1. Introduction

1.1. The Children’s Society is a leading national charity, providing vital help to the most vulnerable children, young people and families in our society through a range of services. We work with over 48,000 children each year, supporting them and advocating on their behalf to tackle discrimination or disadvantage in their daily lives.

1.2. We run 11 specialist services for children who run away or go missing and/or are at risk or victims of sexual exploitation. Our projects provide intensive one-to-one support and advice, drop-in services, awareness raising sessions for children and professionals and family mediation. 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.

1.3. We welcome this important inquiry into the effectiveness of the legislation for tackling child sexual exploitation (CSE) and trafficking within the UK. 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.

2. Summary of key points and recommendations

2.1. Our practitioners report that a very low percentage of sexual exploitation cases go to prosecution. The number of cases is higher in the areas where there is effective local partnership working between the police, social services, voluntary sector and CPS and where local agencies proactively identify children at risk of sexual exploitation and do not solely rely on the young people making a disclosure.

2.2. The key barriers to achieving successful prosecutions for child sexual exploitation under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 are: the lack of effective offences in legislation in relation to CSE, the lack of understanding of CSE and grooming processes among frontline police and social care staff, overreliance on disclosures by the young people for the police to investigate or CPS (Crown Prosecution Service) to prosecute perpetrators of CSE, and the lack of proactive evidence gathering to build the case for prosecution. The lack of support for young people, who may not be want to disclose the exploitation that has occurred or even to recognise that they are the victims of this horrendous crime is another contributory factor. Below are the recommendations we would like the inquiry to consider:

2.3 Recommendation 1: 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.

2.4 Recommendation 2: The Sexual Violence Against Children and Vulnerable Adults National Group 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.

2.5 Recommendation 3: The government should issue guidance for the police, judiciary and children’s services on how to apply the new Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and Sexual Risk Orders in the Anti-Social, Crime and Policing bill to young people under 18 and stipulate entitlements for them to receive the support they need, including an assessment of their emotional, welfare and behavioural needs, therapeutic and/or educational support.

2.6 Recommendation 4: The offence of Meeting a Child Following Sexual Grooming on two occasions should be lowered to one occasion in the Sexual Offences Act.

2.7 Recommendation 5: The Sexual Offences Act should be amended to include an offence of child sexual exploitation or grooming.

2.8 Recommendation 6: The Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), the National Crime Agency (NCA) and the CPS should initiate a programme of work to ensure that the police and prosecutors are aware of and able to make use of legislation relating to trafficking within the UK and that it is recognised that it can apply to very short distances.

2.9 Recommendation 7: The police should have a duty to investigate intelligence around sexual exploitation, regardless of whether there is evidence of rape or assault.

2.10 Recommendation 8: 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.

2.11 Recommendation 9: The government should review the use and efficacy of proactive mechanisms to disrupt and tackle CSE, including the use of Child Abduction Notices and whether they should be extended to all children under 18 and all looked after children?

2.12 Recommendation 10: The prosecution system for child sexual exploitation system should move away from an over-reliance on the victim towards a focus on the perpetrator and evidence gathered and shared by local agencies.

2.13 Recommendation 11: Support for victims should include a clear agreement between agencies working with child victims and their families of what protection they will be offered from the moment they have disclosed abuse.

2.14 Recommendation 12: The suitability of ISVAs being run by adult rape crisis centres to support victims of CSE should be explored.

2.15 Recommendation 13: The CPS need to monitor the level and quality of support offered to young people through the court process to ensure that changes that have been made in relation to how young people are supported in court are implemented.

2.16 Recommendation 14: Child victims of CSE and their parents should be supported by one consistent adult before, during and after the court process.
2.17 Recommendation 15: We believe that ACPO guidance on investigation of missing person should be reviewed to reflect the recommendations from the University of Portsmouth’s research into safeguarding ‘absent’ children to ensure that there is consistent good practice in all police areas.

3. Evidence on the effectiveness of legislation for tackling CSE and trafficking within the UK

3.1 Lack of recognition and awareness of CSE

3.11 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.

3.12 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 care1. The inquiry found that in many cases where children are at risk of, or have experienced sexual exploitation, they were seen by professionals, including the police, 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.

