

The STAGE Partnership: Learning and Legacy

February 2021

In partnership:

**CHANGING
LIVES**

women's Centre

GRW
Empowering women to make informed choices

away out

together women

Basis
yorkshire



Foreword

The organisations involved in the STAGE partnership have strived for many years to raise awareness of the devastatingly poor outcomes for women across our towns and cities who have experienced the trauma of being groomed for sexual exploitation. We have also struggled to attract funding to support women in these circumstances. It is for this reason that when the opportunity for cross-regional funding for women became available through the Tampon Tax Fund, Changing Lives came together with five specialist women's services in the North East and Yorkshire to develop the STAGE partnership – A Way Out, Basis Leeds, GROW, Together Women and WomenCentre.

From the beginning, we knew that we would have much more impact to bring about change by joining together rather than working separately in our individual localities. What we did not necessarily foresee was how our shared purpose would be the foundation for newly emerging relationships between us all individually and our respective organisations, more than we ever imagined at the start. The dynamics of a large organisation such as Changing Lives leading a bidding process with smaller, specialist partners are potentially riven with power imbalance and associated challenges – and this has played out. However, our ethos was so strong from the start that it soon became clear that none of us would allow these obstacles to detract from what we set out to do. A new kind of partnership started to emerge based on growing trust and relationships. We were learning from each other with equal respect and we were protective of this.

As the partnership has developed, each partner has explicitly stated the intention to continue working together wherever possible. This is about furthering our legacy aims for influencing policy and practice locally, regionally and nationally around sexual exploitation, but also beyond this, we have already come together to pursue new opportunities for women-centred services.

This report from IVAR was commissioned to explore, interrogate and evaluate the development of the STAGE partnership. The report does not shy away from the challenges the partnership faced. We recognise that this is the reality of partnership working and collaboration and is also where some of the most important learning is in terms of what we would do differently next time. Especially in my role with Changing Lives, I wanted to make sure that there are no blind spots and there is honesty. This is so important now, as the sustainability of so many charities is challenged – it was ever thus, but it is seriously exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is the responsibility of us all to do everything we can to sustain a diverse and thriving sector.



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Authorship and acknowledgements

This report has been written by Heather Petch and Katie Turner, based on interviews, workshops and desk research carried out by the authors with the six STAGE partners.

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Introduction

When IVAR was approached by Changing Lives on behalf of the STAGE partnership to review their experiences and journey to date as a partnership, it was seen as an opportunity to:

- Draw out lessons learnt that could inform the STAGE partnership's own legacy and future work together
- Identify some of the broader learning for others wanting to embark upon or support similar partnerships, in particular those between larger and smaller charities.

The STAGE partnership felt that, while theirs has been far from a smooth and easy journey, it has been a successful partnership. It has paved the way for separate collaborations between the different partners as well as an intention to continue the work of STAGE in providing and influencing trauma-informed support for women in the North East and Yorkshire.

The partnership's diversity is of particular interest. The partnership is made up of charities that are of considerably different sizes – the smallest has an income of £200,000, the largest £21million. We often hear about the pitfalls of larger and smaller organisations working together and of large organisations pushing out their smaller counterparts from contracting processes. Less common are the stories about partnerships between larger and smaller organisations that have worked. Various STAGE partners had previous experiences of difficulties with each other that are perceived as typical of many partnerships involving larger and smaller charities, such as competitive bidding processes that encourage competition over collaboration or extremely tight turnarounds for tender submissions. In the main, the STAGE partners were able to rise above these types of challenges.

This IVAR report reviews STAGE's experience and journey to date as a partnership. It summarises the factors that are thought to have contributed to the partnership's success while also sharing a frank account of some of the challenges it has faced, and, in some areas, continue to confront, and how it has responded to these.

The work was commissioned by the lead organisation in the partnership, Changing Lives. Research included:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with Changing Lives' Executive Director and relevant project staff, and with the CEOs of each of the five other partner organisations
- Two facilitated discussions with the same group in years two and three of the project
- Short wrap up interviews to follow up on outstanding questions.

The STAGE partnership

The STAGE partnership has been funded by the Tampon Tax Fund, administered by the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) from January 2019 to March 2021 to provide trauma-informed support for women in the North East and Yorkshire who have been groomed by groups of men for sexual exploitation. The lack of an adequate response to this problem is systemic, so partner organisations came together not only to demonstrate how best practice can be delivered in different locations but also to influence policy.

Research into survivor experiences and the impact of the partnership's support is therefore informing national policy work to demonstrate the need for change as well as informing resources to enable the approach to be replicated nationally.

