Introduction

CELCIS is the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children in Scotland based at the University of Strathclyde. Together with partners, we are working to improve the lives of all Looked after children in Scotland. Established in 2011, CELCIS has been committed to further improving the outcomes and opportunities for Looked after children through a collaborative and facilitative approach that is focused on having the maximum positive impact on their lives.

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Public Petitions Committee’s Call for evidence and particularly recognise the work of Barnardo’s Scotland, and other third sector organisations, in highlighting this important issue. Our response draws on our research expertise on the sexual exploitation of looked after children and young people. CELCIS has recently completed a study on the sexual exploitation of children in the Scottish care system commissioned by the Care Inspectorate; amongst other areas, this considers incidence and prevalence (CELCIS, forthcoming).

Key messages

- There are no accurate figures on the scale and extent of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Scotland;
- There needs to be greater awareness of the range of CSE that can exist and the signs children and young people can display that may alert adults to the risk;
- Children and young people can face multiple barriers to disclosing abuse and require safe spaces and relationships with trusted adults;
- Looked after children and young people can face additional vulnerability factors that can heighten their risk of sexual exploitation;
- Different groups of looked after children have very different experiences, whilst we know some risk factors for CSE, further research is needed to identify which children and young people are most at risk.

Questions

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

1.1 There is **lack of awareness of the wide range of CSE and what constitutes CSE** that can take place. In an annual survey of twenty-one child sexual exploitation services, Barnardo’s (2012) identified:
- Organised abuse and internal trafficking- based on links between abusers, this often involves young people being moved to other towns or cities for exploitation;
- Older men masquerading as boyfriends of teenage girls, with the reverse being true for teenage boys;
- Involvement of peers in exploitation – both directly as abusers or indirectly in linking other young people to abusers;
- CSE also occurs through loose networks of abusers and criminal gangs;
- Exploitation of younger children – with children as young as 11 years old believed to be at risk of exploitation;
- The role of technology in exploitation – shown to have increased markedly since 2010.

There needs to be a greater awareness of the forms of CSE amongst workers and provision of training to ensure workers are confident to deal with suspected CSE. There may be instances where professionals fail to recognise and report abuse.

1.2 There is also **lack of awareness of child characteristics and behaviour** which indicate they may be being exploited. Factors can include:

- Going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late;
- Regularly missing school or not taking part in education;
- Appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions;
- Associating with other young people involved in exploitation;
- Having older boyfriends or girlfriends;
- Suffering from sexually transmitted infections;
- Mood swings or changes in emotional wellbeing;
- Drug and alcohol misuse;
- Displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour (Barnardos, 2012: 5).

1.3 Barriers also include **children’s unwillingness to disclose abuse** – often due to threats and manipulation from the perpetrator (Paine and Hanson 2002). These types of barriers may be greater for some populations of children e.g. disabled children (Oosterhoorn & Kendrick, 2001; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000), some ethnic minority backgrounds (Ward & Patel, 2006) and sexuality (Moody, 1999). Therefore, children and young people require opportunities and safe spaces to disclose abuse to trusted adults. However, given the coercive nature of CSE, it should be recognised that this can be extremely difficult for many children and young people.

1.4 There is a need to review the efficacy of current legislation. As highlighted by Barnardo’s Scotland, the **Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005** has rarely been enacted. A lack of convictions
may be indicative of a lack of justice for this group of children and young people that must be addressed.

1.5 These barriers could be addressed through:

- A National Strategy on CSE for Scotland being developed, adequately resourced and implemented, including good practice examples of multi-agency, child-centred work;
- Provision of training on CSE for all staff working with children and young people. This can include, for example, completion of one of the CSE training courses currently available or inclusion of CSE training in qualifying courses;
- Developing a wide range of accessible information resources for children, young people, families and professionals on identifying CSE, protective strategies and available support.

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

2.1 Research identified that children and young people with care experiences can be at heightened risk of child sexual exploitation (Brodie & Pearce, 2012). Children who have been abused prior to care can be at greater risk to experience further abuse (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010).

