



Policy Report:

Sexual exploitation of children involved in the Children's Hearings System

Maddy Kirkman
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**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's
Scotland**

Foreword

Daljeet Dagon, CSE Programme Manager, Barnardo's Scotland

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) remains a widespread form of abuse in Scotland, affecting children from all backgrounds in all parts of the country. The research partnership with the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) upon which this policy paper is based, is further evidence of this.

Looking back over the last thirty years of Barnardo's Scotland's work in this area it is important to reflect on the pace of change. Much has improved in the way we understand and respond to CSE, but much still remains to be done.

We are twenty years on from our *No Son of Mine* (Palmer, 2001) report looking at the experiences of boys and young men, and nearly two years on from our *Public Understandings of Child Sexual Exploitation in Scotland* research (Friskney, 2019). And yet, this paper repeats many of the same recommendations that we, and other organisations, have been making for so many years.

While it is important to recognise the progress that has been made on many fronts, largely through sector-wide collaboration and implementation of a national strategy, we must maintain a focus on this issue and sustain our efforts in tackling this deeply harmful form of abuse and on ensuring better outcomes for children and young people.

It is our hope that this project's research findings and policy recommendations inject a renewed sense of urgency and focus on child sexual exploitation. We look forward to further working with Government and other stakeholders to see our vision of a Scotland with stronger families, safer childhoods and brighter futures come to life.

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1. Introduction & Background

This policy paper is based on the findings of a recent study conducted by the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration (SCRA) and Barnardo’s Scotland; *Sexual exploitation of children involved in the Children’s Hearings System (2020)*.

The two reports should be read in parallel for a full understanding of the evidence and our recommendations.

This study is the first at a national level in Scotland on child sexual exploitation (CSE) and the first to consider the vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation experienced by both girls and boys. There has been no previous national scoping or data gathering exercise regarding CSE in Scotland, and there has been no Scottish study that specifically looked at boys vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

In recognition of these gaps in our knowledge of CSE in Scotland, in late 2018 Barnardo’s Scotland and SCRA began exploring how we could bring together our expertise and information to carry out research about children who are victims of sexual exploitation.

Our two organisations were ideally placed to undertake this collaboration. Since 1992, Barnardo’s Scotland has been at the forefront of delivering specialist services to directly support children and young people who are vulnerable to and/or harmed by sexual exploitation, facilitating multi-agency work to increase action on CSE, and increasing public understanding through research publications and policy influencing. SCRA is a statutory organisation that is responsible for the administration of the Children’s Hearings System. It is the only organisation in Scotland that holds information on all children involved

in the Hearings System at a national level and also has a research team with expertise on looked-after children.

The research project used information from SCRA’s case files to explore the following questions:

- **What are the pathways of children to becoming at risk of sexual exploitation?**
- **When CSE vulnerability indicators first emerged, were these recognised as such by agencies and interventions made to protect and support the child?**
- **What are the backgrounds, vulnerabilities and trajectories of boys most at risk of sexual exploitation in Scotland?**
- **Is CSE considered in decision-making by Children’s Hearings for children who are victims of sexual exploitation?**

The findings tell us much about the experiences of children at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation – both in terms of vulnerability factors in their own lives, and their journey with statutory agencies and services.

This policy paper builds on this evidence base, and research from elsewhere, to propose changes to policy and practice throughout the systems and services that children may come into contact with. Many of the recommendations made within this report are not new. There must however be a renewed urgency around delivering better protection and services for some of Scotland’s most vulnerable young people.

2. Improving strategic understanding of CSE in Scotland

Key findings:

“This study is the first at a national level in Scotland on child sexual exploitation (CSE) and the first to consider the vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation experienced by both girls and boys.”

“There has been no previous national scoping or data gathering exercise regarding CSE in Scotland”

“There has been very little evidence of data gathering regarding the scale and nature of CSE at local level that would inform the development of policy and practice.”

Effective strategy, policy and practice in preventing and responding to CSE must be founded in a strong evidence base. The lack of a Scotland-specific prevalence study limits our effectiveness in tackling CSE. While several Scotland-based research projects in recent years have provided evidence of particular aspects of CSE on particular population groups (c.f. Lerpiniere et al, 2013; Rigby and Murie, 2013; Rigby et al, 2017; Brodie and Pearce, 2012), many have recognised that they provide only a ‘snapshot’ of the full picture. As such, we have no way of knowing the true scale and nature of CSE in Scotland.

