

Puppet on a string

The urgent need to cut children free from sexual exploitation.

Believe in children



Barnardo's



Foreword



I have a lifetime of experience working in children's services, but there is nothing that shocks me more than the horrific nature of child sexual exploitation. Vulnerable, defenceless girls

and boys who are craving love and attention, are groomed and then abused, often for years on end, leaving them deeply traumatised and scarred for life.

The great tragedy is that more often than not the children are never cut free from their exploitation. That's because it remains hidden, taking place out of sight in our towns and cities. It is impossible to say how many children are being exploited, but at Barnardo's, we know from our 16 years' experience operating specialist services in the UK that it is far more widespread than is generally recognised. And we are finding that the victims are becoming younger and the exploitation more sophisticated, involving organised networks that move children from place to place to be abused.

Despite the best efforts of practitioners working with children and young people, the victims are not identified because the tell-tale signs are overlooked. There is a shocking lack of awareness that stretches from the frontline of practice to the corridors of government. Too often, sexual exploitation is not recognised

as a form of child abuse that requires the full attention of all those who work to safeguard and protect our children. Urgent action is required to address this, which is why Barnardo's is publishing this report and launching a campaign calling for reform.

The report not only examines what is known about the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation, but also provides powerful evidence from our services on the developing trends. The stories of young people like Emma, Sophie and Tim explain how any child can become trapped in a terrifying world of drugs, violence and sex.

As a society, we need to acknowledge that child sexual exploitation can exist in every community. The sooner we open our eyes to this incomprehensible abuse, the sooner we can begin to tackle the problem and ensure that we intervene early.

We are calling on the public to urge government to take radical action and appoint a minister who will take responsibility and bring forward a plan to deliver a step change in policy and practice. Until government takes the lead to protect children fully, they will remain at too great a risk from all the horrors of sexual exploitation.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Marie Carrie". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Anne Marie Carrie
Chief Executive, Barnardo's

Introduction

It is 16 years since Barnardo's opened its first service for sexually exploited children and young people in Bradford. The 'Streets and Lanes' project was a pioneering service that specialised in supporting some of the most vulnerable and excluded young people in our society. At the time, there remained a widespread belief that these children were somehow responsible for their own abuse – that they had consented to be abused through prostitution. Others found it hard to believe that children could be subject to such horrific exploitation.

Barnardo's has led the way in influencing policy and practice to redefine the issue as one of child sexual exploitation rather than child prostitution. New legislation has been introduced and there have been important changes to policy and guidance. Barnardo's now operates 22 projects throughout the UK, 18 of them in England, and we work closely with the police, local authorities, schools and other agencies to turn around the lives of thousands of sexually exploited children.

However, despite this progress, we are yet to see the major step change in policy and practice that is needed to recognise sexual exploitation as a pervasive form of abuse from which all children are at risk. Awareness of the issue amongst those who work with children remains low. Too often children slip through the net and the tell-tale signs of abuse are going unnoticed. When they are identified, specialist help is not always available. The harsh reality is that, despite new national guidance, in most local authorities, child sexual exploitation is not recognised as a mainstream child protection issue.

We know from experience that the problem is widespread. Findings from our services set out in this report indicate a worrying trend that the grooming of children for sexual exploitation is becoming more sophisticated. Children are being brainwashed by abusers in the most pernicious way and are often transported between towns and cities to be subjected to multiple acts of abuse by groups of men.

Recent high-profile cases have meant that child protection has been firmly focused on babies suffering abuse and neglect at the hands of their parents, relatives or carers in the family home. But, as this report graphically demonstrates, there are many children and young people who are being preyed upon in our communities and then subjected to horrendous forms of abuse and exploitation. Barnardo's fears that the issue will continue to remain hidden, with a wholly inadequate response from those who are tasked with protecting children, unless the government steps in and makes it a priority.

The policy recommendations set out in this report are focused on England only, but we do draw on our experiences in each of the nations to show that this is a UK-wide issue that needs to be taken seriously by governments across the UK.

This report calls on the Secretary of State for Education to take the lead in ensuring a fundamental shift in policy, practice and service delivery in England. It makes the case for a minister, supported by dedicated officials, to take responsibility and set out a clear plan of action for all agencies to:

1. Raise awareness to improve early identification of child sexual exploitation

All professionals in universal services need to be aware of their role in identifying and addressing child sexual exploitation. Children, young people and their parents and carers need to have the right information to help them access support quickly and safely.

2. Improve statutory responses and the provision of services

In addition to ensuring that universal services can respond to boys and girls who are victims of sexual exploitation, it is also vital that the right specialist

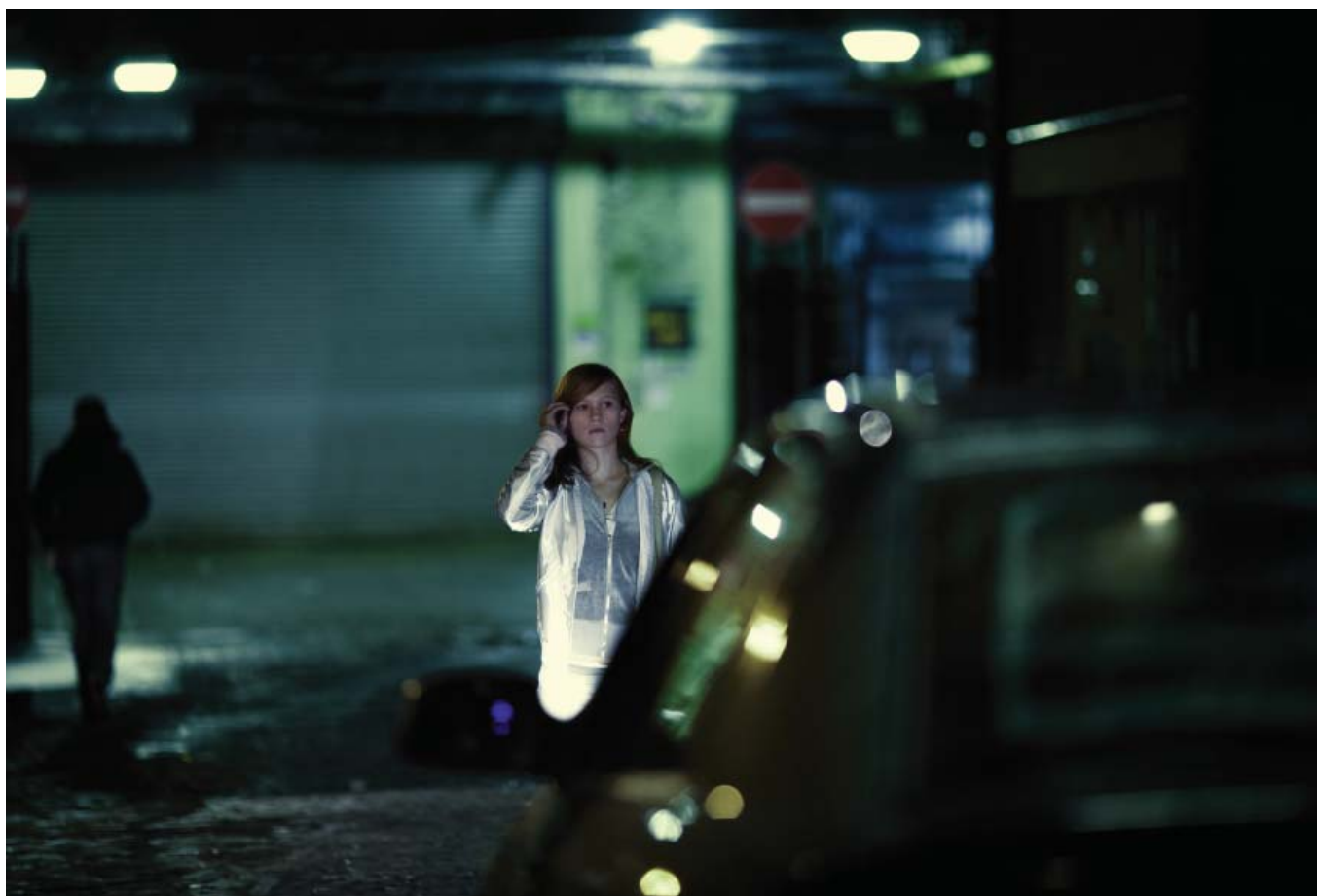
services are commissioned and that there are clearly determined pathways from universal to specialist services.

3. Improve the evidence

There is an urgent need to improve data on the prevalence of child sexual exploitation, to strengthen the evidence base and to support professionals to appropriately share information.

4. Improve prosecution procedures

To increase the number of cases that lead to a conviction, action is needed to improve police, prosecution and court practice, particularly in supporting victims to act as witnesses.



Section 1: What is child sexual exploitation?

