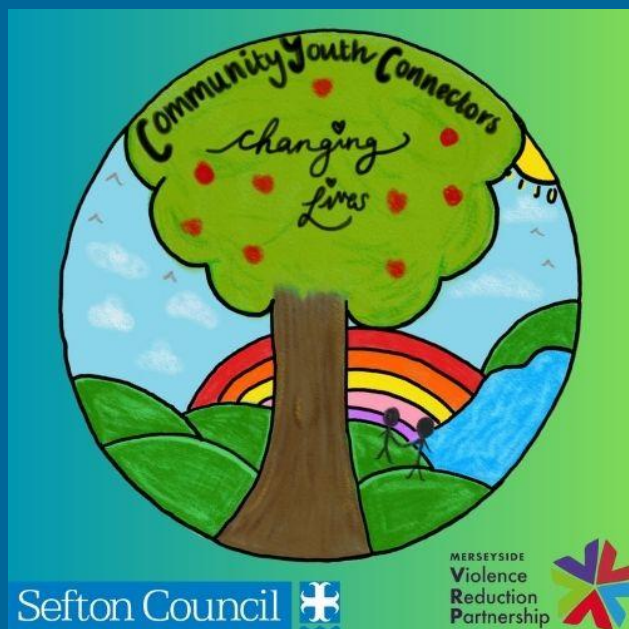# Evaluation of the Youth Connectors Programme, Sefton.

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Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership Whole System Evaluation 2022/23 Supplementary Report 1

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1. Introduction

Merseyside is one of the 18 areas allocated funding since 2019 by the UK Government to establish a Violence Reduction Unit. To inform the continued development of the Merseyside Violence Reduction Partnership (MVRP) in November 2019 (Quigg, et al., 2020), July 2020 (Quigg, et al., 2021) and June 2021 (Quigg et al, 2022) the Merseyside Academics' Violence Prevention Partnership (MAVPP) were commissioned to evaluate the MVRP whole system. As part of the 2022/23 evaluation, Community Safety Partnership leads from the five local authority areas in Merseyside nominated one MVRP funded intervention to be included as a case study in the whole system evaluation. This report presents an evaluation of the Youth Connectors Programme in Sefton.

1.1.   The Youth Connectors Programme

The Youth Connectors Programme was designed and developed by the Sefton Youth Justice Services to provide direct support to young women aged between 8-15 years whose experiences make them vulnerable to risk-taking behaviour or criminal justice involvement. The programme stems directly from an increasing number of girls and young women in Knowsley experiencing poor mental wellbeing, lowered engagement in education and increased engagement in antisocial behaviour. Data from local services showed many young women in this group were not accessing the support available, making them more vulnerable to risk, including criminal and sexual exploitation. The Youth Connector programme was designed to respond to this need by offering one-to-one mentoring support to young women to help them engage with wider services, enhance mental wellbeing, increase emotional resilience, and raise awareness of keeping safe. Both national and international literature has provided promising evidence in favour of one-to-one mentoring, showing that frequent and consistent support provided by a mentor the young person feels close to has a great effect on wellbeing and offending behaviours (Gafney, Jolliffe and White, 2022; O'Dwyer, 2019; SCSN, 2021).

The programme follows an early preventative approach that seeks to identify and meet the needs of young women and to reduce the likelihood of future engagement with Youth Justice Services. At present, the programme has been introduced in 13 schools across the North and South of Sefton borough. The North and South of Sefton were chosen for delivery as routine monitoring data indicated lower attainment levels, higher indices of deprivation and lower mental wellbeing among girls and young women in these areas. Schools in these areas were then invited to participate, using data on school attendance and exclusion rates, crisis calls and high-need student populations to select schools most in need of support. The programme is supported by partner agencies including Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council, and the Sefton Council for Voluntary Service (CVS).

