Children in Scotland is pleased to respond to the Committee’s Inquiry into tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland and congratulates it on taking forward work in this important area.

Our Chief Executive, Jackie Brock is chair of the Ministerial Group on Child Sexual Exploitation. Therefore, we consider it more appropriate, at this stage, to use this opportunity to identify the key issues for consideration rather than promote specific solutions or proposals for future action. We note that several of our members have recommended specific actions and we think these merit serious consideration. We would also ask Committee members to take note of the following points:

1. The lack of evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland. We note the concern at the lack of research providing definitive evidence on the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland. We believe further research would prove useful but it should not act as a brake or delaying measure on identifying action which would help young people and children experiencing sexual exploitation, those at risk and the practitioners who want to support these young people and children effectively. We believe that focused, action research among children’s services leaders in the police, local authorities and voluntary sectors would provide a helpful contribution to the more detailed understanding of why, in Scotland, some young people and children are experiencing or are at risk of experiencing, sexual exploitation and, indeed, a more profound knowledge of the perpetrators of such exploitation.

2. A more definitive knowledge of the prevalence of child sexual exploitation and a clearer definition of child sexual exploitation would also be of merit. Nevertheless, we believe there is a sufficient understanding of the risk factors and a good enough working definition of child sexual exploitation to enable us to move forward now with identifying effective support for young people and children; enhancing protective factors and the development of an effective learning and development programme for practitioners.

3. The Scottish Government commissioned in 2012 a study exploring the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland:

The study noted the definition established in 2003 of child sexual exploitation but that it had been superseded by more recent child protection guidance. We expect the Scottish Government will want to update this definition and, for the purpose of this response, we prefer the definition adopted in the Welsh Assembly guidance of 2010: “Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive "something" e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of performing and/or others performing on them,
4. Crucially, the young person will believe that the perpetrator loves and cares for them. They will believe that the violence committed against them is, at some levels, acceptable. This adds a tremendously difficult layer of complexity for professionals, however experienced they are, in dealing with child protection matters.

5. The understanding of adolescence and teenage behaviour in such circumstances and how to gain their trust and confidence has proved immensely challenging for all professionals involved in this issue across children’s services. It is our belief that we need to gain a greater understanding of the reasons why some vulnerable adolescents fall prey to sexual exploitation when others do not. This is why we prefer action-based research based within our services where experienced professionals working with adolescents can help us gather the more detailed evidence required to understand why adolescents experienced this; what could have prevented this; what support has been effective for those who have experienced it and, how professionals can learn and develop from this evidence.

6. The Scottish study confirms research that, while any child or young person may experience sexual exploitation, some groups are especially vulnerable: those who are or who have experienced being looked after; experiencing abuse or neglect; a history of running away; non attendance or exclusion from school and drug and alcohol misuse. We need to understand from our work with young people and adolescents, why some from such backgrounds have experienced sexual exploitation. We also question the extent to which children's health services are contributing to our understanding of their experience, for example sexual health, teenage pregnancy services, alcohol and drugs services.

7. We need to understand, from evidence held by the police, COPFS and, potentially, community planning partnerships, more about the perpetrators. What more could we have done within our communities to have prevented some routes into sexual exploitation.

8. While we want to learn more about effective practice in supporting children and adolescents, we believe the effective solutions will lie in how we apply effectively Getting It Right For Every Child principles. Professor Brigid Daniel’s recent work (available at: www.actionforchildren.org.uk/media/5120220/2013_neglect_fullreport_v12.pdf) suggests that our early intervention principles fall down, not in the principles, but in their robust application, when children are experiencing neglect but delays are made in intervening early. If we could understand more about the journey of a young person who has been exploited and how this could have been prevented, we will know what practice could be improved and how practitioners could be supported to put in place preventative action.

9. However, we cannot separate the circumstances of those specific children and adolescents who have experienced, or been at risk of sexual exploitation from wider concerns about the increasing sexualisation of children and young people. For example, the worrying levels of children and adolescents who have accessed online pornography, in some cases illegal or otherwise extreme; the increasing
phenomenon of so-called “sexting” due to mobile phone technology, particularly if combined with potentially damaging social media activity; and (perhaps related) attitudes expressed by some young men and women about sex and relationships. Similarly, our intolerance and low expectations of some adolescents can lead to neglect and in some cases, dereliction of our duty to them. This appears to have been the case in Rochdale.

I hope this is helpful to the Committee. Please do not hesitate to get in touch if we can be of any further assistance as the inquiry develops.

Yours faithfully

Ross Gilligan

Policy Officer

Children in Scotland is the national umbrella agency for organisations and professionals working with and for children, young people and their families. It exists to identify and promote the interests of children and their families and to ensure that policies and services and other provisions are of the highest possible quality and are able to meet the needs of a diverse society. Children in Scotland represents more than 400 members, including most of Scottish local authorities, all major voluntary, statutory and private children’s agencies, professional organisations, as well as many other smaller community groups and children’s services. It is linked with similar agencies in other parts of the UK and Europe.

The work of Children in Scotland encompasses extensive information, policy, research and practice development programmes. The agency works closely with MSPs, the Scottish Government, local authorities and practitioners. It also services groups such as the Cross Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Young People (with YouthLink Scotland). In addition, Children in Scotland hosts Enquire - the national advice service for additional support for learning, and Resolve: ASL, Scotland’s largest independent education mediation service.