Briefing on Child Sexual Exploitation

The Children’s Society has a national network of projects delivering specialist services for children who are disadvantaged in their daily lives. We support children in trouble with the law, young runaways at risk on the street, disabled children who face social exclusion and young refugees rebuilding their lives in the UK. We work with children who are often forgotten or whose needs are ignored, such as traveller children or children affected by parental substance misuse.

**Background**

“You don’t realise that what’s happening is sexual abuse. You need somewhere safe to go and someone to reassure you that help is there if you want to leave, instead of being arrested and ending up back on the streets.” (Safiya, 20)

Children and young people are sexually exploited when they receive something (such as food, accommodation or drugs) as a result of performing sexual acts, or of having sexual acts performed on them. Whether this exploitation takes place within a seemingly ‘consensual’ relationship or within an organised crime and child trafficking ring, the defining characteristic is an imbalance of power: the perpetrator coerces, intimidates or entices the victim.

Sexual exploitation is a hidden and rarely identified issue, and so estimates as to the number of children and young people affected vary greatly. We tend to think of the children most at risk of sexual exploitation as being young runaways, children in care, and female, but this is not necessarily the case. Any child or young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation. Children as young as 9 are known to have been sexually exploited, with the average age being 12 years old. Some young people may be ‘groomed’ but an awful lot more become exploited after becoming homeless, disengaging from education, misusing illegal substances, or suffering a blow to their self-confidence.

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**Courtney’s story**

Courtney spent the early part of her childhood in care to escape the domestic abuse she was suffering at home. Suddenly, when she turned 12, she began to regularly go missing from her care home. Instead of going to school she’d spend days hanging around the town centre with older teenagers and adults. Soon she was targeted for sex by a group of older men.

Thankfully, professionals working with Courtney saw that she was in immediate danger and referred her case to the Safe in the City project. Anna, Courtney’s project worker, got together with social services, the local authority and her teachers, and made sure that Courtney had a say in the decisions which affected her future. A bond of trust developed, and Courtney has a stable support system whenever she needs to call upon it.

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**Our Practice**
The Children’s Society has been a leading voice in the third sector on this issue as a founding member of End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) and the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (NWG). We supported the last government’s guidance in ‘Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation’ (2009), which set out how local agencies should work together to protect young people at risk.

We are particularly concerned that a child aged ten or over currently remains criminally liable for the commission of a prostitution offence, such as loitering or soliciting. We believe that no child should be punished for their involvement in sexual exploitation, or for the survival strategies (i.e. begging, stealing or substance misuse) that they use. Whether it is likely or not that they would be prosecuted, the fear of prosecution alone could deter them from seeking help.

**SCARPA** is a Children’s Society project based in Newcastle which provides an intensive support service to young people in the North East who are experiencing, or are at risk of experiencing sexual exploitation. SCARPA aims to deliver an early intervention service to young people between the ages of 11 and 18.

The **Street Safe - Lancashire** project works directly with children and young people reported missing from foster care and children's homes across Lancashire. It helps children and young people to identify the issues that have lead them to their situation, and works with statutory and voluntary agencies in addressing those issues.

**Recommendations**

- There should be a co-ordinated response across central government, through which awareness of the issue is raised and new strategies can be proposed.
- There should be dedicated long-term resources for specialist services to support and protect children who experience sexual exploitation and their families.
- Share and develop good practice around prosecution of perpetrators.