



‘You can trust me...’

Young people going missing and at risk of,
or abused through, child sexual exploitation
in North Wales

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all participants from statutory and voluntary agencies who contributed to this research.

We would also like to thank the North Wales Safeguarding Children Board and North Wales Police for their support in facilitating the research.

Most of all we would like to thank the three young people who were prepared to talk to us about their experience of going missing and child sexual exploitation, and about the services they received.

The research was funded by Barnardo's and delivered in partnership with Glyndwr University.

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Introduction

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) has been a strategic priority, and a key area for practice development, for Barnardo's for over two decades. Within Wales, Barnardo's Cymru has worked closely with the Welsh Government since 2005 to support the development of robust policy and practice guidance to address CSE in Wales.

Established research and practice evidence demonstrates a strong correlation between children and young people going missing and risk of sexual exploitation.¹ Over the past few years, a series of high-profile prosecutions of cases of CSE have raised public awareness of this crime. Networks of perpetrators who had been abusing children and young people over many years were uncovered in Rotherham, Rochdale, Derby, Sheffield, Manchester and Oxford, leading to an increase in activity across all sectors to improve safeguarding and disrupt perpetrators.

This research aims to improve understanding of the nature of the relationship between going missing and CSE, and to improve responses to children and young people at risk. Although this issue has been considered at a UK level, very little research into children and young people who go missing and the link between going missing and risk of CSE has been undertaken in Wales. This research was carried out in North Wales but might usefully inform practice across Wales.

¹ Smeaton, E (2003) Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation. Barnardo's, Barking. <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/child-protection/child-sexual-exploitation/running-from-hate-to-what-you-think-is-love>



Summary of key findings and recommendations

Key findings: young people

Young people go missing for a number of interrelated reasons: to get away from conflict, because they feel emotionally isolated, because it is exciting, to spend time with other young people, or because of a relationship with an adult who is grooming or abusing them.

When young people go missing: they struggle to access money, food and somewhere safe to stay, they experience conflict with other young people and they are at risk of grooming, exploitation and sexual assault.

When young people return from a missing episode: they feel anxious about the responses of parents, carers and residential staff.

Young people are reluctant to disclose information following a missing episode: they worry that they will get other young people or adults into trouble if they disclose where they have been and who they have been with, they want to be able to return to the places and/or people they have been with in the future, and they are afraid of reprisals from perpetrators.

Young people can often be more reluctant to disclose information to the police: knowledge of the role of the police impacts on the way some young people respond to them. Young people do not always want to take responsibility for passing information directly to the police and sometimes prefer to pass this responsibility onto other professionals.

Key findings: professionals and practitioners

About practice

Awareness raising, prevention, identification and responses to CSE

- Practitioners and professionals who regularly work directly with children and young people at risk of or abused through CSE have a good awareness of the impact of CSE and are equipped to identify children and young people at risk.
- There have also been marked improvements in the ways in which practitioners and professionals from across the statutory sector perceive, understand and respond to the behaviour of young people with 'risky behaviour' and young people who have been or are being abused through CSE.
- More training is needed for practitioners and professionals working in education, health, youth work and the criminal justice system.
- There is still concern about the ways in which the grooming and abuse of older young people is perceived and understood, with abuse sometimes understood as a choice that older young people make.
- Some practitioners and professionals remain frustrated about the considerable challenge of getting children and young people to engage in safety plans, and this may suggest the need for additional support to develop professionals' skills.

- There is a need for more CSE awareness raising, information and advice targeted at children and young people through education and community settings, and for more information for parents and carers, to keep children and young people safe.

The North Wales police missing/CSE service

- Respondents highlighted the benefits of having designated workers with expertise in CSE and missing.
- The benefits of interviews being conducted by Seraf workers were identified, and Seraf workers gave examples of using information from the interviews to inform safeguarding responses.
- Practitioners see the 12-week programme as securing positive outcomes for those assessed as at mild or moderate risk of CSE, but some believe that young people at significant risk of or abused through CSE need a more intensive response.

The SERAF (Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework) assessment

- Overall, the SERAF assessment is viewed as an important tool to aid decisions in relation to children and young people at risk of CSE.
- Some professionals and practitioners think that a SERAF form should only be completed by a specialist worker or someone who has completed SERAF training. More guidance is needed on how to complete and process a SERAF form.

About placements in residential care in North Wales

- Children and young people in residential placements who are from outside North Wales, many of whom are placed by authorities in England, often arrive as an emergency placement and are moved to secure their immediate safety.
- There is significant concern about a lack of information, assessment and placement planning to adequately support the safety of children from outside North Wales in residential placements.
- There is concern about a lack of risk assessment in relation to young people who are already being actively groomed or abused being placed into residential provision with other vulnerable young people.
- There is concern that moving children and young people to another area to secure their immediate safety may put them at greater risk of going missing and/or abuse in the absence of an accompanying package of care and therapeutic intervention to reduce the risks of CSE and support recovery.
- There is evidence that practice is improving, as a result of multi-agency working and better communication and engagement with residential placement providers. Respondents identified the role of police missing coordinators in supporting these arrangements as key to sustaining progress.

About multi-agency strategy meetings and missing strategy meetings

- Some professionals identified clear benefits of multi-agency CSE strategy meetings, reporting good agency representation and clear outcomes in terms of responsibilities for each agency as part of a safety plan.
- Other professionals reported concerns about delays between identification of risk and the multi-agency CSE strategy meeting, poor attendance by some agencies and a lack of robust safety plans as an outcome of multi-agency meetings.
- Multi-agency strategy meetings have generated information that has been used to disrupt perpetrators and put wider safeguarding arrangements in place.
- Missing strategy meetings were identified as an effective means for sharing information and developing shared safeguarding responses.
- The time demands of multi-agency CSE strategy meetings and missing strategy meetings are considerable and are increasing as a result of better awareness and identification of children and young people at risk. This is being addressed in some areas by the establishment of CSE panels that meet on a regular basis.
- The three missing/CSE multi-agency strategic groups in the region are identified as effective in supporting information sharing and strategic and operational planning. Some professionals believe that these groups should be set up at the individual authority level and others identified the need for greater consistency of function and agenda across the three existing groups.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Information and guidance should be developed for parents, carers and residential staff on the best ways to respond to children and young people when they return from a missing episode.

Recommendation 2: A Welsh Government child sexual exploitation guide, developed with young people, to help children and young people stay safe and get help is already available.² Consideration should be given to the development of a similar guide to provide children and young people with information about the risks of going missing. This could include information on where to go for help and support with the things that may be making them think about going missing and during periods when they are missing.

Recommendation 3: Robust and sustained programmes of direct intervention and therapeutic support should be provided to children and young people at significant risk of or abused through CSE, as part of a care and support plan to secure their safety and recovery.

² Sexual Exploitation: Sex, Secrets and Lies – Your Guide (2013). Available at www.barnardos.org.uk/cse_booklet_sex_secrets_and_lies_-_english_version.pdf

Recommendation 4: Education on CSE, staying safe and healthy relationships should be available across education settings, as part of a prevention programme.

Recommendation 5: Resources, advice and support should be made available to better equip parents and carers to recognise risks and better protect children and young people from abuse through CSE.

Recommendation 6: Further training on CSE should be rolled out to professionals and practitioners who work with children and young people across all sectors, including education, health, youth work and the criminal justice system.

