements Regarding Exploitation of Young People: Aligning Policy and Practice Using Normalisation Processing Theory

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Abstract

Multi-agency working has long been advocated for within safeguarding (how we promote an individual's welfare and keep them safe from harm) and is particularly advantageous when responding to risks of child criminal exploitation. In the United Kingdom (UK), despite a commitment from government policy and a consensus on the ground, there remain substantial challenges in implementing this policy into practice. This paper attempts to explore the relationship between policy and practice, with a focus on how certain factors facilitate effective multi-agency working. The study utilised data from 23 qualitative interviews from professionals and practitioners working with young people across local safeguarding partnerships, from different sectors, within one local authority area based in the UK. It sought to apply a theoretical analysis of how specific mechanisms enable the embedding of new practice. Findings suggest that a number of factors can support effective multi-agency working, including congruence in strategy to operational activity, proactive, passionate, and productive leaders, and effective partnerships, underpinned by a culture of inclusion and challenge. Normalisation Processing Theory highlighted these factors related to the process of cognitive participation, an essential component in initiating and enacting partnership working and embedding a multi-agency approach. These findings can be considered when seeking to implement existing and future multi-agency policy to safeguard young people, to ensure that the realities of the nuances involved in implementation are considered. Whilst there is a wealth of research surrounding multi-agency working, there is less specifically on embedding multi-agency working into practice and the theory underpinning this.

Keywords Young people · Multi-agency safeguarding · Normalisation processing · Collaboration

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

Introduction

Internationally, there is a general consensus that multi-agency collaboration is a necessary way of working with groups of people with complex needs (Solomon 2019), and within complex systems (Dixon et al. 2022) including the safeguarding of young people. Research carried out by Humphreys et al. (2018) in Australia focussed on community organisations involved in domestic abuse and statutory child protection agencies working together and noted that “a group of factors need to be aligned strongly enough to enable successful collaboration” (Humphreys et al. 2018 p171). Similarly, focussing on multi-agency safeguarding, partnership working is noted to not be an “exclusive United Kingdom (UK) phenomenon” (Dudau et al. 2016, p1538). Bregua (2018) conducted a study relating to multi-agency working within eight countries in South-East Europe and asserts that despite best efforts and regional variation, “all countries face considerable challenges in ensuring that multi-agency working as envisaged is translated into action” (2018, p120). In England (UK), there is a well-established commitment to multi-agency working at government strategic level through various policy documents (Home Office 2014; Department for Education 2011, 2023; Ofsted 2018) and relevant policy will be discussed within this article to provide a summary of the legal obligations regarding safeguarding. Whilst few would disagree that multi-agency working is a crucial element of safeguarding children and young people and despite a plethora of policy and guidance, there are persistent challenges to maintaining an effective, inclusive, and sustainable multi-agency safeguarding response in relation to supporting young people. This article will discuss Normalisation Processing Theory (NPT) to understand what can be learned in terms of understanding *how* safeguarding policy can be embedded into practice.

The UK Home Office (2014) produced a report focussing on effective multi-agency working and found that barriers included misunderstandings around what information could be shared, the inclusion of adults in multi-agency safeguarding, cultural barriers with a focus on structural processes, underdeveloped assessment of performances, issues with risk thresholds (such as the threshold criteria which must be reached to be provided with a statutory safeguarding response), challenges around resources, a lack of co-terminus or aligned boundaries which apply to different organisations, and a lack of clarity around accountability. A report from the Australian Institute of Family Studies identifies two different types of barriers to effective collaboration (Price-Robertson et al. 2020). Firstly, there are system-level barriers which include inadequate resources, different conceptual frameworks, aims and practices, different confidentiality policies and practices, and a lack of organisational support. Secondly, there are also practitioner-level barriers which include mutual lack of understanding, lack of clarity about when and how to collaborate, and ineffective communication. They suggest that there is a need to understand the differences between sectors, to clarify specific elements of collaboration, and to be able to communicate. Implementation of multi-agency working remains a challenge (Shorrock et al. 2020) and guidance may not always consider the local landscape to which these policy documents are intended to govern and inform.

