Public Petitions Committee

Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland

Written submission from Who Cares? Scotland

Who Cares? Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute the experiences of our staff and young people into the Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Scotland Inquiry. It is very difficult to be precise about the numbers of young people worked with who have experienced sexual exploitation. The main reasons for this are two-fold. Often young people themselves do not recognise that they are being exploited. Secondly, in attempting to maintain young people’s privacy and confidentiality, information is often not shared with us if it is not relevant to an advocacy task. Over the last year we have dealt with 28 situations which have been specifically identified as sexual exploitation.

The most common types of CSE that Who Cares? Scotland has witnessed in our service users is:

1. **Grooming through use of social media. Internet / mobile phones.**
2. **Inappropriate relationships in the community.**

**Grooming Through Social Media**

A common theme from our work in this area is the use of social media as a means of making and maintaining contact with young people. This has included:

- Young people sending inappropriate photographs of themselves to unknown males met on the internet.
- Young people arranging to meet unknown males via internet contact.
- Young person being provided mobile phones and train tickets by unknown male/s whom they have never physically met.
- Young people being picked up by adult males in expensive vehicles – arranged through social media sites.

**Inappropriate Relationships in the Community**

- Introductions through “friends”.
- Young people feeling that they fit in with new friends, in a way that they don’t feel they fit in elsewhere in their lives.
- Inappropriate community relationships maintained and developed through use of social media.

Coming into care can be a traumatic and frightening experience for children and young people. It is characterised by confusion, loss, change and grief. Many children struggle to retain a consistent sense of their own identity and the trauma of broken or fragmented attachment relationships can have a considerable impact on how children and young people go on to form new relationships.
Very often, the conditions for sexual exploitation to occur are a result of emotionally vulnerable young people just wanting to be the same as their peers. As shown in the quotes from young people below.

“*You need to get in with a group of young people to fit in. It’s a group of peers initially, then older people get involved because it’s usually their house you’re in.*

“*Some young people in care are seen as weaker. People pleasers. But, young people want to make connections that are meaningful for them.*”

The above statements are fairly typical of Who Cares? Scotland’s experience of CSE. Children and young people are often introduced to houses in the community by their peers where alcohol and drugs are available.

“You might go into the house a few times and never take drugs or anything, but you might be having a bad day about something – a bad day at school or anything, and that’s when you can get talked into drinking or doing other stuff. Adults sometimes are just waiting for the opportunity. Once you’ve done it it’s like you need to keep doing it or you lose face, because they’re your pals.”

Because of the experiences that some children and young people will have had prior to coming into care, they may have unsafe personal boundaries or expectations of what other people should be able to ask of them. Many will have experienced neglect and physical, sexual or emotional abuse, which may well have impacted on their confidence, self-esteem, resilience and ability to identify risk. Loyalty to people who have been their “friends” when they’ve had no-one else, can tie young people into exploitative and dangerous situations.

“*Some people tell you that your friends are not good for you, but you don’t believe them. Even though you know they’re right. Sometimes when you realise they’re not your pals, it’s too late. You feel that you are betraying your friends if you stop seeing them.*”

One ex-care leaver explained that the experience of being cared for by residential staff could feel overwhelming and frightening. This resulted in them spending more time in the community in potentially unsafe situations.

“They’re [young people in care] surrounded by people who care about them and they don’t want that. People caring for you, want you to care back about them. Caring about someone else is scary.”

Young people often describe the sexual acts they engage in as consensual; a choice which they have made. Sex is often traded for alcohol, cigarettes, drugs or in some cases food. Both male and female young people are targeted, usually by older males. Some of the young people Who Cares? Scotland has worked with, have become involved in prostitution, or in more widespread abuse perpetrated by groups of adult males. We have experience of this occurring with both male and female young people. We have also worked with young people who have been sexually
abused and prostituted by family members and young people subject to forced marriage, although in fairly small numbers.

Who Cares? Scotland supports Barnardo’s key commitment 1.

“The Scottish Government should develop a National Strategy for tackling CSE (similar to ‘Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation in England.’)…..” (Barnardo’s, 2013)

Who Cares? Scotland supports Barnardo’s key commitment 5.

There needs to be a consistently high commitment to disrupting perpetrator activity and identifying those at risk. Police Scotland should work with relevant agencies to develop protocols to achieve this…”

In terms of good practice examples, the best practices that Who Cares? Scotland have experienced have consistently included, coherent and cohesive multi-agency working and effective information sharing processes.

