

“If only someone had listened”

Office of the Children's
Commissioner's Inquiry into
Child Sexual Exploitation
in Gangs and Groups

Final Report

November 2013

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Executive summary

Key findings

Despite increased awareness and a heightened state of alert regarding child sexual exploitation children are still slipping through the net and falling prey to sexual predators. Serious gaps remain in the knowledge, practice and services required to tackle this problem. There are pockets of good practice, but much still needs to be done to prevent thousands more children falling victim.

This is the principal finding of *"If only someone had listened" – the Final Report of the Inquiry of the Office of the Children's Commissioner into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (CSEGG)*.

In many areas the required agencies have only recently started to come together to tackle the issue despite the statutory guidance issued by the Government in 2009. A comparison of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCB) current practice against this guidance indicates that only 6% of LSCBs were meeting the requirements in full, with around one third not even meeting half of them. Substantial gaps remain in the availability of specialist provision for victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE).

This report outlines the urgent steps needed so that children can be effectively made and kept safe – from decision-making at senior levels to the practitioner working with individual child victims – whether a social worker, police officer, health clinician, teacher or anyone else who has contact with children.

Phase 1 of the Inquiry reported that a total of 2,409 children were known to be victims of CSE by gangs and groups. In addition the Inquiry identified 16,500 children and young people as being at risk of CSE.

Many of the known victims had been badly let down by those agencies and services that should have been protecting them. The reality is that children and young people are continuing to fall victim to exploitation. Although there are heightened efforts to address this issue, too many agencies and services are still failing to safeguard children and young people effectively.

We have seen examples, however, of local services who *are* putting children at the centre of everything they do. In these places there is a coherent and collaborative response to CSE with utmost commitment from the most senior to frontline staff, thereby offering greater protection for children threatened by, or experiencing, sexual exploitation. These examples have informed our view of what needs to be done in those places where children are not being protected and is encapsulated in the Inquiry's new operational and strategic Framework – **See Me, Hear Me**.

Child Sexual Exploitation by Gangs and Groups

In this Inquiry we use the following definitions of gangs and groups.

- **Gangs** are relatively durable, predominantly street-based, social groups of children, young people and, not infrequently, young adults who see themselves, and are seen by others, as affiliates of a discrete, named group who (1) engage in a range of criminal activity and violence; (2) identify or lay claim to territory; (3) have some form of identifying structural feature; and (4) are in conflict with similar groups.

- **Groups** are two or more people of any age, connected through formal or informal associations or networks, including, but not exclusive to, friendship groups.

The Inquiry identified 13 patterns of child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups. These are set out in **Appendix 2** of the report.

Evidence base

The Inquiry gathered an unprecedented evidence base during Phase 2 to inform the findings of this report. We collected a wide range of qualitative and quantitative evidence from children and young people, parents, carers and a variety of professionals and agencies, as well as evaluations of interventions in place. This included 100% response from every LSCB and police force. A full breakdown of the evidence can found in **Appendix 1**.

Report structure

The second phase of this Inquiry sought to explore and identify good practice in addressing child sexual exploitation by gangs and/or groups around which the report is structured.

In ensuring that all children are being safeguarded, we need to first understand **Why are children and young people still slipping through the net?**

Chapter 1 seeks to outline what is and is not working in addressing CSE involving gangs and groups nationally. **Part A: What is going wrong?** describes the failings that are impeding the proper safeguarding of children. In contrast, **Part B: What is working?** describes how some children have been protected. It outlines nine key foundations for good practice.

Chapter 2: Getting it right: The Framework for action, builds on this evidence and outlines the overarching Framework (**See Me, Hear Me**) that is needed to ensure coherent and collaborative working between the various agencies and services involved in tackling CSE.

Chapter 3 closes the report by laying out **conclusions, recommendations and next steps**.

Inquiry findings

Chapter 1: The National Response to Child Sexual Exploitation

Part A: Why are children slipping through the net: what is going wrong?

'They talked about me like I wasn't even there. They were very harsh.'

The Inquiry identified nine significant **failings** in the current response to tackle and address child sexual exploitation.

Many agencies are **forgetting the child**. Children who are at high risk of CSE, or already victims, are often simply ignored or discounted. They are often invisible – not seen or heard. Whilst 98% of LSCBs told the Inquiry that CSE is a strategic priority, almost half were unable to tell us how many victims had been identified during 2012 in their local area. During site visits we also continued to hear references to children 'putting themselves at risk', rather than the perpetrators being the risk to children.

