Public Petitions Committee
Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland
Written submission from Who Cares? Scotland

Who Cares? Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Tackling Child Sexual Exploitation in Scotland Inquiry. Our response is based on our direct work with children and young people; their stories and our staff observations and experiences. Our response will focus on the following key points.

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

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

In Who Cares? Scotland’s experience the most significant barrier to identifying, disrupting or prosecuting CSE perpetrators is the protection afforded to perpetrators by their child victims. Children will be vulnerable, often having been removed from families, friends, school and local community. Some may already have experienced sexual abuse; others will have lived in environments where the abuse of power is the norm. Social and emotional isolation of children, lack of resilience and a need to belong, are all factors which lead children to perpetrators in the first place.

Perpetrators are usually skilled relationship builders. They listen to children; they talk to them as equals and appear to value and care for them. Over time children’s loyalty to these “friends” increases and they may engage in sexual behaviours as a means of compensating the perpetrator for their “kindness and friendship”. This loyalty tethers children to perpetrators, and children will usually protect them by secrecy and their silence.

In order to overcome this barrier, Who Cares? Scotland believes that a national programme of education is required in order to raise the general public’s awareness – not just about the issue of exploitation, but also about the vulnerability of this group of children, and the stigma they often experience as a result of some people’s perceptions that they may be “from a bad family”; the simple fact of being in the care of the local authority – or a combination of the two.

Stigma underpins how society views vulnerable children – as bad kids, who must be in care because they’ve done something wrong. They are often seen as flawed; a problem; not the type you’d want your own children to associate with…..

The general public have minimal awareness of the life experiences that many vulnerable children will have had, so there will be a need to ensure that adults have the opportunity to learn how already vulnerable children become so isolated and desperate to belong, that they can be sexually exploited. We need to change the attitudes and perceptions of adults about vulnerable children. All too often society problematises, judges, excludes and looks down on this group of children. Sadly,
this is the very behaviour which will push them towards those adults who will do them most harm.

Children themselves need to understand what exploitation is. They need to understand how they are affected by power. They also need to understand concepts such as coercion and choice, and what their rights are under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In order to achieve this, awareness raising of children’s rights must be embedded in Scotland’s education system – at an appropriate level from p1 onwards. This should be supported by a TV advertising campaign, which would educate both children and adults.

It is very difficult to keep children safe from perpetrators. The process of grooming children is one which is cloaked in secrecy. Children are groomed not to tell. For children living at home – who may be living in situations of neglect, substance misuse or domestic violence. they may not recognise that they are being exploited. Some of these children will already have experienced sexual abuse and therefore view exploitative behaviour as part of their normality – something which they are expected to go along with. As above, many will feel that they are making a choice. Who Cares? Scotland’s experience of children dealing with issues like neglect, domestic violence and substance misuse is that they often don’t tell professionals working closely with them, for fear of making their situation worse – e.g. that they may be removed from their families.

Living in a care setting is a completely different experience for children than living at home. Children often feel that their roots are elsewhere, and that they don’t belong. Children want to have a peer group, they want to fit in, and will often do so by compromising their own safety. They often feel loved and cared for by perpetrators, therefore it’s crucial that as a sector we ensure that children feel loved and cared for in the places that they live, and through ongoing contact with friends, families, community, school etc. Children must feel listened to, valued, respected and that they have some control over their own lives. Many children experience relief at being brought into care, whereas others describe a range of emotions including anger, rage, fear, embarrassment and deep-rooted frustration. Whilst these same children may not recognise the power and control being woven around them by perpetrators, they are able to clearly identify the power and control used by the state to remove them from their family homes. Perpetrators capitalise on this. Perpetrators act with subtlety and secrecy, extending the hand of friendship and inclusiveness, often providing access to money, alcohol and drugs. They place themselves firmly on the child’s side. This is a seductive and dangerous combination.

Who Cares? Scotland believes that it is of paramount importance that children and young people living away from their families have access to independent advocacy on an ongoing basis. In order for children to build trust with their advocate, time is required. It is unhelpful for an advocate to be “parachuted in” at the point of placement breakdown – as often happens. Being generally unhappy, feeling disempowered, not listened to or respected is difficult for any child to deal with, however it can be a significant issue for children looked after away from home if not acted upon. This can lead to children truanting from school and absconding, which in turn can lead to them forming relationships – often through peers – with adults
who will exploit them. Children seldom realise this is wrong, often feeling that they have exerted choice. For those who do know it’s wrong, or who want to stop, it can be difficult to know who can help. Another difficulty children face here is that they are so accessible to perpetrators via technology. Most young people have a mobile phone with internet access, and through chat rooms and social networking sites frighteningly, perpetrators have a direct link to children.

Exploitation of children involves the use of power and control to coerce children into situations and behaviours which make them vulnerable and unsafe. However, it’s often done in such a subtle and gentle way that children feel supported and included by perpetrators. There are often other young people in the same group, and very vulnerable and isolated children can feel that they have found a peer group of people who care about them, who like them as they are, are interested in them and want to be with them.