

# What's going on

to Safeguard Children and Young  
People from Sexual Exploitation?

## Research Briefing

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## Summary

This research project has explored the extent and nature of the response of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) to the 2009 government guidance on safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation<sup>1</sup>. Where the guidance is followed, there are examples of developing and innovative practice to protect and support young people and their families and to investigate and prosecute their abusers. However, the research has found that the delivery of that dual approach to child sexual exploitation is far from the norm. There are three areas that cause particular concern:

- **only a quarter of LSCBs in England are implementing the guidance**
- **young people, their families and carers receive awareness raising in less than half of the country**
- **the prosecution of abusers is rare and, where criminal proceedings take place, young people's experience of court can be intolerable**

These and related findings are set out below together with recommendations on how to ensure that action is taken, locally and nationally, to address this form of child abuse.

## The research

This Comic Relief-funded research was commissioned to review the implementation of the 2009 government guidance *Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation*. Separate but related work is taking place in Wales and Northern Ireland. The research does not cover Scotland as there are different legal and organisational arrangements.

Welcomed for giving a helpful overview of safeguarding sexually exploited young people, the 2009 guidance recommended that each LSCB have a proactive strategy with a dual approach to prevent child sexual exploitation: protecting young people and prosecuting abusers. It suggested that LSCBs take a strategic lead with a specific protocol; a multi-agency sub-group to implement joint interventions; and coordination of the delivery of the strategy. It noted the need for support for sexually exploited young people and their families or carers.

The research, led by Principle Investigators, Professor Jenny Pearce and Sue Jago, was carried out between 2009 and 2011 with a multi-disciplinary team from the International Centre for the Study of Sexually Exploited and Trafficked Young People, based in the Institute of Applied Social Research at the University of Bedfordshire.

## Methods, ethical considerations and accountability

Survey forms were sent to all LSCBs in England (144 in 2010) with a resulting return of 100 (70%). Follow-up questionnaire based semi-structured interviews were held with 24 LSCB areas, resulting in 89 questionnaires for analysis. Seminars were run with specialist practitioners focusing on specific questions about implementing the 2009 guidance. The *What Works for Us* young people's participation group responded to some of the findings and shared reflections on effective services. Quantitative data analysis was undertaken using SPSS (version 18). Qualitative data analysis was thematic, undertaken both manually and using Nvivo software.

A data monitoring system was developed and piloted to produce a 'snap shot' of 1065 sexually exploited young people worked with in nine regions of England on 6th June 2011. A review of training on child sexual exploitation was undertaken and a self assessment checklist developed for LSCBs to use as a tool for assessing their progress in safeguarding young people from sexual exploitation.

Ethical considerations followed British Sociological Association and Barnardo's guidelines and approval was given through the University of Bedfordshire Ethics Committee. Quality assurance was maintained through regular reporting to a multi-agency Project Advisory

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<sup>1</sup> DCSF (2009)

Group, independently chaired by Professor Susanne MacGregor from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

A regular newsletter, *What's Going On?*, was produced to communicate with practitioners on progress on the research project and to create a platform for the sharing of policy, practice and research on child sexual exploitation.

## **Key findings: Co-ordinating a local response to child sexual exploitation**

### **1 Child sexual exploitation is a form of child abuse**

A conceptual shift is needed to safeguard older children from abuse outside the home. Qualitative and quantitative data suggest that against competing demands on resources, child sexual exploitation fails to be recognised as of equal priority to sexual abuse experienced by younger children in the home. Sexually exploited young people experience sexual abuse, rape, violence, abduction, intimidation, emotionally subtle and violently explicit coercion. It is child abuse: specialist staff trained in child sexual exploitation are needed in LSCB teams.

### **2 LSCBs are failing to safeguard young people from sexual exploitation**

Approximately three quarters of LSCBs are not proactive in implementing the 2009 guidance. Only a quarter of the country has current protocols with co-ordinators to oversee the work in operation; just over one third (38 of 100) has a sub group in place addressing sexual exploitation and a specialist project providing services for young people. Well over half (64 of the 100) survey respondents had 'no plans' to appoint a co-ordinator and a third of the country reported that they had 'no plans' for developing a protocol or strategy, with some overtly stating that child sexual exploitation was not a priority for them. Co-located units, where key practitioners from children's services and police work together in a team, were identified as an 'ideal type' for developing the dual strategy. However, only around 10% of 100 LSCB areas that took part in the research have co-located units in place.

