It Takes a Village to Raise a Child (VRAC)

East Sussex Survey and Local Scoping
May - June 2019

Final report and Thematic analysis

Ali Winstanley
June 2019
aliwinstanley@gmail.com

Contents

Introduction

As the first part of the scoping stage of 'It Takes a Village to Raise a Child' project, a period of surveying and research with key figures and organisations working with young people in East Sussex was commissioned in order to inform the design and development of the project. This was undertaken in May and June 2019.

Survey methods

13 respondents were surveyed via telephone, in person and over email in May and June 2019.

Survey Design

Surveys varied in length depending on the respondents' time, with some common questions, some questions tailored specific to the individual and some questions rotated so a number of areas could be covered whilst also being mindful of respondents' time.

The survey was loosely split into two parts:

i. **The current East Sussex Landscape - What are the issues affecting young people?** Assessing the current issues and difficulties young people face in East Sussex in education, engaging with activities and their overall mental health and wellbeing

ii. **How can VRAC create positive change for vulnerable young people in the area?** Mapping the various considerations and strategies respondents believed any successful local project with young people should encompass. Scoping ideas for new innovative approaches and novel methodologies, and insight into how front line teams should look.

--

Survey respondents

Respondent breakdown:

7 respondents - VCSE sector
Lisa Dando - CEO Brighton Woman's Centre (Project partner)
Claire Piper - Amazing Futures Project Coordinator, Amaze
Michelle Trunchion - People in Partnership Manager, Southdown Housing
Jon Green - Keywork Manager, Education Futures Trust
Shannon Payne - Youth Community Development Lead, Sussex Community Development Association (SCDA)
Michelle Nice - Partnership Development Lead, East Sussex Parents and Carers Council
Karen Laver - Village Agent - Children and Families, Action in Rural Sussex

5 respondents - Local authorities
Judy Perraton - Lead for Emotional Wellbeing in Schools, East Sussex County Council
Atiya Gourlay - Equalities and Participation Manager, East Sussex County Council
Min Stone - Locality Link Worker, Seaford, East Sussex County Council
Alison Sorlie - Locality Link Worker, Hailsham, East Sussex County Council
Andy Joyes - Youth Project Coordinator, Hailsham Town Council

1 respondent - NHS
Viki Ashby - Local Transformation Plan Manager / Manager of i-rock youth counselling service, Sussex Partnership NHS Trust

---

Survey Findings

i. The current East Sussex landscape - What are the issues affecting vulnerable young people?

A number of themes emerged in this section of the survey. Many of these will be universal across the UK and have been seen in recent national media reports, whereas others may be more specific to the demographics of the East Sussex area and the particular make-up of the two pilot town areas, Seaford and Hailsham.

✧ **Reasons for young people locally struggling at school**

Top responses:

- **Mental health, anxiety, low self esteem** Respondents thought young people with mental health issues could find it hard to be in groups, or deal with the pressure of school. With constant assessment now and targets that have to be hit, this all has a knock on effect on these children. Mental health problems may also not be taken seriously by people or understood by schools and access to support at early stages is very limited.
- **Learning disabilities / different learning styles** Mentioned by most respondents. Young people may have a diagnosed or undiagnosed learning disability or may just not be suited to the 'rigid' learning environment of most state schools in the area - their needs aren't identified. Large classoom sizes were also cited as having a negative effect on these children. Lack of one to one or tailored support for children with different learning needs, or a variety of learning environments means these young people can fall behind, misbehave and eventually disengage.
- **Looked after children** This demographic were reported as struggling at every stage of development and education. Some want to learn but may be let down. One respondent mentioned a child keen to learn but let down by administrative procedures - nobody ensured she was registered for exams. These young people can lack consistency in key workers and withdraw trust in individuals or institutions, leading to struggling at school and then dropping out.
- **Complex families, chaotic home lives** Family breakdown, divorce, responsibilities and stress at home such as caring for a mentally or physically ill parent can all affect the ability to engage and not fall behind. Respondents gave case studies of this, where children are only attending for an hour or two a day because of carer situations at home, but are given no consistent one to one support at school and don't meet CAMHS threshold.