This has been recognised in policy circles for some time, with repeated commitments to deliver a comprehensive study. However, several challenges have prevented this from occurring.

One such challenge is variation in the data collection and reporting of the numerous agencies and organisations that may come into contact with a vulnerable child. Other methodological barriers have been the absence of a consistent definition of CSE across agencies, the fact that many affected by CSE do not recognise themselves as victims, and the often lengthy delay in disclosure that is common among many survivors of abuse.

Nevertheless, ongoing work by the Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse in England and Wales demonstrates a useful approach to overcoming these barriers and beginning to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of CSE (2020, online).

It is important that any such research focuses both on ‘scale’ and ‘nature’. A prevalence study will indicate how many children and young people may be experiencing this form of abuse and therefore how hidden the problem is and what the scale of our response must be. Research into the ‘nature’ of CSE in Scotland would aid understanding of many topics – including; vulnerable populations, particular models of abuse, strategies used by abusers, geographical trends and so on – thereby helping to develop effective strategy, policy and practice.

Our (2020) study, on which this paper is based, is an important contribution to the understanding of CSE in Scotland and is the first nation-wide study on the subject. However, it does exclusively look at the experiences of looked-after children and can therefore not substitute for a full prevalence study.

Delivering a robust piece of scale and nature research in Scotland will require multi-agency co-operation and sufficient time and resources from an experienced researcher or research team. These skills exist in Scotland and we call on the Scottish Government to invest in this process as a matter of urgency.

Recommendation 1

Scottish Government must invest in Scotland-specific research into the scale and nature of CSE and support researchers by facilitating multi-agency co-operation in its delivery.

3. Improving professional understanding and confidence

Gender

“80% [of] boys (compared with 25% [of] girls) that were identified by the research team as likely victims of sexual exploitation were not identified in official reports as being victims.”

“There are many similarities between boys and girls ... Many of the vulnerability factors were present in their lives, and most of these became apparent when they were aged between 9 to 13 years old.”

“There were also differences [reported between boys and girls]. Boys were more likely to have been exposed to violence (76% boys, 53% girls); and girls were more likely to have had a much older boy/girlfriend (14% boys, 70% girls) and have been reported as being the victim of sexual abuse (24% boys, 55% girls).”

“There were vulnerability factors that appeared to be reported almost uniquely for girls. These were entering/leaving vehicles driven by unknown adults, unexplained injury, and sexually risky behaviour.”

These findings evidence what many practitioners have already been warning; that our understanding of what CSE is, and who is affected by it, is leading to a failure to identify certain vulnerable young people, especially boys. This issue was highlighted by Barnardo's Scotland over twenty years ago in our *No Son of Mine* report (Palmer, 2001) and extensive work by Barnardo's Cymru in the Boys2 project (Beech et al, 2018) working alongside boys and young men who have experienced sexual exploitation. While some progress has been made, this new (2020) research demonstrates the need for urgency in further change.

Our study found a significantly higher proportion of boys within the sample were victims or likely victims of CSE, and yet this had not been picked up or considered by the services with which they came into contact.

The problem here is twofold: Firstly, many of the vulnerability factors commonly used to identify CSE are based on a gendered understanding of what CSE is – as in, we have some recognition of what girls may go through, but we don't know if boys experience the same thing as a result of the same vulnerabilities.

Secondly, there appears to be a cultural barrier in recognising potential risk of CSE when we are interacting with boys, especially those exhibiting 'challenging' behaviours – we do not put two and two together as often. This is despite research evidence clearly showing that challenging and aggressive behaviours, and offending, are often responses to trauma (Barnardo's, 2014).

It is important that our growing understanding of CSE takes cognisance of the similarities and differences between the experiences of boys and girls. We know that sexual abuse is a gendered crime, and that boys and girls experience different trajectories into and out of exploitation. Differences in the recording of factors such as violence, sexual assault, and peer relationships must be explored to ensure we are asking the right questions at the right time about whether a child may be at risk of or is already experiencing sexual exploitation.

Location

“We identified CSE cases in 27 of Scotland’s 32 local authority areas.”

