Public Petitions Committee  
Tackling child sexual exploitation in Scotland  

Written submission from Glasgow Violence Against Women Partnership  

Background Information  
Glasgow Violence Against Women Partnership ("GVAWP") was established in 2000 to promote a strategic multi-agency response to violence against women in Glasgow. The Glasgow Violence Against Women Partnership brings together a range of statutory and voluntary agencies in Glasgow with the aim of improving agency responses to women, children and young people who have experienced male violence. The GVAWP believes that by improving participation will result in better service provision, improved legal protection and help prevent further abuse to women, children and young people. This aim is in line with the Scottish Government’s Safer Lives: Changed Lives: A Shared Approach.  

Our Interest In This Enquiry  
We very much welcome the opportunity to contribute to the call for written evidence – tackling child sexual exploitation. The GVAWP are supportive of this enquiry as we have a serious concern about the prevalence of child sexual exploitation. We are aware that partner organisations will also be making a response to this enquiry and they will have more expert opinion in relation to trafficking; the disruption, prosecution and conviction of perpetrators.

1. Barriers to Identification  

1.1 Child sexual exploitation operates on a continuum with more subtle forms going largely unnoticed and unreported. Sexualised content and imagery are present every day in magazines, marketing, advertising, film, music, games and now social networking. Coy (2009) describes the experiences of sexualised imagery from a very young age as being essential to its normalisation. The culture of normalisation should not be underestimated and presents a significant barrier to early identification and appropriate interventions.

1.2 Consistent exposure to sexual imagery has a profound impact on young people in particular on their self esteem, self worth, how they view their peers, how they interact with one another, what is deemed as valuable and role models they identify with.

1.4 Children and young people are increasingly being exposed to pornography at a very early age. This has a damaging affect on boys and young men creating a culture of hyper masculinity where traits
such as physical strength, physique and sexual prowess are admired and encouraged. For girls and young women there is pressure to be hyper feminine where characteristics of being sexually available and objectified are desirable.

1.6 The increased use of mobile technology and social networking by children and young people occurs with little parental/adult monitoring. Social networking and texting has a language all of its own and parents/carers and professionals would appear to have very little understanding or knowledge of its meaning. Parents/carers are failing to see the more negative aspects to mobile technology and social networking, this knowledge gap needs to be addressed. There is reliance on schools and teachers to fulfil some of this function, often they are only alerted when a child protection issue arises.

1.7 Boys/young men think very little of sending pictures to girls/young women of their genitals and pressure them into reciprocating, these pictures are known as ‘selfies’. When that relationship breaks down these shared pictures are non consensually shared with others, the sender is unaware that they are distributing child pornography. Subsequently if discovered there are legal, mental, emotional health and other issues for all involved.

1.8 There are groups of children and young people who by dint of their childhood experiences are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation but not exclusively so. Within this group we would include those who:

- have been subject to child sexual abuse
- have learning or other difficulties
- are looked after and accommodated
- have parents with addictions
- are living with domestic abuse
- are neglected
- go missing or runaway
- are excluded or truanted from school
- are homeless

Scott, Creegan and Smith 2005 describe being separated from family life as a significant factor in child sexual exploitation.

The GVAWP are of the view that children and young people who are from the above groups are targeted by individuals and organised groups for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Sexual exploitation is not obvious to the child or young person concerned, there is a period of grooming, encouraging children and young people to believe that they are in genuine friendship/relationship prior to the exploitative behaviour escalating.
1.9 Professionals are failing to identify when exploitation is occurring. Lack of knowledge, understanding and awareness all contribute towards this.

2. Overcoming Barriers

2.1 The current definition of child sexual exploitation requires reviewing and should be amended in line with the findings from this enquiry. A common shared definition of what child sexual exploitation is, is needed along with a common shared risk assessment.

2.2 The safety of the child or young person needs to be at the centre of all interventions and interventions constantly scrutinised in their ability to keep a child or young person safe.

2.3 There needs to be a cohesive and coordinated multi agency strategy/framework developed to tackle child sexual exploitation and some of this work could be undertaken by existing VAW Partnerships and with adult and child protection committee’s.

2.4 Tackling child sexual exploitation successfully requires leadership and the appointment of a Champion to lead this work at a national level should be given some consideration.

2.5 A programme of multi agency training requires to be rolled out across partner agencies covering definitions; prevalence; risks; collaborative responses; referral pathways.

2.6 As well as dedicated training programmes around child sexual exploitation the issues need to be included within existing violence against women, child and adult protection training programmes.

2.7 Interagency information sharing protocols need to be further developed in relation to child sexual exploitation.

2.8 The profile of child sexual exploitation needs to be raised in order that parents/carers and professionals are able to name and identify sexually exploitative behaviours that children may be exposed to and take steps to intervene. Funding needs to be made available to support a wide spread public awareness and education campaign.

2.9 There is a need for improved data collection in order that we better understand the prevalence of child sexual exploitation at a national and a local level.

2.10 When engaging with children and young people it is important that it is at a level that is appropriate for their developmental stage. The scope to build on existing programmes delivered in schools should be explored. There is a need to ensure that there is equality of access for children in all learning environments. We need to be mindful that while
making children more aware at no time should the responsibility for prevention and protection become theirs.

3. Training

No formal training has been delivered in a multi agency setting on Child Sexual Exploitation under the auspices of the GVAWP.

We are aware that partner organisations will be responding and they are best placed to share information on the training that they make available to their staff.