Recommendation 7: Guidance on the use of SERAF assessments should be shared with all practitioners and professionals working with vulnerable children and young people.

Recommendation 8: The Welsh Government should urgently review and strengthen the arrangements associated with the placement of children from outside North Wales with residential providers in the region.

Recommendation 9: Residential providers should be directly involved in multi-agency information sharing arrangements, safeguarding groups and systems.

Recommendation 10: Lessons from the effective use of multi-agency strategy meetings in some areas should be shared to inform a consistent approach across the region, so that meetings result in good information sharing and robust safety plans.

Recommendation 11: Further evidence on the use of CSE panels should be gathered to inform strategic discussions on whether there is a place for this approach across the region.

Recommendation 12: The potential of a consistent approach to the operation of the three existing CSE/missing strategic groups should be considered.





Section One: Background

Research approach

A mixed methodology approach was employed:

- Secondary data held by the service was analysed.
- Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 22 strategic personnel and practitioners across North Wales from social services, education, police, the third sector, youth justice/probation and residential care.
- A focus group was conducted with nine health personnel with responsibility for safeguarding.
- A survey of 41 professionals and practitioners from social services, education, health, police, the third sector, youth justice and residential care was carried out.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three young people at risk of or with experience of CSE and going missing in North Wales. Two of the young people had received support from Barnardo's Cymru Seraf practitioners as part of North Wales police missing service and one received support from other services in North Wales. Two of the young people were female and one was a male. They were all aged between 15 and 18.

See Appendix 1 for further detail about research design, methods and ethical issues.

Barnardo's and CSE

Child sexual exploitation is one of Barnardo's priority areas. We established the first of many specialist CSE services in Bradford in 1995 and carried out some of the first research and campaign work to improve responses to this form of abuse.

In 2005, building on ten years' practice and research at the UK level, Barnardo's Cymru undertook the first research into the nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation in Wales. This scoping study identified 184 cases of children and young people at risk of CSE.³

Between 2006 and 2008, Barnardo's Cymru developed and piloted the Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (SERAF). The framework assists professionals in identifying children and young people at risk of CSE, so that risk can be prevented and children and young people better protected. The pilot study identified 129 cases of children and young people as at significant risk of sexual exploitation, which represented 9% of a sample of 1,486 cases drawn from social services and youth offending teams across three local authorities.⁴ The Barnardo's Cymru Seraf service was established in 2006 to provide specialist support to children and young people at risk of or abused through CSE, and to provide multi-agency training and awareness raising for professionals.

³ Coles, J (2005) Out of sight, out of mind: Child sexual exploitation. Barnardo's Cymru, Cardiff.

⁴ Clutton, S and Coles, J (2008) Child Sexual Exploitation in Wales: 3 years on. Barnardo's Cymru, Cardiff.

Policy in Wales

The All Wales Protocol on child sexual exploitation was published by the All Child Wales Protection Procedures Review Group in 2008 (reviewed in 2013) and provides direction on safeguarding practice in relation to CSE.⁵ This was followed in 2011 by Welsh Government statutory guidance on safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation⁶, which replaced guidance covering England and Wales that had been in place since 2000. Child sexual exploitation is defined within the All Wales Protocol and Welsh Government statutory guidance:

‘Child sexual exploitation is the coercion or manipulation of children and young people into taking part in sexual activities. It is the form of sexual abuse involving an exchange of some form of payment which can include money, mobile phones and other items, drugs, alcohol, a place to stay, “protection” or affection. The vulnerability of the young person and grooming process employed by perpetrators renders them powerless to recognise the exploitative nature of the relationship and unable to give informed consent.’

The All Wales Child Protection Procedures also include direction through the All Wales Protocol for missing children (2011)⁷ and the All Wales Practice Guidance on child trafficking (2011)⁸.

There is no crime of child sexual exploitation as such. However ‘charges may be brought on a range of offences including: rape (s.1); sexual assault (s.2 and 3); rape and other sexual offences against children under 13 (s.5-8); meeting a child following sexual grooming (s.15); causing or inciting child prostitution or pornography (s.48); and trafficking within the UK for sexual exploitation (s.59A).’⁹ The crime of child trafficking, previously located in the *Sexual Offences Act 2003*, is now consolidated with other trafficking offences under the *Modern Slavery Act 2015*.

Key themes from existing research

There is a strong correlation between going missing and child sexual exploitation. Children and young people may be targeted by perpetrators while they are missing, may go missing while they are being groomed but before abuse has taken place, and may go missing for periods during which exploitation and abuse is taking place.¹⁰ Welsh-specific research on ‘running

5 All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group (2008, reviewed 2013) Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children who are at Risk of Abuse through Sexual Exploitation: All Wales Protocol.

6 Welsh Assembly Government (2011) Safeguarding Children and Young People from Sexual Exploitation – Supplementary guidance to Safeguarding Children: Working Together under The Children Act 2004.

7 All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group (2011) All Wales Protocol – Missing Children: Children who run away or go missing from home or care.

8 All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group (2011) All Wales Practice Guidance for Safeguarding Children Who May Have Been Trafficked.

9 Report of the Parliamentary inquiry into the effectiveness of legislation for tackling child sexual exploitation and trafficking within the UK (Chaired by Sarah Champion MP) (2014). Barnardo's, Barkingside.

10 Smeaton, E (2003) Running from hate to what you think is love: The relationship between running away and child sexual exploitation. Barnardo's, Barkingside.

away' was published in 2002 based on a survey of 1,706 young people aged 14–16.¹¹ It suggested an association between instability and harm that children might be running away from and exposure to harm during the periods in which they were missing.

Adolescents are the age group most likely to be reported as missing,¹² and adolescents are also at greatest risk of sexual exploitation.¹³ The increased risks of looked after children going missing are well established^{14 15}, and looked after children are over-represented among those children and young people assessed as at significant risk of CSE.

How the police-led missing/CSE service operates

The North Wales police missing/CSE service responds when children go missing from the North Wales police area. The service comprises of two missing co-ordinators, line managed by a police detective chief inspector from the Public Protection Unit, and three Barnardo's Seraf practitioners, managed by Barnardo's Cymru staff. There are three missing/CSE multi-agency strategic task groups in place, covering Gwynedd and Anglesey, Conwy and Denbighshire, and Wrexham and Flintshire.

All children and young people returning home from a missing episode receive a visit from the police, who carry out a 'safe and well' check. If a child or young person goes missing on three or more occasions, a missing strategy meeting will be called. Seraf practitioners carry out return home interviews with children and young people who are looked after and those who have already been identified as at risk of CSE. A CSE strategy meeting will be called in relation to a child or young person where further evidence of risk is identified.

The Seraf practitioners also deliver a 12-week risk awareness programme as part of this service. This is delivered on a one-to-one basis and young people are referred following a CSE strategy meeting.

The profile of young people affected

This research referred to data collected by the Seraf service in North Wales on young people going missing and at risk of, or abused through, child sexual exploitation. The data was collected between March 2010 and January 2015. North Wales police also provided a sample of redacted I-Trace data, which records data relating to young people going missing, from April 2014 to April 2015.

11 Wade, J; Mitchell, F; Rees, G (2002) Running away in Wales: patterns, needs and services. National Assembly for Wales.