3.13 At the same time, learning from our practice shows that responses to CSE cases vary considerably from one area to another. There are examples of good joint working at a local level where professionals from all agencies show dedication to protect vulnerable young people and intervene as early as possible to disrupt sexual exploitation and to build evidence long before the young victim of sexual exploitation or grooming is prepared to make a disclosure. For example, our practice report instances where the police have successfully used provisions contained in different pieces of legislation to disrupt CSE and to build evidence for prosecution. Examples include: the application of Child Abduction Notices to break up contact between a child and a suspected perpetrator, the application and breach of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) to deal with grooming cases, investigating premises as part of health and safety or environmental checks, or working closely with the voluntary sector to build up a bigger picture and intelligence on local hot spots and individuals posing a risk to children. More information on pro-active responses to tackle and disrupt CSE is contained in section 3.5.

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1 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
3.14 Our practice reports that prosecutions are more likely to be successful under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 when the young person makes a disclosure of CSE. At the same time in many cases there is an over-reliance on the disclosure by the young person and opportunities are missed to gather evidence for prosecution. An example was cited by our practice of the police not writing down names of all the people who were found in a flat when they responded to a call about disturbances at the address, even though there were young people present at the address at the time, which was a known local hotspot for CSE. This issue discussed in more detail in section 3.6.

3.15 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. For example, our CheckPoint project in Torquay has been delivering awareness raising training to police officers on what actions to take if they come across a young person that has run away and/or been sexually exploited and how to identify risk indicators. Police can also do a two week placement with CheckPoint to gain greater understanding on the links between running away and CSE and how to address these.

3.16 **Recommendation 1:** 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.

3.2 Lack of recognition of different types of perpetrators

3.21 Another issue that can impact on the ability of the CPS and police to achieve successful prosecutions 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. Our project in Lancashire, for example, has done a number of targeted campaigns with the police to raise awareness of boys as victims of sexual exploitation.

3.22 Our practitioners report that peer on peer exploitation is becoming increasingly common and the number of referrals from schools concerned about changes in young people’s behaviour or patterns of attendance have increased. "It’s not just ‘boyfriend’ grooming, you see other girls and boys grooming young people, and taking other young girls to sex parties or parties where they can get drink and drugs." 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.

3.23 **Recommendation 2:** The Sexual Violence Against Children and Vulnerable Adults National Group 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.

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3.24 Case study from our practice: One of our projects has been working with a very vulnerable 17 year old young woman called ‘Olivia’ who is suspected of exploiting other children and who was sexually exploited herself for a long period of time by individuals operating through a grooming ring in the area. Whilst she is a victim herself and a vulnerable young person, Olivia is also a danger to others so it is imperative that she is prevented from recruiting and exploiting other young people.

3.25 There is a need to address the complexity of peer on peer exploitation, as in the case study above, in legislation and guidance for the police and judiciary to ensure that adequate therapeutic support is available for young people like Olivia alongside a criminal justice response. The new Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and Sexual Risk Orders introduced in the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Bill will allow the police and CPS to deal with peer on peer exploitation from a criminal justice point of view to an extent. However, it is equally important that there are provisions to ensure young people involved in exploiting other young people are offered support to help them break the cycle of exploitation.

3.26 Recommendation 3: The government should issue guidance for the police, judiciary and children’s services on how to apply the new Sexual Harm Prevention Orders and Sexual Risk Orders to young people under 18 and stipulate entitlements for them to receive the support they need, including an assessment of their emotional, welfare and behavioural needs, therapeutic and/or educational support.

3.3 CSE not acknowledged as a crime in legislation/draw backs in the current legislation

3.31 A key issue for investigating and prosecuting CSE is that there is no offence of sexual exploitation. The CPS are only able to prosecute under specific offences that require very explicit proof of activity such as Sexual assault; Sexual activity with a child; Rape and Meeting a Child Following Sexual Grooming. Our practitioners report that this means that if these offences or another type of harm are not 'spelt out' and clear to see, the police, CPS and social services will not proceed with an investigation and are even less likely to follow this through to prosecution. There is a need to recognise that CSE is much more than a sexual act as it involves grooming and manipulation, often through making the child addicted to drugs and alcohol, to make the child compliant with the demands of a perpetrator.

3.32 Meeting a Child Following Sexual Grooming is the only grooming related offence in legislation but practitioners report that this is very difficult to prove even when they know that a meeting has taken place as there has to be proof that the perpetrator has met or communicated twice with the victim on two occasions and then subsequently met or travelled to meet them. Furthermore, the police and CPS will not institute a prosecution without a body of text messages or online conversations. Although our practitioners find the majority of grooming starts online, the perpetrators are well aware of the importance of evidence to prove grooming and use increasingly sophisticated technology which makes it harder to trace conversations.