Services are **failing to engage** with children and young people. There was a lack of awareness and understanding from some professionals and agencies on how to engage with children and young people. This was identified in 61% of (call for evidence) submissions from the voluntary sector. Specialist organisations, particularly working with minority groups and gender-specific organisations, highlighted that often statutory services have a poor understanding of the children and young people with whom they work and their specific needs. The Inquiry uncovered a significant difference between children and young people's views of their needs and what would help them, and professionals understanding of what would help. This has contributed to children and young people slipping through the net.

There is a **lack of leadership** amongst some of the most senior decision makers at local level, who are failing to grasp the gravity of CSE, commit resources and coordinate multi-agency responses. At both a national and local level it is also unclear whether CSE is being seen as predominantly a child protection issue or a crime and disorder issue.

We uncovered limited or **no strategic planning** in some LSCBs in relation to CSE. Almost half of all LSCBs do not have a strategy in place to tackle child sexual exploitation. An absence of strategy can result in differing approaches and an uncoordinated response across agencies.

Too many people who should be protecting children are **in denial** about the realities of CSE and therefore do not believe what children may tell them. One young person told us, *'They made me feel like it was my fault.'*

Professionals are **failing to recognise** victims. There are still pervasive and damaging myths about the profiles of both victims and perpetrators with the result that many different patterns of sexual exploitation are being ignored and the victims not being protected. Of the 323 gangs believed to currently be active in England and identified by police forces, only 16 have been associated with CSE. There has also been limited 'problem-profiling' (obtaining a detailed picture) of the scale and nature of CSE in local areas with only 35% of LSCBs having undertaken activity in this area.

Too many areas are still **working in isolation** to tackle CSE. Almost a third of LSCBs (comprising several agencies and services) have no plans to appoint a child sexual exploitation coordinator. Nearly half of all CSE sub-groups have no specific representative from sexual health services. Information sharing remains an issue with some agencies holding information on sexual exploitation that is not also held by or shared with the police, children's services and others. Although some agencies do engage in collaborative or partnership work, they are still not all communicating effectively.

A **delayed response** to CSE continues to hamper the development and improvement of practice to tackle CSE. Only two police forces have sought to 'map' (locate and log the connections of) girls and young women associated with street gangs despite recommendations made in the Interim Report.

Results are not being monitored. Statutory agencies are failing to check whether their actions are working and there is no common agreement between them as to what they are trying to achieve.

It is essential that these factors are urgently addressed to ensure child victims are not missed.

Part B: How some children and young people have been protected: what is working?

'The team and everything they did. It's more the fact that they got to know us. Not force it out of us but they got to know us. Built that relationship and um... obviously when we felt we could trust them, we bring it out and told them what is going on. It's better than the fact that "oh. I just met you. Tell me what is going on." It was building that relationship that was nice.'

Having identified the failings, the Inquiry has also identified nine essential foundations of effective practice for safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation based on the evidence collected.

In all examples of good practice there was a **focus on the child**. Children and young people were clearly visible to those responsible for protecting them. These services sought to ensure that those at risk or who are victims are the primary focus of professionals and agencies at all times. They identified that providing support for a child who has been sexually exploited should not be seen as a quick fix. Professionals and agencies need to be mindful of children and young people's individual needs and equalities.

Gaining a child's confidence was found to be important to enable the children and young people to be equipped with the knowledge to recognise what is abuse, and feel supported to be able to tell someone about it. 52% of voluntary sector call for evidence submissions highlighted the importance of building positive relationships and trust when working with children and young people.

Conditions need to be created in school, the home and socially to support this process.

Effective **leadership** was instrumental in developing good practice. The good leaders we observed demonstrated and modelled their commitment to tackling child sexual exploitation and this translated into effective practice. In areas where we observed poor leadership, professionals lack a sense of direction as they carry out their work, and the likelihood of good governance, accountability and quality assurance was diminished.

Strategic planning was identified by the professionals we spoke to as being central to effective practice. 91% of LSCBs have a CSE sub-group in place or underway. In the areas where we observed best practice, they had a clear strategy in place. Some of the most effective strategies extended from prevention through to protection and included on-going support for victims and enforcement.

