What are the most common types of CSE your organisation has witnessed in your service users?

This varies depending on the circumstances of the young person. Historically we saw a number of young people who had been exploited by family members and people connected with the family. Over the years this has changed to a great deal of exploitation taking place through the internet and mobile phones as a grooming process. Many young women in the youth service have been targeted by adult males or peers to send explicit images of themselves or to go on skype for online sex. This has then escalated to contact being made and young people being abused. many do not see this as abuse or exploitation as they feel there is a relationship. We are extremely concerned about this area of exploitation as many of the young people we work with are vulnerable to further abuse due to the abuse they have already experienced. Low self esteem leaves them open to grooming by predators.

We work with a great deal of young people who have been in care due to the circumstances of being abused and removed from the home. The added vulnerability of being in a care setting without the protective factors of a family bond can increase the risk. However being in a family setting where there are difficult relationships can be equally relevant for increasing risk.

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

In making this assessment it is important to consider the definition of sexual exploitation. Open Secret feel strongly that for young people who have been sexually abused all of this abuse will involve exploitation. Therefore this would relate to all of the young people in Open Secret who have experienced childhood sexual abuse. Obviously there are clearer cases of exploitation where financial reward is offered but in any case through the grooming process some form of reward will be offered. One of our staff who responded to the request for information and examples had worked with 10 young people who had been clearly exploited (according to the definition) since starting in post in January.

Open Secret work with over 200 children and young people per annum so the scope of exploitation that we work with is within those statistics, meaning over 3 years the possibility is over 600 young people.
One strong suspicion of child exploitation. Social Work had suspicions of exploitation and referred a 15 year old female to the service. Her father has been providing her with cigarettes, mobile phones and contracts for them on contact visits. The girl is currently in residential care and has been displaying sexualized behavior from a young age. No disclosure has been made yet but we are working with her to gain trust in the hope that she will disclose soon.

One case of child exploitation. Another piece of joint work with Social Work. They referred an 11 year old female who has been sexually exploited by the father of her best friend. Whilst at sleepovers at the friend's house he gave them freedom to drink alcohol and smoke. He began to groom her via facebook and blackmailing her by saying that if she told he would tell her parents about her smoking and drinking. He went on to rape her and eventually reported this to the school. A good piece of joint working with Social Work and family support.

**What are the main routes or pathways through which the young people you work with have become involved in CSE?**

Open Secret see the main pathway of being through family, family friends or the internet. We gather information on our first appointment forms about who the abuser is and in the vast majority of cases this is someone previously known to the young person with the largest statistic being family members. However as stated above we have seen a huge incidence of further exploitation through the internet, particularly social networking. Young people are targeted and groomed over social networking sites using their vulnerability to gain trust.

In many cases this is someone known to the young person and connected with them by family and friends but there are cases where someone unknown to the young person will add them on a social networking site through some other connection such as a social networking suggestion. many young people have thousands of friends on social networking many of which will be potential predators. One of the indicators of sexual exploitation/grooming in the past could have been purchasing phone credit, but now due to free applications such as whatsapp...young people can send messages for free, so this may increase/hide the risk.

Once connections are made then meetings are arranged putting the young person at significant risk of sexual exploitation.

As mentioned above another route in where the person exploiting the young person is a family member or family friend and there is a risk that will lead to them being shared with other abusers. Open Secret statistics show multiple abusers in a large number of cases.
The vulnerability to further abuse comes from young people who have already experienced abuse and who have either been removed from home or continue to live at home with the non-abusing parent. In Open Secret we work with them to improve their self-esteem and level of resilience as they will be at risk of further targeting. One example of a young person we worked with was a young woman of 13 who was vulnerable due to bullying and who often posted on Facebook about her experiences of being bullied. She was then added as a friend by a young man of 19 who posted on his site about how much he hated bullies and had many young girls on his site. He used the bullying to build a relationship with her and ultimately then managed to persuade her to strip on Skype.

Could you give an example of good practice you have witnessed through multi-agency working?

Open Secret have been involved in the internet safety action group which is a multi-agency group including the police, social work, health, education and the voluntary sector. Events have been held to raise awareness of internet safety and Open Secret presented at these events. The domestic abuse MAG also held a day event focussing on raising awareness of CSE and related issues with stalls on child protection, stalking, CSE (Open Secret), FGM, trafficking etc. Open Secret have provided training on sexual exploitation at other events organised by the MAG. Therefore in Forth Valley there is a consistent multi-agency approach to working with issues of exploitation.

Could you give an example of unhelpful practice you have witnessed through multi-agency working (or lack of it)?

In Forth Valley there is a great deal of positive multi-agency working taking place perhaps due to the fact that there is an organisation in the area specialising in childhood sexual abuse. The local authority have shown their commitment to working with the issues of abuse and exploitation. However we have seen difficulties when cases go forward to the justice system. The lack of information given to young people as cases progress (or don't) can be very traumatic. We have seen a recent case where it did not progress past the PF but the young person was not informed.

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

It is vital that young people (specifically young women) are educated about sexual exploitation risks and keeping themselves safe online, sharing explicit images etc and the law. This could take place in schools, youth groups and through agencies working with abuse and exploitation.
Where a young person has experienced some form of increased vulnerability in childhood it is important that they receive the appropriate support to enable them to build resilience, self-esteem and confidence to reduce the chances of them being at further risk. This increased vulnerability could be from bullying, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect or parental substance misuse. It is very important that all agencies who may come into contact with the young person recognise the risks and ensure that the young person receives support.

Helping a young person escape exploitation can be very complex as often they may feel that the person exploiting them is the only one who cares about them and they may not see it as exploitation or abuse. They may be very frightened and unable to break free. It is very important in such cases that all agencies involved with the young person work together to ensure that they are safe and able to break free. Prosecutions for the perpetrator are also very important and we feel there needs to be a great deal of progress in this area.

It would be helpful if, when making your submission, you were able to indicate whether your organisation would be willing to give oral evidence. It may be that the Committee will undertake site visits to some organisations.

Yes we would be willing to give oral evidence and would be happy to facilitate a site visit. We did not include evidence from young people at this stage as there was a changeover of staff in the young person’s project but I am sure the group once established and young people accessing the service would be happy to speak to members of the Committee.