Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland

Written submission from Safe Space

Safe Space offers counselling support, group work and Justice Support to male/female survivors of sexual abuse from age 12 upwards. Safe Space has been operational in Fife for 25 years. We value the opportunity of contributing to this inquiry.

What barriers exist to identifying, disrupting or prosecuting child sexual exploitation (CSE) perpetrators? How might these be overcome?

Barriers of silence, fear and shame exist for children and young people on a number of levels who are being targeted or abused by perpetrators. Statutory and voluntary agencies must work closer together in order that young people are sufficiently supported to share information on tactics, language and whereabouts of perpetrators. Due to the power imbalance it will always prove difficult to disrupt perpetrators tactics when young people feel they have no rights over their bodies, are influenced by constant graphic sexual imagery and lack role models in the media, advertising and music industry.

Safe Space has a young people’s Advisory Group. Recent discussion highlighted that young people were unhappy about the term sexual exploitation as opposed to sexual abuse. They stress that their understanding of sexual abuse is by exploiting the vulnerability of young people whether or not goods are received. Many of these young survivors recognise the term sexual abuse and through working hard to overcome the secrecy, fear and shame associated with it can now say the words and importantly speak openly about it to others. Young survivors at Safe Space fear the term sexual exploitation is now confusing issues for young people in Scotland who are reluctant to ask what this term actually means.

Years of ground work by sexual abuse organisations in Scotland has enabled young people to consider the complexity of issues around sexual abuse, define it in their own ways and develop understanding of terms such as ‘grooming’. The current definition of child sexual exploitation was considered by young survivors to be complex and confusing and the question “does this mean grooming?” was asked repeatedly by them. The definition was also understood to mean one significant transaction taking place for money or goods whereas their experience of abuse was long term, insidious and complex regarding abuse of trust and often within perceived loving relationships. A significant point raised by the group was that perpetrators love muddied waters therefore if young people’s grasp of the issue becomes confusing the limits for perpetrators open wider.
Only through listening to young people will we begin to identify and disrupt perpetrators and this means ongoing provision of support services that are accessible and adaptable to their needs. Long waiting lists are the first turn off point for those who need support at the time they want to disclose or need time to explore fears, concerns and feelings about their experience. Expectations that young people will disclose an abusers identity and speak to statutory services before being offered a supportive, trusting environment is unrealistic and can serve to keep young people silent for too long. Voluntary sector agencies supporting survivors of sexual abuse gather stats and information that are very informative about local communities, risks and health issues that statutory services should be closely aligned with therefore it is highly concerning that there are few referrals from social workers for young people over 12 yrs, who have actually disclosed, or for non abusing parents to access parent support.

Support for non abusing parents can prove essential to many young people accessing services and alleviate pressure around their worries about upsetting the family, being removed from family home and ongoing consequences of their disclosure. For some young people provision of a parent support group at Safe Space has enabled them to maintain contact with their counselling support worker for longer than they had expected. Non abusing parents may hold their own information on perpetrators and how they operate and support for their needs following a child’s disclosure can prove crucial in disrupting perpetrator activity. Preventative work with non abusing parents is also crucial in raising awareness of the risks women and children are exposed to and offers opportunity for community based inter agency working.

Confidence in children has to be instilled from the earliest possible age and when this might not happen at home Pre School groups, nurseries and schools have a crucial role to play. The Early Years Collaborative appears to focus on children’s attainment rather than identity formation, self esteem and confidence building which develop a sense of self and body awareness essential to safety and boundaries. Closure of so many Family Centres across Scotland was short sighted and lost the impetus for communities working closely with a range of statutory and voluntary services to address family needs in direct and holistic ways.

**What difficulties exist around keeping looked - after children and young people (accommodated or at home) safe from CSE perpetrators?**

Looked –after children and young people are often society’s most vulnerable young people totally dependent upon those they are living with and therefore easily exposed to manipulation and grooming. They must be made aware of services available to them with statutory services enabling and encouraging this process to happen. Out with the cities Scotland’s remote and rural areas are desperately
lacking in resources offering support even on an outreach basis. This needs to be addressed in order to disrupt the potential isolation and helplessness many looked after young people experience. For some the desperation of running away from home exposes them to far greater risk and establishment of Safe Houses, particularly near ports and transport stations could offer respite until the young person feels safe and supported. The necessity of providing well trained and well paid staff to support these young people is obvious. Non abusing parents are often scared to seek help when they fear their child is being targeted therefore direct, accessible provision of a service should be made available to them.