The partnership comprises of six organisations – a lead partner, Changing Lives, a 'major'¹ charity with c.£21 million turnover; Together Women and the WomenCentre, both of which are large² charities (over £1 million turnover); A Way Out and Basis which are both medium-sized³; and GROW, which is small⁴ (£200k turnover). The partner organisations are summarised below, with fuller profiles in Appendix Three.

Changing Lives is a national charity working with people facing the most challenging of circumstances including homelessness, addiction, contact with the justice system, abuse and exploitation. It helps people to develop the skills and self-belief to move past prior experiences, change their story and achieve a better future – for themselves, their families and their communities.

Together Women provides holistic services to women and girls with multiple and complex needs across Yorkshire, Humberside and the North of England. Services are delivered through trauma informed gender specific support, a key worker approach, peer mentors, 1:1, group work and therapy and signposting.

WomenCentre is a one-stop service working mainly in Kirklees, Calderdale and Bradford. The Centre has a wide-ranging suite of services enabling women to improve health and well-being, confidence and self-esteem, access training and employment opportunities, improve citizenship and social inclusion, have positive relationships and support the safety and well-being of their children.

A Way Out is an outreach and prevention charity tackling and preventing the exploitation of young people and families. The charity is based in Stockton-on-Tees and works across Cleveland and Durham. A Way Out runs four projects: Women Liberty (works with sex workers and female survivors of those at risk of sexual exploitation), Blossom (young women), RISE (families) and a youth outreach project working with 200 people per annum.

BASIS Yorkshire works with sex workers (women including women who identify as) and young people (girls and boys who are being exploited sexually or at risk thereof) and supports and empowers people to take informed choices. The charity predominantly works in Leeds but also other parts of Yorkshire and Humberside.

GROW supports women in Rotherham and Barnsley with a wide range of issues and often who are in crisis and have experienced distress and trauma. They deliver six projects: Post Abuse Support (for survivors of child sexual exploitation); MYSELF – an empowerment project for girls up to 18; Safe Space for women survivors of abuse; Trauma and Resilience; Transforming Rehabilitation.

¹ NCVO, 2020. *UK Civil Society Almanac*. size and scope definitions: <https://data.ncvo.org.uk/profile/size-and-scope/>

² Ibid 1

³ Ibid 1

⁴ Ibid 1

Detail on the origins, inception and structure of the STAGE partnership is set out in Appendix One. For more detail about the approach taken by the partnership and how it has benefited women who have experienced sexual exploitation, see the Theory of Change in Appendix Two.

Resources and guidance will be available from April/May 2021, informed by the experiences of women accessing the STAGE partnership's services and their caseworkers. These resources will be practical, accessible and designed for practitioners providing trauma-informed support across the country for women who have been sexually exploited. They will provide nationally relevant guidance but also recognise the need to respond to differences in local geographies and in the pathways that need to be followed, e.g. different processes for notifying the police.

Key highlights

The STAGE partnership has confronted challenges and difficulties along the way and continues to grapple with some of these. However, on the whole, the experiences of the partnership have been positive. The organisations involved plan to continue working together and believe there will be a strong legacy from the work carried out through STAGE to date. The following were some of the defining factors that were felt to have contributed to its success:

- **A partnership approach was taken at every level.** The **delivery** of the work on the ground is supported through case-workers from each organisation attending joint clinical supervision meetings. **Oversight** of delivery is led by the Single Point of Contacts (SPOCs) who meet on a bi-monthly basis and feed into strategic level discussions.
- **Strategic decision-making** and influencing is led by the six CEOs who meet on a bi-monthly basis to discuss STAGE and attend the 'influencing group' on a rota.
- **The range of skills and experience across the partnership.** Partners hold a mutual appreciation of each other's organisations, of the learning that comes from the range of experience across the partnership, and of the history and deep local roots that make up their unique expertise. Smaller organisations feel their contributions and expertise are valued, which has not always been their experience in other partnerships.
- **Partners appreciated the skill and success with which Changing Lives put together the bid,** although a short time scale meant that there was limited time to be inclusive and to build and develop the partnership before becoming active.
- **A shared ethos, including a strong commitment to working with every woman in a person-centred way focused on her unique individual goals and needs,** meant that challenges were overcome at the start of the project, such as with recruitment and other set up issues.
- **Accountability and governance structures evolved rather than being imposed early on.** Lack of accountability structures is an area of high risk for partnerships. Over its first 18 months, STAGE partners succeeded in co-designing structures that all described, towards the end of the partnership, as reasonably fit for purpose. Although a co-design approach was appreciated and felt to be most appropriate, some partners suggested that having some

organising principles from the start and standing agenda items would have been helpful.