Specifically, within the area of child criminal exploitation, multi-agency working is an imperative aspect of the safeguarding response, due to its contextual nature. In the UK, Child Criminal Exploitation has been defined as being “Common in county lines and occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, control, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18. The victim may have been criminally exploited even if the activity appears consensual. Child criminal exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology”. (Home Office 2018, p48). Young people experiencing criminal exploitation often require holistic understanding and support from a variety of agencies, which must be coordinated. One example within England and Wales, of coordinating this multi-agency response, is through a Multi-agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meeting/panel. This includes representation from a wide variety of agencies and organisations who could be involved in safeguarding young people and utilising contextual safeguarding approaches (Public Health England 2021). The MACE can operate differently across local authority areas in England and Wales, but aims to capture strategic information and intelligence, so that key themes and trends can be identified to enable coordinated person-centred support. The Contextual Safeguarding approach (Firmin 2020) asserts that harm for young people often is sourced outside of the home (i.e. extra-familial) and includes potential harm from an array of contexts, such as peer relationships and public spaces. This widens the safeguarding responsibility for agencies supporting young people, with multi-agency working even more crucial to support a young person’s needs.

Multi-agency working cannot be taken for granted as something which occurs automatically. It is a continual process and can be complex. Barnes (2019) explored multi-agency working with young people and families in Europe and examined case studies from Belgium, Greece, Italy, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, and the UK. Whilst the case studies highlighted that different countries face different issues regarding disadvantage for families, there were common themes which facilitated successful integrated service delivery, including having a common sense of purpose which was both “bottom up” and “top down”. However, despite examples of effective inter-agency working amongst different countries, it was noted that developing a complete integrated service for young people and families is a challenge. Regardless of an abundance of committed professionals working to support young people and an array of policy, implementation of such policy is often problematic. There is a crucial need to investigate which factors enable or facilitate multi-agency working to become embedded and normalised into existing work culture and to understand the processes required for this. By understanding such processes which acknowledge what works and how, we can incorporate these nuances into future implementation plans, thus allowing an effective multi-agency safeguarding response for young people requiring support. Without an understanding of this process, there is a risk that valuable recommendations from research which are integrated into policy may become lost in translation.

UK Policy Landscape

The UK Children's Act 1989 formalised the notion that to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, there must be partnership working with the family and child, in addition to requiring agencies to collaborate, noting that professionals must be better at working together better (Cheminais 2009). The case of Victoria Climbe, who was abused and killed by family members, highlighted that multiple agencies were in contact with her and her family such as Police, Local Authorities, Health Services, and community organisations. This led to the subsequent Victoria Climbe Inquiry (Laming 2003), where a catalogue of failures was identified and recommendations developed, including stronger accountability and inter-agency working. Following this report, The ^# 2004 imposed a "duty to cooperate" for all related partners working when making arrangements to promote well-being for children. Subsequently, Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government 2023) provides guidance on how all relevant agencies must work together. The Munro Report (2011) argued that for multi-agency working to be more effective, there must be clear lines of accountability and that any multi-agency systems must allow for monitoring, learning, and adapting their practice and noted that Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCB) were a key part in this process (Department for Education 2011).

The Wood Review (Department for Education 2016) evaluated the effectiveness of LSCB and concluded that the duty to cooperate was not enough to facilitate effective multi-agency collaboration and that the LSCB were to be replaced with Local Children's Safeguarding Partnerships, promoting strategic leadership from three key partners: local authority, police, and health, who must take ownership of multi-agency arrangements, ensuring greater accountability and innovation. These recommendations were mandated in The Children and Social Work Act 2017 which created additional duties for police, health sector, local authority, and relevant agencies to make arrangements locally to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. In addition to statutory agencies, Research in Practice (2019) observes that successful multi-agency working requires good relationships between strategic leads of both statutory and voluntary charity organisations, to overcome potential challenges and that these partnership relationships must be modelled at a strategic level right through to practitioners. The follow-up Wood Review (Department for Education 2021a) reflects on progress on the reform of new safeguarding arrangements and made a number of recommendations including the crucial need to include education within the multi-agency arrangements. The review also called for more joined-up support from government, clarification on funding and responsibilities between agencies, and critically, supplementary support for "bedding in change" (Department for Education 2021a, b, c, p50) particularly important when recommendations are to be implemented. Whilst factors of effective multi-agency working are often discussed what is often absent, is how such features of effective multi-agency working, including strategic buy-in, are facilitated, implemented, and sustained (Home Office 2014). Exploring this process could be key to understanding the potential deficit between policy and practice.

