Public Petitions Committee
Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland
Written submission from Aberlour Child Care Trust

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

Aberlour is Scotland’s largest solely Scottish Children’s charity. We have been delivering services to vulnerable children for nearly 140 years. Working across a broad portfolio of interventions, we work to offer care and support to some of Scotland’s most vulnerable communities.

We encounter childhood sexual exploitation in a range of situations, but we have chosen in this submission to focus on three specific kinds of service provision where we assist young people who have experienced sexual exploitation.

1: Aberlour Runaways:

Aberlour deliver Scotland’s only refuge for children who have run away from home, up to the age of 16. The service comprises a 3 bed unit in the Glasgow area and a wrap around and outreach support service. Refuge staff offers a holistic package of support to young people in our care, including goal setting, anger management, sexual health advice, self-esteem support and advice on education, employment and training. On leaving, young people are offered an information pack with lots of advice and details around health, wellbeing and employment. Following their stay, refuge staff will continue to work with the young person and their carers to offer support and will bring them together for a review at some point after their stay.

National research shows that on average, 1 in 9 children will run away from home at least once whilst they are growing up. Of this group around 25% will experience some form of physical or sexual abuse and exploitation while they are running.

The sexual exploitation experienced by some of the young people who access this service stems from different origins:

- Some of the young people have left home to meet an older person who they have met online, through Facebook, Blackberry Messenger or other social media platforms. They have been induced to leave home and meet up through persistent grooming. Usually this will affect young girls in the main but we have assisted one young boy who had been groomed in an internet chat room.

- In another instance, we assisted a young girl who had been the victim of gang orchestrated sexual exploitation at the hands of a group of older men who had targeted young teenage girls and exchanged gifts and money for sexual favours.
In a number of the cases that we have encountered, young people who have been sexually exploited will not actually realise that they are victims of any crime. Particularly when they have been induced through incentives like gifts, money or affection, they may identify their abuser as a ‘boyfriend’ and may even try to protect them.

2: Aberlour Guardianship:

In partnership with the Scottish Refugee Council, we run Scotland’s only dedicated guardianship service for separated young people seeking asylum or who have been trafficked.

The Guardianship Service has experience of young people who have been trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation or have experienced sexual exploitation on their journeys to the UK. This is in the context of trafficking and usually involves organised crime for the purpose of prostitution once in the UK or young people are sexually abused by the people smugglers on route to the UK.

Separated young people are often lonely and looking for love and protection as they have no family in the UK and are therefore a particularly vulnerable group. We have some concerns about the vulnerability of young people who are in Local Authority care, particularly females, who have begun 'relationships' with significantly older men which have resulted in unplanned pregnancy. Often the relationship is short term and has ended with the father no longer involved in the young person’s life.

Whilst we support young people who have escaped from trafficking situations they can often remain vulnerable to further exploitation. Traffickers often employ methods of control and coercion which young people can be extremely vulnerable to. They therefore require on-going support, monitoring and advice, including education on what trafficking and exploitation mean, and their rights here in the UK.

We are also aware of 9 young people who have gone missing from Local Authority care. The whereabouts of 2 of these young people were later known but 7 have not been found or heard from. This is concerning as the young people had been identified as Potential Victims of Trafficking and we believe they may have returned to their traffickers. The exploitation in these cases was mainly for cannabis cultivation but there are concerns that this could lead onto other types of exploitation.

There are also concerns for age disputed young people who are often accommodated with older adults when they may in fact be under 18 or young people who are refused asylum after they are age 18 and do not have recourse to public funds and can find themselves destitute and possibly forced into exploitative situations with limited availability of choices. The Guardianship Service has close links with the Glasgow City Council Child Protection team and the Police Vice and Anti-Trafficking Co-Ordination Unit and sits on the Cross Party group for Human Trafficking and on the GCC trafficking sub group.

3: Aberlour Sycamore Services (residential care for looked after children)
A number of the children in our residential care services have been removed from their families due to sexual abuse or exploitation. This can take the form of intra-family abuse, or children who have been exposed to other adults due to parental lifestyles which put them at further risk. In some cases children are exploited through incentives or inducements such as alcohol or money or are persuaded that the exploitation is a normal part of familial affection.

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

Somewhere between 20-30 cases.

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

As explained above, there are several routes through which children and young people might come to be sexually exploited and these are not always means of coherion.

Abusers will in many cases seek to exploit children through their willing participation following grooming online or in person, sometimes involving the exchange of gifts or money and the held belief that the older person is a legitimate ‘boyfriend’ and that the activity they are engaging in is an expression of love.

Young people may encounter those who would exploit them in a number of circumstances where they have not previously agreed to meet following online grooming:

- Whilst truanting, young people may occupy secluded spaces, in an effort to hide from authorities, which in turn may be targeted by potential abusers.
- Young people who have run away from home or are homeless for other reasons may seek shelter in places which in turn may be targeted by potential abusers.

Those who would seek to sexually exploit children do not always operate alone and we have encountered children who have been exploited by criminal gangs both in our runaway’s service and in our guardianship service.

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

Following a 2010 pilot in Grampian which recommended joint working between police and independent agencies in addressing the needs of young runaways, Aberlour have been conducting a multi-agency partnership with Glasgow Education and Social Work Services and Strathclyde police that delvers ‘Return Home Welfare Interviews’ to young runaways once they have been returned home.
· Could you give an example of unhelpful practice you have witnessed through multi-agency working (or lack of it)?

In terms of support for young runaways, whilst section 38 of the Children (Scotland) 1995 Act makes allowance for the provision of refuge to young runaways, in practice only a very small percentage of children are ever actually offered refuge. This is due to the way in which police and social work process individual cases and all too often young people are returned home only to run away again.

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

Aberlour hope to see an amendment to the draft Children and Young People’s Bill which places a duty on all Scottish Local Authorities to provide age appropriate refuge to young runaways that ask for it. This would see a significant decline in the number of young people sleeping rough or in places where they might be at heightened risk of exploitation.

With regard to separated children seeking asylum, we recognise that many of the changes required are reserved, but these include an increase in the speed at which asylum claims are processed and recognition of the increased vulnerability that juvenile asylum seekers face.