12 Missing Persons: Data and Analysis 2011/12. Missing Person's Bureau.

13 Anson, E and Holmes, D (2014) That Difficult Age: Developing a more effective response to risk in adolescence. Research in Practice/ADCS, Dartington.

14 Cutting them free: How is the UK progressing in protecting its children from sexual exploitation? (2011). Barnardo's, Barking.

15 Beckett, H (2011) 'Not a world away': The sexual exploitation of children and young people in Northern Ireland. Barnardo's, Northern Ireland.

The data from the Seraf service shows that the young people assessed were, on average, aged between 14 and 16. The I-Trace data sample had a broader age range of 12 to 17. It showed that of those who had gone missing more than 12 times during the year, eight were female and two were male.

The levels of risk recorded by the Seraf service during this time were:

No risk	3%
Mild risk	6%
Moderate risk	11%
Significant risk	80%

The Seraf data also highlighted the most common features of a child or young person's experience that might make them vulnerable to CSE:

Lack of positive relationship with an adult	60%
Emotional neglect	63%
Low self esteem	74%
Breakdown of family relationships	86%

This evidence underlines how valuable it is for young people to have safe, consistent relationships with trusted adults. Young people become emotionally isolated and vulnerable when their relationships with caring and responsible adults weaken and break down. Despite adolescents' developmental drive for increased independence and separation from adults, it's important to notice and check up on young people who are becoming more remote from their caring networks.

Substance misuse, domestic violence and mental ill health are recognised as often being interlinked – the 'toxic trio'. Around half of the young people assessed had one or more of these elements in their family history:

The SERAF includes risk indicators to help assess whether a child or young person is at mild, moderate or significant risk of CSE. The following table shows the six most commonly registered moderate indicators and the four most commonly registered significant indicators:

Moderate risk indicators	
Use of the internet that causes concern	43%
Use of mobile phone that causes concern	46%
Alcohol misuse	50%
Exclusion/absence/not engaged in education	66%
Staying out late	75%
Expressions of despair/self harm/suicidal thoughts/actions	78%
Significant risk indicators	
Peers involved in clipping/sexual exploitation	30%
Disclosure of assault followed by withdrawal of allegation	31%
Relationship with controlling adult	54%
Periods of going missing overnight or longer	62%

The complex needs that are associated with young people who are vulnerable to CSE suggests they may be a 'hard to reach' group. To find potential service user participants for this research, the Barnardo's Cymru Seraf service and other services in North Wales were approached. The practitioners considered very few of the young people they worked with to be suitable participants, and some young people we did approach decided that they did not wish to take part in the research.

This research, therefore, includes evidence from in-depth interviews with just three young people. However, their accounts were rich and detailed, and strongly reflect what we know about the experiences of other young people supported through sexual exploitation work.



Section Two: What young people told us

About going missing

The young people we spoke to identified a number of ‘push’ factors in relation to going missing, such as problems with their families, friends or school. They also talked about ‘pull’ factors: some related to feeling happier away from the place they went missing from, some related to risk-taking behavior and some related to grooming.

‘Family problems like fighting with family and that, problems at home... just things like that really.’

‘I think they are running away to something happier because they might have family problems or school problems or friends that have abandoned them, they might have family problems and want to get away from home.’

‘I know how it feels, why people are running off and why they’ve got problems. If someone has got problems and they can’t cope and they don’t want to tell anyone, they run off or they take it out on themselves... some people think it will calm them down and all that and get rid of it.’

Others also referenced peer pressure as a factor.

‘When I’ve run off I’ve done it because I’ve followed people.’

‘...peer pressure because somebody might say, “So-and-so has done this and done that,”... and some people might go, “I’m going to do it because so-and-so has done it.”’

About the grooming process

One young person talked about the grooming process, describing how ‘some people can get really close to you and then they do something that they know that you like.’ They talked about becoming isolated from their family as part of the grooming process:

‘He was pushing me away from my family, telling me, “Trust me, I am always going to be here for you. And I’m not going to hurt you, I’m never going to leave, you can trust me.”’

This young person also described changes in their own behaviour and their relationship with their family as a result of the grooming process:

‘I did change quite a lot... I was a lot grumpier, I grew apart from my family and would hardly be downstairs.’

About what happened while they were missing

The young people spoke about basic survival issues, such as finding something to eat and somewhere to sleep, and also about personal safety issues.

‘Sometimes you don’t think about everything, you might not think about all the money you need... where you are going to stay, how you are going to get money, how you are going to get food.’

One young person talked about visiting family and friends, who provided food and shelter, and also about going missing with other young people and taking them to places to stay.

‘I was staying in mates and families’ houses where you know they are not going to check... every time I’ve run off I always had somewhere to go because I’ve lived in a lot of areas and I know quite a few people so I know where to run to... I have gone once or twice by myself but the rest was with other kids.’

They also identified the risks of offending while missing to get money for food or drugs, and the possibility of getting arrested. Another issue identified was conflict during periods of missing with young people ‘always arguing, getting hit and things like that’.

The young people also talked about the way adults target, groom and exert control over them:

‘...trusting people, because they might be like, “Oh I can help you,” and then that can go bad and [you] can end up being abused and assaulted and raped and all that.’

‘The way that they do it is clever but it’s not... by offering you to go to a party and that and then they get you drunk and they tell you to have some of this and weed and that... and some men can be really nice, offer them food money and a place to stay, and they start getting aggressive and saying that you have got to pay for what you owe me, so they tell them to sleep with their mates, and it’s just grim.’

‘...sexual abuse, getting battered, seeing men trying to get you to sleep with another person just for money... getting you into drugs.’

About returning home

The young people talked about their anxieties about returning home, whether to their families or a residential placement:

‘I thought about what happens if I went back, would they be really annoyed at me, would I be grounded for life? Would I ever be let out of the house... and they might not believe me?’

‘Sometimes they could be fine with you and other times you would get a bollocking, depends on what reason it is that you tell them, they will probably try and sort it out... if there is no reason they would be like, “Why have you done it? For no reason?”... some staff are on for two days and have to stay awake looking for you and they get a bit stressed, they don’t need it do they... they have been awake for god knows how long and have tried to search for you, they get a bit naggy.’

Fear of reprisals from the perpetrator was also an issue in relation to returning:

‘I was scared that if the person found out that he was going to kick off or that something bad might happen.’

Fears about how they might be perceived by adults on their return was also an issue:

‘I was scared if I said that we did stuff they would say I was a stupid girl.’

About the return home process

The young people told us that they were sometimes reluctant to share fully in ‘safe and well’ checks because of the possibility of going missing again in the future or because of fears about getting others into trouble.

‘Police ask you where you’ve been but you don’t tell them so you can go back there next time.’

‘...because they will get other people into trouble and they will find out.’

The young people also spoke about the style of safe and well checks interviews:

‘The police, they will question you and question you, why did you do this, why did you do that?’

‘They would want to find out more information, so they would try and do anything to try and get you to trust them... Sometimes, if they think they are not going to get the answer to a question that they need, they will change the question to make it look like it’s a different one.’

One young person suggested that an opportunity to talk about what had happened at a later point would be helpful.

‘I couldn’t remember a lot of things and then I wished they had left it a month or a week because then I would have remembered... I did ask, “Can you ask me a few days later,” and they said, “Well some people forget,” and I was like, “Yes but most people will remember what else happened.” Because you are still in shock, you are trying to remember everything.’