Definitions

The definition used by the government in its guidance in England states:

Sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involves exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people (or a third person or persons) receive ‘something’ (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of them performing, and/or another or others performing on them, sexual activities. Child sexual exploitation can occur through the use of technology without the child’s immediate recognition; for example being persuaded to post sexual images on the Internet/mobile phones without immediate payment or gain. In all cases, those exploiting the child/young person have power over them by virtue of their age, gender, intellect, physical strength and/or economic or other resources. Violence, coercion and intimidation are common, involvement in exploitative relationships being characterised in the main by the child or young person’s limited availability of choice resulting from their social/economic and/or emotional vulnerability.¹

Sophie’s story

‘I met him at a family party, he said he was 18. I later found he was 34 with a criminal record’, Sophie.

Sophie is 16. She’s bright, pretty and studying at college. One day she wants to be a child psychologist.

But this girl’s life could have been so very different, if it wasn’t for the quick thinking of the police and some very intensive support from a Barnardo’s specialist child sexual exploitation service.

The oldest of six children, Sophie grew up caring for her younger siblings and for her mother, who suffered from mental health issues. The family was too scared to ask for help, so Sophie struggled on, lonely and isolated, too proud to ask for help, sacrificing her childhood for others close to her. She says:

I had a lot to do at home and I admit, sometimes it felt lonely. I started

to get into trouble at school for attendance and by the time I was 12, I began falling behind.

I suppose I did feel isolated and I never seemed to get any attention at home.

Typical of many young carers, Sophie craved attention and it was this vulnerability that would make her the perfect target for an abuser. She continues:

I was 13 when I met him and it all seemed so exciting. I was invited to my cousin’s 21st birthday party at her house and met this gorgeous guy. He said that he was 18 and we swapped telephone numbers – it seemed so innocent at first.

The guy started calling Sophie regularly. He took her to the cinema,

¹ DCSF (2009) *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation: supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*. http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Safeguarding_CPY_from_sexual_exploitation.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010.

bought her thoughtful presents, ‘daft bits of jewellery’, and paid her the attention she had never experienced. Within weeks she was ‘hooked’ and there was no going back. She says:

At first he really treated me well and it felt so normal, so right. My mum was getting worried, but I didn’t listen to her, I wouldn’t have listened to anyone, I was totally in love.

But then he started to change. He got more aggressive and bad things started happening. He’d hit me, but the next day say he was sorry. I’d always forgive him. He started taking me to parties, he’d give me drink and we’d stay out all night. It just got worse, worse, worse.

Sophie was just 14. Her relationship with her mother was deteriorating rapidly, she wouldn’t hear a word said against her ‘boyfriend’ and she had started to go missing for days on end. Sophie was being dragged into a dangerous world of drugs, alcohol and sex. Still a child, lonely and desperately in love, she was powerless to resist. She says:

The parties got worse and so did the way he treated me. At first I’d fight back, but it was really hard. Then one night at a party, he took me ... upstairs. He made me do things that I didn’t want to do. I was frightened.

At first Sophie had told her mother that she was staying over with friends. She regularly got grounded, but would then run away to be with her boyfriend. The grip he had over her life was terrifying – Sophie just couldn’t see the danger she was in. She adds:

Friends told me he was older, that he had a police record, but I wouldn’t believe them. I called them a liar, I was still in love with him.

But Sophie’s regular episodes of running away hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Her mother had reported the incidents to the police and they became concerned at her relationship with the older man. They began an investigation, interviewed Sophie’s friends and then alerted the local Barnardo’s child sexual exploitation project. Sophie says:

From then on, every time I went missing the project worker came out to me. She told me straight what he was doing and how it was not only me, but my family that was at risk. Gradually, I began to see what was happening – I realised the danger and that I needed to get out.

With the help of Barnardo’s, Sophie plucked up the courage to tell her abuser to leave her alone. It wasn’t easy; he followed her, left messages and intimidated friends. But with the support of Barnardo’s and the police she was able to escape. She explains:

Barnardo’s helped me realise what was happening and then they helped me escape. The worker helped me mend the broken relationship with my mum and get the whole family back on track.

Sophie wants to use her experience to help others. She hopes to be a child psychologist one day and is working as a mentor to other young people at the Barnardo’s project.



Barnardo's has found that child sexual exploitation tends to be a hidden activity and much more likely to take place in private residences than visibly, on the streets. Barnardo's has identified three different models of activity; they are not exhaustive, but show a spectrum of exploitation, as follows:

1	Inappropriate relationships	Usually involving one perpetrator who has inappropriate power or control over a young person (physical, emotional or financial). One indicator may be a significant age gap. The young person may believe they are in a loving relationship.
2	'Boyfriend' model of exploitation and peer exploitation	The perpetrator befriends and grooms a young person into a 'relationship' and then coerces or forces them to have sex with friends or associates. Our services have reported a rise in peer exploitation where young people are forced or coerced into sexual activity by peers and associates. Sometimes this can be associated with gang activity but not always. ²
3	Organised/networked sexual exploitation or trafficking	Young people (often connected) are passed through networks, possibly over geographical distances, between towns and cities where they may be forced / coerced into sexual activity with multiple men. Often this occurs at 'sex parties', and young people who are involved may be used as agents to recruit others into the network. Some of this activity is described as serious organised crime and can involve the organised 'buying and selling' of young people by perpetrators.

The third model, organised sexual exploitation or trafficking, is the most sophisticated and complex form of child sexual exploitation and those young people involved would be considered at very high risk. However, young people from any of the models described above can be victim to extreme levels of intimidation, and physical and sexual violence.

Organised exploitation varies from spontaneous networking between groups of perpetrators to more serious organised crime where young people

are effectively 'sold'. Because of the complexity, these activities are likely to require dedicated police resources to investigate and are described as 'internal trafficking' or 'trafficking for child sexual exploitation'. In these cases, perpetrators may not always be engaging in sexual activity with young people themselves but arranging for others to do so. Under the Sexual Offences Act 2003 (S.58), this is defined as trafficking within the UK. As we explain in the next section, the evidence from our services suggests that cases such as these, involving multiple perpetrators and victims, are increasing.

² DCSF (2009) *Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity*. <http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-00064-2010.pdf>, accessed 14 December 2010.; Firmin, C (2010) *Female Voice in Violence Project: a study into the impact of serious youth and gang violence on women and girls*. ROTA, London.

The tell-tale signs

There are a number of tell-tale signs or indicators that a child is being groomed for sexual exploitation. These include:

- going missing for periods of time or regularly returning home late: unhappy and lonely young people can be flattered and seduced by the attention of streetwise adults who appear to sympathise with them.
- disengagement from education: young people who are not in school during the day may be more at risk of sexual exploitation. Children who are becoming involved in this activity may begin to skip school or become disruptive.
- appearing with unexplained gifts or new possessions: children who appear to have new clothes, jewellery, mobile phones or money that cannot plausibly be accounted for.
- peers and friends: association with other young people involved in exploitation and with older boyfriends/girlfriends.
- sexual health issues: a history of unprotected sex leading to sexually transmitted infections or inappropriate sexual behaviour.
- changes in temperament/depression: mood swings or changes in emotional well being can be related to being involved in sexual exploitation.
- drug and alcohol misuse: this may leave children more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and abusers may use drugs and alcohol to help control children.
- displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviours, such as being over-familiar with strangers

or sending sexualised images via the internet or mobile phones.

- involvement in exploitative relationships or association with risky adults.

There are additional signs that might indicate that a young person is a victim of complex or organised sexual exploitation. A young person may describe being taken to different towns or districts, or they may be found in areas with which they have no known connection. Young people may also make reference to risky adults who appear to be connected to each other.

Who is most at risk?

The reality is that any child or young person, from any social or ethnic background, can be exploited. Boys and young men can be at risk as well as girls and young women.

Research has shown that a number of factors can increase a young person's vulnerability to sexual exploitation.³ These include disrupted family life and domestic violence, a history of physical or sexual abuse, disadvantage, poor mental health, problematic parenting, parental drug or alcohol misuse and parental mental health problems.

We also know that some groups of young people are more vulnerable to targeting by the perpetrators of sexual exploitation. These include children living in care, particularly residential care, those who are excluded from mainstream school and those who misuse drugs and alcohol. Barnardo's is concerned that these children are increasingly being targeted by abusers who are developing more sophisticated grooming techniques.

³ Scott, S (2001) *Barnardo's PHASE project: a case study evaluation*. University of Liverpool, Liverpool.: Cusick, L (2002) Youth prostitution: a literature review, *Child Abuse Review* 11: 230-251.

Section 2: What is the extent of sexual exploitation?

It is very difficult to say how many children and young people are being sexually exploited in the UK, because the hidden nature of the issue makes it difficult to identify and there is no central system for recording cases. Practitioners often do not identify it and young people themselves frequently do not recognise themselves as abused. Given that both professionals and victims can fail to recognise exploitation and that there is no national referral or reporting system, any approximate figure is likely to be massively underestimated.

