A Guide on developing Communities of Practice

For services who are working with children and young people affected by sexual violence.

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INTRODUCTION TO THE LEAP PROJECT

The Life skills, Leadership and Limitless Potential (LEAP) project was a two-year programme funded by the European Commission, with co-funding from Oak Foundation. It was coordinated by the International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, violence and trafficking at the University of Bedfordshire (hereafter referred to as the International Centre)[1] and delivered in four countries: the United Kingdom (UK), Bulgaria, Romania and the Netherlands.

LEAP sought to improve knowledge and develop skills and understanding of a child rights approach to safe and ethical participatory practice when working with children and young people affected by sexual violence. The central aims of the project were to develop confidence amongst practitioners who work in specialist services supporting children and young people who are affected by sexual violence and to strengthen commitments to participatory practice. The project aimed to build the evidence base on how to support and involve practitioners and young people in advocacy, through research and evaluation. LEAP has also facilitated a European knowledge exchange through the dissemination of freely accessible tools and resources.

Together with the four country partners, the International Centre:

- Designed and delivered a four-day course on participatory practice for specialist service practitioners (in each country) and developed this course into an e-learning programme.
- Organised and facilitated 'communities of practice' in each country.
- Developed and delivered a three-day training programme for Youth Facilitators, who have co-delivered a life skills programme to other young people in their countries.
- Supported child and youth-led creative projects combatting sexual violence towards children and young people and shared these with the wider public to raise awareness.

This guide seeks to share tips, tools and stories of change from the project in order to enable others to set up their own communities of practice and strengthen commitments to participatory practice when supporting children and young people affected by sexual violence.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

"Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (Wenger, 2007).

Communities of practice are made up of people in the same profession who have a common sense of purpose.

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[1]

The concept was first proposed by Lave and Wenger in their book *Situated Learning* (Lave & Wenger 1991). They proposed that learning involved a process of engagement in a 'community of practice' (see Smith, M. (2003, 2009) and highlighted the importance of 'situated', social learning, where relationships between people are essential but facilitation is required to enable participants to engage constructively.

A community of practice is held together by a sense of purpose and a desire to learn from and with each other. What sets communities of practice apart from teams is that the former are defined by an appreciation of the value of new knowledge rather than merely by a task or deadline.

As McDermott (in Murphy 1999:17) states:

"*Learning traditionally gets measured on the assumption that it is a possession of individuals that can be found inside their head but in a community of practice learning is in the relationships between people. Learning is in the conditions that bring people together with others and allows for particular pieces of information to take on relevance. Without contact, without the system of relevancies, there is no learning. Learning does not belong to individual persons, but to the various conversations of which they are a part. Knowledge and learning is created by groups, used and transferred.*"

LEAP Communities of Practice

Each country's community of practice determined how their community worked and what they wanted to gain from it. However, two core elements were consistent across all four of the communities of practice involved in this project:

1. *The sense of purpose:* All members were committed to the aim of improving participatory practice by professionals working with children and young people affected by sexual violence.

2. *Commitment to the community*: Members of the four LEAP communities of practice shared their own experiences, stories, resources, opportunities and challenges. This required commitment and ongoing interaction with each other; interactions took place online as well as in face-to-face meetings. To pursue their purpose, members pledged to meet, discuss and support each other and share information. The relationships they built created trust and, from this, knowledge and learning. This was not necessarily an easy process, as the generation of learning requires the sharing of both good and bad experiences. LEAP members reported that trust and new learning were valued outputs from their communities.

TIPS AND TOOLS FROM LEAP

Since LEAP began in November 2015, a great deal has been learned about developing a community of practice. Whilst every experience will be different, the following section tells you a little about some of the activities and processes partners adopted within LEAP. The quotes are all anonymous to protect the identity of individual community of practice members.

Phase 1: Inviting members

LEAP partners used a range of methods to approach and engage people. These included:

- face to face
- LinkedIn and Facebook
- calling, mailing, meeting
- official letters (these are helpful when approaching individuals and organisations).

Clear information was provided from the start about processes, benefits and commitments. Selling points used to encourage engagement included:

- a free four-day training course at the start of the project
- the opportunity to work as part of a network, exchange knowledge and learn from each other
- international experience through linking with other countries' communities
- flexibility: members did not have to attend every time.

"The course was substantial in terms of length and how deeply it delved into participation issues. I had a very simple knowledge of participation and was interested in developing this and embedding the learning back into my own project. As a new project, I felt it important to get the project right from the get go in terms of hearing young people's voices!"

Phase 2: Structuring the community of practice

Members needed to feel safe: the environment needed to be open, friendly and not too formal, in order for practitioners to feel they could share challenges and difficulties as well as successes.