Other responses:

- **Bullying, relationships at school**

- **'Self fulfilling prophecy'** Respondents reported when children are punished with detentions with no effort made to understand their behaviour, their behaviour then deteriorates and they take on the labels given to them such as 'low achiever' or 'truant'.
- **Poverty** Stresses at home around adequate housing, food and basic needs have an obvious knock on effect on children's ability to flourish at school.
- **Early trauma** Children who have been through this can find school extra challenging

✧ **Reasons for young people locally leaving school early**

Top responses:

- **Mental health** This was mentioned by every respondent. Statistics show 45% of young people with mental health problems are out of full-time education with many finding they cannot deal with the social and academic pressures.
- **Learning disabilities and styles** Respondents believed young people with different learning styles and needs often aren't identified or catered for. Some with more complex learning disabilities can struggle with social side of school. In general these young people can stop engaging as the school environment isn't catering for them and then fall behind.
- **Looked after children** High proportions of this demographic drop out. Can be a real lack of one to one support or guidance in particular for these children. They may also lack trust in people or institutions and have a distinct lack of consistent figures of support.
- **Academic pressures** With so much pressure now to achieve, this can prove too much for some children, especially if they also have mental health problems.
- **Complex families, chaotic home lives** Some young people may have carer responsibilities at home and have to help parents with physical or mental health conditions. There may be a lack of support to keep attending school. These young people end up putting parents first and abandon their own needs.
- **'Home education'** Respondents reported that many children are given home education status as an alternative to exclusion and so parents don't get in trouble with the council, but this often means the original problems with them engaging with school are not tackled and they get little support or learning at home.
- **Family attitudes and education level** Some families may encourage children to start work early and not continue with education. It may not be in the parents experience to stay in education so there is a lack of support for children to do this. Can be no culture of separation in these families.

Other responses:

- **Family relationship with school**
- **Bullying**
- **Transport difficulties**

♦ **Reasons for young people locally having mental health difficulties**

Top responses:

- **Social media pressure** Mentioned by almost every respondent, this was cited as having a huge impact on young people's mental health, due to the pressures it inflicts on young people. Many reported that young people 'don't have the tools to manage' social media.
- **Lack of one to one support** Respondents believed high proportions of young people don't have 'one trusted adult' they feel they can go to for support. This means problems can escalate, especially without access to early intervention services. They also reported that young people can also feel their mental health issues are not taken seriously or understood by adults, can often be dismissed as 'a phase' if they do confide in people.
- **Looked after children** This demographic have consistently high levels of poor mental health due to issues such as early trauma, a lack of consistency in trusted figures and scarcity of one to one support.
- **High CAMHS threshold, poor access to early intervention services** Mentioned by almost every respondent, this was cited as the cause of a situation where you 'have to get worse to get better.' Poor access to early intervention services means young people deteriorate and are led to think they need another person to get better. Respondents thought that if self help skills, resources and activities were accessible at an early stage, young people could feel more empowered and start to recover a lot earlier.
- **Exam pressures** Also mentioned by many respondents, the pressure to achieve at school now was deemed a leading cause of poor mental health across the demographics of young people - both from working class and more middle class backgrounds. The way schools now assess constantly was deemed very stressful, as well as the cutting of services such as music and arts which might offer some respite from constant academic study.
- **Complex families, chaotic home lives** Carer responsibilities at home, parent ill health, domestic violence, divorce, blended families were all cited as common causes of mental health problems in young people.
- **Deprivation** Another common response, especially since pockets of East Sussex are 'as deprived as parts of London.' Struggles with adequate housing, poor living standards, food, access to transport, accessing benefits system are not uncommon for young people and their families, which can feed into poor mental health.