To date, the number of children exploited has been estimated on the basis of research studies, surveys and data from organisations such as the National Working Group for Sexually Exploited Children and Young People (NWG) and the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP). A survey published by the NWG in November 2010 of 53 services operated by its members in the UK, found that 2,894 children had been engaged with during the previous year.⁴ This gives an indication of the number of children and young people that specialist services are supporting, but does not capture the many children who are not identified and therefore not assisted by these services.

The most recent annual count of exploitation and abuse reports by CEOP indicates that there has been a 16 per cent year-on-year increase from 5,411 reports in 2008/9 to 6,291 in 2009/10.⁵ A quarter of these reports relate to online grooming, 434 reports involve an abuser inciting a child to perform a

sexual act and 135 involve arrangements to meet a child. CEOP emphasises the risks of meeting people who were first contacted online, highlighting that this is a growing issue. The multi-national EU Kids Online project indicates that meeting up with internet contacts is not uncommon amongst 9- to 16-year-olds; 1 in 12 of the 23,000 children interviewed had met up with someone in person that they had met online first.⁶

Barnardo's own research has provided estimates of sexual exploitation. In 2005,⁷ research across 31 London boroughs identified 507 separate suspected or known cases of exploitation. The fact that the figures for individual boroughs ranged from 1 to 53 cases suggested that exploitation may be underestimated in some areas. In order to address this, the authors used figures for known risk indicators to estimate levels of exploitation in each borough. This gave an estimate of 1,002 young people experiencing exploitation in London, roughly double the number of known or suspected cases.

In 2006, Barnardo's published an evaluation of its work with young people in London which indicated the types of young people who tend to be most at risk of exploitation.⁸ This two-year study indicated that the peak age was 15, but children as young as 10 were identified as being at risk. Girls and young women were more than six times as likely as boys and young men to be identified as being at risk, but it was widely understood that actual risks to males were probably underestimated.

4 NWG (2010) *A national picture of child sexual exploitation and specialist provisions in the UK*, http://www.nationalworkinggroup.org/system/datas/281/original/PDF_report_2010_A4.pdf?1290595299, accessed 14 December 2010.

5 CEOP (2010) *Strategic overview 2009–10*. CEOP, London.

6 Livingstone S, Haddon, L, Görzig, A et al. (2010) *Risks and safety on the internet*. http://www2.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/research/EUKidsOnline/Initial_findings_report.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010.

7 Harper, Z and Scott, S (2005) *Meeting the needs of sexually exploited young people in London*. Barnardo's, Barking, pp43 and 45–48.

8 Scott, S and Skidmore, P (2006) *Reducing the risk: Barnardo's support for sexually exploited young people*. Barnardo's, Barking.

Findings from Barnardo's services

Barnardo's conducted two annual surveys of our 22 sexual exploitation services in the UK, covering 2008/9 and 2009/10. The surveys give an indication of prevalence as they show how many children and young people we work with and also identify significant trends in sexual exploitation. They show that the number of young people intensively supported by our services has been rising. In 2008/09, we worked with 1,059 children and young people in the UK. In 2009/10 this number rose by 4 per cent to 1,098. The most recent survey also highlighted a number of important trends, listed below.

1. Young people being moved or 'trafficked'

Over the last two years, our services have become increasingly concerned that child sexual exploitation is more organised, with networks moving children from town to town, or locality to locality within a city, specifically to be abused. This internal trafficking of British children within the country often involves a number of perpetrators and is more sophisticated in the way that it is organised.

Of our 22 services, 21 have encountered cases of this kind at some point during the last two years. The 2009/10 survey found that at that time we were working with 94 children who had been trafficked for exploitation; this was almost the same figure as the previous year, when the number was 97. In both years, this was nearly one in five of all those we were working with at the time.

The movement of children and young people between localities might involve adults or different groups of young people. Some of our services are aware of networks of older men using a legitimate taxi business or pizza take-away as a means of grooming and trafficking

children. In other cases, the networks have been made up of groups of young people that are involved in more organised forms of exploitation through gangs.

Ella, a service manager in the South West,⁹ said:

Child sexual exploitation appears to be far more organised, more carefully planned and executed now. We regularly find girls who are from totally different areas of the city, different schools, who know each other well. After some investigation it usually transpires that they share the same 'boyfriends'. This is a frightening development as it appears that these 'boyfriends' or perpetrators are no longer satisfied with abusing one young person at a time – they are working with groups of girls or boys on a much wider scale.

The process [of grooming] has become so sophisticated, such a complex network, there is no doubt in my mind that the people who perpetrate this are extremely calculating, practised criminals. Grooming is the initial stage, taking grooming out through a network of friends or peers is a whole new level. One perpetrator can recruit a group of vulnerable children who can then be abused or even internally trafficked. It sounds far fetched, but we know it is happening.

The UK Human Trafficking Centre (UKHTC) is working to raise awareness of this form of child abuse, which is identified in some cases as serious organised crime. Section 58 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 specifies that trafficking within the UK for sexual exploitation is an offence punishable by up to 14 years imprisonment. However, the true extent of this crime has been difficult to measure because victims frequently feel too afraid or ashamed to make a formal complaint, or have been carefully and expertly groomed not to recognise themselves as the victim.

⁹ The full names of the service managers and the services they lead have not been given, because for reasons of personal safety, we need to protect their identity.

Emma's story

'I started seeing faceless men, it was my way of blocking out the pain', Emma.

Emma was 17 years old when she walked into a Barnardo's project. Excluded from school, isolated and angry, Emma wasn't the type of girl for whom people would automatically show concern. In fact, the hollow-eyed teenager would be the first to confess that she didn't like herself much either, she was a 'disruptive, bad child' and she 'didn't deserve help'.

But much like many of the children Barnardo's works with, Emma wasn't born 'bad'. Working closely with a project worker, she soon began to reveal a catalogue of neglect and abuse. Her story was one of calculated crime and entrapment, perpetrated by predatory adults – so clever they could persuade Emma she was the one who was 'bad'. She says:

I went into care when I was 13 months old and spent the next few years going back and forth between my mum and foster parents. My mum finally gave me up for adoption when I was six. By then it was too late.

Emma couldn't settle; it wasn't really anybody's fault, but placement after placement broke down. Unloved, lonely and isolated, Emma was targeted by an abuser. To this day Emma cannot remember the detail – she sees the man and the location. She feels the pain. She knows that she was sexually abused. But the memories come in flashback and the man's face is always a blur.

I think that I must have been seven or eight when it happened. I don't like to remember, it hurts. But I do know that after that I started behaving badly at school, I didn't want to go and I didn't want to talk to anyone. It

felt like my ability to speak had been taken away.

The abuse went unreported, unnoticed. Emma continues:

I couldn't form any real relationships and I ended up running away when I was 14. I was sleeping rough and staying on friends' sofas.

I liked living alone. I didn't like being told what to do. I never had an adult in my life that I could trust or rely on. Everyone had let me down and I didn't want to get hurt anymore. So I was going out all the time, getting drunk, meeting guys. I met an older man who I believed loved me and all I wanted was to be loved by someone. I used to think I needed a man to love me to be happy.

Emma was missing school and behaving badly when she did attend. She started going to clubs and experimenting with drugs – anything to block out the memories. The man Emma met and believed to be her 'boyfriend' was in his early 30s. He showered her with attention, gifts, alcohol and drugs. He picked her up in a smart car, made her feel important and gave her a mobile phone. For a child with very little, it was enticing.

At Barnardo's we recognise this as the 'grooming process'. Emma thought she was in love. Soon the 'boyfriend' began using violence and finally he forced Emma to sleep with different male friends. She was trapped.

I really thought he loved me, I would have done anything for him. Then it all got really confusing. I didn't want to remember anything. I just hoped that

one day one of the men would want to be a real 'boyfriend', that he'd like me, for the real me and that he'd want to save me. But it never happened.