Careful leadership was used at the start to engage members, create safe space, share the aims and objectives of the LEAP project, decide what they wanted to achieve (as individuals and as a group), and address the other questions outlined in the appendix. Thereafter the aim was for ownership to come from members; decisions and actions needed to be made by them. We tapped into participants' own

agendas, gaps in knowledge and interests and pushed back responsibility, asking 'what do you think you can do to solve this, to shape this?'

Examples of subjects LEAP members had questions about at the outset included:

- Action plans and how to use them
- Philosophy and theories of participation: how to apply these in work
- Inviting young people to meetings to speak to professionals
- How to discuss sexuality with young people (as a starting point for participation)
- Whose responsibility is sexual violence and how can specialists undertake participation work? What does it look like in practice?
- How can we embed participation in organisations and services?
- Examples of prevention activities
- How to influence and drive policy making
- Organising active youth groups

In terms of the practical outworking of our communities of practice, we learn that:

- Meetings need to last between three and four hours to allow participants to have time to discuss practice as well as any other items they feel important. For example, they chose to discuss active practice, intervention and the sharing of resources. Sometimes members wanted advice on how to deal with cases they were working with.
- The venue can alternate as a 'travelling circus' and it is useful if different members host different meetings, as this allows other members to see other organisations and work places.
- It is important that the venue is comfortable and the participants are well catered for, so that members feel looked after and safe.
- The agenda should be decided on by the group to reflect their needs, especially as this might be influenced by local and national policy. For example:

  > A focus on schools' responsibility towards child protection meant that the Bulgarian community of practice invited school teachers to be members.

  > In the Netherlands, experienced experts (those who have experienced sexual violence first hand) are increasingly involved in prevention and support.

- Reflecting on theory and models from research helps members plan action. This might include, for example, considering the evidence on why participation is beneficial.
- Participatory exercises are useful as warm-up and ice breakers.
- Interactive methods such as drawing, photography and role-plays are useful for sharing stories of change (see page 8).
- Meetings can be used to share resources such as films, lessons plans and workshops.

- Meetings can be used to share learning.

Tips

- Take time to inform and recruit committed members. Remember that time and energy are required to get member involvement and commitment.
- Remember that participatory facilitation is an eye opener for many people and the facilitator's role in providing a context of learning and vision amongst the members is a great skill. Identifying and valuing the skill of facilitation in the group enables new leaders to be created who can champion participatory practice.
- Maintaining good relations among the members is key – participants need a good feeling of working together, of respect and joy in being part of a community of specialists who embrace the same vision.
- Establish a safe space which enables practitioners to share 'failure' as well as 'success'. Specialist services working with young people want individual exchanges, and need time to get used to a group setting and to sharing their struggles, problems and doubts.
- Keep asking the question: what is participation, what is not?
- Provide good, simple examples of participation and methods of working with young people that show how participation can be a part of everyday practice, and not just an add-on.
- Make good use of practical activities – these are always popular.
- Ensure that members' managers understand and are supportive of the principles you are working to. Promoting an agenda for participation can be difficult for some organisations, depending on their own aims, objectives and resources; participation may not be embedded in or part of their work. To maintain attendance and motivation, support from managers is needed.
- Invite young people to meetings (and/or adult experienced experts). If they cannot be present, ask their views and communicate these to the group with their permission.[2] Although specialists want to undertake participation, they might not feel confident initially in working in groups with young people affected by sexual violence. Space to discuss this openly and give each other advice on how to do this safely is appreciated.
- Listen to members' needs and challenges. Create a list of topics to be addressed at meetings.
- Maintain the network online and offline (set aside time for both).
- Encourage reflection on practice – what they did, how they did it, sharing learning together.
- **Encourage change, even if very small, and celebrate it!**

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[2] See LEAP ethical guidance for more information.

STORIES OF CHANGE

Stories of change can be told and recorded in a community of practice to evidence impact. LEAP members used the term 'story' to describe qualitative data, which is subjective and shows evidence of change. Their 'stories of change' included a description of:

- The starting point for the person involved regarding participation work
- The participation work they did and/or techniques used
- Reflection on this practice to identify change
- Capturing the learning from this change.

The 'Most Significant Change' technique is a form of participatory monitoring and evaluation. It is participatory because those involved share their stories and then decide collectively which types of evidence are most significant to them and to their learning and progression.

How to identify significant changes:

1. Practitioners collect stories of significant change: stories about themselves, reflecting on their own starting point, their plans, developments, ideas, successes and challenges.
2. In community of practice meetings, members may read a prepared story or share their own on the spot. The community of practice has regular, and often in-depth, discussions about the value of these reported changes.
3. The community of practice might choose to systemically select some stories to demonstrate project impact. Alternatively they build a collection of all the stories to demonstrate the wide range of experiences practitioners have in undertaking participation.