Other responses:

- **Early trauma**
- **Body image, celebrities**
- **Bereavement**

◇ **Reasons for young people locally not engaging with activities**

● **Peer pressure** Young people want to be where other young people in their circle are, so may not engage with youth clubs etc if not deemed 'cool.' Alcohol and drugs can be more appealing after a certain age.
● **Lack of appealing options** Some respondents thought the youth club model was 'outdated' and the religious venues for some of these groups could be off-putting. They also thought there could be stereotypes around youth clubs and who they are targeted at.
● **'Latch key' children** Respondents talked about some numbers of young people who are 'always out' - they don't want to engage with buildings and like to be outside 'hanging around', not being tied down somewhere.
● **Lack of anonymity** In small towns where many people know each other and gossip is common there can be uncertainty and shyness about who might also be attending activity groups, especially if it's something like a 'wellbeing' group that might have certain connotations around mental health.
● **Difficulty in travel between areas** Rural transport was also reported as a common issue, especially if parents are living in poverty, disengaged or unsupportive so unable to drive young people to activities and bus services might be limited or prohibitive financially.

◇ **Further issues affecting young people in pilot areas**

Some key individuals surveyed working within Seaford and Hailsham also gave some insight into specific issues in these areas that may affect young people.

Seaford

● **Drug and alcohol** There can be problems in fields and rural spaces
● **CAMHS waiting list** Although a nationwide issue, Seaford GPs are reporting huge problems with children and young people's mental health and their ability to access services for them and are finding this very difficult to manage. Thresholds are now very high to receive treatment and there is still a long waiting list of 8-9 months.
● **Small insular town** Reports that Seaford is like a 'little island' and that young people don't want to leave the town. Very local networks.

Hailsham

● **Lack of anonymity** Being a small town can cause blocks to engaging with activities as young people are unsure who they might see there.
● **Alcohol** Groups of young people gathering with strong alcohol. Police have done some work on this with local vendors.
● **Places to meet** Reportedly an issue with physical spaces. Some are too small, larger spaces aren't engaged with and some are on the edge of town.
● **Rural boredom** Reports of fights on the cuckoo trail and shooting air guns at road.
● **Large traveller population** There is a traveller site in Hailsham and young people from here may not engage with school.

- **Immigration** Reports of refugees on same estates with some tension
- **Transport** Hailsham is a rural area so it can be difficult to access services and activities elsewhere

ii. How can VRAC create positive change for vulnerable young people in the area and build new front line teams?

There were many ideas shared by respondents when posed with questions about what would make a real difference to young people in the area, what specific activities might be helpful for young people and what they might do with more money and more capacity. What makes good front line support was also explored.

Key themes emerging were around one to one consistent support, early intervention services, a range of physical and creative activities to free young people up from the rigidity of school and skills based activities where young people can take something away. Good front line teams were deemed to be consistent, joined up, with the ability to develop long term trust with young people and the skills and training to offer support for mental health problems.

✧ **Top suggestions for making a real difference**

Top responses:

- **Mentoring, peer befriending, one to one support** By far the most common response was some kind of one to one contact for young people, either from peers or mentor figures. Respondents reported a huge need for young people to be supported by people either like them (who may have gone through what they have, perhaps peer supoprters) or who 'get' them and don't judge them. Projects such as Sacred Earth near Uckfield were mentioned. Older people who had 'lived a bit' were leaders here and young people felt they could talk about drugs with them and not be judged, since these older people had experienced them in their youth too. A real need reported for mentor figures to really understand a young person's world. A lack of young people with 'one good adult' to talk to and get support from means there is a strong need for mentor figures who won't dismiss young person's concerns, have insight into mental health and a 'real understanding of empathy.' Trustworthy figures young people believe want to find solutions for them were deemed extremely important.
- **Consistency in contacts and services** Many respondents mentioned how consistency can be a real issue for vulnerable young people who may be passed between services and individuals. There is a real need to create consistent mentor figures, services and activities that young people can attach to and trust - especially those with early trauma issues who may struggle with attachment and for whom this is an ongoing issue. Any projects that can encourage long term trust in an individual were cited as very beneficial, at a regular time and with a regular person.
- **Skills for life, embedding learning** Short term projects that end were seen as sometimes unhelpful as it can be another ending for young people, so an activity for example in a school that could also be learned by teachers so they could continue sessions after the project finishes was mentioned by some respondents. Activities that leave young people with skills for life that they can also continue themselves were deemed very useful.
- **Early intervention, filling the gaps of CAMHS, signposting and tools** Many respondents talked about the need for preventative services and support so mental health problems

don't escalate. There is also a real need for services that focus on early intervention with support for young people to access resources, skills and services that will boost their wellbeing and self esteem as well as giving practical support and advice with mild mental health problems.

