

Young People's views on Child Sexual Exploitation

**Commissioned by the Independent Inquiry into CSE in
Northern Ireland**

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Introduction

Acknowledgements

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I am grateful to the youth workers who sat in on all the focus groups to ensure that young people were supported through the process of discussing a difficult and sometimes distressing subject.

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Finally acknowledgment is due to the 64 young people who participated in focus groups. The enthusiasm with which they shared their views, particularly in relation to such a sensitive subject, was remarkable. They gave careful consideration to every aspect of the work and provided valuable insights which will be of great assistance to the Inquiry Board.

Background

A major PSNI investigation into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), led to the arrest of 30 individuals in Northern Ireland. On 5th November 2013, the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety announced that Professor Kathleen Marshall was to lead an independent inquiry into CSE.

The terms of reference for the CSE Inquiry Board include a requirement to seek the views of children and young people here in relation to CSE.

The Inquiry team has developed a comprehensive process of engagement with children and young people – particularly with those who have been directly affected by the issue. The team also wanted to hear from other young people, in community based groups.

Children in Northern Ireland's Participation Network was commissioned to undertake such an exercise. The purpose of which was:

- To seek the views of young people around their perceptions, understanding and experience of Child Sexual Exploitation and to hear their ideas for tackling the issue.
- To allow members of the Inquiry Board, where feasible, an opportunity to engage directly with young people.
- To produce a report of the engagements

Methodology

All the work of the Participation Network is based on the **ASK FIRST** standards. These were developed by the Network and have been endorsed by the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Health and Social Care Board.

These ensure that engagements are characterised by:

Appropriate methods – to maintain interest, particularly when engaging younger children

Support – young participants have access to support workers

Knowledge – information is provided in child friendly formats

Feedback – children are told the outcomes of their input

Inclusion – processes are open to all children

Respect – children and their views are respected

Senior people – those who can influence outcomes are present to hear the children's views

Timing – engagement takes place at an early stage of the work

The engagement involved focus groups with young people. The design of these primarily set out to create a safe space in which to explore issues around Child Sexual Exploitation. In each case we worked with ready-formed groups who were accompanied by their usual group worker. It was made clear that children were not expected to talk about their own direct experience.

Young people, through a variety of methods, addressed the following:

- What do you know about Child Sexual Exploitation – where have you learned about it?
- What do you think Child Sexual Exploitation is?
- Have you heard any messages about Child Sexual Exploitation – how effective are these?
- What makes children or young people vulnerable to Child Sexual Exploitation?
- Who do you think should be involved in protecting children and young people from Child Sexual Exploitation – what should they do?
- What should the Inquiry Board be recommending to Government?

Five focus group sessions were facilitated as follows:

2 sessions with Gay and Lesbian Youth Northern Ireland (GLYNI) in Belfast – this included a direct meeting between the young people and Professor Marshall, Chair of the Inquiry Board

Session with Youth Action leadership programme in Enniskillen

Session with WELB youth group in Derry

Session with SELB youth group in Craigavon

In all 64 young people aged 15-25 years participated, the majority were aged 16-18 years.

We were not able to access a group of young people with disabilities within the allotted time frame. This was primarily due to an assessment of the amount of

preparatory work that would need to have been undertaken. However, it was agreed that we would access information through discussions with staff from the Barnardo's Disabled Children and Young People's Participation Project. The learning from that exercise is included in this report.

The report begins with a summary of key messages from children and young people, it continues by setting out their views under the following headings:

- Awareness of CSE
- Identifying those at risk
- Barriers to identification
- What agencies / communities could do – recommendations

The report concludes with a discussion of issues pertaining to Child Sexual Exploitation for young people with disabilities.

Summary of key messages

Analysis of the views expressed by the young people consulted gives rise to a number of common themes.

Awareness of CSE

- Very few young people said they had an understanding of CSE prior to the session – those who had heard of it, tended to describe more general child abuse rather than specific CSE behaviours
- Young people said that apart from some “stranger danger” information or talks about keeping safe on-line, the subject was not covered in schools – many felt that this was part of a general prohibition around talking about sex in any form
- Young gay people said that there was no mention of LGBT relationships or safe sex advice in schools
- None of the 10 youth workers who helped facilitate the focus groups had heard of CSE
- Many participants felt that young people could find themselves being sexually exploited without realising it
- Some young people felt that a relationship between an older and younger person wasn’t always exploitative – it would depend on the balance of power

Identifying those at risk

Participants suggested a comprehensive range of young people who might be at particular risk. These included those:

- With very little money – from poorer backgrounds
- In care
- With disability
- With low self esteem
- Who are LGBT (through being bullied / blackmailed)
- Who aren’t aware of CSE
- From broken homes / bad family situations
- Who are quiet / isolated with few friends
- Who have a mental illness
- Who are newcomers to Northern Ireland
- Who are young carers
- Who are single mothers
- Who are on the streets
- Who are involved in drinking or taking drugs
- Who are in the UK because being gay is illegal in their own country

All groups made the point that anyone can be vulnerable.