Remember:

- Members need to feel safe to share. Their story does not have to be positive or perfect because it is based on their own learning and implementation of participation. All stories are valuable (indeed challenges faced can be of more value than 'easy wins').

- This process of sharing stories, reflecting and identifying learning within a community of practice can really foster confidence in participation work in professional practice.

If you plan to circulate the stories to a wider network who want to learn about participatory practice, members need to be happy for them to be shared.

LEAP stories of change have been included below to provide some concrete examples. The following section provides some examples of LEAP community members' stories of change to evidence impact and learning from the project.

LEAP stories of change

<u>**Story one**</u>

Be inspired!

I discovered what participation means by interacting daily with children and young people. Learning from them…

Many years ago, when I started to work in the centre, the children were secluded. I have had the opportunity to create a relationship with the children and young people and answer to their direct needs. Slowly, they started to open themselves in our relationship and more importantly… started to trust me. You cannot, as a specialist, build anything if you don't have the basis of an open relationship with the children, based on reciprocal trust. Kids know when you are not authentic. And when you are not authentic, you cannot be participative…

I have told them that our door is always open for them. Even if the president comes to the office, still if they need something, they are welcome to enter! We are all here for them! I want them to feel that this is their home.

I started to change, consulting with young people about the services we provide for them and asking how these could be improved. They started to be consulted over all activities… lunch options, meal times, the clothes they wear, the daily programme, extra activities they would like to attend, and so on. I am always consulting with them and include their ideas. As a centre, we get the best strategies when we work collaboratively with the young people.

Learning: *Due to these participative actions, children and young people improved their wellbeing and they are now used to being part of the consultative and decision making processes. Feeling included and nurtured, they started to communicate better between themselves and with the staff and increased their self-confidence. In the end, participation means to me giving the child the right to be, to communicate, to be inspired in letting him discover his or her inner resources... it means not treating them as an object, but as a truly active partner in change.*

Participation became for me a way of being….

Story two

I've got involved in this LEAP project both because I was convinced of the importance of participation and empowering children to take their life decisions in their own hands.

Since LEAP started, I had the opportunity to meet outstanding people, both established professionals and young people seeking their path in life.

The discussions with the specialists and the study visits in different places where children and young people affected by all forms of abuse live made me understand things from the inside, and made me feel both with my heart and my mind.

Learning: *The thing that those people had in common was that they were all speaking with their heart, to your heart, and so I realised that, in order to make a difference in somebody's life, you should speak from your heart and in ways that touch hearts. This gives the communication authenticity, like this you can get clients to stick to the programme, and have further opportunities to talk to them about participation and let them carry it out. The starting point for 'teaching' participation is to fully participate yourself, with all your body, heart and mind, in their stories of life, good or less good, and transform them together in their life story.*

Story three

The original LEAP action plan involved setting up a group of young people, however this did not work as many young people had high risk and many needs and commitment was difficult to establish. The work with young people in our organisation is often short-term, and there is a waiting list for support, so creating a long-term group was challenging.

The new plan has been to review the 'participation requests' the team receives regularly – there is a steady flow of invitations to activities and events – for example designing a poster, or a one-off consultation, speaking to probation volunteers… They have used these as a basis for activity and then asked different young people if they are interested in taking them up. Every month there is at least one event so this provides a rolling programme for engagement.

Learning: *You cannot force young people to engage in the way you want them to! An organic system works well – creating the group was trying to insist on the workers' method; however, the way it is working now, informed by young people, is much more relevant. For example, young people chose to design new leaflets for the organisation as the existing leaflets were not used because young people disliked them.*

Story four

The plan for LEAP was to develop a participation group and a training resource for young people affected by sexual violence. However, the group idea was based on a model used by other practitioners who were not working with young people affected by sexual violence. The model did not work for our own group, who were.

The group was stopped by managers after a while, as it was not working. This was not an action that the worker agreed with, however. Instead the focus was directed on the development of a training resource for practitioners who work with this group of young people. The resource has been informed by young people and piloted with a variety of groups of young people. The pack is focussed on managing risk and ensuring adults do not feel they have the right to ask what a young person's personal story is.

Learning: *Group work does not always work. Support from management is important from the outset for group work to avoid the issue noted above. However, even when decisions are made where you have limited influence, you can use creative and different ways to do participation work. Not imposing structures but providing space for young people is good – let them develop the activity how they want. Supporting participation with young people affected by sexual violence requires a strong organisational commitment.*

Story five

Wow! What a journey! I could never have believed that so much would change or we would have achieved so much, way back when we were all sat in the training for LEAP! There have been both good times and sad times – but I feel that there is a seed of hope and what has been achieved will grow and flourish.