- **Range of activities for different children** Respondents were keen that there would be a range of activities on offer for different young people who might enjoy different things - catering for different tastes and abilities.
- **Co-design** Many respondents stressed the need for any new project to be co-designed with young people, their parents and carers and schools, so they don't have something 'done' to them because of research or policy - it's more an activity that they have expressed interest in. Respondents told of the need for young people to 'feel safe', and how vital it is that they are asked how the conditions can be created where they can feel this.
- **Basic needs such as benefits access, housing, food need to be considered** Respondents reported that many young people need help just getting their basic needs met, ensuring they have appropriate access to benefits, the food they need and safe and secure places to live.   Once these needs are met they may then engage with extra activities but they felt it was important to start here - referring to Maslow's pyramid of needs.
- **Joined up services** Many respondents talked about young people being moved between 'pillar to post' and a lack of communication between services, suggesting that a system that was easier to navigate and more in touch with each other would be very beneficial to vulnerable young people to stop them 'falling through the cracks.'

◇ **Types of activities for extended learning time**

Choose from Creative Arts, Sports, Getting active in nature, Self-reflection / Self-awareness Relaxation / Mindfulness / Mental Wellbeing, Skills for Life

A number of respondents said all of the activities suggested would be useful and encouraged a range to be on offer to suit different tastes and aptitudes. Some were unsure about Mindfulness - it was reported as being difficult for some and not for everyone. Also emotional wellbeing education was thought useful by some but others reported that some people can be put off by group activities where you may have to talk about feelings. Some respondents felt that branding of activities was important - the term 'wellbeing' can make people aversive. Skills based activities where young people could take something away were deemed very important by many respondents.

- **Mentoring, peer support, one to one support** Again, the leading response and mentioned by every respondent. So many young people are lacking support that this was seen as a crucial element to any kind of new project for young people in the area.
- **Physical activities, sports, movement** Many respondents had first hand experience that these sorts of activities were useful for young people, especially as many are sat at a desk all day, and recent local pilots were mentioned where teenage boys had an hour combining physical activity and emotional wellbeing education a few times a week, with positive results. Some respondents mentioned energy levels and how teenagers can feel stifled in school environment with little movement all day, really benefiting from even a short period of physical activity.

- **Creative and performing arts, kinaesthetic activities, music** Lots of responses focused on how many creative and musical activities are now being cut so school is quite serious. Some respondents thought it can be helpful with all the pressure young people are under to just allow them to 'play'. Performing arts such as drama and circus skills were reported as being particularly helpful for young people with learning disabilities.
- **Relationship building whilst doing an activity** Some respondents praised 'indirect' activities to boost wellbeing. This involves setting up an environment where young people learn a new activity but may get to talk to somebody at the same time and slowly build a relationship, without it being the obvious primary aim. This can be less invasive for some and might lead to them opening up.
- **Manual outdoors work** Reports of projects involving working in a farm setting being very beneficial to young people locally. One such project mentioned - Sacred Earth near Uckfield - saw high levels of attendance and young people seemed to benefit from being 'put out of their comfort zone', especially those who never usually let themselves get dirty. Reports of lots of local possibility for similar projects like this in East Sussex, being a largely rural area.
- **Volunteering, helping community, having purpose** Some respondents were keen that any activities were seen as empowering and involved the young people helping others, rather than being told to do something just to help themselves. This was reported as building connections with the community and boosting self esteem. There are also a number of volunteer options locally through organisations keen to engage young people which some respondents thought could be utilised.
- **Animal activities** This now has growing recognition and has been shown to be a valuable way to reach vulnerable young people who may not engage or have behavioural, trust, social difficulties and / or learning disabilities. There are a number of local animal organisations also starting to work on project with vulnerable young people or keen to do this. It was reported to be very valuable for a young person to have a mutually beneficial relationship with an animal, especially those that are rescued or in sanctuaries. Sometimes vulnerable young people can feel the animals have had a similar life to themselves which can lead to a strong bond.

