

## **NSPCC Scotland response to the Public Petitions Committee Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Scotland**

**April 2013**

NSPCC Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public petitions committee inquiry into child sexual exploitation. We believe that the sexual exploitation of children is part of the larger problem of child sexual abuse, the vast majority of which goes unreported and untreated.

Establishing the prevalence of sexual exploitation in Scotland is very difficult due to the lack of research investigating this specific form of child sexual abuse<sup>1</sup>. Available data indicates that both victims and professionals find it hard to recognise grooming and sexual exploitation<sup>2</sup>. There is a need for both primary prevention mechanisms such as awareness raising in schools, alongside targeted prevention undertaken by professionals working with children who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Child sexual abuse, including sexual exploitation, seriously damages children and young people's lives. There is a significant short fall in the availability of therapeutic services for victims and we believe more provision is required to help children and young people begin to overcome the trauma experienced as a result of sexual exploitation in childhood.

### **About NSPCC Scotland**

The NSPCC aims to end cruelty to children. Our vision is of a society where all children are loved, valued and able to fulfil their potential. We are working with partners to introduce new child protection services to help some of the most vulnerable and at-risk children in Scotland. We are testing the very best intervention models from around the world, alongside our universal services such as ChildLine, and the NSPCC Helpline. Based on the learning from all our services we seek to achieve cultural, social and political change – influencing legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours so that all children in Scotland have the best protection from cruelty.

### **NSPCC Scotland response**

**What are the most common types of child sexual exploitation?**

**What are the main routes young people become involved in sexual exploitation?**

A variety of routes into sexual exploitation are identified within the available Scottish research<sup>3</sup>: grooming by individual adults; on-line grooming; the use of drink, drugs and

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government Exploring the Scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00404853.pdf> 2012

<sup>2</sup> NSPCC Evidence to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into localised grooming for the purpose of sexual exploitation 2012

<sup>3</sup> Scottish Government Exploring the Scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00404853.pdf> 2012

parties to befriend, then exploit, young people; exploitation via groups of other young people; and the targeting of places where young people socialise and residential units. Going missing – whether from the family home or from care placements – is highly significant in placing children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation. There is also evidence showing the particular vulnerability of young people who are looked after to sexual exploitation.

### Children who go missing from care

NSPCC Scotland believes we need to understand better practice to prevent looked after children running away in order to avoid a pattern of unsafe experiences and placement disruption<sup>4</sup>. Looked after children are significantly more likely than all children to go missing, with those in residential care an estimated three times more likely to go missing<sup>5</sup>. These children face a significant risk of harm, and are likely to be exposed to the risk of alcohol and drugs, criminal and sexual victimisation including prostitution, sexually transmitted diseases and arrest<sup>6</sup>. Research identifies some of the factors which may reduce the likelihood of looked after children going missing. However it is acknowledged that greater understanding of effective practice is needed to help prevent those at risk of going missing.

The reasons why young people abscond from care are complex (and individual). However, at a fundamental level, going missing is a key indicator that something is not right in a child's life<sup>7</sup>. NSPCC and Quarriers recently conducted a study into children who go missing from care in Glasgow<sup>8</sup>. Our research shows how freedom, support and having views heard, are important for young people. Maintaining contact with family (particularly siblings) is important and where it is safe to do so, facilitation of effective contact needs to be improved. Moreover, it is crucial that young people are involved and informed with decisions regarding such processes and contacts.

For the young people in the study, authority and power; friction; isolation and environmental issues were the primary reasons why they ran away from care. Actions of those in positions of authority, such as restraining the young person or locking them in a room as a „preventative“ measure, were seen by young people as exacerbating volatile situations. This is a far cry from the principles of respect, dignity and involvement with decision making highlighted in policy documents<sup>9</sup>.

