Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation:

Strategic Commissioning of Children's Services

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This briefing paper is for commissioners of children's social care and related children's services. It brings together key messages from research on child sexual exploitation (CSE) with implications for commissioning and should be read in conjunction with guidance for professionals [Links to English guidance and Welsh guidance].

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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/ go missing from home or care, or are gang-associated.

- Assessment of scale and need should be based on local analysis of both victimisation and perpetration.

- Ensuring regular learning and ongoing professional development for professionals, and involving practitioners in the design of services, are ways to cascade strategic approaches on sexual exploitation to frontline practice.

- Specialist services can offer intensive and flexible support to young people, reducing a number of risks associated with sexual exploitation and potentially offering significant savings.

- Placements with well-supported foster carers who have had specialist training on sexual exploitation show positive impact for sexually exploited young people.

- It is important for services to have mechanisms to recognise and address the emotional impact on practitioners of supporting sexually exploited young people.

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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 (CEOP, 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.

All the research evidence to date shows that girls and young women are the great majority of victims, although boys and young men are also sexually 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. Less is known about the exploitation of those from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) communities (Ward and Patel, 2006; Gohir, 2013; Coy, 2016a; Sharp, 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; and 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). Sexual exploitation can also involve peers in complex ways, as facilitators, abusers or bystanders (Firmin, 2011; Beckett 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.

Assessing need and planning approaches

Sexual exploitation occurs in every region (Beckett and Schubotz, 2014; Berelowitz et al. 2012; Hughes and Thomas, 2016) and problem profiles will offer a picture of what is known about the extent of sexual exploitation. These can be supplemented by local assessments of scale, evidence gathered for Joint Strategic Needs Assessments and community intelligence including that of families/carers. The practice-based knowledge of agencies working directly with sexually exploited young people (including Rape Crisis Centres and Sexual Assault Referral Centres) is a further valuable resource.

> "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]

Identification of perpetrators of sexual exploitation is critical. As young people and perpetrators often move across local authority boundaries, and/or may live in one area and associate in another, cross-borough or regional partnerships may also be valuable (Martin et al. 2014).

At a strategic level, CSE needs to connect with local approaches to violence against women and girls (Brayley and Cockbain, 2014; Coy, 2016b), going missing, and national guidance on how to respond to international and internal trafficking. In addition, sexual exploitation does not stop at age 18 (Coy, 2016b), and the transition to adult services can mean young people fall through gaps. Some strategic responses are recognising these overlaps and links. Collaboration with commissioners in other fields e.g. police, education and health (including mental and sexual health) will also enhance planning.

Safeguarding models

High profile criminal trials, reports on sexual exploitation in local areas and inquiries/inspections have exposed safeguarding failures in both frontline practice and strategic leadership (e.g. Berelowitz et al. 2013, Casey, 2015; Jay, 2014; Ofsted, 2014). Commissioners play a crucial role in ensuring that required standards are being met, both in terms of making resources available and championing good practice.

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1 Cited in Jago et al. 2011

Serious Case Reviews have identified that the configuration of safeguarding services shapes responses to CSE (e.g. Myers and Carmi, 2016). Traditional approaches to child protection are stretched by the complex dynamics of sexual exploitation and the range of needs that sexually exploited young people have (Pearce, 2014). A key activity for commissioners, therefore, is reviewing whether appropriate specialist training is available and delivered on a regular, rolling basis to frontline practitioners.

Strategic plans are likely to have more traction if local plans are informed by the views and experiences of those who have been at risk of or abused through sexual exploitation, their parents/carers and the practice-based evidence of practitioners. Commissioners can invite young people with experience of CSE services into conversations about whether and how current provision is meeting their needs (Ofsted, 2014; Webb and Holmes, 2015).

Prevention work is another important element of strategic approaches to CSE. Initiatives in schools and local communities that involve young people, families/carers and professionals in raising awareness of CSE can increase knowledge and confidence about how to keep young people safe (D'Arcy et al. 2015; Bovarnick and Scott, 2016). These will be more effective if the messages and materials are 'sense checked' with young people who have been sexually exploited.

Commissioning safeguarding services

Sexual exploitation is a process, and enabling young people to find a way out can be similar to supporting victims of domestic violence: focussing on strengths, assessing risk and widening space for action – a process of 'sustained safeguarding' (Pearce, 2009). Intensive support provides young people with the sense of security they need and acts as a counterbalance to the 'pull' of exploiters (Coy, 2009; Gilligan, 2016; Shuker, 2013).

How to enable this in the context of diminishing resources, recruitment difficulties and rising demand is an acute challenge. Social workers indicate that they would like working arrangements that afford them more support and time to focus on nonprocedural elements of their role, including more space with children and young people to build trust and relationships (Martin et al. 2014; Coy, 2016b).