- ✦ **Front-line teams**

- **Consistency** This was the top response since so many vulnerable young people are shifted 'from pillar to post' between individuals and services, and may have already suffered rupture in their family life and early trauma making attachment difficult. Consistency and ongoing support from one person was seen as necessary for any young person to have the chance of building up trust and sharing elements of their lives and experiences.
- **Mental health awareness** It was reported that many young people feel they do not have a trusted adult to talk to, and when they have raised their mental health concerns with people they have felt dismissed. Mental Health awareness and training such as Mental Health First Aid, Safetalk, Coaching and Active Listening training were all mentioned by respondents as vital training. They felt it was of strong importance for front line teams to enable young people feel 'really listened to.' Awareness of what real empathy is and what helpful responses might be to young people in distress were also seen as key.

- **Understanding young people's worlds** Respondents praised the use of peer befrienders who have 'been through what they have', since young people can often relate to and look up them. For those who weren't peers, it was thought to be of strong importance that front line teams took the time to understand young people, what they enjoyed and the issues affecting them and crucially, didn't make them feel judged.
- **Holistic approach** Taking into account all aspects of a young person's life, being able to help them with practical things such as signposting and practical advice to issues with school and learning as well as offering emotional support.
- **Networking, joining up and pooling skills, partnership working** This was mentioned by many respondents, with the need for local organisations supporting young people to be more reliably networked and aware of each others' skills, working in partnership more, keeping in closer contact and following up with each other when young people have been passed on to them.

Conclusion

It is clear from this piece of work that there is a mental health crisis for young people in East Sussex and beyond. This appears to be in part caused by a variety of key factors such as social media and the social pressures entwined with it, academic pressures due to constant assessment at schools, lack of consistent trusted figures to speak to and chaotic and complex home lives.

This situation is clearly being exacerbated by the high threshold required to receive treatment by CAMHS, the length of waiting times and the lack of services working on prevention, early intervention and providing tools, resources and support to empower young people to boost their own wellbeing and educate themselves about their mental health.

Alongside this, many young people with different learning styles in East Sussex are struggling with school or dropping out early due to learning environments that are not appropriate to them, their needs not being identified or met and a real lack of consistent one to one provision. Looked after children, those with complex or unsupportive families and young people living in poverty are also particularly at risk, as well as young people who are offered 'home education' as an alternative to exclusion and whose original behavioural issues are not tackled. Wider activities aimed at young people are also often not engaged with due to peer pressure, aversion to committing to something, lack of appealing options and also issues around transport in rural areas of East Sussex. There was also exists some stereoytpying around activities like youth clubs, with many believing the model is out of date.

In terms of potential solutions, the emerging theme from this piece of work is the urgent need for varieties of mentoring and one to one support to help fill in the gaps for young people. The support needed is across a wide spectrum including help navigating the school system and identifying and meeting learning needs, support with emotional wellbeing, self esteem and achieving their goals as well as help with practical skills, advice and support around housing, benefits and food through signposting to helpful organisations and services.

Another major theme apparent within this piece of work was the need for consistent figures and fixtures in young people's lives. Respondents reported that it was only through long term relationships with reliable figures that young people managed to build trust and start to share aspects of their lives and with many vulnerable young people experiencing attachment issues from early trauma and chaotic home lives, this consistency is paramount in making any kind of lasting change.

When asked about particular activities helpful for young people, co-design and consultation with young people was viewed as crucial by many respondents in informing content of any projects. Many respondents praised sports and physical activities as a way to engage young people who were often used to sedentary lifestyles sat at desks, on consoles and using screens. Anything skills based that young people can take away was also thought highly of due to it's ability to empower young people. Activities that were long term and delivered at

the same time and by the same person were generally cited as the most valuable as well as having a variety of options on offer to appeal to different preferences. Skills based activities were also viewed as beneficial in helping people gradually build relationships and talk about themselves in a non-pressurised way, whilst absorbed in something else.