### **3 Isolated pockets of good practice have been developed, usually as a response to a child death or through the commitment of a local 'champion'**

Despite there being some examples of excellent practice, this occurs in 'pockets' across the country often where a child's death resulted from sexual exploitation or where an individual 'champions' the cause. Lessons learnt are not shared between LSCBs. In the 24 areas where good practice was developing 76% noted regular reports of intervention discussed at strategy meetings, 48% had had a police operation into child sexual exploitation in the last year, 24% of which resulted in prosecutions. Although not fully implementing the guidance, these areas of active practice demonstrate that young people can be protected from child sexual exploitation and abusers can be prosecuted.

### **4 Awareness raising and training is piecemeal and inadequate**

Both the survey and interview data reported poor levels of awareness raising and training on child sexual exploitation. Where it existed, there were higher levels of awareness raising with practitioners than with young people, carers or families. Survey and interview data showed similar findings: approximately 71% of LSCBs raising awareness for professionals, 42% for young people and 38% for parents and carers. There is clearly a need for LSCBs, schools and health practitioners to extend awareness raising to young people, their families and to communities overall.

## **Key findings: identifying child sexual exploitation**

### **5 Child sexual exploitation takes place in many ways**

There is no one model of how young people are sexually exploited and no one method of coercion.

Data on models of exploitation was provided from the research 'snap shot' on 439 cases. While exploitation by an older boy/girlfriend was noted most frequently (137 of 439 cases), a total of 27% of the cases noted peer on peer exploitation. Although most sexual exploitation involves perpetrators from outside the immediate family, exploitation involving a relative was noted in 26 (6%) cases. Recent media attention has suggested predominance of exploitation through an organised network of perpetrators. Data revealed this to be known in 78 (18%) of the cases.

Similarly, a number of methods of coercion were identified from 473 cases. Methods were used interchangeably. Grooming was the main method of coercion identified (211 cases). Pressure from a peer who is also sexually exploited, or pressure from young people in gang affected neighbourhoods together accounted for 104 cases. Twenty-six cases noted local businesses to be coercive. Evidence shows that this can be prevented through licensing agreements between LSCBs and local businesses. Technology was recorded as a method of coercion in 118 cases, social networking specifically identified in 82 of these. Other forms of coercion (58 cases) included risky peer behaviour, gifts (variously money, a place to stay, alcohol, cigarettes and drugs), and 'party lifestyle'.

### **6 A high proportion of sexually exploited young people 'go missing' while some are purposefully moved within the UK for sexual exploitation usually without intelligence sharing between professionals in different areas**

From the cases reported in the 'snap shot' over a third of those who had gone missing (427 cases) had done so more than 10 times. Of 481 cases where levels of exploitation were discussed, 47 (10%) were noted as being moved between areas of the UK – trafficked for sexual exploitation. Questions were raised in interviews about effective information sharing between LSCBs and police to identify and track young people who had gone missing, including those abducted and forcibly moved within the UK.

### **7 Research is needed to identify the needs of sexually exploited boys and young men, and of young people from BME communities**

Of the 1065 cases, the average age was 15. The majority of the cases related to girls, boys representing only 8.6% of the cases, with one further case identified as transgender. The ethnicity of young people was given in 1040 cases, including 819 identified as White, 73 Asian, and 61 Black African or Caribbean and 62 Mixed Race. Qualitative data raised questions about the local accessibility of services to victims from different Black and Minority Ethnic communities; the nature and understanding of exploitation within different communities; and the need for better awareness of how to assess risk and intervene to support boys and young men.

## **Key findings: Protecting and supporting young people and families**

### **8 Current thresholds for intervention through child protection procedures are too high**

Qualitative data notes practitioners' views that thresholds for intervention outlined in the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), which assesses for intervention in child protection cases, are too high. Essentially, practitioners' acceptance of young people's apparent consent to abuse must be challenged otherwise practitioners are colluding with exploitation. While useful, the Common Assessment Framework does not address the thresholds needed to protect young people from exploitation. This is particularly relevant in cases of child sexual exploitation when the young person is over 16 years of age, and in cases of boys and young men when false assumptions of experimental sexual activity may conceal abuse, exploitation and violence.

### **9 A disproportionate number of sexually exploited young people are looked after by the local authority, and a disproportionate number are placed in residential care, increasing vulnerability to sexual exploitation**

The high number, 54% (78 of 145 young people), from the 'snap shot' accommodated in residential care is worrying, as qualitative evidence and previous research shows that,

unless specifically trained and managed to prevent child sexual exploitation, placement in residential units can increase a young person's vulnerability to abuse. Comparisons with national statistics of looked after young people suggest that sexually exploited young people may be 4½ times more likely to be accommodated in residential care.

Details of living arrangements were provided in a total of 648 cases. One hundred and forty five (21%) of these young people were looked after by the local authority. Again, this appears to be higher than the national average. Thirty-seven (27%) of the 145 looked after young people were in foster care, seemingly significantly lower than the national average. Eighteen young people were in supported accommodation and three in bed and breakfast. This is despite guidance specifying that this type of accommodation is unsuitable for young people, particularly those known to be at risk of child sexual exploitation. Six (0.8%) of the young people were placed in secure accommodation or were in custody.