Young people described feeling more comfortable disclosing information to Barnardo’s Seraf workers: ‘You could just talk about anything to [name]’. One young person said that giving the Barnardo’s worker information that they would have to pass on to the police meant they didn’t have to take responsibility for telling the police themselves.

‘...because if they are in danger they [Seraf workers] have to tell their work people, their bosses, they should tell the police.’

Recommendation 1: Information and guidance should be developed for parents, carers and residential staff on the best ways to respond to children and young people when they return from a missing episode.

About preventing young people from going missing

The young people said that having support services available, knowing how to access them and making contact with services was a key issue 'so they can talk to people and try and get advice'.

They also talked about the credibility of young people as peer educators and of the advice they would offer children and young people in similar situations:

'Some kids don't like speaking about problems... but after a while you need to speak to someone, otherwise you are going to run.'

'Don't run away... if there is arguments in the house or something, just go for a walk and go back and calm down, don't run off or anything.'

'If somebody is telling you that you can only trust them, that I will always be there for you... You need to talk to somebody fast, if you feel like you can only talk to that one person and only trust that one person then it's going to be really hard for you and you have to break it off.'

Recommendation 3: A Welsh Government child sexual exploitation guide, developed with young people, to help children and young people stay safe and get help is already available.¹⁶ Consideration should be given to the development of a similar guide to provide children and young people with information about the risks of going missing. This could include information on where to go for help and support with the things that may be making them think about going missing and during periods when they are missing.

About the experience of getting support

Two of the respondents had completed the 12-week risk awareness programme with the Barnardo's Seraf workers and were positive about the quality of the relationship they had with workers, the advice and information they got, the intervention process and feeling listened to.

'Someone to talk to, as much as my parents say, "You can talk to us about it," you really can't... it's nice to have a stranger that... has had experience.'

'[Name] has always told me that if you want to talk about it and you get upset a lot you can always phone up Barnardo's or phone up Childline or something like that... which I kind of like because I am going to miss this. But... I am glad that it is over... Because I am now sorted and that is closure for me... if I need any help I can always just phone up someone else.'

¹⁶ Sexual Exploitation: Sex, Secrets and Lies – Your Guide (2013). Available at www.barnardos.org.uk/cse_booklet_sex_secrets_and_lies_-_english_version.pdf

Recommendation 4: Robust and sustained programmes of direct intervention and therapeutic support should be provided to children and young people at significant risk of or abused through CSE, as part of a care and support plan to secure their safety and recovery.

Key findings: young people

- **Young people go missing for a number of interrelated reasons:** to get away from conflict, because they feel emotionally isolated, because it is exciting, to spend time with other young people, or because of a relationship with an adult who is grooming or abusing them.
- **When young people go missing:** they struggle to access money, food and somewhere safe to stay, they experience conflict with other young people and they are at risk of grooming, exploitation and sexual assault.
- **When young people return from a missing episode:** they feel anxious about the responses of parents, carers and residential staff.
- **Young people are reluctant to disclose information following a missing episode:** they worry that they will get other young people or adults into trouble if they disclose where they have been and who they have been with, they want to be able to return to the places and/or people they have been with in the future, and they are afraid of reprisals from perpetrators.
- **Young people can often be more reluctant to disclose information to the police:** knowledge of the role of the police impacts on the way some young people respond to them. Young people do not always want to take responsibility for passing information directly to the police and sometimes prefer to pass this responsibility onto other professionals.



Section Three:

What Professionals and Practitioners told us

About practice

Awareness raising and prevention

Professionals and practitioners acknowledged that awareness of CSE and the link between going missing and the risk of CSE among key agencies working with vulnerable children and young people has improved significantly. However, they also identified a need to extend awareness raising and training for children and young people, parents and carers and practitioners and professionals working outside social services.

Education on healthy relationships, recognising risks and the grooming process was identified as an important area for development, and respondents felt that this work should begin in primary school, with content adapted to be age appropriate:

‘There is no point in waiting until someone becomes vulnerable – we need to be educating them before they get to that point.’

Respondents also identified the need for advice and support for parents and carers, and reported a lack of resources to equip parents and carers to understand risks and keep their children safe.

Recommendation 5: Education on CSE, staying safe and healthy relationships should be available across education settings, as part of a prevention programme.

Recommendation 6: Resources, advice and support should be made available to better equip parents and carers to recognise risks and better protect children and young people from abuse through CSE.

Identification and response to CSE

Professionals highlighted an increase in the number of young people identified as at risk of/victims of CSE in recent years, with a corresponding increase in CSE strategy meetings. Some professionals perceived this as evidence of an increase in this form of abuse, while others acknowledged that increased awareness was leading to better identification.

‘In the past I have sat at meetings where [organisation] have said, “These children, they are voting with their feet, we can’t do anything,” but I’m not hearing that now... I think CSE has been so much to the fore people are realising that, yes, actually there is something more to this.’

‘Looking back now you could always see these things were going on, but

you didn't actually see them as CSE necessarily... it was treated as individual incidents of what the missing episodes were or what the offences were, but it certainly wasn't looked at as it is now.... there has just been a massive, massive drive on making people aware of what it is and what we need to do about it.'

However, professionals also identified the need to understand more about the way in which child sexual exploitation operates and a need for further awareness raising and training.

'We are nowhere near understanding it fully.'

'I think it's very much tip of the iceberg stuff – it's very much a hidden crime.'

Respondents felt that not all organisations and practitioners had a working understanding of CSE and missing:

'I don't think it probably is enough on people's radar – everybody has a different remit as well, and it's really difficult because I guess I would like to be saying, "Anyone who works with children should be looking for this."

Some respondents highlighted a concerning perception among some practitioners that older young people involved in CSE were making their own choices:

'It's not about someone making a choice to have sex with someone when they are a child or even when they are a vulnerable adult... we have to recognise that they haven't got the capacity to make that choice.'

'It's people identifying it to be what it is and not, "She is a 17 year old, she is a naughty girl, she is making decisions," because we know actually that is not the case.'

Professionals and practitioners identified the need for training for staff in mainstream services, to support the identification of and appropriate responses to risk of CSE, with education and health roles most commonly cited. Specifically, they recognised the need for training for those working in both primary and secondary schools, pupil referral units and EOTAS (Education Other Than At School) and those in CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), sexual health clinics, accident and emergency, GP surgeries and for school nurses. Youth workers, youth offending teams and staff in secure units were also identified as groups that would benefit from training.

Professionals saw young people missing from home as being most at risk of CSE:

'Missing is the most significant risk indicator for CSE and they are away from the protective factors once they are missing... the associations they then make with people, they are then exposed to drugs, alcohol, registered sex offenders or just unsavoury characters... it's very concerning.'

Respondents identified the relationship between difficult or traumatic early childhood experiences, limited parenting capacity and vulnerability to CSE. Looked after children were perceived by some respondents to be 'almost

vulnerable by definition' because of the experiences that brought them into care in the first place. Professionals felt that these vulnerabilities were a focus of perpetrator targeting:

'Perpetrators deliberately look for certain groups of young people that fit within that vulnerable category that look like they are going to be easy to groom and basically hook in.'

Poor educational engagement and experiences of bullying and of not feeling part of the school community were also identified as vulnerabilities and as common experiences for young people at risk of abuse:

'The children that don't go to school all the time, who don't necessarily have a lot to do with them, we need to get better at dealing with, and in there that's another key factor.'