Creative and performing arts and music were also recommended, since many of these activities are getting cut by schools and young people are losing an ability to 'play.' Some of these kinds of activities were also reported as beneficial for those with different learning styles, such as drama sometimes being helpful for autistic children. Work with animals and in outdoor farming settings was also suggested as a way to reach young people who may have different learning styles or be harder to engage, with some existing positive examples of this as well as some organisations in local rural areas keen to branch out into these sorts of projects.   Branding was also deemed important with reports that young people can be reluctant to attend 'wellbeing' groups in smaller rural places due to fear of being seen and stigmatised. Volunteering was talked about as a valuable way to empower young people and to package an activity in a way that they were helping others and not that they needed help themselves.

Good frontline teams were deemed to be consistent, empathetic, with the ability to develop long term trust with young people, possessing the skills and training to offer support for mental health problems and really listen to young people's concerns. There was also a need for them to understand the world of young people and appear non-judgemental so vulnerable young people could reappraise their image of what an authority figure was and develop trust. Better communication and pooling of skills between front line teams and wider services and organisations in East Sussex was also reported as being vital in ensuring young people didn't fall through the net.

Recommendations

Providing activities that have a one to one element, a regular and consistent time and individual leading the activity, a long term time frame and the chance to embed skills either within teachers so they can continue delivering the activity after it finishes, or within young people themselves, are the key recommendations based on this survey.

It is clear from this piece of work that co-design with young people and schools is essential - this should be the next step in the scoping process to gain proper insight into what might work for young people.

However, based on some of the feedback from this survey and the assets and needs of the local area, here are some two examples of the way potential projects could be shaped:

Skills based physical or creative activities that have also have a one to one, peer support or mentoring element

This could be a sports team where individual mentoring is also offered by an older adult or a peer as well as the group activity, developing individual goals with the young person about what they want to learn or achieve and time to talk through this as well as taking part in the activity. With many sports and activity clubs and leisure centres locally, this might be an obvious approach to consider. There could also be a group goal such as a tournament, or series of matches.

Another option could be an arts group teaching specific crafts or visual arts skills such as pottery, mosaics where participants could also receive one to support in achieving their goals and talking in a wider holistic way about their lives. Drama and performing arts groups could be another example, again with some one to one element to support individual goals. Group goals for these activities could be an exhibition or final performance.

Group leaders would be trained in Mental Health First Aid, Active Listening and awareness enabling them to offer emotional support as well as skills based advice.

Alongside this, there could be be a peer support element to these groups from young people who may have studied sports, art or drama, or who were at nearby colleges completing courses and could act as further role models for young people taking part.

This approach would embed new skills within young people that they could continue themselves at minimal cost to boost their wellbeing. It would give them access to networks of others enjoying the same activity and could grow their abilities to work confidently as a group as well as experience nurturing one to one support. Support could be put in place for networks to continue after the project finishes, for example social media groups and meet ups.

Outdoors, farming and animal based volunteering activities with one to one and peer support element

Utilising local assets such as the rural landscape and coastline as well as local voluntary organisations could give young people a chance to be active outdoors and in nature but also help the local community, empowering themselves at the same time.

Activities could be set up with local charitable organisations related to the outdoors, conservation, animals and wildlife where young people get chance to gain new skills and knowledge through learning about for example the environment, animal care, permaculture, wildlife and land management.

There could be group goals attached to this (perhaps around transforming an outdoor space) as well as ongoing individualised support to find out what young people are enjoying and would like to learn more of. Again leaders would be trained in Mental Health First Aid, Active Listening and have an awareness of issues young people might be facing and how to deal with that helpfully.

There could also be a peer support element to this sort of project, with local students at colleges such as Plumpton who specialise in agriculture and animal care, being brought in.

In this example, young people would be empowered by learning new skills perhaps quite different to what they were used to as well as working for a 'cause' and doing something for others. The animal element of this kind of activity might also be beneficial to young people with learning or social difficulties and the manual team work required might help young people develop trust and form relationships where they can talk whilst being engaged in an activity, as well as grow confidence in their abilities in a group.

--

Interreg

EUROPEAN UNION

2 Seas Mers Zeeën

VRAC

European Regional Development Fund