Barriers to identification

Young people were able to cite a range of factors that might get in the way of seeing that a child or young person is being sexually exploited:

As a victim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe that the person loves them • Like getting expensive things • They think they are in control • Not knowing what a good relationship is • Don't know what CSE is • Need to feel special
As friends of the person being exploited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Victim too ashamed to let them know what's happening • Looks like a normal relationship • Don't know what to look out for • Think its 'cool' to have an older girlfriend / boyfriend
As parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents may not care enough to notice • May think child is lying for attention • Parents may abuse alcohol / drugs • Child may be good at covering up
As the police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young person may have a bad relationship with PSNI e.g. ASBO • Police lack evidence so don't act • Police over confident that they are capable of dealing with it, so won't believe it could happen • Have bigger issues to deal with • Don't believe young people – wary of false claims • Bugged down in paper work
As the public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't understand what CSE is • Afraid of accusation of interfering • Not something people talk about • Don't want to get involved

Or that get in the way of telling someone ...

... that you are being exploited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shame • Afraid of the PSNI so won't approach them • Afraid no-one will believe you • Don't trust the PSNI
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't know what will happen • Afraid of exploiter • Boys would lose face if they go to police • Girls would be called a slut if it was known
... that you think someone you know is being exploited	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worried about accusing in the wrong • You might lose your friend • Don't know who to tell • The abuser could be someone in authority – with power

What people / agencies should do ...

Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give more money to raise awareness and employ people to help • Give social workers more powers • Work with offenders to stop them offending • Provide more groups and counselling for victims • Make sure social workers and youth workers are trained in CSE • Make sure pupils get mandatory teaching on CSE every year
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell when it is happening to you or your friends • Look out for your friends • Warn people about CSE • Young people should be trained to tell other young people about CSE – peer education
Social workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with vulnerable young people to make sure they are not exploited • Visit houses and check for dangerous situations • Talk to young people more to find out what is happening • Give advice to parents
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell children about CSE • Have a good relationship with your child and each other • If you notice something take action
Safeguarding Board	<p>(Role of SBNI had to be explained)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be more thorough – look into every case • Tell people about CSE

Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach children about what a healthy relationship is • Be approachable to children after class • Teach about CSE
Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investigate all concerns from children • Have special officers to deal with this • Always act – even if it seems minor • Have a better relationship with young people
Youth service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have information evenings about CSE • Notice changes in young people • Act as a link between young people who want to report CSE and the PSNI
The public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell police or social workers of any suspicions • It <u>is</u> your business – should be an advertising campaign • Get informed
Care homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure young people know dangers • Always know who young people's friends are
The courts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Put exploiters in prison • Have harsher sentences
The Inquiry Board	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell the Ministers what young people think • Make sure CSE is taught in schools • Get everyone to work together (police, youth service, social workers)
NSPCC / Barnardo's	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Go into schools and educate young people about CSE • Run a free CSE telephone helpline – 24hrs • Help victims • Advertise what you do • Run parenting courses so they know how to protect their children
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neighbours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set up neighbourhood watch • Tell parents if child is acting strangely • Ask young people if everything is ok
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell people you feel safe with what is happening to you • Join a youth group • Look out for signs among your friends

Additional key points from consultation in relation to disability

- Young people with disabilities aren't prepared by school (or home) for sexual relationships – it is assumed they will never be sexual – this increases their vulnerability to exploitation
- Young people with learning disabilities have very few boundaries – don't know the difference between love and exploitation – aren't taught
- Many young people with disabilities are dependant on the internet for social interaction – can be targeted as easily as young people at discos
- Parents of young people with disabilities need support to learn to enable their children and support them to be as independent as possible
- Professionals who deal with CSE need disability awareness training – delivered by young people with disabilities

Views of young people

Awareness

Sessions began with a PowerPoint based input on what Child Sexual Exploitation is and how it operates. Young people were then asked if they had heard of CSE. In the main, only a tiny proportion of the participants knew about CSE. Even those who said they had heard of it, tended to give descriptions of more general abuse.

