

Robyn and Molly – a simulation tool for trauma informed approaches to child sexual exploitation

Robyn and Molly is a ‘serious game’ training tool which aims to strengthen police skills in trauma-informed investigation and victim engagement, specifically focusing on female child sexual exploitation.

First published
18 September 2025

Key details

Does it work?	Promising
Focus	Organisational Prevention
Topic	Child sexual exploitation and abuse Leadership, development and learning Vulnerability and safeguarding
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Region	South East
Partners	Police Education
Stage of practice	The practice is implemented.

Key details

Start date	August 2023
Scale of initiative	National
Target group	Children and young people Families Victims Workforce

Aim

The aims of the initiative are to:

- develop knowledge of identifying and recognising signs of child sexual exploitation
- develop understanding of how to support those affected by child sexual exploitation using a trauma-informed approach
- develop skills for officers and staff who are investigating child sexual exploitation cases
- improve understanding of how best to prepare and present child sexual exploitation cases to the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS)
- recognise and respond to secondary trauma in police officers and staff
- develop skills to engage with girls with lived experience of child sexual exploitation

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of the initiative are to:

- improve understanding of trauma-informed approaches to child sexual exploitation
- improve confidence among officers and staff engaging with girls who have lived experience of child sexual exploitation
- improve decision-making skills for child sexual exploitation investigations

Description

Kent Police and the University of Kent identified a need to upskill officers and staff to understand and respond to girls affected by child sexual exploitation (CSE). The following research questions were developed to address the growing concerns around the welfare of girls lived experiences of child sexual exploitation (GLE-CSE):

- what key features should be included in a simulated training tool for police to foster a trauma informed approach (TIA) to support, help and intervention with GLE-CSE?
- what do police value, dislike or desire from the pilot training tool created to promote a TIA to support, help and intervention with GLE-CSE?
- how do police feel the simulation training tool has impacted on their knowledge, skills, and behaviours around TIAs to support, help and intervention with GLE-CSE?

Between November 2022 and February 2023, a collaborative design was created between the Centre for Child Protection (CCP) and Kent Police. The aim of the design was to explore key areas of development for a pilot-simulation training tool, called Robyn and Molly. The head of the CPP from the University of Kent and child centred policing manager led the planning of the planning of the workshops. During this process they agreed on the following processes:

- learning outcomes
- interactive elements
- storyline and character profiles
- script writing
- training strategies to engage officers and staff

Between March and June 2023 outputs from the design process were integrated into the creation of the pilot training tool. The tool aims to embed TIA with GLE-CSE. Using Articulate software, the CCP led on creating the pilot training tool. CCP and Kent Police developed the following training material:

- instructions on how to use training tool
- finalised learning outcomes
- activities and worksheets
- training pack
- overview of essential concepts

Collaboration between CCP and Kent Police continued as key design elements were applied, questioned, and finessed.

Between July and October 2023, the pilot training tool was implemented, evaluated, and modified. Nine training sessions were delivered to 77 detectives. CCP and Kent Police jointly facilitated these training sessions, sharing key training expertise and supporting application and implementation of the training tool. CCP led in the development, administration, and analysis of an evaluative questionnaire. Feedback was discussed between CCP and Kent Police to consider and implement adaptations and modifications to the pilot-simulation.

Between August 2024 January 2025 a further 200 police and staff investigators received the training.

Cost

CCP and Kent police received just under £50,000 from the economic and social research council. This funding covered the purchase of the covered Articulate software, art design of characters, ongoing collaboration and travel. An additional £2,500 was granted from the University of Kent to support the initial knowledge exchange between CCP and Kent Police as well as a research assistant post.

Evaluation

The [evaluation](#) commenced in July 2023 and was led by the University of Kent and Kent Police.

Training was delivered in the South East and was evaluated using a mixed-methods survey with short answer feedback and questions which required Likert-scale answers. There was a 100% response rate. Participants completed feedback forms before, during and after training where they self-assessed against learning outcomes. Internal audits of case files and an internal questionnaire 6-months post training was also distributed to gather longer term impact results.

The evaluation established:

- A collaborative knowledge exchange identified six priority learning outcomes (LOs) for the pilot-simulation training tool.
- Qualitative feedback highlighted participants liking the interactive, varied, and immersive nature of the tool as well as the group discussions in a safe environment, informed trainers, helpful

resources, and the overall case scenario and topics explored throughout the day. Areas for development included enhancements of the interactive content for an even more immersive experience and the further development and elaboration of key topics.