Everyone on alert – 78% of LSCBs have delivered awareness-raising activity programmes for professionals locally. We found that victims and children or young people at risk of CSE were more likely to be identified and be provided the right support when professionals, families, communities and local businesses were informed about CSE and understood the impact that it can have.

Spotting the warning signs – 70% of health agencies which responded to the dataset indicated that they had circulated the risk indicators/warning signs published in the Inquiry's Interim Report and a further 17% were planning to do so. Distributing and understanding these warning signs can improve the likelihood children and young people who are at risk or victims of CSE will be recognised without placing the onus on victims to tell their story.

Joined-up working improved identification and enabled all-encompassing child-centred practice. Evidence to the Inquiry conclusively shows that no single agency acting in isolation can adequately respond to child sexual exploitation. In areas where we observed joined-up working, there were higher levels of identification of victims and a more comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of the children and young people.

Early identification and **pre-emptive action** leads to the breaking-up of networks that exploit children. This is a far more effective approach than waiting until a child reveals that he or she is being exploited and avoids further exploitation and abuse.

Effective pre-emptive action was observed in agencies that combine all their data, intelligence, experience and know-how into a strategic plan for action. Pre-emptive action also included proactive prevention. This was particularly observed in schools-based programmes on the risks of CSE. These helped to educate children and young people to use the internet safely, address the very worrying attitudes that many boys have towards girls and make sure young people know where to turn for help.

Scrutiny and oversight was found to be essential to ensure that the intended outcomes are being achieved.

Are we really seeing, hearing and understanding the victims and are we truly acting in their best interests? Those are the questions that need to be asked at every stage. These questions are set out in the **See Me, Hear Me** Framework in Chapter 2.

Everyone involved – from service heads setting the strategic agenda to those handling cases day-in, day-out – needs to know what is required of them to make the system work.

Chapter 2: Getting it right – the Framework for action

This Inquiry found that no single agency can respond alone or on a case-by-case basis to child sexual exploitation by gangs or groups. A coherent local and national response to child sexual exploitation needs to cover the entire range of agencies and services that are involved in the protection and safety of children and young people, at both a strategic and operational level.

It is against this background that we have developed the **See Me, Hear Me** Framework which provides a child-centred approach for protecting children. This Framework focuses on:

- preventing the sexual exploitation of children
- identifying, protecting and supporting the victims
- disrupting and stopping perpetrators, securing justice for victims and obtaining convictions.

See Me, Hear Me ensures that children and young people who are victims of CSE or at risk of becoming victims, are seen, heard, supported and understood. It is about making the child visible. It has been developed with the assistance of a group of young people who have been victims of sexual exploitation and representatives from key agencies working in the field. It draws extensively on evidence of effective practice examined by the Inquiry.

The Framework sets out the agencies, networks and stage-by-stage coordination of what is needed to enable effective practice and to ensure joined-up working – from the top strategic level down to

the on-the-ground handling of cases with victims and perpetrators. This joined-up approach reflects all messages in *Working Together guidance on CSE* (DSCF, 2009) and all the major child abuse enquiries. It is underpinned by seven firm principles of effective practice.

Principles of effective practice

Evidence to the Inquiry demonstrated that a strategic and operational framework would struggle to be effective if it were not founded upon seven principles set out below. These are predicated on Articles 3, 12, 19, 24, 34 and 39 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Fulfilling the principles will ensure that children's rights under the UNCRC are honoured.

1. The child's best interests must be the top priority

The best interests of children and young people and their rights to protection must drive all decision making. The paramountcy principle (Children Act 1989) must be adhered to where applicable and children's rights under UNCRC Article 3 fully honoured.

2. Participation of children and young people

Services need to involve children and young people when decisions are being made about their care, protection and on-going support and be kept informed on any issues that affect them throughout. Professionals must be mindful of children and young people's needs and equalities. Their UNCRC Article 12 rights must be honoured.

3. Enduring relationships and support

Support must be tailored to meet the needs of the child, according to their age, identity, ethnicity, belief, sexual orientation, disability, language, and stage of development. Children and young people have told us that a consistent person who sticks with them throughout the whole period of their protection and on-going care is crucial to their recovery.

4. Comprehensive problem-profiling

It is critical that agencies regularly problem-profile their local area to analyse and understand all the patterns of exploitation to which children and young people are subjected to. A comprehensive problem-profile needs to be compiled with the oversight of the LSCB and should be shared across all key partners to inform the development of a multi-agency strategy and action plans, the commissioning of services and the delivery of training and awareness-raising activity to support local professionals.

