

# Getting focused & Staying focused



**A report about 'Looked After Children',  
Going Missing and  
Child Sexual Exploitation**



## What's it all about?

This is a report about an investigation into Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) in Northern Ireland.

CSE is a serious problem across the UK. We know that it happens in Northern Ireland. We know that anyone can be affected but some young people are particularly at risk. This is especially true of young people who are 'Looked After'.

### WHAT DOES BEING 'LOOKED AFTER' MEAN?

For some young people, their parents have problems with drink, drugs or violence; or they may be unwell or simply can't cope.

For other young people, personal difficulties they are experiencing can mean that their behaviour is challenging for family members, who are trying to care for them.

If the overall problems are serious, the children will sometimes become the responsibility of Social Services and they will be 'Looked After' by other family members, or foster parents, or by staff in a residential home.

We know that a small number of children and young people who are 'Looked After', will sometimes run away and go missing. The people who look after them worry about them, as they don't know where they are or what they are doing.

These children and young people are at great risk of sexual exploitation.

### WHAT IS CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION?

CSE is a form of sexual abuse. It happens when a child or young person under 18, is given money, drink or drugs, somewhere to stay, presents, affection, cigarettes, food - or something else they want. In return adults and / or peers will expect them, or force them, to get involved in sex. The child or young person may think they are in control - but they are being used. It is a criminal offence. The child or young person is in no way responsible - the abusers are always to blame.



## Operation Owl



The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and Social Services worked together to look at what was happening to 'Looked After' children and young people who were often going missing. Their investigation found a group of 22 'Looked After' children and young people who had been assessed as being at risk of sexual exploitation by adults and peers. The PSNI continue to work on bringing the abusers to Court and Social Services continue to support the young victims of these crimes.

It can take a long time for cases to go through the courts - in the meantime the Government here did two things.

They set up an **Inquiry led by Professor Kathleen Marshall** - this looked at CSE generally across Northern Ireland. The experts involved made a report with suggestions for change. This was published in December 2014.

The second thing was that the Government asked the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) to look at the cases of the children and young people who were identified through 'Operation Owl'.

The SBNI is in charge of making sure that agencies, involved in protecting children here, work well together.

The SBNI worked with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) to produce this report.



## This report

There are four main questions to be answered about what happened to the children and young people identified through "Operation Owl":

**Did the action taken to protect the young people follow the rules and guidelines for the protection of children?**

**Did the action taken keep the young people safe?**

**Did the agencies involved talk to each other and work together well?**

**Did workers have a good relationship with the young people they were trying to help?**

In order to answer those questions the QUB team looked at the records that agencies like Social Services, PSNI, Youth Justice Agency and Barnardos NI wrote about the young people. These files gave details of all the plans and actions taken while the young people were 'Looked After'. The files show what was happening to the young people at various stages and what the different agencies working with them thought should be done.

Although 22 young people were identified through 'Operation Owl' it was only possible to look at the files of 10 young people. This was partly because some of the young people themselves did not want their files read and this was respected and sometimes because the PSNI felt that information in the files could put the prosecution of the abusers at risk.

The point of this report is to learn lessons from what happened to these young people and to see where improvements can be made in the future.

We want to say thank you to the young people who felt able to allow access to their files. We know that must have been difficult for them.





## Findings about the young people

Some of the key things the team found were:

### Before becoming 'Looked After'

Common things in some of the young people's backgrounds included:

- emotional abuse
- sexual abuse
- domestic violence
- young people being violent or aggressive towards family members and others
- young people misusing substances
- young people having problems in school - not attending / excluded
- young people being sexually active
- young people going missing from home
- young people offending
- young people self-harming

It is important to say that not all of the young people experienced all of these things - they are individuals who had different experiences, but the QUB team highlighted these things as some common threads for some of the young people.

During this time the young people received a range of services - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, counselling, sexual health/ education, substance misuse support etc. - to help keep them out of Care.

The QUB team felt there were 3 main reasons why the services didn't work to keep the young person out of Care:

- The services were reacting to what was happening rather than being planned and in some cases there were no services because of lack of money
- Some parents and young people struggled to, or chose not to, use the services that were offered
- The services focused on the parents and family - the needs of the young person were lost



### When being 'Looked After'

- Some young people became 'Looked After' because they were at risk of serious harm
- Some young people became 'Looked After' because their parents couldn't cope with their behaviour
- Many of the young people had problems with emotions and behaviour - some were self-harming
- Many regularly went missing, and staff were concerned that they were involved in risky sexual behaviour and misusing alcohol / drugs
- Some of the young people had four or more different places to live since being 'Looked After'
- Some young people were placed in the Juvenile Justice Centre or secure accommodation
- Some of the young people had been involved in under-age sex
- Most of the young people did not see themselves as being abused but some spoke about being unconscious or "out of it" on drink or drugs during sex

Again - the young people are individuals and did not all have the same experiences.