Eventually, she was introduced to two new men, who took her for a meal. She thought life was about to change, but the horrible truth was that Emma had been 'passed on' to a new predatory adult, who would traffic her around the country for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

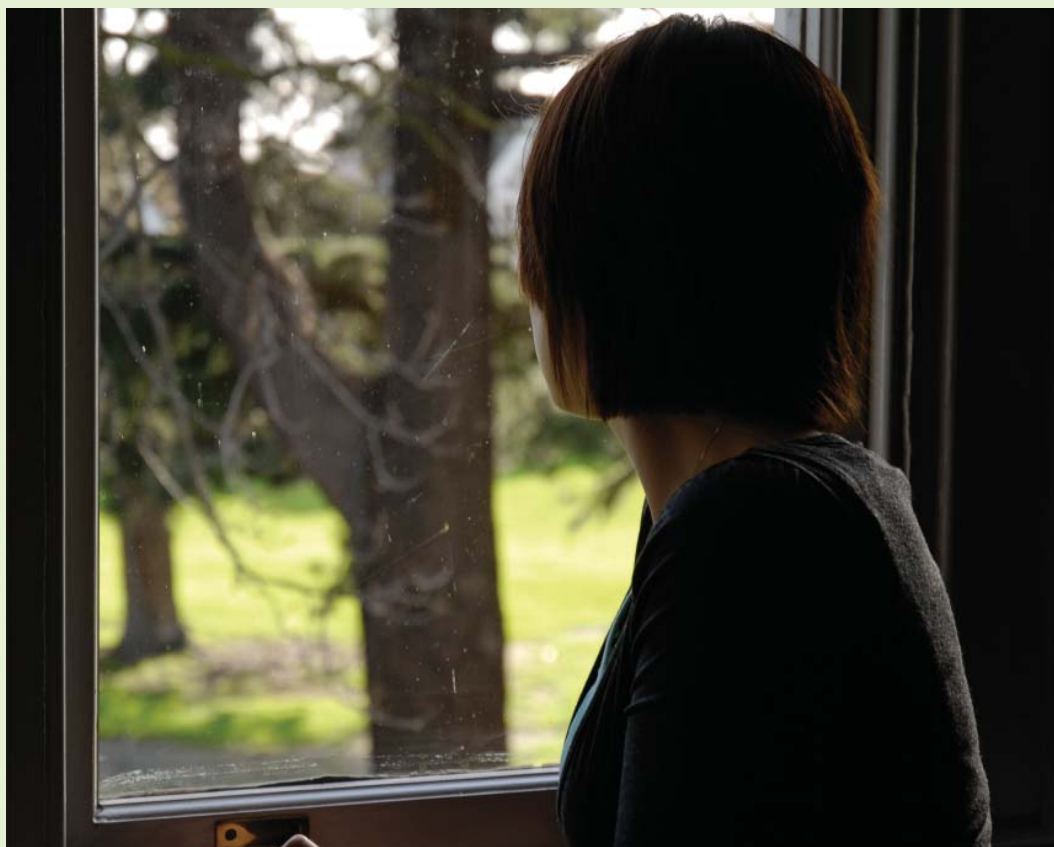
I got taken to flats, I don't know where they were and men would be brought to me. I was never given any names and I don't remember their faces. My mobile number was given out and I got loads of frightening calls. I was terrified. Eventually, I was taken up north somewhere and locked in a flat. They forced me to sleep with loads of men. I felt sick.

Emma managed to run away and was found by the police, but she was too

distressed to give her story and yet again the crime went unpunished. However, the police put the young girl in touch with a Barnardo's worker, who managed to gain her trust, and slowly Emma began to reveal her true story. Emma continues:

The project worker stood by me, talking to me, advising me. She seemed to care so I began to let her in. I used to have moments where I felt really sorry for myself, but she helped me to look at what I had got, not what I hadn't got. She also helped me to be more positive and to remember there is always a light at the end of the tunnel.

Now I have the strength to not let anything stand in my way and to never give up. I know that life's hard and you just have to make the best of it. My worker said if I let my past ruin my future, I'd be letting all those bad guys win and she was right. Because of her advice and belief in me I have never given up.



2. Grooming using the internet and mobile technology is becoming increasingly common

Using technology to target and exploit children has been highlighted by CEOP as a key feature in recent years. Barnardo's first identified the use of the internet in exploitation in 2002¹⁰ and subsequently highlighted the risks posed by internet contacts and the rise of web-based grooming in a research report in 2004.¹¹ Since then, concerns have continued to grow and this form of exploitation was one of the prominent trends reported by our services in the 2009/10 survey. They highlighted the increased use of the internet and social networking sites for grooming and direct exploitation as well as a significant rise in the use of mobile phones, including Bluetooth technology, to target young people, alongside grooming and exploitation through texts and picture messages.

One service conducted a snapshot survey with young people aged nine to eleven during online-safety training in a primary school. It found that almost a third (27 out of 87 children) admitted to having met someone whom they had previously only met online. Whilst this was only a small study, the number of very young children putting themselves, unwittingly, at extreme risk was alarmingly high. This highlights how even primary aged school children are vulnerable to online grooming.

Kay, a service manager in the north of England, says:

A 10-year-old girl was referred to our project for posting graphic, sexualised images of herself on the internet. There is no doubt in my mind that the internet is a serious tool being employed by abusers to target and exploit children.

3. Younger children are increasingly at risk of sexual exploitation

The experience of at least a third of our services is that overall, the children we are working with are getting younger. During the last five years, the average age of service users has fallen from 15 to around 13, and some services have started working with children as young as 10. One service stated: 'It is widely accepted by professionals that 13 year old females are sexually active'. Another noted that 11, 12 and 13 year olds are being forced to have sex under the influence of alcohol.

Some services suggested that the rise in children at risk of exploitation could be linked to earlier sexual abuse or exposure to overtly sexual content in the media, on the internet or via mobile phones. In these cases referrals are often made to projects on the basis that a child is displaying inappropriate sexualised behaviour.

Kay continues:

The children referred to us recently are definitely getting younger and there appears to be a distinct pattern emerging, with referrals on the basis of younger children displaying sexualised behaviours. We recently supported a girl of 12, who was at very high risk. Although we are yet to conduct any formal research, we are beginning to think that in many cases of child sexual exploitation the youngsters have been sexually abused at an early age. I think that sexualised behaviour is increasingly recognised as both an indicator and risk factor for child sexual exploitation.

4. Peer exploitation

A quarter of our services identified peer-based exploitation as becoming more

10 Palmer, T and Stacey, L (2002) *Stolen childhood: Barnardo's work with children abused through prostitution*. Barnardo's, Barkingside.

11 Palmer, T and Stacey, L (2004) *Just one click: sexual abuse of children and young people through the internet and mobile phone technology*. Barnardo's, Barkingside.

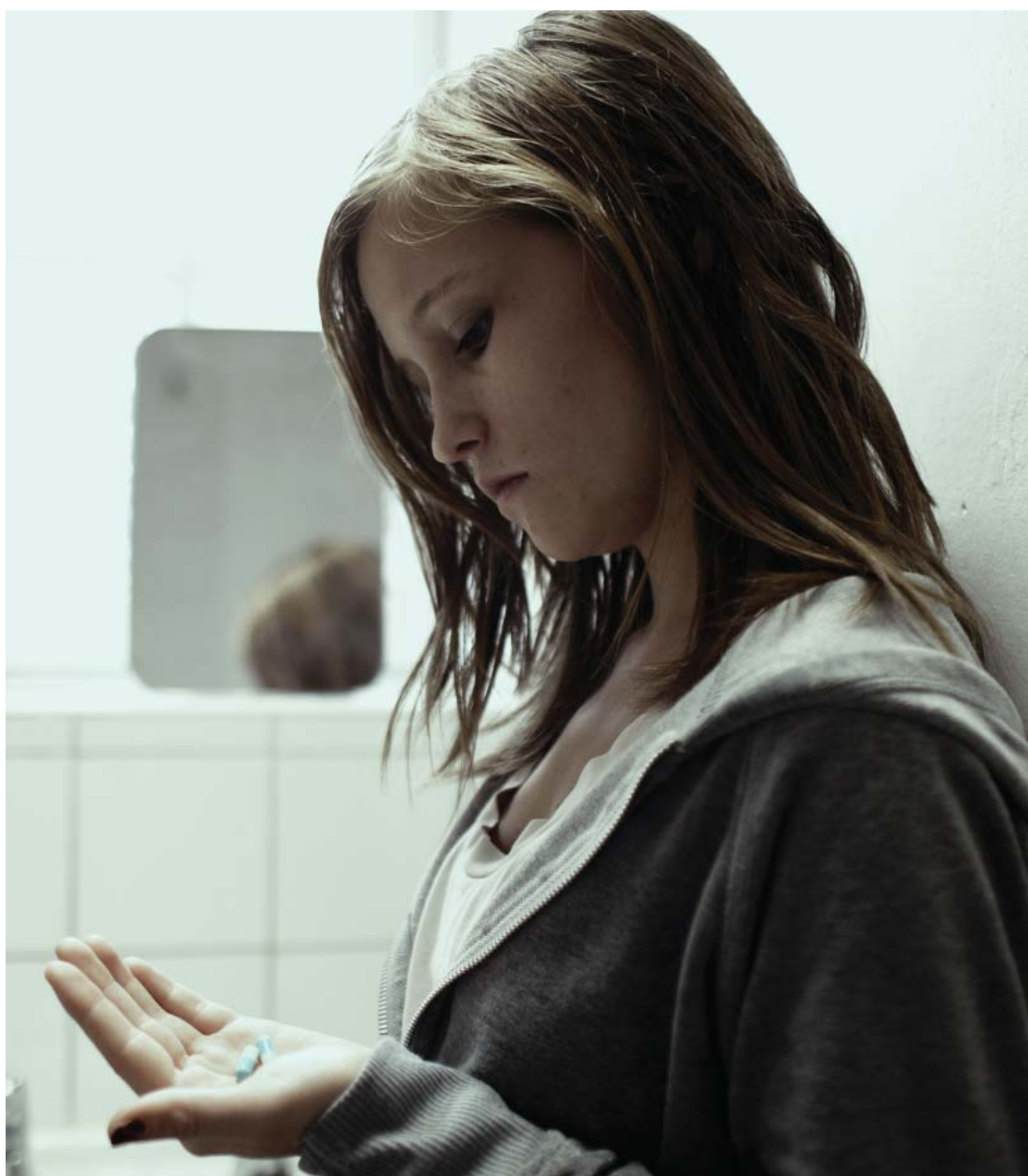
common. Although the majority of cases concern older perpetrators, in some, the exploitation appears to be taking place within age-appropriate associations or relationships. One service identified a significant issue with groups of young people hanging around in parks drinking alcohol given by older people or peers and having sex.