For example, from the outset, regular reporting on the overall budget, shared data monitoring criteria and ensuring that an exit strategy, including the sustainability of services, was addressed. If these principles had been in place from the beginning of the partnership, even if adapted along the way, it may have helped to alleviate initial concerns about lack of clarity in decision-making processes, particularly in relation to strategy, influencing and sharing power. It would help for funding approaches to incorporate resources to allow time for partnerships to form and establish a set of accountability principles (to support equality of participation) prior to beginning more operational discussions.

- **The breadth and diversity of learning and evidence within the partnership.** Operating the same model but in different localities has enabled problem solving and strengthened each partner's services, including through increasing their ability to challenge and influence commissioners and statutory bodies in their local areas.
- **Partners share an emphasis on cooperation and joint working as opposed to competition to strengthen the positive impact of their interventions in women's lives.** Procurement strategies, including competition, were described as wasteful and time-consuming, whereas effective collaboration draws on different skills and expertise, including that of local areas.

Challenges and countermeasures

Collaboration and partnership working, regardless of the end goal or context, is rarely, if ever, easy or straightforward, and the STAGE partnership is no exception. It was important to STAGE partners that this report acknowledge and detail the challenges they faced as a partnership. However, the partnership's commitment to learning, review and iteration throughout has helped them to find ways in which to counter the challenges it has experienced. The following are some of the challenges encountered during the scoping and delivery phases, and the countermeasures that helped to overcome them.

1. The initial stages of working together



Challenge: Short timescale for submission of bid

There was limited time to engage and consult partners which also meant one partner was initially excluded:

'Changing Lives, through no fault on their part, were left with a lot to do in a short space of time ... in an ideal world, we would have played more of a significant part in helping to shape the application'

Countermeasure: Confidence in the quality and integrity of each other's services

The initial stages of establishing the partnership were some of the trickiest. Once funding had been confirmed, partners had to work quickly to establish relationships.

The red thread running through the project has been the shared ethos and **confidence in the quality and integrity of each other's services**. This enabled partners to hit the ground running with effective delivery in year one and to overcome practical and strategic challenges:

'We are all driven in delivery by what women are saying they want. The approach fits nicely into our ethos for delivering a good service.'

2. Varying experiences of multi-faceted partnerships



Photo credit: Changing Lives

Challenge: Limited experience of a multi-faceted partnership

Most partners had worked with at least one other partner on contract delivery, and several had taken a lead partner role in the past.

Different partners had worked with each other in partnerships and learning networks at local, regional and national levels, such as Women Lives Leeds, the North East Sex Work Forum and the Corston Coalition.

However, the whole group of six organisations had no experience of working together, and there has been little experience amongst STAGE partners of a service delivery partnership with specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that also incorporates learning and evaluation, as well as local, regional and national influencing goals.

Countermeasure: Challenge and disagreements were generally seen as constructive and as an opportunity to learn

The experiences of other partnerships and networks meant there were few illusions about the ‘forming and storming’ time needed to build trust and relationships:

‘You can’t be too hard on yourselves when you come together as a partnership. It takes time.’

‘You’re never going to agree all the time, so you take constructive challenge as an opportunity to grow, an opportunity to learn that you can take away into other spheres.’

3. Seeing the strength in diverse partnerships



Photo credit: RapidEye (iStock)

Challenge: Poor experiences of partnerships for procurement and smaller organisations’ fears of loss of identity

Experiences of working together on and/or bidding against each other have not always been positive in the past. For example, one larger organisation talked about how competitive bidding processes have repeatedly damaged relationships. This is because they often encourage competition rather than collaboration.

Smaller organisations also shared fears – some well-grounded – that their experience and identity would be side-lined and swallowed up by the dominance and power of much larger partners.

Countermeasure: All partners at all levels within their organisations believed strongly that the diversity of the partnership strengthened its expertise and effectiveness

There was a deep appreciation of the expertise that each organisation and their respective leaders brought to the partnership. Mutual respect engendered trust, which overcame some of the suspicions based on poor experiences in the past:

‘Every organisation is experienced in what they do, so it didn’t feel like a risk to work together.’

Countermeasure: STAGE did not set out to create duplicate services in each area

On the contrary, the identity of each organisation was valued:

‘A lot of energy can be wasted on both navel gazing and infighting and competition which is not solely the fault of the charity/voluntary sector, but commissioning and procurement approaches which often set organisations up to behave like that.’

Partners believe flaws continue in the recent Ministry of Justice commissioning process for women in the Criminal Justice system, the ‘Dynamic Framework’ that has replaced ‘Transforming Rehabilitation’ following probation reform. However, they now feel geared for better conversations underpinned by trust-based relationships.