One of the most significantly unhelpful elements of practice, is that many workers, from different sectors, are not able to identify CSE, often taking the view that young people are engaged in consensual activity, or that they have made a conscious choice to engage in harmful or risky behaviours. Responses to young people are often judgemental, which can further alienate them and make their “friends” seem more appealing. Another unhelpful practice is the threat of secure care for young people by decision makers, without any attempt to address the issues underpinning their apparent risky behaviour.

Who Cares? Scotland support Barnardo’s key commitment 3.

“There should be a nationwide education programme, with support materials, delivered in all high schools…” (ibid)

Who cares? Scotland would further suggest that education around awareness raising should be broader than just in schools. Many of the young people we work with are not in formal education, or do not engage well with this type of learning.

In addition, multi-agency training for staff in different sectors would allow different experiences, knowledge and skills to be shared.

Appropriate Placements / Cyber Safety

Many children and young people are looked after a great distance from their local area. These children can experience considerable loss, feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can be compounded if they are unhappy in their placement. The internet is freely available in a range of different places including young people’s mobile phones, and some young people will access social networking sites as a means of feeling connected. Properly monitored and supported by staff in a setting where the child is happy and has good relationships at home, school and in the community, this can enhance the child’s connectedness and can be a positive
experience. Who Cares? Scotland’s experience is that where the opposite is true, children can become very unsafe.

**Relationships**

Relationships are key to supporting young people to extricate themselves from situations where they are being exploited by others. However this goes hand in hand with our earlier point that many workers – although best placed to support young people through these situations - do not recognise CSE.

**Please see the appended case study which illustrates some of the points made in this response.**

Who Cares Scotland  
May 2013
Case Study

I was born 22 years ago in Scotland. I was sexually, emotionally, physically and mentally abused and neglected by both of my biological parents. I was sexually abused by my siblings and by other people known to my parents. I was just an infant when the abuse began (my siblings were also abused) and my early childhood has very limited happy memories. I have memories of being abused at a very early age.

Recently I have begun going through my social work files and feel very badly let down as it is documented on several occasions that social work had very strong concerns regarding my safety. Others in the community also raised their concerns but I remained in my parents care until I was 5. Before this happened my parents separated and although my mother looked after me, there was a condition that she did not let my father in the family home, but she did and I continued to be abused.

My father received a substantial prison sentence with regards to the sexual abuse – and although social work strongly suspected my mother’s involvement she was never charged. After I came into care, during contact visits with my mother and siblings, on occasion my siblings continued to abuse me.

I was also sexually abused when placed with foster carers. From the age of 7, I had no contact with any of my immediate or extended family, and was given no information about them as social work felt this would be in my best interests, in order to protect me.

When I reached 18 years of age, I changed my name in order to sever all links with my past, but at the same time was very curious about my family and made contact with my mum. Unfortunately my oldest brother who lived with my mum took total control over the contact used it to gain control over me. He manipulated all the arrangements and again sexually abused me. I think this was able to happen to me because I just wanted to know my mother, and if possible establish a relationship where I would be able to ask my mother some of the many questions that remain unanswered about my life.

Throughout my childhood, right up until I was 17, I did not attend any meetings. No professional ever spoke to me about my past, even when I would try and ask questions. Since then, I have had the support of an advocacy worker from Who Cares? Scotland. I believe strongly that if I had known earlier that I was entitled to an advocacy worker that it would have made a huge difference in my life as I would have had somebody there just for me who could have attended my meetings and spoke up for me.

Due to my childhood and care experiences, I have a massive lack of trust around adults. I believe that although young people should be protected from all forms of abuse they should be consulted more and given information about their past when they ask, as this would help them try and understand why decisions were made and why no family contact ever took place. It would also help them make more informed choices when they left care as to whether they wanted to trace their family.
I believe that social work and police let me down badly as both agencies had strong suspicions that my 2 older siblings were being abused and then I myself was abused. By then too much time had gone by and all 3 of us had horrific childhoods due to nobody taking action quicker.

I strongly believe that early intervention is a must and that the child should be removed at first indication there may be any abuse going on and that only when full police and social work investigation is carried out should the child be able to go back home. Everybody should be responsible for reporting abuse. When I was allowed to attend nursery it is documented in my files that I was very withdrawn and never played. Even with that statement, action should have been taken.

Miss X