

LAUNCHING SAFE COMMUNITIES

A REPORT ON THE LOCAL CONFERENCES FOR THE SAFE COMMUNITIES PROJECT



OCTOBER 2007

Introduction

The Safe Communities project has been launched in three areas: Brent; Denbighshire; and Birmingham. Support has been made available to local voluntary and community agencies in those three areas to help them to work with the safe communities toolkit and to develop their safeguarding policies and practices. The evaluation of this project will include a comparison of the impact of this community development approach in these three areas with that of the distribution of toolkits through umbrella organisations and funding bodies.

The project and toolkit were launched in the three areas by conferences. The aims of the conferences were to:

1. launch Safe Communities - a toolkit to protect children and young people
2. explore the role of community groups in safeguarding
3. strengthen relationships between community groups and safeguarding agencies
4. explain how the pilot will influence policy and practice in England and Wales.

This report is based on the following sources of data: participant observation; interviews of the young people involved; collation and analysis of the feedback forms; debriefing with the project team; participation in the project “lessons learned” meetings; and notes from a stakeholder’s meeting.

One conference was held in each of Brent and Birmingham and two were held in Denbighshire (at Llangollen and St. Asaph), reflecting significant differences in demographic characteristics within the county and to reduce travel times for delegates. The format for the conference days was similar, as each included: an opening by a local politician; a presentation about the toolkit; a presentation by a group of young people; at least one group discussion; reflections by a local councillor; a “marketplace” of stalls from local agencies; and lunch. Nevertheless, the differences between the conferences were probably more striking, including:

- the length of the conferences, as they were half days in Denbighshire compared with full days in Brent and Birmingham;
- the Brent and Birmingham conferences were chaired by a NSPCC manager whereas the Denbighshire conferences were chaired by senior local authority managers;
- the Brent and Denbighshire conferences were co-chaired with young people;
- toolkits were available for collection at Denbighshire and Birmingham but not at Brent;
- most of the presentations were from the NSPCC, large voluntary organisations or statutory agencies. The only presentations from truly local agencies were by an umbrella organisation for the voluntary sector at Brent and a residents’ association at St. Asaph;
- a part of the DVD from the toolkit was played during the conference at Brent and Llangollen;

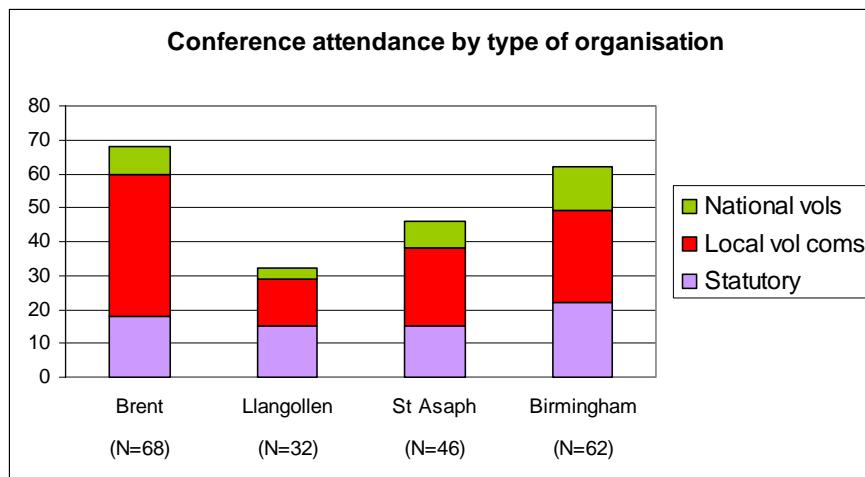
- and the number of delegates and the sectors they represented (see below).

Attendance

Figure 1 shows that the attendance at each of the Denbighshire conferences was lower than for Brent and Birmingham, which is not surprising given that there were two of them. The relationship in proportion of representatives from the voluntary and community sectors and the statutory sector varied between the conferences. The most successful conference in terms of attracting the voluntary and community sector was Brent, with the more work to do in Llangollen and Birmingham. Delegates thought that the conferences provided good networking opportunities even when they thought that they should have been better attended:

“Good networking, surprised that there were not more voluntary organisations present.”

