University of Bedfordshire

Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation, gang-association and associated vulnerabilities

A briefing for Inspectorates

Purpose

1. This briefing has been designed to inform the development of the Joint Targeted Area Inspections into child sexual exploitation by Ofsted, HMIC, HMIP and the CQC. It has been updated from an original briefing published on CSE for inspection in 2016, to include contemporary key messages from The International Centre: Researching child sexual exploitation, trafficking and violence' (IC) at the University of Bedfordshire, and provide more detailed comment on gang-association and criminal exploitation.

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

3. Please note that the text below contains live-links to relevant documents and resources from the IC research centre and project websites. Please visit the website (www.beds.ac.uk/ic) for more information on our work and to access additional resources.

The nature of child sexual exploitation

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

5. There has much debate about the definition of CSE, and the extent to which it needs review. A new definition and associated advice was published by the Government in 2017. Central components of the revised definition, the explanatory text provided with it, and wider research into the issue, highlight that in essence CSE:

   - Can affect any child up to the age of 18 and is not associated to the age of consent to sexual activity;
   - Involves a power imbalance between those being exploited and those who are exploiting them;
   - Involves some element of exchange: where the young person and/or those who are exploiting them receive something (such as money, protection) in exchange for the young person's involvement in sexual activity; and
   - Involves situations, contexts and relationships in which a child's choices are limited or constrained

6. The notion of constrained choices leads us towards a more social, rather than biological, understanding of consent. In cases of CSE young people often appear to make choices, and may even describe themselves as doing so. For example, sex with an adult rather than homelessness for the night, or sex

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with a peer to prevent the sharing of a video online. In such situations factors constraining young people's 'choices' make them exploitative and non-consensual

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

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

9. In addition to highlighting individual characteristics of those who experience CSE, research is increasingly highlighting the contexts, situations and relationships in which exploitation is likely to manifest. The nature of young people's peer groups and schools are consistently linked to their experiences of CSE, with both contexts being identified as ones in which young people can be recruited into exploitative networks and/or abuse can be normalised. The nature of young people's neighbourhoods can also increase vulnerability to exploitation, with an exposure to violence and crime, coupled with a limited access to routes for support, creating situations that can be exploited. When a young person is exposed to contextual risks it can overwhelm families and disrupt safe and protective parent-child relationships.

10. It is important to note that neither individual nor contextual vulnerabilities cause exploitation – there has to be a person or people who have the motive to abuse another in order for exploitation to occur and an inadequate set of protective in place to disrupt them. These people will then exploit the vulnerabilities identified by research in order to abuse children. A the lack of protective structures interplay with contextual factors, individual characteristics and the motivations of those who are abusive to create interconnected conditions of abuse.

Gang-association, CSE and other forms of exploitation

11. In recent years there has been an increased recognition amongst professionals and policymakers that young people can be sexually exploited within and between street gangs. Furthermore that organised crime groups have been exploiting young people into criminal, as well as sexual, activity – using them to transport drugs from urban to rural or metropolitan areas (known as 'County Lines').

12. [As awareness of both County Lines and gang-associated CSE has increased so too has professional understanding of the often inter-connected nature of these issues](). For example young men who have been exploited to transport drugs on a county line may be also be 'provided' with sex upon arrival at a drop-off spot for those drugs. Their ability to consent to this form of sexual activity is highly questionable given the coercive nature of this experience, and the young woman involved will also have been sexually exploited through this process. Likewise young women may be exploited to traffic drugs on county lines to avoid involvement in CSE.

13. Not only can gang-association and criminal exploitation be inter-connected with CSE, but the nature of these issues is very similar. Like CSE (and as outlined above), gang-association and criminal exploitation can affect children of any age, but often impacts young people during adolescence. They all involve a power imbalance between those who are abusive and those who are being abused. Young people associated to gangs and/or being exploited through County Lines may appear to have made a choice to be involved – and may also believe themselves to have done so. In reality many young people are involved as a result of grooming (with poverty, exclusion from mainstream education and unemployment used as levers to garner involvement) or fear following threats to themselves or their families. Drugs-debts are also used to constrain the ability of young people to exit County Lines activity.

Associated Vulnerabilities

14. CSE does not occur in a vacuum. In addition to gang-association, research has demonstrated that young people often experience other forms of abuse alongside CSE, creating situations of [poly-victimisation or poly-vulnerability]() that require a holistic response.

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

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

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

15.3   Adolescent to parent violence: young people who are being exploited, controlled or abused by adults/peers in their community can assault parents who try to disrupt these abusive relationships. These reactions can be the result of: the trauma young people have experienced; the process of grooming purposefully breaking down familial relationships, or; a young person being fearful that their families will be harmed should they try to exit an exploitative relationship or network.

