

The tangled web

How child sexual
exploitation is becoming
more complex

Believe in
children



Barnardo's



Foreword



In January 2011, I became Barnardo's Chief Executive and launched **Cut them free**, our campaign for urgent action to tackle child sexual exploitation.

We have seen some real changes since – at a national level and in local areas.

All four nations have seen greater central government commitment to tackling this abuse. More areas now know they need to protect children from this threat and do more to support those who are exploited.

But this progress is still too slow for the children who are being abused. For four years we have been surveying our sexual exploitation services. The 2011-12 survey shows that abusers are becoming more sophisticated in how they exploit children.

All forms of child sexual exploitation are appalling but we are very alarmed at the rise in the number of our service users reporting that they have been moved by abusers for sex. Such internal trafficking of children for sex is a sinister form of organized exploitation by networks.

Barnardo's has 24 child sexual exploitation services across the UK, and each time we open a new service it quickly becomes fully subscribed. But even we do not know the full extent of this hidden abuse as victims are still being overlooked or identified only after years of horrendous exploitation.

If we are to save children from suffering more must be done by the authorities to identify victims of child sexual exploitation who are being internally trafficked and to stop this activity earlier on. Local areas and police need to do all they can to identify, monitor and tackle child sexual exploitation and the threat of trafficking children for sex.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Anne Marie Carrie'.

Anne Marie Carrie
Chief Executive, Barnardo's

Introduction

Barnardo's has been tackling child sexual exploitation since 1994 when we opened a specialist service in Yorkshire and started to challenge the widespread perception of sexually exploited children as 'prostitutes'.

For most of the 18 years since, child sexual exploitation was still poorly understood by the public, practitioners and policy makers – victims were not seen as abused children and the issue was assumed to relate to very few young people. In launching Cut them free, Barnardo's showed that thousands of young people were sexually exploited. We alone worked with 1,098 sexually exploited young people and children in 2009-10, and we knew that professional awareness of the issue was still low among those who should have been protecting children from abuse.

There has since been significant progress in national and local action on this abuse, and we know that more victims are being identified and given some form of support.

But we also see how rapidly exploitation is changing. This report shows that abusers are exploiting children at younger ages and in more sophisticated ways, including moving children between areas for sex.

It sets out what must be done to protect all children more effectively and to make sure that those who exploit children for sex are identified and stopped. Local and national efforts to tackle the abuse are improving, but we know that further action is needed.

Key findings

Since 2008-09 we have conducted annual surveys of our sexual exploitation services.

In 2011-12, our 24 services reported that:

- **numbers of sexually exploited children** increased by 22 percent since 2010-11 to 1,452 and by 37 percent since 2008-09
- **26 percent** of sexually exploited children **had been moved for sex**
- **55 percent** of sexually exploited children **had gone missing**
- **younger children** are being exploited
- exploitation is **increasingly complex**
- the **internet** is used in most exploitation

1. Increasing evidence of exploitation

Barnardo's now has 24 sexual exploitation services across the UK, three more than in 2010-11. The number of young people and children using our services increased by 22 percent from 2010-11 to 2011-12 (1,190 to 1,452) – up by 37 percent since 2008-09.¹ So while our service provision has grown, our annual sexual exploitation service surveys show that there has been an even greater rise in the demand for our services.

We saw increases in all four nations of the UK (Table 1). The rise was most marked in Wales, where the government has done much to raise the profile of child sexual exploitation, local statutory agencies are proving better at identifying those at risk and our service has extended its reach. In each of the other nations the combination of policy attention to the issue, improved statutory responses and greater specialist provision also contributed to more victims being identified and referred to services.

	2011-12	2010-11	% change
England	1,185	996	19
N. Ireland	52	48	8
Scotland	132	124	6
Wales	83	22	377
Total	1,452	1,190	22

Table 1: Sexual exploitation service use is rising

The services survey reinforced evidence that going missing is a key risk indicator. The proportion of service users known to have gone missing has been high in each of our surveys and was 55 percent in 2011-12.

As in previous years, children in care were over-represented among our service users but the proportion had risen significantly from 14 percent in 2010-11 to almost 40 percent of service users currently in care. The additional vulnerability of children in care came to public and policy attention in 2012 following a major sexual exploitation court case. This may have helped staff to recognise the vulnerability of children in their care.

Three services had seen more referrals for boys and young men. As male victims are often overlooked, increased referrals are encouraging – but the picture is uneven. Overall, ten percent of our service users are male. The proportion is 20 percent in three services and 34 percent in a fourth.

However, in five services less than five percent of service users in 2010-11 were male, and four services had received no male referrals. The disparity between areas suggests that male victims are still not routinely identified and referred to us.

Overall our services saw more referrals for children and young people from black and minority ethnic communities. Children of any background can be at risk of sexual exploitation, but those from non-white backgrounds are often under identified as victims so this increase is encouraging – although the rise is still not widespread.