1.2.   Programme Delivery

A team of female Youth Connectors with experience working with young people across different settings were recruited and assigned to participating schools across North and South Sefton. Youth Connectors work with teachers and stakeholders from services such as social care and early help workers, to identify and refer young women with risk markers such as exploitation, high-risk antisocial behaviour, and low mental wellbeing onto the programme. The programme recognises the crucial role trusted adults and educators play in the lives of the children they work closely with, as they are able to recognise and mitigate risks and vulnerabilities at early stages.

The Youth Connectors programme uses a young person led mode of delivery through weekly one-to-one mentoring sessions, usually delivered in school (home and community locations are also offered for young people facing difficulties attending school). The programme has also adopted an open-door service, so that young people can contact their Connector outside of their pre-scheduled sessions. The Youth Connectors Programme does not have a fixed delivery period, allowing students to receive support until they feel progress has been made. Young women also decide what goals they wish to work towards with their connector, with goals named by young people including more confidence, increasing self-esteem, controlling anger and aggressive behaviour, being better listeners and reducing social media usage time. The Youth Connectors use a range of activities to improve mental wellbeing and resilience, as well as introducing techniques young people can use outside of their sessions such as positive affirmations and journalling. Youth Connectors also work to help young people connect with their social circles and the wider community by matching young people to services and opportunities that align with their goals. This includes accompanying young people to their appointments, acting as young person's voice during stakeholder meetings, and arranging extracurricular activities. Participation in the programme is voluntary, with schools confirming that the vast majority of girls approached have accepted the referral and chosen to engage with the programme to completion.

The Youth Connectors have also identified that the transition from primary to secondary school is often a tumultuous time, placing already vulnerable students under additional stress and pressure. The Youth Connectors deliver a specialised school transition service, supporting young people from primary to secondary school, to prepare for and navigate life in their new school and link with peers in their new secondary school. In instances where students have moved to schools outside of the Sefton borough, Connectors have linked students with support and mental wellbeing services in their new school, setting up a support plan for the young person. Young people also benefit from one-to-one mentoring sessions specifically dedicated to this transition where Connectors upskill and prepare young people for secondary school environments and learning expectations.

2. Methodology

The aim of this study was to implement a process and outcome evaluation of Sefton Youth Connectors to 1) describe programme implementation, barriers, facilitators, and areas for development, and 2) explore stakeholder and young women's experiences of the programme and the actual and intended impacts. Semi structured interviews (n=11) were carried out with stakeholders, teachers, and young people in primary and secondary school. Stakeholders and teaching staff were invited to take part in the interview via email and interviews were conducted via MS Teams and telephone. Youth Connectors were used as gatekeepers to recruit young people to the study and sought parental consent for young people under 16 years. Interviews took place in person (at school or youth club venues) and via telephone. Young women taking part were given a £10 voucher to thank them for their time. All participants provided written consent prior to the interview and the study received ethical approval from the Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee (UREC Ref. No: 23/PHI/003). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interview data were coded and thematically analysed.

Stakeholder Interviews (*n*=5)

Including: Stakeholders involved in the implementation, design, and delivery of the Youth Connectors Programme and those in Youth Connectors roles.

Teacher Interviews (*n*=2)

Including: Educators from participating schools who worked closely with the young people involved in the Youth Connectors programme.

Young Person Interviews (*n*=4)

Including: Young people who have taken part in the programme at primary and secondary schools.

3. Findings

3.1. Delivery Approach

Participants identified two key aspects of the Youth Connectors programme which facilitated successful delivery. Firstly, Stakeholders and educators both recognised the narrative of continuity and long-term change built into the Youth Connectors' programme delivery. Stakeholders were aware that many interventions did not ensure continuity of support for young people beyond a fixed delivery period. Teachers noted that programmes without clearly defined exit strategies often have the opposite to their intended effect for participating students; without ongoing support some students could return to the behaviours they hoped to change. In contrast, teachers felt the Youth Connectors programme kept the school continuously aware of the programme's exit plans with Connectors facilitating referral to other organisations and services that to ensure that students had continuity of support.