- The training programme was evaluated as relevant and effective in enhancing the knowledge and understanding of trauma informed approaches to investigating CSE cases. 95% of delegates rated the training as 'highly relevant' or 'relevant' with 99% also rating the tool as 'very helpful' or 'helpful'. Improvement across all areas LOs was evident.

Overall impact

The partnership between Kent Police and the University of Kent has ensured the utilisation of a pilot-simulation training tool embedding a trauma informed approach (TIA) within police responses to girls with lived experience of child sexual exploitation (GLE-CSE). The detective superintendent for Kent Police shared:

"For the officers trained within the pilot, the impact of the training; increased confidence and understanding... in how they would respond to CSE, appreciation of what it means to be trauma informed and recognition of the impact their interactions can have."

It also led to reassessment of risk in specific cases and an overall increase in recordings of trauma.

This project strengthened Kent Police's capacity building by sharing novel training technologies and evidence-informed perspectives. Project impact was recognised by a detective superintendent for

"innovative solutions to many of the key issues of training large numbers of staff in what is a complex area of business."

and the Strategic Prevention Head of Command Award (2023) highlighted that it was valuable for

"improving approaches to trauma informed investigations and therefore...service and support to our most vulnerable young victims in Kent...(as well as) drive and commitment to improving the police response to CSE investigations and improving police."

A detective superintendent highlighted a positive cultural impact, supporting Kent Police

"to be victim centred in (their) approach, ensuring that (they) eradicate victim blaming language."

Kent Police has since modified this training so that the first half of the training is mandated for all roles within policing to tackle victim blaming language while the full delivery of this training is now available for detectives to cover a broader understanding of TIA investigations when working with GLE-CSE. It has also attracted interest for use on a national scale from national policing leads for child exploitation investigations.

Post-training feedback included a plethora of comments highlighting improved knowledge:

- *"(I have a) better understanding of trauma responses and CSE."*
- *"broadened my awareness of CSE."*
- *"I now understand more about trauma informed approaches."*
- *"This will assist my engagement and investigations every day moving forward."*

A vital shift was identified post-training in understanding how past traumas manifest in young people's presenting behaviours. Between March and June 2023 (pre-training) and October to December 2023 (post-training), the presence of the word 'trauma' in children's assessments raised from 12 to 28. Considering the regional 21% decrease in individuals reported missing in the same post-training timeframe, the 133% increase in the recording and consideration of trauma post-training has contributed to a significant enhancement of police assessments with GLE-CSE. For example, in a Kent Police assessment of a GLE-CSE, pre-training case notes highlighted victim blaming language like:

- *"made deliberate plans to go missing."*
- *"this is normal for (her)."*

Past trauma was not acknowledged; however, post-training recording omitted victim blaming language and identified the young person as someone who "has experienced adverse childhood trauma which leads her to struggle with her emotional regulation."

Three to six months post-training, delegates highlighted the instrumental impact of training:

- *"(It) helped me to have empathy and greater understanding of previous and current events to offer support to the child."*
- *"I have engaged with intermediaries for achieving best evidence interviews with female victims of exploitation offences since the training. This has assisted in supporting them to give their evidence."*

- *"improved my understanding (of) the detail needed to support an investigation."*

Learning

'Serious game' simulation training is linked to immersive and more readily retained learning. Building on this premise, expertise, findings from research, and a participatory action approach was applied between centre for child protection and Kent Police collaborators and delegates who offered detailed feedback on development and delivery. This action-oriented approach ensured a highly targeted and engaging simulation while generating a sense of ownership among stakeholders. It provided unique professional datasets, unpublished research, and frontline and first-hand identification of areas of concern, which were integrated into the pilot-simulation for enhanced impact.

Although this project secured funding from the economic and social research council, 'serious game' development often faces challenges, particularly around funding. With under £50,000, the force developed a pilot with basic presentation. A higher budget of over £100,000 would have richer graphics and interactivity.

'Robyn and Molly' has been evaluated regionally, however, early national delivery shows strong learning outcome achievement, engagement, and relevance. The force is seeking further funding to support national rollout and evaluation, helping refine the training to better address broader, context-specific needs.

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