At CHILDREN 1ST, we listen, we support and we take action to secure a brighter future for Scotland’s vulnerable children. Our work is built on over 125 years’ experience as the RSSPCC. By working together with, and listening to children, young people, their families and communities, and by influencing public policy and opinion; we help to change the lives of vulnerable children and young people for the better. We work to safeguard children and young people, to support them within their families and to help them to recover from abuse, neglect and violence.

CHILDREN 1ST has 46 local services and four national services across Scotland, and we work closely with many local authorities as well as working in partnership with other organisations. All our services are child centred. The children, young people and families we support are key partners in all aspects of our work.

- In the last 3 years or so, how many cases of CSE involving your service users have you known or strongly suspected?

Last year CHILDREN 1ST worked with 1881 people, 204 of whom said they had experienced or been impacted by sexual abuse; 59 were adults, the rest were children. We think this number is probably much higher, because of the number of people who don’t feel able to tell anyone. When we look specifically at child sexual exploitation (CSE) it is even harder to know exactly how many people have been affected. This is a problem across Scotland, and is partly about the definition, and understanding of the definition, of CSE.

Our Violence Against Women services in Aberdeenshire, Moray and Highland have an element of identifying and reaching out to women and children who have been exposed to sexual exploitation, and through that work they have been struggling with the definition applied, which is often seen to link with trafficking. The statistics available about levels of CSE suggest very low levels of CSE, and we know this is not reflective of the problem.

Many of our services have worked with children and young people who have been in exploitative sexual relationships. Staff have often been unsure whether these relationships constitute CSE in the strictest definition of the term, and as such are likely to record these as child sexual abuse (CSA) rather than CSE. This is a complex area, made more complex by the fact that victims of CSE may not always believe they are victims; some of our abuse and trauma recovery services note that where it is not a family perpetrator, it is a relatively common feature for men or older young people to exploit a young person, especially a 12 -16 year old, who may want to feel and believe this is a more equal and valuing relationship.

For many of the victims the category is irrelevant as the impact and devastation that remains is similar.
What are the main routes or pathways through which the young people you work with have become involved in CSE?

There are some common ways and places that children become involved in CSE, as outlined in Barnardo's response to this inquiry, which we fully support. There is, however, a wider issue here. CHILDREN 1ST believes that children become at risk of being exploited when they are vulnerable in other ways. We need to enable and encourage Scotland’s children to be confident and knowledgeable in order to make them less vulnerable to exploitation. We know that perpetrators of CSE often carefully plan and create complex situations in which they gradually, sometimes over a great deal of time, come to hold all the power. It is, therefore, a challenge to enable our children and young people to recognise and resist this.

What changes would be most helpful in preventing young people getting involved in CSE and in helping them escape it?

Healthy relationships

Many organisations currently deliver workshops in schools about healthy relationships. These can cover sexual health, domestic abuse, and parenting, sometimes with a different organisation delivering each session. A sector-wide mapping exercise should be undertaken in order to draw out existing good practice. This way we could, as a sector, plan an approach to ‘healthy relationships’ education and deliver a comprehensive programme, building on the work that has already been undertaken. Currently as a sector we often attempt to divide this complex area into palatable ‘chunks’ in order for each organisation to protect its knowledge base and funding. This undoubtedly prevents us achieving the best outcome for the children and young people with the highest level of need, as in the allocated time for each ‘chunk’ it is not possible to really get to grips with the thematic underlying issues affecting all relationships, including power, control, assertiveness, confidence and independence. Until we truly explore these issues with all children and young people, we are leaving the most vulnerable at risk of being exploited.

CHILDREN 1ST is currently working in a number of local authorities to deliver domestic abuse awareness raising workshops in primary. These projects allow a level of trust and openness that may not otherwise be possible. It also makes use of the extensive knowledge and experience CHILDREN 1ST has in this area, meaning that the best and most up to date knowledge can be shared with the young people taking part. In addition, it creates a direct link with trauma and abuse recovery services so that children can be referred directly into these services. The programme draws on materials already available, including Zero Tolerance and MVP, and was devised in conjunction with relevant agencies working with families experiencing domestic abuse in each area, as well as the schools involved, in order to avoid duplication. The focus of the sessions is on relationships, feelings and identity, and enables the children to build their knowledge and consider more complex issues as the sessions go on. We would like to see more of these types of high-quality courses, but dealing with all aspects of relationships, available to children across the whole of Scotland. This education needs to weave through the education system from a very early age in an age appropriate way. It is not an ‘issue’ to be dipped in
and out of, but a whole school approach where respect is nurtured and modelled by staff.