“These children came from island, rural and urban areas.”

As the first national study on CSE in Scotland, the finding that children at risk of or experiencing sexual exploitation come from all parts of the country is significant. We know from practice experience that sexual exploitation can happen anywhere. Children are vulnerable by nature of their age, context and because someone is prepared to exploit and harm them, not their location.

Barnardo’s Scotland’s *Public Understandings of Sexual Exploitation in Scotland* (2019) research identified a tendency towards recognising the sexual exploitation of children as a problem, combined with reluctance to recognise that it may be occurring in close proximity to oneself. The evidence from this (2020) research exposes how dangerous this can be.

Our findings from the 2020 study re-emphasise how important it is that our understanding of the nature of CSE is evidence-based. We already know that models of exploitation can look different in different places. For example, the ‘party flat’ model of exploitation is likely to be more prevalent in urban spaces, while exploitation of young people’s need for transportation may be more likely in rural areas. If we are looking for the wrong things in the wrong places, we will not recognise sexual abuse when it is happening.

Barnardo’s Scotland has been involved with awareness raising initiatives throughout Scotland for many years. This includes public-facing campaigns as well as training with key stakeholders such as night-time economy workers as well as child protection professionals. The message that child sexual exploitation can happen anywhere is as important now as it has ever been, and efforts to increase communities’ and agencies’ ability to recognise and respond must continue.

Victim-blaming

“[Multiple Children’s Hearings] alluded to CSE in their reasons with use of terms such as ‘extreme risk’, ‘risk taking behaviours’, ‘severe danger’, ‘moral welfare at risk’, ‘at risk from her sexual activities’, ‘placing herself in dangerous situations’, etc.”

Child sexual exploitation is never the fault of the child. Abusers exploit vulnerabilities experienced by children in ways that mask the nature of the abuse. Cultural attitudes towards the experiences and behaviours of some young people appear to cloud our understanding of consent and victimhood, leading to too many children and young people being seen as complicit in their abuse. This is unacceptable.

These attitudes are so ingrained into our understanding of sexual abuse that the language we use to identify cases can blame victims. It is important to be honest about the difficulty in describing a young person’s experience without referring to their own actions and behaviours in this way. Nevertheless, children do not put themselves at risk: they become vulnerable due to their circumstances and when their needs are not being met, which is exploited by abusers. The language we use inevitably permeates into the way we respond to children experiencing abuse who are in need of our support and compassion.

Equally, phrases such as these have been used to avoid naming the reality of the child’s experience. For example, “moral danger” is essentially a euphemism for sexual abuse – one that avoids the accountability of abusers and places a value judgement on the trauma experienced by the child. This links to issues raised elsewhere in this paper around our unwillingness to recognise CSE and name it for what it is.

An urgent reset in the way we understand and describe the sexual exploitation of children is needed to avoid a young person ever being blamed (implicitly or explicitly) for their abuse and to ensure that children receive the rights-based and trauma-informed response they deserve.

Recommendation 2

Scottish Government and partners must continue public-facing awareness raising campaigns and engagement must be designed to tackle misconceptions around identity, gender, location and responsibility.

Recommendation 3

Children’s Hearings Scotland and SCRA must ensure that workers and volunteers within the Children’s Hearings System have access to training on the identification of and response to child sexual exploitation that takes account of issues relating to identity and tackles victim-blaming attitudes.

Recommendation 4

Scottish Government must support cultural change throughout the sector to eradicate victim-blaming attitudes and language by delivering training, supporting internal audits and reflection, and reporting progress.

4. Improving prevention of CSE

Key findings:

“All of the children were known to services before they were reported as victims of sexual exploitation – for 61% of them this was for over 10 years.”

“What differentiated children who were victims from those who were not, related to the actions of others (often older people) with or towards the child.”

“There is therefore a need to look beyond a child’s behaviour and family circumstances to who is associating with the child, why they are doing this and when this happens, to better identify and protect those vulnerable to sexual exploitation.”

These findings illustrate that there are often missed opportunities to protect children from sexual exploitation. We know that many of the vulnerability factors experienced by children who are sexually exploited are present from a young age and that it is precisely these factors that have led to their involvement with services.