Theoretical Framework

Normalisation Processing Theory (NPT) has predominantly been employed within health care settings; however, May et al. (2009) note that the theory is abstract enough to be applied to different areas of social behaviour. The constructs seek to define the work carried out in certain circumstances, such as implementing a new practice and thus can provide a sociological framework which may be useful for comparing implementation studies. By adopting an NPT framework, this study sought to identify where themes relate to relevant constructs to guide the implementation of multi-agency working policy.

Normalisation Processing Theory

May et al. (2009) devised NPT to understand and explain how social processes are viewed, enacted, and operationalised. There are four constructs pre-defined by NPT or “generative mechanisms” that are identified which promote or inhibit the adoption of a specific practice: coherence, cognitive participation, collective action, reflexive monitoring (Table 1). Each of these is then defined to illustrate how this works to embed a process such as policy, into practice.

Method

Research Design

The research was underpinned by a constructivist approach which asserts that reality is created and experienced by people differently and this reality can undergo constant reflection. Qualitative semi-structured interviews were employed as they were deemed as the most appropriate method for this research question to provide an

Table 1 NPT construct (Finch et al. 2013¹)

Construct	Definition
Coherence	Sensemaking that promotes or inhibits the coherence of a practice to its users. These processes are energised by investments of meaning made by participants
Cognitive participation	Participation that promotes or inhibits users’ enrolment and legitimisation of a practice. These processes are energised by investments of commitment made by participants
Collective action	Activity that promotes or inhibits the enacting of a practice by its users. These processes are energised by investments of effort made by participants
Reflexive monitoring	Practices that promote or inhibit users’ comprehension of the effects of a practice. These processes are energised by investments in appraisal made by participants

¹Improving the normalisation of complex interventions: measure development based on normalisation process theory (NoMAD): study protocol | Implementation Science | Full Text (biomedcentral.com)

“authentic insight” into how individuals attach meanings to experiences and social processes (Edwards and Holland 2020, p583), thus allowing for a rich and in-depth account from the participant to discuss their own experiences and perspectives, concerning the subject area.

Research Questions

This research project was part of a larger study. Within this current study, data was used to understand two research questions:

- i. Which aspects of multi-agency structures and processes do practitioners working with young people believe are working well, allowing successful transition of safeguarding multi-agency policy to practice?
- ii. What can we learn from Normalisation Processing Theory to potentially support sustainable implementation of safeguarding multi-agency policy into practice?

Setting and Sample

This research was undertaken within a safeguarding partnership in Southern England, UK. The business manager from the partnership was contacted in the first instance to outline the research and project and to gain gatekeeper consent on behalf of the Safeguarding Partnership. Following a briefing meeting, the gatekeeper received consent from colleagues to share an initial set of names and contact email addresses with the researcher for managers and practitioners who were involved in safeguarding young people at risk of exploitation. Individuals were contacted via email separately with a Participant Information Sheet, Consent Form, and Project Information Briefing. In some instances, snowball sampling was utilised, whereby interviewees suggested relevant colleagues, following permission to share their contact details with the researcher; they were contacted via email and invited to participate.

Data Collection

In total, 23 participants took part in semi-structured interviews conducted using Microsoft Teams or telephone; the interview lasted between 31 and 92 min. Questions focused on key areas such as safeguarding structures, multi-agency partnerships, agency remit, and responsibility and collaborative working arrangements (Tables 2 and 3). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using a secure transcription programme and verified by the researcher.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were imported into NVIVO software and then coded and synthesised into themes, which were refined and finalised (Braun and Clark 2012). Data was thematically analysed *inductively* to identify patterns and common topics across transcripts in relation to the research question one, regarding how multi-agency working can

Table 2 Participant sector breakdown

Sector	Participants (<i>n</i> = 23)
Police	5
Local Authority Social Care	5
Voluntary Community, Social Enterprise (VCSE) Sector	4
Education	3
Health	2
Local Authority Early Help; Community Safety; Intelligence	3
Youth Offending Service	1

Table 3 Participant role breakdown

Role type and Responsibility	Participants (<i>n</i> = 23)
Operational	5
Management	18
Strategic	10

successfully be integrated into practice. Interviews were then re-analysed according to Normalisation Processing Theory to understand the implementation process and this involved the codes and themes being re-analysed deductively to identify any alliance to NPT constructs.

Ethics

Ethics for this study was approved by the University.

