Public Petitions Committee

Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland

Written submission from Say Women

Background
SAY Women is a voluntary sector organisation, established in 1991, that supports young survivors of childhood sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence and who are at risk of / are homeless and are aged 16-25 years.

The services we provide are:

- A safe accommodation for 8 young women for up to 18 months in partnership with Shettleston Housing Association.
- A resettlement service for young women leaving the Accommodation Project.
- A crisis and ongoing support for both young women and young men who are living in other homeless/addiction projects or in their own tenancies.
- Training programmes to staff on working with childhood sexual abuse; the links to self harm/injury; addictions; housing/homelessness.

SAY Women welcomes this opportunity to review the impact of policy and Guidance around Child Sexual Exploitation, (CSE). Any attempt to progress the prosecution of perpetrators and the protection of children and young people is supported by the Organisation.

The following response will begin with a statement from SAY Women in relation to the issue of CSE, before following the format of the inquiry questions.

Statement
Whilst SAY Women recognises the benefits of exploring CSE, identifying some of the risk factors and providing informed and adequate support to survivors, we do have concerns about sectioning out CSE from Child Sexual Abuse in general.

“Sexual exploitation of children is not easily separable from other forms of sexual abuse in childhood, since it can be an aspect of ongoing abuse by a family member/known adult as well as independent of this; it can occur in single and multiple offender contexts. For these reasons we regard it dangerous to create classifications of sexual abuse as mutually exclusive categories.”

(Kelly, L. et al 2006)
We believe the Scottish Guidelines definition of child sexual abuse adequately supports the protection and response to children and young people experiencing CSE.

“When any person, by design or neglect, exploits the child … in any activity intended to lead to the sexual arousal or other forms of gratification of that person or any other person(s), including organised networks. This definition holds whether or not there has been any genital contact and whether or not the child is said to have initiated, or consented to, the behaviour.”

We are concerned that the focus on the child / young person’s involvement in the forms of grooming, i.e. money, supply of drugs alcohol etc, diverts attention from the abusers actions, and focuses on the vulnerabilities of the child / young person. This appears to be in contradiction to the above definition. We would support the continuing focus on the perpetrator, “any person, …..., exploits the child” as opposed to “Any involvement of a child or young person...”.

**Key Points**

**What are the most common types of CSE and how many for SAY Women service users?**

SAY Women collates annual statistics on the issues being supported across our services. Below are our latest figures for the year 2011-12.

- Accommodation Project housed 13 young women, of whom 4 had been cared for by a local authority. 23% had an illegal drug dependency; 46% had an alcohol dependency; 61% had experienced prostitution; 4 had experienced ‘grooming’.

- The Resource service supported 60 young people, 3 of whom were young men. 15% had been cared for by a local authority; 27% had an illegal drug dependency; 38% had an alcohol dependency; 5% had experienced prostitution; 8 had been ‘groomed’ (including internet).

**What are the main routes or pathways?**

Those with addictions are mainly prostituted by current/previous boyfriends to fund his initial ‘habit’ and the young women begin using to cope with the ongoing abuse in prostitution. Or young women having sex with drug dealers in exchange for drugs for her own use. The relationships usually begin in homeless projects or in addiction rehab facilities.

Other pathways are much wider and take place in the community and have ranged from the following:

- Private hire taxis – oral sex in exchange for fares.
- Local takeaway shops – food in exchange for oral sex and leading to rape. Also to organised prostitution network.
Local grocer shop – invites to parties by shop owner.
Photography studio – photographs for portfolio leading to suggestion of ‘glamour/underwear modelling’.
Local pubs – invites to parties by group of older men where alcohol and drugs are supplied.
Lapdancing – requested to give ‘private’ sessions where men are allowed to ‘touch’.

Examples of good multi-agency practice?

Very little in our experience and mainly with police. The local community police have responded well to our information on local shops by visiting the staff. However, how much is being picked up when there is no support organisation involved with the child/young person. Unsure if police collect information from parents who have also complained. Again highlighting extent of abusers already established in the community and targetting vulnerable and isolated young people and children.

Former Strathclyde Police headquarters had facility to report third party on any concerning activity. Is this part of new Scotland wide service?

Good examples of police questioning of vulnerable young people regarding commercial sexual exploitation.