### **10 Sexually exploited young people, including those living with their families, had a number of associated problems**

The 'snap shot' data showed that many young people identified as at risk of or experiencing child sexual exploitation also experienced a range of other problems. These problems may have increased the vulnerability of the young people to this form of abuse, or may have occurred as part of that abuse. Information on living circumstances was provided for a total of 684 cases. Four hundred and seventy nine (71%) were living with family, many experiencing multiple problems. Children's services had been actively involved with 41% (n=201) of these cases: 28% (n=135) for child protection interventions and a further 66 registered as 'Children in Need' prior to sexual exploitation being identified. One hundred and twenty four of the 684 cases had problems with substance misuse, 88 had diagnosed sexual health problems and 81 had mental health problems. Sixty-seven were known to have committed offences and a further 15 were receiving support for criminal behavior.

Of the total 1065 cases identified in the snap shot, 223 (21%) noted the young person to have experienced domestic violence. Witnessing domestic violence was the most frequent experience (100 of 223) while a significant number had experienced domestic violence themselves (72). Just under half of 459 young people whose educational circumstances were known were not attending school. Fourteen percent of those who were on a school roll (n=62) were truanting or temporarily excluded. Forty-six were in a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU). In the 135 cases where a disability was recorded, 8 (6%) noted a physical disability and 95 (14%) noted learning difficulties. In addition, under request for information about educational circumstances, 67 (8%) of 857 cases identified young people with special educational needs.

With such problems facing the young people, their families and carers, it would be expected that a range of professional support agencies were already involved with addressing different problems. If these professionals were trained to recognise and prevent sexual exploitation, cost effective interventions with the most vulnerable young people could be developed. It is significant to return to finding 4 which notes that training and awareness raising with families, carers and young people is sparse.

### **11 Criminality may be an indicator of child sexual abuse; sexual exploitation of young people in gang-affected neighbourhoods may not be recognised and child protection and community safety strategies are rarely 'joined up'**

Of 341 cases where information was provided about sexually exploited young people and criminality, 34% (n=115) noted that the young person had committed offences. Qualitative data suggests that offending can be an indicator of distress and/or coercion caused through child sexual exploitation. Forty two per cent of the 89 interviews recognised gang-associated child sexual exploitation (although qualitative interviews noted variations in the meaning of 'gang'). Only 14% of the 24 areas activity working on child sexual exploitation targeted sexual exploitation in gang affected neighbourhoods. As 42% of interviewees are concerned about sexual exploitation in gang affected neighbourhoods and as peer on peer exploitation is identified as a model, there is a need for further exploration into the relationship between criminality, peer on peer exploitation and sexual exploitation. This should address the divide between policy targeted to work with alleged offenders, with child sexual exploitation and with community safety in gang-affected neighbourhoods.

## Key findings: Disrupting and prosecuting abusers

### 12 Despite the police taking a lead in a small number of areas, LSCBs are not proactive in disrupting and prosecuting offenders

Less than a quarter of LSCBs demonstrated strategies for both protecting young people from sexual exploitation and prosecuting abusers. In the 24 areas identified as the most active in the country, 31% noted training on disruption. Thirty-one per cent of interview participants reported local training to cover disruption. In the 24 areas identified as active, police played the biggest role in disrupting abusers (73%); children's services were noted by 33%; and 31% reported licensing authorities involvement. Only 27% of these areas noted carers and 14% noted voluntary organisations involved in disruptive tactics. Methods of disruption varied: 51% of 89 interviews noted use of child abduction notices; 31% forensic evidence and 27% reported other techniques. Identified as an investigative technique, covert surveillance (noted in 20% of the 89 interviews) was deemed valuable for providing evidence for prosecutions. However, covert surveillance raised serious questions about joint work between agencies to ensure that appropriate child protection procedures were maintained. Reviews of prosecutions note that when abuse is identified, the need for intelligence should not override the need to intervene to prevent exploitation and abuse.

### 13 Few cases come to court and victims' experiences of the court processes are negative

The 89 interviews from 24 areas noted that police were known to be actively involved in 238 cases of child sexual exploitation. Data was provided on 158 of those cases in relation to court proceedings. The most striking statistic is the low number of cases with convictions (34 convictions of 158 cases). This reflects the rarity of sexual exploitation cases reaching court. It may also reflect the low number of young people receiving appropriate support before, during and after the court proceedings.