### After being 'Looked After'

- Some young people turned 18 during the period being looked at. This meant they were no longer being 'Looked After' - although they would still get Social Services support until at least 21
- All the young people were involved with workers in making formal future plans and were able to get services to help them
- Some young people were parents and this seemed to help them become more settled
- The young people were trying to get on with their lives - some were surviving and some really struggled



## The four questions



### Did the action taken to protect the young people follow the rules and guidelines for the protection of children?

In general, actions that were taken to protect these young people did follow the rules and guidelines. The QUB team found that there were a few differences here and there - which is perhaps understandable in such complex cases. They stress that it is essential to follow guidelines at all times.

### Did the action taken keep the young people safe?

For long periods of time the action taken did not work - the young people were not kept safe.

There were some differences - some actions helped some of the young people some of the time. In some cases it was clear that staff actions had helped to save the young person's life.

### The QUB team came up with reasons why actions might not have worked - some of these were:

- Agencies didn't always agree that CSE was the most important issue among all the things that were happening in the young person's life
- By the time they became teenagers, parents and staff were not always able to offer the help and support that the young people needed to be safe, despite their best efforts
- The young people could be kept physically safe in the Juvenile Justice Centre or in secure accommodation - but not when they went back to a residential home or foster care
- Staff were having to react to a number of crises - sometimes more than one young person went missing at a time
- Professionals found it extremely difficult to build relationships with the young people
- The young people had deep and complex problems and their behaviour could be very challenging
- There wasn't a good range of secure accommodation and there could be delays in getting into what was there

- Staff could try to persuade young people not to leave the home without permission and even stand in their way - if they tried to physically restrain the young person they were afraid that a complaint would be made about them
- Sometimes professionals focused too much on the young people's behaviour rather than on who was abusing them
- PSNI were good at returning the young people to a safe place but not always so good at finding out who the abusers were
- Young people were often reluctant or afraid to give information about who was abusing them
- Young people did not see themselves as being abused and thought they were in control of the situation
- Although many services were offered, young people often refused help

### Did the agencies involved talk to each other and work together well?

Information was shared between agencies, and individual workers and agencies generally worked well together, but they did not always use the information to understand the risk and who was posing the risk to the young people, therefore for these young people their work did not prevent the young people being abused. The QUB team felt that the agencies needed to focus more on CSE and both care for the young people and go after the abusers to stop their activity, and bring them to court.

### Did workers have a good relationship with the young people they were trying to help?

It is clear that professionals struggled to reach these young people and that the young people themselves often rejected offers of help and friendship. The QUB team felt that services have to find ways of offering help when young people need it, in a way that they can accept and use.



## What needs to happen now

This report is about learning lessons from what happened to the young people involved in 'Operation Owl'. The QUB team made suggestions about things that could be improved. Their main idea is that an Audit should be completed in a year's time to see how things have improved and what else needs to be done.

Here are some examples of what they feel needs to happen now:

### Looking at what young people need and being able to tell if they are at risk of CSE

- Use special recording tools to spot the risk of CSE early on
- Social Services, Health and Education work together to spot the risk of CSE and what should be done
- PSNI and Social Services to be more active in gathering intelligence about who abusers are and how they link to young people

### Making sure the right services are there - and working well together

- Families to get support early in the child's life
- Youth workers, voluntary agencies, taxi-drivers, bar and hotel staff need to work with the PSNI to provide information on abusers and to provide support for the young people
- Have more choices of where young people can safely live and get specialist support
- Make sure that, when they return from going missing, young people are interviewed by staff they can choose themselves
- PSNI and Social Services to be more active when young people are repeatedly running away and gather evidence of CSE



### Working to have better relationships with young people

- Work with the young person's family and friends to plan their future and build better relationships with staff
- More clarity for staff about the use of different approaches to try and communicate with and prevent young people leaving children's homes and ending up at risk.
- Deal with social media as both a positive thing and a risk in terms of CSE
- Set up specialist CSE services

### Always learning

- Put experienced staff from different agencies to work in the same place and teach others about CSE
- Use information gathering to spot the places where CSE is happening and to identify trends in behaviours and practice which may need to be worked on
- Make sure senior managers have the information they need to plan services
- Make sure staff are well supported to take care of themselves, think about what they are doing and follow guidelines
- Provide on-going training





**SBNI**  
The Beeches  
12 Hampton Manor Drive,  
Belfast BT7 3EN

Telephone: 028 9069 0418  
[www.safeguardingni.org](http://www.safeguardingni.org)



**Participation Network**  
Children in Northern Ireland  
Unit 9, 40 Montgomery Road,  
Belfast BT6 9HL

Telephone: 028 9040 1290  
[www.ci-ni.org.uk](http://www.ci-ni.org.uk)



## Useful numbers

Police = 999 in an emergency  
Police non emergency number is 101

NSPCC Helpline - 0800 3891 701

ChildLine - 0800 1111

You can also contact the helpline in your Health & Social Care Trust area:

- Belfast HSC Trust - 028 9050 7000
- Northern HSC Trust - 0300 1234 333
- South Eastern HSC Trust - 0300 1000 300
- Southern HSC Trust - 0800 7837 745
- Western HSC Trust - 028 7131 4090