Results and Findings

Multi-agency Structures and Processes Working Well to Transition Policy to Practice

Theme One: Present, Passionate, Proactive Leaders

Within the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements in this particular area, there are three safeguarding partnerships: safeguarding adults board (responding to concerns for adults at risk or who may be vulnerable from harm), safeguarding children's partnership (with joint responsibility and ownership from Children's Services within the Local Authority, Police and Health), and community safety partnership (the Police, Fire and Rescue Authority, Local Authorities, Health Partners, and Probation Services), all of whom work closely together. Participants identified a strong leadership presence across the safeguarding

partnerships. A clear designated lead in social care for responding to exploitation was identified and mentioned by almost all participants; they were spoken very highly of and considered instrumental in leading a contextual multi-agency response to exploitation, including delivery of contextual safeguarding training. In addition, there was alignment in strategic to operational activity, ensuring that the strong leaders in strategy were matched to strong leadership and coordination in frontline operations. It was also noted that there has been a relatively recent change in senior management over the last 18 months within the safeguarding partnerships and participants noticed the positive “fresh eyes, fresh thought, fresh push, fresh energy” effect.

Alongside having a strategic vision, practitioners felt that their leadership teams facilitated the development of multi-agency working by allowing time to collaborate with partner agencies and to build the relationships as part of their duties:

“By our bosses allowing us to chat, we all have the same ideas so we can support each other”

The passionate leadership is present and visible, allowing an understanding of issues which are occurring operationally, whilst taking responsibility for that ongoing coordination of a multi-agency safeguarding response for exploitation of young people. The proactive drive from leadership incorporated a commitment to evolve and strive to achieve more with key leaders being described as “selfless” and other practitioners noted they were “well supported from the top”. There is also an investment in training and awareness raising, which involved contextual safeguarding and exploitation. This is being delivered to wider supporting organisations outside of statutory services who work with young people and even wider to local businesses and transport services such as bus companies and taxi firms.

Theme Two: Strategic to Operations Congruence

Within each of these partnerships, adult’s, children’s, and community safety, there was evidence of congruence in actions and commitment between those employed at strategy level and those working on frontline operations. This was evident through various multi-agency meetings such as MACE (Missing and Child Exploitation) panel, as well as working in accordance to shared guidance and under shared governance, resulting in holistic responsibility.

Practitioners frequently mentioned the MACE panel, which focusses on a multi-agency contextual safeguarding response, in addition to case management and noted that was the most crucial multi-agency meeting. The panel has a contextual focus wider than just looking at the young person themselves and focuses on public spaces and places, suspicious motor vehicles and potential perpetrators, who may be involved in exploitation concerns.

“A significant number of people sit around the table really and what I think is good with that is the willingness from partners across the board to actually take the lead when it’s appropriate because it’s not something that we can always do, well we can’t all do on our own.”

Complementing the strategic led MACE panel, the safeguarding partnerships have initiated operational Local Disruption Support Meetings (LDSMs) to address issues “on the ground”. The LDSMs are a more localised and operational extension of the MACE process and typically involve practitioners in frontline roles. The primary aim of the LDSM is to share information and “map” what is going on and where, in a timely and effective manner.

Some individuals who attend strategic groups also attend operation level sub-groups and this allows for a successful cascading of information from leadership to practice. In addition to individuals attending meetings across different levels to ensure continuity, there was also a commitment from professionals to attend different partnership meetings to ensure a holistic understanding and different perspectives of common issues.

“There are quite a lot of meetings, but there is different elements and there’s always like different levers, like, just within each one, if you like, and it does help the being at three to join things up. . . I think if I hadn’t gone to the adult board, I wouldn’t have been able to solve that problem because it would have gone on, I don’t know, because people just didn’t see it”

This multi-agency approach and cohesion between partnerships has contributed to a comprehensive Exploitation Strategy which is co-owned by the three safeguarding partnerships. This shared governance strategy is aligned to the Home Office’s Four P’s strategic outcomes: Prevent, Prepare, Pursue, and Protect. The Four P’s focus on a multi-agency response to exploitation, enabling all organisations and agencies to contribute to different parts of the exploitation process and responding to risks in a contextual and proactive way (HM Government 2013, p4). The strategy enables practitioners to identify with ownership and accountability from each agency who are working to support young people.

