

Appropriate support for sexually exploited young people

Introduction

Sexual exploitation of young people takes different forms, from young people being involved in sexually exploitative relationships and receiving money, drugs or accommodation in exchange for sex with one or more men, to being exploited in more 'formal' prostitution. In all cases, those exploiting the young people have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, physical strength, or economic or other resources, such as access to drugs. While some element of coercion or intimidation is common, the involvement in exploitative relationships is most significantly characterized by choices born out of the social, emotional and economic vulnerability of the young person.

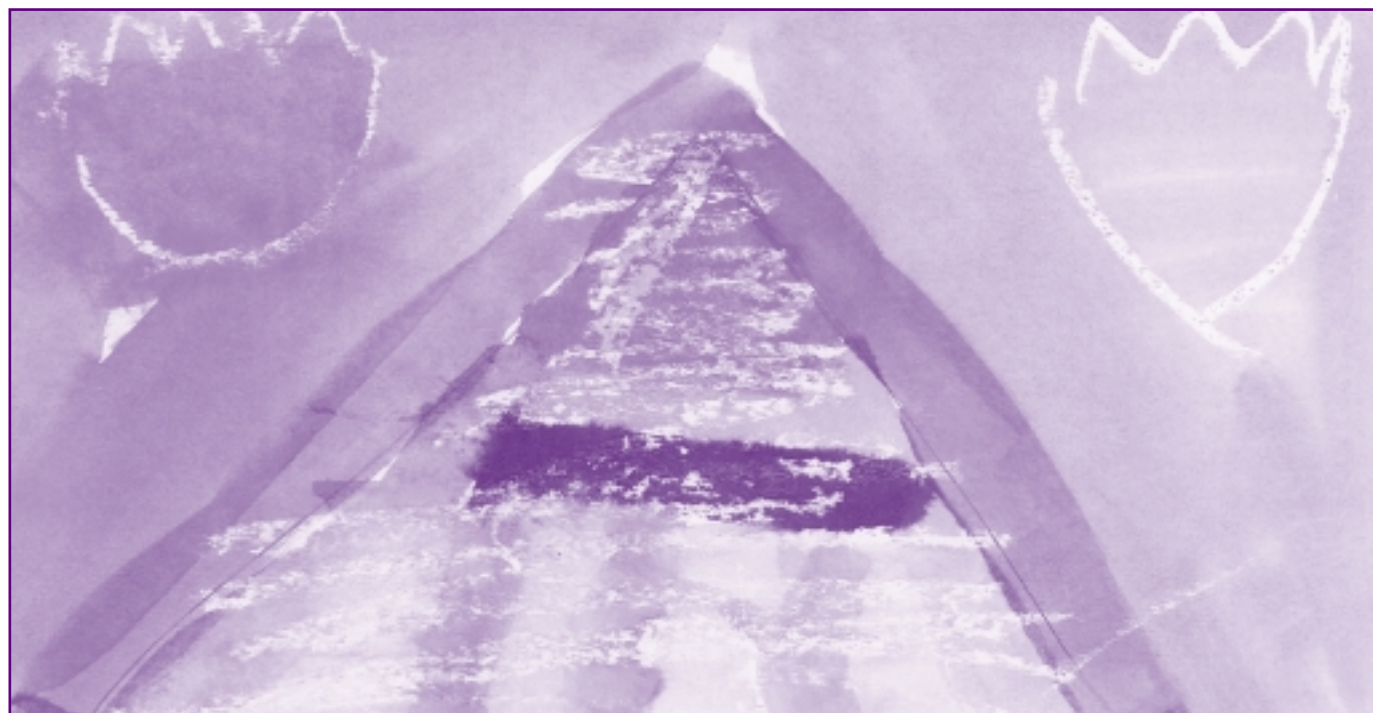
Until relatively recently, children and young people involved in prostitution were seen to have made a 'choice' about their activities and, if apprehended treated as offenders under criminal law. A number of high profile campaigns by Barnardo's and others led to changes in the approach taken with such young people. They are now predominantly viewed and treated as 'children in need', who do not 'consent' to their abuse; and across the UK new legislation and guidance encourages this approach, along with the development of multi-agency protocols and working practices.

Research carried out by Barnardo's highlights that the best way to protect young people from sexual

exploitation is through a model of care that includes early intervention, safe accommodation, continuity of care, intensive support, multi-agency coordination and police action against perpetrators. Our research has shown that in the absence of such a response young people (usually young women) are being referred to Secure Accommodation as a last resort means of protection. It is widely recognized that this measure fails to promote recovery – may even cause children more harm – and makes the implementation of an appropriate model of care all the more urgent.