It is important to avoid a determinism which assumes all children in families who are struggling generally are automatically likely to become victims of CSE – however, given what we know about increased vulnerability in certain contexts, greater support and earlier interventions will play a role in preventing child sexual exploitation. Addressing vulnerability factors will help avoid many types of harm, including CSE, and is a positive outcome in and of itself.

Greater understanding of the effectiveness of various interventions, both via the Children’s Hearings System and service provision, is necessary to understand how and where opportunities are being missed to design supportive interventions that are recovery-focussed, rights-based and trauma-informed.

Additional attention must be given to forward planning; recognising that children’s needs and preferences change as they grow and develop, and services must be responsive and adaptive.

Addressing these issues is a core proposal of the Independent Care Review’s proposals around Family Support. *The Promise* (2020) set out 10 principles for ‘intensive family support’ which included, among other aspirations, the need for such services to be community-based, responsive, empowering, flexible, therapeutic, non-stigmatising, and embedded in a children’s rights framework.

We welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to progressing towards this vision, and would add that such services must not only be targeted at situations where 'intensive' support is needed. Families of all kinds must have access to holistic, universal services to offer the best protection to children in Scotland.

Beyond this, our research identifies that many of the vulnerability factors experienced by children who are sexually exploited are external to the child's family and home. These mainly relate to abusive adults in the community and locations of concern for exploitation and other criminal activity. To ignore this substantial set of risks and focus interventions only on the child and their family would be an extension of a victim-blaming model which does not take account of the child's context.

Contextual safeguarding would take this critique one step further and state that even when responses apprehend or disrupt those who exploit children, until recently, interventions rarely took into account the locations in which the exploitation had occurred. This latter limitation is gradually being addressed, with interventions targeting the night-time economy (such as hotels, taxi firms and take-away shops in which young people may be exploited).

However, we must ensure that all activities are based on local intelligence and avoid cultural biases that may result in the targeting of particular ethnic groups. We must think more broadly about the places and spaces that children and young people use – shopping centres, transport hubs, live venues, and digital platforms.

Increasing children's protective factors and families' resilience while tackling risks posed by people and places is at the heart of contextual safeguarding models which aim for the sustained prevention of harm within a community (Firman, 2017). We consider this a useful model for understanding and responding to the types of vulnerability our research

identifies as key in children's experiences of sexual exploitation. Considering locations creates an opportunity to disrupt/change contexts associated with CSE and other related vulnerabilities.

Recommendation 5

Scotland's commitment to the The Promise's model of inclusive Family Support must be sustained and additional work must be undertaken to provide holistic support to any family in need.

Recommendation 6

Models of contextual safeguarding must be embedded across the children's sector, in both policy and practice, in order to adequately respond to the array of risks and vulnerabilities children face. Child Protection Committees and Community Safety Partnerships can play an important role in progressing this.

Recommendation 7

Local and national strategy must ensure an emphasis on locations of concern and people who abuse, and all agencies and services must collaborate in order to tackle contextual risks. Police Scotland and Community Safety Partnerships can play an important role in progressing this.

5. Improving identification of CSE

Key findings:

“Child sexual exploitation was first identified in reports from the following sources: Social work – 21 children (48%); Police – 19 children (43%); Residential or secure unit – less than five children (<5%); and Children's Reporter's grounds - less than five children (<5%).”

“For 15 of the 44 children (34%), there was evidence in their case files that an assessment of CSE risk had been carried out. This was either by multi-agency, police, social work, vulnerable young person's case conference/meeting, Multi-Systemic Therapy, Barnardo's Scotland, or residential unit.”

“These assessments were not made available to the Children's Reporter or Children's Hearings.”

These findings illustrate the ways in which concerns about the potential sexual exploitation of children are raised, assessed and reported within the Children's Hearings System. The overall picture shows that patterns of identification and information-sharing are inconsistent and often ineffective.

An important element to highlight here is that we cannot wait for children to disclose their own abuse. As evidenced elsewhere, children experiencing sexual exploitation often do not recognise themselves as victims due to the nature of the grooming or coercion they have experienced. Additionally, young people – perhaps especially boys – face barriers in sharing their experience due to shame, embarrassment and the potential for negative or blaming responses. It is vitally important that all professionals remain alert to the vulnerabilities and indicators of CSE and ensure they are asking the right questions, at the right time, and in the right way.

