Public Petitions Committee

Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland

Written submission from Superintendent Ricky Mason, Police Scotland

In March 2013 a tri-partnership initiative between the Police in K Division, Renfrewshire Council and Barnardo’s was established to better identify, protect and directly support children who have been missing from their home,

As well as aiming to reduce these incidences it also aims to prevent placement/home breakdown and reduce the risk of children and young people becoming subject to sexual exploitation and crime related issues. This partnership approach will seek to better understand why our children and young people go missing and ensure timely and direct support is put in place. Overall the aim is to reduce the number of runaways and minimise the risks to those who do go missing.

The initiative was brought about as both the Division and Renfrewshire Council had identified that our response to young runaways could be improved. This coupled with the adverse reporting of cases in the media in terms of CSE prompted us to take a proactive approach to the problem. The tri partnership group that has been set up will utilise proactive problem solving to counter the risks associated with victims, perpetrators and locations. Taking effective action against those intent on abusing and exploiting children and young people is an important aspect of this.

It is our collective responsibility to identify these children and young people and both protect and safeguard them from further risk of harm.

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

It has been acknowledged that troubled children and young people may be reluctant to engage with different statutory agencies. This reluctance to share what is happening to them is a real barrier to their protection. There is also an issue as it is a hidden crime. It is often the case that children and young people do not perceive themselves to be victims, as they consider they have acted voluntarily. The reality is that their behaviour is not voluntary or consenting. For victims, the pain of their ordeal and fear that they will not be believed means they are too often scared to come forward.

Within Renfrewshire the basic principle is that where a child has been missing, on their return the police will refer them to Barnardo’s who will then interview them. This does not take away the responsibility from the Police. They will still attend and interview them when they return.
Barnardo’s involvement will help to build relationships with children and young people to enable them to hopefully develop more trust and feel they can share information about where they have gone missing, what happened while they were away and what support they need. Therefore, within Renfrewshire, Barnardo’s will now interview the child or young person on return, if the child or young person is accommodated. Improved information will help other agencies better safeguard and protect children and develop the right support package to meet their needs.

Renfrewshire have set up a number of multi agency groups to ensure that information about missing children in the Renfrewshire area is effectively shared, reviewed and actioned to support co-ordinated joint activity. This activity will better assist in locating children and young people, identifying and disrupting those who harbour them and initiating actions and strategies to reduce risk.

The organisations involved in these groups will work together to keep children and young people safe from sexual exploitation. These organisations will be drawn from the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and their work will follow recognised principles of effective practice to safeguard and protect the welfare of children and young people.

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

From a policing perspective the intelligence gap in relation to potential CSE means that it is very difficult to establish the scale of the problem at present. Without commitment from all agencies involved a true picture and assessment of this new and emerging trend will never be achieved. It is therefore crucial that organisations recognise the indicators and identify those most vulnerable or at risk of becoming victims of CSE.

Child sexual exploitation takes place in local communities and information known to partners could be used to highlight the threat and establish risk. It is anticipated that an improved intelligence picture will enable effective action in a greater number of cases of child sexual exploitation, thereby reducing the harm which would otherwise be caused to the young victims and their families.

The children or young people in Renfrewshire are referred to a Vulnerable Persons Operational Group. This is basically a multi agency meeting which discusses specific cases and relevant intelligence and information is shared which will then be used to co-ordinate responses.

The Operational Group will have the potential to call upon the diverse skills and experience available from amongst its members. In conjunction with sharing information to increase the understanding of the threat posed by Child Sexual Exploitation, they will bring together a range of specialist knowledge
and partnership agreement to ensure that each organisation plays its role, collectively, effectively and individually.

The Operational Group identifies those high risk children and young people who go missing from home or who come to the attention of an organisation and it is felt that they are at risk. The meeting is utilised to monitor and develop action plans and strategies to reduce Missing from Home episodes. These high risk children are discussed in detail with the Police, Barnardo's, Criminal Justice Social Work, Health, Education and other relevant groups which will be decided on a case by case basis to assess the needs of the child and action plans are developed.

The meetings allow each partner agency to share information and intelligence. This allows effective decision making to take place which ensures resources are deployed to tackle individuals who pose the greatest risk.

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

This question will best be dealt with by Police Scotland.

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

The project in Renfrewshire was initiated in March 2013. Training has been provided to officers on the use of forms which are being utilised and inputs have been provided to officers on CSE. Barnardo's will be providing training inputs to officers in the near future.

**Have you used the 2005 and 2009 Acts to disrupt, prosecute, charge or convict perpetrators of CS, do problems remain about using these Acts? If so, please provide detail.**

The Pilot only started in March 2013 and there has been one Operational Group meeting. No disruptions or prosecutions have taken place.