Key research findings

1. Prevention and early intervention are vital when indications of risk are first identified.
2. Many young people at risk of exploitation in adolescence have been failed by services at earlier stages in their lives.
3. A pro-active approach to identify sexual exploitation and the development of detailed protocols are essential to effective intervention in the lives of young people at risk.
4. A lead officer for sexual exploitation with managerial support helps ensure good interagency coordination.
5. Specialist services play a vital role in engaging this hard-to-reach and vulnerable group of young people; facilitating access to other services; and in developing and disseminating expertise in working with sexually exploited young people.
6. Continuity of care is essential as the high level of vulnerability of these young people often leads to multiple placements and interventions.
7. Barnardo's research into the use of Secure Accommodation in the UK suggests that concern about sexual exploitation is a significant issue on the grounds for placing between 40% and 90% of young women in Secure Accommodation.⁸
8. There is no evidence that using Secure Accommodation works in turning round the lives of sexually exploited young people. At best it is a short term, crisis measure.
9. Locking up children in Secure Accommodation when they have committed no offence raises serious concerns. The confusion between the aim of providing protection, and what is experienced by those young people as a punitive response, can leave those who have been sexually exploited feeling blamed for their abuse, and wary of seeking help in the future.
10. Responses to young people at risk of sexual exploitation are undermined by severe resource constraints. For example, there has been no additional funding in England and Wales to implement DoH guidance: *Safeguarding children involved in prostitution* (2000), a major problem for already over-stretched local authority resources.



This briefing

This briefing draws on a range of Barnardo's research and practice experience and, in particular, the findings outlined in two major reports *Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London*¹ and *The use of Secure Accommodation and alternative provisions for sexually exploited young people in Scotland*² published in 2005. The former reports the findings from a two year study identifying the service needs of young people at risk of sexual exploitation in London and gives evidence collected from over 100 informants in 30 London boroughs, including the police, health, education, child protection, the voluntary sector and specialist services and from young people themselves. The second report was funded by the Scottish Executive and contains the findings from a year's research into the use of Secure Accommodation in Scotland. The findings were corroborated in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by a snapshot survey undertaken in 2004. Evidence was collected from a wide range of professionals including local authority social services managers, secure unit staff, community agency staff and children's reporters.

Barnardo's operates 15 services for children who are sexually exploited or at risk and 4 'missing' services for those running away and at risk of sexual exploitation. In 2004/5 these services worked with 2075 young people;³ additionally Barnardo's campaigns such as 'Whose Daughter Next'⁴ and 'No Son of Mine'⁵ highlighted initial concerns about the scale of the problem and the way children abused through prostitution were dealt with. These campaigns contributed to changes in legislation and policy, resulting in such children being treated as 'children in need' by police, social services and other agencies; however, the more recent research undertaken by Barnardo's demonstrates that there are still serious shortcomings in the services provided.

Policy context

Children and young people have the right to be protected from sexual exploitation. At an international level this is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Article 34

State Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, State Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:

- The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in unlawful sexual activity.
- The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual activities.
- The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials.

Article 39

State Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation or abuse.

In England and Wales, domestic legislation and policy within the 1989 Children Act guidance, *Safeguarding children involved in prostitution* (2000); and in the 2003 *Sexual Offences Act*, gives safeguards to children and provides more legal options to prosecute perpetrators. Similar provisions are also in place in Scotland in 'Guidance on young runaways and sexual exploitation' and the forthcoming 'Protection of children and prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act';⁶ and in Northern Ireland in the guidance 'Cooperating to safeguard children'.⁷

Notwithstanding these measures, more needs to be done to provide appropriate and suitable support to children and young people who are sexually exploited or at risk.

What should we focus on?

Use of Secure Accommodation

There are currently 28 secure children's homes in England with 430 places⁹, 1 secure unit in Wales with 18 places; 6 secure units in Scotland with 96 places and 2 units in Northern Ireland with 15 places; the number of admissions per year being much higher as each place will be used for more than one child or placement during the year.

In relation to secure admissions, there is a lack of data on specific grounds for referral so it is difficult to know how many young people are held in Secure Accommodation due to risk of sexual exploitation. However, secure units surveyed by Barnardo's gave estimates of sexual exploitation being a concern for between 40% and 90% of young women in Secure Accommodation, suggesting that it is a significant issue. Young men were less readily identified but it was considered a factor in individual cases.

Is Secure Accommodation an effective response for sexually exploited young people?

Locking up young people in Secure Accommodation when they have committed no offence raises serious concerns relating to ethics and human rights.

