

Written evidence to Birmingham City Council Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation

1. Introduction

Question One: If you are responding on behalf of an organisation what is its role and how do you work with the council?

- 1.1. The Children's Society is a leading national charity, driven by the belief that every child deserves a good childhood. We provide vital help to the most vulnerable children, young people and families in our society through a range of services.
- 1.2. Across the country we run 12 specialist services for children who run away or go missing and/or at risk or victims of sexual exploitation, supporting more than a thousand children every year. In Birmingham, we run the West Midlands Refugee and Destitution Service, a Missing from Home and Care Service where many of the young people we support are at risk of CSE, and a counselling service for unaccompanied asylum seeking children who access our youth club provision.
- 1.3. Our CSE and Missing service provide intensive one-to-one support and advice, drop-in services and awareness raising sessions for children and professionals. Our services provide a safe haven where children can go for independent and confidential help, advice and support. We have experience in supporting young people before, after and during the prosecution process, including in several large scale, high profile CSE police operations. We also have experience of providing intelligence for such investigations and several of our projects are co-located with their local police forces.
- 1.4. We welcome this important inquiry into how Birmingham City Council can improve its work to tackle child sexual exploitation. Our submission is informed by learning and case studies from our direct work with children and young people who are at risk of CSE or have been sexually exploited.
- 1.5. Through our policy and research, we seek to influence public policy and practice as well as changing attitudes and perceptions of young people at all levels to enable all children and young people to have a better chance in life.

Question Two: What structures and strategies does your service currently have in place to tackle CSE?

2. The Streetwise delivery model

- 2.1. The Streetwise service provides intensive support to victims of child sexual exploitation in Birmingham and Coventry. Streetwise provides 1:1 and group awareness raising

sessions around Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) for young people and 1:1 intensive support for young people at risk of CSE. Shortly after the project began, the profile of CSE increased and agencies became more aware of the issues. As a result referrals to the project went up, and demand for awareness raising training increased.

- 2.2. Our delivery model is based on resilience and social learning theories, recognising the importance of risk and protective factors in a young person's life. The risk factors that are likely to be relevant are family instability, family conflict, poverty, deprived community environment, risky peer and social relationships and a low degree of school commitment. These are counterbalanced by protective factors such as a secure, stable family, a set of personal moral values, safe/positive peer and social relationships, achievement in school and attachment to a community. Intrinsic to this approach is a holistic intervention considering the influences of home, school and community when addressing a young person's needs. The need for holistic support for young people informs the need for co-located teams and improved information sharing.

3. Independent return interviews

- 3.1. It is estimated that over 2,500 young people runaway in Birmingham every year. Running away is a recognised indicator that a child may be at risk of harm, including child sexual exploitation, abuse or involvement in crime. Research shows that a quarter of young people who runaway have experienced harm¹.
- 3.2. That is why it is very important to address the reasons behind child's running away and also find out about their experience from home or care. The statutory guidance on children who runaway or go missing from home or care published in January 2014 requires all local authorities to conduct return interviews for children who go missing².
- 3.3. Return interviews, which are separate and in addition to police Safe and Well checks, provide an opportunity for young people who go missing to speak to an independent specially trained professional about the reasons behind their running away. Return interviews done independently allow a young person to talk to someone they trust and is independent from the professionals they may wish to discuss. Return interviews are now required in statutory guidance for all children who go missing from home or care and whether the police classify them as absent or missing. Return interviews also provide an opportunity to gather information about places children are running away to (local hotspots) and individuals who may target young runaways for sexual exploitation.
- 3.4. The Children's Society is currently commissioned by Birmingham City Council to provide return interviews for children who run away from home and care. Streetwise Birmingham (formerly the Looked After Missing Persons Project (LAMP)) carries out

¹ Still Running 2: http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/Still%20running%20%20-%20Findings%20from%20the%20second%20national%20survey%20of%20young%20runaways_0.pdf

² Government Statutory Guidance on Children who go missing from home or care
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/statutory-guidance-on-children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care>

independent return interviews. The sharing of information from return interviews is particularly critical to ensure mapping of perpetrators, premises and potential victims can be identified.

Case Study

Chantelle Smith is 14 years old and had been missing 8 times in 2 months.

During the last missing episode Chantelle was missing for 4-5 days. Chantelle had not been reported missing by her mum until the 8th time of going missing. The referral was immediately picked up as Chantelle had reported to her mum and the police that she had been raped whilst she was missing but at this point would not provide further details.

A project worker from The Children's Society met with Chantelle at her home to complete a return interview and explore the missing episodes with her. Chantelle told the project worker that during the last missing episode she was with her friend Leanne.

