

Young people's views on services aimed at helping them to recover from and avoid child sexual exploitation: interim report.

The research funded by a BASPCAN research grant aimed to:

- Gather data on the views and experiences of sexually exploited young people in Bradford about which interventions, approaches and services have helped and will help them to recover from and avoid sexual exploitation.
- Be emancipatory and empowering of participants;
- Disseminate findings which inform practitioners and policy makers in offering more effective services.

Potential participants were contacted by the Barnardo's Turnaround Service and the Children Society's Hand-in Hand Project and invited to participate in activities designed to gather their views. If willing, they were asked to choose preferred method(s) for doing so.

Twenty-five individuals who are former or current service users of the two projects (20 from Turnaround and its forerunner and five from Hand-in-Hand) were ultimately involved. Their current ages ranged from 13 to 23 years (average = 16.32 years). In terms of ethnicity, they are broadly representative of their demographic within the district, but males are underrepresented. 24 are female and one male. 60% ($n=15$) are 'White British', 28% are 'Asian' ($n=7$) and 12% ($n=3$) have 'Shared Heritage'. They had begun to receive relevant interventions between the ages of 12 and 17 years (average = 13.8 years), typically in the context of concerns about vulnerability to or known sexual exploitation whilst going missing from home. Most lived with at least one parent and had initially been referred by other agencies; notably schools and local authority social workers. Of 15 providing individual information, 73.3% ($n=11$) had received individual direct work, 26.6% ($n=4$) group work and 20% ($n=3$) 'therapeutic outreach' (informal visits at home), while one was dropping-in to group sessions at her own initiative.

Thirteen participated in individual audio-recorded semi-structured interviews and two completed questionnaires. Of these 15, two also participated in both of two one day workshops held in May and July 2013 and seven in that held in July 2013. A further ten young women participated in group discussions and other activities at one or both workshops where they also contributed poems, written comments and artwork.

Seven workers from the larger of the two projects, the chair of the LSCB and lead representatives from the Police and Children's Services also provided views and

information via both individual interviews and group discussions, including direct discussions with the young people at the May workshop.

Data is still being analysed, but several major themes are already emerging. These include:

- The young people's overwhelming satisfaction with and positive feedback about the services they had received from the two agencies. 93% (n=14 of 15) said that the service had been extremely, very or really helpful. They identified little that had been unhelpful, but several suggested that more of the same would have been better and that more 'out-of-hours' services would have helped them (e.g. *"even if it is 2 o'clock in the morning you want to pick the phone up and you do want talk to someone"*).
- The major negative impact that that being sexually exploited had had on them, at least in the short-term. Several mentioned threats to their lives and one said straightforwardly *"it's bad it's really really bad"*.
- Some young people's ongoing ambivalence about the nature of their relevant experiences and agencies' efforts to influence their behaviour. Regardless of the perceptions of professionals, some, particularly those in the early stages of interventions expressed ambivalence about the concerns others expressed about them, while older former service users tended to highlight the need for services and workers to be flexible in their approach and to maintain contact until the young person was ready to accept services. One recalled that it had taken her two years to trust her worker.
- The likelihood that relevant young people will use terminology different from that used by professionals and may initially reject terms such as "child sexual exploitation" or "sexual abuse" as being relevant to their current experiences. They may well use terms such as *"relationships"* and *"chilling"* when referring to activities which professionals would see as exposing them to serious dangers.
- The paramount importance of their knowing that they had access to a worker who they could talk to and who they could rely on to listen in a non-judgemental way (e.g. *"you like build up a ... strong bond ... you are able to trust them"*).
- The importance for many of there being a physical place they could go to where they felt safe (physically and emotionally). One young woman spoke of needing somewhere she *"felt safe and ... knew people and ... could just relax, just think what my next steps were, get a breather"*.
- The usefulness of information, training and advice about matters such as 'grooming', 'keeping safe' and the risks inherent in 'running away' / 'going missing'.
- The importance of enrichment experiences providing practical diversions from activities which place them at risk of sexual exploitation and serving

to partially and symbolically meet their need to know that someone cares about them.

- The need for a range of services tailored to individual needs and significant variations in the exact types of services and interventions young people felt they could use. Some clearly welcomed the opportunities which group work provides for making friends and gaining a sense of solidarity, but others expressed anxieties about mixing and sharing sensitive information with other young people.
- Expressions of discontent and criticism of the day-to-day services provided by the police and local authority services. Young people frequently volunteered views which suggested that they feel that statutory agencies do not listen to or care about them. Several expressed this in terms of their 'hatred' of the police and/or in terms of feeling that police and local authority social workers were 'on their backs'. One suggested "*they treat the innocent as if they are the perpetrators*", while another asserted "*I think they just stick their nose in everything and make more problems and then just blame it on you ... they act like your mum and tell you what to do...*".
- Concerns about the limits of confidentiality. Not all the young people agreed that their workers needed to share information with statutory agencies and a vocal minority were particularly critical at cooperation with the police. One commented "*I couldn't really tell my problems 'cause ... the more I told them the more worried they got and the more police got involved. So I never used to tell am ought*".
- Concerns about the apparent inability of secondary schools to prevent sexual exploitation beginning and happening within school time.
- Concerns about their own and workers' physical safety.
- The need for services which also engage with these young people's parents and carers.
- The significance of mobile phones as a means of contact between workers and professionals.