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

One of the main barriers that we have experienced is workers’ understanding of the variety of exploitation experienced by, particularly, young people, and a preference to focus on the vulnerabilities of the young person, rather than the actions of the perpetrator. This often transfers to viewing the young person as the “risk taker” and as making “choices”. This is evident not only in training, but also in our interaction with services.

An example was the needs a young person recently sexually exploited by a male passer by who stopped her from jumping from a bridge were dismissed by police officers who attended when she returned to the bridge, instead their questioning focussed on the incident as a sexual encounter rather than exploitation. Although this young person was over 18 years old, the issues were the same and the police officers lost the opportunity to gather evidence on a potential perpetrator in the community.

The vast majority of workers accessing our training express low confidence and concern at supporting disclosure. Furthermore workers often express disappointment in support and supervision, particularly in the statutory services. Whilst SAY Women recognise that workers attending training are there due to identified training needs, we are concerned at reports of inadequate support and supervision, with many workers reporting that supervision is based on case need rather than their own support. SAY Women believe this will have a negative affect on the workers ability to
support survivors to disclose their experiences of abuse, not only reducing the opportunity to support the survivor, but also identifying perpetrators.

More specialised training for workers would overcome some of these difficulties, locating child sexual abuse within the violence against women and children continuum (Kelly, L. 1991) and refocuses workers on the actions on supporting the child / young person as a “victim” would support disclosure, and therefore increase potential for prosecution. Training should also be undertaken by those in the justice system, such as judges, and also should be included in standard Children’s Panel training programmes.

Any industry values the use of a clear, concise and common language. SAY Women has recognised that there has been a movement away from terms that identifies abuse, such as rape, to focus on the impact of it, e.g. trauma, effectively ‘medicalising’ the issues. Whilst this is helpful in supporting survivors to overcome the abuse they have experienced, we believe this would not be helpful either in evidence gathering or also in the transfer of survivors between services.

Although many children and young people try to communicate their distress surrounding their experiences of abuse, they often do not have the language or are fearful of fully disclosing. SAY Women would emphasise that we should not be distracted by perceived difficulties young people may have with disclosure, but support staff to become more skilled at recognising the signs and build confidence to ask direct questions. Many staff express concern that talking to children about sexual abuse may affect any future court proceedings, indicating a lack of knowledge and skills around supporting disclosure. More specialised training on how to speak to and support children and young people with disclosure is essential.

There is a lack of co-ordinated and joined-up training in relation to what is available from a range of organisations. The current climate has led to a marked drop in numbers of staff attending specific training on male violence against women and children unless this training is free. Most organisations are facing the same problem.

SAY Women are also concerned at the lack of progress in identifying and prosecuting “punters” involved in the buying of children and young people for sex. We hope that this will be included in any future guidance on the prosecution of CSE. If we are truly committed to reduction child sexual exploitation through prostitution challenging the abuse of power through the demand for sexual access to children and young people is essential.

Adequate resources for services are always a difficulty, however, specialised services for survivors of childhood sexual abuse are particularly affected. In Glasgow, recent research showed that only 5% of the Violence Against Women budget was spent on supporting survivors of childhood sexual abuse. We do not believe that this is unusual in Scotland. Although SAY Women recognise the restrictions on budgets we believe that in order to respond to adequately to CSE priority must be given to the support of historical survivors
of abuse, as well as the protection of children and young people, as it is through this work we can gather evidence and identify perpetrators.

The use of mobile phones by abusers in making contact with young people is also making it much more difficult for staff supporting the child or young person to gather information such as location, etc. Again this identifies the need for widespread training on how to recognise abuse since the child/young person is most likely to disclose to an adult they trust and have an existing relationship with.

What difficulties exist around keeping looked-after children and young people (accommodated or at home) safe from CSE perpetrators? How might these be overcome?

We are all aware that looked after young people experience a variety of disadvantages, including low educational attainment, health and wellbeing statistics, high levels of running away and increased chance of homelessness. All of these disadvantages can be exploited by perpetrators and therefore children and young people in this position can be targeted by abusers, as shown in recent high profile cases in the UK. This reflects the experience of the adult population, for example women in homeless accommodation. More support for workers caring for looked after children and young people to provide adequate care including increased staff to children ratio and policies that aid rather than obstruct support, e.g. what powers do workers have in relation to investigating concerns around CSE, such as checking mobile phone contacts.