Leanne is 17 years old. Leanne asked Chantelle if she wanted to meet up with some of her friends for a drink and "a good time". They met a couple of Leanne's friends who were older males. They took the girls to a hotel and were taken into a hotel room where there were 15 older men. The girls were given alcohol which was laced with drugs. Chantelle was then locked in the bathroom and raped repeatedly for 4 days until she was released by the men.

The return interview was crucial in gaining further information and details for the police, as well as providing a safe person for Chantelle to talk to. Chantelle and her mum were supported by The Children's Society in taking the statement forward and the project worker followed the return interview with a specific session with Chantelle around 'Keeping Safe and Healthy Relationships'. There have been no missing episodes reported since.

3.5. *Recommendation 1: In line with newly published statutory guidance on Children who go Missing from home or care, all children who go missing now need to be offered a return interview.*

3.6. Return interviews form one of the important elements of a wider response to ensure that children who run away are kept safe. It is important to ensure that the response to young runaways is comprehensive and involves all local agencies with safeguarding responsibilities. The Children's Society has been running Make Runaways Safe Campaign calling on local authorities to sign up to the Runaways Charter which outlines the steps that local authorities can take to protect children who run away using a four-step model: count, think, act prevent. We have also produced a more detailed guidance on what steps need to be taken under count, think, act prevent to ensure that there is a comprehensive response. These resources are available on The Children's Society's website.

3.7. The Runaways Charter was designed with the involvement of young people who wanted to ensure that improved strategic response to young runaways is accompanied with the changes in attitudes. This issue is addressed further in our submission.

3.8. Recommendation 2: Birmingham City Council needs to review its response to young runaways to ensure that it meets the requirements of the new Statutory guidance on missing children

3.9. Recommendation 3: Every area should have a multi-agency forum and co-located or virtual CSE and missing team to ensure intelligence about CSE cases is shared with the police and the CPS for investigations and prosecutions. This should include information from return interviews.

Question Three: What interventions/approaches are you aware of the Council using to support prevention, displacement, protection and prosecution?

Question Four: How effective are the above, what gaps are there and what further steps need to be taken?

4. Birmingham Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub Pilot

- 4.1. Birmingham's size in and of itself is challenging to coordinate the efforts of the statutory and voluntary sector. Our services also report that the size of the city means agencies are at an immediate disadvantage in trying to uncover networks of perpetrators and young people.
- 4.2. Multi-agency safeguarding hubs have been a significant step forward in recognising the benefits and advantages of co-location to jointly assessing risk and developing joint safeguarding protocols. This is recognised in the Munro review of child protection³. Alongside co-located teams it is important local partners have coordinated and complimentary protocols to safeguard children and that risk assessments are completed with a holistic picture of the child's needs. This should include information held by the police, local authority, other statutory agencies and the voluntary sector.
- 4.3. The pilot MASH in South Birmingham has been recognised both in Ofsted reviews and an independent evaluation as a positive example of multi-agency working and joint assessments of child protection concerns conducted routinely in this setting⁴. Ofsted in 2012 found that "co-location of agencies in a multi-agency safeguarding hub is adding considerable value to the joint delivery of child protection processes". Research on the impact of MASHs in other parts of the country has also echoed this finding. Greenwich University has recently published an independent report into the effectiveness of MASH in five local authority areas in London. It found that the mean turnaround time for cases initially assessed as level 3 (high or complex needs) nearly halved in some areas, from 2.5 days to just over 1.25 days. The turnaround time for referrals initially

³ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/175391/Munro-Review.pdf p.82

⁴ Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub Review, 2012

assessed as level 2 (low to vulnerable) halved from more than 4.5 days to less than 2.5 days⁵.

- 4.4. The MASH pilot in Birmingham is to be welcomed. In order to increase its effectiveness and reach the pilot should be extended to all parts of the city and aligned to existing structures where possible to expedite this rollout. This recommendation is discussed in more detail in Section 5.

4.5. Recommendation 4: Birmingham City Council should lead the rollout of Birmingham wide MASH structure.

Question Five: Are young people able to access specialist support and what are their views?

5. The importance of working with the voluntary sector

- 5.1. On Tuesday 8th October 2013 West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner Bob Jones hosted an event to bring partners together to discuss how we can work together to tackle child sexual exploitation and human trafficking.
- 5.2. A close working relationship between the Police, Council and the voluntary sector is critical to enabling information to be shared to support pro-active disruption and prosecution of perpetrators. Often voluntary sector staff are able to gather information through their work with young people which if shared could lead to more robust evidence gathering and building up a case against the perpetrator. Practitioners regularly tell us that information is shared regularly with them and not with the Police or council services and that this information could support pro-active information gathering to aid prosecutions for example registration numbers, addresses and names.