Wendy, a service manager in the north east, says:

I think that the perpetrators who abuse young people prey on the fact that teenagers want to feel independent

and grown up, they want freedom. If a parent doesn't know where their child is – then this could play into the hands of the perpetrator. That child might go to a party, but it will be a very different party – one that's about drugs, alcohol, sex and abuse.

Young people want to think the best of people, they want to trust. This is exactly what the perpetrators exploit. All I can say, both to parents and young people is, be vigilant. And if a child does start to go missing for the odd night here or there, find out what's happening – before it's too late.



Tim's story

'It was a destructive cycle, I couldn't get out. I tried to escape but I got attacked, beaten up and taken advantage of. I was too scared to leave', Tim.

Tim grew up in a supportive, caring family. But at the age of 14 he started to become depressed, turning to alcohol and self harm. His self-esteem suffered and he became vulnerable and confused. Tim was the perfect target for abusive men, intent on the sexual exploitation of children. He says:

I knew I had been adopted from an early age, but life at home with my

mother, father and brother was fine. In fact, the first half of my childhood was good. At the age of 14 I told my school friends I was gay. But it was okay, I wasn't bullied, being gay wasn't an issue. The problem wasn't with school, I had some issues with depression and started to self harm.

At this time a good friend asked me to go to meet a guy he'd met on the





internet. I didn't really think much of it and went along. The guy was in his 20s and, to me, an adult. We were taken to a flat and whilst I sat watching the TV, they both went off into the bedroom.

Tim didn't want to get involved, but meetings with the man continued. He and his friend were offered alcohol and drugs – they were encouraged to 'have fun'. The boys felt like they were being treated as adults; in fact they were being groomed for sexual exploitation.

Before I knew it I was involved and being introduced to the internet guy's 'friends' – lots of men who wanted sex. I started to get 'gifts' and thought that meeting up with guys who gave you money, fags and alcohol was a normal thing. At the time I thought all relationships were like that. These men make you think that. Now I know different.

He continues:

I soon realised that things were not what they first appeared. If I tried to say 'no' I got physically hurt. A couple of times it got bad and I had to get a friend to help me out to cover my injuries so my parents wouldn't find out. It got so bad my body is now physically scarred.

Tim was now drinking heavily and taking drugs to block out the reality of the situation. He hit the lowest point and wanted to end his life. He says:

I got introduced to Barnardo's around the time of my 16th birthday. I was at rock bottom, being abused by different men, drinking heavily and taking more and more drugs. I had such a low opinion of myself that I couldn't think of anything else except not living.

It was a destructive cycle and once trapped it seemed impossible to escape. I tried once and did manage to leave for a week. But they found me and I got attacked, beaten up and taken advantage of. I was too scared to leave again, but I desperately wanted someone to drag me away. I wanted to be saved.

It's not an exaggeration to say that if Barnardo's hadn't come along, I would have intentionally or unintentionally killed myself. I wasn't a human being anymore. I was drugged and drunk – just a shell.

Tim was supported by one of Barnardo's specialist child sexual exploitation services, which provided him with the advice, help and attention he so desperately needed. His worker helped Tim gain the confidence to escape the abuse and begin to rebuild his future.

Today, Tim's life is turned around. He's happier and confident. He has a flat, a job, a long-term boyfriend and even a cat. Essentially, he's back on track and now his life, family and career are good.

Prosecutions

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 introduced a range of new offences that recognised the grooming, coercion and control of children.

- S.14 Arranging or facilitating a child sex offence (child under 16)
- S.15 Meeting a child following sexual grooming (child under 16)
- S.47 Paying for the sexual services of a child
- S.48 Causing or inciting child prostitution or pornography
- S.49 Controlling a child prostitute or a child involved in pornography
- S.50 Arranging or facilitating child prostitution or pornography
- S.57, 58, 59 Trafficking into, within or out of the UK for sexual exploitation.

Despite the introduction of these offences, there have been very few successful prosecutions, so they do not reflect the true scale of the issue and the number of children who are affected. Latest figures (Table 1) show that the number convicted and sentenced remains very low. In 2009, only 55 people were

found guilty of offences relating to child sexual exploitation.

It is important to note, however, that the police and Crown Prosecution Service will often seek to convict using other sexual offences, such as rape or the offence of sexual activity with a child under 13 or a child under 16. In some cases they may even use other legislation to disrupt this activity, such as the Abduction Act 1984 s2 or the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. Whilst this can be very effective, it does mean that individual cases do not come to light as sexual exploitation in the national criminal statistics.

There have been a number of recent high-profile prosecutions. For example, in November 2010, 9 out of a group of 13 men were convicted following a groundbreaking operation by Derbyshire Police that uncovered horrendous abuse of 26 girls as young as 12. They were moved from town to town, where they were taken to 'parties' and used for sex, often by multiple perpetrators. Much of the abuse was recorded as trophies on mobile phones. The men were convicted for a range of offences, including rape and false imprisonment. In the same month, a three-year police investigation in Cornwall into the abuse and exploitation of 30 girls came to an end. The investigation resulted in the conviction of four men for a range of sexual offences.

Table 1 – Offenders convicted and sentenced at all courts for indictable sexual offences relating to child sexual exploitation in England and Wales, 2009

Offence	Total proceeded against	Total found guilty	Total number of sentences
Abuse of children through prostitution and pornography	47	32	30
Trafficking for sexual exploitation (includes offences against adults)	33	23	23

(Source: *Criminal Statistics England and Wales, 2009*. Table S5.11)

In another major case in August 2010, a man from Blackburn was found guilty of grooming and sexually exploiting five girls aged 13 to 15. During the same month, nine men were convicted for crimes relating to sexual exploitation of a girl aged 14 from Rochdale. The offenders were found guilty of a range of sexual offences and not just those that specify the grooming, coercion and control of children.

Despite these prosecutions, the number of abusers convicted is likely to be just the small tip of a very big iceberg. Evidence from Barnardo's services suggests that many cases are dropped. Often this is because of a lack of evidence or because the Crown Prosecution Service assesses the young person or people as unreliable witnesses. Young people and their families have also withdrawn because of intimidation and fear of reprisals. For cases that do proceed, the jury's lack of understanding of the issues, including the level of influence grooming can have on a vulnerable young person, can mean that the young person is viewed as consenting to the abuse.

The children and young people our services work with are extremely vulnerable. They have experienced great trauma and emotional distress as a result of the exploitation and abuse. Seeking a prosecution and having to go through with a court case might, on balance, be more damaging to their emotional well-being and overall welfare. Therefore, services have to make difficult decisions if they are to encourage a young person to push ahead with a prosecution.

Despite these challenges, the findings from the 2009/10 survey show that increasingly our services are working to support young people to co-operate

with prosecutions and act as witnesses. More than half of services had supported children and young people in this way over the last two years. Whilst many cases were dropped, services reported that there had been at least 22 prosecutions which had resulted in a custodial sentence. Several cases were still proceeding through the courts and many more young people were being supported in preparing for court appearances.

Wendy, service manager in the north east, continues:

Recently, we have become more involved in supporting young people as witnesses. The Home Office has granted us funding for a specialist worker, trained to support young people before and during preparation for a trial. The worker is able to provide vital support and offer considered, pre-trial therapy. It's a new and very necessary part of our work.

Barnardo's welcomes the support that the Home Office has given to our project to improve provision for young people as witnesses. However, we would like to see further consideration given to how young witnesses can be supported during the traumatic experience of giving evidence and how this whole process can be radically improved.

Barnardo's believes there needs to be an urgent review of prosecution procedures to address how to overcome the barriers to achieving prosecutions in cases of child sexual exploitation and facilitate good practice. This should include consideration of how the welfare, support and protection of the child is prioritised by all agencies before, during and after the court process, particularly in complex cases of child sexual exploitation.