One study by the University of Bedford found on one day in 2011, 22% of children using child sexual exploitation services were ‘in care’ (Jago, et al., 2011). Similarly the Barnardo’s 2010-2011 survey of their sexual exploitation services found that 14% of service users had been in care. While recognising the legislative differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK, these factors highlight the particular vulnerability of children who are ‘looked after’ to sexual exploitation.

2.2 Looked after children and young people may experience more risk factors for CSE; for example, increased rates of running away, use of alcohol/drugs, disengagement from education, influence of negative peer groups, historical abuse and neglect and mental health problems. The geographical mobility of some children and young people through placement changes can contribute to vulnerability through an absence of support networks.

2.2 It is believed perpetrators may target young people in care because they are often vulnerable. It is widely acknowledged that some perpetrators volunteer or seek employment in organisations for young people, such as care settings and schools (Wurtele, 2012). However Wurtele suggests that intentional exploitation forms only a small part of the problem. Perpetrators will target weaknesses in any structures or systems to access children and young
people. Therefore, targeting vulnerable families where there may be less professional awareness of CSE is a particular concern.

2.3 Additional barriers can be caused by professional attitudes towards children and young people. Staff in social work agencies may view children with difficult behaviour as ‘problematic’. Therefore young people may receive a poorer level of services and continue to have increased levels of vulnerability to exploitation (Beckett, 2011). It must be acknowledged that young people who are considered ‘streetwise’ and ‘able to take care of themselves’ in residential settings, may in reality be at heightened risk of CSE.

2.4 Creegan, Scott and Smith (2005) identify five key elements to any model of care provided for CSE: Early intervention, safe accommodation, continuity of care, intensive support and multi-agency coordination. Writing within a Scottish context, they examine the implications for interventions in secure residential care, close support, specialist fostering and intensive intervention in the community. Reviewing the suitability of these settings individually, they propose that each can meet the needs of young people with the appropriate supports in place, although they caution that secure care works best only in the short term, where it may be necessary to break contact with abusive adults (Creegan, et al., 2005).

2.4 These barriers could be addressed through:

- Ensuring that all looked after children and young people have safe spaces and opportunities to talk about relationships and safety;
- Children should not have to ‘disclose’ CSE for preventative action to be taken by professionals;
- Challenging stereotypes of which looked after children and young people are at risk of CSE;
- Although there are significant gaps in knowledge, increased recognition that families may be targeted by perpetrators.

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

3.1 Child sexual exploitation through online and social media is a particularly complex problem. The CEOP’s work in this area highlights that online offenders are frequently organised and often:

... coalesce to form online offender networks that are as tightly controlled as their ‘real world’ equivalents. It is understood that the individuals involved in these networks are generally unknown to each other offline and are commonly not financially motivated. (CEOP, 2012b, p. 5)

A distinct barrier is the privacy in which this type of CSE may occur. Password protected sites, the ability to masquerade online as a young
person, the scale of networking among young people which provides perpetrators with unlimited ‘opportunities’ to target young people. Mitchell et al. (2010) found that perpetrators used social networking sites to gain access to friends of their victims. There is an increasing risk of CSE from overseas offenders as internet use across developing nations expands (CEOP, 2012a, 2012b). In addition, concealed recording devices make it easier to take images in public without suspicion being raised (CEOP, 2012a, 2012b). Boys and girls were exposed to the same risk of online CSE (CEOP, 2012b).

Perpetrators are increasingly using their relationships with children to gain access to passwords for social networking sites and threatening to upload inappropriate photos/messages if children do not perform or participate in sexual activities (CEOP, 2012b).

3.2 Children and young people’s attitudes to, and limited knowledge about, online safety and networking can increase their risk of online CSE. One study showed that young people are not always aware of their privacy settings and who has what level of access to their site (Moreno et al., 2012).

3.3 Overcoming barriers can include:

- Wider awareness raising for children, families and those working with them, to prevent them becoming involved in online CSE;
- Provision of support for children and young people affected by CSE;
- Enhancing the work of the police and CEOP to identify and prosecute perpetrators of CSE using social media.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond. We would welcome any further discussions.

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References

CELCIS (Forthcoming). The Sexual Exploitation of Looked after Children in Scotland: A study conducted for the Care Inspectorate, Glasgow: CELCIS.