Question Six: With regards to CSE are there any priority areas of improvement for the Council?

6. City-wide MASH structure

- 6.1. The need to develop co-located MASHs covering the entirety of Birmingham City Council should be a priority area of improvement and implementation for the Council. Practitioners tell us that a model aligned to the four Local Policing Units in the city would be one possibility to enable citywide co-location to be progressed. Having four multi-agency co-located CSE teams based on the LPUs, with a presence from the voluntary sector would facilitate improved information sharing and improved multi-agency working. This proposal is based on the feedback of practitioners working in Birmingham and The Children's Society would be happy to support the development of a citywide MASH structure.

⁵ <http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/mash/>

- 6.2. The review of South Birmingham MASH found that a significant development opportunity is a rollout of the MASH model in Birmingham building on lessons learnt from the pilot in the South.
- 6.3. *Recommendation 5: Birmingham City Council to conduct a review into the feasibility of rollout of the MASH across the city aligned to the four citywide LPUs.***
- 6.4. Partner engagement and input in the MASH**
- 6.5. The review of the South Birmingham MASH also found that the effectiveness of any MASH is directly proportional to the number of agencies involved. It did not however look in detail at the alignment of budgets, aligned to resources, to support greater multi-agency working. The role of the voluntary sector in supporting the MASH is critical and this needs to be strengthened during the citywide rollout of the MASH. The Children's Society would be interested in being a part of this process.
- 6.6. Throughout the review the value of school insight was highlighted and The Children's Society are working closely with Birmingham City Council on both the Early Years and Education Services Review which is part of Birmingham's announced £10m improvement plan. The role of schools in supporting Birmingham's safeguarding is crucial and schools should be supported and encouraged to work with the council and the MASH structure.
- 6.7. *Recommendation 6: Birmingham City Council should ensure the MASH rollout in the city includes an active role for the voluntary sector and local schools.***

7. Referrals and risk assessment in MASH

- 7.1. Feedback from practitioners working in Birmingham suggests that a one-point referral for CSE cases would improve procedures and practices. The proposal would be that this could be facilitated through the four LPU's (MASHs) with an overarching management structure, as discussed in section 6. The Children's Society missing service in Birmingham is examining the possibility of aligning our service to the four existing LPU's in the city, providing designated workers to each of the LPU's. This is to maximise relationship building across agencies in the city.
- 7.2. The Children's Society has raised concerns about the introduction by the police of 'missing' and 'absent' definitions in relation to children reported missing and the impact these new definitions may have on safeguarding children. Although these are managed and implemented by West Midlands Police the sharing of information amongst agencies is crucial to ensuring risk is safely and responsibly identified to protect vulnerable young people. In particular the sharing of information when a child is classified as 'absent' is critical as sharing this information amongst key agencies may lead to the child being reclassified as 'missing' due to knowledge about the young person which another agency may hold. This holistic and comprehensive risk assessment is crucial to ensuring young people are appropriately classified when they are missing from either home or care.

7.3. Our practitioners have reported a confusion around the use of the absent category. One on occasion an agency reported to police that a missing child was going to a known address and where there were safeguarding concerns. The police then categorised this young person as absent rather than missing as the referrer knew where the young people was. This shows the need for training and support around the new definitions across agencies in the city.

7.4. Recommendation 7: Birmingham City Council should support the development of a one-point referral system for CSE cases.

7.5. Recommendation 8: Birmingham City Council should investigate the protocol for information sharing when children are classified as absent by West Midlands Police.

8. Pro-active information sharing

8.1. A lack of information sharing between agencies prevents services from intervening early to identify and safeguard young people at risk and secure intelligence and evidence for CSE prosecutions. We have been instrumental nationwide in setting up a number of multi-agency forums on CSE and missing that involve social and voluntary services and the police and we are part of MASH arrangements across the county.

8.2. MASHs in Birmingham present an opportunity to not only collaboratively address risk and work across agencies to safeguard children but also to play a proactive role in prevention and information gathering. The government's statutory guidance on children who go missing from home or care published in February 2014 require all local authorities to conduct return interviews for child who go missing⁶. Ensuring information obtained from return interviews is collated, analysed and interpreted at a MASH level is critical to identifying trends in child sexual exploitation and in turn opportunities to pursue prosecution. This information sharing should be built into MASH protocols in Birmingham.