4. Understanding the value and needs of small charity partners



Photo credit: Changing Lives

Challenge: Capacity within smaller organisations was limited

This affected their ability to keep up with the requirements for monitoring information and created some frustrations all round: for project management staff having to comply with DCMS expectations; and for smaller organisations struggling with thinly stretched roles which, for some, was exacerbated by having to furlough support staff in 2020.

Even some of the medium-sized organisations said that they had struggled to put aside the time needed to engage with the partnership, although they had done so.

Countermeasure: Smaller organisations understood the value that they brought to the partnership

‘Don’t underestimate the value that you bring to the table ... sit there as an equal partner’.

Countermeasure: Honest discussion about how it feels to be a small charity working with much larger charities

This did take place, although partners felt it ought to have happened earlier on in the partnership. It is important to understand what it means for a small organisation to be at that table and what resources are required so that smaller partners can contribute equitably. Smaller organisations thought that asking the question, **‘What do we need to do to help small charity partners?’** probably needed to be a standing item on each agenda as, with the best will in the world, it still felt as though this was often forgotten.

Countermeasure: Discussion of difficult areas was predominant

For example, there was discussion in year two about rotating the chairing and leadership of meetings to improve equality of participation. Such offers were appreciated, as long as they remained open offers, rather than a requirement, in acknowledgement that capacity was an issue for smaller organisations.

Countermeasure: Changing Lives used its capacity to support partners in concrete ways

This included shouldering the financial burden and offering a mix of either monthly or quarterly payments to partner organisations, rather than requiring partners to draw down funding in arrears (as is normally the case with DCMS funding). Partners were also grateful to be able to ‘lean in’ and access certain expertise from within Changing Lives. For example, their Communications Officer would produce draft communications which partners could then tailor to their own specific, regional audiences:

‘It was much easier to change bits than to start from a blank piece of paper’.

They also made time to talk through the communications strategy for the partnership which one of the partners said helped their understanding and skillset around project communications.

5. Influencing strategy in times of change



Challenge: Influencing strategy and political context

By year two, clarity about the influencing strategy had not yet been achieved. The strategy's development had been driven mainly by Changing Lives' Executive Director and included establishment of a high-profile group of largely cross-party parliamentary supporters, but its progress was hampered by the political context of prorogation, Brexit, etc. Some partners felt that the strategy needed to focus more on, and join up with, opportunities at local level, where there was greater potential to make a difference.

Countermeasure: The partnership provided a direct link to the issues and solutions on the ground, which, in turn, informed the changes to policy and practice required

The SPOCs had a pivotal role to play as they had direct experience and knowledge of the issues of women being sexually exploited but also understood what was required in terms of managing the staff delivering the work, e.g. their own self-care and well-being needs.

The SPOCs insights fed directly into the discussions of the influencing group:

'What we see and what we hear on the ground is what affects policy.'

Countermeasure: By the end of year two, an influencing strategy was in place which was developed collectively at strategy meetings

Leaders of the smaller charities also recognised that the capacity of larger charities enabled access to expertise – networks, contacts, knowledge and evidence – that they would struggle to find otherwise, given that their roles are so thinly stretched:

'As a small charity, we wouldn't have the time or capacity to access and learn from the strategic links that come with bigger charities, but I am able to be a part of this via the STAGE collaboration.'

'When you are one small organisation, you can feel like a voice in the wilderness but, in this partnership, we are in it for the long game and can lean on each other.'

6. Sharing leadership, accountability and participation



Photo credit: A Way Out

Challenge: Leadership, accountability and equality of participation

There were difficult discussions at a strategic level in year one. Leadership had been driven by Changing Lives in putting together a successful bid and in ensuring that partners were able to hit the ground running – this meant that there was insufficient time to build relationships and agree appropriate structures. Most partners flagged the need for greater equality of participation and clearer accountability structures:

‘The early days of the STAGE partnership reflects similar experiences with other partnerships and alliances, where processes such as an independent chair and partnership sharing agreement were put in place. Right now, it doesn’t feel like an equal partnership, but it has only been going for a year.’

Countermeasure: Structures for decision-making were allowed to evolve rather than imposed

A year and a half into the partnership, all partners emphasised that there was trust and an appreciation of their different but equally important contributions. Partners concluded that, on the whole, it had been right to let structures for decision-making evolve, rather than be imposed at the outset.

However, there were some unresolved governance and accountability issues identified in the final interviews and some concluded that some guiding principles from the outset would have been helpful:

‘When the CEOs started meeting, the focus was on sharing the rich experience in the group and not getting bogged down in minutiae. Maybe a bit more structure would have been useful but it was an interesting exercise: something about a more organic approach worked well.’