Theme Three: Established Functioning Partnerships

When identifying and responding to exploitation, the safeguarding partnerships highlighted that partner relationships were fundamental to the safeguarding response. Findings showed that having established, stable relationships amongst practitioners and professionals, both within and between agencies was beneficial to the functioning of partnership working. It was noted that these partner agency relationships were inclusive, in that they encouraged contributions from all those concerned and moreover, there was a culture which both encouraged and enabled reflection and professional challenge. Having aligned and shared values allowed professionals to strive for a common goal when working with young people. Across the different agencies, there was evidence that partnership working and relationships were valued with a “strong cultural atmosphere with multi-agency partnerships”.

This understanding was aided by a longstanding and stable workforce, which can help build relationships and clarify how agencies could best work together and how “that does have an impact around knowing, knowing the role of each individual professional and knowing what their responsibilities are”. This

stability in workforce also allowed for accumulation of a wealth of knowledge described as “encyclopaedic”.

Participants spoke about the inclusive approach that embraces the contributions from both statutory agencies and the Voluntary Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) sector. The safeguarding partnerships clearly valued the expertise and unique position of the VCSE and were keen to work in partnership with these agencies. This was evident at an operations level whereby there was a VCSE coordinator within the Multi-agency Referral Unit to assist with coordinating referrals. There was also evidence at strategy level that the VCSE was paramount to service delivery, particularly for working with adolescents. An example of this commitment to the multi-agency approach was that the safeguarding partnerships tasked a VCSE organisation to chair a working group which is focussing on developing and implementing contextual safeguarding. This was because they are deemed to have crucial insight in this area. It was noted that there was a shift in the VCSE being included strategically, with VCSE practitioners being described as “you’re not a helpful kind, amateur, you are a very capable, amazing professional, so you chair this group”.

There was also an open, inviting, and inclusive approach from the exploitation leads within Social Care and practitioners are “not made to feel like that was a daft thing to say”. Also, in addition to formal referrals, they are also available for advice and consultation for other agencies and given an opportunity to discuss queries before putting in a referral.

Professional challenge was also welcomed and recognised by participants as a key feature within organisations and between agencies, at both a strategic and board level, as well as at an operations level. Input from all agencies is actively encouraged and relationships between agencies are often longstanding, allowing for professionals and practitioners to feel comfortable in challenging each other’s view in a safe environment. Participants noted that this challenge was perceived as positive and progressive and allows for development and focus of key aims as they are not meant to be “yes people”:

“People within that panel who are very, very, very firm and very, very willing to challenge, quite tough and that’s really positive”.

Learning from Normalisation Processing Theory

Table 4 illustrates the key NPT constructs and components and how these can relate to the findings of this study. Whilst all constructs have relevance to multi-agency working becoming embedded in everyday practice and will be discussed, there will be a deeper dive into on the construct of cognitive participation and exploration of each of its four components. This is deemed the most relevant to this study as it focuses on the relational work of building and sustaining a community of practice which is the very essence of multi-agency working.

Table 4 NPT constructs and components

Construct		Component
Coherence	Sensemaking How do people make sense of and operationalise multi-agency working	Differentiation Communal specification Individual specification Internalisation
Cognitive participation	Relational work How do people build and sustain a community or practice around multi-agency working	Initiation Enrolment Legitimation Activation
Collective action	Operational work How do people enact a new set of practices of multi-agency working	Interactional workability Relational integration Skill set workability Contextual integration
Reflexive monitoring	Appraisal work How do people assess and evaluate the impact of multi-agency working	Systemisation Communal appraisal Individual appraisal Reconfiguration

Distinction between before and after implementation of multi-agency working
 Working together to build a shared understanding and expected benefits of multi-agency working
 Understanding of responsibilities and expected practice of multi-agency working
 Understanding value and attributing worth to multi-agency working
 Are there key people driving the multi-agency working forward
 Is there evidence of community “buy in” from people involved in multi-agency working
 Belief that individuals themselves should be involved and they can make a valuable contribution
 Define relevant procedures to sustain practice and continued involvement in multi-agency working
 Interactional work when people are operationalising multi-agency work into everyday practice
 Creating accountability and confidence in new practice of multi-agency working
 Allocation of who does which work regarding multi-agency working
 Allocation of resources in reaction to procedures and protocols relating to multi-agency working
 Collating information to assess effectiveness of multi-agency working
 People working together to evaluate worth of multi-agency working, problem solving
 Impact on individuals how does affect their situation and interact with existing practices
 Appraisal work can help modify and refine multi-agency practice and procedures