3.33 Recommendation 4: The offence of Meeting a Child Following Sexual Grooming on two occasions should be lowered to one occasion.

3.34 Another issue that impacts on investigation and prosecution of CSE cases is that under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 in cases involving young people aged 13 -15, there is a

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3 Schedule 1 Offences, Sexual Offences Act 2003
defence of mistaken belief about the age of the child and related to this an issue of ‘consent’. Our practitioners report examples where cases of CSE have not proceeded to the prosecution stage because the young person (in the view of the person making decision) could be perceived as looking older than their age and as someone who ‘gave consent’ to sexual activity. The issue of consent in terms of sexual exploitation is also important in cases of young people over 16. The government’s definition of CSE applies to children aged 16 – 18 as well. The focus of the police and CPS on the sexual act, rather than the grooming process, is what leads to questioning around the young person’s consent which is very difficult to prove when a child has been groomed and manipulated. The possibility of an offence of sexual exploitation where you do not need to prove consent because exploitation has happened to a child, as in trafficking legislation should be explored.

3.35 **Recommendation 5: The Sexual Offences Act should be amended to include an offence of child sexual exploitation or grooming.**

3.3 **Trafficking within the UK for the purposes of sexual exploitation**

3.31 Our practitioners report a mixed picture in terms of police awareness of legislation relating to trafficking within the UK for the purposes of sexual exploitation. The majority of our practitioners report that the police are not aware of the trafficking legislation in the Sexual Offences Act or do not use it to its full potential. Therefore very few of the CSE cases that they have been involved with at prosecution stage have used the charges of trafficking within the UK to prosecute despite trafficking having taken place. This is mostly because it can be difficult to prove movement.

3.32 The majority of our services have no cases where trafficking was used to prosecute in their local area, despite there being several large scale CSE police operations. For example, our CheckPoint project in Torbay was involved in Operation Mansfield and although our practitioners believe trafficking within the UK took place, the police and CPS were unable to prove it and could not charge the men with trafficking. In another example, trafficking charges were not used, despite the evidence of movement, as the police and CPS believed that young people have not been moved far enough. There is a perception that trafficking only takes place across country or county borders. However, our practitioners find that trafficking may occur as part of the grooming process within a very short distance, e.g. from street to street or even house to house.

3.33 Where trafficking offences are prosecuted for, they are a very beneficial piece of legislation and have a high likelihood of conviction. This is because they are often the only charges that the CPS can bring a strong case for and ensure a long sentence. Practitioners also report that trafficking is easier to trace and prove than other offences and do not involve the victims disclosing that they have been abused in the same way as with such offences as rape. This is because trafficking of a child is always an offence because a child cannot consent.

3.34 Our projects also find that if trafficking within the UK can be proved and young people can be referred and recognised as a victim of trafficking by the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), this adds weight to the prosecution and can take pressure of the victim or witness.

3.35 **Recommendation 6: ACPO, the NCA and the CPS should initiate a programme of work to ensure that the police and prosecutors are aware of and able to make use of legislation relating to trafficking within the UK and that it is recognised that it can apply to very short distances.**
3.4 Reactive law enforcement responses

3.41 Our practitioners report that law enforcement responses are primarily reactive, rather than pro-active. A focus on offences where you have to prove sexual assault or rape in some cases makes grooming and sexual exploitation seem less urgent or relevant to the police and social services to deal with. One of our services reports collecting large amounts of intelligence on young people they believe are at risk of CSE and the police have refused to act. Another reports that the police log the case on their system but will not act or initiate surveillance unless there is a proof of rape or sexual assault. This greatly impacts on their ability to do any preventative work to protect young people at risk of CSE before the situation escalates and makes it even harder for the young person to escape the exploitation.

3.42 Recommendation 7: The police should have a duty to investigate intelligence around sexual exploitation, regardless of whether there is evidence of rape or assault.

3.5 Pro-active responses to information sharing and intelligence gathering

3.51 A lack of information sharing between agencies also prevents services from intervening early to identify and safeguard young people at risk and, as well as secure intelligence and evidence for CSE prosecutions. For example, our projects have found that some professionals are not sharing information about children who may be victims of CSE or reporting them through the appropriate systems.