If the Scottish Government is to fulfil its obligations as corporate parents, it is critical that the system of residential care is adequately resourced to deal with challenges posed by the risk or occurrence of sexual exploitation as research shows that children who

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<sup>4</sup> Clark H, Crosland K, Geller D, Cripe M, Kenney T, Neff B, et al. Enhancing participation and voice: involving young people as peer interviewers in child protection research 2008;18(5):429-41

<sup>5</sup> Rees G, Lee J. The Children's Society, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Wade J, Biehal N, Clayden J, Stein M. *Going Missing: Young People Absent from Care*. Chichester: Wiley, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Westminster APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults and the APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers. Report from the Joint Inquiry into Children who go Missing from Care. London: APPG, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> The Scottish Government A Guide to Getting it Right for Every Child  
[http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/09/22091734/20\\_2010](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/09/22091734/20_2010)

regularly go missing from care are at greater risk of being groomed<sup>10</sup>. One of the children in care in the Rochdale case had run away 19 times.

There is also a need to acknowledge the challenges faced in reporting missing children where this happens frequently. The NSPCC has experienced numerous cases of young people who have gone missing from care and are incredibly vulnerable, but there is evidence from England that it can be challenging ensuring police act upon these reports<sup>11</sup>. Assumptions can be made that the longer a young person is missing, the more able they are to take care of themselves. A lack of action from the police can in turn deter professionals from reporting in the future. Therefore training for care home staff to recognise the signs and triggers of sexual exploitation (for example, going missing and use of alcohol and drugs) is imperative. The relationship between care home staff and the children and young people in their care is also important in order to fully understand their needs and behaviours.

The Scottish Government has an aspiration of making Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. The Children's Charter sets out children's needs and expectations in terms of their protection from abuse. Similarly a „runaways charter“ has been published recently by the Children's Society in England, and the broad principles give the same consistent message about listening and respecting and being trustworthy<sup>12</sup>. The Scottish Government has made a commitment to addressing the significantly poorer health, housing, educational outcomes and employment prospects for looked after children<sup>13</sup>. „These are our Bairns<sup>14</sup>“ provides guidance on improving local authorities aspirations, commitment and support for children and young people in their care, termed „corporate parenting“, with a specific aim that there should be no discernable difference in outcomes between children and young people in the care system and their peers. Despite the existing robust policy framework that aims to ensure equality for looked after children, our study<sup>15</sup> shows that significant improvements are still needed to improve support for children in care and prevent and address the risks of running away.

## Grooming

The recently published ChildLine report, „Caught in a trap: the impact of grooming in 2012<sup>16</sup>“ provides an insight into the contacts ChildLine has had from young people who have been sexually exploited through grooming both in online and face-to-face situations. The report is called „Caught in a trap“ because that is how children and young people describe the experience of being enticed into situations where they are then sexually exploited and abused. Because they have been groomed they feel they cannot ask for help, except through ChildLine.

<sup>10</sup> NSPCC Evidence to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into localised grooming for the purpose of sexual exploitation 2012

<sup>11</sup> Police shake up over missing person <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21854549>

<sup>12</sup> The Children's Society. The Runaways' Charter. London: The Children's Society, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> The Scottish Government. These are our Bairns. Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> The Scottish Government. These are our Bairns. Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2008

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, J. Rahilly, T & Hunter, H. Children who go missing from care: A participatory project with young people as peer interviewers 2012

<sup>16</sup> ChildLine, 'Caught in the trap: the impact of grooming in 2012' [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/our-news/nspcc-news/12-11-12-grooming-report/caught-in-a-trap-pdf\\_wdf92793.pdf](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/news-and-views/our-news/nspcc-news/12-11-12-grooming-report/caught-in-a-trap-pdf_wdf92793.pdf)

They describe themselves as being in a cycle of fear and shame, where they think no-one will believe what is happening and that they are to blame for the exploitation they are suffering. Young people say that it is very difficult to break free of this trap and tell someone. They also don't recognise the process of being drawn into a situation as grooming. The young people involved describe the long-term impact on their lives as devastating whether this is through abusive images, messages or experiences of direct sexual abuse.

According to the NSPCC's most recent prevalence survey<sup>17</sup>, both sexual abuse and physical abuse have decreased in the last decade but we are seeing disturbing changes in how young people are being groomed, resulting in sexual abuse. They talk about being engaged in friendships through the internet, being asked "to go a bit further" by exchanging photos or messages which are then used as a threat to trap them. In face-to-face situations, these friendships come with flattering offers of a "loving relationship", alcohol or social opportunities.