Some partners believed that greater clarity and structure in relation to certain aspects of the partnership would have been helpful, for example, sustainability, financial reporting and data monitoring expectations.

Countermeasure: Leadership from Changing Lives was relational, thoughtful and sensitive to the power dynamics which was demonstrated in its willingness to learn and adapt and the commissioning of this review

In the second year, problems arose in putting together a tender involving another STAGE partner. This experience has resulted in learning for Changing Lives’ business development team about what they need to do to support joint bidding processes between very different sized organisations.

Countermeasure: Partners were able to use their collective experience of the work and the evidence base built up across multiple geographies to go to commissioners with a ‘proof of concept’

‘We have been able to use the learning to provide a clear steer to commissioners. For work with women who have experienced sexual trauma, commissioners have used this to develop a service specification cutting across both Adults and Children’s Services, which is what STAGE is all about.’

‘Every organisation is experienced in what they do, so it didn’t feel like a risk to work together.’

Continuing challenges

As discussed in the Legacy section below, STAGE partners hope to continue working together when the Tampon Tax Fund grant comes to an end. While the experience of working in partnership to date has enabled them to identify measures that aim to counterbalance some of the challenges that they have faced, they recognise that they are on a journey and that challenges still exist and will continue to arise.

Sustaining STAGE services and continuation funding:

In the initial interviews several partners mentioned the need for a greater focus on continuation funding. By the final interviews, funding had still not been secured to sustain the services. One partner had been successful in obtaining local funding. Two partner organisations talked of fears of having to end services to a group of women whose needs cannot be met by other existing provision and/or of not being able to start work with new women:

‘We’ve got women who’ve built up a trusting relationship with us and we can’t just drop them.’

‘At the moment, we can’t start work with new women because we don’t know if we can continue and given the complexity of their needs and the typical experience of having been let down by systems since childhood, we can’t let them down again.’

At the time of writing, a bid is being prepared by Changing Lives to a national funder. However, partners were aware that the lead-in time for such funds can often be lengthy. Partners also understood that the Covid-19 pandemic had closed off some funding opportunities for a period of time. Changing Lives pointed out that because of their size, many grant programmes, other than Lottery Funds, are closed to them and that there are few grant funders who would fund such a large partnership across two regions as the Tampon Tax fund has done. It seems all partners agreed that, if at all possible, they would try and obtain future funding together to continue services. It was hoped that this might come from local commissioning through STAGE’s influencing work. However, as the Partnership has made clear in its policy recommendations, sexual exploitation is not the responsibility of any one department or public service, so, as a theme, it slips through the net of commissioning and is not funded.

At a local level, the resource base in many areas has also been severely constrained by the Covid-19 pandemic:

‘Influencing local commissioning practices is all well and good. We’ve got a round table in January but now in having to deal with the impact of the year-long pandemic their [Commissioners’] priorities are tight ... However important a local authority thinks this issue is, they can only cut the cake so many ways. All in all, the context is not conducive to continuation. The reality is now very different to one year ago.’

The key learning seems to be two-fold: at a policy level no one public service or department takes responsibility for this area of need; and from a partnership’s point of view, discussion about an exit strategy and agreement about leadership of and expectations for future funding are best discussed at the outset of a partnership addressing a theme which falls between service gaps. A number of partners felt strongly that funding should have been a standing agenda item for the strategy group and that if conversations about funding had started at an earlier stage, they would be in a better position.

Monitoring data and information sharing requirements:

Crucial data on race and ethnicity characteristics is lacking because not all partners collected this. This means that the partnership is unable to talk authoritatively about a sensitive and contested dimension to grooming and sexual exploitation:

‘There is a notion we are mainly dealing with white victims. But there are pockets of difference and we are not able to capture that as we haven’t required all partners to submit data on this and/or in a common format. I’m mindful that this is a hot potato in media, that our team of workers are not diverse ... but we don’t have crucial data to be able to talk about this authoritatively.’

Legacy

One of the primary reasons for documenting the STAGE partnership journey and lessons learnt was to inform the partnership's future work together and legacy. The following were identified as the key areas of legacy that the partnership hopes to build on:

- A more confident, independent STAGE partnership
- Promoting a positive partnership model
- Support national replication of the approach
- Continue to influence local commissioning practices
- Continue discussions and actions for influencing national policy and practice.