Figure 1



There was some disappointment within the project team at the attendance levels. The difficulties in securing higher levels of attendance reflected fundamental constraints to engagement with small community and voluntary groups, particularly with the so-called “hard to reach” groups. These constraints stemmed in part from the limited time available for community engagement prior to the conferences. The engagement with the voluntary and community sector in Birmingham was hindered in comparison with the other areas because the NSPCC had not had a specific safeguarding initiative with that sector as in Brent or a longstanding role in partnership working as in Denbighshire.

Feedback on conferences

Delegates were asked: how well did the presentations describe the Safe Communities project? The majority of responses were very positive, as shown in Figure 2, based on a six-point scale, in which the higher the score, the more positive the response. Although some respondents would have liked

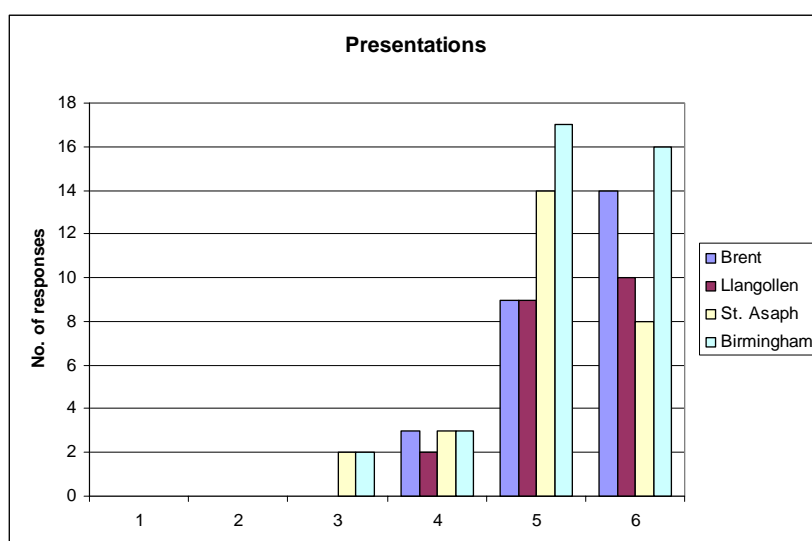
longer focusing on the toolkit, the positive features of the presentations that were highlighted included:

“There were some really good presentations and they made me think about different communities.” (Brent)

“Good to hear from different agencies involved in the project.” (Llangollen)

“This made me think laterally about my focus on Every Child Matters.” (Birmingham)