Following further clarification we discussed how it was different to normal healthy relationships and young people identified issues of power, coercion and money.

“It’s being abused into it – feeling you have to give back”

“In relationships both should give and take”

“It’s about money not love”

Many young people readily identified the insidious nature of CSE

“It’s hard to now if you’re being exploited”

“Young people are oblivious – they don’t realise it’s happening – even if their mates say, they just think they’re jealous”

Some young people were of the opinion that relationships between older and younger people weren’t always exploitative, although others felt that it depended on the age gap. Young people from the gay community mentioned that young adults were potentially at risk of engaging in sexual activity with young people under the age of consent who look, and claim to be, older. In such cases it was felt that the younger person might be exploiting the older person.

Only three young people said they had heard of CSE in school. For two, this involved an organisation coming into the school and presenting information. The class teacher was present and this was not seen as problematic. Another young person said that a teacher had talked about it as it had been on the news.

Other young people said that they had received some information about “stranger danger” and internet safety in schools but that CSE had not been specifically addressed.

Many young people went on to say that sex is rarely mentioned in schools. They felt that it is a ‘taboo’ subject and that such an attitude leads to young people being unaware of dangers and can place them at risk”

“It’s a touchy subject – to be avoided”

“Priests are against sex education – then they complain about teenage pregnancy”

“Safe sex is never mentioned – they don’t care if you’re safe”

“They do reproductive education but not sex education”

Young people from the gay community said that because of the religious ethos in many schools there was no mention of LGBT relationships or advice about safe sex. They said that, in their experience, the HYPE programme, which was set up to give

young people information about sexual health choices in the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust, didn't mention LGBT people. They felt that such invisibility contributed to exposing young LGBT people to a variety of risks and potential abuse.

In conversations with the youth workers who helped facilitate the focus group sessions it became clear that none of the ten were familiar with, or had any training in relation to, CSE. Many of them felt that, with appropriate support, they would be well placed to help young people become aware of and deal with the issues involved.

Identifying those at risk

While most of the young people in the focus groups were not aware of CSE prior to the session, they were readily able to identify young people who might be at particular risk.

Among those they suggested were those:

- With very little money – from poorer backgrounds
- In care
- With disability
- With low self esteem
- Who are LGBT (through being bullied / blackmailed)
- Who aren't aware of CSE
- From broken homes / bad family situations
- Who are quiet / isolated with few friends
- Who have a mental illness
- Who are newcomers to Northern Ireland
- Who are young carers
- Who are single mothers
- Who are on the streets
- Who are involved in drinking or taking drugs
- Who are in the UK because being gay is illegal in their own country

All groups made the point that any young person can be vulnerable to CSE.

Barriers to identification

Participants were asked to consider what factors might act as barriers to the identification of CSE.

In relation to **victims** of CSE failing to identify what was going on they suggested a range of reasons. They felt that the young person may have come to depend upon and enjoy the gifts and money that are given at the grooming stage; that they might have an on-going need to feel special or that they may have come to believe that they are in control of the situation.

“They would get used to nice things and not want to admit what was going on”

“The person is nice to them and makes them feel wanted”

“They could tell themselves that they are doing the exploiting ‘cos they get the stuff”

Participants felt that lack of knowledge of CSE and a lack of understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship could be contributory factors.

“Don’t know what it is”

“Not having had good relationships in the past – don’t know the difference”

Friends may be unable to spot CSE through a similar lack of information.

“Don’t know what to look out for”

“Just looks like an ordinary relationship”

There was discussion around the fact that it might be perceived as “cool” to have an older boy/girlfriend. It was also felt that young people would be unlikely to let their friends know what is happening because of feelings of shame.

“A young fella with an older girl is way cool – you’d be jealous”

“You wouldn’t tell your friends for fear of what they’d think of you”

Similarly children may not tell their **parents** because they fear they would be judged and may develop skills in covering up their feelings. They may also be afraid that they would not be believed.

“They’d put on a show so their parents wouldn’t start asking questions”

“Maybe their parents would think they were just looking for attention”

Others felt that some parents may not be sufficiently interested in their children’s welfare to notice a change in their behaviour or that parents may have their own problems.

“Parents might have a lack of care for their child”

“Parents could be under the influence of either drugs or alcohol”

Participants felt that that the **police** may not identify CSE for a variety of reasons including poor relationships / lack of trust with young people; lack of evidence; denial; and competing priorities.