> *"If we pull away, that's not a good exit strategy. If we, for example, six weeks before we know we're going to exit, start connecting them into another service, that's a robust exit plan. Because when we go, they've got someone else to pick them up and support them. And that's a much better transition than telling them 'Oh, no, you can't go to that service for another six months and I can't work with you' because then that young person ends up lost and then their mental health probably will deteriorate."-Stakeholder 5.*

Secondly, teachers and young people noted how the support delivered by the Youth Connectors programme was both unconditional and non-judgemental. Both groups expressed how although the programme followed a structure of one-to-one support and goal setting, girls were not left behind or discharged if they were unable to attend or make continuous progress towards these goals. Teachers specifically noted that the youth connector's willingness to work with young people in spite of the

barriers the young people were experiencing helped students engage with the programme as they felt they were not being given up on.

> *"You know what? With these children, with these students that we've got, they often are let down so often, you know, but their Connector hasn't let these kids down. She'll do what she promised to them no matter what." Teacher 1.*

3.2. Programme Facilitators

3.2.1. Multi-agency collaboration

All those interviewed strongly expressed that the partnership working between stakeholders, schools, and parents was one of the key facilitators of the programme. There was strong recognition that open communication between all parties involved helped the programme's aims to be met effectively. Stakeholders felt working closely with participating schools had ensured that the right target population were being identified and reached quickly through the use of a straightforward referral system. A highly collaborative work environment was also seen as essential in meeting the programme's objectives as it allowed progress to be measured more effectively, with any concerns relating to young people's safety and wellbeing being instantly communicated and addressed.

> *"Being able to identify the children in-house and keeping the referral really simple by just having a conversation with parents to introduce ourselves before we go and see the child has made a difference. Because sometimes that can put families and professionals off because they think, 'You know what? I just need some help for this this young person, and I've got to do all this form filling and ask the child all these questions', but they haven't needed to here." – Stakeholder 2.*

> *"The Connector and the teacher will have a conversation about that young person. We will then connect to the social worker or the early help and then we always speak to the parents once a week. So, after every session we'll say, 'She's being amazing', or 'She wasn't great today, has anything happened at home?' So doing that whole system approach I think is the key to this work." – Stakeholder 5.*

Partnership working with outside organisations was also recognised as a key facilitator. Stakeholders noted how working closely with these organisations enabled Connectors to refer students on to more targeted services when high-need support was required. This would initially begin as parallel to support from the Connectors and ensured continuity of support once young people exited the Connectors programme.

> *"We're always speaking to a lot of services around child exploitation, drug and alcohol services and domestic violence and we've got their referral forms.* So yeah, they'll always hear from us and we're always working together in one way or another. *It's an important ingredient." – Stakeholder 4.*

3.2.2. The absence of a stringent working model

A model that moved away from a fixed way of working with young people was described as an essential facilitating factor, as it allowed stakeholders to come up with creative and innovative tailored responses to the varying needs of each girl. A model that permitted autonomy allowed Connectors to

bring their respective experience and knowledge to their work and allowed students to work on their objectives at their own pace.

"It was like here's a laptop. Tell me what you think. Research, go and find out [..] they really invested in it and they've developed their own suite of resources. I think this was one of the magic ingredients as well because we've not assumed 'This is what they need'. And let's face it, some agencies can do that a lot but that has never been the case here." – Stakeholder 1.

3.2.3.   Connector-student relationships

By providing participating students with consistent support and showing the girls that their support is not conditional, Connectors helped foster a trusted relationship between themselves and the young person they were supporting. This relationship allowed students to feel safe opening up to their connector. Participants also highlighted that the external nature of the Youth Connectors programme strengthened this trust, as students viewed their Connector as a peer rather than someone in authority or that forms part of the school.

"I feel like we have a very good relationship. I just feel like she's a very chatty person and so am I and I like that we can just talk for hours and that I will not be judged. I feel comfortable because I know the reason she's kind of there is for me." – Young Person 4.

"The girls and I get along like a house on fire. I think they see me as another pupil and that works really well. You know, I'm not their parents, I'm not their teacher and I'm not social services either. So, it's a really good in between and I always say to them 'You can tell me like everything with no judgement'. They warm up to you." – Stakeholder 4.

