

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation:

Strategic Commissioning of Police Services

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This briefing paper brings together key messages from research on child sexual exploitation (CSE) and highlights implications for the strategic commissioning of police services. It should be read in conjunction with guidance for professionals on tackling CSE [[Links to English guidance](#) and [Welsh guidance](#)].

Key messages

- Exploitation can happen to young people from all backgrounds. Whilst young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited.
- Commissioners should assume that CSE is a national issue, occurring in every police force area and across force boundaries. The police need to take a proactive intelligence led approach to identifying both victims and perpetrators and contributing to prevention.
- Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse (CSA), and is linked in complex ways to other forms of violence and abuse. A strategic approach should embed these connections.
- An audit of existing police training and professional development can ensure that frontline and investigative officers as well as call-handlers and senior leaders are appropriately skilled to respond to CSE and CSA.
- Funding and support for specialist CSE and CSA services need to meet the safeguarding and welfare needs of victims in order to have positive impacts on criminal justice outcomes.
- Crime data alone is insufficient to map the full extent of CSE. Commissioners taking the lead to build strategic partnerships locally can improve information sharing so that offender and victim profiles are more complete and feed into effective disruption and early intervention techniques.
- Linked issues include running away/going missing/absence from education. Return home interviews by specialist services are able to sensitively explore what happened when the young person was away.

Child Sexual Exploitation

‘Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator.’

[\(New England definition 2017\)](#)

There is no one way that CSE is perpetrated (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre, 2011; Berelowitz et al, 2012; Gohir, 2013). Grooming is common in some forms of CSE including online, but it is not always present (Beckett, 2011; Melrose, 2013). Online and offline (contact) exploitation can overlap (Fox and Kalkan, 2016). That children and young people may appear to co-operate cannot be taken as consent: they are legally minors and subject to many forms of coercion and control. These abuses of power are similar to those which are recognised in domestic violence.

Whilst all of the research evidence to date shows that girls and young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited. The average age at which concerns are first identified is 12 to 15 years, although recent studies show increasing referrals for 8 to 11 year

olds, particularly in relation to online exploitation. Less is known about the exploitation of those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities (Ward and Patel, 2006; Gohir, 2013; Coy, 2016a; Sharp, 2015; Fox, 2016). It is important for Commissioners to communicate that there is no 'typical' victim.

That said, some are more vulnerable to being exploited than others, with a range of factors highlighted that professionals should be alert to. These include: prior abuse in the family; deprivation; homelessness; misuse of substances; disability; being in care; running away/going missing; and gang association (Brown et al., 2016; Coy, 2009; Franklin, Raws and Smeaton, 2015; Harris and Robinson, 2007; Klatt et al., 2014; Jago et al., 2011; Smeaton, 2013). It is not known whether these also apply to young people where exploitation begins or wholly occurs online, although some factors appear to be involved in both contexts (Whittle et al., 2013). Neither these, nor lists of indicators, are evidence that sexual exploitation has taken place. Police officers and other professionals need to use their professional curiosity and judgement to explore what is going on with each young person. Information sharing between agencies is a critical first step. The next has to be sensitive but inquisitive conversations with young people.

Efficient and effective policing

CSA has been given the status of a national threat, alongside serious and organised crime and counter-terrorism. Accordingly, CSE features prominently in National Crime Agency strategic documents on serious and organised crime (Skidmore et al., 2016). Police force areas are expected to clearly set out plans to address and resource CSE (within CSA) in their Police and Crime Plan developed in partnership with other agencies (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills 2016).

CSE and CSA are more extensive than is recorded in official police statistics due to low levels of disclosure and missed opportunities for early identification (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). It is difficult for young people to speak about what is happening, in part due to fear of reprisals, loyalty to the exploiters or fear of being disbelieved and/or blamed. A proactive intelligence led approach to identifying both victims and perpetrators is, therefore, essential (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; Myers & Carmi, 2016). Police (including first responders) may be the first agency to come into contact with a sexually exploited child or young person through linked issues such as running away/going missing or young people becoming involved in criminal activity such as substance/alcohol misuse, gang association, anti-social behaviour or even facilitating CSE (Bartlett, 2016; Berelowitz, et al., 2013; Waddell and Molloy, 2015).