1. A more confident, independent STAGE partnership

The STAGE partnership wishes to continue working together and is actively seeking funding opportunities to sustain the work it has begun. Individual partners are also already working in partnership as different, smaller combinations of organisations. Improved communications, trust and understanding has strengthened joint working at local and national levels and in both service delivery and influencing ambition. The future plan for STAGE is for services management to be embedded in each of the partner organisations and for a longer-term policy worker to be based at Changing Lives and available to support STAGE partners' local and national level policy work, as they may have limited internal capacity to take this work on.

2. Promoting a positive partnership model

While the pitfalls and failings of partnership working are often recounted, particularly where combinations of organisations of significantly different sizes (in relation to income) are concerned, the success stories are often less well documented or publicised. Specifically, examples of those partnerships that are successful but are also willing to give a frank account of some of the difficulties and challenges faced along the way and how these have been addressed.

There is also a view held by some that women's organisations, in particular, are pitted against each other. The experiences of the STAGE partnership hope to encourage other voluntary groups towards working in partnership, including women's organisations, so as to deliver more effective services that address differing needs.

3. Support national replication of the approach

Resources and guidance are being produced for practitioners providing trauma-informed support across the country for women who have been sexually exploited in order to support national replication of the approaches piloted through the STAGE partnership. The strength of the guidance being developed is that it is based on the partnership's own on-the-ground experiences and embraces the differences between localities.

It also recognises the range of needs of different women, with specific attention to the interventions required to support certain groups, for example, women with learning disabilities.

4. Continue to influence local commissioning practices

Each partner has reported that learning from the STAGE partnership has improved its ability to influence locally and they expect joint working with each other will sustain this and inform relevant local events in towns and cities across the regions.

Events have been held in some areas, and/or are planned, with local police and crime commissioners, and safeguarding leads. A roundtable took place in January 2021, bringing people together from localities across the North East and Yorkshire regions.

The partnership has enabled the development of a common call, with a clear shared narrative, to articulate the work that is needed to improve the life changes and well-being of women who have been traumatised by sexual grooming and exploitation:

‘In meetings with commissioners, etc., it’s easy to get bogged down in details and offer them everything. STAGE has offered the language – ‘this is it and this is why’ – enabling [us] to be succinct and have clarity and purpose ... People need to hear information very quickly, very contained and to the point.’

In Cleveland, on Teesside, **A Way Out** has been able to make the issues more visible to commissioners and the leaders of statutory services. They have had meaningful conversations about how services can be adapted for women who have been sexually exploited.

In Kirklees, the **WomenCentre** has been influencing locally and successfully so. It has already secured an extension to a contract with the local authority which funds an additional worker to work alongside the existing STAGE worker.

5. Continue discussions and actions for influencing national policy and practice

Working as a partnership has enabled identification of common issues that cut across all geographies so as to enable evidence-based solutions to support and care for women who have gone through long-term trauma:

‘At a local level we’ve been raising these points for years and years, but to be able to get them into a national arena ... I don’t think people wanted to hear it, as they’ve not known what to do with it but having an influencing group that shows the scale of the issue and can start to identify solutions ... We need to upstream things and make changes at policy level that then filters to what’s on the ground.’

The ambitions of the STAGE partnership in relation to influencing national policy and practice are:

- To create local and national recognition of the need for commissioned, long-term support for adult survivors of sexual exploitation.

- Ensure that patterns of sexual exploitation are embedded in national strategic thinking across relevant government departments.
- Contribute to a much-needed debate to develop a new national framework for safeguarding adults from sexual exploitation, and a statutory definition of adult sexual exploitation and be inclusive of women who experience racism.

Conclusion

The STAGE partnership is perceived by the six partner organisations as a success. Participation and the learning engendered has both improved services for women who have experienced sexual exploitation who are overlooked by statutory provision, as well as increasing local influence. Partners have also welcomed the opportunity to engage in influencing at national level. As part of the legacy, all partners want to devote time towards joint working on longer-term influencing goals and Changing Lives is able to provide specific resources to support this work, such as the skills of its policy lead.

Critical success factors for partnership working include having a clear, strong sense of shared purpose; and high-quality relationships underpinned by trust. In addition, STAGE has benefited from a clear-eyed focus on good service delivery, enabling individual women to achieve their potential:

‘Together, we are on the long-term road of getting alongside women and not running services like a sausage factory.’

All partners – both larger and smaller – entered the partnership with a desire to learn together about how to overcome challenges and continue improvements. They came with a strong commitment to achieve changes in the understanding and response of other agencies (in particular statutory and commissioning bodies) to the needs of adult women who have been sexually exploited. This common ground has acted as a kind of glue.