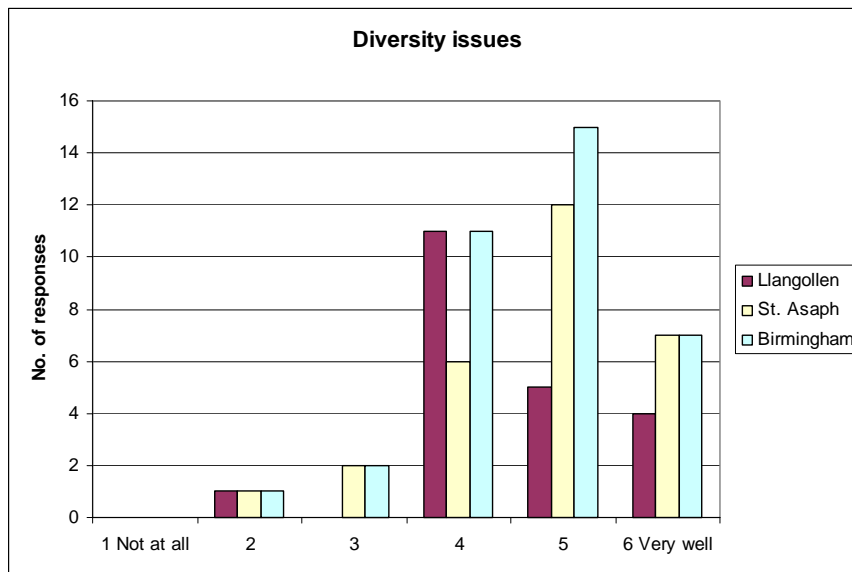
Figure 2



While the majority of young people felt that they had been listened to respectfully and that they could say what they wanted to, a small number did not want to participate in such an adult forum. This raises a fundamental question about the nature of young people’s involvement in conferences which have been organised around the needs of adults. There were many positive aspects to their involvement, not least in helping to reinforce the message that safeguarding is everybody’s business. Their involvement could feel problematic however, not least for the young people themselves. Some of them felt bored at different points and that the presentations were insufficiently engaging and interactive. The workers supporting the young people experienced some dilemmas as well, in particular about the degree to which the young people should be able to opt out of parts of the conference. Some of these difficulties reflect the fact that planning for the young people’s involvement was not built in from the outset. Thereafter, the time and staff resource required to prepare and support the young people was severely underestimated. A key learning point is that if young people are to be involved in such conferences, their involvement needs to be planned from the outset and integrated more effectively within the conferences.

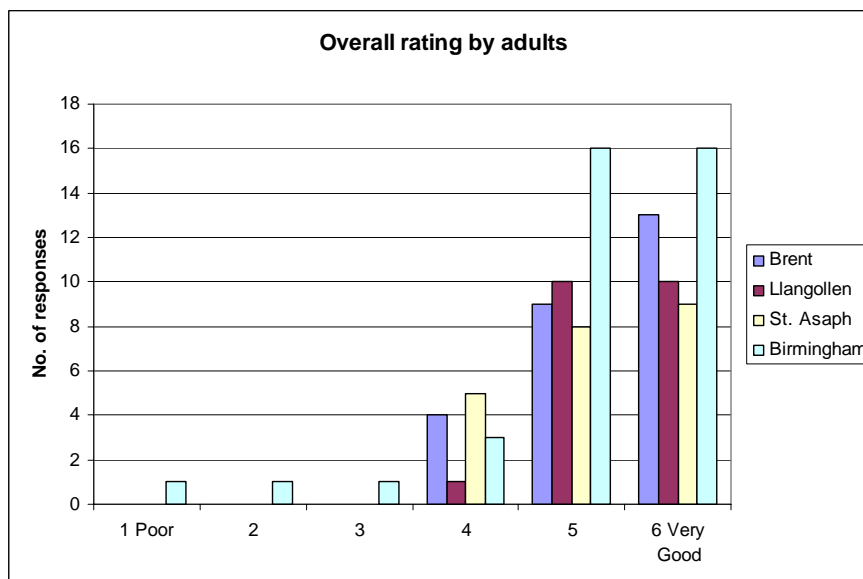
The adult delegates from the Denbighshire and Birmingham conferences were asked: did you feel that diversity issues were well integrated into the conference? The majority of responses were positive, as shown in Figure 3, although there was room for improvement in addressing issues more explicitly and in better reflecting local communities. The following comments from the Birmingham conference reflect different positions on the latter issue:
“Highlighted throughout that Birmingham is a multi-racial, ethnic city.”
“This conference did not reflect Birmingham’s communities.”

Figure 3



The overall rating for the conferences from adult delegates was high, as shown in Figure 4. They commented that they had found the networking valuable.

Figure 4



Achievement of aims

Aim 1: Launch Safe Communities project/toolkit

A large majority of delegates thought that the information presented about the project had been done so clearly, although a small number of delegates were left confused about what would happen next. Similarly, despite high scores to the clarity of presentation question, a small number of young people were left confused, not having understood what was said. The issue that most respondents identified as their having learnt something about was the Safe

Communities project and in particular the toolkit: five of the eight comments received referred to learning about the “use” of the toolkit. One respondent for example, said they would talk to their manager about plans to cascade information about the toolkit, while another pointed to the needs of community groups for training in its use. Their consideration of how to implement the toolkit suggests that their learning had moved beyond an abstract or conceptual level.

At the Denbighshire and Birmingham conferences, delegates could apply for toolkits and take them away with them. A total of 67 toolkits were distributed in this way. It was unfortunate that this provision had not been available at the Brent conference due to a technical distribution error. Group discussions in each of the conferences focussed on the toolkit and the next stages of the project locally. Experiences of the group discussions were however, very varied. In Brent for example, some groups seemed to be able to move to addressing the questions about the toolkit quickly, while others struggled on the basis that group members did not feel sufficiently well acquainted with the toolkit and that the time allowed for discussion was too short. There was a similarly mixed experience at Birmingham, where after the first group discussions, two groups said they would have needed more time to address the questions more effectively, while one group commented that they could not address one of the questions because they did not know what was in the toolkit.

