



The West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board's Response to SCR Key: A Serious Case Review into Child Sexual Exploitation in West Sussex

Introduction by independent Chair

Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) is defined as: "The sexual exploitation of children and young people under 18 involving exploitative situations, contexts and relationships where young people receive "something" (e.g. food, accommodation, drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, affection, gifts, money) as a result of engaging in sexual activities. This can occur through the use of technology without the child's immediate recognition, for example the persuasion to post sexual images on the internet/mobile phones with no 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" (Definition included in the National Working Group for sexually exploited children and young people, 2008)ⁱ

Until recently both professionals and the public have failed to recognise the extent and prevalence of Child Sexual Exploitation. High profile cases in Rochdale, Rotherham and Oxfordshire have made us aware of this significant threat to children. Perpetrators pay little regard to whether children live in large rural counties or metropolitan boroughs and child sexual exploitation can take place anywhere.

West Sussex continue to ensure the partnership approach to tackling CSE is robust. Most recently this has included reviewing our procedures, improving our assessment tools, revising our multi-agency arrangements for tracking and monitoring, and developing a robust training offer to skill up the multi-agency workforce. However, there remain areas for improvement as identified in this SCR response paper.

Elaine Coleridge-Smith

West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board

Background

Serious Case Review Key has looked into a case of child sexual exploitation (CSE) which culminated in prosecutions against two men for charges including rape, sexual assault and sexual activity with a child, carried out against twelve girls aged between 13 and 15 at the time of the offences. The review sought to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the professional response and activity following the identification of children potentially at risk of, or being exposed to, sexual exploitation.

Improving the local response to child sexual exploitation (CSE)

This Serious Case Review Report – conducted by an experienced independent lead reviewer - considered professional practices that were up to five years old. During this time considerable work has been carried out to make improvements to the way child sexual exploitation and child sexual activity is addressed across the multi-agency partnership. We accept we need to remain alert to this risk.

In October 2015 the Ofsted inspection of West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board (WSSCB) found that the Board should 'improve its understanding of the local nature and prevalence of child sexual exploitation....to support the development of strategic multi-agency responses'. Since that time there has been further progress in the West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board's delivery of work to tackle CSE.

- The WSSCB Child sexual exploitation sub-group has led the work to develop, and monitor the effectiveness of, a new multi-agency CSE strategy.
- Alongside this updated policies and procedures have been put in place to ensure the workforce understand how to deliver best practice in tackling CSE.
- A multi-agency Missing and Exploitation operational group leads on the effectiveness of operational activity, with a governance structure surrounding it to strengthen the work to ensure a robust response to any exploitation of children and young people in West Sussex. The weekly operational meetings review risk for individual children and monthly tactical meetings oversee progress, risk factors and actions.
- An updated CSE screening tool and risk assessment has been developed in partnership with young people at risk of CSE.
- A programme of quarterly multi-agency auditing is in place to identify progress made and any ongoing or new themes for improvement. Alongside this a performance report based on the Ofsted thematic inspection requirements is being developed.
- Work to understand and monitor the prevalence of CSE is leading to improvements in our focus, response, and analysis which is informing the decision-making across strategic and tactical CSE groups.
- Services that provide support and intervention where CSE has been identified have been reviewed to ensure a robust response for children at low, medium and high risk of CSE. This includes the provision of therapeutic support for those who have been victims of CSE
- Training and practice improvement programmes have been put in place across partner agencies, including Early Help, Children's Social Care, Police, and health organisations. The WSSCB multi-agency CSE training has been expanded to ensure it reaches more frontline staff.