The way in which power is exercised within partnerships can also be critical to their success, especially in cases such as STAGE where there are significant differences in the size of partner organisations. For most partners, previous commissioning experiences (including with each other) had created a degree of inter-organisational tension and wariness. Some of this mistrust was exacerbated by the Tampon Tax Fund application process which was short and allowed little time for Changing Lives, who put the bid together, to engage and consult with partners, let alone undertake relationship building or think through structures. Much of the application process was therefore driven by pragmatic decisions made by Changing Lives in response to the unrealistic time scales given by the funder.

Given the variations in size of the partner organisations and some poor experiences of other partnerships in the past, one of the outstanding features of the STAGE partnership has been the positive feedback and shared commitment to excellent service provision. However, we were asked to look at the learning, and the challenges are part of that. The early weeks and months were hard, and there was much storming and forming in year one. A partnership is also an ongoing process, and in our final interviews, several challenges were mentioned, which were either new to us or we thought had been resolved in year two.

The speed with which the new partnership had to be established meant that governance principles and accountability structures were neglected in the first year but evolved over the two-year life of the partnership. Many viewed this organic process as positive and felt that resulting arrangements were broadly fit for purpose. However, some pointed to a few examples of outstanding issues

which they felt may have been resolved if there had been clearer governance principles and accountability structures from an earlier stage.

Despite initial and ongoing challenges, the specific ingredients which have been most visible and dominant within STAGE – a focus on improving the lives of women who have experienced sexual exploitation, a shared ethos and approach – have engendered strong trust. Building on this level of trust has resulted in the barriers to effective partnership working – which were flagged by smaller partners and acknowledged by the lead partner in the scoping phase of this review – to be overcome.

Appendix One: Origins, inception and structure of the STAGE partnership

- The Tampon Tax grant of just over £1 million which has funded the two-year partnership required submission of applications at short notice with criteria issued in December 2018 for January 2019 submission. As a larger organisation with a clear Theory of Change to underpin the project, Changing Lives was able to draw on a range of internal expertise to work on the bid. A first task in preparing the bid was to focus the work realistically and select partners with a shared ethos.
- Partners jointly agreed to narrow the remit of the work to areas where there were ongoing police operations because this focus felt manageable and within the scope of the work and funding:

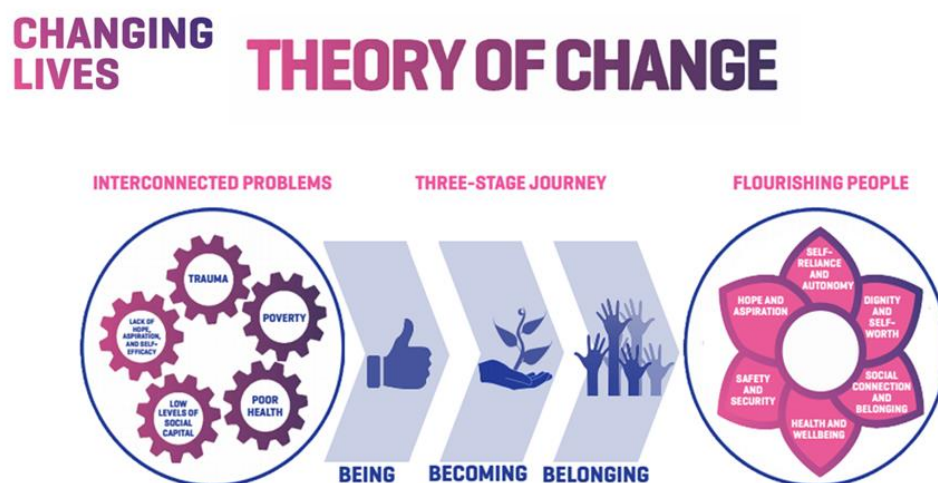
‘We looked at really high-profile cases pending or where there had been a serious case review pending ... the geography [of that was] alarming ... we realised that the money wouldn’t stretch to what was needed. Sad and terrifying that in many places there were pending investigations involving organised crime ... but there hadn’t been a high-profile case.’

Initially, one organisation that became a member of the partnership was excluded, but was then brought on board when they pointed out that they were working with a relevant local police operation.

- A project manager was employed by Changing Lives who has managed and coordinated the partnership’s delivery of agreed KPIs, the evaluation, and production of the toolkit and guidance. Each partner employed at least one support worker, and all described funding as ‘adequate’.
- The Changing Lives Executive Director of External Affairs has had overall responsibility for the partnership and has led on the national influencing work. Operational partnership meetings have been quarterly. Leads of partner organisations also met quarterly and, out of these meetings, a strategy group was established to make strategic decisions, including on the influencing strand of the project.