8.3. Several of our projects have been involved in mapping and gathering intelligence about perpetrators which have sometimes been the first step in uncovering grooming rings and have resulted in police operations. This is because they are often the first professionals to come into contact with the victims and will uncover valuable information about whom they are associating with, which other victims may be involved and where the exploitation may be taking place. Frequently the site of exploitation or perpetrator is uncovered through return interviews that are required in statutory guidance, to take place when a child has gone missing or run away.

8.4. Return interviews for all children who run away can also highlight where police responses may not have been sufficient and help the agency conducting these to gain a

⁶ Government Statutory Guidance on Children who go missing from home or care
<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/statutory-guidance-on-children-who-run-away-or-go-missing-from-home-or-care>

better understanding of why the young people ran away and the risks they faced, so they can share this with the police.

9. Lack of recognition and awareness of CSE

- 9.1. In recent years there has been an increased focus on child sexual exploitation. A number of high profile CSE cases around the country have led to better awareness of this crime and prompted responses from national and local decision makers. Despite this, our practitioners report that frontline professionals in children's services, the police, the CPS and judiciary still lack a good understanding of what constitutes child sexual exploitation, how children are groomed for sexual exploitation, children's responses to grooming and CSE and indicators of CSE (such as going missing, challenging behaviour, and substance misuse). As a result, when a child is identified as at risk of CSE, in many cases the necessary steps are not taken to support the child with a disclosure or to share information and build evidence for successful prosecution.
- 9.2. Our practice also reports that the attitudes of some professionals to children who are sexually exploited remain an issue of concern. This was highlighted in the APPG inquiry we supported into children who go missing from care⁷. The inquiry found that in many cases where children are at risk of, or have experienced sexual exploitation, they were seen by professionals as "promiscuous" and making an active "choice" to become involved in a particular "lifestyle" or were seen in some way "complicit" in their abuse. For example a practitioner working with children and young people at risk of CSE told of a response from a police officer to a young girl who disclosed a sexual transgression "...what do you expect dressed like that, you're looking for it...". The inquiry was told that some professionals saw sexual activity between a child under 16 and an adult as acceptable. They believed that the young person had "consented" to sexual relations and therefore did not perceive it as a child protection or sexual exploitation concern. In other examples, professionals could recognise CSE but believed that a young person could not be helped.
- 9.3. It is positive that in many areas there are now professionals in local agencies with specialist knowledge of CSE. To move away from relying on disclosure by the young person, it is vital that all frontline police officers, as well as other professionals who work directly with young people receive appropriate training about CSE and how to gather and share local intelligence about CSE hot spots and individuals posing risk to children.

9.4. *Recommendation 9: All frontline staff should receive training on CSE and grooming, including on the warning signs and indicators of grooming and CSE, the importance of recording evidence and local processes for information sharing where there are suspicions of CSE.*

10. Lack of recognition of different types of perpetrators

⁷ The APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers (2012) Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care

- 10.1. Another issue that can impact on the ability to identify victims of CSE is a failure to understand that there are many types of CSE. Our services find that there is too great a focus on sexual exploitation perpetrated by male groups or gangs against young girls, partly due to the increased media focus on this type of exploitation. This can lead to the police failing to investigate when the exploitation is not in this form. This includes a lack of understanding that both victims and perpetrators may not fit any particular model and can be of any gender, ethnicity and age.
- 10.2. Our practitioners report that peer-on-peer exploitation is becoming increasingly common. Young people can be groomed to become victims of sexual exploitation as well as groomed to become perpetrators of this crime. Some may turn into perpetrators as a result of sexual abuse or violence whilst they can be victims and perpetrators at the same time.

10.3. Recommendation 10: Birmingham City Council should lead a programme of work to help professionals understand that child sexual exploitation can take many forms and develop approaches that place the child at the centre of response rather than focus on particular type or model of exploitation.

11. Working with industry in Birmingham to safeguard children

- 11.1. Recent high profile sexual exploitation cases – such as in Oxford – and our services have identified that grooming, exploitation and trafficking is happening in hotels, restaurants and other commercial premises. That is why The Children’s Society and the National Working Group developed the Say Something if You See Something campaign with local businesses such as the hospitality, retail, transport and leisure industries to tackle child sexual exploitation taking place on their premises. The campaign and toolkit helps staff in these industries to recognise the signs that sexual exploitation is taking place and sets out what action they can take in response.
- 11.2. Under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Policing and Crime Bill police have been given new powers to tackle crimes against children in hotels. The Bill gives the police powers to require hotels to disclose the personal details of guests, such as names and addresses if they have a ‘reasonable suspicion’ that someone is committing crimes against children. These details will provide the police with vital information so they can identify, gather further intelligence and take instant action to prevent guests from sexually exploiting or grooming young people. The Bill also permits the police to close premises used for child sexual exploitation, where at the moment police can only close the premises of a hotel if prostitution and child pornography offences are taking place there. The Children’s Society would encourage Birmingham City Council to work with the West Midlands Police to ensure these measures are used to tackle and disrupt child sexual exploitation in the capital.