“The young person might have a bad relationship with the PSNI – maybe have an ASBO”

“The police don’t believe young people”

“Maybe someone made up stories before and the police won’t listen”

“If there is no evidence the police won’t do anything”

“Denial – they want to believe that they are capable of dealing with it so believe it won’t happen”

“They have bigger issues to deal with”

“They’re bogged down in paperwork”

In relation to the **public**, young people felt that there was a lack of understanding of CSE and a reluctance to become involved.

“How would they know what it is?”

“They’d be afraid they’d be accused of interfering”

“People don’t like to talk about anything to do with sex”

“People just don’t want to know”

Discussions then focussed on why young people might not **report** that CSE was happening to themselves or a friend.

Participants felt that young people might not **self-report** because of shame; fear of /lack of trust in the police; risk of not being believed; intimidation from the exploiter or not knowing what the consequences are.

It was felt that reasons might be different for young men and young women. Boys might lose face for seeking help and would find it hard to present themselves as vulnerable and girls might be afraid that their reputation would suffer.

“You’d be too ashamed to let on to anyone”

“A lot of young people have had bad experiences with the police and would be afraid to go near them”

“You wouldn’t tell the police anything – wouldn’t trust them”

“What if no-one believed you were being forced to do it?”

“He might kill you to stop you giving evidence”

“What happens if you tell?”

“No wee lad is going to go to the police and say he’s a victim”

“If a girl has sex she’s a slut - end of story”

Young people felt that it would be difficult to **report that a friend** was being sexually exploited due to fear of making a false accusation; fear of losing the friendship with the victim; fear of incurring the wrath of the perpetrator who might be someone in power or not knowing how to make a report.

“What if you get it wrong – that’s a serious thing to say about someone”

“Your friend may not want you to tell and you could lose that friend”

“The person doing it could be a policeman or someone else in authority – they could really hurt you too”

“I wouldn’t know who you should tell”

What people / agencies should do

The young people made a number of recommendations in relation to what individuals and organisations might do to protect children and young people from Child Sexual Exploitation.

They felt that the **Government** should increase spending on awareness raising and employing staff to deal with CSE through counselling and support groups. Some felt that work should be undertaken with offenders and that social services staff should have increased powers to investigate suspected cases of CSE. A number of participants suggested that social workers and youth workers should get specific training on CSE.

Young people argued most vociferously that schools should teach pupils about CSE with some feeling that this should take place annually on a mandatory basis.

“They have to give money to make sure everyone knows about it”

“There should be more money for people to help”

“The government could have more groups for young people who’ve gone through CSE”

“You need people to talk to – there should be more counselling”

“Someone needs to work with the people who are doing it – to stop them doing it again”

“If you work with young people – like youth workers or in children’s homes you should have to learn about it”

In relation to what **Young people** might do it was felt they should be vigilant and look out for each other. They should report CSE whether it is happening to themselves or their friends. The young people attending the focus groups said they would share what they had learned among their friends. A number of different groups suggested that young people should be trained to inform each other about CSE through a process of peer education.

“We need to keep an eye on our mates – even if they don’t say anything”

“Young people should tell if it is happening”

“If you know something you need to say so that people know it’s going on”

“Nobody knows about this, I’m going to warn my friends”

“Younger kids need to know about this too – we need to tell them what could happen – they won’t hear it in school”

“It’s better if friends told you rather than adults”

“Peer educators could do this”

Participants talked about the role of **social workers**, suggesting that they should work in a preventative way with children at risk and investigate potentially difficult situations. They felt that social workers should spend more time engaging with young people and could play a part in informing and advising parents about CSE.

“They should work with vulnerable young people before anything happens - make sure they know about it and are warned about it”

“Social workers should go into houses and check that there’s no dangers”

“They need to really talk to young people – find out what’s going on for them – what’s happening.”

“Someone needs to tell parents about the dangers – they could make sure parents have heard about it and know what to do”

“Could scare parents into educating the kids – rather than scare the kids”

The latter point was reiterated when discussing how **parents** could protect children. Young people felt that parents should tell children about CSE and take action on any concerns they might have. A number of groups suggested that parents having a good relationship, not only with their child but with each other, was a protective factor.

“They should talk to their children about CSE – warn them without scaring them about it”

“If parents think there is something up they need to do something about it not just sit and worry”

“They need to get on well with their kids so they’ll talk to them”

“If they have a good relationship then the child will know what a good relationship is like”

None of the young people had heard of the **Safeguarding Board**, when their role was explained they suggested that the SBNI should monitor cases of CSE closely and should also inform people about CSE. These sessions took place before the launch of the SBNI CSE public awareness campaign.