'I don't think she'd have seen it as prostitution, but gradually she got involved in a group of people where she was definitely being sexually exploited. She ran away one night from the unit and was raped and she was then sent to secure. It was for her protection but she interpreted it as, 'I ran away, I was raped, I have been locked up because of it.' *Case illustration, Scotland*

The physical security of the building does not necessarily make units a safe place for sexually exploited young people. Locking up vulnerable young women with young men who had committed offences – in some cases sexual offences – is particularly problematic. Bullying, intimidation, sexual aggression and harassment were all reported in the research.

While secure units provide 'containment', it is relational security that is essential to helping sexually exploited young people build positive relationships with workers and carers, and overcome the deep-rooted difficulties resulting from the disadvantage and abuse in their lives.

Most local authority secure unit respondents surveyed by Barnardo's did not consider that Secure Accommodation was desirable for the majority of sexually exploited/at risk young women currently referred. It was considered, at best a short term crisis measure, providing that high levels of support were available after the placement. There was no evidence that using Secure Accommodation worked in turning around the lives of sexually exploited young people, and the experience in Secure Accommodation may make it even less likely that a young person will access the long term support they need afterwards:

'In our experience, if children have been through secure, they are absolutely determined not to be returned – when they go missing, they stay away from protective adults. They are very afraid of emerging. And it does not solve the problem as the networks (within which they were previously exploited) are there when they leave.'

Practitioner, Voluntary Sector Specialist Service, England



Reasons why Secure Accommodation is used as a response

Local Authority informants were clear that when they took the decision to place young people in Secure Accommodation, it was felt to be in their best interests, particularly where abuse had escalated to a dangerous level. However, they also acknowledge that this decision was often related to a lack of any suitable alternatives within the community.

Most local authority practitioners surveyed by Barnardo's preferred to manage risk in the community, but this was sometimes considered impossible because of a lack of resources and services. A link was also made by practitioners between the lack of police action against perpetrators, and the continued risk towards a young person which could lead to a placement in Secure Accommodation.

What should we be doing to help?

We need to be developing responses on three fronts: the *prevention* of sexual exploitation, the *protection* of sexually exploited young people and the *prosecution* of perpetrators offers the best and most effective approach.

- Prevention should involve primary prevention work in schools to tackle a culture of normalized violence towards young women, and to equip young people with the skills and confidence to assert themselves against sexually aggressive behaviour. Many young people who become at risk of sexual exploitation in adolescence had been failed by services at earlier stages of their lives, so improving the quality of services, particularly social services, is another important aspect of prevention.
- Earlier identification of young people at risk, and targeting early intervention work through the provision of services, is also necessary in order to prevent risk escalating. Young people



do not readily disclose this form of abuse so practitioners must be able to respond to indications of possible sexual exploitation.

- Protection requires a multi agency approach coordinated by social services under specific protocols for sexual exploitation. Intensive support is needed and, as far as possible a therapeutic approach needs to support and empower young people in achieving change on their own behalf.
- Prosecution of perpetrators requires proactive police work to gather and coordinate intelligence on exploitation.

Key messages for commissioners and service providers

- Early intervention is vital when indications of risk are first identified. When a young person runs away or goes missing, working with them and their families or carers at this stage can prevent their exposure to risk from escalating.
- Training and awareness raising on the signs and indicators of vulnerability to exploitation is essential for front line practitioners.
- Safe accommodation is needed in a way that maximizes the possibilities for relational security. This will preferably be in the young person's current home or placement, with intensive support provided to them and their families or carers.
- Continuity of care is essential as the high level of vulnerability of this group often leads to multiple placements and interventions.
- Services need to be tailored to bring support to young people directly, and workers and carers may need to adopt assertive outreach methods such as daily phone calls, text messaging and 'door stepping'. Such are the methods used by Barnardo's sexual exploitation services with young people in crisis and at high risk.
- As the levels of disadvantage and abuse in these young people's lives give rise to a range of needs, which cannot be readily met by a single agency, the need for multi agency coordination is paramount. This may involve social work, health, education and specialist services in the voluntary sector, as well as police action to tackle the continued risk represented by perpetrators.
- Long term funding needs to be provided in order to offer stability of specialist services to young people. It is important to acknowledge that working to change the circumstances of sexually exploited young people can take time.