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

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

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

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

Key components of a local response

17. The local response to CSE, gang association, and criminal exploitation needs to address the nature of the phenomenon/s (as outlined above), the individuals and contexts most readily associated with it, and offer an integrated response to associated vulnerabilities. Holding these factors in mind, research being conducted at IC is highlighting a number of key components to a local response:

17.1   The range of models of CSE, and the potential number of related vulnerabilities, indicates the importance of local, live and holistic problem profiling. A study of CSE responses in London in 2014 indicated that a number of areas were developing strategies for tackling the issue before they knew their local problem profile – and even when profiles were being developed professionals were sometimes looking for particular forms of exploitation to the exclusion of others. If the local profile indicates a predominant peer-on-peer abuse model which overlaps with young people going missing and being gang-affiliated then the local strategy for addressing CSE would differ significantly from an area where organised crime groups were exploiting youth homelessness and drug use in order to abuse. Furthermore, a series of seminars run with CSE analysts in 2015-2016 found that problem profiling had the potential to direct and evaluate interventions, identify interconnected vulnerabilities and map contexts associated to adolescent vulnerability. However, analysts were often asked to generate profiles without a clear objective for doing so and which didn't always result in action being taken by the local multi-agency partnership.

17.2   Responses to CSE need to form part of a broader response to sexual abuse and other forms of adolescent vulnerability, rather than being prioritised over them. This broader strategic and operational approach could identify opportunities to provide integrated models of working, and move beyond issue-specific silos. Integrated responses could include profiling links between

associated vulnerabilities, coordinating siloed assessment and referral pathways, and avoiding the duplication of training or multi-agency meetings. In recent years a number of local areas have integrated strategic and operational meetings concerned with all forms of exploitation, missing and trafficking to address the relationship between gang-association, youth violence, County Lines, missing and CSE.

17.3   Whilst these vulnerabilities may enhance the potential for CSE, it is critical to remember that a young person's vulnerability is never the reason for their exploitation. CSE occurs because someone is willing to take advantage of their vulnerability, and there are inadequate protective structures in place to mediate against this risk. A focus on disrupting and prosecuting perpetrators must therefore be central to any response.

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

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

17.6   Children and young people repeatedly tell us that a consistent relationship, with an adult they trust, is a critical component to safeguarding them from CSE. Voluntary sector CSE services have been found to make a distinct contribution to local safeguarding through their ability to engage children and young people who may be mistrustful of statutory services. By empowering children and young people, and offering choices, workers create the conditions for establishing trusting relationships. This support is valued by children and young people, and often becomes a safe relationship for children to disclose their experiences and receive help and protection. In addition to providing these relationships, and working in a context in which they can be sustained, multi-agency partnerships need to consider the extent to which their interventions may disrupt young people's protective relationships with friends, parents/carers and/or professionals. The use of relocation, for example, may disrupt a young person's relational safety in pursuit of physical safety. While this process may be necessary in some instances it is important to consider safety as multi-

dimensional, and explore the safeguarding response with reference to all aspects of young people's welfare.

17.7   Parents should be treated as partners in safeguarding, and drawn in to multi-agency discussion and planning. Parent support work is important to equip parents with knowledge, empower them to take safeguarding action and help them to remain emotionally resilient if their child is being exploited. When parents are excluded, the protective capacity of the home is weakened

18. The above components promote a safeguarding response to child sexual exploitation and gang association that:

- Is built upon problem profiling
- Is integrated within a broader response to safeguarding young people from other forms of exploitation, sexual abuse and other associated vulnerabilities
- Recognises choice, and therefore consent, as social and in this regard works with young people as partners in safeguarding
- Adopts a contextual approach to identification, assessment and intervention in public as well as private spaces, including disrupting the adults, peer groups, school, community and online environments associated to young people's experiences of exploitation and where appropriate using prosecution and conviction
- Promotes relational, as well as physical, safety.

Implications for inspections

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

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

19.2   Test whether responses to CSE are based on an up-to-date and holistic local problem profile: for example, if CSE training has been provided to taxi drivers and hoteliers, is this in response to mini cabs and hotels featuring in the local models of CSE or is it in response to other local areas adopting this approach? Is the local response to CSE, gang-association, youth violence and County Lines (where those interconnections exist) appropriately coordinated to address any cross-cutting issues identified in local profiles? Is multi-agency or police-only data being used to develop a problem profile? Are analysts trained to profile CSE and related-vulnerabilities?   Is their evidence that profiles have been disseminated and reviewed in ways that inform practice?

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

19.4   Investigate the extent to which local practice responses to exploitation address associated extra-familial risks (i.e. whether CSE is occurring in a school or transport hub). Should risk be identified in public spaces or educational provisions, to what extent do risk assessment and interventions seek to disrupt individuals and reduce risk in those spaces while simultaneously providing 1:1 support for young people and families who have been affected?

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

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

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

19.8   Investigate the extent to which young people's recovery and reintegration is part of the local response. For example, is relational safety a desirable outcome for the multi-agency partnership? Are steps taken to protect safe relationships when relocation is used to achieve physical safety?

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

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

In addition to the IC website (www.uniofbeds.ac.uk/ic), for further resources on:

- Policing and CSE please visit https://www.uobcsepolicinghub.org.uk/
- Contextual Safeguarding please visit www.contextualsafeguarding.org.uk
- The role of the voluntary sector in responding to CSE please visit https://www.alexiproject.org.uk/