“They should be more thorough – look into every case”

“Tell people about CSE”

As mentioned elsewhere the young people felt that **teachers** had a particular responsibility in relation to informing children about CSE. In order to do this effectively it was felt that they should be approachable and available to children outside the classroom.

“Teach children about what a healthy relationship is – actually talk about sex”

“You should be able to go to your teacher with problems when class is over”

“Teach about CSE”

Participants were aware that the **police** had a major responsibility in relation to protecting children from CSE. They felt that they would be more effective in this role if they had a more positive relationship with young people. The young people suggested that the police should take all concerns raised by children seriously and that specialist officers should deal with CSE.

“You’d be wary of going near the police – they act like all young people are on drugs or something – they need to wind their necks down”

“They should listen to children and take their worries seriously – not like they’re making it up”

“They should do something about it – even if it doesn’t seem big or important – it is to the child”

“You should be able to go to police specially trained so they know what it’s about”

Young people felt that the **youth service** could play a role in protecting children from CSE. They felt that youth workers were more likely to have positive relationships with young people and would be held in a position of trust. Suggestions included providing information about CSE, monitoring the well-being of young people and acting as a link between the PSNI and young people who want to report CSE.

“Youth clubs should have evenings about CSE like this one”

“Youth workers could notice changes in the young person and get them to talk about it”

“Your youth worker could help you go to the police”

In relation to members of the **public** young people felt that they needed to know more about CSE and overcome any inhibitions they might have to act on anything suspicious they witness.

“They need to get information – be informed”

“It is your business – should be an advertising campaign”

“Tell the police or social workers if you think CSE is happening”

Participants felt that **care homes** could better protect children if they alerted their residents to CSE and monitored friendships formed by the young people.

“Make sure young people know about the dangers of CSE – they are most at risk”

“Always know who the young people’s friends are”

Views of what the **courts** could do focussed largely on harsher sentencing practices.

“There should be longer sentences”

“Exploiters should be put in prison”

Young people felt that the **Inquiry Board** should ensure that the Government takes into account the views of young people; ensure that CSE is taught in schools and ensure interagency co-operation to tackle CSE.

“Tell the Ministers what we think”

“Make sure children hear about CSE when they’re at school”

“Get everyone to work together – police, youth workers, social workers”

Participants felt that agencies like **NSPCC and Barnardo’s** should advertise their services; undertake awareness raising in schools; support victims; operate a help-line and work with parents.

“Tell people what they do”

“Go into schools and educate young people about CSE”

“Help people it has happened to”

“Have a free 24 hour help line you can ring – free is really important”

“Run parenting courses so they know how to protect their children”

Suggestions for **neighbours** included setting up neighbourhood watch schemes, talking to young people about how they are and informing parents if they have concerns about their children.

“Set up a neighbourhood watch”

“Ask young people if everything is okay”

“Tell parents if their child is acting strangely”

In relation to what the **participants themselves** might do, the young people felt they should report CSE, counter isolation by becoming involved in a youth group and notice their friend’s behaviour.

“Tell people you feel safe with what is happening to you”

“Join a youth group”

“Look out for signs in your mates”

Young people with disabilities

A primary concern in relation to children with disabilities centred on their lack of information, not only about CSE specifically but also about sexuality in general. Young people with physical disabilities often require intimate personal care (being showered and toileted) which depends on the development of trust with a range of adults. They aren't told what is appropriate behaviour from carers. Staff from Barnardo's DCYPPP felt that in these circumstances young people develop unclear boundaries are inclined to trust any adult very readily. This increases vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Young people with disabilities can be highly dependant on their families and may perceive themselves as a burden, this could lead to a reluctance to disclose abuse. Children in these circumstances aspire to be normal – they want to have boy/girlfriends but receive no preparation for sexual relationships. They are inclined to “latch on” to any type of relationship and will not be able to identify dangers. Young people with learning difficulties are particularly vulnerable in this respect.

The project worked with young people with disabilities around abuse issues. They found that young people were aware that the internet could pose risks but were unaware of the consequences of what could happen – particularly in relation to “sexting”. Given the extent to which the young people depend on the internet for social interaction they are exposed to increased risk and “can be targeted as easily as young people at discos”.

The team felt that in order to protect children, work needed to be undertaken to support parents, from diagnosis on. The danger is that parents may “treat their children with kid-gloves and not allow them to mature in an age appropriate way”. Work could be directed towards enabling parents to support their children to be normal and as independent as possible – encouraging them to have a fulfilled life.

The project recommends that all professionals who deal with CSE should undertake disability awareness training and that this is most powerful and impactful when delivered by young people with disabilities themselves.
