Izzy's Promise is a registered charity (SC033706), which provides support and information to survivors of organized and ritual abuse across the UK. We were formed in 2001 and since then have worked with thousands of survivors of all ages. We have expertise in ritual abuse, trafficking, exploitation, asylum seekers, minority ethnic issues and a range of associated subjects.

Izzy's Promise has been very active networking with other organisations and taking part in conferences, seminars and workshops. Izzy’s Promise was represented at the University of Dundee Trauma seminar series, we also co-sponsored one seminar series on ritual abuse with the University of Dundee. Izzy's Promise has been commissioned several times as expert witnesses for abuse survivors who had been trafficked and sexually exploited in the UK by use of rituals. Izzy's Promise was also involved in the Inquiry on Human Trafficking and Exploitation in Scotland organised by Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). Izzy's Promise workers and volunteers in partnership with Eighteen And Under a young persons support organisation are also busy raising awareness in the community around Dundee and in the whole of Scotland on issues around trafficking and exploitation of children and young people.

We currently have several projects including deaf awareness and signing to support hearing impaired abuse survivors, African awareness project, Sexual exploitation of young people (Project No-1), Confidential Services for survivors Consultation and an ongoing research project into the needs of ritual abuse survivors. We provide support through e-mail, phone, text, drop in and message boards.

The most common type of CSE we have witnessed through our service users has been young people trafficked into the country for use is prostitution, abuse of young people in care, exploitation of vulnerable young people by older people, exploitation of young people through cultural practices such as forced marriages, runaways enticed into exploitation and exploitation of young people through organized and ritual abuse in abusive families.

In Scotland, most victims of CSE who have been in touch with our support service have always been victims trafficked or sucked into sexual exploitation. We have supported women trafficked from Africa by use of rituals such as juju and voodoo for purposes of prostitution and exploitation in Scotland. Most women have always been trafficked in the UK from Africa with false pretence of getting good education or a promise of a better life only to find themselves being prostituted. Due to the belief in the oaths and rituals they have been forced to undergo such survivors find it very difficult to disclose the abuse they have suffered.

Our Project, No-1 is currently carrying out research into sexual exploitation and works in partnership with several agencies to reach young people involved in sexual exploitation. This Project carries out direct street work and offers drop in services
and awareness sessions in schools and communities. The Project No-1 Development worker will submit an individual response to the Committee.

In the last 3 years over 300 service users have spoken about being involved in CSE and for many others, we have suspected involvement. It is not always easy to be clear about involvement in CSE when the service user is under 16 as the younger people are very suspicious and cagey. We find that those aged 16 and over are much more likely to tell us truthfully about such involvement as they are aware that child protection services will not get involved with the over 16’s.

The main routes in our experience are through trafficking, peer pressure, family pressure, drug dependency, homelessness and being in the care system. Any vulnerable young person who is not fully protected is at risk of becoming prey and being picked up by those seeking to exploit them. Some of our service users speak about running away from an abusive family only to end up on the streets and being picked up.

Some good practice is when agencies genuinely work together but this is rare as many practitioners regard themselves as the experts and do not value the voluntary sector. We have encountered some examples of individuals prepared to talk, share and work together but when there is a perceived child protection issue (which is anytime it suits it seems), all communication ends. With young people aged 16 to 18 who are not in care, there seems to be no protection at all. The police will only take action is they make a complaint (which they dare not do) and social work has no responsibility at all.

In our experience, multi-agency work only happens between statutory organisations and those who are funded by councils or the government. Independent organisations such as us are excluded completely and have to work in isolation. If we do refer a service user to the powers that be, we are kept out of the loop completely. This is very poor practice and not helpful to our service users.

To change things for young people involved in exploitation is not simple or easy as it needs to be tackled on so many fronts. Trafficking would need to be stopped and the young people rescued, no simple matter. Family abuse would need to be exposed and young runaways provided with safety and support. Young people who are vulnerable would need to be protected.

Early education to raise awareness of the issues or abuse and all forms of exploitation would be a good step providing it was done using evidence-based resources and fully trained workers. A good example of this is the Violence Is Preventable Project at www.violenceispreventable.org.uk

Independent support and information services providing confidential breathing space to young survivors would be another useful step forwards. Listening to the needs of young people might also help as well as raising the age that young people get protection to 18.

Another very useful step forwards would be agencies actually working together instead of being bogged down in petty politics and power dynamics.
The asylum and immigration policy also helps to scare such survivors of CSE from coming forward and talking about the horrific experiences they have suffered. Due to the fear of not being believed by the immigration officials and hence being deported to their countries of origin scares most of such survivors into silence. Most of such survivors have mental health issues due to the suffering they have been subjected to during the trafficking and exploitation. Izzy’s Promise has been commissioned several times to produce expert reports for such traumatised survivors of ritual abuse and trafficking/sexual exploitation in their asylum seeking process. There is need for the immigration and asylum policy to incorporate services of organisations like Izzy’s Promise with expert knowledge on how to support people who have been trafficked/sexually exploited to the UK by use of rituals such as juju and voodoo and who have been subjected to ritual and organised abuse. This will enable such survivors to gain confidence to be able to disclose their abuse and even assist the police in prosecuting the perpetrators.

Case study

Alice was working as a prostitute and we first approached her in the standard way that we have discovered works best. That is to say in a very casual non-judgmental way by simply asking if everything was OK and offering her a pair of gloves and a card with our contact details on it. She was very suspicious at first but took the card and gloves before quickly walking away. Over the next few weeks Alice began to stop and speak with us on the street more often and for longer. On one of these occasions she said she would like to speak to us ‘properly’ but did not want to come to our place as she had had some bad experiences with other people ‘like us’, so we suggested she take a walk with us down to a local garage for a cup of tea to which she agreed gratefully.

Over the next 30 minutes or so we were able to build a picture of what Alice’s life was like. She had been abused as a child and started to act out at home. Her single parent mother could not cope with Alice’s behaviour and had put her in to the care system. From there, things really went downhill. She began sleeping with older men and when she was released from care went to stay with one in particular. He had gotten her addicted to heroin, turned violent and then convinced her to start sleeping with other men for money. Alice eventually got away from this man but had nowhere else to go and so became homeless. She began both street prostitution and shoplifting/housebreaking along with similar crimes to feed her habit.

She has been imprisoned several times for various crimes. The same cycle always seeming to repeat (jail, off drugs, released, no support, back on drugs, back into petty theft and prostitution, back into jail)

After speaking with us for some time Alice seemed positively lifted to have had someone listen and not judge her. A little while after this she turned up at our offices out of the blue and from there began fully engaging with our support services. We were able to help her find and furnish her own flat (right down to workers finding and moving furniture in for her). She did have one slight relapse and was imprisoned again for a few weeks, during which time she wrote to us regularly. She is now back in her own flat, currently drug free, and doing very well. We have also been able to
support her through her successful bid to gain visiting rights with her young daughter whom she clearly loves very much but is looked after by family members.

Alice is one of three young women, each with a unique story, that we have been able to help achieve independent living in the last 12 months.