'It's the ones that don't go very often, [who are] truanting... I really think we need to work on getting that awareness going with schools.'

Respondents also identified the need to consider links between non-attendance and potential safeguarding issues.

'The focus... [is] very much around the attendance of children rather than the safeguarding functionality.'

Many social care professionals talked about the need for vigilance in relation to the indicators of CSE and missing, particularly for very vulnerable young people who may be described as 'difficult to engage'.

'These young people, sadly, as much as we try and target them don't necessarily see themselves as victims and don't want to engage with us so that's been a challenge... I think other authorities in the past, and we have been the same, would have closed cases on that basis... we don't do that easily anymore.'

Other practitioners described the ways in which young people exhibited behaviour that put them at risk or was associated with the impact of their experiences of abuse:

'They do lose that emotional warmth... they don't like to make that contact [with practitioner] because they know they will have to detach. [They have] a detached level of contact for money with somebody else and they start using that technique more and more – detach and block, rather than acknowledge the world that is going on around them.'

'We get quite a lot coming into the hospitals that are picked up by the police and they have taken drugs or alcohol, they self harm – often they are involved with CAMHS as well as missing from home.'

Professionals described the young people at risk of or abused through CSE as the 'most disadvantaged and damaged', with low self-worth and an absence of nurturing relationships in their lives. Limited parenting capacity in some families

was identified as a factor putting young people at greater risk, with incidents, for example, of families failing to report 13 year olds as missing overnight.

‘I think the parents are quite vulnerable sometimes themselves... and they don’t have the strength or the insight or the emotional intelligence to parent those children, and so for that reason if a child is a 16 year old and he is playing up and he is staying out at night, I have sat at meetings where [it was asked], “Why didn’t you ring the police?” and they have said, “Well we thought he would come back.”’

Professionals were also concerned about the response to vulnerable young people once they turned 18, who are not covered by child protection legislation.

Recommendation 7: Further training on CSE should be rolled out to professionals and practitioners who work with children and young people across all sectors, including education, health, youth work and the criminal justice system.

The North Wales police missing/CSE service

The benefits of having designated workers with expertise in CSE and missing were highlighted by a number of respondents:

‘It has had a huge positive impact... their function is pivotal.’

‘That role for me is critical, absolutely critical... without that role I think the gaps would be huge.’

Respondents highlighted the service as an important source of information, advice and guidance to support responses to children and young people at risk of and abused through CSE. Residential childcare providers reported that the processes for information sharing and case management were better supported through the provision of the service:

‘Having [the missing co-ordinators] serves an incredibly useful purpose, not just to the young people ultimately, but people like me who come in and aren’t familiar with the system or need that contact to say, “This is going on, who do I talk to now, what is my process now?”’

A number of practitioners highlighted the value of being able to link with the Seraf workers:

‘Having [name] in the PPU [Public Protection Unit] as a Seraf worker... you have got someone at hand that can do the work, who can support and advise.’

Respondents also identified the benefits of having a resource that could respond to missing children and young people through return home interviews and associated this process with more robust responses to risk of CSE. In particular, the benefits of interviews being conducted by Seraf workers were identified:

‘There is a barrier with us [Seraf]... and they [the police] haven’t got the skill base as much as Barnardo’s workers to deal with it.’

Seraf workers themselves reported that young people can be less reluctant about disclosing information to them:

‘[The report] says, “Will not tell police where they have been,” and we go out and they will speak about it and they will tell me straight away. And they say that they don’t like talking to the police... I just think it’s because we are not the police maybe.’

However, they also reported that some young people remain reluctant to disclose, and this was perceived to be the result of information sharing between agencies to safeguard young people:

‘A couple of us have had... “I’m not telling you his name because I know you will give it back to the police,” so we have had that, but they engage and they talk and they tell us where they have been, just won’t give the vital [information].’

‘Some of them are quite happy to sit and talk about where they have been [and] who they are with, some of them are quite wise and say, “I am not going to give you any names,” when you ask them who they have been with, some of them just don’t really want to talk at all, particularly, I have found, if they are older and if they are more entrenched in CSE.’

Practitioners were able to give examples of the ways in which the information they got from young people could be used to inform safeguarding responses:

‘We would never have had that information otherwise at all... It’s for development and safeguarding... it might identify hot spots that we can target or a particular person that we need to target and disrupt, we have had loads come back from it – it’s been really, really positive.’

Practitioners also said that it was important that police officers who conduct the ‘safe and well checks’ on children who have returned from being missing but are not looked after or already identified as at risk of CSE are equipped to ‘ask the right questions’.

As part of the North Wales police missing/CSE service, some young people are referred to a 12-week intervention programme delivered by Seraf workers. The intervention aims to reduce the number of missing episodes and is a targeted response to children and young people assessed as at mild or moderate risk of CSE through a SERAF assessment. The programme involves working with young people to improve their understanding of safe, healthy and appropriate relationships, keeping safe and recognising the signs of grooming and CSE.

Seraf practitioners reported that the intervention gets some positive results with young people assessed as at mild or moderate risk of CSE, including reductions in the number of missing episodes, positive engagement and further disclosure of intelligence. However, respondents also raised concerns about

the suitability of a 12-week intervention as a response to young people at significant risk of or abused through CSE, who need a more intensive response:

‘Twelve weeks with a young person who has experienced two years of being exploited... you are not even going to scratch the surface. I would argue that you would need a minimum of 12 months to even start addressing the issues for that young person.’

‘A lot of those 12 weeks will be just about building a relationship, so how much work can you do in 12 weeks? You can maybe... give them some strategies and tools or techniques... but it depends how vulnerable that young person is... if they have had experiences and difficulties then you are talking about long-term therapy really... to try and change the mind-set of a young person.’

There were also concerns about ongoing, managed support at the end of the 12-week intervention and about lack of capacity as more children and young people at risk are identified:

‘There is only so much that [the Seraf practitioner] can do ... she is available to do specific pieces of work for up to 12 weeks... that’s not going to target everybody is it? There is going to come a point where she is going to have a waiting list. So I do think that more specialist workers like that would be needed definitely.’

The SERAF assessment process

A SERAF (Sexual Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework) assessment is undertaken when there is concern that a child or young person may be at risk of CSE, in line with guidance under the All Wales Protocol for Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children who are at Risk of Abuse through Sexual Exploitation. A SERAF form is completed to capture information about a child or young person in one place. The SERAF form includes information on vulnerabilities and risks related to risk of CSE, which are weighted to generate a score that provides an indication of whether CSE may be an issue to be considered in relation to the child or young person.

The SERAF was developed by Barnardo’s Cymru and was designed to be used by practitioners and professionals in relation to children and young people they hold information about or work with. Some respondents, however, thought a SERAF assessment should be completed by a member of Barnardo’s staff or a professional who has received SERAF training:

‘It needs to be a skilled person undertaking it because if somebody hasn’t had the training... they won’t explore that [CSE] with the young person... I think with Barnardo’s, they have got such a vast amount of experience and they know the issues, and they understand them much better.’

Overall, most respondents perceived the SERAF assessment as an important tool to aid discussion in relation to children and young people and risk of CSE:

‘We had a joint strategy meeting about those [group of young people] and the SERAFs – we completed them almost as a huge group of people... So we did the SERAF, we brought them all back together and we discussed the plan of who was doing what and how we were going to deal with it... this is where I think SERAF stopped being just a document.’