Understanding the size of the problem

Despite efforts by Barnardo's, the National Working Group and the data collected by CEOP, there remains a worrying lack of data available to present a more accurate picture of the national scale and nature of child sexual exploitation. The guidance says that every area should start from the assumption that child sexual exploitation is taking place.¹² Research undertaken by the University of Bedfordshire has found that few data are currently collected locally. However, the research team is working with local authorities to help them develop recording mechanisms that will both inform the national picture and support service planning at local level.¹³

It is widely recognised that the true scale of child exploitation is far greater than is currently calculated. Chief Superintendent Tony Blockley, head of crime at Derbyshire Constabulary, told the Independent:

The scale of it is enormous. Derby isn't a hotbed of this – it's just one town that's decided to look at this as a problem.¹⁴

The latest strategic overview by CEOP supports this view and emphasises the need for improvements in data collection, stating:

What is universally agreed amongst law enforcement, however, is that the scale of abuse is potentially far bigger than that portrayed in the current picture and that there needs to be improvements in data collection in order to gain a much better understanding of the scale of child sexual abuse wherever it takes place.¹⁵

There is clearly an urgent need for the Home Office to look at developing national reporting mechanisms so that a more accurate picture of the level of child sexual exploitation is established quickly.



12 DCSF (2009) *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation: supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*. http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Safeguarding_CPY_from_sexual_exploitation.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010.

13 Jago, S, Pearce, J et al. (2010) *What's going on to prevent sexual exploitation of children and young people*. www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/intcent/WGO_Interim_Report_Sept10_2__1.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010. Final report expected October 2011.

14 Dugan, E (2010) Revealed: the horrific trade in British children for sex, *Independent on Sunday*, 15 August.

15 CEOP (2010) *Strategic overview 2009–10*. CEOP, London.

Section 3: What is Barnardo's doing to support children and young people at risk of child sexual exploitation?

Barnardo's is the main provider of specialist child sexual exploitation services in the UK. We have 22 specialist services across the UK providing support to children who are sexually exploited or at risk. They offer a safe, confidential environment where young people can go for non-judgemental help, advice and support. For many vulnerable youngsters, struggling in a chaotic, abusive, loveless existence, this can be a lifeline.

Many of our services sit alongside services for children who go missing, because we have learned that running away on a regular basis can often be a sign of child sexual exploitation. We have also learned from our experience of working with vulnerable young people that preventative work can be effective, and we work with children through the delivery of programmes in schools, pupil referral units and residential units.

The Barnardo's model of working

Barnardo's services' central aim is to prevent sexual exploitation, increasing the protection of vulnerable young people and supporting them to escape exploitation. In addition to our specialist direct work with young people, services carry out a range of activities, including educational work, training for other agencies including the police and local authorities, and involvement in multi-agency partnerships.

Our services all use a similar model of support for young people.¹⁶ We describe this as the four A's:

- Access
- Attention
- Assertive outreach
- Advocacy for young people in need

Access

Each of our services provides a friendly and welcoming environment for young people. They usually have a kitchen area, showers and washing facilities, a cosy lounge space and counselling rooms. The larger services may have additional on-site resources, such as gym equipment, art/activities rooms, a sexual health nurse's room and a patio or garden.

Children and young people can refer themselves directly to our services and information or free phone numbers are widely available in areas local to our projects. Sometimes other agencies, for example local authorities or the police, will refer children and young people to us and we work together to ensure that they can identify the signs of sexual exploitation and respond appropriately.

We always make sure to be open and honest with children and young people, so that they feel confident to talk in a safe and private environment.

Attention

We know that children and young people often need positive and consistent attention from a trusted adult. This is a central theme to the support we provide.

¹⁶ Scott, S and Skidmore, P (2005) *Reducing the risk: Barnardo's support for sexually exploited young people: a two-year evaluation*. Barnardo's, Barking-side.

We do this by giving them a key worker who stays with them throughout their engagement with the service. This person is able to build trust with the young person over a period of time. Through developing this safe, secure relationship, we can then help the young person look at the difficulties they are experiencing in their lives and start to replace the exploitative relationship with safe and positive ones. For some youngsters, particularly those from care or difficult backgrounds, this may be the first adult in their lives whom they can trust.

Through a range of one-to-one work and counselling, drop-in support and group work sessions, we are eventually able to help the young person stabilise their life and build their confidence to a point where they are able to escape the situation in which they are being exploited.

Assertive outreach

Many services use a method called 'assertive outreach' to engage young people to help them accept support. Often children and young people do not realise how dangerous their situation is, or have been groomed to believe the abuse they are suffering is 'normal'. Assertive outreach involves our staff going out on the streets and touring the areas where young people gather. Staff use a range of techniques, such as frequent text messaging or mobile calls and home visits in order to stay in contact. Sometimes something as simple as a hot cup of tea on a cold night can help the worker start to gain the trust of a youngster.

The persistence of workers in following up on young people, including those who initially show little or no interest, is eventually understood and appreciated as being genuine concern for their well-being. It also signals to the young person that the worker is trustworthy and will not let them down. This can take time, particularly for children who have never had a caring adult figure in their lives.

Advocacy and links to other services

For many of these young people, everyday life can be chaotic. They might find it difficult to attend appointments with agencies that are trying to help them, such as children's services, police, health or housing. Barnardo's services understand that these young people may not always be focused or disciplined. Staff patiently help them to get access to the key services they need and keep appointments, and advocate for them when relationships with other services break down. We also work with other professionals to increase their understanding of the pressures in young people's lives. A range of services are necessary to help build a protective network around the young person, and Barnardo's advocacy often makes an immediate difference in helping young people get the help and support they need.

Working with children who go missing

We know from our services that children who go missing or run away regularly are at risk of becoming involved in sexual exploitation. Going missing may also be an indicator that sexual exploitation is occurring. Of the children and young people we were working with when the survey was conducted in 2009/10, more than half (51 per cent) went missing on a regular basis.

The entrapment of children and young people in sexual exploitation does not occur overnight. They may become more vulnerable if they are spending a lot of time away from home, from their care placement or from school because they are running away. National research estimates that around 100,000 young people under the age of 16 run away from home or care across the UK each year. Although many of them will stay with family or friends, others will find themselves in far riskier situations. It is thought that around one in six will sleep rough and

one in twelve will come to some harm while they are away.¹⁷

Each time a young person is reported missing, the police assess their level of risk. If a young person goes missing regularly, there is a danger that professionals become complacent, believing the young person will return as usual or that they can somehow manage. This is when they are at greatest risk, and service managers tell us that the people who exploit children in this way are all too aware of how the system works.

Wendy, service manager in the north east, says:

We know that a huge proportion of the children we see, who go missing on a regular basis, are being sexually exploited in some way. It is almost impossible to estimate the true extent of the problem. The children often have no choice over what they do, they are frequently controlled by a predatory adult, who will know how to work the system. These heartless men and women understand the police procedure on runaway children and know if a child goes missing on a regular basis, for a short period of time and then returns home safely, the case is unlikely to attract much attention.

The risk factor is huge and largely ignored. If we could identify these children, and the abusing adults who encourage them to run away earlier, we could significantly reduce the number of children being exposed to these horrific risks.

Barnardo's recognised the link between going missing and child sexual exploitation at an early stage in our work and we now have 13 specialist services

in the UK to support these vulnerable young people. We work in partnership with other agencies, including police, health and children's services, providing support to children of 16 years and under who are reported missing and those aged 18 and under who are looked after.

The work we do is focused on exploring risks and developing strategies with children for keeping themselves safe. The work can make a big difference to the child's life and can include family work, crisis intervention, advocacy or simply a listening and support service. We also offer support to young people in accessing services and resources that may help them.

Prevention – working with children in schools

In 2009/10, we worked with 10,337 children and young people through our delivery of preventative work in schools, pupil referral units, supported housing, youth clubs and health projects in the UK. Sexual exploitation education, which is focused on 'appropriate relationships' training, was delivered to a large number of young people, particularly in areas where we see high numbers of cases.

Barnardo's Young Women's Project is currently being funded by London councils to provide a prevention education programme on sexual exploitation in every London borough. This programme includes training for professionals and group work for young people, using the 'B Wise 2 Sexual Exploitation' resource. The pack equips teachers, social workers and counsellors to educate young people about sexual exploitation with honesty and realism. The material is based on the experiences of young people supported by a specialist Barnardo's service.