#### Use of digital technology in grooming

Technology is playing a part in child sexual exploitation, both in terms of perpetrators use of it to control victims, but also in terms of practitioners being able to keep in contact with victims. In cases we have dealt with via our services, technology was used in a variety of contexts, be it making initial contact via a social networking sites, threats and intimidation via text messages, blackmail in relation to videos on YouTube or one victim having 3 mobile phones in her possession.

Our newly published *How Safe Are Our Children?* Report includes data on online harm. It states that 12% of 11-16 year old internet users from across the UK have received sexual messages; 2% receiving more than one a week. „Sexting“ activities are often coercive and are linked to harassment, bullying and even violence.<sup>18</sup>

A report by the Children's Commissioner in England<sup>19</sup> states that 'The use of mobile technology and messaging systems is significant in the facilitation, instigation, sustaining of and perpetrators' engagement in abuse.' Callers to ChildLine spoke about being asked to send sexually explicit images or texts, perform sexual acts on video links, and engage in sexual acts face-to-face with one or more people. The sharing of images and the threat to use these is common in both face-to-face and online situations. In some contacts, online grooming did result in face-to-face sexual exploitation.

NSPCC is currently reviewing calls to ChildLine in relation to grooming for sexual abuse which will provide clearer and more up to date picture of vulnerability factors and in which children are being groomed. We look forward to sharing this learning with the

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<sup>17</sup> Cawson, P., Wattam, C., Brooker, S. and Kelly, G. (2000) Child maltreatment in the United Kingdom: a study of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. London: NSPCC

<sup>19</sup> Accelerated report on the emerging findings of its two-year inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, Office of the Children's Commissioner for England 2012

Scottish Government and the Public Petitions Committee when the summary is produced.

### **What examples exist of good and bad practice through multi-agency working?**

The NSPCC is pioneering new services across the UK (building on knowledge we have gathered from around the world) in seven priority areas in order to reach the most vulnerable children. The findings from evaluating our services will be used to provide best practice and improve knowledge in this area. One of our priority areas of work is sexual abuse where we provide much needed therapeutic services for sexually abused children. This represents our largest area of service delivery across 18 sites in the UK. While we are not delivering these services in Scotland as yet, we believe the learning from our activities will nevertheless be useful in the Scottish context.

Using the latest research and evidence-based theories, as well as the views of children and adults who have received therapy following sexual abuse, we have developed a guide called *Letting The Future In*. This guide allows us to work with children from the age of four who have been sexually abused, helping them to understand their abuse, explore their feelings about it and express themselves. From our experience, we know the effects of sexual abuse can be managed through cognitive therapies and through *Letting The Future In* we are testing and evaluating a range of guided non-directive therapeutic approaches for children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse. This will provide important information in relation to which approaches, in addition to cognitive behavioural therapies, are the most promising and the impact of the therapist/child relationship during the therapy.

The NSPCC also runs a specialist child sexual exploitation service *Protect and Respect* which is a newly developed programme, building on our experience of delivering a specialist sexual exploitation service in East London for over a decade. From our experience, children and young people who have been sexually exploited are vulnerable to high levels of physical and sexual violence and it may take substantial therapeutic work to enable them to recover. Problems may include difficulties forming relationships with others, a lack of confidence or self-esteem and a negative impact on children's physical and mental health. This may include sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy and abortion and long term reproductive problems. Equally it can result in serious psychological harm, including anxiety, depression and behavioural disorders. We currently provide a range of intensive support to young women aged 11 - 19 who have been sexually exploited in East London, Nottingham and Croydon. The service also specifically supports young people who have been trafficked, separated, who are unaccompanied asylum seekers, looked after children and those who have frequent „missing“ episodes - as long as there is also a concern that the young person is vulnerable to sexual exploitation or has been sexually exploited. At the preventative end, NSPCC practitioners work with young people to provide information on the risks of sexual exploitation, including its definition, signs and indicators and their rights. At the protective end, NSPCC practitioners undertake an assessment of risk with the young person and develop a tailored intervention plan, (including one-to-one and group work). The NSPCC would be happy to provide more information to the committee on any of these services should that be of interest.