3.3.   Programme Barriers and Challenges

3.3.1.   Varied Data Sharing Systems

A barrier that that presented some minor challenges during the initial stages of the programme's implementation was the matching up of young people's records across a number of data systems being used by different organisations. Stakeholders had worked to address this barrier by implementing a checking system and allowing data sharing across organisations.

"We had to build a kind of checking system so that we know that if a child becomes known to children's social care or youth justice, we're aware of that and we link in with those professionals and share the information where needed. But there was a barrier around the data systems and the recording because everyone is on different systems. So that initial kind of sorting out was a bit of a barrier for us and kind of trying to do that amongst changes within systems and things like that was a bit of a pain." – Stakeholder 2.

3.3.2.   External Influences

Connectors described how negative external influences, from friendship groups or other peers, can pose a challenge to the support being provided by the Connectors. As sessions tend to take place within school premises, this can make it challenging for students who are facing difficulties moving

away from negative peer influences to adhere to or to attend to their sessions. Nonetheless, Connectors have been seeking to overcome these barriers through the introduction of extracurricular sessions outside of school.

> *"I think outside influences are definitely a barrier to our work, because they're always inclined to listen to their friends more. And I think that's where introducing them to sort of a big group like we're going to be doing in the half term might really help with bringing them away from negative influences and showing them that there's more positive people out there." – Stakeholder 4.*

3.4. Outcomes and Impact

3.4.1. Emotional Regulation

Participating young people who had identified reducing anger and strong emotions as one of their personal goals, felt their ability to control and regulate their emotions had increased. Several participating young people discussed applying the emotional regulation exercises and techniques covered in their Youth Connector sessions in a number of different settings.

> *"I've been able to handle my anger better after we talked about certain techniques like me leaving the situation for a minute to calm down and then go back to it and handling it calmly rather than just lashing out. So now whenever I am in a situation like that, I do think like 'Let's leave for a minute'. So, I do use what we've been talking about, and it helped me stay calm." – Young Person 4.*

3.4.2. Confidence and Interpersonal Skills Development

Participating young people also described increased sense of confidence. Several expressed how this confidence inspired them to make a number of positive changes and to involve themselves in positive and rewarding experiences. Young people outlined how through their new-found confidence, they were actively able to resist peer pressure, both within the school and in outside social settings. They also felt more confident to make new friendships with other peers at school.

> *"It's so much easier for me to say no now. There was this girl and she was in the park and she said, 'Do you want some of my drink?" and I said, 'No, I'm not an alcoholic'. And she went, 'Are you sure you don't want any?' twice and I said, "I'm fine, find someone else.'" – Young Person 2.*

> *"I now have confidence to make mates. There was a new girl that joined [..] and I met her and I was like 'Do you want to be my mate?' and she just went 'Yeah'." – Young Person 2.*

School staff also highlighted how the ability to get involved in different activities through the programme proved beneficial to the self-esteem of some of the girls, as they recognised first-hand their ability to develop and practice new skills.

> *"It gave them something else to do outside the school instead of just wandering the streets as I know that that they do. They've actually obtained a focus now and they felt*

that they're getting something out of that focus as well, so it actually gives them that self-esteem that they've learned something new." – Teacher 1.

3.4.3.   Truancy Reduction

Schools also reported a decrease in severity of absenteeism from school and lessons, with Connectors and students attributing this improvement to both the work done within the mentoring sessions, and the positive relationship students had with their Connector. Young people being supported by the Connectors described being able to navigate school days better knowing that there is support available for them.

"I find myself looking forward to seeing my Connector. So it's like, I know that if I go in and something happens in school, it's not like going to build up on me. So when I've had an emotional week, at the end of the weekend, I know it's going to be okay if I go to school." -Young Person 4.