Despite the constraints, the group discussions did yield some ideas for progressing the project. In Denbighshire for example, there was a consensus at the St. Asaph conference that the workshops should be run in both the north and south of the county, given the disparate nature of the communities. Resource constraints on the capacity of the voluntary and community sector were highlighted in the Birmingham conference, resulting in a suggestion that workshops could be organised on a half-day rather than whole-day basis, such that it would be easier for representatives from smaller groups to attend. Many delegates expressed positive views about the potential of the project to initiate changes locally, as in these two quotes:

“I am looking forward to how this project will help influence and change the direction of communities in Brent.” (Brent)

“Feel that the project has the potential to be of real use to vol orgs/community groups.” (St. Asaph)

Given the high ratings for presentations and for the conferences overall, the learning about the project, the positive reception of the toolkit and suggestions for the next stages of the project, the conferences can be seen to have contributed significantly to the launch of the Safe Communities project and toolkit.

Aim 2: Explore the role of community groups in safeguarding

The verb “explore” suggests an active engagement, so this aim is judged according to the extent to which conference delegates were enabled to participate in the conferences and engage with the safeguarding agenda and the role of community groups within this. One indicator over which the

conferences varied was the number of questions and comments from delegates following presentations: 13 in Brent; seven in St. Asaph; three in Birmingham; and just one in Llangollen. Differences in the level of interactivity in part seemed to reflect different chairing styles. Opportunities were available in different ways for delegates to explore safeguarding actively, including:

- networking- delegates valued this highly, although the value could have been enhanced with better attendance;
- market stalls- set up by local agencies to provide information and promote awareness of their work. These were very popular, but as with the networking, the value obtained from them could have been enhanced with greater numbers;
- postcards- there was a good completion rate of these, as local organisations took the opportunity to share examples of good practice;
- group discussions - delegates largely welcomed the atmosphere and facilitation of the group discussions, such that they felt they could say what they wanted and were listened to respectfully. The most frequent complaint about the group discussions however, as noted above, concerned the lack of time, which several delegates had found to be constraining. Arguably, a different format for the conferences involving more workshop activity, would be required to facilitate delegates' contributions.

Several respondents specified the learning about child protection and safeguarding they felt they had achieved through the conferences, as in the following three quotes:

"Importance of Children's Safety Act/policy not only on paper but understanding it and well versed to explain it to others." (Brent)

"The conference made me realise that our child protection policy must be an active one and not just a piece of paper in a drawer." (Brent)

"This made me think in a 24 hour way, not just employment." (Birmingham)

The first two quotes suggest that for any new initiative (like the toolkit) to make an impact, it cannot be stuck on a shelf, but must be more of a live document. The third quote suggests a broader responsibility to safeguarding through all aspects of our lives rather than just through our employment. Given that all those in employment also live in "communities" this is potentially significant for promoting the safeguarding agenda. Linked to this, three respondents referred to safeguarding being everyone's business and the need for wider community involvement:

"It is everybody's responsibility to safeguard children." (Brent)

"Reinforced the message that it is everyone's business, not just the statutory agencies." (Llangollen)

Delegates were able to explore the role of community and voluntary groups in safeguarding through various means and some significant learning has been identified. Nevertheless, judged by the active form of the term "explore" and given the constraints identified, such as limited time, the conferences can be seen as only partly fulfilling this second aim.

Aim 3: Strengthen relationships between community groups and safeguarding agencies

At each conference there was at least one presentation by statutory agencies. There was a big difference between the conferences as to how explicit tensions between the voluntary and statutory sectors were. At Brent and St. Asaph these tensions were very obvious. In the former, there was some lack of confidence evident from the voluntary sector in the capacity of the statutory sector to deliver what they believed it should. This was evident through criticisms that statutory services had not acted appropriately or provided sufficient support. Worryingly for the Safe Communities project, one delegate felt reluctant to engage with it too fully from a concern that some parents would be stigmatised from a child protection referral which could have been averted if they had received sufficient support. Communication problems between the sectors were highlighted by one delegate:

“... the needs of the community are well known but communication not adequate.”