3.52 We have been instrumental in setting up a number of multi-agency forums on CSE and missing locally which involve social and voluntary services and the police. However the quality of information sharing and intelligence gathering that takes place within these hugely depends on the willingness of agencies to be involved. Several projects report that key agencies such as social services or the police do not attend meetings. It is also important that health and drugs and alcohol services are involved so that concerns and information about young people can be shared before they escalate. Some projects also report that adult services need to be involved, otherwise the vulnerable child turns into vulnerable adults whose needs are not addressed.

3.53 In other areas we are part of co-located or virtual CSE teams or Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) which are very effective at preventing, tackling, investigating and disrupting CSE.

3.54 Case study from our practice: In Lancashire, we have a particularly strong relationship with Lancashire Constabulary which has been aided by co-location. Both our Street Safe project and social services have staff who work out of offices in each of the four Lancashire divisions. The presence of a police Missing from Home Co-ordinator within these multi-agency teams is of paramount importance in identifying the links and recognising the early signs of CSE in young people who are reported missing. The county has now developed a MASH which deals with all safeguarding referrals including CSE and missing. The MASH includes staff from across social services, the police, health and The Children’s Society and other voluntary sector agencies.

3.55 As a result, The Children’s Society in Lancashire has worked hard with the police to develop innovative ways of responding to the different patterns of emerging need and achieving successful prosecutions (e.g. work with young men as victims of CSE; work with young men at risk of becoming perpetrators of CSE and how they are now involved in challenging other young men; and night-time outreach in partnership with police operations working in red light districts). In Bradford and Calderdale, the creation of co-
located teams and better partnership working has led to a higher number of CSE cases being investigated and an increase in prosecutions.

3.56 **Recommendation 8:** 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.

3.57 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 which should take place when a child has gone missing or run away and allow practitioners to explore what happens during a missing episode. For example, Operation Mansfield was initiated because our CheckPoint project discovered through return interviews that several of the children were running away to be the same man’s house.

3.58 Our projects also make use of online intelligence to help gather evidence, disrupt CSE and secure prosecutions. This can also help identify young people at risk of CSE and individuals who may pose a risk to them, particularly in cases where we are working with one young person and it is clear that others may be involved. For example, our services use Facebook to find the names of potential perpetrators and who else they are friends with, as well as peer-review sites like Trip Adviser to see if anyone has reported anything suspicious about certain hotels or restaurants.

3.59 Information sharing is crucial, though it is very important that young people have a clear understanding of how and what information will be shared with other local agencies. For example, in one area where the project works closely with the police, we share information that the young person has told us about the sexual exploitation with the police, even if the young person does not want to make a complaint or disclose. This is done in order to help the police disrupt and investigate key ‘hot spot’ areas for exploitation such as take aways or hotels. The time we have spent building up relationships with young people means they trust how our services and the police will use the information.

3.60 As mentioned in paragraph 3.13, we believe that more pro-active steps such as the use of Child Abduction Notices (‘Harbouring Notices’)⁴ should be made use of. These help to break the contact between children who may be going missing to the property of certain individuals and collect evidence for prosecution. Our projects report that these are under-used by the police and could be used more effectively and widely.

3.61 **Recommendation 9:** The government should review the use and efficacy of pro-active mechanisms to disrupt and tackle CSE, including the use of Child Abduction Notices and whether they should be extended to all children under 18 and all looked after children?

3.6 Over-reliance on young victim to disclose abuse

3.61 A more pro-active response to evidence gathering would also help take the focus off the young person. However, because of the lack of suitable offences likely to secure a

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⁴ If child is under 16 years of age – Section 2 of the Child Abduction Act 1984. If a child is under 18 years AND in local authority care under Sec 31 Children Act 1989 – Section 49 of the Children Act 1989.
conviction or long sentence in the Sexual Offences Act combined with the difficulty of finding sufficient in complex cases evidence, our practitioners report there is too much emphasis on the child to make a complaint and disclose abuse, otherwise a case does not proceed or the police will not investigate. Our practitioners often report that social workers are putting pressure on young people to disclose when they are not ready. However, in Torbay, our CheckPoint project works closely with the Child Abuse Investigation Unit (CIAU) so we can negotiate with them when a child is ready to disclose and wants to talk to the police.