Services also saw an increase in younger children at high risk or already exploited. We saw this trend in 2009-10, but services noted it again as a major concern this year. The younger children are mostly 11 and 12 but we have worked with seven year olds. Among the young victims are 12 year olds who were taken to hotels to be abused and seven year olds who met their abuser after ‘making friends’ online. However, the use of the internet and the adoption of more covert strategies to conduct exploitation are not limited to the youngest victims.

2. Risk of exploitation more widespread

Our survey shows that internet use has broadened risk for all ages. Across the UK (in the Midlands, north east, Northern Ireland, south west, Scotland and Wales) services highlighted how children’s use of mobile phones, social networks and photo sharing are central to abusers’ contact, grooming and exploitation strategies. It is clear that children’s numbers and images (self-posted or shared by friends) are now routinely used by abusers to find, groom and exploit victims. Eleven services said the internet was implicated in almost every referral they had received in 2011-12.

Young people are sophisticatedly targeted by abusers online, groomed and persuaded to meet them. (Service manager)

Services also highlighted their concerns at how exploitative sexual relationships and behaviour are increasingly seen as ‘normal’ by many of the young people we support. One service manager explained that many of their service users were “facing sexual

exploitation in all aspects of their lives”, in their community, within friendship groups and online – and the comprehensive nature of the threat led them to view it as ‘normal’.

Five services (in London, the north west, the south east and Wales) identified peer-based exploitation as an increasing trend. Internet use facilitates abuse, especially via instant chat, social networking or ‘dating’ sites where photos and contacts are widely shared, often without permission. Peer led sexual bullying can prove influential in normalizing exploitative sexual behaviour.

Two services specified the role of ‘parties’ in persuading young people that what is actually sexual exploitation is common and an acceptable, exciting part of growing up. As one service manager explained “we hear of more parties where young people are expected to have sex with anyone there and sex with strangers is normalised”.

Although ‘parties’ are typically organised by adults, young people are often forced or compelled to bring peers to the event or bring friends hoping to protect themselves – so young people who are less vulnerable to sexual exploitation are abused if friends take them to such events.

3. Exploitation is more sophisticated

‘Parties’ which are used to commit abuse are a more organised form of exploitation. As a service manager noted “when older peers or adults invite children and young people to a house to ‘party’, no single relationship is formed but a network of abusers is created.”

Evidence of coordinated abuse by networks of perpetrators has been increasing since our first survey was conducted in 2009, but it appears to have become yet more prevalent within the last year. These abuse networks may be informal clusters of people linked through a set of victims or by some other association, or they may be more organised criminal groups or gangs.

Technology is widely used in organising both online and offline abuse. As a service manager explained, “children and young people are not only groomed through the use of technology but are also controlled and sold over the internet, with mobile phones being particularly used”. A service

highlighted a growing trend for victims to be taken to hotels with only online check-ins, so that perpetrators could avoid being observed by hotel staff. In 2011-12, seven of their service users disclosed having been (separately) taken to be abused in this way.

The survey revealed other trends towards more organised or sophisticated forms of sexual exploitation. Services noted that, in addition to the widespread use of drugs and alcohol to disorient and abuse victims, legal highs are increasingly being used. A service also outlined how abusers avoided suspicion by taking victims to be abused only for a short time, or during school hours or returning them home before they are considered to be missing. Some young people were recorded as having been paid to introduce abusers to their peers. There was also further evidence that abusers are travelling or moving victims for the abuse.

Some abusers have travelled from England to Northern Ireland to exploit the children and others planned to. (Service manager)

4. Marked rise in internal trafficking

The 2011-12 services survey shows a clear rise in both the numbers and proportions of service users who were moved for sexual exploitation (or ‘internally trafficked’). Our snapshot of service users supported in one month found that one in four were known to have been moved for sexual exploitation – a notable rise on the one in six who were known to have been moved in 2010-11.

The actual numbers of children who were moved rose even more dramatically, up by 84 percent from 76 to 140 children. In four services, two in every five young people were known to have been moved, and in two services, one in two young people had been moved.

Human trafficking involves the movement of a person between places to exploit them. Internal/domestic trafficking refers to the forced movement of people within the UK.

Children as young as 13 are arranging to visit ‘boyfriends’ or ‘friends’ all across the country ... One child is talking now about going abroad with her ‘boyfriend’ who is a convicted sex offender. (Service manager)

Internal trafficking for sexual exploitation is a crime. It occurs if children and young people under 18 are moved from one place to another to be sexually exploited. As the movement itself is criminal activity, it is a crime even if the child is not then abused.

Our services know of young people being moved between towns, from rural to urban areas and from one part of a town or city to another. Sexual exploitation victims may not see the movement as problematic, they may consider that it was their own choice to travel and indeed they will often make a journey unaccompanied. However, making an arrangement for a child to be moved for sexual exploitation is still a crime.

