

‘I THOUGHT I WAS THE ONLY ONE’

**Listening to those affected by sexual violence to transform
the Suffolk support system**

Policy and practice briefing - executive summary

Authors and contributors:

Dr Katherine Allen
Dr Laura Stevens
Professor Jo Finch
Autism & ADHD
P.H.O.E.B.E
Restitute

Introduction

The Suffolk support system

People living in Suffolk who have been affected by sexual violence have access to a [range of specialist services](#). Sometimes, people do not recognise or feel comfortable naming their experiences as sexual violence. Others prefer not to tell anyone that they have been affected by sexual violence or are unsure where to go to find specialist support.

The Suffolk system includes a wide range of 'mainstream' or non-specialist services. People who have been affected by sexual violence continue to need and navigate non-specialist services, including: police, social care, health, voluntary sector and community-based organisations, schools and colleges and higher education.

Because non-specialist services regularly see and interact with people affected by sexual violence, including those who have not told anyone about their experiences, it is important that they are [trauma-informed](#). This means that all services across the Suffolk system should be safe, trustworthy and accessible for people affected by sexual violence, removing barriers that can delay people seeking and receiving support.

About the research

This was a research collaboration between, [P.H.O.E.B.E.](#), [Restitute](#) and the [University of Suffolk](#). [Autism and ADHD](#), [P.H.O.E.B.E.](#), [Restitute](#) and the [University of Suffolk](#).

The aim of the research collaboration was to explore how services across the Suffolk system can work together in a way that is trauma-informed, listens to, and respects the needs of people affected by sexual violence.

We invited 20 participants (6 interviews; 12 workshop participants; 2 survey participants) to share their views about:

- What an ideal Suffolk system would look like
- How local services can work in partnership with people affected by sexual violence, to ensure that services meet their needs (co-production)
- How researchers should be guided by, and work with people affected by sexual violence, to ensure that local research on sexual violence reflects their needs

The ideal Suffolk system

Participants said that an ideal Suffolk system would place people with lived experience at the centre, as shown in Figure 1.

This means that services should listen and respond to individuals, rather than taking a 'one size fits all' approach. All services would communicate clearly and sensitively, and would work to meet people's specific communication, cultural and accessibility needs, collaborating with other services where needed.

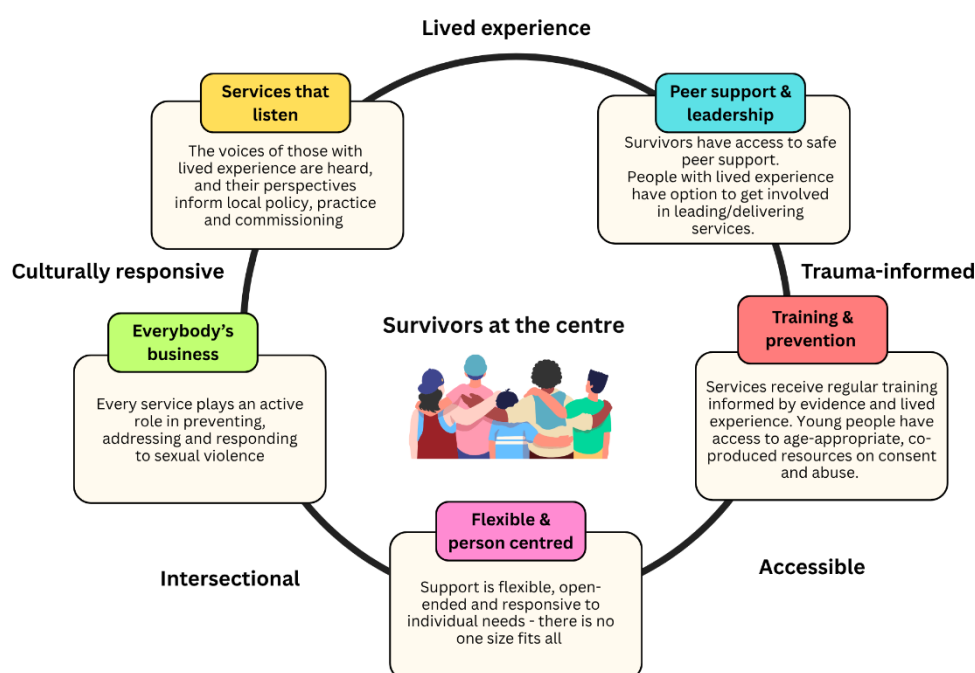


Figure 1: Ideal Suffolk system

Services would recognise that some people may need flexible or open-ended emotional support, or to come back and access services again in future, because 'recovery' from sexual violence is not a straightforward process.

Participants emphasised the need for a local system that understands, recognises and seeks to prevent sexual violence, as well as responding to people who are seeking support after violence. To move towards this ideal Suffolk system, participants recommended regular training for mainstream services, targeted interventions for potentially vulnerable groups, and age-appropriate education on relationships, consent, and sexuality in schools.

