Public Petitions Committee

Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland

Written submission from the Care Inspectorate

Introduction

1. The Care Inspectorate welcomes the opportunity to submit supplementary evidence to inform the Committee’s inquiry. This should be considered in addition to the oral evidence provided by our Chief Executive Annette Bruton and Head of Quality Improvement Helen Happer on Tuesday 30 April 2013. Our staff are able to contribute to this call for evidence on the basis of relevant experience in front-line practice, management of services and enquiries.

2. The Care Inspectorate is the independent scrutiny and improvement body established under the Public Services Reform (Scotland) Act 2010, that brings together the scrutiny work previously undertaken by the Care Commission, HMIE child protection team and the Social Work Inspection Agency. Our role is to regulate and inspect care and support services (including criminal justice services), carry out scrutiny of social work services and conduct joint inspections with other scrutiny partners of services for adults and children. We have a significant role in providing assurance and protection for people who use services, their families and carers and the wider public as well as supporting delivery partners to improve the quality of care for people in Scotland.

3. A major focus of the Care Inspectorate’s scrutiny activity involves examining how well services support all vulnerable children. We have developed a new approach to the joint inspection of children’s services that focuses on outcomes for children and brings together a multi-agency approach to regulation and inspection. A report on the findings from our second cycle of child protection inspections is due to be published imminently.

Barriers to identification

4. As acknowledged by the University of Bedfordshire’s research into the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation, establishing prevalence is very difficult and more research is required in this area.

5. Providing appropriate care and support for young people involves adults in caring roles having a sound understanding of the nature of grooming and manipulation, why young people may not be able to break free from abuse and why it is so hard for them to tell about what is happening to them. Parents, teachers and youth workers, as well as foster carers and residential staff in the case of looked after young people, would benefit from this kind of education and information. Across the country, staff from a range of services are benefiting from multi-agency training in a range of
child protection topics. It would be helpful for child protection committees to ensure child sexual exploitation is routinely included in such programmes.

6. Although we know that vulnerable children and young people are most at risk, it is important to stress the need for all children and young people to be kept safe from exploitation. With this in mind, we advocate and support greater provision of educational materials and guidance for young people, teachers, parents and carers on how best to identify the risks associated with child sexual exploitation and how to protect all children accordingly.

7. Findings from joint inspections of services to protect children and inspections of residential establishments for young people show that, while services generally recognise risks to young people who go missing from home or care placements, arrangements to share information between services are often outdated. Risks may be underestimated because incidents are dealt with on a single agency basis and there is no agreed definition of what constitutes being ‘missing’.

8. In many cases, a full picture of the reasons why young people are going missing, and who they are spending time with, is not being developed. Risks to young people who are looked after at home may be overlooked because there is less stringent monitoring of where, and with whom, they are spending time. Ongoing scrutiny activity shows room for improvement in care planning for children looked after at home, to ensure their circumstances are fully understood and their needs met. In some areas, services are using established inter-agency forums, developed as part of the implementation of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), to share information and jointly assess risks. However, a more proactive approach is required overall. Clearer definitions of what constitutes ‘missing’ and dissemination of best practice models would be helpful.

**Difficulties in keeping looked after young people safe**

9. Looked after children and young people are likely to have had experiences which may make them particularly susceptible to exploitation, such as feeling unloved; lacking affection and attention; or having low self-esteem. Protective factors include warm, nurturing environments; respect for children’s rights; and stability of placement which provide young people with the chance to build strong, positive and trusting relationships with consistent and reliable adults.

10. A number of studies indicate that being groomed and/or abused in the past increases young people’s susceptibility to being further abused and exploited. It is critical, then, that children and young people who have experienced abuse receive appropriate help to understand what has happened to them and to give them the best possible chance of recovery. The second programme of joint inspections of child protection services found a lack of therapeutic recovery services for children and young people across the country. Many young people are not getting the help
they need to heal from hurt, build resilience and develop positive self-esteem, increasing their vulnerability to further exploitation and abuse.

11. We do know that any young person can be susceptible to exploitation and the use of social media is a particular area of concern, where young people can make personal data readily available and be drawn in to activity which quickly becomes beyond their control.

12. There is a need for effective awareness-raising of both the benefits and risks of young people’s use of social media and of how young people may be groomed and manipulated. Awareness-raising should aim to help parents and other adults involved in children’s lives become confident and able to support young people to keep safe. It would be helpful to consider ways in which young people could seek help for themselves or their friends at an early stage if they find themselves in difficulties, for example through on-line advice sites and helplines.

Care Inspectorate
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