So… 19 months down the line, we have a small group of three young people who have formally met twice and have come up with a whole list of ways that they want to be involved in the future – such as involvement in interviewing new staff / opportunities to receive training (e.g. first aid training) / development of a specific Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) service, e.g. updating forms, leaflets, policies, paperwork to be used with young people, paperwork to be used with adults and professionals) / involvement in delivering CSE training to professionals and carers / answering questionnaires (e.g. sex education, mental health service provision) / opportunities to participate in national research… We might not have achieved all that we wanted to achieve and the journey has been quite difficult at times. BUT I think we have made a difference! I think they have been able to lead by example and that they will leave behind a solid legacy. I guess I see our role as the 'gardeners'. We prepared the soil, planted the seeds of good practice and the shoots have now started to shoot. I hope the participation groups do continue to grow and thrive.

CLOSING REMARKS

We hope you find this guide and the tips, tools and stories of change helpful in setting up your own community of practice and strengthening commitments to participatory practice when supporting children and young people who are affected by sexual violence.

If you have questions or feedback please get in touch with the project co-ordinator – Kate D'Arcy – email kate.d'arcy@beds.ac.uk

REFERENCES

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Murphy, P. (ed.) (1999) Learners, Learning and Assessment, London: Paul Chapman. See, also, Leach, J. and Moon, B. (eds.) (1999) Learners and Pedagogy, London: Paul Chapman. 280 + viii pages; and McCormick, R. and Paetcher, C. (eds.) (1999) Learning and Knowledge, London: Paul Chapman. 254 + xiv pages.

Smith, M. (2003, 2009) *Jean Lave, Etienne Wenger and communities of practice* http://infed.org/mobi/jean-lave-etienne-wenger-and-communities-of-practice/

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Links to more information about COP practices and projects:

Worldwide community of practice on participatory video. (webinars, blogs, virtual field visits etc) https://betterpvpractice.wordpress.com/

Pieper I (ed) (2011) *Civic Driven Change: Implications for policymakers and practitioners*, Development Policy Review Network, http://www.bibalex.org/search4dev/files/376945/215516.pdf

APPENDIX: ESTABLISHING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

Questions to consider before you set up the community of practice

- *Question 1: What do you want to achieve, as individuals and as a group?*

Having clear aims and objectives, which are agreed by the group, was found to be useful to set the focus. Returning to aims and objectives at later stages is also helpful to check if progress is being made.

- *Question 2: How will you organise meetings? Who decides the purpose of each meeting and who leads the meeting? Do you take turns?*

Some form of structure is very helpful for practitioners, especially at the beginning. The role of the facilitator is to provide that structure and at the same time to empower members to make decisions themselves about the agenda, content, needs and wishes of the group.

- *Question 3: What issues and themes do you want to discuss at the outset, in the middle, and later on? You will also need to consider who will record these and track how they change and develop?*

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1. **The community of practice discuss and write down topics they want to cover.**

2. **The facilitator groups these into themes, developing a list of options.**

3. **Each member of the community votes on these by writing a tick or placing a sticker next to the theme which is most useful or interesting to them.**

4. **Those with the most ticks or stickers are the main topics to begin with.**

Box 1. Sample activity to decide on issues and themes to cover:

- *Question 4: How will you tell stories of change (see page 8) in your community of practice? And how will these be recorded to evidence impact?*

Writing, filming[3], drawing and PowerPoint presentations are all good ways to capture and share stories of change.

- ***Question 5: How can you create a safe space?***

The environment needs to be open, safe, not too formal, and friendly, in order for practitioners to feel they can share challenges and difficulties as well as successes. The venue can alternate as a 'travelling circus' – it is useful if different members host different meetings, as this allows other members to see other organisations and work places.

- **Question 6: Have you agreed rules around confidentiality when sharing stories?**

Table 2. Sample activity to demonstrate a practical way to illustrate confidentiality boundaries

> - Explain to the community that they will collectively create a group agreement. Explain that they should decide this based on how they want people in the group to behave towards each other and how they will collectively manage confidentiality and any difficulties in the group setting if and when they occur.
> - Ask the group to divide into pairs and ask them to briefly discuss the rules that they think should be included in the agreement. Give them five minutes to do this.
> - Next ask the pairs to shout out some of their ideas. After each idea is presented, the facilitator should consult with the wider group to:
>   - Establish what they understand this rule to mean
>   - Ask if they agree that it should go into the group agreement.

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[3] Participatory video is a collaborative approach to working with a group or a community in shaping and creating their own film for positive change and transformation. See a compilation of their videos at **https://betterpvpractice.wordpress.com/**