



Barnardo's Scotland briefing

Petitions Committee Debate: Report on Tackling Child Exploitation

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes this debate on the Public Petitions Committee's inquiry into child sexual exploitation (CSE). As the organisation which submitted the original petition, we commend the Public Petitions Committee for their dedication and hard work on taking forward this issue, which we believe is a demonstration of how effective the petitions process can be in highlighting issues which need greater focus. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the Minister, the Committee and all concerned for their ongoing efforts to tackle the sexual exploitation of children in Scotland.

The key areas from the report we would wish to highlight for debate:

- A National Strategic Action Plan that sets out the actions we need to tackle CSE, bringing together all the good work that is being done, including by the Ministerial Working Group on CSE.
- Work at a local level by all the agencies involved in Child Protection Committees (CPCs) to look at what is currently in place to support victims of exploitation and learn from best practice around Scotland and the UK.
- Police Scotland and justice bodies to consider whether better use might be made of relevant legislation to tackle the perpetrators of abuse.
- The need to engage with children through education and work in schools.
- The need for research into specific areas where we lack knowledge.

What is Child Sexual Exploitation?

Child sexual exploitation is child sexual abuse by people who have power over a young person and use it to sexually abuse them, which involves an element of exchange whether in the form of cash or gifts, or in kind, including affection or recognition. It can involve a broad range of exploitative activity, from seemingly 'consensual' relationships and informal exchanges of sex for attention, accommodation, gifts or cigarettes, through to very serious organised crime. **As the Committee report states in para 63, 'CSE is part of a spectrum of child sexual abuse, but is a previously under-emphasised part which deserves urgent attention in its own right'.**

CSE has in the past been described as child prostitution. However, Barnardo's Scotland believes that this is not helpful both because prostitution to some extent implies consent, and no child can consent to sex with an adult, and because it doesn't fully cover the range of exploitative child abuse that exists.

The definition of CSE in the 2003 Scottish Government Guidance describes CSE as involving 'sexual activity for remuneration of cash or kind'. However, we would highlight that the remuneration element of CSE does not necessarily have to take place at the same time as the sexual activity. Perpetrators will often groom a young person over a long period of time, buy them gifts such as mobile phones, take them out and show them

affection. It is this longer process that often leads up to the sexual activity, during which the perpetrator has gained power and control and the young person may come to believe they are in a loving, consensual relationship. This makes it hard for a young person to recognise the abuse and all the more difficult for them to escape from it.

Why CSE needs a distinct approach to be tackled effectively

Barnardo's Scotland has long argued that a distinct and differentiated approach is needed to identify CSE, support victims and disrupt perpetrators. While we recognise that most child sexual abuse tends to be found within family contexts, it is important that we also tackle CSE which tends to be outside the home and can therefore go unrecognised. There is no single form of CSE; sexual exploitation varies between geographical areas and can take many forms, which are evolving and changing over time, particularly as technology changes. Forms of CSE can include:

- One-to-one: for example, exploitation of a child by an adult who appears to be a 'boyfriend';
- Involvement of peers in exploitation – directly as abusers or indirectly linking others to abusers;
- Online – perpetrators meeting and contacting victims via the internet, social networking and mobile phones;
- Networks of abusers and criminal gangs.

As highlighted in reviews of cases in England, adults, including those with child protection responsibilities, can fail to recognise a vulnerable young person's sexual behaviour in terms of abuse and exploitation. CSE can often look to the outside world like a normal relationship between two consenting 'adults'. **However, a child under 16 cannot by definition be in an adult relationship.** In our experience, what the young person sees as a loving relationship can simply be a business relationship to the abusing adult. Therefore, because this form of child sexual abuse manifests itself in a different way it requires a specific response.

Gathering momentum of efforts to tackle CSE in Scotland

The Committee report highlights in para. 3 that there has recently been an increase in activity to address and tackle CSE in Scotland. From a Barnardo's Scotland point of view this is extremely welcome, and has created an opportunity to build a cross-cutting movement to tackle CSE. We particularly welcomed the creation of the Scottish Government's Ministerial Working Group to address these issues. We believe that there is a clear synergy between the broad areas of activity identified by the Ministerial Working Group, and the more specific recommendations of the Petitions Committee report. We therefore look forward to working with the Minister and the Ministerial Working Group to take forward the Committee's recommendations.

Need for a National Strategic Action Plan

The overarching recommendation of the Committee report, as set out in para. 5, is that a National Strategy for CSE be developed to create a framework for a co-ordinated national action plan for tackling and preventing CSE and supporting victims. This recommendation

is welcomed by Barnardo's Scotland and was one of our five key commitments set out in our written evidence to the Committee.

