

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation: Multi-agency working

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This briefing paper is for child sexual exploitation (CSE) coordinators/lead professionals from any agency, and for those planning multi-agency approaches. It brings together key messages from research on CSE with implications for multi-agency working and should be read in conjunction with guidance for professionals. [\[Links to English guidance\]](#) and [\[Welsh guidance\]](#)

Key messages

- Child sexual exploitation can happen to young people from all backgrounds. Whilst young women are the majority of victims, boys and young men are also exploited.
- Some young people may be more vulnerable – those who have experienced prior abuse, are homeless, are misusing alcohol and drugs, have a disability, are in care, are out of education, have run away/ gone missing from home or care, or are gang-associated.
- Supporting sexually exploited young people and disrupting perpetrators are complex processes that require appropriate interventions from a range of stakeholders.
- Multi-agency approaches enable organisations to contribute their specific role whilst also developing shared perspectives and approaches to protecting young people.
- Whatever the precise set-up of the multi-agency arrangement, the key factor is coordination.
- When accompanied by multi-agency commitment to shared outcomes, advantages of close working arrangements include: sharing expertise; establishing shared expectations and approaches; facilitating information sharing to safeguard young people; sharing resources; and sharing intelligence to disrupt perpetrators.

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; Research in Practice and University of Greenwich, 2015). Grooming is common in some forms of CSE, but it is not always present (Beckett, 2011; Melrose, 2013). Online and offline 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 abuses of power and they may lead to children and young people being unable to recognise what is happening to them as abuse.

The majority of offenders are men. Sexual exploitation can also involve peers in complex ways – as facilitators, abusers or bystanders (Firmin, 2011; Beckett et al. 2013). 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 at 12 to 15 years, although recent studies show increasing rates of referrals for 8 to 11 year olds, particularly in relation to online exploitation (Department for Education, 2017). 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, 2016b; Sharp, 2013; Fox, 2016).

There is no 'typical' victim. That said, some young people may be more vulnerable than others, and a range of indicators have been highlighted to which professionals should be alert. These include: prior abuse in the family; deprivation; homelessness; misuse of substances; disability; being in care; running away/going missing; gang-association (Beckett et al. 2013; 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). Indicators are not evidence that sexual exploitation has taken place. All they suggest is that practitioners need to use professional curiosity and judgement to explore what is going on with each young person.

An integrated approach

The importance of an integrated approach to sexual exploitation through multi-agency working is well recognised (Berelowitz et al. 2013; Cockbain et al. 2014; Jago et al. 2011; Pearce, 2014). Supporting sexually exploited young people and disrupting perpetrators are complex processes that require appropriate interventions from a range of stakeholders. Multi-agency approaches enable organisations to contribute their specific role whilst also developing shared actions to protect young people and pro-actively investigate abusers (Berelowitz et al. 2013). Early findings from Serious Case Reviews highlight failings in coordinated responses (Myers and Carmi, 2016; Sidebotham et al. 2016).

There is no one approach to how local areas organise multi-agency responses to sexual exploitation (Martin et al. 2014; Research in Practice, 2015). Safeguarding arrangements can be organised through forums such as Multi-Agency Sexual Exploitation (MASE) meetings and/or initiatives led by a Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH).

Multi-agency arrangements may integrate sexual exploitation with known linked issues such as missing, trafficking, gang-association, violence against women and girls, and drugs and alcohol (Barnardo's, 2012; Harris et al. 2015; Marshall, 2014; Home Office, 2014). For instance, schools have the capacity to provide data to local authorities on children who are missing from education, children absent without authorisation, as well as children who regularly register for a day but do not attend lessons. This can be cross referenced with local authority data on children who are reported as missing to the police in order to identify children who may require intervention (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, 2016; Gohir, 2013).

In some areas, work is of an inter-agency nature. For instance, specialist sexual exploitation workers are co-located in statutory settings e.g. with police, children's services and youth offending teams (Harris et al. 2015; Coy, 2016a). The location is significant; police stations and medical settings may have negative associations for children and young people (Children's Commissioner for England, 2016). Buildings should therefore be chosen where young people are able to feel at ease and not subject to stigma or scrutiny (Drew, 2016; Gilligan, 2016).

Sexual exploitation does not stop at age 18 (Coy, 2016b) and services for adults in the sex industry and violence against women sector are key partners. A wide range of activities can therefore be covered by multi-agency approaches, including: identification of sexually exploited

young people; prevention and early intervention; delivery of support; disruption of perpetrators; training and community awareness raising (Harris et al. 2015).

Whatever the precise set-up of the multi-agency or inter-agency arrangement, the key factor is coordination (Dodsworth and Larsson, 2014). When accompanied by multi-agency commitment to shared outcomes at the strategic level (Lebloch and King, 2006), advantages of close working arrangements include the following:

■ Sharing expertise

Each agency will bring expertise to multi-agency working and the ability to access young people in different contexts (Firmin, 2016). When organisations are able to learn from and professionally challenge each other's practice, this can lead to enhanced responses (Martin et al. 2014; Coy, 2016a; Hughes and Thomas, 2016). The best multi-agency approaches are those that are child-centred and involve a range of agencies and practitioners. Some models are statutory in nature, involving: children's social care; police; health; education; probation; housing; and the youth offending service. Others are more community based and also include the voluntary sector, parents/carers and other stakeholders (Barnardo's, 2012; Berelowitz et al. 2015; D'Arcy et al. 2015; Harris et al. 2015; Research in Practice and University of Greenwich, 2015; Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Smeaton, 2013). For instance, innovative engagement within the community model can also include hoteliers, bed and breakfast owners and taxi drivers (Home Office, 2014).