Further action is required to continue our progress and understand the impact of our work. This includes:

- An evaluation with schools of the impact of CSE awareness raising work on children and young people, plus further work, alongside the Healthy Schools programme, to identify a coordinated offer for schools in relation to healthy relationships and keeping safe. This will include addressing the

increasing prevalence of digital activity which may be perceived to be less risky by children and young people

- An evaluation of the impact of preventative work and the identification of further targeted awareness raising required. Including widening our CSE training and awareness programme to include an offer for multi-agency front line staff who do not work directly with children, initially focusing on those who are actively working within communities

The following section outlines our response to the specific recommendations provided in the SCR report.

Recommendations

The recommendations from this report have already been disseminated by single agencies involved in the review to their teams. The WSSCB will now ensure that the recommendations and learning from this Serious Case Review will be shared with all front line staff working with children and their families in West Sussex via a special bulletin circulated post SCR publication. A Learning Event will also be held shortly after publication for staff to attend and subsequently disseminate the messages to team members. The WSSCB recognise that the recommendations and learning should be shared with a wider range of professionals who don't work directly with children and young people but are connected to communities and therefore able to support and engage in creating a culture of community curiosity

Three recommendations were made;

Recommendation 1:

The Board should

- a) review the outcomes and impact of recent campaigns which aimed to promote public awareness of the issue of CSE, when and how concerns should be raised and what should happen as a result**
- b) ensure that the issue continues to have a high profile**

The Board's Response:

The review highlights the importance of ensuring that the public understand the vulnerability of some children to sexual exploitation and challenging the myths related to the type of children who are vulnerable. It is essential that the public are aware of their role in recognising and responding to the signs that a child may be being exploited. The Board recognises that during the timeframes covered by this review there was a growing appreciation nationally about CSE and that both public and professional awareness was not what it is now. Ensuring that the public were aware of avenues for raising concerns, at the time, was therefore not prominent.

The Board's Actions:

In 2015, the growing national understanding of CSE coupled with the learning from a number of Sussex Police reviews into CSE, led to increased public awareness and raised activity by the WSSCB. Since this time we have campaigned to raise awareness by targeting young people, parents/carers and teachers in West Sussex. This has included the use of social media, posters in public spaces, and items in the local news.

Targeted activities have included a drama performance delivered throughout 2015-17 to more than 21,000 West Sussex pupils to explore the realities of sexual exploitation called 'Chelsea's Choice'; the development and sharing of a range of information for parents and carers about CSE (including information leaflets, spotting the signs posters and online safety guides); video blogs with young people on healthy relationship and consent; a County Council pledge to tackle CSE with partners; and work with partners, including our Community Safety partners, to develop innovative pilots such as training licensed taxi drivers and hotel owners in the signs of sexual exploitation, and delivering community based activity for frontline staff who don't work directly with children and young people, and those within the night time economy.

The WSSCB intends to continue raising awareness of CSE through a number of activities:

- Complete a full evaluation of the impact of Chelsea's Choice and the needs for future awareness raising to inform future plans
- The delivery of campaigns focusing on internet safety, as this has been recognised as one of the largest areas of exploitation
- Training for schools in responding to sexting incidents

The WSSCB recognises that once children reach adolescence their peer groups, neighbourhoods and other social spaces are often more influential than family in setting standards of behaviour and social norms. The WSSCB plans include intervening in these places to create safer spaces for young people. By raising awareness of CSE and the fact that it can and does happen in West Sussex we can start to reduce people's tolerance or their social apathy to CSE. We will continue to train people, especially those working in social spaces frequented by young people, to understand exploitation, spot the signs of abuse and feel confident in reporting concerns. We will seek to develop a much stronger community development focussed approach and encourage people to speak up, providing valuable community intelligence across West Sussex in partnership with our District and Borough Council partners. Engagement in communities to deliver grass roots interventions will be core to our next steps. The WSSCB acknowledges that changing the social dynamics of an area will always be more sustainable than simply relocating children away from harm.