3.62 Negative attitudes towards child victims of CSE, as listed above, 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 the focus away from the child and make it more on the perpetrator.

3.63 **Recommendation 10:** *The prosecution system for child sexual exploitation system should move away from an over-reliance on the victim towards a focus on the perpetrator and evidence gathered and shared by local agencies.*

3.7 **Perception of unreliable witnesses**

3.71 The over-reliance of CSE investigations and prosecutions on the victim means cases easily fall through if the evidence is not strong enough or the young person is not perceived as a good enough or reliable witness. As the young person has been manipulated and is often too traumatised to give evidence, a full disclosure usually comes later. This, combined with alcohol and substance misuse and the young person continuing to contact the abuser are all cited as examples of unreliable witnesses or ‘liars’ who have changed their story. However, this perception is due to a lack of understanding of the grooming process. Despite the recent progress made by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) to ensure that prosecutors look at the credibility of the overall allegation of abuse rather than the perceived weakness of the person making it, our practitioners report that the focus is still very much on questioning the young person’s story and character.

3.72 As a result our services report that many victims who report allegations of serious sexual violence find that “No Further Action” (NFA) is taken on their case. A large number of cases are discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). Practitioners tell us that young people often report feeling ‘dropped’ once a case is NFA’ed. Initially there is a lot of interest in what happened and they find themselves having to tell their story (the ABE ‘Achieving Best Evidence interview’) to large numbers of strangers and agencies/professionals they did not even know existed. However, once the case is not going forward or it is dropped in court, most professionals withdraw and young people often feel that they have been left to deal with the consequences of talking (both psychological and physical) on their own.

3.8 **Lack of support before, after and during the court process**

3.81 The process of grooming which children are subjected to and the use of threats and coercion makes it extremely difficult for them to go through the criminal justice process. Our projects find that young people are not given adequate support before, during or after the court process to allow their complaint to progress to prosecution or enable them to give evidence in court which will lead to a successful conviction.
3.82 The large number of cases that do not progress to prosecution or result in a conviction is a barrier to victims coming forward and disclosing abuse. Many of the Offences in the Sexual Offences Act carry short maximum sentences which means that young people are too fearful to disclose abuse because they are scared that the perpetrator will be free within short time. Our projects also report that alleged offenders are often freed on bail whilst they are awaiting trial but victims support services such as ours are not informed which makes victims and witnesses vulnerable to intimidation and further violence. For example, one of our services reports that several witnesses in a large grooming operation were approached and threatened by the alleged offenders who were out on bail. This was despite strict bail conditions that forbade them from doing this.

3.83 Both young people and their parents need a package of support if successful prosecutions are to occur and progress to conviction. During Operation Mansfield, our senior practitioner in Torbay was part of a multi-agency group which delivered the practical support for the Operation such as working with the police to approach victims and providing support and information packs for young people and their families. She was also the main point of liaison from the group with the young people involved in the investigation with other services such as CAHMS and the police as they knew her and trusted her. In Torbay they also have Sexual Offences Legislation Officers (SOLOs) who are used when offences progress to court. Young people speak highly of these as they are specifically trained in working with victims of sexual violence and abuse. Furthermore having one specialist officer means they have one consistent person who they can rely and trust throughout the process.

3.84 **Recommendation 11: Support for victims should include a clear agreement between agencies working with child victims and their families of what protection they will be offered from the moment they have disclosed abuse.**

3.85 However, several of our projects report that because they have been involved in gathering evidence for prosecutions where they are supporting young people, they are therefore not allowed to support the young person in court. This means the young person does not have the support of one trusted, consistent adult from beginning to end. Whilst this person cannot go to court and cannot provide therapeutic, counselling support, they can listen and support the young person and will be an independent figure who can help the young person liaise with different agencies such as the police and intermediaries.

3.86 Many of our services report that there are no ISVAs in their area or if there are, they have not been involved with cases we have supported. They report that the young person does not know the ISVA or Victim Support so when they do the pre-trial visit, we have to go with them as they do not want to go with someone they do not know. Furthermore our projects report that ISVAs are usually based within adult rape crisis centres which are geared towards self-referring adults and a traditional counselling model. This means they are not experienced in providing assertive outreach for reluctant young people who may not even recognise that they are being exploited and need persistent tailored support. Our practitioners report that the centres treat the young person purely as a victim and do not offer holistic support that looks at all the needs of the young person. One of our projects reports that as a result, the young people are referred back to us.