17 Rees, G and Lee, J (2005) *Still running II*. Children's Society, London.

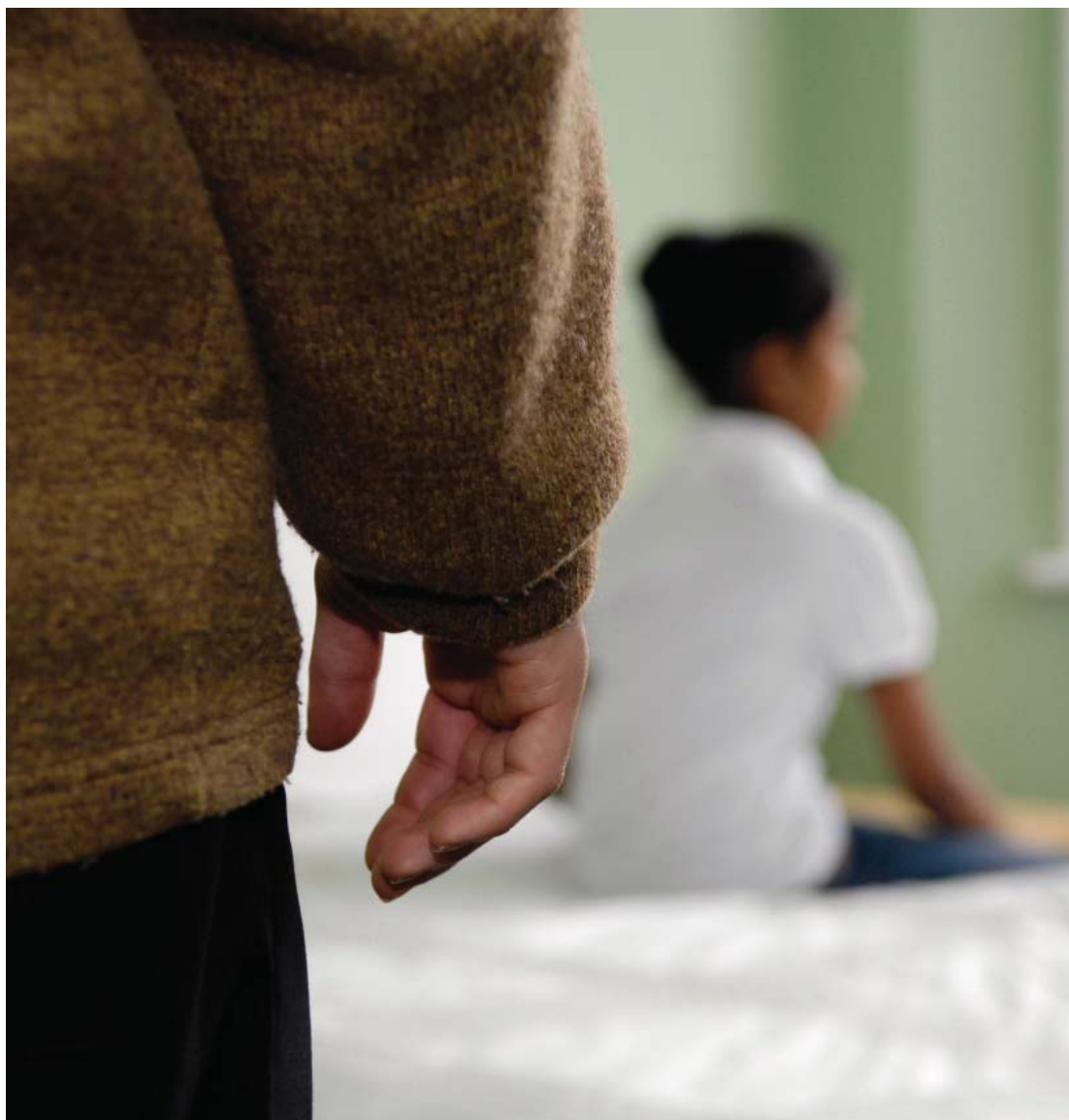
How Barnardo's works with other agencies

Barnardo's child sexual exploitation services work closely with other agencies, including the police, the Crown Prosecution Service, local authority children's services, health services, schools and other voluntary agencies, to firstly identify children who may have been sexually exploited and then to help them.

Staff attend joint meetings, advise on issues specific to sexual exploitation and provide both direct and preventative work to third-party organisations. Many of our services offer awareness-raising sessions, conferences or formal

training to multi-agency professionals from a range of areas including social care, police, education and the voluntary sector. Experience has proven that raising the awareness of fellow professionals increases their ability to identify vulnerable children and gives them the confidence to give sound advice and support to young people at risk.

Since many of the referrals to our services have traditionally come from social services or the police, our projects have long-established links with these agencies that have proved vital in supporting the young people. We have also improved links with the courts and Crown Prosecution Service, supporting young people as witnesses.



A model of how Barnardo's works: A flagship project in the north east

The service aims to identify, support and assist young people at risk of sexual exploitation and takes referrals from police and social services for children missing from home, sexually exploited children and young people on the streets. They work with children as young as 11 and the outreach team is on the streets of a northern town from 6pm–11pm most evenings. They check parks and places where young people hang out and visit known bed and breakfasts or hostels and check for vulnerable children and young people in need of support.

The service manager, Wendy, says: **The children we work with feel a terrible sense of shame. They've been forced to do awful things by the adults who groom and control them, yet somehow society blames them. A child cannot consent to their own abuse.**

Young people and children can self-refer, but the service also takes referrals from social services, police, education, youth and community services or any other service where it is believed that a young person may be at risk. The project has developed a close relationship with the police and this ensures that staff are both kept aware of any children at risk in the area and up to date on any significant police activity.

Wendy says: **The close relationship we have developed with the local police has proved a vital element for us both. Something as simple as recognising a new area of concern, maybe a pizza bar or dodgy bed and breakfast can enable us to focus our efforts on that location, looking for vulnerable children who we can help and it's definitely a two way relationship. Such is the level of trust that we have developed, we have been**

involved with conferences and training with the UK Human Trafficking Centre.

On a practical level, the project offers a range of social care, health and education services. Staff provide the children and young people with toiletries, food and clean clothing. They talk about appointments and advocate for them, often with health, housing, benefit agencies or education. The focus of the services is always on prevention, harm reduction and enabling the young people to exit the situations they find themselves in.

The work tends to be long term. Young people are vulnerable because the grooming process by their 'boyfriends' leaves them confused about what a healthy relationship is. Often the children won't even realise they are being abused. Exploring the grooming process allows the young people to recognise what abuse is and reflect on their own relationships. Relationships are discussed along with other issues, including developing protective behaviour, identity, body image, self-harm, food issues, drugs and safe sex.

Group work is undertaken on a regular basis and the service provides a programme combining issue-based work and fun activities, including poetry writing and art work. The aim of this approach is to involve the young people creatively.

The project works hard to promote the service and awareness of the risks these children face by providing training to agencies who work with young people. The intention is to actively raise awareness of child sexual exploitation with agencies and decision makers and to influence attitudes, policy and practice.

Section 4: What needs to change?

It would be a mistake to suggest that there has been no progress in identifying and understanding child sexual exploitation. Policy makers have become more aware of the issue, and significantly, this led to the publication of new guidance in 2009 to ensure that those who work with children and young people protect them from sexual exploitation.¹⁸ The guidance sets out how police, teachers, social workers, health workers, youth workers and other professionals who come into contact with children should identify those at risk, protect and support them and then take action against perpetrators. It describes the roles and responsibilities that different organisations and individuals should play, in particular the role of the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) in leading this work. It says all local authorities should identify what action should be taken to combat sexual exploitation.

Barnardo's welcomed the guidance as a positive step towards ending child sexual exploitation. However, we are acutely aware that this guidance is only as effective as its implementation. Interim research findings¹⁹ from the University of Bedfordshire and Comic Relief suggest that fewer than a quarter of local authorities have a strategy to protect children from sexual exploitation and to proactively investigate their abusers. It found that there are just 29 sexual exploitation co-ordinators in post – representing less than a quarter of the country. In addition, only a quarter of the country has access to a specialist project which supports children who are sexually exploited. The evidence thus far suggests

that only a minority of local authorities are prioritising child sexual exploitation as a child protection issue.

The research has found that although there are examples of good practice, they are the exceptions rather than the rule. Barnardo's is very concerned that sexual exploitation is not being considered as a national child protection issue. In too many areas, there is a lack of activity to address this type of abuse. Too many children who deserve support are being overlooked by professionals who are not picking up the tell-tale signs.

It is of particular concern that at a time when our services are reporting more sophisticated, complex and organised forms of sexual exploitation, those who work with children are not taking all the necessary steps to protect them. Clearly, all agencies need to be challenged and supported to do more. In our view, this can best be achieved by central government taking a lead role to ensure that all children are protected from sexual exploitation.