Coherence: Sensemaking—Make Sense of and Operationalise Multi-agency Working

The first theme of Present, Passionate, Proactive Leaders highlights its key benefits and importance, differentiating it from alternative ways of working. These leaders engaged with teams to ensure they all felt included to understand all responsibilities of multi-agency practice, clearly demonstrating the values. The second theme which identified coherence within Strategy to Operation Congruence, clearly enabled these messages to be understood across the levels, allowing all key individuals to be of the same understanding. The third theme, Established Functioning Partnerships, allowed the key individuals who must be included within multi-agency working to feel included, valued, and able to challenge based upon their own perspective; thus, all sectors across all levels could make sense of how multi-agency working could be operationalised and one participant noted that “we have a shared understanding and a shared language and everybody knows what the process is”.

Collective Action—Operational Work—How Do People Enact New Set of Practices Regarding Multi-agency Working?

The constant drive from Present, Passionate, Proactive leaders encouraged the enactment of multi-agency working by remaining a continual focus. The exploitation lead was noted to “drive the agenda” for working together to respond to exploitation. The Congruence in Strategy to Operations allowed for key accountability and inclusivity across all levels and the Effective Functional Partnerships facilitated an understanding regarding which work was to be undertaken by who and allocate appropriate resources.

Reflexive Monitoring Appraisal: How Do People Assess and Evaluate Multi-agency Working?

Present, Passionate, Proactive leaders ensured that there was follow through in multi-agency working and that new information regarding how the multi-agency working was operating was overseen as they were present and involved. The inclusivity of different partners due to Effective Functioning Relationships allowed for different individuals to remain accountable for their own aspects of multi-agency working and the inclusivity of partners allowed for challenge and review of any potential challenges, allowing for new developments. The Congruence in Strategy and Operations allowed for any strategic changes to be implemented if appropriate and ensured that frontline operational activity was understood at a strategic level. A general feeling of striving to go further was evident throughout many participants and one noted how “what we have got at the moment works. Could it work better? Yes. Are we trying to get there? Certainly”.

Cognitive Participation: Relational Work—Building and Sustaining Partnership Working

Cognitive participation was demonstrated by a commitment to initiating and building relationships and also ensuring that these relationships were sustained.

“A lot of times I would suggest years ago that there was a lip service to it [partnership working], now I think there is a genuine achievement to actually achieving that locally”.

Components

Initiation (Key People Driving Intervention) The impact of *Present, Passionate, Proactive Leaders* is fundamental in spearheading the exploitation multi-agency safeguarding response. These leaders illuminate a clear focus and coherent strategy, and this is successfully communicated from a strategic position to operational level and across agencies. The ongoing commitment and constant investment from these leaders allow multi-agency working to remain an ongoing priority and a process which is nurtured.

Enrolment (Community Buy-in) There is evidence of a strong commitment of buy-in across the partnerships. This is established within organisations through the clear relationship *Congruence from of Strategy to Operations*. The same enthusiasm, dedication, passion, and commitment which were visible from the strategy level and those informing delivery were echoed within the frontline workers who were delivering that vision. This was evidenced by reliable and consistent attendance at multi-agency meetings, some of which included representation from the same people at levels of different levels, across sectors which ensured that there was a clear understanding of the whole picture.

Legitimation (Involvement and Valued Contribution) The *Established Functioning Partnerships* and stable relationships, evident within the partnerships, are key in legitimising different partners contributions. The culture of inclusion and encouragement from all agencies, together with the welcoming of different perspectives and contributions, allows for a diverse and holistic multi-agency response. The inclusive culture allows for the development of professional challenge to be encouraged which further serves to diffuse power imbalances between agencies and professionals and allows for effective and meaningful partnership. This inclusivity enables both formal pathways to share information but also the ability to informally exchange of information, both of which are key to understanding the full picture.