Beyond this, it is important that our assessment frameworks are fit for purpose. Other recent research has shown that many of the most common tools for assessing risk of CSE struggle to distinguish between vulnerabilities that increase *risk* or *vulnerability* from factors that *indicate* CSE is *occurring*. This has huge implications for child protection responses as many of the factors identified in these tools are in themselves instances of serious harm (such as sexual assault or kidnapping) or traumatic events (such as abandonment or bereavement).

It has also been noted that these assessment models rely heavily on a 'tick-box approach' which attempt to give quantifiable weight to individual factors rather than looking holistically at a child's experiences and circumstances. These methodological challenges were addressed within this (2020) research project and necessitated a multi-stage approach to sampling.

As noted elsewhere in this paper, the tools and frameworks we use to recognise and respond to CSE must reflect the diversity of young people affected and the variety of the abuse they may experience. For example, we know that boys and girls may experience different trajectories into and out of exploitation, while models of abuse may vary in rural and urban settings.

Additional attention must also be paid to other aspects of identity. Research has indicated that one of the few evidence-based risk factors for CSE is being disabled (Brown et al, 2017), and yet the specifics of how an impairment might be effecting a child's needs and vulnerabilities is rarely explored in case files with reference to CSE. Equally, practice experience tells us that the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities and young people who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Intersex (LGBTI) are often missing from the public narrative around CSE. It is important that this is tackled and that our professional understanding of how CSE manifests in different contexts for different young people is reflected in our efforts to identify abuse.

Finally, our research findings show a diversity of practice between the various agencies and services that may come into contact with vulnerable children. This implies that there is room for improvement in both policy and practice within parts of the sector, and

opportunities should be sought to share good practice and support professionals across the sector to identify CSE.

It is likely that 'practitioner confidence' plays an important role in how often CSE is raised as a specific concern. Our service experience suggests that many professionals still struggle to have conversations about sex with children and young people, let alone about sexual abuse. There may also be a reticence to raise concerns of CSE because of the severity of the "allegation" and its relationship to criminality. It is essential that these psychological and cultural barriers are understood and overcome for the sexual exploitation of children to be identified and responded to.

Recommendation 8

Experience from across the sector must be drawn upon in order to develop an approach to risk that moves from process to principles, values and practices, and is designed to emphasise a child's needs, rather than screen children out.

Recommendation 9

Opportunities to share best practice on identification and assessment of CSE within and across organisations must be sought and efforts to improve cultures around naming CSE must be pursued. Child Protection Committees can play an important role in progressing this.

6. Improving decision-making

Key findings:

“The majority of the 220 Hearings (71%) were provided with information that the child was a victim of sexual exploitation, but around a quarter were not.”

“There were only 23 Hearings (10%) where the social work recommendation included or referenced CSE.”

“Of the 156 Hearings that were provided with information that the child was being sexually exploited or this was suspected, 17 (11%) specifically referenced CSE in their reasons and decisions.”

“There were three children whose Hearings were never provided with information that they were being sexually exploited. For these three children, CSE was identified in police reports but this information was not included in the papers for any of their Children's Hearings.”

Those making decisions about the lives of children and young people must have access to appropriate information about the experiences they have had and the context they are living in.

It is a serious concern that an assessment of CSE may be carried out but no mention of this is made in the papers available at the Children's Hearing. Given the barriers to recognising CSE outlined elsewhere in this paper, and the additional barriers to an accurate assessment and identification of CSE, it is crucial that where these steps have taken place, that this is considered when making decisions that affect the child.

The way in which such assessments are referred to is also important. As this research shows, in many cases, little explanation is given as to the nature of the assessment, let alone the basis for the concern. It is imperative that decision-makers have a full understanding of the experiences and vulnerabilities of a child if they are to make decisions in their best interests. Sexual exploitation cannot be understood as a vague additional risk, but rather a lived traumatic reality for a significant minority of children and young people involved in the Children's Hearings System.

Children's Reporters play an important role in this process as they have access to an array of information that others do not and make decisions about what information is shared and whether a particular case goes to a Children's Hearing. Where CSE is mentioned in, for example, one police report, but this is not referred to elsewhere, Reporters should feel empowered to have discussions with other practitioners to establish a clearer picture. This may be particularly relevant in the completion of a GIRFEC assessment or development of a Child's Plan.