Barriers to developing good practice include a lack of awareness amongst professionals, parents and carers and a lack of good information through which to identify local patterns of sexual exploitation. It is important that all services and individual practitioners take responsibility for sexual exploitation. There is evidence<sup>20</sup> that young people who are sexually exploited are often viewed negatively, and that they are not always recognised as victims of abuse.

Sexual exploitation requires a co-ordinated multi-agency response. Universal and specialist services have important roles to play. Work with individual young people is important, but should be accompanied by recognition that the issue also requires consideration of the abusive behaviour of the person(s) who have exploited them. This should direct services to work together to disrupt and prosecute abusers. Local authorities, the police force and residential care home staff need to work better together to protect children in care. It is vital that children's experiences are placed at the heart of professionals' responses to child sexual exploitation.

### **What changes would be helpful in preventing child sexual exploitation in Scotland?**

No national scoping or data gathering exercise regarding sexual exploitation has taken place in Scotland and there is very little evidence of data gathering regarding the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation at local level<sup>21</sup>. There is a need to improve data recording systems at both a local and national level to enable statutory services to risk assess against prevalence and to inform the development of policy and practice.

Greater awareness of child sexual exploitation amongst stakeholders including the police, social work, health, residential care staff and voluntary agencies will go some way to preventing the exploitation of children in Scotland. Professionals find it hard to recognise grooming and sexual exploitation<sup>22</sup>. The recent high profile cases have shown that the children involved have suffered for months or years without having been able to disclose what had happened. Even when they had disclosed, too often they were disbelieved. The need to listen to children and young people and to take their disclosures seriously has been a theme in recent child abuse cases and also last year's 15,993 contacts to ChildLine about grooming. The services put in place to safeguard children and young people must act on disclosures children make. Child sexual exploitation and abuse seriously damages young people's lives and the impact is deep and long-lasting.

Furthermore, there is a significant shortfall in the availability of support and therapeutic services for victims. Support needs to be given the same priority as the criminal process. The majority of young people told ChildLine about experiencing a lack of understanding from families, police and other adults when they first disclosed sexual exploitation and were struggling to cope with the aftermath. In 82 per cent of counselling interactions

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<sup>20</sup> Walker, S, Roberts, S, Written evidence to Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry into localised child grooming for the purpose of sexual exploitation 2012

<sup>21</sup> Scottish Government 'Exploring the Scale and nature of child sexual exploitation in Scotland' <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00404853.pdf> 2012

<sup>22</sup> 'What's going on to safeguard children and young people from sexual exploitation?' University of Bedfordshire. 2011

about sexual grooming<sup>23</sup>, the child or young person did not recognise the process as grooming. There is a need both for primary prevention mechanisms such as awareness-raising in schools, alongside targeted prevention undertaken by professionals working with children who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. We support Barnardo's call that the Scottish Government should develop a national strategy for tackling child sexual exploitation, similar to the strategy in England, to put in place a framework for a coordinated national approach to prevent child sexual exploitation and to support victims. It is also crucial that strategy is matched by delivery. At present there is patchy provision of services to address child sexual exploitation in Scotland. The provision could take a variety of forms, including but not limited to dedicated services.

## Conclusion

NSPCC Scotland welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into child sexual exploitation and acknowledges the work of Barnardo's in shining a spotlight on this important issue. There is still little central data collection about sexual exploitation and consequently there is little strategic oversight of the issue. Greater awareness about every aspect of this form of abuse is necessary including the treatment needs of victims and the extent to which these are the same or different to intra-familial child sexual abuse as well as the profile of adults involved.

The high profile cases of sexual exploitation highlighted by the media in recent years do not necessarily reflect the overall national picture. We believe child exploitation should be seen as part of a wider child sexual abuse challenge. A cross departmental government child sexual abuse prevention strategy would enable this to happen and would facilitate a common language in relation to all aspects of child sexual abuse. There is a need to be aware of sexual abuse and exploitation in the broadest sense in order to recognise the signs and enable victims to seek help regardless of where it may occur.

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<sup>23</sup> NSPCC Evidence to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry into localised grooming for the purpose of sexual exploitation 2012