While, for the most part, professionals valued the SERAF, some made suggestions about better directions for practitioners and professionals on completing a SERAF form and about the process through which a SERAF form is shared:

‘What would be helpful... would be to have two pages that show... a sample copy of a filled-out [SERAF] form, anonymised obviously, but this is the level of details that we are looking for, and the quality of information, these are the people that it now needs to go to, this is who will be in your meeting, this is who chairs, this is who does the minutes, this is when the minutes come back to you, etc... user friendly, two pages.’

Recommendation 8: Guidance on the use of SERAF assessments should be shared with all practitioners and professionals working with vulnerable children and young people.

Key findings: professionals and practitioners

About practice

Awareness raising, prevention, identification and responses to CSE

- Practitioners and professionals who regularly work directly with children and young people at risk of or abused through CSE have a good awareness of the impact of CSE and are equipped to identify children and young people at risk.
- There have also been marked improvements in the ways in which practitioners and professionals from across the statutory sector perceive, understand and respond to the behaviour of young people with ‘risky behaviour’ and young people who have been or are being abused through CSE.
- More training is needed for practitioners and professionals working in education, health, youth work and the criminal justice system.
- There is still concern about the ways in which the grooming and abuse of older young people is perceived and understood, with abuse sometimes understood as a choice that older young people make.
- Some practitioners and professionals remain frustrated about the considerable challenge of getting children and young people to engage in safety plans, and this may suggest the need for additional support to develop professionals’ skills.

- There is a need for more CSE awareness raising, information and advice targeted at children and young people through education and community settings, and for more information for parents and carers, to keep children and young people safe.

The North Wales police missing/CSE service

- Respondents highlighted the benefits of having designated workers with expertise in CSE and missing.
- The benefits of interviews being conducted by Seraf workers were identified, and Seraf workers gave examples of using information from the interviews to inform safeguarding responses.
- Practitioners see the 12-week programme as securing positive outcomes for those assessed as at mild or moderate risk of CSE, but some believe that young people at significant risk of or abused through CSE need a more intensive response.

The SERAF assessment

- Overall, the SERAF assessment is viewed as an important tool to aid decisions in relation to children and young people at risk of CSE.
- Some professionals and practitioners think that a SERAF form should only be completed by a specialist worker or someone who has completed SERAF training. More guidance is needed on how to complete and process a SERAF form.

About placements in private residential care in North Wales

Children and young people from English local authorities may be placed in residential care in North Wales. Young people in this situation who come into contact with the North Wales police missing/CSE service have often been placed in North Wales on an emergency basis, because of serious concerns about episodes of going missing and CSE. Authorities have sought to make them 'safe' by moving them physically away from perpetrators.

The Welsh Government has raised concerns in relation to the placement of children by English authorities that ['lack effective planning and information sharing to determine the availability of local education, health, social and other services to meet the child's needs.'](#)¹⁷

Respondents to this research also expressed significant concern that placements, in particular emergency placements, for children and young people from outside North Wales were not sufficiently planned. Notifications and consultations affecting any out-of-county placement must be carried out within

¹⁷ The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations – Volume 2: care planning, placement and case reviews (2015).

five working days of an emergency placement.¹⁸ However, this research found that relevant information may be delayed and that placement planning around the long-term safeguarding of children and young people is not robust enough.

‘It becomes all about emergency placement, which in itself is an issue, because when you take an emergency placement you find you are never in receipt of a case history... no impact assessment will have been done and it should be.’

‘It’s very difficult when children come from other local authorities, it’s very, very difficult to get a chronology from children’s services, so eventually, when I got that, I could see that there were suspicions in previous local authorities of sexual exploitation but not a lot of digging really had been done.’

Some respondents also suggested that placing local authorities sometimes didn’t have a clear understanding of the area they were placing the child into.

‘A lot of the local authorities placing into this area... they think, “Oh North Wales... it’s in the sticks,” and the amount of strategy meetings that I have sat through and you get that attitude from local authorities. I think, “Do you realise you have got Liverpool on our doorstep, we have got the second busiest port in the UK in Holyhead, with easy rail links,”... so there is a naivety from these bigger local authorities.’

Respondents reported particular difficulties associated with the placement of children and young people abused through CSE from England:

‘There is obviously a recognition of the link between children who go missing and CSE, and a lot of the children who are placed here come here with history of CSE from their placement authorities, often in England.’

Professionals reported that moving a child or young person in this way did little to secure their safety:

‘Out of sight out of mind’, and that was exactly what was playing out, and yet the young person is still being abused, the young person is still suffering from being exploited, so nothing has changed by placing them out of county, and I think this is one of the things that, in reality, probably needs to be addressed on a national level... regardless of where you put the child, you need to address the root cause, you can’t just move them from one place to the other hoping that that will sort the problem out.’

Far from keeping them safe, a placement away from known networks can put young people at additional risk:

‘The young person then seeks relationships outside of the placement and that then means that they become hyper vigilant to people in the community around them... unless that hyper vigilance is mirrored by the staff and the placement then you have got a big problem, and I have seen that play out so

¹⁸ The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations – Volume 2: care planning, placement and case reviews (2015).

many times with young people that are placed into this area from out of county, they gravitate towards the people that they shouldn't be gravitating towards.'

Inevitably, children in residential care are brought into contact with others who have similar vulnerabilities and difficulties.

'You have got lots of vulnerable people together, and they are all going missing together. So to give you an example, the last week, three homes that are sort of linked up, one person has met with the others and for the last three consecutive nights we have had four missing people.'

Professionals and practitioners working in and outside residential care also identified issues with the ways in which residential placements are managed:

'One of the things that I am trying to address with children's homes is actually that when there is a need to escalate, whether or not a placement is appropriate, they really need to engage.'

'We also consider that we have a duty of care to our current residents and I think historically we have perhaps failed in that area and perhaps just took what came along... sometimes there is a lot more strength in recognising you are unable to assist a young person.'

The evidence gathered for this research suggests the need for improved information sharing, stronger coordination of assessments and better placement planning for children and young people where CSE risk is indicated who are placed out of their local authority area.

'I would argue when you have got some of these prolific CSE cases coming through there needs to be a whole package of support in place for that young person, we are talking therapy, therapeutic practice models within the homes, proper strategies... for how are you actually going to move that young person forward from what they have experienced, break the ties and the cycle and actually then [make] the pathway plan beyond? Often none of that is thought through because the immediate focus is on "we have space", the local authority needs them out of county because the risks are immediate to them there.'

Unless placement planning and an adequate package of support is put in place in relation to young people who are moved away from their home authorities, good outcomes and safety for these young people will not be secured.

Professionals did identify that practice was improving in some areas as a result of multi-agency working. Missing co-ordinators were engaging positively with residential providers to support better safeguarding arrangements and information sharing in relation to the suitability of placements, for example. However, it was acknowledged that investment in sustaining positive links between agencies was key to securing change. There is a need for stronger arrangements for including residential placement providers in multi-agency

strategic forums that relate to children and young people at risk of and abused through CSE and to missing children.

Recommendation 9: The Welsh Government should urgently review and strengthen the arrangements associated with the placement of children from outside North Wales with residential providers in the region.