The current SCRA Practice Direction (2015) lists the information to be provided to the Children's Hearing and also states that the Reporter must provide “any other report or information which is relevant or material to the Hearing's consideration”. In line with this, Reporters should be encouraged to write a note to the Children's Hearing covering the nature of CSE concerns. This might help to prevent the situation where children are identified as being sexually exploited but this information is not provided to the Children's Hearing, as happened for three children in the research.

For such processes to be successful in supporting better identification of CSE and sharing of information, Reporters must receive CSE-specific training which covers aspects of CSE risk and explores the dynamics of its identification and assessment within the Scottish system. By increasing knowledge, understanding and confidence, Reporters can become better gatekeepers of information about a child's experiences.

Another way to improve decision-makers' awareness of CSE would be to encourage a professional curiosity among Panel Members. If a Panel Member receives papers that allude to sexual exploitation but do not give more information, they must feel empowered to ask more questions and raise more concerns in the Children's Hearing. This can be fostered through training and cultural change.

Participation work with children and young people who access Barnardo's Scotland sexual exploitation services has told us that their experience of decision-making about them is often negative. They have expressed their frustration at having to repeat their story multiple times and explained how disempowering it is to learn of meetings and investigations that have taken place "behind your back". They have reported that they are aware of victim-blaming attitudes within these systems and how the experience can cause deterioration in their wellbeing, which impacts on their relationships with trusted adults. In fact, some young people have explained how these processes have felt as coercive, traumatising and isolating as the exploitative situation they should be being protected from.

Given this, it is vital that changes to policy and practice are designed to emphasise the voice of the child. Advocates, especially those with relevant skills in supporting children who have been through traumatic experiences, can help to amplify the child's perspective and needs. In a process where complex and difficult experiences are often filtered through layers of reporting, supporting children to express themselves is crucial.

Recommendation 10

SCRA must investigate changes in policy and practice that will improve the timeliness of decision-making, especially through systems that alert decision-makers to CSE concerns.

Recommendation 11

SCRA must embed as standard CSE-specific training for Reporters to improve knowledge, understanding and confidence on a range of issues relating to CSE risk and information-sharing.

Recommendation 12

Children's Hearings Scotland must embed as standard CSE-specific training for Panel members in order to foster appropriate curiosity as to the nature of children's experiences.

Recommendation 13

Scottish Government must work with partners to deliver greater advocacy for children within decision-making processes.

7. Improving responses to CSE

Key findings:

“The periods when the children were most vulnerable to sexual exploitation correlated with when most of them were in care. This may not be because they were necessarily more vulnerable to sexual exploitation as they were in care, it could also be that they were placed in usually residential or secure care to protect them from abuse and for therapeutic and preventative support.”

“After being identified as victims, almost all the children were living in either secure (57%) or residential (36%) care. It would appear then that, particularly, secure care is being used to protect children from the risks presented by others. This removed these children from immediate risk but did not necessarily address their vulnerabilities to those who would seek to abuse and exploit them.”

“There were eight girls who were identified, by the researchers, as victims or likely victims of sexual exploitation across three age stages (i.e. from 9 to 13 up to 17 years old). There were legal measures in place for all of these girls across all of this time. That these children were so vulnerable for such a prolonged time, raises questions about the effectiveness of the legal measures that were in place in protecting them.”

Our research indicated that in many cases the legal measures put in place to safeguard children had not been sufficient to protect them from sexual exploitation. This may be because risk of sexual exploitation had not been identified and was therefore not taken into consideration when a decision was made, or it may be that the existing legal measures and provision of services are inadequate, or not sufficiently focused on, protection from these types of harm.

As we know from practice experience, many young people who have been sexually exploited become accommodated within secure units. This has serious implications for their rights and can be a traumatic experience in itself. While the impulse to protect a young person from the harm they face is understandable, if efforts are not made to change the situation in which they usually live, then the root cause of the exploitation (abusers and exploitative contexts) will not be tackled.

In addition, where such measures are used, the environment in which a young person with such experiences is placed must be tailored towards rights-based, trauma-informed and recovery-focussed support. We support the approach of the Independent Care Review which stated that:

“Scotland knows that some boys placed in Secure Care have been sexually abused and exploited. Scotland must make sure that they have the therapeutic care and support they need to recover and be kept safe. Their rights must be recognised and upheld in a trauma informed way, so that their pain is not exacerbated by their placement.”

