Public Petitions Committee
Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland
Written submission from East Ayrshire Council

Introduction
East Ayrshire Council Social Work Service welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Parliament’s call for evidence regarding their inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE).

Background
East Ayrshire Council is fully aware of the importance of safeguarding and protecting children which is a key area in social work with children and young people. It is also an area of work where definitions have changed and developed over a period of time as understanding of the breadth of issues has increased. Understanding and engagement in relation to CSE has developed over recent years and as a result attitudes towards CSE are changing which may impact on levels of reporting.

To date within East Ayrshire, CSE has been determined or suspected in a small number of cases over the past 4 years of which we have reliable data. The Children and Families Social Work Services is currently working with 1795 children and young people, of which 526 are looked after (209 being accommodated). Within this group there have been 3 cases in the past 3 years where CSE has been reported and only 1 case where CSE led to a conviction.

All 3 cases were girls aged between 13 and 16 years, 2 were accommodated and 1 lived at home. It is important to note that in all 3 cases the reports of CSE came from the young people themselves to care staff working with them:

- Child 1 was reported to the Police and resulted in a successful prosecution
- Child 2 concerned an unaccompanied asylum seeker who reported sexual exploitation, but absconded from care before this could be fully investigated
- Child 3 was reported to community based Social Work staff and also to the Police but did not result in a prosecution as the girl concerned found the process of investigation and a forensic medical examination too difficult and withdrew from the process before the medical examination could be undertaken.
Having consulted with staff within Children and Families and Criminal Justice Services the following information has been structured as responses to the questions highlighted in the Scottish Parliament Inquiry.

**What barriers exist to identifying, disrupting or prosecuting CSE perpetrators? How might these be overcome?**

Under reporting is almost certainly an issue as outlined in the background to this response. Perpetrators of CSE are often able to strongly influence the young people involved as the young people:

- Do not realise that anything is wrong
- They enjoy being treated like an adult
- They appreciate being treated as special which is part of the early grooming experience

This in turn may result in the relationships young people have with protective services becoming strained which makes reporting highly unlikely. This is apparent in a lack of willingness amongst vulnerable young people to discuss with the Police as demonstrated in the case of child 3.

Within East Ayrshire CSE has not been reported concerning boys or young men and this may indicate that workers involved with young women are more attuned to the dangers of CSE than those working with young men; therefore identifying CSE where young men are being exploited appears to be more difficult.

To overcome these barriers it will be necessary to raise awareness with all who work with young people to build resilience in young people, particularly vulnerable young people as a preventative measure and to build local multi-agency links in order to best respond to CSE where it occurs. The response of care staff to suspected CSE is extremely important. As carers may be concerned about the safety of young people, it may appear to the young people concerned that their carers are attempting to control them by enforcing rules and measures intended to keep the young people away from possible perpetrators. This can cause a negative reaction from young people and difficulty in their relationships with carers. To best respond to young people where CSE is suspected, carers require to maintain a nurturing relationship that recognises the feelings of young people around these issues and also supports them to make statements to the Police regarding the exploitation they have suffered. Without the co-operation of young people it will be impossible to hold perpetrators to account.

On-going support and development for staff working with young people will be required to address this issue and build the skills required. Work has already begun
in raising awareness in relation to CSE in East Ayrshire, and in April of this year Barnardo’s delivered a presentation to an audience gathered from member agencies of the Child Protection Committee, with a view to further developing our response locally. In addition, the West of Scotland Child Protection Consortium has agreed to jointly develop learning and development materials and staff guidance in respect of CSE. Barnardo’s has agreed to support this work. This will maximise effort and continuity of response across the West of Scotland.

The role of the Police with vulnerable children particularly looked after children also require to be considered. Young people will be more willing to provide Police statements if they have an existing relationship with Community Police Officers who can support them through this process.

Currently multi-agency child protection processes are used to co-ordinate services between agencies when children are at risk within families. These processes do not easily fit CSE cases as the risk to the young people will often come from an external source that may not easily be identified. There is therefore a need for guidance and learning and development materials to be developed for multi-agency coordination of responses to CSE cases. As outlined, this is currently being taken forward by the West of Scotland Child Protection Consortium, (this represents the 13 Child Protection Committees in the West of Scotland).