Recommendation 10: Residential providers should be directly involved in multi-agency information sharing arrangements, safeguarding groups and systems.

Key findings: professionals and practitioners

About placements in residential care in North Wales

- Children and young people in residential placements who are from outside North Wales, many of whom are placed by authorities in England, often arrive as an emergency placement and are moved to secure their immediate safety.
- There is significant concern about a lack of information, assessment and placement planning to adequately support the safety of children from outside North Wales in residential placements.
- There is concern about a lack of risk assessment in relation to young people who are already being actively groomed or abused being placed into residential provision with other vulnerable young people.
- There is concern that moving children and young people to another area to secure their immediate safety may put them at greater risk of going missing and/or abuse in the absence of an accompanying package of care and therapeutic intervention to reduce the risks of CSE and support recovery.
- There is evidence that practice is improving, as a result of multi-agency working and better communication and engagement with residential placement providers. Respondents identified the role of police missing co-ordinators in supporting these arrangements as key to sustaining progress.

About multi-agency working

Multi-agency CSE strategy meetings and missing strategy meetings

One respondent reported that SERAF forms are not routinely shared with all professionals attending a CSE strategy meeting held under the All Wales Protocol and in line with Welsh Government statutory guidance.¹⁹ Instead, the outcomes of the SERAF assessment, in terms of a score and associated category of risk, are shared, rather than the completed SERAF form itself.

Some professionals identified the benefits of multi-agency CSE strategy meetings and reported that meetings were carried out to appropriate timescales, with good attendance and responses from key agencies:

‘I have never seen any gaps in relation to meeting those requirements and people fulfilling their roles and responsibilities... I think they are a quite a thorough and robust process of support to young people.. I think the work as well is quite detailed, I think it’s thorough, I think it’s specific to the key issues from the assessment itself, because what we need to focus on is what are the real risks to this child, and we need to focus on reducing those risks in a reasonable and short timescale as well... and I think there is evidence of that happening.’

However, other respondents reported concerns in relation to the need for more efficient responses to concerns identified through the completion of a SERAF form and the need to ensure that the strategy meeting process results in an effective safety plan for individual children and young people:

‘I’m not sure what happens after them, sometimes there is little effectiveness after the SERAF meeting [and] I think that would be one of my big queries, what effectively changes for that young person?... who takes responsibility?... I think that needs a bit more clarity.’

There were some concerns around some agencies’ representation at multi-agency CSE strategy meetings.

The missing strategy meetings were also identified as an effective means of discussing individual cases and gathering information on young people who might otherwise not be identified as needing a multi-agency response, even if they are already known to social services:

‘I think the missing person strategy meetings are essential because... [If] there is a strategy meeting between social services and the police then the specific issue generally will get discussed.’

¹⁹ All Wales Child Protection Procedures Review Group (2008, reviewed 2013) Safeguarding and Promoting the Welfare of Children who are at Risk of Abuse through Sexual Exploitation: All Wales Protocol.

Multi-agency strategy meetings were seen as crucial in developing robust safeguarding responses, as where information is shared a safety plan can be developed between agencies.

However, there was concern about capacity to attend multi-agency strategy meetings, with examples given of the same representatives being called to a CSE strategy meeting and a missing strategy meeting:

'I am booking a missing persons meeting and a SERAF strategy meeting and both have cross overs in that... for the most part, attendance will be the same... in some ways it's heartening because you have got a good eye on the case and you have got lots of professionals involved on one level, on another level it is quite frustrating that there are two processes going on which involve essentially the same information.'

One of the ways in which the demands on staff capacity to attend multi-agency meetings are being addressed is through the development of CSE panels, drawing on practice from elsewhere in the UK.

'More and more of [the CSE strategy meetings] were getting generated and it was getting more and more difficult to actually attend those meetings... so... a CSE panel [has been set up] to do the SERAF strategy meetings... [Local authority] have decided that they will do it once a month... So the strategy discussions will take place to make sure that any immediate action is taken and then that case will be taken to the panel and reviewed once a month. This morning I have been in [local authority] and they have decided that they are going to do it every fortnight.'

Recommendation 11: Lessons from the effective use of multi-agency strategy meetings in some areas should be shared to inform a consistent approach across the region, so that meetings result in good information sharing and robust safety plans.

Recommendation 12: Further evidence on the use of CSE panels should be gathered to inform strategic discussions on whether there is a place for this approach across the region.

Missing/CSE multi-agency strategic groups

There are three missing/CSE multi-agency strategic task groups in place, covering Gwynedd and Anglesey, Conwy and Denbighshire and Wrexham and Flintshire. Respondents viewed these forums as an important way of working together:

'I think it's a very effective group because... it's a good information sharing process, but it's planning, so there is a delivery there in terms of providing services to the most vulnerable young people in the county.'

Respondents gave examples of how multi-agency information sharing had supported actions against perpetrators:

‘We just ‘board blasted’ who the young person associated with, where they were found and where they went, and then we realised very quickly that in the middle of all this spider’s web that started to come out of that, there were a number of people, a number of addresses, that came across loud and clear... we were able to track the fact that these young females were going to these properties and were staying there and that resulted in a policing operation where all the males were arrested, their computers were seized etc.’

However, some respondents felt that groups needed to consider issues at a single local authority level, while others identified the need for a more consistent approach, with a shared focus and strategic process in place across North Wales.

Respondents also identified the potential to secure evidence through multi-agency group processes to inform the development of strategic, as well as operational, responses to missing children and young people and those at risk of CSE:

‘I would like to think that when a group is well established and we had some statistical data, or evidence, to support our views, we could challenge processes or practices or even legislation if necessary... I would like to think that the panel would... not just improve operational practices and... outcomes for young people, but give us some data and evidence to challenge appropriately.’

Recommendation 13: The potential of a consistent approach to the operation of the three existing CSE/missing strategic groups should be considered.

Key findings: professionals and practitioners

About multi-agency strategy meetings and missing strategy meetings

- Some professionals identified clear benefits of multi-agency CSE strategy meetings, reporting good agency representation and clear outcomes in terms of responsibilities for each agency as part of a safety plan.
- Other professionals reported concerns about delays between identification of risk and the multi-agency CSE strategy meeting, poor attendance by some agencies and a lack of robust safety plans as an outcome of multi-agency meetings.
- Multi-agency strategy meetings have generated information that has been used to disrupt perpetrators and put wider safeguarding arrangements in place.
- Missing strategy meetings were identified as an effective means for sharing information and developing shared safeguarding responses.
- The time demands of multi-agency CSE strategy meetings and missing

strategy meetings are considerable and are increasing as a result of better awareness and identification of children and young people at risk. This is being addressed in some areas by the establishment of CSE panels that meet on a regular basis, and respondents viewed this as an effective response.

- The three missing/CSE multi-agency strategic groups in the region are identified as effective in supporting information sharing and strategic and operational planning. Some professionals believe that these groups should be set up at the individual authority level and others identified the need for greater consistency of function and agenda across the three existing groups.



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Appendix 1: Research design and methods

Study design

The research sample was drawn from the community of strategic and practice personnel involved in the police-led missing/CSE service established to address the needs of children and young people going missing from across North Wales.