Recommendation 2:

The Board should review local arrangements for the escalation of safeguarding concerns so as to ensure that

a) those arrangements are fit for purpose

b) and that agencies and individuals know how and when they should be used

The Board's Response:

The WSSCB recognises that occasionally situations arise when workers within one agency feel that the decision made by a worker from another agency is either not safe or not in the best interests of a child. The multi-agency contribution to keeping children safe is crucial to an effective partnership, and this includes the need to work in an open and honest way. Problem resolution is an integral part of professional co-operation and joint working to safeguard children.

As a result of the review the WSSCB has recognised that the local arrangements for escalation were not clear, and that agencies and individuals were not always confident in escalating their concerns. A Resolution for Professional Differences protocol was in place at the time of the Serious Case Review, and available to workers via the Pan-Sussex Procedures website. However the WSSCB acknowledges that this protocol did not provide a clear pathway or clarify expectations upon each agency when escalating a matter or being in receipt of a matter which is escalated.

For this specific SCR, were it not for the tenacity of one individual, matters may not have come to light. The Board acknowledges that further work is necessary to ensure a culture of high support and high challenge across the multi-agency partnership.

The Board's Actions

The Board has agreed and disseminated a new multi-agency Escalation Policy. This provides workers, based in agencies working across the journey that a child may take through the professional and statutory system, with the means to raise concerns they have about decisions made by other professionals or agencies. The protocol includes the expectation that the WSSCB Business Unit will be informed of escalations as they arise, in order that the Board can understand the use of the protocol and the effectiveness of response. The impact of the protocol on practice across the children's workforce will be monitored by the WSSCB Practice Improvement sub-group.

The importance of escalation has been promoted via the WSSCB bulletins, and this will continue on a regular basis. All WSSCB multi-agency training highlights the expectation that workers will escalate cases where they are unhappy with, or worried about, decision-making around a child.

Recommendation 3:

The Board should produce information which reminds agencies and practitioners of their duties, responsibilities and of best professional practice when receiving reports of sexual activity by children and young people

The Board Response:



Professionals working with children are expected to consider, in every case of sexual activity involving a child aged 13 to 15, whether there should be a discussion with other agencies and whether a referral should be made to the Local Authority Children's Social Care. A referral to Children's Social Care or the Police should always be made in cases involving children aged less than 13. The Board is overseeing an active area of work regarding the issue of consent in relation to children aged 16 and over, with the aim of improving our understanding and work with those children in this age group who are being exploited by others.

At the time of the incidents explored in the Serious Case Review, these expectations were outlined in the Pan Sussex procedure relating to 'Sexually Active Children', available to practitioners on the Pan Sussex Procedures website. However the WSSCB recognises that in the circumstances of the Serious Case Review, there were failures to respond appropriately to the issues of consent which arose. Actions are currently being taken to refresh professionals' knowledge of the procedures relating to sexually active children, and so that practice expectations are clearly understood and applied.

The Board's Actions

The Board is responsible for communicating practice expectations in response to children who are sexually active, and supporting the workforce in understanding the complexities of consent in this context.

In response to this finding, partner agencies including the Police, the Local Authority and those organisations across health, have reinforced practice expectation across their workforce, and included these messages in their single agency training. WSSCB multi-agency training has been updated to include the protocol on Sexually Active Children.

The WSSCB plans a special bulletin on responding to children who are sexually active and considering consent, which will be disseminated following the Serious Case Review Key learning event.

Elaine Coleridge-Smith

Independent Chair, WSSCB

9th May 2017

ⁱ This was the definition used at the time. The current definition is as follows:

'Child sexual exploitation is a form of child sexual abuse. It occurs where an individual or group takes advantage of an imbalance of power to coerce, manipulate or deceive a child or young person under the age of 18 into sexual activity (a) in exchange for something the victim needs or wants, and/or (b) for the financial advantage or increased status of the perpetrator or facilitator. The victim may have been sexually exploited even if the sexual activity appears consensual. Child sexual exploitation does not always involve physical contact; it can also occur through the use of technology.'

(Child Sexual Exploitation, DfE 2017)