11.3. Recommendation 11: Birmingham City Council should work with West Midlands Police and Crime Commissioner to support the Say Something if You

See Something campaign and work with the hospitality, retail, transport and leisure industries in London to safeguard children.

Question Seven: What more could the council do to support you in your work?

12. Longer term funding for the voluntary sector

12.1. The financial challenges facing local authorities are well known. The current funding environment does however present challenges for voluntary sector delivery, for example financial uncertainty, disjointed services and a lack of preventative support. In the area of supporting children experiencing and at risk of child sexual exploitation continuity of personnel is particularly important. This is crucial to enable project workers to build trust and relationships with young people and aid longer term service development. A longer-term funding model will also aid intelligence gathering and joint working at a local level.

12.2. Recommendation 12: Birmingham City Council should explore the possibility of funding to be provided over a longer time period than annually (ideally 3 years) to support stability in service delivery and sustainable relationships with young people.

Question Eight: What steps (including training) can be taken to raise young people's, officers', Members', parents' and residents' awareness (and appropriate signposting to enable action) of this matter?

13. Prevention training in schools and youth settings

13.1. Preventative work in schools is crucial to developing young people's understanding of child sexual exploitation and grooming, with many young people being unaware that this is in fact what is happening within their relationships. Alongside intensive 1:1 work with young people most at risk, doing outreach work is critical to raise awareness and provide opportunities for young people to ask questions and in some circumstances disclose exploitation. Awareness raising work is also crucial to intelligence gathering, as young people share information in less pressured surroundings.

13.2. The financial challenges facing early intervention make the provision of group work difficult yet it is crucial that this area of work is resourced to enable the preventative work to continue.

13.3. Recommendation 13: The allocation of resources aligned to CSE across council services should be reviewed and assessed to ensure there is adequate investment in early intervention services.

14. Joint training between the Police and council services

14.1. Feedback from our practitioners working in Birmingham have described the challenge of engaging frontline officers, both in the police and council, in training. This feedback from practitioners reflects that training and support for officers at all levels is crucial in

particular those officers that may be amongst the first professionals to engage with young people. Practitioners have raised the importance of engaging with officers outside of children's services who may be aware of safeguarding concerns for example housing officers or education welfare officers.

- 14.2. The training should be required to cover the attitudes of professionals as well as safeguarding processes and procedures as young people regularly report their attempts to explain to officers their circumstances are treated with scepticism at best, or are regularly disregarded.
- 14.3. Despite recent high profile CSE cases our practitioners report that frontline professionals in children's services, the police, the CPS and judiciary still lack a good understanding of what constitutes child sexual exploitation, how children are groomed for sexual exploitation, children's responses to grooming and CSE and indicators of CSE (such as going missing, challenging behaviour, and substance misuse). As a result, when a child is identified as at risk of CSE, in many cases the necessary steps are not taken to support the child with a disclosure or to share information and build evidence for successful prosecution. Work done in Derby with Operation Retriever showed that prolonged relationship building with young people by agencies brings better results with regards to disclosure, engagement with potential prosecutions.
- 14.4. The APPG inquiry into children missing from care heard from several witnesses⁸ who told how many cases where children are at risk of, or have experienced sexual exploitation and may have also run away, they are seen by professionals, as 'promiscuous' and making an active choice to become involved in a particular 'lifestyle'. Negative attitudes towards child victims of CSE also hugely impact on their willingness to disclose their exploitation. Young people who have been groomed are also often *unable to see or understand they have been groomed* which means they do not want to disclose. It takes a long time for young people who have been groomed to trust professionals, because sometimes at first the young people believe in the innocence of the perpetrators, and will not want to engage with someone telling them otherwise or asking them to break contact or disclose abuse. We need a system that takes focus away from the child and focuses on a more pro-active investigation to target the perpetrator.

14.5. Recommendation 14: Birmingham City Council should put in place a comprehensive joint training programme with the police to highlight the signs of child sexual exploitation. This training should also include a focus on changing attitudes.

If you have any questions about this submission please contact either
Lucy Capron
Senior Local Public Affairs Officer
020 7841 4494 or lucy.capron@childrenssociety.org.uk

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/report-from-the-joint-inquiry-into-children-who-go-missing-from-care>