Activation (Relevant Procedures Sustain Practice and Continued Involvement) Between departments, the clear shared guidance of the jointly owned Exploitation Strategy not only allowed for different agencies to identify the part that their agency and role had to play, but also, which stage in the exploitation process. This common governance and holistic responsibility which united agencies and the different levels within agencies provided common goals and collective accountability. The *Present, Passionate, Proactive Leaders* ensure that there are regular audits to measure progress and outcomes for multi-agency safeguarding responses for exploitation and when concerns are flagged, they will ensure there are multi-agency working groups introduced to respond to particular challenges.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the alignment and relationship between multi-agency policy, guidance, and practice for professionals working to safeguard young people at risk from exploitation. The first research question sought to understand the views and perspectives of professionals working within the safeguarding environment and to learn how theory can be applied and utilised to further understand the process and nuances of implementation, regarding multi-agency working responding to child criminal exploitation. This understanding of policy implementation process is essential given the numerous legislation and policy guidance which already exist in addition to findings and recommendations of numerous serious case reviews. Howarth (2021) notes that there have been more than 1500 serious case reviews, dating back to 1945. Gallagher (2021) points out that the value of these reviews is clearly limited; they have been criticised for offering repetitive findings and recommendations that do not always improve practice.

The first theme, *Present, Passionate, Proactive Leaders*, highlighted the importance of leaders who are present for their team and able to offer support through a proactive approach and passion ensuring that all sectors saw the relevance of their contribution and role in multi-agency working. This enabled a shared understanding of role and ownership of risk, which McManus and Boulton (2020) note is fundamental to multi-agency working. Olsvik and Saus (2022) discuss the challenges, contradictions, and complexities within leadership in child welfare services. Research from Norway argues that leadership includes a “powerful emotional aspect and is largely based upon collaboration with others” (Olsvik and Saus 2022, p466) in addition to being guided by a service objective. This relates to the current study findings, with participants feeling supported by managers, where there is genuine collaboration to support them through having presence in their team, and by demonstrating a genuine passion and proactive drive which ensures that the service objective remains focussed and relevant to all sectors.

The second theme, *Strategic to Operations Congruence*, highlighted how there must be continuity and congruence between strategic level leadership and policy-making and operational frontline activity of practitioners. Without this connection, intended outcomes may be inhibited by unanticipated or unclear barriers in practice. Balogun et al. (2015) report that there has been little work undertaken to explore how strategy is implemented into practice. Kras et al. (2017) distinguish strategy from operations as managers being policy makers and street level workers as policy implementers. They state that the middle management level workers are “caught in a vice trying to adhere to directives from above, reconcile their own beliefs about policy, present policy to street-level staff, and then follow up with superiors to share street-level staff concern” (Kras et al. 2017, p225). Findings from this study highlight the importance of having present, proactive, and passionate managers who ensure all partners are included and contribute to the process, for example through governance arrangements or attendance at numerous multi-agency meetings. This is supported by Birken et al. (2012) who argue that “middle managers have the potential to bridge informational gaps that might

otherwise impede innovation implementation” (p2). This echoes the importance of that congruence and communication across all levels within an organisation and notes how middle managers can be fundamental to this.

The third theme of Established Functioning Partnerships facilitated a culture of inclusion, value, and appreciation of different perspectives whilst also enabling a culture of professional challenge. It has been stated that there must input from a wide range of different agencies in safeguarding children (HM Government 2023); however, this can be difficult to implement in practice. The inclusive approach from the safeguarding partnerships ensured that education and the VCSE were very much valued and included in their safeguarding arrangements and engaged in multi-agency arrangements from strategy to frontline. Firmin et al. (2022) recommend that when working across agencies, the aim should be to ‘create a single, mutually agreed set of aims, values, pathways, and procedures’, rather than potentially blurring individual contributions (Firmin et al. 2022, p45).

This strengthens the findings of this study agreeing that the development of established, functioning relationships can then encourage autonomy in individual knowledge, skills, and confidence to contribute to the common purpose.

These established and mature relationships allowed for information to be exchanged both formally as well as informally, which build upon the mandated partnership processes and procedures. The benefits are highlighted by Moran et al. (2007) who discuss the importance of informal opportunities for communication between practitioners, yet this is not something always allowed for in policy documents.

The second research question aimed to understand what we could learn from Normalisation Processing Theory (NPT) to potentially support sustainable implementation of policy into practice. There is a generally a consensus that multi-agency working is paramount when safeguarding young people; however, there is less understanding of the process of implementation and translating policy into practice. By adopting a NPT framework, data was re-analysed to explore the mechanisms which enabled multi-agency working to be effective. Whilst the data in this study could be applied to all of the four constructs, the construct most relevant was Cognitive Participation as this focussed on participation by stakeholders that promotes or inhibits enrolment in a practice and how their participation is legitimised, and is divided into four further components, initiation, enrolment, legitimisation, and activation.