This includes three multi-agency groups across North Wales, representing Gwynedd and Ynys Mon, Conwy and Denbighshire, and Wrexham and Flintshire. The researchers disseminated information about the project via the three groups. This involved attending each group and providing follow-up material in the form of information and consent forms for professionals, and a link to the online questionnaire. The link was circulated to all members of the groups, and they were asked to circulate it further across their professional networks.

The Barnardo's Cymru Seraf service was approached to access potential service user participants. Other Barnardo's Cymru services in North Wales were also approached, as was the Buddies Group, a group of young people with experience of the care system who mentor and support other young people in care.

Research methods

The research adopts a primarily qualitative approach. However, it is also informed by secondary quantitative data from the SERAF database held by Barnardo's Cymru and redacted data from the I-Trace system provided by North Wales police.

Researchers carried out 22 semi-structured interviews with a sample of strategic personnel and practitioners across North Wales. In addition, a focus group was conducted with nine health professionals with responsibility for the safeguarding of children from all six counties.

Interviews focused on:

- roles and responsibilities relating to young people with experience of/at risk of CSE and going missing
- perceptions of the extent of the problem
- perceptions of the risks and protective factors of CSE and missing
- key issues in their areas/counties
- key aims of services and the extent to which aims are perceived as being met
- service co-ordination
- national and local strategies
- gaps in services
- resources
- recommendations for improved practice.

The interviews were supplemented by an online questionnaire, which covered the same areas. In all, 41 online questionnaires were completed by professionals and practitioners: 39 of these stated the sector they worked in and two declined.

Number of interviews and online questionnaires completed

Sector/organisation	Interviews and focus groups	Online questionnaire
Education	3	8
Youth justice/probation	4	7
Social services	3 (one from each missing/CSE task group)	6
Police	3	3
Residential organisation	5	3
Voluntary sector	4	9
Health	Focus group (9 participants)	3
TOTAL	31	39

Three semi-structured interviews were carried out with a sample of young people who have accessed the Seraf service or other services in North Wales, and have experiences of being missing and vulnerable to CSE. The sample comprised two females and one male aged between 15 and 18.

The interviews focused on why children and young people run away, issues affecting children and young people who run away, and perceptions of what happens when children and young people return home.

Ethical issues

The research was approved by the Glyndwr University Research Ethics Committee. The study adhered to required ethical research practice (as set out by the British Sociological Association) and observed the principles of informed voluntary consent, anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were given information about the study and signed consent was obtained before the interviews. Participants could decline being interviewed at any stage without negative consequences.

Due to the particular vulnerability of the young people interviewed, a number of measures were put in place to ensure their safety and emotional wellbeing.

The semi-structured interview questions, additional materials and all information and consent forms were submitted for consideration to a research advisory group of young people from Voices from Care, supported by Cardiff University. The feedback from this group was incorporated into the research materials, ensuring a children's rights focus to the research.

All research data was stored and managed in line with the Data Protection Act.

Data analysis

All audio recordings were fully transcribed. Interviews and the focus group discussions were analysed using a constant comparative approach. Transcripts were read by research team members and an analytic framework developed, based on emergent themes. The data was analysed using NVivo 10.



Appendix 2: Online questionnaire findings

In total, 41 people completed the online questionnaire. Of the respondents, 28 were either frontline professionals who work directly with children, young people and their families or line managers of frontline professionals.

Profile of respondents

Numbers of responses by sector:

Social services	10
Youth offending teams	6
Probation	3
The police	3
Health	3
Education	7
Residential care providers	3
Voluntary sector	5
Not known	1

The majority of respondents were aware of the All Wales Protocol on missing children and the Welsh Government guidance on safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation. A third had received training on using the guidance on sexual exploitation.

Are you aware of the All Wales Protocol on missing children?	66%
Have you received training on using the All Wales Protocol on missing children?	10%
Are you aware of Welsh Government guidance on safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation?	80%
Have you received training on using the Welsh Government guidance on safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation?	29%

A significant number of respondents, 73%, had experience of working with a child who they were worried might run away and be at risk of sexual exploitation, and 37% had worked with a child or young person who they thought may have been sexually exploited while missing. In addition, 54% had worked directly with (or been responsible for services working directly with) children or young people who had been exposed to CSE while missing, and 63% worked with children and young people who had experienced missing episodes.

We asked what could be done to help prevent young people going missing. The following table summarises the main suggestions:

Suggested action	Number of respondents making the suggestion
Improved education of children and young people on healthy relationships, consent, grooming and risks	7
Improved inter-agency information and co-operation, both within the locality and with other local authorities placing children and young people in residential care in North Wales	5
Improved relationship building with vulnerable young people	4
Continued awareness raising and education of professionals	4
Greater availability of risk reduction programmes	2
Improved risk management planning	2
Earlier intervention with at risk young people	2

We asked what the most accessible places were to place information and support for young people while they were missing.

The key suggestions made by respondents were:

Suggested locations	Number of respondents suggesting this location
Schools, youth centres and children's services	6
The police	6
The internet and social media	5
Supportive peers and family	4
Public places such as leisure services, libraries and post offices	3
Helplines such as Childline	2

We asked what was currently in place to ensure children and young people know where to access help when missing, and whether this could be improved. Of the 30 professionals who responded to this question, half didn't know what information was routinely supplied to vulnerable children and young people, or thought that the current situation could be improved. Of the remainder, three respondents, working in residential care settings, were clear

that young people could get in touch with the home or their key worker, and one health worker gave young people a work mobile number to contact if required. The rest of the respondents referred to internet and telephone (Childline) support and the police, social services, peers and family, but there was no indication that the contact details were supplied to children and young people or that the issues were discussed with them within an educational or direct work context.

We asked what agencies were usually involved when a child or young person requiring support returned from being missing.

The key agencies cited were:

Police	13
Social services	11
Barnardo's Seraf service	10
School/education	4
Carers/residential care/accommodation provider	4
GP/nurse	3
CAMHS	2
Youth offending team	2

We asked respondents what could be done to improve outcomes for this group of children and young people. The majority of suggestions fell into two main categories: prevention activities and good inter-agency working. The following table details some of the key suggestions that professionals made in these two areas.

Prevention

- Training for staff in schools.
- Attachment training for all contact staff.
- Education on healthy relationships and CSE in schools and youth clubs.
- Ensure information and education programmes are creative, engaging and accessible to all.
- Peer mentoring or buddying for young people at risk.
- Improve professional communication with young people using whatever method works, including social media.
- Early work to identify why young people have run away or gone missing.

Inter-agency working

- More multi-agency awareness raising and training events to develop an informed and confident workforce in relation to CSE.
- Ensure good communication between agencies working with individual young people.
- Join up agencies working with CSE and harmful sexual behaviour services to pool information and support a more joined-up approach to target perpetrators.
- Improved communication to monitor patterns of behaviour.

Other suggestions, some of which resonate with activities taking place in other parts of the UK, included:

- Establish CAMHS outreach support for children and young people with chaotic lifestyles who are at risk of CSE.
- More resources for therapeutic work to support the recovery process.
- Research activities with children and young people to find out what would be the best way to provide help and support.
- Consider setting up an independent 'keep safe' helpline for children and young people to use when missing.
- Awareness raising for the area police on why young people go missing.

‘You can trust me...’

Young people going
missing and at risk of,
or abused through, child
sexual exploitation in
North Wales

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Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos.
216250 and SC037605 17312ab16