This mirrored the finding from the NSPCC’s previous project in Brent: Respect 2 Protect, which found that black and minority ethnic organisations wanted to engage with safeguarding issues but struggled to get the information. It may also reflect a tension in the relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors.

At St. Asaph there was a concern about the impact of resource constraints on the voluntary sector and how the statutory sector managed this, as expressed through the following memorable plea: *“Don’t kill off the voluntary sector.”* Communication problems between the different sectors regarding children’s services were identified, including: not knowing if a child had a social worker; not knowing which channels to pass information through; and a perception that social services was not giving high enough priority to services for adolescents. In addition there was some resentment from voluntary sector delegates that they were considered less professional and not valued sufficiently by their statutory counterparts. The LSCB chair acknowledged:

“... we are not so systematised with sharing information with voluntary organisations. I took away from the [previous Denbighshire] conference the need to think about how to take this forward without breaching confidentiality. How would parents feel for example, about information being shared with a non-statutory body?”

These tensions were aired and managed within the context of the conference. This could be seen as the first step towards a strengthening of relationships. It is unclear how to interpret the lack of evident tensions between the sectors at the Llangollen and Birmingham conferences. At Llangollen this may have been because there were so few representatives present from the local voluntary and community sector. Given the resource environment that many organisations work within, where need outstrips supply, it would be a surprise if there were no tensions between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

Despite the tensions outlined above, many delegates identified their learning about the statutory sector and procedures, especially the LSCB. Some of the learning that was specified included: the application of national policies locally; the Common Assessment Framework; the legal framework; and local procedures. Such learning is significant because better knowledge of each sector would presumably facilitate the strengthening of their relationships. In addition some positive comments were made about the potential of the project to improve partnership working, with a suggestion that this could be facilitated by having similar conferences in the future. This suggestion arose from participants at the Brent conference, which was a bit surprising given the observation that representatives from the voluntary and statutory sectors had tended to sit on different tables.

It would appear positive that existing tensions were openly identified at the Brent and St. Asaph conferences. The ability of the project to navigate its way through these tensions will be a significant factor in determining its success, but this will only become apparent later. The airing of such tensions could be seen as a necessary first step to the strengthening of relationships. It is less clear how the lack of such a first step experience, at Llangollen and Birmingham, can be interpreted.

Aim 4: Explain how the pilot will influence policy and practice in England and Wales

The conferences were successful in generating local support politically, not least through the attendance of the lead council member for children's services at all four conferences. In each of the conferences, the lead member's input was near the end, and was distinctive from the other presentations in that they offered their reflections on the conference. The local MP had been due to attend the Brent conference but was sick on the day. Project members subsequently thought they had relied too much on the MP for providing the national perspective. A national perspective was most strongly provided at the St. Asaph conference through the presentation by the local Welsh Assembly Member. She talked for example about the review of services for vulnerable children that had recently been conducted by the Welsh Assembly. A very neat feature of her presentation was her ability to dovetail a local focus with a national perspective.

A national perspective was introduced into the conferences in other ways too, for example it was mentioned in all four presentations by NSPCC staff on the Safe Communities project. Some other presenters also made reference to a broader picture. At Brent for example, the lead member referred to the new Children Act and the extended schools initiative. The latter initiative was also mentioned by the lead member at Birmingham as a contrast for their local variation of this. The broader national picture featured least strongly at the Llangollen conference. Overall though, this aim did not feature much in the delivery of the four conferences. Realistically, given the focus on the local development of the project in each area, it is not clear how helpful it would have been to focus on the national picture much more.

This aim was addressed to a very limited extent, but it may not have been realistic to have focussed on this any more. It would have felt strange to devote a lot of attention to the national picture at these essentially local events.

The focus of this report is the launch of the Safe Communities project in three pilot areas. The impact of the project and the toolkit in particular will be further tracked in evaluation activities that include a follow up survey of organisations, case studies of its implementation and statistics on referrals to local safeguarding agencies. In this way a bigger picture of the impact of the Safe Communities project will be made over the life of the project.

Richard Cotmore and Paul Whalley



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