As those under 18 cannot consent to being moved, it is irrelevant whether deception or coercion has been used in moving them – the fact of the movement and the intent to abuse are sufficient for the crime to be proven. This is an important advantage in prosecutions as the child victim cannot be cross-examined about having ‘consented’.

5. More attention and action still needed

Barnardo's recognises the real effort being made by national governments and by local agencies to tackle sexual exploitation but it requires still more attention and action to prevent other children being exploited and support those already affected to recover.

Our Cut them free campaign calls on the UK Government, devolved administrations and authorities throughout the UK to do more to tackle child sexual exploitation.

The significant increase in the proportion of victims trafficked within the UK for sex makes tackling this form of exploitation a clear priority if we are to see a step change in how effectively this abuse is addressed.

Barnardo's is calling on local multi-agency bodies with responsibility for safeguarding children to monitor both the risk levels and the incidence of children being trafficked for sexual exploitation. Areas are only able to protect and support children properly if they understand what is happening locally. Our good practice briefing sets out ways in which areas can monitor the local picture.ⁱⁱ

Barnardo's is calling on police forces to use the full range of both law enforcement and disruption tactics to arrest and deter those involved in trafficking children for sex and other forms of sexual exploitation.

In England, we are calling the Department for Education and the Home Office to do more to deliver on the National Action Plan's commitment to tackling child sexual exploitationⁱⁱⁱ by ensuring that local areas monitor internal trafficking, and police are identifying, obstructing and preventing it.

In England and Wales, we are calling for Police and Crime Commissioners to tackle domestic trafficking of children for sexual exploitation, by ensuring that local police are fulfilling their responsibilities.

As trafficking can be conducted using taxi and train providers, hotels, cafes and other services, Barnardo's has produced a leaflet so staff in hospitality, leisure, tourism and transport can ‘spot the signs’ of trafficking for child sexual exploitation. The leaflet is available alongside spot the signs guidance for young people, parents/carers and staff who work with young people, online here: www.barnardos.org.uk/spotthesigns

Sam's story: Internal trafficking for sex

When I was 13 I was constantly missing – staying out and about. ... And I was getting involved with a gang who were making me sell drugs for them. The guy who ran the gang had sex with me. I thought it was a good thing because he told me I was safe in the gang now. I didn't want help because I was too scared to tell what was happening.

I know stuff happened that was bad but it's all really confusing. I remember having sex with all these different men [in different places]. I thought I deserved it – I didn't want it to happen but I couldn't say no.

Barnardo's got involved and the worker kept coming to find me round the city. ... Stuff didn't get better quickly but it did change slowly ... For the first time I started to understand what danger I was in, that I had been groomed, and got help working out how to get out safely. ... I got moved a lot but my Barnardo's worker stuck by me. I am now 17. I'm in my own supported flat, I'm back in education and in work. I still have some hard times but it's looking brighter.

6. Barnardo's campaign to Cut them free

Barnardo's has been tackling child sexual exploitation for almost two decades. At the time we opened our first service in 1994, a child abused in this terrible way would be widely viewed as a prostitute – even by the police, the law and in government policy.

It took many years to change this idea but from 2009 we saw governments across the UK recognising these children as victims of sexual exploitation. Many police forces and local authorities also showed greater understanding of child sexual exploitation – referring to it as abuse rather than child prostitution and considering how to react.

However, our experience of working with sexually exploited children across the UK made it clear that progress was still slow. Professionals often spoke of victims as if they had consented to the abuse. Positive steps in an agency or local authority were still exceptional rather than the standard. Few areas saw child sexual exploitation as a mainstream child protection issue.

So in January 2011 we launched Cut them free, our UK-wide campaign for a real step change in child sexual exploitation policy and practice.^{iv} We called for:

- **awareness-raising** among the public and professionals who protect children
- better **evidence** with local information sharing and national data gathering
- greater **support for victims** and more appropriate statutory responses
- improved **prosecution procedures** so victims are better supported throughout.

We have seen notable successes across the UK, including a lead Minister and National Action Plan in England, commitment from the Scottish Minister for Children and Young People to take action on this abuse, prioritization of child sexual exploitation by the Northern Irish Safeguarding Board and ongoing policy attention and improved risk assessment in Wales. We will maintain the momentum until we see a step change in how children are protected, victims are supported and prosecutions are conducted.

*The tangled web:
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ⁱ Barnardo's (2012) *Cutting them free: How is the UK progressing in protecting its children from sexual exploitation?* Barnardo's, Barkingside

ⁱⁱ Barnardo's/Local Government Association (2012) *Tackling child sexual exploitation: Helping local authorities to develop effective responses*. Barnardo's with the Local Government Association, Barkingside

ⁱⁱⁱ Department for Education (2011) *Tackling child sexual exploitation: Action plan*. London: Department for Education

^{iv} Barnardo's (2011) *Puppet on a string: The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation*. Barnardo's, Barkingside