Confidential spaces and the child protection system

We know from the children and families we work with that confidential space to discuss what is happening is hugely important. National confidential services such as ChildLine and ParentLine are available for anyone who has concerns about a child to talk about their concerns and gain support before, during and after the child protection process. For both children and adults the effect of these ‘sounding boards’ is often to clarify concerns and processes, give them time and space to increase their coping capacity and confidence to take their concerns or experiences forward, increase resilience and ultimately lead to a better outcome. We must continue to publicise and fund these services.

Where children decide to speak out about abuse, including CSE, they have a desire to retain some control of the process, and to know what to expect. Children rarely rate their experience of the child protection system in terms of speed of response. Instead, children more than anything else most often just want someone to listen to what they have to share, and to be helped to find relief from the abuse in a way that is sensitive to each child’s particular fears.

Too often, professionals interpret slowing down the child protection response mechanisms to suit a child’s own needs as being commensurate with an inadequate response, at least as far as government and monitoring agencies are likely to evaluate it. Encouraging professionals to challenge this assumption is fraught with difficulties. Professionals fear for the child and the consequences that child must face if action is not taken quickly enough to remove the child to safety.

Although the child’s safety should always be paramount, it is important to remember how long a child may have been coping with their situation, and that unless abuse is imminent, some more time can be taken which usually results in a more resilient child who is able to understand what their disclosure means and how the process will protect them. Without this children can retract disclosure, often leaving them in an even more vulnerable position and without support.

All people who work with children and young people need training on disclosure. This is paramount if awareness of this issue is to be raised and staff know how to support children through a disclosure and ultimately ensure they are believed and supported.

Justice

The justice process should serve as an incentive for victims’ disclosures, not a disincentive: We have worked with many child abuse victims who tell us after the trial is finished that had they known what the justice process would be like, they would have never disclosed abuse in the first place. In certain cases, the child feels well supported by the justice process, and able to move on after the trial without any difficulty. But in other cases, particularly where the case was delayed and where the child felt unsupported in giving evidence, the child will feel the justice process was a
trauma in and of itself. The more well-supported child victims feel during the process, the less likely they will be to leave the trial feeling haunted by their decision to disclose. Many good practices exist, and many child victims report feeling well-supported by the justice system. For example, over the past several years, the method of taking evidence from vulnerable children has radically transformed from being a rigid system of rules, to a more flexible system guided by the communication and support needs of individual children. Thus, child victims who have difficulty communicating have been helped to give evidence on commission in advance of the trial, away from the accused, and protected from the confusing and intimidating style of questioning that is normally used in court. We are, however, aware through our work, of several cases where child victims of sexual violence were not offered this level of valuable support, and where vulnerable witness applications for further special measures were discouraged due to the child’s age.

Professionals involved at all levels and all stages of the justice process need to be made more aware of the needs of victims of CSE, and the existing measures that they can draw on to support witnesses and other family members. Judges and sheriffs need to know how to address the child victim in a manner appropriate to that child’s stage of development. Judges and sheriffs also need to be able to advise their court of these issues and monitor the manner in which prosecution and defence address the child.

We believe that victims of child sexual exploitation should be provided with a named person to support him or her throughout the justice process. This support would help the child to navigate through all stages and aspects of the justice process, from JI’s to managing time off from school, to seeking support for upset parents and family members who aren’t coping with the trial pressures, to having someone to hold their hand and take them to the trial on the day.

Care and support

If we are to support children and young people to escape sexual exploitation, we need to be absolutely certain that the care and support we offer them once they have left is better than they were given at the hands of their exploiters. It should not be assumed that the level of care offered by the state to Scotland’s most vulnerable children is always better than the care they experienced before statutory involvement, or what they see as love and care at the hands of the people who are exploiting them. There have been a number of high profile cases in recent years in which adults have come forward to share their experiences of being abused while in statutory care. On a wider scale, the emotional needs of children placed in care are often not being met, with children who are already traumatised being denied opportunities to form meaningful relationships.

We must not become complacent about the level of care we offer to children while they are at their most vulnerable, and we must not underestimate the importance of consistent, loving care.

In Scotland there is a great shortage of abuse recovery services for children and their families. CHILDREN 1ST is clear that there are children and families in Scotland who have suffered from sexual abuse, including CSE, whose needs are not
being met. Children are often on waiting lists for months, if not years. More needs to be done to protect children and help them recover from sexual abuse and harm.

For more information about CHILDREN 1ST or any of our national or local services, contact the policy team at policy@children1st.org.uk or on 0131 446 2310.