**What barriers exist to combating perpetrators’ use of online/ social media and how might these be overcome?**

Accessibility of chat lines, advertising and easy access to pornography through the internet within peoples own homes will always make perpetrators use of online/social media difficult to monitor. The faceless interaction of internet and its popularity as a chosen medium by young people poses unprecedented risks. Education regarding the dangers has to be stepped up and young survivors (male and female) would be willing to give case examples of how quickly and easily perpetrators are ahead of young people via the internet. Education must focus much more on the authority and rights young people have not to be influenced by others and ensure they are empowered through mutual respect in all relationships. **Zero Tolerance** provides an excellent programme ‘Respect’ which is easy to use and has been well evaluated by young people.

**What types of training is given or is needed in identifying, disrupting or prosecuting CSE perpetrators?**

All services need to draw on collective learning over the years from survivors of sexual abuse utilising their experience through disclosure and recovery process to influence terminology and future direction of services. Some survivor’s agencies in Scotland were set up by survivors themselves who had little or no support from statutory agencies. Their personal experience was mainly led by a feminist perspective making the connection between gender, inequality, violence and manipulation. This also accepts that male children are predominantly abused through manipulation and power of male abusers. Most survivors’ agencies in Scotland offer excellent training on working with survivors which is led from survivor’s perspectives and is informed by current research based on survivor’s experiences.

The Scottish Government has taken serious consideration of gender inequality by attention to exploitation through prostitution as set out in ‘Safer Lives: Changed lives’ * and ongoing consultation within the Scottish Parliament such as the current **Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex (Scotland) Bill (2).** The focus on gender
inequality has to remain in order that identification of abuse, training for services and disruption to exploitation on all levels maintains its impetus as being totally unacceptable to our society. Mandatory training for judges, police, Procurator Fiscals, social workers, nurses, teachers and local councillors should be informed by survivors who know how perpetrators operate, how they target children and young people and how manipulative, powerful and influential they can be. Every local Council has to take more responsibility for overseeing what happens in their own authority by scrutinising use of premises to eliminate lap dancing clubs, strip clubs and exploitative employment practice.

What experience of examples of good practice can be identified as working to address the problem?

In 2011 WithScotland undertook a Pilot Group with Safe Space and Fife Child Protection Committee to consult with survivors in respect of national and local policy in order that those who experienced sexual abuse and Child Protection Systems were offered opportunity to influence and shape policy and practice. It was also to establish links with the Public Reference Group in Child Protection. Other organisations were invited to participate in the process, with SAY Women and KASP following this up. KASP and Safe Space service users became regular attendees of the group achieving the following outcomes:

- Survivors having a process to be heard and have their views included in responses to local and national initiatives.
- Fife CPC meeting its obligations to consult with young people and include their views in policy and practice
- Information disseminated to other CPCs
- Joined up working between statutory and voluntary agencies addressing Children’s Rights and Wellbeing.

This Pilot Group were consulted about Joint Investigative Interviews of Child Witnesses in Scotland and offered valuable insight regarding potential impact upon young people of this process and what might be of assistance to young people in understanding the process. They were also able to highlight what benefits they considered perpetrators might derive from this way of working and how evidence would be used in court. Two young women from Safe Space gave permission for a recording of their experience of disclosure to be used in joint training for police and social workers in Fife. The Pilot group also stressed concerns that those caught and charged with sexual exploitation offences are seen to be receiving lesser sentences than those charged with sexual abuse offences. They also worried that sexual exploitation offences might allow individuals to escape being registered as sex offenders.
CSE/020

Safe Space would be willing to give oral evidence and we would welcome a site visit. www.safespace.co.uk.

WithScotland provides an excellent website, access to information, advice and training www.WithScotland.org

*www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/2009/06/02153519/0