Appendix Two: STAGE Theory of Change and approach

The model of support uses a model based on Changing Lives' Theory of Change (ToC), which was designed by women with experience of sexual exploitation and focuses on how individuals move from interconnected experiences of trauma to live flourishing lives and develop pro-social identities.



- **Phase 1: Being** – Initially engaging individuals through assertive outreach, being responsive and flexible to their needs (housing, health, addiction). This phase is about building up trust through unconditional positive regard and a non-judgemental approach.
- **Phase 2: Becoming** – This stage supports individuals to begin building recovery. The focus is on supporting women to overcome trauma, address complex emotions and engage with court processes.
- **Phase 3: Belonging** – The final phase of support consists of building positive social networks and integrating into the community. Women are supported to link into community resources and build on their strengths through employment, training and education.

Women have a named keyworker who provides consistent support, including peer support opportunities, such as drop-ins and therapeutic groupwork programmes, creating safe, women-only spaces which foster validation, empathy and recovery.

In-reach support is also provided for survivors who are serving sentences in two women's prisons, where many are survivors of abuse and sexual exploitation, and including therapeutic support which enhances existing Through the Gate provision delivered by two of the partner organisations.

Appendix Three: The STAGE partner organisations

A Way Out is an outreach and prevention charity tackling and preventing the exploitation of young people and families. The charity is based in Stockton-on-Tees and works across Cleveland and Durham. It has a strong Christian ethos and is 'supported by the local Christian community' but does not expect all 29 staff and 60 volunteers to subscribe to the Christian faith. There are nine trustees and the Senior Management Team consists of two service managers – adults & young people and families, business development manager, a general manager and a CEO. With an income of c.£700k, A Way Out runs four projects: Women Liberty (works with sex workers and female survivors of those at risk of sexual exploitation), Blossom (young women), RISE (families) and a youth outreach project working with 200 people per annum.

BASIS Yorkshire works with sex workers (women including women who identify as) and young people (girls and boys who are being exploited sexually or at risk thereof) and supports and empowers people to take informed choices. The charity predominantly works in Leeds but also other parts of Yorkshire and Humberside. Basis has developed a reputation for not judging or 'saving'. There are seven trustees, four senior staff, including the CEO, 13 support workers, two systems change workers and three administrative staff, five associate trainers and 20 volunteers. Basis has an income of c.£770k and works with around 225 women and 73 young people per annum.

Changing Lives is a national charity working with people facing the most challenging of circumstances including homelessness, addiction, contact with the justice system, abuse and exploitation. It helps people to develop the skills and self-belief to move past prior experiences, change their story and achieve a better future – for themselves, their families and their communities. Changing Lives currently has nine trustees, over 700 staff members, including an executive team of seven, around 100 volunteers and works with around 13,000 people per annum with a turnover of c.£21 million.

GROW supports women in Rotherham and Barnsley with a wide range of issues and often who are in crisis and have experienced distress and trauma. Six projects focus on supporting women to overcome barriers to achieving their potential and 'celebrating their successes': Post Abuse Support (for survivors of child sexual exploitation), MYSELF – an empowerment project for girls up to 18, Safe Space for women survivors of abuse, Trauma and Resilience Project – delivering a trauma stabilisation programme and part of a 'real time' action referral hub for Operation Stovewood Survivors, and those who have experienced CSE/Adult SE, Transforming Rehabilitation – providing interventions and pathways for change for women in the criminal justice system, and REAL – a community based women's support group, and also a community Food Hub. It has 8 staff including a CEO, 4 volunteers and 8 trustees. The charity works with 188 women per annum and has a turnover of c.£200k and supports around 250+ women and girls per annum.

Together Women provides holistic services to women and girls with multiple and complex needs across Yorkshire, Humberside and the North of England. Services are delivered through trauma informed gender specific support, a key worker approach, peer mentors, 1:1, group work and therapy and signposting. The charity runs 'Women's Centres' in Leeds, Bradford, Sheffield, Hull, HMP New Hall and a social enterprise in HMP Askham Grange. There are 10 trustees, 62 staff,

48 volunteers and turnover is c. £1.6 million supporting over 3000 women each year.

WomenCentre is a one-stop service working mainly in Kirklees, Calderdale and Bradford. The Centre has a wide-ranging suite of services enabling women to improve health and well-being, confidence and self-esteem, access training and employment opportunities, improve citizenship and social inclusion, have positive relationships and support the safety and well-being of their children. There are 70 staff including a senior management team of five, 70 volunteers and a Management Committee of 14 drawn from an engaged membership of 300 (in July 2020). Turnover is £1.2 million and the charity supports 3000+ people per annum (mainly women and girls but also with small numbers of male victims of domestic abuse and some male perpetrators).