Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation and associated vulnerabilities

A briefing for Inspectorates

Purpose

1. This briefing has been designed to inform the development of the Joint Targeted Area Inspections by Ofsted, HMIC, HMIP and the CQC. It incorporates key messages from the research of 'The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence' at the University of Bedfordshire. The Centre received a Queen's Anniversary Prize for its research into sexual exploitation in 2013.

2. Although this briefing has a particular focus on inspecting responses to child sexual exploitation (CSE) and other forms of child sexual abuse (CSA), it also considers associated vulnerabilities - such as being missing from home or education – which are important for safeguarding in adolescence more broadly.

3. Please note that the text below contains live-links to relevant documents and resources on our website. Please visit the website (www.beds.ac.uk/ic) for more information on our work and other resources.

[The nature of child sexual exploitation](#)

4. CSE is a form of child sexual abuse. It is first and foremost a child protection issue, and one that poses a risk of significant harm to children and young people in the UK.

5. There is much debate about the definition of CSE, and the extent to which it needs review. However, central components of the existing definition, and research into the issue, highlight that in essence CSE:

- Can affect any child up to the age of 18 and is not associated to the age of consent to sexual activity;
- Involves a power imbalance between those being exploited and those who are exploiting them;
- Involves some element of exchange for sexual activities; and
- Involves situations, contexts and relationships in which a child has a limited availability of choice.

6. The notion of a 'limited availability of choice' is an important one that leads us towards a more [social, rather than biological, understanding of consent](#). In cases of CSE young people often appear to make choices, and may even describe themselves as doing so. For example, sex with an adult rather than homelessness for the night, or sex with a peer to prevent the sharing of a video online. In such situations the limitations that surround young people mean that their 'choices' are exploitative and non-consensual.

7. There are multiple models of CSE, occurring both online and offline, including that which involves: an older 'partner', gang-associated violence, abuse in young people's friendship groups and relationships (peer-on-peer), organised crime groups, association with local businesses and those who work for institutions. On occasions CSE can be intertwined with intra-familial child sexual abuse but on most occasions it is a form of sexual abuse that occurs independently of a child's immediate family setting.

8. CSE is generally experienced by young people during adolescence –as they transition into secondary school and begin to form friendships, relationships and identities independently from their families and carers. However some services have identified individual cases of children aged 8-10 being exploited, particularly online. The majority of young people identified as being exploited are female however a significant minority are male. In areas where there is dedicated response to boys and young men, while they remain in the minority, up to a third of those identified as exploited are male. Black and minority ethnic young people are often under-identified and while young people with disabilities are thought to be particularly vulnerable to CSE, gaps in research and data collection remain. Young people living in homes where they are exposed to domestic abuse, or are abused physically, sexually, emotionally, or through neglect, are thought to be more vulnerable to being exploited as well as exploiting others. The vast majority of young people who are sexually exploited are living at home when the abuse begins, although a disproportionate number are in care.

9. In addition to highlighting individual characteristics of those who experience sexual exploitation, research is increasingly highlighting the contexts, situations and relationships in which exploitation is likely to manifest. The nature of young people's peer groups and schools are consistently linked to their experiences of CSE, with both contexts being identified as ones in which young people can be recruited into exploitative networks and/or abuse can be normalised. The nature of young people's neighbourhoods can also increase vulnerability to exploitation, with an exposure to violence and crime, coupled with a limited access to routes for support, creating situations that can be exploited. For both individual and contextual vulnerabilities it is important to note that neither causes exploitation – there has to be a person or people who have the motive to abuse another in order for exploitation to occur. These people will then exploit the vulnerabilities identified in the research in order to abuse children.

Related vulnerabilities

10. Research is increasingly indicating that young people do not experience CSE in a vacuum. Young people often experience multiple forms of abuse at once, creating situations of poly-victimisation or polyvulnerability that require a holistic response.

11. Factors that may intersect, or overlap, with young people's experiences of exploitation could include:

11.1 Gang-association: a young person may be sexually exploited within a street gang to whom they are associated and/or may be groomed to exploit others in this context. Exploitation may also feature when young people are groomed into other offending behaviour including drugs supply or robbery.