There was a lack of support for the young person during the court process: only 1/3 of the 89 interviews were able to identify who would provide such support. The young people who came forward with previous experience of attending court said that the process can feel like repeat abuse: the pre-, during and post-court experience was intrusive and they had little confidence that the alleged abuser would be convicted, or prevented from re-abusing them post-sentencing.

## Key findings: collecting and managing data

### 14 Data is not being collected on the nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation, despite data collection being intricately linked to awareness raising

Over half (59%) of LSCBs surveyed reported that they were not recording any data on child sexual exploitation. Only one LSCB collected and shared data at both agency and LSCB level. Only 33 responses were given to the national 'snap shot' data collection, eight of which were provided from statutory agencies. Twenty-five were from Non Government Organisations (NGOs), 22 of which were Barnardo's specialist child sexual exploitation and missing services. These findings are in accordance with findings from CEOP's (2011) thematic assessment: *Out of Mind; Out of Sight* which documents poor child sexual exploitation data collection within LSCBs. Collecting data and scoping the extent and nature of the problem in the local area is one way for the LSCB to begin to identify where and how child sexual exploitation takes place, providing intelligence to inform strategic (rather than individually led random) preventative interventions. The research report outlines methods that can be used to scope the nature and scale of the problem and provides information on training available.

## Recommendations

These recommendations are made in the context of the over-riding need for a conceptual shift in child protection that recognises child sexual exploitation as a form of child abuse. This means extending the remit of child protection beyond the safeguarding of younger children in the home so that the safeguarding needs of older children with multiple vulnerabilities are also addressed.

## **1 There is an urgent need to review how the court process impacts on young people who are victims of child sexual exploitation, learning from the experiences of recent prosecutions**

The review needs to assess how reforms designed to achieve child-friendly justice have been implemented, particularly in respect to supporting victims of abuse through the court process. The review should consider young people's experiences as victims and witnesses in recent cases where alleged offenders of child sexual exploitation have been taken to court, and assess the extent of training received by the Crown Prosecution Service, the judiciary, barristers and senior court officials in understanding the dynamics and nature of child sexual exploitation

Lead implementation: Ministry of Justice

## **2 All pre and post qualifying training for professionals working with young people should include child sexual exploitation**

It should be a statutory requirement for child sexual exploitation to be on the curriculum for trainee social workers, youth workers, youth offending team practitioners, health workers (primary and secondary care workers); CPS staff; and education practitioners including head teachers, teachers, teaching support staff and education social workers. The quantity and quality of input on curriculum for these staff should be inspected, monitored and reviewed

Lead implementation: providers of professional pre- and post-qualifying training; progress to be reviewed and assessed through the Department for Education

## **3 All LSCB Chairs and Directors of Children's Services should receive training on child sexual exploitation**

This should include awareness raising of the prevalence and nature of child sexual exploitation, of thresholds of abuse and child protection strategies and of their duty to deliver a dual approach to safeguarding children from sexual exploitation: protecting children and prosecuting abusers.

Lead implementation: Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), Department for Education

## **4 Inspections of LSCBs should include progress on the dual aim of a child sexual exploitation strategy**

When inspections of Children's Trusts and LSCB activities are carried out, activities to safeguard young people from child sexual exploitation should be included, addressing multi-agency work between representatives in children's services, police, education and health.

Lead implementation: OFSTED with Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary

## **5 The Department for Education should lead an assessment of the availability and appropriateness of specific forms of accommodation provided by local authorities in response to the needs of looked after children who have experienced sexual exploitation**

Lead implementation: Department for Education

## **6 A national database providing information on the nature and prevalence of sexual exploitation should be maintained and monitored**

CEOP to be supported to manage the collection and analysis of annual data on the nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation.

Lead implementation: CEOP, with support from the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO); Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (OCC), regarding data of young people in gang affected neighbourhoods, and Department for Education

## **7 Each LSCB should use the 2009 guidance to develop a multi-agency strategy with a co-ordinator, a sub group with lead professionals and a service for children and young people**

## **8 Each LSCB should use the self assessment tool developed through this research and report on progress for annual audits and inspections**

**9 Each LSCB should work with local partners to develop and implement an awareness raising and training strategy that reaches practitioners and, importantly, young people, their families and communities.**

**10 Each LSCB should scope child sexual exploitation in their area to identify its nature and prevalence and use the monitoring tool developed through this research to provide an annual return of data to CEOP**

**11 Each LSCB should work towards having a co-located team.**

All recommendations should be considered by and, where appropriate, built into the forthcoming national action plan for safeguarding sexually exploited children and young people.

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**This briefing has been written by Professor Jenny Pearce and Sue Jago (2011), drawing on findings from Jago et al 2011 *What's Going On to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation* available from [Cara.Senouni@beds.ac.uk](mailto:Cara.Senouni@beds.ac.uk)**