

Parliamentary briefing paper

Appropriate support for sexually exploited young people

Children and young people have a right to be protected from sexual exploitation. The steps the government have taken to protect children through the practice guidance, Safeguarding Children Involved in Prostitution (2000), and the Sexual Offences Act 2003 are welcomed, but more needs to be done.

Abuse of young people through prostitution can take 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, abuse is involved, with those exploiting the young person having 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 characterised by choices born out of

the social, emotional and economic vulnerability of the young person.

Research carried out by Barnardo's¹ across the UK highlights that the best way to protect young people from this abuse is through a model of care that includes early intervention, safe accommodation, continuity of care, intensive support, multi-agency co-ordination and police action against perpetrators. Our research has shown that in the absence of such a response young people (usually young women) are being locked in secure accommodation as a last resort means of protection. It is widely recognised 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. Barnardo's is calling on the government to issue guidance on reducing the use of secure accommodation, along with providing resources to support this model of care.



Barnardo's

GIVING CHILDREN BACK THEIR FUTURE

Use of secure accommodation in the UK – the facts.

In England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as detaining young people who have committed criminal offences, there are legal provisions that allow for children to have their liberty removed for 'welfare' reasons – primarily to ensure their safety. In England and Wales, the placing of children in secure accommodation for their own protection is governed by section 25 of the Children Act 1989. In Scotland, children's panels can make an authorisation for secure care under section 70 of the Children (Scotland) Act. And in Northern Ireland, it is article 44 of the Children Order 1996 that governs such admissions.

There are currently 28 secure children's homes in England providing a total of 430 places²; 1 secure unit in Wales with 18 places; 6 secure units in Scotland with 96 places; and 2 units in Northern Ireland providing 15 places, with the number of admissions per year being much higher as each place will be used for more than one child or young person during the year. There has been an increase in the use of secure care in England and Wales over the last 5 years³ and there are plans to increase the secure estate in both Scotland and Northern Ireland.

There is a lack of data on the specific grounds for referral in relation to secure admissions 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.

What the UN Convention on the Rights of the child says about protecting children from sexual exploitation

Article 34: States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse.

Article 39: States 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.

Is secure accommodation an effective response for sexually exploited young people?

Locking up children who have committed no offence in secure accommodation raises serious concerns relating to ethics and human rights. The confusion between the aim of providing protection, and what is experienced by young people as a punitive response can leave those who have been sexually exploited, feeling blamed for their abuse:

'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 – was considered by staff as particularly problematic. Bullying, intimidation, sexual aggression and harassment were reported during the research, with one girl commenting that her time in a secure unit was the most terrifying period in her life.

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

Most 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, provided that it was part of a process of support before and after, which was often not the case. There is no evidence that using secure accommodation works 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 acknowledged that this was often related to a lack of any suitable alternatives within the community.

'All we have... the kid being raped every night we put in secure, especially if they are younger, and if they go back [to the unsafe situation] again and again... we haven't got anything else. I'm not going to go home on a Friday night unless they're physically safe, even if it is secure.' *Practitioner, Social Services, England*

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 services and resources.

'There needs to be a lot more in the community, a lot more in accessible resources.' *Practitioner, Wales*

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 Barnardo's is doing to protect children and young people who are, or at risk of, being sexual exploited

Case Illustration, Barnardo's

Louise was 16 years old and in care when she was referred to Barnardo's. She had not disclosed that she was being sexually exploited, but workers from her children's home had identified that she was going missing for frequent and prolonged periods and had serious concerns for her safety. A multi-agency meeting involving Barnardo's, Social Services, the police and the children's home was called under the local authority's protocols for responding to sexual exploitation. As the authority tried to avoid using secure accommodation, a plan of intensive support involving all agencies was agreed, with the police taking responsibility for tracking the abusers.

Rachel, a social worker with a Barnardo's specialist sexual exploitation service, met Louise every week. Rachel was honest and upfront about the concerns that led to the referral, but the meetings were informal and they would go for lunch and talk. When Louise went missing, Rachel texted her every day to stay in contact. Rachel also met regularly with Louise and her key worker to talk about her running away, which helped restore

communication and trust between Louise and her carers. After a few months, Louise could also trust Rachel enough to reveal some of the violence she was experiencing from the man she had been introduced to. Rachel was then able to start more therapeutic work with Louise to help her understand and reject the abuse she was suffering.

Rachel supported Louise to stay at her school throughout this period, which meant that she could keep the friendships she had there, and through some success in her studies, Louise began to look forward to a different future for herself. Louise still has periods when she feels overwhelmed, but now attends a Barnardo's drop-in for support when she needs it.

The way forward

A few local authorities surveyed had taken the decision to manage risk in the community as far as possible, with success. The model of care being provided was one where support is provided at the highest degree of relational security possible with the lowest level of physical security needed. This is the preferred model indicated by Barnardo's research to respond to young people who are, or are at risk of being, sexually exploited.

Key messages for effective protection

- Early intervention is vital when indications of risk are first identified. When a young person runs away or goes missing, proactive work with them at this stage can prevent their exposure to risk from escalating.
- Safe accommodation is also required in a way that maximises the possibilities for relational security. This will preferably be in the young person's current home or placement, with a lot of support provided to them and their carers.
- Continuity of care is essential as the high level of vulnerability of this group of young people often leads to multiple placements and interventions, which can be destabilising.
- In order for the above to be possible, they need to be combined with intensive support, to ensure a level of relational security to 'hold' them through a transition period in their life.
- Services need to be tailored to bring support to young people directly, and it may involve workers and carers adopting assertive outreach methods such as daily phone calls, text-messaging and 'door-stepping'. Such are the methods utilized by Barnardo's sexual exploitation services with young people in crisis and at high risk.
- As the levels of disadvantage and abuse in 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 co-ordination is paramount. This may involve social work, health, education, specialist services in the voluntary sector, as well as taking police action to tackle the continued risk presented by perpetrators of this abuse.

What the government can do

'It would be helpful to have a model of intervention that has worked elsewhere and is centrally driven.'

Practitioner, Social Services, England

The government has taken steps to protect young people from sexual exploitation and abuse, but much more is required. Barnardo's would like to see protective networks and resources made available and we recommend the following actions:

- The dissemination of best practice guidance to Area Child Protection Committees on using intensive community-based support as an alternative to secure accommodation and
- The provision of resources for services to offer the intensive support required to ensure that abuse through prostitution no longer steals children's lives.

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References

1. Barnardo's carried out detailed research into the use of secure accommodation for sexually exploited young people in Scotland: C. Creegan, S. Scott and R. Smith (2004) *The use of secure accommodation and alternative provisions for sexually exploited young people in Scotland*, a report to the Scottish Executive. The research involved face-to-face interviews with 21 staff from all 6 secure units; telephone interviews with 21 out of the 32 local authorities in Scotland; telephone interviews with 6 children's reporters, and face-to-face interviews with 5 community-based agencies working with sexually exploited young people. Following this research, a snapshot survey of the use of secure accommodation in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was carried out to assess whether the issues were the same. A representative sample of agencies across England, Wales and Northern Ireland was devised, and telephone interviews carried out with managers of 6 secure units; 4 local authorities (including London where information was gathered from interviews with 30 boroughs); and 6 community-based agencies working with sexually exploited young people.
2. DfES (2004) *Children accommodated in secure children's homes (formerly Secure Units), year ending 31 March 2004: England and Wales* (London: DfES). Figures are rounded to the nearest 5.
3. Ibid. Statistics for the period 1994-2004, which relate to England only, show an increase in the use of secure care over the last 10 years also.