11.2 Missing from school and/or home: a young person may go missing as a result of exploitation – running to abusers as a result of grooming or out of fear, being taken around the country for the purposes of exploitation, or avoiding school if they are being abused by peers in this context. However, going missing for other reasons, such as running from domestic abuse at home or being neglected, can also increase a young person's vulnerability to exploitation.

11.3 Adolescent mental health issues: CSE can impact a young person's mental health and emotional well-being, across a spectrum of diagnosable and non-diagnosable issues. However, young people's experiences of mental health difficulties, such as depression, body dysmorphia and eating disorders, can also be vulnerability factors for being groomed and/or controlled or coerced into exploitative situations

11.4 Harmful sexual behaviour: young people who are suspected of sexually exploiting their peers may be identified as those who are displaying inappropriate or abusive sexual behaviours towards peers or younger children. The prevention of peer-on-peer exploitation, and child sexual abuse more generally, will be directly related to local responses to harmful sexual behaviour.

11.5 Drug and alcohol misuse: young people may use drugs and/or alcohol as a coping mechanism following exploitation, they may be given drugs and/or alcohol while being groomed, or may be given such substances so that they cannot give a coherent account of the abuse that they experience. However, young people who are already using drugs and alcohol can be vulnerable to abuse as a result of this. Their use of substances can act as a lever through which young people can be exploited, with sex being exchanged to settle drug debts for example.

11.6 Teenage relationship abuse: young people who are in abusive 1:1 relationships with others of a similar age may also be exploited by their partners. Relationships between young people that may initially reflect domestic abuse between adults, may also involve abusive exchanges related to sexual activities and on occasion the involvement of a young person's wider peer network.

12. The above is not an exclusive list and CSE can also exist without any of these factors. However, it serves to highlight the inter-connected nature of young people's experiences of risk and vulnerability.

Key components of a local response

13. The local response to CSE needs to address the nature of the phenomenon (as outlined above), the individuals and contexts most readily associated with it, and offer an integrated response to associated vulnerabilities. Holding these factors in mind, research being conducted by the International Centre is highlighting a number of key components to a local response:

13.1   The range of models of CSE, and the potential number of related vulnerabilities, indicates the importance of local, and live, problem profiling. A study of CSE responses in London in 2014 indicated that a number of areas were developing strategies for tackling the issue before they knew their local problem profile. For example, if the local profile indicates a predominant peer-on-peer abuse model which overlaps with young people going missing and being gang-affiliated then the local strategy would differ significantly from an area where organised crime groups were exploiting youth homelessness and drug use in order to abuse.

13.2   Responses to CSE need to form part of a broader response to sexual abuse and harm, rather than being prioritised over them. This broader strategic and operational approach could identify opportunities to provide integrated models of working, and move beyond issue-specific silos. Integrated responses could include profiling links between associated vulnerabilities, coordinating siloed assessment and referral pathways, and avoiding the duplication of training.

13.3   CSE predominantly affects young people at a time when they are increasingly making choices about relationships, friendships and socialising independently of their families. As a result the choices that young people make play a significant role in their safety. Responses to CSE need to feature young people as partners in safeguarding, where-ever possible involving young people in formal decision making processes, either directly or through specialist advocacy, and consider the role of professionals in enabling young people to make safer choices. Such an approach accommodates a social model of consent outlined earlier in this briefing, by recognising the role of professionals in addressing the situations, contexts and relationships in which young people's choices are limited.