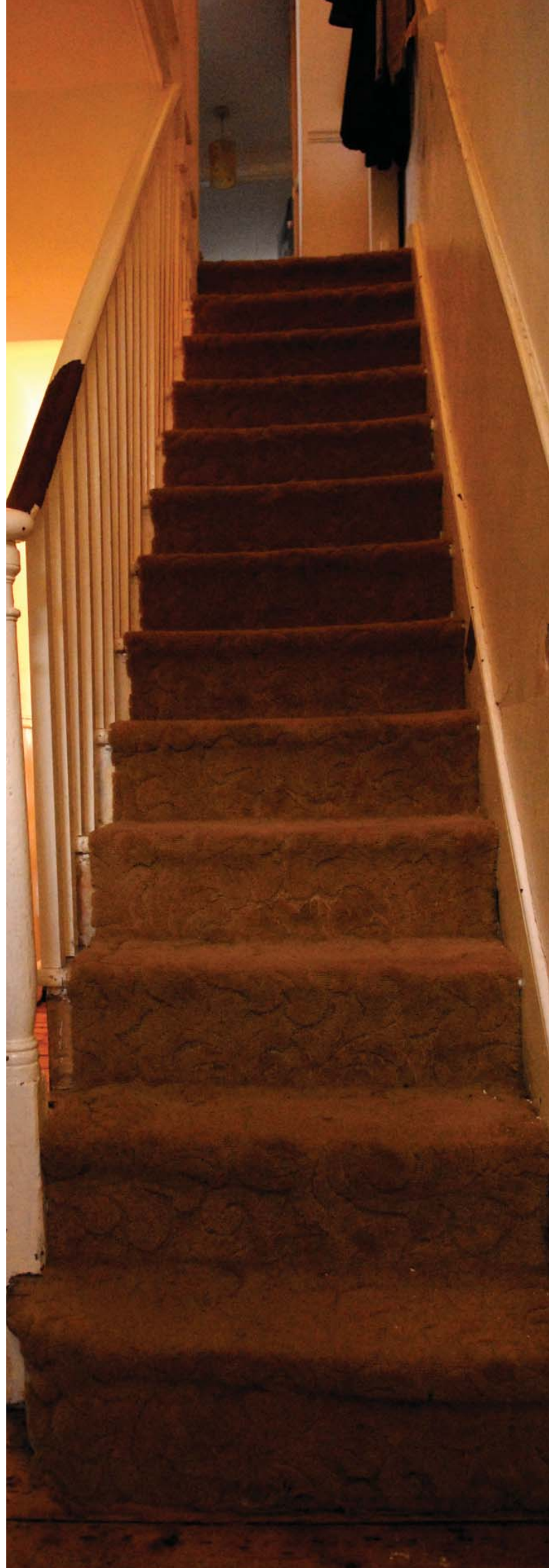
Barnardo's welcomes the publication in November of the Government's 'Call to End Violence against Women and Girls' strategy paper,²⁰ but is concerned that the focus is primarily on domestic violence and sexual abuse. The strategy does not cover the sexual exploitation of boys and young men or girls and young women. Indeed, there is only one mention of exploitation in the report and it relates to women rather than children. This reflects how the scale and nature of child sexual exploitation continues to remain hidden.

18 DCSF (2009) *Safeguarding children and young people from sexual exploitation: supplementary guidance to Working Together to Safeguard Children*. http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/Safeguarding_CPY_from_sexual_exploitation.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010.

19 Jago, S, Pearce, J et al. (2010) *What's going on to prevent sexual exploitation of children and young people*. http://www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/intcent/WGO_Interim_Report_Sept10_2__1.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010. Final report expected October 2011.

20 HM Government (2010) *Call to end violence against women and girls*. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/crime/call-end-violence-women-girls/vawg-paper>, accessed 14 December 2010.

Alarming, at present there is no government minister with responsibility for the issue, in the same way that there is a minister with responsibility for looked-after or disabled children. Barnardo's believes that unless and until a minister provides dedicated attention to this issue, we will not see the improvement necessary to effectively intervene and halt this form of child abuse. There must be a central drive to improve practice, with a minister and dedicated officials leading a national action plan to embed guidance and overcome the barriers to more effective local delivery. Mechanisms must be developed for sharing good practice and ensuring that there is better co-ordination between social services, health, education, specialist services and the police, so that the dots are joined in protecting children at risk. Furthermore, the progress of local authorities needs to be closely monitored and they must be held accountable if they fail to support vulnerable children.



A national action plan

Ministerial leadership would ensure that senior leaders from all the agencies recognise child sexual exploitation as an urgent child protection issue which needs to be addressed. It would also ensure that there is more effective co-ordination at the centre between the Home Office and the Department for Education.

As part of a national action plan led by a minister supported by a cross-departmental implementation group, Barnardo's would like to see central government work with local authorities, the police and other agencies in England to:

1. Raise awareness to improve early identification of child sexual exploitation

There is a critical need for far more awareness amongst all professionals in universal services of their role in identifying and addressing child sexual exploitation. Children and young people and their parents and carers need to have the right information to help them access support quickly and safely.

- An awareness-raising campaign is needed for all health, education, social care, youth support and youth justice agencies so practitioners are given information about the factors that may increase vulnerability to child sexual exploitation as well as the signs and symptoms that it is occurring.
- Training should be developed for frontline staff in services for children and young people to recognise the warning signs and risk factors of child sexual exploitation and how to respond using child protection procedures. This should include understanding the elements of grooming and coercion so that a child or young person's behaviour is not dismissed as rebellious or consenting to the abuse.
- Improved information and education is needed in primary and secondary schools so that children know how to stay safe both online and in their community. Information provided should also alert parents and carers to the signs and symptoms of child sexual exploitation.

2. Improve statutory responses and the provision of services

In addition to ensuring that universal services can respond to boys and girls who are victims of sexual exploitation, it is also vital that the right specialist services are commissioned and that there are clearly determined pathways from universal to specialist services. In some areas of the country there are excellent services for victims and it is important that these continue to be commissioned and that in other areas, gaps in specialist service provision are filled.

- As part of children's service planning, local authorities should undertake a cross-agency risk assessment for child sexual exploitation to determine the level of need in each area.
- Local authorities should pool resources, in order to ensure that specialist services are commissioned to support children and young people at risk. A lead officer should be appointed who is accountable and co-ordinates responses across statutory authorities and the voluntary sector.
- Child sexual exploitation must be explicitly recognised as a form of child abuse within local child protection procedures. These should clearly identify both underlying risk factors for child sexual exploitation along with the signs and symptoms that this form of abuse may be occurring. These should include the link between child

sexual exploitation and children who go missing so that repeated running away always triggers a safeguarding concern for further investigation.

3. Improve the evidence

There is an urgent need to improve data on the prevalence of child sexual exploitation, to strengthen the evidence base and to support professionals to appropriately share information.

- A national reporting mechanism is required so that data is collected to show the scale of child sexual exploitation across the country.²¹
- Processes should be established for services to share safeguarding concerns about child sexual exploitation with the police, in order that information is collated and analysed appropriately to build a picture of activity at local level. Roles and responsibilities for sharing this information should be made explicit.

4. Improve prosecution procedures

To increase the number of cases that lead to a conviction, action is needed to improve police, prosecution and court practice, particularly in supporting victims to act as witnesses.

- A joint review of police practice and prosecution procedures is required in order to overcome the barriers to achieving prosecutions in cases of child sexual exploitation and to facilitate and disseminate good practice.
- The welfare, support and protection of child witnesses should be prioritised by all agencies before, during and after the court process through the development of witness care programmes.

²¹ Building on the work of the University of Bedfordshire and Comic Relief; see: Jago, S, Pearce, J et al. (2010) *What's going on to prevent sexual exploitation of children and young people*. http://www.beds.ac.uk/research/iasr/intcent/WGO_Interim_Report_Sept10_2_1.pdf, accessed 14 December 2010.



Conclusion

We recognise that resources are limited and local authorities have many demands to meet. However, cutting children free from sexual exploitation has to be a top priority. At a time when local authorities are facing competing priorities with a less intrusive performance framework, there has to be a central champion at ministerial level to make sure that protecting children from sexual exploitation is an integral part of all local authority child protection frameworks.

Universal services can certainly do more to identify those children at risk. However, research by Barnardo's over a number of years has found that it is only through specialist services that we can fully ensure that the needs of sexually exploited children are met. We do not expect every local authority to have such a service, but where there is a clear need, authorities should be prepared to pool resources with other agencies and, where possible, across geographical boundaries to provide an appropriate response.

It is also critical that children and young people are fully supported and given intense therapeutic back-up in order to go ahead with prosecutions and endure the traumatic process of providing testimony in court. It is encouraging that there have been a number of high-profile cases resulting in conviction. However we know that there could be many more successful cases if the welfare, support and protection of children was prioritised by all agencies throughout the legal process and, critically, even after a case has ended. This is especially important in the prevention of re-victimisation.

The sexual exploitation of children remains a hidden issue. As a society we know it exists but do not want to face up to it. This is unlikely to change until a government minister takes the lead in raising awareness so there is a step change in policy, practice and service delivery. Unless this happens, far too many children will continue to be subject to the hidden obscenity of sexual exploitation.

Grateful thanks are due to the children and young people who agreed to share their views and experiences with us.

*Puppet on a string:
The urgent need to cut children
free from sexual exploitation.*

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Some images posed by models.
Names have been changed to protect identities.

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