3.4.4.   Strengthened Key Relationships

The strengthening of pre-existing relationships was another outcome identified by stakeholders and young people. Many noted how the tailored support received, enabled young people to build a more secure relationship with their family, citing how such improvements had a positive impact on both the students as well as their respective family members. Stakeholders also highlighted how in some cases, students learnt to recognise the importance of moving away from negative relationships in favour of establishing positive ones.

"I'm now listening to my mum more and I'm respecting her more." – Young Person 3.

"We had a girl who was spending 8 hours on social media and she was detached from home life and wasn't doing so well in school. So we worked with her and her mum was like 'She still uses her phone sometimes but nowhere near as much and she actually engages and spends time with us now." – Stakeholder 1.

"One of the girls through our healthy relationship work has broken up with her boyfriend and she's got much more positive influences around her now. She was going down that path to sort of criminality but she was definitely heading that way, but she's pretty much done a whole 360 on mindset and is doing brilliantly." – Stakeholder 4.

3.4.5.   Reduction in antisocial behaviours

The Youth Connector programme was currently working to implement a programme of activities and training (including Mental Health First Aid training for young people) for young people to attend during school holidays. The intention of this programme was to bring the young people together with peers from outside their own social circles, such as students from other schools. Stakeholders noted attending extra-curricular activities with pupils from other schools had helped young people change any preconceived notions of prejudice or rivalry between schools and peer groups. The Connectors hoped to strengthen this through their holiday programme, which could lead to reductions in antisocial behaviour in the community.

"They're like if there is a girl from a different high school then she's automatically awful and there's quite that culture of like us versus them type thing. So together we broke down those barriers. And this is good both for them and their community because they will be making those links between school and seeing them as individuals rather than rivals they need to fight." – Stakeholder 3.

3.5.   Sustainability

Stakeholders felt there was scope for introducing Connector resources to young men, noting that although young women participating in the programme have made significant progress, they are still prone to multiple vulnerabilities from male peers who may not be in receipt of similar support. This was believed to pose challenges to the young women's ability to sustain such progress longer-term. Hence, there was a collective feeling that the introduction of a universal programme would help ensure continuity of positive impacts. Teachers also described high demand for the programme both in schools that were currently ineligible, and for male pupils in participating schools. Connectors felt that a universal approach to provision could help support the programme with future funding and continuity discussions.

"There's so much more we could do with boys as well, because quite a lot of the girls are talking about behaviours in school and obviously, you know, they're a mixed school and they're talking about how interactions with boys impacts on them. We're saying actually we need to work on girls mental health but there's still a need and demand to work with boys too." – Stakeholder 1.

Stakeholders felt they had developed a replicable programme which was achieving positive outcomes and was sustainable. Stakeholders expressed how with further exposure, the preventative model used by the Youth Connectors Programme could be applied to a number of settings, geographical areas and programmes, ultimately ensuring that such important work carries on.

"You could replicate it. I think it's replicable, and that's part of my leverage for its sustainability as well, actually. The fact that this is replicable and it's working and you could nuance it differently. I think this is good solid prevention work and so if our views as partnerships, local government or national government going forward is around prevention, this is actually something to consider." Stakeholder 1.

4. Discussion and Recommendations

The Youth Connectors programme was established in 2023 to help fill gaps in support service provision for young women who were identified as at risk of exploitation and antisocial behaviour across the North and the South of Sefton local authority area. The programme uses community Connectors to provide one to one support sessions for young women across 13 schools who were identified as having high levels of need within their respective student populations. The service is offered to female pupils between the ages of 8 and 15 who are referred on to the programme by their school. The programme provides tailored and targeted support allowing young women to set their own goals which have tended to centre on improved behaviour in school and with family, increasing one's self-esteem and

confidence, and becoming more assertive in resisting negative peer and external influences. This report presents the results from a process and outcome evaluation, providing a closer insight into the implementation and delivery of the programme and impacts.

4.1.   Implementation and Delivery of the Programme

Findings from this evaluation have attested to a number of key findings across the initial stages of the programme's implementation and execution. Stakeholders highlighted how the VRP funding has been vital in helping secure the programme's strategic vision for young women in areas of high social need and in providing the programme with guidance and direction.