When tendering for and monitoring contracts, Serious Case Reviews suggest that the following issues should be considered (Myers and Carmi, 2016).

- Referral protocols that avoid drift and delay.
- Staffing levels, including ratios of workers/managers.
- Monitoring of caseloads to ensure they are manageable and avoid overload.
- Supervision that enables workers to process the emotional impacts of supporting young people (see also Webb and Holmes, 2015).
- Flexibility and being accessible to young people outside of 9-5 hours.

Support for families and carers of young people at risk of sexual exploitation is part of prevention and early intervention as well as work to rebuild lives (Hallett, 2015), through encouraging them to become part of protective networks (Palmer and Jenkins, 2014).

For all services – universal and specialist – exploring gender norms with young people is crucial in intervention and prevention work (Webb and Holmes, 2015). Sexual exploitation is rooted in

sexualisation of young women's bodies and notions of masculinity - what it means to be a boy or young man (Coy, 2008; 2016a; Brayley et al. 2014). Commissioners can pay attention to how this is addressed in service design and delivery.

Commissioning specialist services

Since CSE is a form of child sexual abuse and many young people who are sexually exploited have previously experienced sexual abuse (Coy, 2009; Hickle, 2016), specialist teams (in the voluntary or statutory sector) with expertise in the impacts of exploitation and abuse provide vital support for young people, families/carers and practitioners.

Specialist CSE services are often able to be more flexible than social workers and work with young people for longer (Gilligan, 2016; Pearce, 2014). Interventions by specialist services are able to reduce risks associated with sexual exploitation. Early intervention that reduces these risks can deliver a potential saving of up to £12 for every £1 invested in funding specialist sexual exploitation services (Barnardo's, 2011).

One recent approach – the 'Hub and Spoke' model – co-locates specialist CSE workers into different agency settings, e.g. children's services or the police. This can enable sharing of expertise, although it takes time to embed new initiatives into local referral pathways and operational structures (Harris et al. 2015; see also Coy, 2016a).

Specialist services can also play a role in delivering 'independent return interviews' for young people who run away or go missing (Smeaton, 2013). National reviews consistently show that return interviews for young people who run away or go missing are often not completed, despite guidance that they should be (Smeaton, 2013). Return interviews present a unique opportunity for spotting signs of, and gathering local intelligence on, sexual exploitation, including about perpetrators (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2016; APPG, 2016). Supporting young people and their families/carers through criminal justice processes is another vital function of specialist services (Palmer and Jenkins, 2014).

Some young people have been denied access to pre-trial therapy because of misperceptions that counselling is not allowed at this stage (see CPS guidance), and many feel abandoned at the withdrawal of support once cases are concluded (Beckett and Warrington, 2015). Access to therapeutic services during court cases and in the aftermath is important both for young people's wellbeing and to support prosecutions of perpetrators.

Commissioning accommodation for young people

Links between being 'looked after' and sexual exploitation are well recognised (Beckett, 2011; Coy, 2009; Shuker, 2013). While issues that lead young people into care may put them at risk, the experience of care itself can also be significant.

Placement planning for both residential and foster care needs to ensure:

■ that care meets young people's needs, including relationship-based practice (Coy, 2008; 2009; Hallett, 2015);

■ attention to building emotional stability, by minimising multiple placement moves and changes of social worker (Coy, 2008; 2009);

- that association with peers also at high risk is avoided (Coy, 2008; 2009; Beckett, 2013); and

- availability of places of safety for young people who have been trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation (Pearce et al. 2009).

To enable trust and relationships to be built, and address the harms of exploitation, placements and support need to be at least 12-18 months long (Shuker, 2013).

Secure accommodation creates short term physical safety, but is rarely able to address the depth and range of emotional needs that precipitated, or developed from, sexual exploitation (Creegan et al. 2005; Coy, 2008; Hart and La Valle, 2016; Scott, 2016). Continuity of care is also disrupted by out of area placements, which are more likely when young people are placed in secure accommodation (Scott, 2016).

Supported accommodation for young people in the community must ensure that locations are not targeted by perpetrators (Coy, 2008; Myers and Carmi, 2016).

Placements with foster carers who have received specialist training on CSE show positive impacts for sexually exploited young people, providing physical and relational security (Pearce et al. 2009; Shuker, 2013). A team of professionals who share understandings about sexual exploitation to support a placement maximises its protective capacity (Shuker, 2013).

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Key messages from research on child sexual exploitation – also available

- Police
- Strategic commissioning of police services
- Social workers
- Staff working in health settings
- Commissioning health care services
- Professionals in school settings
- Multi-agency working

Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse

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