Since CSE is a form of child sexual abuse and given that many young people who are sexually exploited have histories of other forms of sexual abuse (Coy, 2009; Hickle, 2016), Commissioners can encourage an integrated approach which recognises these connections so that police force structures/investigations are responding in the most effective and efficient ways (Nelson, 2016).

Identification of perpetrators of sexual exploitation is also critical. As young people and perpetrators often move across police force boundaries, and/or may live in one area and associate in another, Commissioners can consider whether local issues may be best addressed through a cross-force/regional strategic approach (Martin et al, 2014).

Responses to those who are sexually exploited

CSE involves combinations of emotional, psychological, sexual and physical abuse. As noted above, for many children and young people it is preceded by earlier harmful experiences (Coy,

2009; Hickle, 2016). Commissioners can help ensure that police officers who are in contact with young people understand how anxious and reticent they will be and that investigative processes can cause further harm, especially if they further undermine trust in adults (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). Examples here include: having to wait alone in hi-tech units; not understanding how long decision making by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) may take; not having the ‘dropping’ of charges and/or changes to restrictions on defendants explained in a timely way (ibid). Potential ongoing risks to the child must be considered, addressed and monitored (Bartlett, 2016).

Commissioners can exert influence by ensuring that police recognise and seek to meet the safeguarding and welfare needs of victims (Her Majesty’s Government, 2015): not least because this leads to improved criminal justice outcomes (Allnock, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Children’s Commissioner for England, 2015; Goddard et al., 2015; Ministry of Justice, 2011). Ensuring that end-to-end criminal justice processes are as efficient and effective as possible is one way in which Commissioners can help reduce the anxiety and reticence felt by young people about engaging with the criminal justice system (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). This can involve developing relationships with local criminal justice system partners and setting expectations such as early and collaborative engagement with the CPS.

Commissioners can also address related systems issues. They can audit current police training to ensure that frontline and investigative officers as well as call-handlers and leaders are being appropriately up-skilled (Skidmore et al., 2016). Local strategic approaches to safeguarding and local specialist services that work with sexually exploited young people are often excellent resources from which to commission training, because of their experience and expertise.

Ensuring the needs of victims are met

In many cases, long-term relationships are required to facilitate full disclosure from young people and thus enhance intelligence (Leon and Raws, 2016). Evaluations show that time, patience and persistence are core requirements in creating relationships with young people in order that they feel cared about and respected. They also identify specialist agencies as best placed to undertake proactive outreach work, including daily phone calls and text messages, door-stepping and other ways of maintaining contact, even where this support is initially, or repeatedly, rejected (Coy, 2016a; Oxford Brookes University, 2015; Warrington, 2013). Specialist services work holistically and, where necessary, link young people in with the other services that they require – including sexual health and counselling (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, 2016; Leon and Raws, 2016). Examples here include specialist CSE services as well as services for survivors of domestic violence and Rape Crisis Centres. Independent Sexual Violence Advisors are also well placed to respond to sexually exploited young people given the overlaps of different forms of abuse they may experience (Lovett and Kelly, 2016).

“This [linking in with a specialist service] is a positive thing that the police have done, definitely...This is the most positive and I’m quite thankful to the police for doing this for me... I can quite easily go back to what I was doing before but with this, I can talk about my problems. I know who to go to and I know that I’m safe with [the specialist service].”¹