5. Effective information-sharing within and between agencies

Every area should have a cross sector information-sharing protocol which is predicated on the best interests and safeguarding of children and young people. All relevant agencies and services should be signatories and it should clearly state what information should be shared, by whom and the process for doing this.

6. Supervision, support and training of staff

Services should invest in the development and support of staff including providing regular supervision and the opportunities for them to reflect on practice. Those professionals who offer direct support to sexually exploited children and young people might require further intensive training and must have regular opportunities to reflect on their practice with a skilled consultant or supervisor.

7. Evaluation and review

Evaluations and regular reviews of the effectiveness of the CSE strategy is necessary to ensure services and interventions are achieving their intended outcomes and meeting the child and young person's needs. Children and young people must be directly involved in this process in compliance with Article 12 of the UNCRC. This will ensure that performance is driven continuously by a cycle that leads to improvement.

These principles need to be in place to ensure children and young people are seen, heard and made safe.

The **See Me, Hear Me** Framework also details three sets of simple and essential questions under the headings:

1. **Voice of the Child** – brings the voice and experiences of victims of CSE and those at risk to the fore. These questions were compiled and quality assured by a group of young people who have been victims of sexual exploitation. They were emphatic that protection and support can only be effective when these questions are addressed.
2. **Voice of the Professional** – attends to the anxieties staff may have and highlights the questions which agencies must ask if they are to meet their responsibilities to care for and support their staff.
3. **Protecting the Child** – details some of the questions which agencies need to satisfactorily answer in order to fulfil their statutory responsibilities for keeping all children safe.

The questions have been developed to guide planning and decision making regarding the rights, welfare and protection children and young people who have been victims of CSE.

Finally, the **See Me, Hear Me** Framework outlines the functions and processes required to form a holistic response to sexual exploitation at a local level. The functions and processes are framed within the suggested structure within which the **See Me, Hear Me** Framework could be implemented. This ranges from accountability and strategic coordination to an end to end approach to intervention and service delivery at the ground level.

None of this will work without the commitment of leaders in every relevant agency who are held to account for the implementation of the local CSE strategy and the protection of individual children and young people.

This way of working now needs to become standard practice. Some agencies are already delivering a good service – all now need to do that.

Recommendations

1. The Department for Education should review and where necessary, revise the *Working Together guidance on CSE* (DCSF, 2009). This should include a review of the definition of CSE.
2. Every Local Safeguarding Children Board should take all necessary steps to ensure they are fully compliant with the *Working Together guidance on CSE* (DCSF, 2009).
3. Every Local Safeguarding Children Board should review their strategic and operational plans and procedures against the seven principles, nine foundations and the **See Me, Hear Me Framework** in this report, ensuring they are meeting their obligations to children and young people and the professionals who work with them. Gaps should be identified and plans developed for delivering effective practice in accordance with the evidence. The effectiveness of plans, procedures and practice should be subject to an on-going evaluation and review cycle.
4. There need to be nationally and locally agreed information-sharing protocols that specify every agencies' and professional's responsibilities and duties for sharing information about children who are or may be in need of protection. At the national level, this should be lead and coordinated by the Home Office through the Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People National Group. At the local level, this must be led by LSCBs. All member agencies at both levels must be signatories and compliance rigorously monitored.
5. Problem-profiling of victims, offenders, gangs, gang-associated girls, high risk businesses and neighbourhoods and other relevant factors must take place at both national and local levels. The Home Office, through the Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People National Group, should lead and coordinate the development of a national profile. Local Safeguarding Children Boards should do the equivalent at the local level.
6. Every local authority must ensure that its Joint Strategic Needs Assessment includes evidence about the prevalence of CSE, identification and needs of high risk groups, local gangs, their membership and associated females. This should determine commissioning decisions and priorities.
7. Relationships and sex education must be provided by trained practitioners in every educational setting for all children and young people. This must be part of a holistic/whole-school approach to child protection that includes internet safety and all forms of bullying and harassment and the getting and giving of consent.
8. Through the Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People National Group, the Government should undertake a review of the various initiatives being funded by the Home Office, Department for Education, Department of Health and any others as relevant, in order to ensure services are not duplicated and that programmes are complementary, coordinated and adequately funded. All initiatives should be cross-checked to ensure that they are effectively linked into child protection procedures and local safeguarding arrangements.