The *initiation* stage related to the present, proactive, and passionate leaders who initiated collaboration and drove forward the multi-agency response to safeguarding young people. Dudau (2009) notes these leaders can either encourage or hinder effective collaboration and that they have a role in creating “collaborative capabilities” and thus not always focussing on the immediate goals of agencies but “constant anchoring” of partners to the partnership goal (Dudau 2009, p402). This was evident in the participants responses who felt connected to the overall goal of safeguarding young people.

The *enrolment* stage involving community buy-in was demonstrated by a congruence in strategy to operations, evidenced by attendance multi-agency meetings across all levels and shared governance across safeguarding partnerships, which underpinned

different agencies responses. Whilst there are often calls for strategic buy-in for effective multi-agency working (Home Office 2014), there must be more attention paid to how this buy-in is cascaded down to frontline operations, as noted by Research in Practice (2019) who recommended that there must be modelling of partnership relationships at a strategic level right through to practitioners. Similarly, the Department for Education (2021b) noted that consulting a broad range of individuals when implementing reforms increases overall partnership buy-in. This was evident in the Safeguarding partnership who demonstrated a commitment across all levels.

The *legitimation* phase related to different agencies and professionals feeling that they had a valid contribution. This was achieved through strong partnership relationships and creating a culture of inclusion and challenge. This included agencies outside of the tripart arrangement, such as education and particularly, the VCSE sector, at a strategy board level and an operational level. This is particularly important and highlighted in policy guidance such as Working Together (2023) and Keeping Children Safe in Education (Department for Education 2021c) yet the Department for Education (2021b) notes that it can be a challenge to ensure the VCSE sector have opportunities to contribute.

The *activation* phase relates to ensuring that practice is maintained and sustained. Within the multi-agency meetings, attendance was not the sole factor but the continuation of collaboration, and responsibility following meetings was viewed as a process to which professionals committed to, regardless of their particular remit to support young people. The ongoing governance arrangements such as the Four P Approach and Exploitation Strategy serve as a foundation on which shared aims and responsibilities reside.

Strengths and Limitations

This study sought to focus not only on what works for multi-agency working but also why and in what circumstances by uniquely applying Normalisation Processing Theory (NPT), a theory which is most commonly utilised within health settings, which to the authors knowledge has not been undertaken before. This study focussed on one local area's multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and therefore by exploring more local areas, more could be learned and the theory applied further, increasing validity. The interviews were undertaken without direct reference to Normalisation Processing Theory and this lens was applied post data collection. Therefore, data may have been richer if the interview questions related to NPT; however, it could be viewed as a strength that results could be deductively analysed, demonstrating a stronger rigor process.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

This research has sought to answer how multi-agency working operates within safeguarding, to support young people. By understanding the perspectives and views of professionals and practitioners, whose roles varied from strategic to frontline

operations, the implementation of safeguarding policy was explored. Despite an agreement that partnership working is essential to safeguard young people who are at risk of exploitation and despite a wealth of legislation to support this way of working, it is often reported that multi-agency working remains a challenge. Indeed, the Department for Education (2021a, b, c) noted that “despite a good understanding of why partnership working could be effective, there were lower levels of understanding of how to effectively achieve this goal, particularly at the frontline level”. The findings illustrate that there are areas of encouraging practice, whereby partnership working is effective and this relied upon strong congruence between strategy and operations, present, passionate, and proactive leaders, effective partnership working and shared values, and a common approach. This relates to both within and between organisations. By utilising the application of Normalisation Processing Theory, it was enlightening to understand the role that Cognitive Participation played in explaining how and in what circumstances multi-agency working is developed and sustained. The components of this strand: initiation, enrolment, legitimation, and activation provide a useful framework to consider when organisations are attempting to implement, embed, and integrate policy and guidance into practice. The theory highlights some of the nuances of multi-agency working which may not always be immediately visible, yet once known, understood and acknowledged, consideration of these factors and mechanisms which act as inhibitors and barriers to implementation could have substantial impact upon the successful adoption of practice. It must be acknowledged that for implementation of any aspect of multi-agency working, elements which can arguably enable positive change can also become a barrier. As Humphreys et al. (2018) note, an enabler can become a challenger; for example, if resource is removed, the success of implementation of multi-agency working could be at risk, as there must be a degree of continued investment in factors which enable successful implementation.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval The study was reviewed and approved by Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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