¹ 15 year old young woman, Beckett et al. 2015

Problem profiles will offer a picture of what is known about the extent of sexual exploitation and those affected by it, supplemented by assessments of scale and evidence (gathered for Joint Strategic Needs Assessments) and collaboration with commissioners in other fields (for example, social care and health). Commissioners can, therefore, explore whether sufficient specialist services are available to meet demand. Undertaking an audit of available services means that Commissioners can assess the local capacity to provide the specialist support young people need so that the police are in a position to proactively put victims in touch with them via victim hubs and Victim Support (Beckett et al. 2015; Oxford Brookes University, 2015). If there are not enough services locally to provide support then Commissioners can consider contributing funding towards such services or jointly commissioning them with other agencies or across police force areas (Allnock et al. 2015). Another option is to make links with adult services. For instance, outreach projects for adults in the sex industry are a key route into identification and support for some young people. Sexual exploitation does not stop at age 18 (Coy, 2016b) and some strategic responses are recognising these overlaps and links.

Interim measures such as spot-purchasing from another area can be put in place but this relies on the sustainability of the specialist services, highlighting how contracts for specialist services need to be of sufficient length that they can build trusting relationships with young people. While commissioning long term services may appear costly, re-referrals and ongoing crises are more so (Webb and Holmes, 2015). Investment in specialist services can yield financial benefits with one cost-benefit analysis showing a potential saving of £12 for every £1 invested (Barnardo's, 2011).

Given the time it can take for a case to proceed through the criminal justice system, Commissioners can highlight the importance of police understanding the [CPS guidelines](#) on access to counselling pre-trial (Beckett and Warrington, 2015) and that support should continue when criminal justice processes are completed (Myers and Carmi, 2016).

If specialist resources are not available then Commissioners can, at minimum, advocate for the funding of such services by other agencies and contribute towards the development of an overarching multi-agency framework within which professionals that have specialist expertise can work.

Multi-agency working

There are many reasons why Commissioners have an interest in facilitating close working and/or multi-agency frameworks such as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs. Strategic policing plays a key role in shining a light on abusers' accountability. Yet too much CSE goes unrecognised or unreported. In addition, police recording is currently inconsistent – partly because systems are not configured to capture much of the information that might indicate CSE (Skidmore et al., 2016). Crime data alone is, therefore, insufficient to map its extent. Buy-in across agencies at a strategic level can assist information sharing in order to improve local offender and victim profiling.

Building problem profiles is complex and time-consuming. Commissioners have an important role in both resourcing this process and ensuring there are robust processes in place to capture intelligence from partners which a dedicated professional police analyst can access. Part of the work here is communication – ensuring partners understand what intelligence is most useful (names – including nicknames, addresses, 'hot spots', mobile numbers, local businesses, car registrations etc.) and how it can be used in the identification of offenders and disruption efforts. This makes it more likely that they will commit to and invest in sharing intelligence. Partners here

include: probation and youth offending; the local authority, health – including sexual health, and third sector specialist organisations, including sex industry outreach projects and Rape Crisis Centres (Skidmore et al., 2016). Given that patterns of offending evolve and change, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (2016) recommends that the data analyst also has responsibility for regular updates, which need to address those involved in all levels of exploitation or abuse - organisers, facilitators or abusers.

Commissioners can use problem profiles to explore targeted interventions and disruption activities. Strong links with local authorities can facilitate closures or revocations of business licences for example. Commissioners can invite other agencies, third sector organisations, communities and parents to be local 'eyes and ears', to become part of developing a protective community network. In areas where a specialist CSE multi-agency team has a Parent Liaison Officer to ensure close police-parent relationships, the conviction rate also tends to be higher (Palmer and Jenkins, 2014).

In addition, young people are potential allies whose knowledge of local contexts can build more accurate problem profiles. This highlights the importance of linked issues such as running away/going missing where return home interviews can be conducted by specialist services that are able to sensitively explore why children went missing and what happened when they were away (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2016).

Community safety

Problem profiles can feed into the development of targeted awareness raising activities for the general public (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2016; Webb and Holmes, 2015). The involvement of police and the Police and Crime Commissioner's (PCC) office in primary prevention includes working with schools, youth services and local communities. Effectiveness will be increased here if the messages and materials are 'sense checked' with young people who have been sexually exploited.

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Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation – also available

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