Furthermore the Scottish Government research project, “Exploring the Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Exploitation in Scotland”, recognised the difficulties experienced by young people accommodated by Local Authorities, in relation to peer exploitation. SAY Women recognises this difficulty and repeats our concern, expressed during the consultation period for the Sexual Offences Act, where sexual activity between young people under 16 years can lead to registration on the sex offenders list. This does not adequately assist in identifying abusers, under the age of 16 years, at the core of peer abuse, preferring to emphasise both young people as under the age of 16. This may increase the fears of victims of abuse that they may also be charged. Clear guidance for children and young people on their rights and a respect approach as well as clear challenging of sexual violence and bullying would support greater levels of disclosure.

What barriers exist to combating perpetrators use of online / social media? How might these be overcome?

Online safety for children is particularly complex. Access to the internet can be essential for children and young people who are transient and have limited social and support circles. Traditionally children and young people have been denied access to the internet, and SAY Women welcomes a new approach of supporting understanding and safety when using the internet, rather than
exclusion from it. Increasing the understanding of social media amongst support workers is core to supporting looked after young people to increase their safety online. This requires the limitations of workers to be recognised and opportunities for children and young people and workers to explore their understanding together. Glasgow Women’s Library and SAY Women are presenting a programme designed for workers supporting young people with internet safety to the National Residential Childcare Workers Conference in June. The core principle of the programme is to encourage discussion with the children / young people rather than “educate”, as often their skills and knowledge is more advanced that workers, particularly if the young people have already been targeted by abusers. This can increase young people’s safety, as well as identify perpetrators, using online content can be used as evidence.

As with all support given to children and young people who have / are experiencing sexual abuse, this work should run alongside confidence building and self esteem support, particularly challenging with those young people being accommodated. As Hamilton (2009) highlighted, “The solution is not to ban girls from interacting with peers, but to give them a strong framework and sense of self.” In SAY Women’s experience this is true for both male and female survivors.

Is there a role CEOPS in schools and youth settings? We are aware through our involvement in multi-agency partnerships that staff in schools report being overwhelmed with additional areas of work but schools are such a key part of access to children that the possibility for external organisations to deliver standardised and co-ordinated input across Scotland should be considered. This would also apply to youth and FE situations. We are aware that organisations that have developed information have had funding end.

Also is their a role for information leaflets on internet safety to be sent to all purchasers of computers, in the same manner as buying a TV is automatically reported to the TV Licensing Authority?

What types of training has your organisation had on ways of identifying, disrupting or prosecuting perpetrators?

SAY Women supports survivors of childhood sexual abuse and rape, therefore, our staff are highly skilled at picking up on any signals around CSE and as can be seen from our evidence of local activities aimed at exploiting the young women being supported by us. Our staff attend any external training for appropriate updates. Our Child Protection Policy and Vulnerable Adults Policy includes partnership working with Social Work and Police when required.

(For Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service): Have you used the 2005 and 2009 Acts to disrupt, prosecute, charge or convict perpetrators of CSE, do problems remain about using these Acts? If so, please provide detail.

n/a
(For Police Scotland): Lack of co-ordination, and differing policies among Scotland’s eight police forces were previously sees as difficulties in countering CSE. The Scottish Government has stated that is looking to improve the way CSE is identified by the new single police force. How does Police Scotland intend to make this improvement?

If you have experienced an example of good practice in relation to any of these questions, please describe it for us.

**Summary**

SAY Women welcome this consultation and would highlight the following points.

- Further discussion around the nature of abuse is required, including the role of “punters”, to inform policy and guidance.
- Workers, including criminal justice and Children’s Panel members, require ongoing access to specialised training, locating CSE within the Continuum of violence against women and children.
- Standardised input in schools, youth, FE settings.
- A clear, concise and common language is required to ensure survivors support needs are clearly identified and responded to consistently and adequately.
- Inclusion of young people in discussion around internet safety, both on an individual basis and in group settings.
- Review of Sexual Offences Act to identify and respond to any negative impact on disclosure from under 16 year olds.

**References**

(Kelly, L. et al 2006)
Exploring the Scale and Nature of Child Sexual Exploitation in Scotland"

Hamilton (2009)