13.4   The contexts in which CSE occurs, and in which responses are developed, will impact the extent to which young people can be safeguarded. Responses to CSE need to identify, assess and intervene with all contexts related to the abuse that a young person has experienced, even if this goes beyond the boundaries of their home. This approach, referred to as 'contextual safeguarding', recognises, and seeks to create safety by addressing the situations, contexts and relationships in which exploitation has occurred in addition to supporting the individuals whom it has impacted. This approach to intervention can also inform the evaluation and monitoring of interventions, where outcomes are considered and measured in relation to the context/s in which interventions were delivered. The role of voluntary sector and specialist responses within a wider multi-agency partnership can also be viewed through this lens, with attention given to the contexts in which certain specialist interventions safeguard young people from sexual exploitation

13.5   Children and young people repeatedly tell us that a trusting relationship, with an adult they trust, is a critical component to safeguarding them from CSE. In addition to providing these relationships, and working in a context in which they can be sustained, multi-agency partnerships need to consider the

extent to which their interventions may disrupt young people's protective relationships with friends, parents/carers and/or professionals. The use of relocation, for example, may disrupt a young person's relational safety in pursuit of physical safety. While this process may be necessary in some instances it is important to consider safety as multi-dimensional, and explore the safeguarding response with reference to all aspects of young people's welfare.

14. The above components promote a safeguarding response to child sexual exploitation that:
- Is built upon problem profiling
- Is integrated within a broader response to safeguarding young people from other forms of sexual violence and abuse and other associated vulnerabilities
- Recognises choice, and therefore consent, as social and in this regard works with young people as partners in safeguarding
- Adopts a contextual approach to identification, assessment and intervention in public as well as private spaces, including disrupting the individuals and environments that pose a risk to young people and where appropriate prosecution and conviction
- Promotes relational, as well as physical, safety.

Implications for inspections

15. Promoting this vision for safeguarding young people from CSE has specific implications for the targeted joint inspection process. Based on the findings from our research we would recommend that, as a minimum, inspectors:

15.1 Consider local responses to CSE with reference to wider multi-agency partnership responses to vulnerable children and young people and the individuals or groups who may pose risk to them.

15.2 Test whether responses to CSE are based on an up-to-date local problem profile: for example, if training has been provided to taxi drivers and hoteliers, is this in response to mini cabs and hotels featuring in the local models of CSE or is it in response to other local areas adopting this approach? Is multi-agency or police-only data being used to develop a problem profile? Are analysts trained to profile CSE and related-vulnerabilities?

15.3 Explore the extent to which young people are involved in decisions about their care, and whether the choices that young people make are assessed in context. For example, if a young person continues to go missing, what is informing this choice – have professionals sought to address any push or pull factors that may influence a young person's behaviour and therefore limit their choices?

15.4 Investigate the extent to which local practice responds to risk related to CSE beyond young people's homes (i.e. whether CSE is occurring in the local park or transport hub). Should risk be identified in public spaces, to what extent do risk assessment and interventions seek to disrupt individuals and reduce risk in those spaces while simultaneously provided 1:1 support for those who are affected?

15.5 Capture how the outcomes of interventions are measured – what does the local partnership consider as evidence that a young person has been safeguarded from CSE? Are outcomes measured in relation to young people's individual risk factors alone or are environmental risk factors, and action against those who are abusing young people, also considered? Are outcomes of specialist services and training considered in relation to the success of the wider multi-agency partnership? Do young people have a role in identifying the outcomes which have meaning and relevance to them?

15.6 Ensure that all inspections are informed by detailed and meaningful consultation with young people using (or who have used) services. This requires a consideration of the resource and ethical implications of young people's involvement during inspection planning and budgeting, and, a means of providing accessible feedback to younger stakeholders/service users.

15.7 Assess the efficacy of responses to those who exploit young people including prevention, investigation disruption and where appropriate prosecutions. Does this response include an appropriate safeguarding response to young people suspected of abusing their peers? Is the response able to recognise some young people as both exploited and exploiter?

15.8 Investigate the extent to which young people's recovery and reintegration is part of the local response. For example, is relational safety a desirable outcome for the multi-agency response to CSE? Are provisions put in place to protect relationship safety when relocation is used to achieve physical safety?

16. Many of the considerations identified for inspectors would apply to other safeguarding issues impacting young people: for example relocation can be used for gang-associated young people or those in abusive relationships. As such we would encourage inspectorates to take these factors into account for the targeted inspection process in general, and particularly when considering issues that impact older children.

For queries related to this briefing or the evidence emerging on safeguarding young people from CSE and related vulnerabilities more generally please contact Dr Carlene Firmin, Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bedfordshire on carlene.firmin@beds.ac.uk