We would add that girls must have the same entitlement to this model of support and protection as boys.

Recommendation 14

Scotland's commitment to The Promise must be sustained, and a model of recovery-focussed, trauma-informed, rights-based interventions and placements for all children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse must be implemented.

8. Conclusions

This paper has presented key findings from the accompanying research report published by SCRA and Barnardo's Scotland and offered a range of recommendations for action by a variety of organisations across Scotland. The research itself offers new evidence of aspects of child sexual exploitation that were already clear to many working in the sector and this paper covers important subjects such as our use of language, the gendered nature of CSE, the use of assessment tools and frameworks, the effectiveness of information-sharing, and our response to victims.

As has been acknowledged previously, few of these recommendations are new. They have featured in similar reports and strategies from several stakeholders over recent years. What this research requires of us is a renewed sense of urgency. We must recognise the collective progress we have made on this issue, while maintaining a commitment to further action.

Achieving this requires collective responsibility from the sector and leadership from Scottish Government. As such, we ask that the recommendations outlined here are assigned to an appropriate national working group, with a multi-agency membership, which is empowered to deliver the work needed.

As the National Action Plan to Tackle and Prevent Child Sexual Exploitation came to a close earlier this year, it is necessary to find a new structure through which improvements in policy and practice can be progressed.

Barnardo's Scotland and SCRA look forward to working with all stakeholders in pursuit of these aims.

Recommendation 15

Scottish Government must take responsibility for the recommendations in this report and assign their delivery to an appropriate national working group (either new or existing) with appropriate strategic oversight and accountability processes.

Summary of Recommendations

1 Scottish Government must invest in Scotland-specific research into the scale and nature of CSE and support researchers by facilitating multi-agency co-operation in its delivery.

2 Scottish Government and partners must continue public-facing awareness raising campaigns and engagement must be designed to tackle misconceptions around identity, gender, location and responsibility.

3 Children's Hearings Scotland and SCRA must ensure that workers and volunteers within the Children's Hearings system have access to training on the identification of and response to child sexual exploitation that takes account of issues relating to identity and tackles victim-blaming attitudes.

4 Scottish Government must support cultural change throughout the sector to eradicate victim-blaming attitudes and language by delivering training, supporting internal audits and reflection, and reporting progress.

5 Scotland's commitment to The Promise's model of inclusive Family Support must be sustained and additional work must be undertaken to provide holistic support to any family in need.

6 Models of contextual safeguarding must be embedded across the children's sector, in both policy and practice, in order to adequately respond to the array of risks and vulnerabilities children face. Child Protection Committees and Community Safety Partnerships can play an important role in progressing this.

7 Local and national strategy must ensure an emphasis on locations of concern and people who abuse, and all agencies and services must collaborate in order to tackle contextual risks. Police Scotland and Community Safety Partnerships can play an important role in progressing this.

8 Experience from across the sector must be drawn upon in order to develop an approach to risk that moves from process to principles, values and practices, and is designed to emphasise a child's needs, rather than screen children out.

9 Opportunities to share best practice on identification and assessment of CSE within and across organisations must be sought and efforts to improve cultures around naming CSE must be pursued. Child Protection Committees can play an important role in progressing this.

10 SCRA must investigate changes in policy and practice that will improve the timeliness of decision-making, especially through systems that alert decision-makers to CSE concerns.

11 SCRA must embed as standard CSE-specific training for Reporters to improve knowledge, understanding and confidence on a range of issues relating to CSE risk and information-sharing.

12 Children's Hearings Scotland must embed as standard CSE-specific training for Panel members in order to foster appropriate curiosity as to the nature of children's experiences.

13 Scottish Government must work with partners to deliver greater advocacy for children within decision-making processes.

14 Scotland's commitment to The Promise must be sustained, and a model of recovery-focussed, trauma-informed, rights-based interventions and placements for all children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse must be implemented.

15 Scottish Government must take responsibility for the recommendations in this report and assign their delivery to an appropriate national working group (either new or existing) with appropriate strategic oversight and accountability processes.

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111 Oxfords Road North, Edinburgh,
EH14 1ED Tel: 0131 446 7000

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