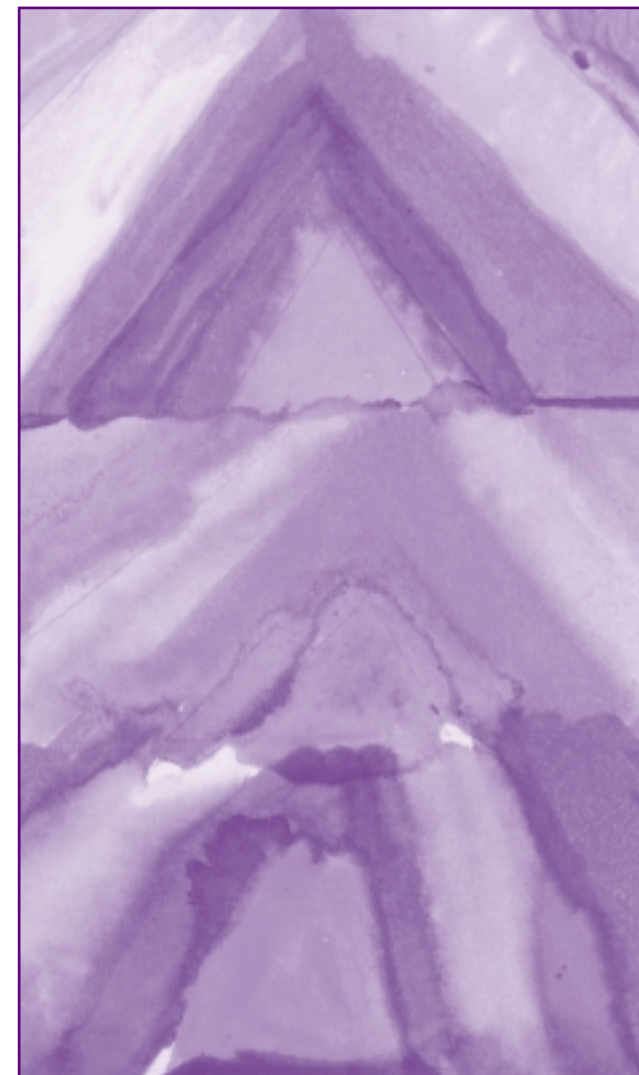
Formulating a better strategic response

Sexual exploitation occurs in a context of normalized sexual violence towards women. This is most acutely experienced by young women, who are at the highest risk of rape, sexual assault and domestic violence. Violence, coercion and intimidation are frequently present in situations of sexual exploitation. However, sexual exploitation primarily occurs as a result of young people making constrained choices against a background of social, economic and emotional vulnerability. Where young women are making these constrained choices in relation to their circumstances, there is a danger that services see this as 'free choice', leading to a lack of protective action. The continued existence of legal provisions to arrest and prosecute young people under 18 for 'persistent and voluntary return' to prostitution may play a role in this perception.

As the sexual exploitation of children and young people is not limited to formal 'prostitution', it is important for policy makers and services to understand and be aware of the full spectrum of sexually exploitative situations, in order to identify and protect young people at risk. Talking about 'prostitution' or 'commercial sexual exploitation' of young people is therefore unhelpful. The findings in *'Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London'* clearly demonstrates the need for cooperation and coordination between agencies – police, social services, health, education, youth offending teams and specialist services – to develop protocols, raise awareness and commission services. The research also highlights the effectiveness of having a lead officer, empowered to be proactive in identifying young people at risk and able to commission appropriate services. However, responses to young people at risk are undermined by resource constraints and the instability of service provision.

Steps needed at a national level.

1. The government should provide ring fenced resources to assist services to take forward the measures outlined in the guidance, '*Safeguarding children involved in prostitution*'.
2. The government should issue guidance that discourages the use of Secure Accommodation and promotes a model of care that includes prevention, early intervention, safe accommodation, continuity of care, intensive support and multi agency co-ordination, including police action against perpetrators
3. The government should remove provisions to arrest and prosecute young people who are considered to 'persistently and voluntarily return' to prostitution. These undermine approaches acknowledging the vulnerability of young people and the need to offer persistent and long term support to young people to disengage them from abusive networks.



Steps needed at a local level

1. Local authorities should develop and disseminate detailed protocols on sexual exploitation, work actively to promote them and encourage the proactive identification of young people at risk.
2. Schools and other front line services should play a greater role in identifying young people at risk of sexual exploitation. Local authorities should organize regular inter-agency training and awareness raising on the indicators of risk.
3. Police forces should adopt proactive approaches to identifying sexual exploitation, including through the gathering and coordination of intelligence; increased partnership working with social services departments and other agencies and the development of systems for monitoring and working with young people who run away or go missing. They should seek creative ways to secure prosecutions of perpetrators, including ways which do not rely on the evidence of the young person.
4. Social services departments should avoid the use of Secure Accommodation as a response to sexually exploited young people. Resources should instead be deployed to provide community based responses involving early intervention, intensive support, safe accommodation and continuity of care. Safe accommodation should be focused on relational security through intensive work with families and carers or placements with specially recruited and trained foster carers.
5. PSHE curriculums in schools should pay attention to issues of violence against women and equip young people with the knowledge and skills to enjoy more equal relationships.
6. Local child protection procedures should be updated in line with current best practice around sexual exploitation.
7. Local safeguarding boards should ensure that procedures include guidance on young people who run away or go missing.

References

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