

# Policing and Crime Bill: Report stage

## *Therapeutic support for victims of child sexual exploitation*

### Introduction

The Policing and Crime Bill makes some welcome provisions in the area of mental health – including by ending the detention of young people in police cells under the Mental Health Act 1983. However, the Bill also presents an important opportunity to improve access to mental health support for young people who come to the attention of police, or other agency, as victims of sexual abuse.

Amendment NC45 would enact the recommendation in the Government's Future in Mind report<sup>1</sup>, by ensuring that young people who have been sexually abused receive an initial assessment of their needs by the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). This would ensure child victims of sexual abuse receive the mental health support they need and would address the fundamental problem that as things stand victims too often have poor access to the therapeutic support they need.

### Key points

- Child sexual abuse or exploitation can seriously derail a child's development and can have long-term emotional and psychological consequences. With timely, professional support, children can be helped to deal with their experiences and rebuild their lives.
- Research by The Children's Society finds that vulnerable groups of young people such as those who have experienced abuse and neglect are not being adequately supported in their journey through the CAMHS system. For example, less than half (47%) of mental health trusts identify children who have experienced sexual exploitation in referral and initial assessment forms. Only 11% of trusts fast track access to CAMHS for this group.
- In cases where sexual abuse results in severe mental health needs, many children face delays in accessing CAMHS services due to rigid criteria, poor referral pathways and long waiting times both for an assessment and treatment.
- In 9 out of 30 cases examined as part of The Children's Society's report 'Old enough to know better?' there were mentions of young people needing intervention from mental health services because of concerns about their well-being and mental health following sexual abuse.
- The Government's report Future in Mind acknowledged the challenges young victims of sexual abuse face in accessing CAMHS and called for comprehensive assessment of needs as well as referrals to appropriate services such as CAMHS to help young victims overcome trauma. This Bill presents an opportunity to implement this recommendation.

### The devastating impact of sexual abuse on children's mental health

In the past year, we calculate that there were more than 40,000 reported crimes of a sexual nature committed against children<sup>2</sup>. Children who have suffered horrific crimes such as sexual abuse and exploitation can experience life-long difficulties often around issues like drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, homelessness, gang affiliation or disability.

In 9 out of 30 sexual abuse cases examined as part of The Children's Society's report 'Old enough to know better?' there were mentions of young people needing intervention from mental health services because of concerns about their well-being, self-harming episodes, suicide

<sup>1</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Taskforce. Future in Mind. 2015, Page 29. Department of Health, London.  
2 Home Office. 2016. Police recorded crime and outcomes open data tables. Analysis of sexual offences against children in 2015 by police force area, England and Wales.

attempts or even episodes of psychosis that required in-patient interventions. The remaining cases may not have specifically mentioned the need for mental health services but referred to the young people feeling low, depressed, anxious, fearful, or having flashbacks of their abuse.

### **Case study: Ruby's story**

*The Children's Society have been helping 16 year old Ruby who has been directly affected by Child Sex Exploitation (CSE). Ruby came to The Children's Society because she had been sexually exploited, being gradually groomed and was given drugs in exchange for sexual favours. The grooming started at around the age of 14. This young person also has a history of her own child's bereavement. Her social worker referred her to CAMHS with the intention of getting her emotional support for both the bereavement and CSE. CAMHS responded by offering an appointment after many weeks on a waiting list. However, as this young person is difficult to engage she did not attend at the given time. She was subsequently discharged for not attending.*

It is not the case that young people cannot recover from abuse and trauma. With the right therapeutic support, including counselling or psychotherapy, children can rebuild their childhood and achieve positive outcomes through to their adult life.

### **The need for improved access to timely therapeutic support**

The Children's Society's 'Access Denied' report found that access to therapeutic support for victims of sexual abuse or exploitation is patchy across the country. Less than half of Mental Health Trusts identify children who have experienced sexual exploitation on referral and initial assessment forms, and only 11% of CAMHS have in place procedures to fast-track access for this group. In some areas these services are unwilling to support young people who are still receiving safeguarding services, going through legal proceedings, or are not yet displaying the symptoms of a diagnosable clinical condition.

It is widely known that the commissioning landscape for mental health services for young people is complex, with some services commissioned by Police and Crime Commissioners and others through Mental Health Trusts. Rising clinical thresholds for these services and a lack of appropriate provision for children who have been abused mean that children who experience sexual abuse or exploitation often do not receive the professional support they need to deal with this trauma unless they have already reached 'crisis point'.

The Government's Future in Mind report called for all children who have been sexually abused and/or exploited to receive a comprehensive specialist initial assessment and a referral to appropriate services providing evidence-based interventions according to their need. This amendment would help to realise this aim by ensuring that where police or local authorities believe that a child has been abused, they make a referral to a named mental health service for an assessment of need.

### **Questions to the Minister**

- Will the Minister provide an update on the work being done to implement the Future in Mind recommendation that all child victims of sexual abuse receive a referral to the appropriate mental health service?
- Does the Minister have information on how many CCG transformation plans assessed the need to provide mental health support to child victims of sexual offences?

***For more information please contact Lucy Capron, Public Affairs Manager on [lucy.capron@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:lucy.capron@childrenssociety.org.uk) or 0207 841 4494***

## **New Clause 45: “Child sexual exploitation: assessment of needs for therapeutic support”**

- (1) Where the police or a local authority have a reasonable belief that a child has been sexually exploited or subject to other forms of child abuse, the police or the local authority must make a referral to a named mental health service.
- (2) The named mental health service must conduct an assessment of the child’s needs and where appropriate make necessary arrangements for the child’s treatment or care.
- (3) The Secretary of State must by regulations—
  - (a) define “named mental health service” for the purpose of this section;
  - (b) specify a minimum level of “necessary arrangements” for the purpose of the section.”