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

Looked after children have particular clusters of need and vulnerability and this makes this group more susceptible to CSE. The cases above were all looked after children (1 at home and 2 accommodated). Current knowledge regarding early years brain development and the effects of trauma, poor attachment and neglect, indicate that looked after children are likely to experience a variety of difficulties as they develop through adolescence into their adult lives. These difficulties include, offending, substance misuse, mental ill health, physical ill health and difficulties in forming and maintaining new relationships. It is therefore important that CSE is seen as one of the factors that require intervention aimed at meeting the range of outcomes that looked after young people require. It is also the case that the barriers identified for children and young people are often amplified for those that are looked after as this group are highly likely to develop attachments to perpetrators which form a barrier to achieving safety. Relationships with agencies may also be problematic for this group and can be a barrier to responding to a risk of CSE, particularly where young people may fear the reaction of services to any disclosure.

Young people need to have confidence that comes from a strong nurturing relationship in order to make statements which allow for CSE cases to be fully
investigated and prosecuted. In the case of child 2, the young person had only recently been accommodated as an asylum seeker when the allegations of CSE were raised by her. Given her circumstances she feared the response of the immigration process to her situation and had not had time to build a strong relationship with care staff.

In the case of child 3 there was a good relationship between the young person and the staff supporting her but this was not enough to help her through an investigation and medical, which she saw as a major intrusion into intimate areas of her life. This was compounded by her family experiences of mistrust of authority figures, particularly the police.

The cases of child 2 and 3 indicate that a strong sense of trust between carers, police and young people is necessary in order to successfully deal with CSE allegations. In the case of child 3 a move from home to a care placement had previously been considered but this was not seen as the best option given that it would further distance her from the supports that she had.

Responses which support young people where they are currently living, involving staff who approach the young person in a supportive and nurturing manner create the best situation for responding to any potential CSE. In addition Police action to target suspected perpetrators will be the best route to ensure child safety. In the case of child 1 the carers in the Children’s House supported the young person to make her complaint to the Police and the Police appropriately targeted the perpetrator. There was no consideration at any stage of a move for the young person and this appears to have resulted in a successful outcome.

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

In the case of child 1 in which a successful prosecution took place, evidence gathered from social networking sites was an important component. One of the strengths that social media brings is the fact that there is a record of communication which can form evidence. One difficulty with social media is the understanding of social media among staff working with young people. For social media to be a strength rather than a threat, carers require to be aware of how young people are using social media, which requires co-operation from young people. Given the availability of access to social media through mobile devices as well as computers it is entirely unrealistic to expect that young people can be prevented from accessing such sites as a protective measure. Raising young people’s awareness of the dangers and helping them make positive choices about forming relationships around social media will provide the best protection. Development of the use of social media by workers working with young people also requires to be developed,
because workers who regularly contact young people through social network sites will be aware of what is being communicated on those sites.

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

Within East Ayrshire a variety of learning and development events have been held for multi-agency audiences, these include:

- Commercial Sexual Exploitation
- Masculinities, Power and Violence Against Women
- Trafficking
- Hidden Children (workshop based on Operation Retriever in Derby)
- Within East Ayrshire Council’s Children’s Houses a Nurture Model Approach has been rolled out to all carers to embed in their day to day practice. This model will be rolled out to all Foster Carers later in the year
- Child Sexual Exploitation development session – presented by Barnardo’s

These events have only laid the groundwork for development of a training approach to staff working with children that sets CSE firmly within the child protection agenda and assists staff to work with young people who may be affected in order to make prosecution and disruption of offending more likely. Learning and Development needs on CSE and associated topics will be determined through consultation with multi-agency partners at the Child Protection Committee.

**If you have experienced an example of good practice please describe it for us?**

A good example of practice is in the case of child 1:

The young person advised her carers of conversations with a taxi driver through Facebook. The adult male, then visited the girl in a house and spoke to the young person, she claimed to be homeless and needed £10 for alcohol. The man went on to have a conversation with the young person, making rude and suggestive comments. This information was passed to the Police and the man was subsequently charged.

**Conclusion**

There is a commitment across agencies to work together to prevent the exploitation of children and young people. The above information indicates a number of specific challenges around CSE, these include:

- Identification of CSE - the need to raise awareness of staff across professional disciplines and parents / communities;
CSE/030

- Ensuring nurturing relationships with young people - which makes reporting and responding to CSE effective;
- The lack of understanding around CSE and boys;
- The importance of workers becoming comfortable with social media when communicating with young people;
- Development of multi-agency guidance and learning and development materials;