In our experience, there can at times be a disconnect between key players at a local level, including social work, health, education, CPCs, the police and the third sector, when it comes to effectively addressing CSE. There are a number of examples of good practice, but many areas are not in a position to always respond effectively to CSE. We would therefore welcome a Scottish strategy which took the form of an action plan, with clear outcomes, timelines and delivery responsibilities. It should include approaches to multi-agency information sharing, the use of risk assessment frameworks, guidance on tackling CSE and robust data collection systems, as well as look to deliver a network of direct services, and a focus on awareness-raising work for practitioners, parents and children. It could also explore training provision for key workers directly working with children and young people. Barnardo's Scotland believes that effective local strategies within the framework of such a national action plan would bring the level of coherence that is required to ensure that there is a more effective response to CSE in every part of the country. We believe that this would link well with the recommendation in para. 24 of the final report of the Ministerial Working Group, that the group continue to meet to manage the delivery of agreed recommendations and consider issues raised by the Petitions Committee report.

Learning from best practice in tackling CSE around Scotland

The Committee highlighted the need for high-quality data collection tools in order to collect vital information on the prevalence and nature of CSE in Scotland (recommendations in paras. 28, 29 and 30). The Ministerial Working Group also recommended that local CPCs should map and review their current arrangements (including data collection, training etc) for CSE and the available support for children and young people. Barnardo's Scotland supports and welcomes both these sets of recommendations. As highlighted above, we know that there is good practice across Scotland, but it is patchy and uncoordinated. CPCs are best placed to collect and map data in their area, where good practice is found, this information should be shared and, where possible, rolled out in other areas across Scotland. We hope this will be taken forward by the Ministerial Working Group as one of the actions in the national strategy.

Tackling abusers and disrupting perpetrator networks

The committee called (recommendation in para. 216) for high commitment to disrupting perpetrator activity on the part of Police Scotland, the Scottish Government and other agencies. We strongly welcome this commitment and would highlight the good work that is already being done by local police teams, for example in Renfrewshire, to address this.. While it is vital that we support victims of abuse, unless the abusers are also identified and dealt with appropriately, it is likely that they will simply seek to groom more children for abuse.

The Committee also highlighted in para. 190 disquiet about an apparent lack of convictions under the Protection of Children and Prevention of Sexual Offences (Scotland) Act 2005. We are concerned that at times there may be only partial understanding of CSE within the criminal justice system, and that the police are not always aware of the full range of available legislation. This is directly addressed in the recommendation made

in para. 22 of the Ministerial Working Group report which suggested there was '*scope for Police Scotland to consider whether better use might be made of these [preventative] orders and other relevant legislation*'. Parliament should continue to keep this area under review.

Engaging with children through education and work in schools

The Committee made a series of recommendations around education and work in schools (paras. 32, 33, 34 and 44). Similar points were raised in the Ministerial Working Group on CSE, which highlighted the need to talk and engage with children and young people, as well as the need for children and young people to be seen as partners in informing thinking as to how to tackle CSE. A lack of public awareness of CSE was also acknowledged in the Scottish-Government-funded research into CSE in Scotland published in October 2012. Children and young people need to know the signs of CSE and how and where to ask for help in order to raise the alarm and get the support they need. We therefore support these recommendations.

Barnardo's Scotland recently submitted a response to the Scottish Government's refresh of the guidance on Relationship, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education (RSHPE) in schools. We believe RSHPE is the appropriate forum in which schools, in an age-appropriate way, can support pupils to understand dangers related to sexual exploitation and abuse. Particularly in the case of child sexual exploitation, victims may not initially see themselves as victims, believing that they are in a healthy 'adult' relationship. It is vital that schools are able to challenge these kinds of behaviour through RSHPE and are able to educate children to recognise that these relationships are exploitative. This has also been identified as an issue by the Ministerial Working Group.

Research into specific areas

We welcome the Committee suggestions in para 28, 29 and 30 around the collection and analysis of information about CSE in Scotland, especially where information already held by agencies hasn't been brought together and used effectively to inform efforts to tackle CSE. These recommendations relate closely to the recommendations of the Ministerial Working Group that CPCs should assess current arrangements for data collection at a local level.

The Scottish-Government-funded research carried out by the University of Bedfordshire in 2012 also found that there is a general lack of research into CSE in Scotland, in so far as existing literature tends to consist of small-scale studies relating to looked-after children and young people, and those living in secure accommodation. Whilst we recognise that any new research needs to be justified in terms of its ability to support practice and explore specific areas of uncertainty, we agree with the Committee report in para. 31 that focussed and specific pieces of research may be helpful, such as exploring the nature of CSE in rural areas in Scotland; grooming in the context of CSE; and specific research on the sexual exploitation and abuse of boys and young men.

Contact

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