3.87 **Recommendation 12: The suitability of ISVAs being run by adult rape crisis centres to support victims of CSE should be explored.**
3.88 The use of special measures such as live video links can greatly help support young people through the court process and despite this being required in guidance, our practitioners still report that these are not always used which means young people have to go to court alone. We welcome that the new CPS guidelines propose the assistance of a Registered Intermediary and the recognition that the earlier the intervention takes places, the more likely successful rapport building will take place and the young person can give their best evidence. This case study shows the positive outcomes that support through the court process can have on a victim of child sexual exploitation.

3.89 Case study from our practice: Joey (aged 14) met another young man online and they soon became quite close. When they met, Joey realised the man was older than he had said but they still began a sexual relationship. Joey believed he was in love and that they were in a loving relationship. Soon he realised he was not the only one and that this man was even older than he had claimed to be. The relationship became violent. After the case was reported to the police, Joey felt overwhelmed by the amount of professionals wanting to talk to him about what had happened and he began to refuse to engage. Joey refused to do an ABE interview (Achieving Best Evidence interview where the child is asked to say what happened to them in their own words.) The police asked The Children’s Society in Lancashire to become involved and to visit Joey. Through our work with him, Joey was able to tell his story and find support for all the confusion and mixed feelings he had. Joey chose to make a statement and with this the police were able to continue the investigation and collect enough evidence to put the case forward.

3.90 The CPS did a thorough job, not only based on evidence provided, but also by requiring files from professionals working with Joey in order to better prepare the case. Joey felt that they were taking him seriously. Through our worker, the police kept Joey and his family informed of each stage and what it meant. Because they felt supported, Joey and his mum were able to pass on extra information and evidence that helped with the case. We also arranged for Joey to visit Court in preparation for the trial. Joey felt extremely distraught and anxious when confronted with the reality of his case going to court. However, due to the positive collaboration in this case and the quality of evidence provided, the offender changed his plea to guilty and is being sentenced on Monday.

3.91 Recommendation 13: The CPS need to monitor the level and quality of support offered to young people through the court process to ensure that changes that have been made in relation to how young people are supported in court are implemented.

3.92 Recommendation 14: Child victims of CSE and their parents should be supported by one consistent adult before, during and after the court process.

3.10 Missing and absent categories

3.101 We are concerned that the new missing and absent categories used by the police are not capable of identifying risk/experience of sexual exploitation by the young person which will have an impact on intelligence for prosecutions. The recent evaluation by the University of Portsmouth reveals a worrying lack of robust risk assessments when children are reported missing, inconsistent training and oversight of ‘absent’ cases and a lack of joined-up work. The police have said these changes are about better targeting of resources but without proper training and oversight, these changes are in danger of becoming a cost-cutting exercise that puts children at risk of serious harm.

5 Shalev Greene, K. and Pakes, F. (2013) Absent: An exploration of common police procedures for safeguarding practices in cases of missing children University of Portsmouth, the Association of Chief Police Officer and the National Crime Agency
3.102 We know children who run away are more likely to be abused or exploited but the report reveals that most police call handlers have not been trained in spotting the signs of child sexual exploitation or other risks associated with runaway children. In some police forces, call handlers are not even expected to risk-assess ‘absent’ cases. Missing children who the police judge to be at risk should always be treated as ‘missing’ rather than ‘absent’, but the report reveals that the police are failing to consistently or robustly carry out risk assessments.

3.103 Furthermore, children classified as ‘absent’ will not receive a return interview and may not even receive a police ‘safe and well’ check so they will have fewer chances to be referred for further support. This means relevant information that could have been gathered during this check, or a return interview, may not come to light until the situation in the child’s life worsens or after a considerable delay.

3.104 ACPO guidance states that the police should collect data on children who are absent but we are concerned that this if this does not happen, vital opportunities to collect intelligence and protect children before harm escalates may be missed. We also need to ensure that safeguards are introduced in the system to guarantee that children to do not fall though the net, such as the use of Missing Person Co-ordinators, close monitoring and re-classification of absent episodes based on thorough risk assessments.

3.105 **Recommendation 15: We believe that the ACPO guidance on investigation of missing person should be reviewed to reflect the recommendations from the University of Portsmouth’s research into safeguarding ‘absent’ children to ensure that there is consistent good practice in all police areas.**

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