■ Flexible approaches

The voluntary sector is often under-represented in multiagency arrangements but key to successful working (Berelowitz et al. 2015; Casey, 2015; Harris et al. 2015; Jay, 2014). The flexibility of voluntary sector workers often enables them to reach out to and support young people and their families in ways that put them at ease (D'Arcy et al. 2015; Dodsworth and Larsson, 2014). This may be particularly important when engaging with young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds (Gohir, 2013); and disabled young people (Smeaton, 2013). In addition, the voluntary sector may provide a 'reassuring presence' through providing expertise on the issue and translating the national agenda into local application (Harris et al. 2015).

■ Establishing shared expectations and approaches

These can be developed through multi-agency training that draws out the different working practices and capacities of agencies, and promotes opportunities for developing shared perspectives (Martin et al. 2014; Dodsworth and Larsson, 2014). This can, in turn, help foster mutual respect among different agencies and build trust (Beckett, 2015; Home Office, 2014). At the same time, it is essential that specialist organisations working directly with young people, who are often valued precisely because they can be more flexible than statutory services, are enabled to maintain their own identity and approach (Coy, 2016a; Harris et al. 2015). Creating shared respect for working practices should include addressing the power dynamics that can exist within multi-agency working arrangements, such as undervaluing the status and contribution of non-statutory agencies (Jay, 2014; Marshall, 2014; Sharp-Jeffs, 2016).

■ Facilitating information sharing to safeguard young people

The timely and effective sharing of information can assist in early identification of sexually exploited young people. Concerns which initially appear to be of a low level when viewed in isolation may be escalated when considered alongside what is known by other agencies

(Home Office, 2014). For instance, visits to sexual health services or school nurses may coincide with young women going missing or returning from being missing (Myers and Carmi, 2016). Sharing information can enhance decision-making by professionals (Leon and Raws, 2016; Home Office, 2014) and more holistic needs assessments (Beckett, 2015; Beckett and Warrington, 2015; Harris et al. 2015; Myers and Carmi, 2016). At the same time, sharing information in multi-agency contexts cannot be viewed as an intervention in and of itself; it must be linked to protective and/or preventative action.

Concerns over confidentiality obligations can hinder sharing of information, particularly in children's services and health (Berelowitz et al. 2015; Dodsworth and Larsson, 2014; Home Office, 2014; Pearce, 2014). However, trust and retaining privacy are essential to young people. Information sharing between agencies, especially without young people's knowledge or consent, can be in tension with the building of relationships as a route to support (Coy, 2016a). Agencies should ensure that the sharing of information and what might happen next has been discussed with young people and with each other.

■ Sharing resources

Multi-agency arrangements can address important practical issues such as establishing referral pathways, creating case-recording procedures, developing information sharing protocols and creating IT systems for storing and analysing information (Home Office, 2014; Myers and Carmi, 2016). Whilst there may be initial costs associated with scoping the nature and prevalence of CSE locally, and then developing shared systems, the information gained can be used to successfully inform and support bids for the resources required to support work in this area (Jago et al. 2011).

More effective systems can result in better allocation of resources, enabling greater efficiencies (Jago and Pearce, 2008). It is important to bear this in mind when already limited (and further reducing) resources may lead agencies to retreat back to a focus on their core, and siloed, functions (Firmin, 2016).

Sharing intelligence to disrupt exploiters

There can be a tendency in responses to CSE to focus only on the victim, stigmatising them further and making perpetrators invisible (Gohir, 2013). Multi-agency working can facilitate the sharing of intelligence to inform disruption and prosecution (Hughes and Thomas, 2016; Home Office, 2014).

“We had a multi-agency meeting – everybody brought what they knew and we just drew it... we literally cleared a wall and put names, known associates, known places where they go and we mapped it all out looking specifically at where the links are”¹

This can be achieved through feeding intelligence into the development of regional 'problem profiles' produced by police analysts (Berelowitz et al. 2013). Intelligence may include: names - including nicknames, addresses, 'hot spots', mobile numbers, car registrations and information about the role played by local businesses (Hughes and Thomas, 2016; Drew, 2016; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; Myers and Carmi, 2016; Nelson, 2016; Palmer and Jenkins, 2014; Pona, 2016). In this way, multi-agency working can contribute to the

¹ Cited in Jago et al. 2011

development of a protective community network (Nelson, 2016; Firmin, 2016). Not only does the sharing of intelligence lead to the identification of patterns of victimisation and perpetration, but it can also result in individual agencies being better positioned to recognise the significance of information that they hear.

It is clear that multi-agency working can make an important contribution to protecting children and young people and holding exploiters to account when a broad range of agencies is fully engaged and committed.

Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation – also available

- Police
- Strategic commissioning of police services
- Social workers
- Strategic commissioning of children's services
- Staff working in health settings
- Commissioning health care services
- Professionals in school settings

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