Participants affected by sexual violence especially highlighted the significance of peer support and building community with others, and the 'healing' that some people find in taking on an advocacy role. Peer support – and peer visibility in leadership and support roles in specialist services – also enabled participants to feel less alone, and was a powerful counterweight to shame:

***““I didn't know anybody was out there. I thought I was the only one”
(Interviewee 1)***

“I think that's honestly how you combat shame. If it's everywhere, if I speak about what happened to me, you speak about what happened to you, that person speaks about what happened to them, it's so much easier to just report, get the support, and just improve services” (Workshop 2, participant 1)

Recommendations for co-production and future research

Participants highlighted that all research and co-production activities related to sexual violence should be guided by individuals affected by sexual violence, as well as core principles of trauma-informed practice, including:

Safety

- activities should take place in a safe, comfortable space, with access to emotional support before, during and after the session
- when designing group activities, sessions should be built around opportunities for positive and creative engagement, to reduce the risk that people will feel pressure to discuss personal experiences

Choice

- provide a range of options to contribute, including one-to-one, group, textual, in-person, virtual and creative activities
- participants should have the option to contribute anonymously, so they can speak freely and do not feel pressure to respond in a particular way

Voice and collaboration

- Contributing to research and co-production can be empowering and 'healing' for some people affected by sexual violence, countering shame and promoting visibility. Services should recognise the value of lived experience perspectives, and create opportunities for collaboration with those who would like to contribute
- Services should work together and use their data to understand the needs of different groups of people affected by sexual violence, and to assess changing patterns of need, gaps and barriers in services available locally

The leverage points detailed in Figure 2 were identified as viable routes for achieving positive change locally, drawing on participant insights, practice perspectives, local knowledge and research evidence.

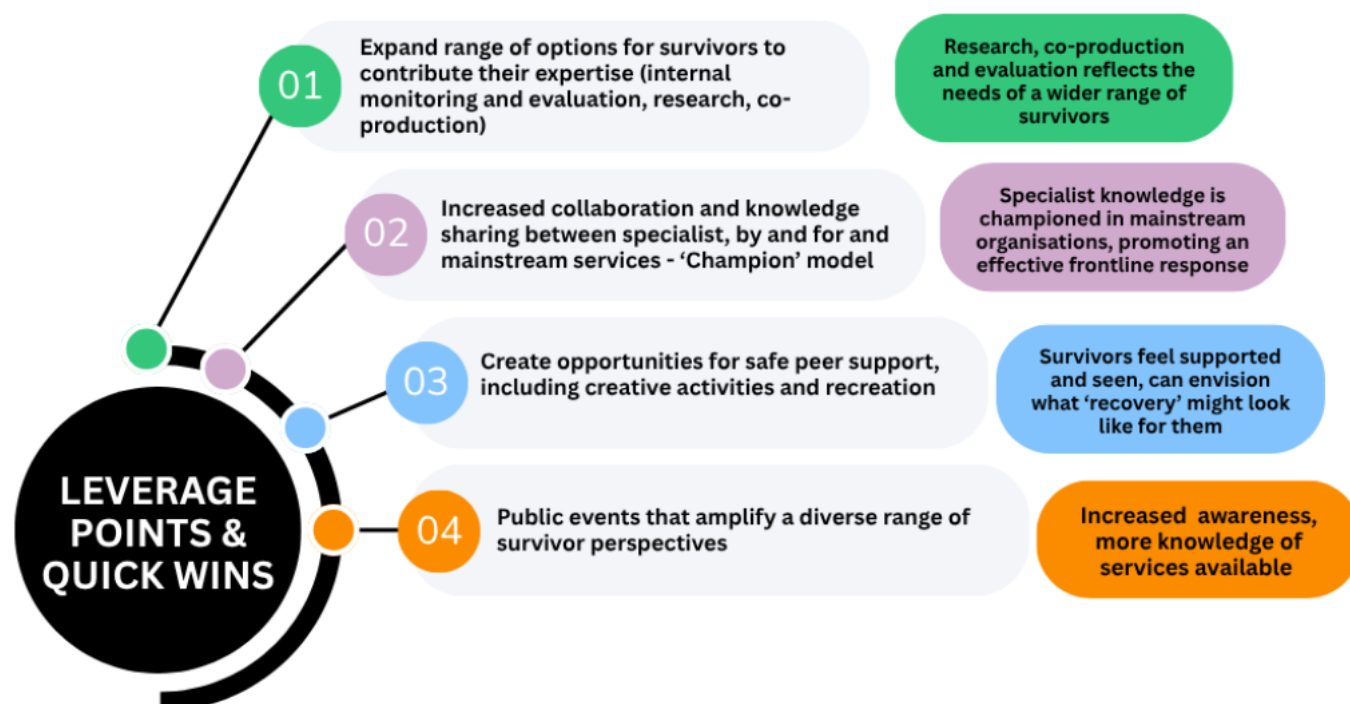


Figure 2: Leverage points and quick wins