

“If only someone had listened”: Final Report from the Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups

Summary

Final Report of The Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (CSEGG).

http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_743

This covers Phase 2 of the Inquiry (2012-13) and identifies measures required to prevent CSEGG and recommend how to put these measures into force. Phase 1 ran from 2011-2012 and gathered evidence on the nature and scale of CSEGG across England.

Practice Areas Affected:

All staff working with children or young adults.

Status:

Final Report from Office of Children’s Commissioner, November 2013.

Linked Briefings:

79: Interim Report from the Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (http://www.trixonline.co.uk/website/news/pdf/policy_briefing_No-79.pdf)

104: *See Me, Hear Me Framework*

(http://www.trixonline.co.uk/website/news/pdf/policy_briefing_No-104.pdf)

Introduction

This briefing is a summary of the final report from the Office of the Children’s Commissioner’s Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups. The Inquiry has now published six related reports which can be accessed via <http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications>.

Phase 1 of the Inquiry reported that a total of 2,409 children were known to be victims of child sexual exploitation (CSE) by gangs and groups. In addition 16,500 children and young people were identified as being at risk of CSE. The Inquiry uses the following definitions of gangs and groups:

- Gangs are relatively durable, predominantly street-based, social groups of children, young people and sometimes 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.

Thirteen patterns of CSE in gangs and groups were identified, see Appendix 2 of the Final Report.

The Inquiry found that despite increased awareness, children are still slipping through the net and becoming victims of sexual predators. Serious gaps remain in practitioner knowledge and practice, and in the services required to tackle this problem. There is some good practice, but there is still much that needs to be done to prevent thousands more children becoming victims.

Despite CSE statutory guidance being issued by the Government in 2009, some areas are only just coming together to address the issue. A comparison of current practice of Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCB) in relation to the guidance indicated only 6% are meeting the full requirements, with approximately one third not even meeting half. Substantial gaps also remain in the availability of specialist provision for victims.

The Inquiry outlines urgent steps needed so 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.

The National Response to Child Sexual Exploitation

'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.

1. **Forgetting the child:** Children who are at high risk of CSE, or who are already victims, are often simply ignored or discounted. They are invisible; not seen or heard. Whilst 98% of LSCBs reported CSE is a strategic priority, almost half were unable to report how many victims had been identified during 2012 in their local area. There was continued reference to children 'putting themselves at risk', rather than the perpetrators being the risk to children.
2. **Failing to engage with children and young people:** There is a lack of professional and agency awareness and understanding on how to engage with children and young people. Specialist organisations highlighted statutory services often have a poor understanding of the children they work with and their specific needs. The Inquiry noted a significant difference between children's views of their needs and what would help and professional understanding of what would help, which contributed to them slipping through the net.
3. **Lack of leadership:** The Inquiry found a lack of leadership amongst some of the most senior local decision makers, who are failing to grasp the gravity of CSE, commit resources and coordinate multi-agency responses. At both national and local levels the Inquiry believes it is unclear whether CSE is seen as predominantly a child protection or crime and disorder issue.
4. **Limited or no strategic planning:** Almost half of all LSCBs do not have a strategy in place to tackle CSE. An absence of strategy can result in differing approaches and an uncoordinated response across agencies.
5. **In denial:** Too many people who should be protecting children are in denial about the realities of CSE and therefore do not believe what children tell them.
6. **Failing to recognise victims:** Damaging and persuasive myths still exist about the profiles of both victims and perpetrators. This results in different patterns of sexual exploitation being ignored and victims left un-protected, for example in relation to gangs. Only 35% of LSCBs have undertaken any activity to obtain a detailed local picture of the scale and nature of CSE.
7. **Working in isolation:** The Inquiry found nearly a third of LSCBs have no plans to appoint a CSE coordinator. Information sharing remains an issue; some agencies hold information not shared with the police, children's services and others. Although some agencies do engage in collaborative or partnership work, they are not all communicating effectively.

8. **Delayed response:** This continues to hamper the development and improvement of practice. Only two police forces have sought to locate and log the connections of girls and young women associated with street gangs' despite recommendations made in the Interim Report.
9. **Results are not monitored:** Statutory agencies are failing to check whether actions are working and there is no common agreement as to what they are trying to achieve.

How some children and young people have been protected: What is working?

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

1. **Focus on the child:** Children were clearly visible to those responsible for protecting them. These services sought to ensure that those at risk or victims are their primary focus at all times. They identified that providing support for a child who has been sexually exploited should not be seen as a quick fix, and be mindful of individual needs and equalities.
2. **Gaining a child's confidence:** This is important to enable children and young people to recognise what is abuse, and feel supported to be able to tell someone about it. Conditions need to be created in school, the home and socially to support this process.
3. **Effective leadership:** The good leaders demonstrated and modelled their commitment to tackling CSE and this translated into effective practice.
4. **Strategic planning:** This was identified by professionals as being central to effective practice. 91% of LSCBs have a CSE sub-group in place or underway. In areas where best practice was observed, there is a clear strategy. Some of the most effective strategies extend from prevention through to protection, included on-going support for victims and enforcement.
5. **Everyone on alert:** 78% of LSCBs have delivered local awareness-raising activity programmes for professionals. 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 its impact.
6. **Spotting the warning signs:** 70% of health agencies (who responded to the Inquiry) indicated they circulated the risk indicators / warning signs published in the Inquiry's Interim Report; 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.
7. **Joined-up working:** This improved identification and enabled all-encompassing child-centred practice. Evidence to the Inquiry showed no single agency acting in isolation can adequately respond to CSE. In areas of joined-up working, there were higher levels of identification of victims and a more comprehensive approach to addressing their needs.
8. **Early identification and pre-emptive action:** This leads to networks which exploit children being broken up, which is far more effective than waiting until a child reveals they are being exploited and avoids further exploitation and abuse. Agencies which combine data, intelligence, experience and knowledge into a strategic plan for action were more likely to take effective pre-emptive action, including proactive prevention. This was particularly observed in schools-based programmes on the risks of CSE, including internet safety, addressing the very worrying attitudes that many boys have towards girls and ensuring young people know where to turn for help.
9. **Scrutiny and oversight** was found to be essential to ensure that the intended outcomes are being achieved.

Report Recommendations

The Inquiry Report makes a number of recommendations in order to improve the prevention, protection and response in relation to child sexual exploitation. Recommendations for local areas are highlighted below:

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 LSCB** should take all necessary steps to ensure they are fully compliant with the Working Together guidance on CSE (DCSF, 2009).
3. **Every LSCB** should review their strategic and operational plans and procedures against the seven principles, nine foundations and the *See Me, Hear Me Framework* (see Policy Briefing # 104), 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 agency and professional 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.** 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.

Through the Sexual Violence against Children and Vulnerable People National Group, the Government should undertake a review of the various initiatives being funded by its departments and any others as relevant, in order to ensure services are not duplicated and that programmes are complementary, coordinated and adequately funded.

Contact Us

Kensington House, 50-52 Albany Road, Earlsdon, Coventry, CV5 6JU

www.trixonline.co.uk

T: 024 7667 8053

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