Although initially, the programme experienced difficulty in sharing information across organisations about referred young people, close collaboration with social care, youth justice services and other partners emerged as an essential factor in both the design and the delivery of the programme. Connectors all discussed how working closely with these groups has vital been in the safeguarding of young women referred to the programme by discussing concerns which emerged in mentoring sessions, developing relevant support plans and ensuring referral to specialised services.

Significant to the programme's delivery was also schools' willingness to participate in the programme. Although some schools were slow to respond to the initial invitations, there was now a sense of enthusiasm shared across schools to become involved with the programme. Teachers revealed how they quickly understood the benefits and the impacts the programme would have on their students. Strong relationships and been established between the youth Connectors and teachers, allowing schools, Connectors and parents to share pertinent information and remain informed about the young people's needs and progress. This relationship has also had direct impact on the mentoring sessions, as Youth Connectors have often sought schoolteachers' experience of working with particular students to help tailor the sessions towards their needs and interests.

4.2.   Programme Impacts

All interview participants provided evidence of numerous positive impacts resulting from the Youth Connectors Programme. In particular, significant improvements in school attendance rates, lesson attendance rates and punctuality for school and lessons were noticed as soon as a few weeks after the students started being supported by their Connector. Students were also observed forming and identifying with more positive friendship and peer groups in school. Young people also described a number of positive changes including greater emotional regulation, dedicating more time to actively listen to and spend time with their family, and keeping themselves and others safe whilst resisting peer pressure. This suggests the programme's impacts were not only felt by young people but also their family, social circles and the wider community.

Although the Youth Connectors programme was only launched in the last year, this report has found promising initial evidence for the programme's impacts. While some young women spoke about using the exercises and techniques introduced by their Connector after they were no longer in receipt of direct support, evidence on longer term outcomes of the programme is currently lacking. The Youth Connector programme should therefore implement routine monitoring of outcomes for young women with a pre-established follow up period to create a body of data that can shed light on the programme's sustainability. Further evaluation should include follow-up interviews at context-specific

intervals, with young women who received support during primary school being interviewed after they transition to secondary school, and with those who received support in secondary school being interviewed after leaving school. These follow-up interviews would not simply measure the longevity of the programme's impact but also whether the programme has influenced the young women's achievements and opportunities both in and outside of school.

Of considerable interest, all those interviewed revealed how the trusting relationships developed with the Youth Connectors influenced young people's engagement with the programme, and ultimately, it's impacts. Students attested to feeling more comfortable opening up to someone who had no preconceived notions of them, making them feel less judged. This also highlights a key concern regarding the sustainability of the programme going forward, as it suggests that the experience and external nature of the Youth Connectors team is an important facilitator which would be lost if schools and educators themselves were to replicate the programme. In order to ensure that the impacts continue to be sustained, this report recommends sustaining this external delivery model and involving young women who had previously received support through the Youth Connectors programme in shaping and designing delivery to support them in school.

Finally, the Youth Connectors service has increased young women's engagement with services by taking a young person led approach to delivery, using flexible sessions based on young people's goals and increasing young people's skills (for example through mental health training for young people). The Youth Connectors service should ensure that this learning from young women is fed back to statutory organisations and schools across Sefton to ensure programmes are being designed and delivered in a way that can meet these young women's needs.

4.3.   Conclusion

The findings presented in this evaluation have highlighted key facilitators and barriers to the development, implementation and delivery of the Youth Connectors programme and highlighted a number of intended and actual impacts. Overall, the programme provides a unique offer of tailored one-to-one mentoring support to young women. The programme gives young women the ability to set their own goals and supports them to work towards achieving them by increasing their skills and confidence, and improving their mental wellbeing. It also provides young women with opportunities to help them find their place and voice in the wider community. This evaluation has produced a robust body of evidence that reveals the initial success of the programme during its first year in supporting young women who are at risk of exploitation, offending and poor mental wellbeing.

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